

# *“Socialism is Great!”*

**A Worker's Memoir of the New China**

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*To Zhou Fang,  
who did most of the pushing  
to get this frog out of the factory well.*



A frog in a shallow well says to a turtle from the Eastern Sea: “How happy I am! Sometimes I jump into the well; at other times I rest on a broken brick inside. When I swim, the water in the well comes up under my arms and supports my chin; when I leap, the mud covers my feet. I look around and see that none of those insects, crabs, or tadpoles are better off than me. Besides, I alone have the whole well, the whole pleasure of the well. This is the highest plane in life! Why don’t you often come here to visit and broaden your horizon?”

The turtle accepts the invitation. He lowers his right leg into the well. But before he can put his left leg in, he realizes the well is too small and has to give up. Then the turtle tells the frog in the well about the sea. “The long distance of ten thousand li is not enough to describe the greatness of the sea; eight thousand inches is not enough to describe its depth. During the Dayu period, there were floods for nine out of ten years, yet the sea didn’t rise. During the reign of Emperor Tang in the Shang Dynasty, there were droughts for seven out of eight years, yet the sea didn’t fall. The sea will not change over time and will not rise or fall because of floods or drought. It is the joy of living in the Eastern Sea!”

Upon hearing this, the frog is truly surprised. It then feels disappointed and lost for a long time.

—Zhuang Zi, Chinese philosopher, fourth century BCE



# 1

## Inheritance

“Would you like to be a worker, if you have a chance?”

“Of course not, Ma. Why?” I answered my mother flatly, without even looking up from my homework. To be a worker? What an odd question! I was only sixteen, in my first term at senior middle school, and I was doing well.

Across the table, Ma tugged threads into a tassel for an Islamic prayer mat, made for export. For years we had been taking in embroidery work for sorely needed extra cash. Nai, my grandma, also clutched a prayer mat to embroider, but had dozed off. She dozed off more often now. If we asked her to go to bed she would straighten up and resume her work, only to fall asleep again within minutes.

“Not even working at a first-class enterprise like Liming, a real ‘iron rice bowl?’” Ma had spent her entire working life at Liming Machinery Factory, the largest state-owned enterprise in our city, Nanjing. Under the authority of the Ministry of Aerospace Industry, our factory had nearly ten thousand employees. Its prestige derived from not only its scale but also its status as a military factory. With free services from nurseries

to cremation, and countless bowls of rice in between, the life of a state employee meant cradle-to-grave security. Plus free showers and subsidized haircuts.

“Not even Liming.” Finally I raised my head to look at Ma, who was frowning in my direction. I liked to look at Ma. She was pretty—when she didn’t frown. She had lovely high cheeks, and bright, slanted eyes. Her arched eyebrows were like two new moons. Her name was fitting too: Yufang, fragrance of cloud.

Now she seemed at a loss for words. After a while, she added: “I would think twice if I were you, Little Li.” That was my pet name at home, though I hardly merited its meaning, “little beauty.”

It was the beginning of December 1980. Winter had come early. My hands, swelling red with chilblains, were carefully copying English words into an exercise book. How fascinating! This language system, reintroduced to schools recently, was completely different from Chinese. Our characters developed from pictographs, real pictures of actual things. *Jia*, for example, means home, where a roof shelters a pig and reveals our farming roots. Hunched over a naked bulb of low wattage, just about bright enough for our tasks, three generations of Chinese women, bundled up in padded cotton jackets and trousers, sat around three sides of a table pushed against a window. The lack of heating was geographic fate: the Communist central planners permitted no central heating south of the Yangtze, the river that splits China in two. The “southern capital” Nanjing lies on the lower reaches of its southern bank, where, though temperatures never fall as low as in cities to the north, the damp cold goes straight to one’s bones. To fight the chill, we stuffed our feet in a straw basket warmed by a copper hot-water bottle. I could always tell which pair were Nai’s—the tiny, bound ones. A warm, womanly intimacy hung in the air.

There were others in my family, but they weren't around. My father had spent his whole working life in another city. My elder sister Weijia was studying at her college in a far corner of the city. My naughty brother Xiaoshi was out playing in our village, Wuding New Village, the largest residential area for Liming employees.

Located just outside Wuding Gate, one of the thirteen city gates that once defined and guarded Nanjing, the village was still classed as rural, although the sprawling urban landscape was slowly swallowing up the green patchwork of fields that surrounded it. With few trees and little green space, there was none of the rustic beauty or tradition that the word "village" suggests. There were several thousand villagers, packed into three dozen or so concrete blocks, identical but for being either three or four stories high, depending on the year of construction.

Our flat, on the second floor of a four-story block, felt matchbox-sized, with low ceilings, one main room, and one side room. The walls of peeling yellow paint were bare but for a factory calendar and the two school certificates of merit that my sister and I earned each year without fail. Two beds took up much of the main room where we sat, but the bedding was neatly folded, for the beds also served as seats and worktables. An old wardrobe, a wedding gift from my mother's in-laws, gave off distorted reflections in its full-length mirror. The once intricate carvings were cracked, like an old worn face. A white tablecloth, crocheted by Weijia with sewing threads, covered a coarsely made cupboard. On top sat a colorful biscuit tin, long empty, but kept for decoration. Beside it stood a "hero" clock. "The masses are the real heroes" read one of Chairman Mao's quotations, printed on the clock face. A worker grasping a hammer, a peasant her sickle, and a soldier his gun were painted waving aloft his Little Red Book.

Looking at the painted worker, I smiled to myself. A worker? How funny I would look if I wore his canvas uniform and peaked cap.

Three weeks later, I was summoned after supper for a “little talk” in Ma’s bedroom. I knew it was serious when she shut the door. Our last closed-door session had been nearly four years earlier, when I was in my last year at primary school. My teacher had recommended I study at Nanjing Foreign Languages School, an exclusive place whose graduates all went on to university, and were later trained as diplomats or interpreters for high-ranking leaders. “Would you like to go there to study?” she had asked. I had jumped up with joy. But my happiness was premature: I failed the political censorship—my father had “political problems.” I was therefore rejected.

Ma’s room was always so dim—high wattage would use too much electricity. When I started middle school, she arranged for me to sleep with her, thinking I was too big to share a bed with my brother and Nai. While Ma, next door, made endless tassels into the night, I was scared on my own—the eight-watt fluorescent lamp flickered in the darkness like a jack-o’-lantern. To forget my fear, I began to read books. Within months the characters on the school blackboard became as blurred as crawling ants. A pair of black-framed glasses came to reside on my small nose. When Ma discovered why, she banished me back to Nai’s bed—it would have been wasteful to install a bright light just for my reading. I slept better, holding Nai’s thin legs.

Now I looked expectantly at Ma as she sat down on the bed. What could it be this time? Even in the semidarkness, I could see her “two new moons” knitting together in a frown.

“Remember I asked if you would like to be a worker?” she began, her voice husky and low. She cleared her throat. “You are going to take over my job.”

The sentence fell like thunder from a bright blue sky.

“What?! NO!” I jumped up again, this time in protest. “Why? I’m still young!” I pleaded.

“I became a worker myself at your age, only half a year older,” she said matter-of-factly. I remembered Ma once boasting that she had been a promising student, too, but was forced to give up school because her family was too poor.

“But surely, Ma, you can support me to finish school, then...”

“Poverty is only part of the reason.” Then, calmly, she began to explain the rest. When the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, China was a mess, its economy on the brink of collapse. To tackle the soaring numbers of jobless, a temporary policy appeared called *dingzhi*, literally, “replacing job.” If parents could secure retirement, their children could take over their jobs. Several rounds of *dingzhi* had followed until it was strongly rumored that December 1980 was the last such opportunity. Despite excellent health at forty-three—some seventeen years away from the normal retirement age for women—Ma had decided to take advantage of the opportunity. When she first raised the issue with me, she had already applied to retire early on the grounds of poor health: she had been working for many years on the hazardous acid-pickling line. My poor reaction had not deterred her in the least, and now her application had been approved.

“I don’t want to be a worker!” I insisted, stamping a foot in disgust.

In my mind’s eye, I saw the blue canvas uniform and Ma’s coarse hands. A worker? I knew it was the likely fate for children from our village, but I had grand plans for myself.

“I want to be a journalist!”

“I told you before, don’t even dream about it,” she replied. “A journalist? Writing is a dangerous thing to do in this country. Your dad is a good example.” She frowned: the sheer mention of my father seemed to vex her. “Anyway, becoming a journalist is just one of your flights of fancy. You also wanted to be a pilot, a barefoot doctor, and an interpreter, just to name a few!”

Ma had a glib tongue, but I was far from convinced.

“I’m good at writing, my literature teacher said so.” At school, teachers often read out my compositions, and fellow students copied my prose. “Whatever happens in the future, I want to go to university first,” I added assertively.

“Getting into university is harder than climbing to heaven!” she retorted. “I know you’re a good student, but your school is very bad. Look, this year they ‘drew an egg’ again—not a single student passed the university entrance exam.”

That much was beyond dispute. My middle school, like my primary school, had been established by Liming for its employees’ children. Only later was the school’s administration transferred to the city’s education authority and children from nearby areas allowed to attend. No self-respecting teacher would choose to work at either of these remote and poorly equipped schools. After the humiliating failure of last year, the school introduced a new strategy—streaming students into classes based on their abilities, so that the most resources and attention would be spent on pupils with the greatest hope of reaching university.

But I was in the fast class, wasn’t I? As if reading my mind, Ma continued in a crisp and clear voice, with a fluency that spoke of many rehearsals in her mind. “Even if you do pass the entrance exam, your bad eyesight will probably fail you. Look at Weijia, she scored quite well but only got into a teacher-training school.”

A fair point. My sister Weijia was training as a primary school teacher at Xingzhi Secondary Normal College, not a “proper” university and hardly a place for an ambitious youth. However, poor sight (as in my sister’s case) or any other physical defect was held against you. The university entrance system, only reintroduced in 1977 after the chaotic years, demanded almost perfect physical health—a useful way to reduce the pool of candidates. China’s proper universities could accommodate fewer than 4 percent of those who took the entrance exam. In other words, only one out of six hundred Chinese children was lucky enough to experience higher education.

“But at least I can try, and if I score really high, some university will surely accept me. Can you wait for three years, Ma?” I knew someone from Weijia’s class had gotten into Beijing University, China’s Oxford, despite his bad eyesight. I didn’t need to remind Ma that university was one of few guaranteed routes to success for an ordinary family like ours.

“Wait? I can, but not dingzhi. You know government policy is like a child’s face—three changes in a day.”

I wasn’t good at arguing with Ma. To be a good child meant *tinghua*, “to listen to words,” a phrase that conveyed obedience, the most desirable quality for Chinese children. So I listened, obediently, to the words of my teachers at school and my mother at home.

Barely comprehending, I listened as she went on. If I failed the university exam I would end up one of those jobless youths, or get a job in a collectively owned factory, if I was really lucky. A good job with Liming? No chance!

The prestige of state-owned firms remained high. “The working class leads everything!” newspapers reminded us. “Workers are our elder brothers” and “the masters of the nation.”

“Look at this house. We are so poor,” grumbled Ma, kicking her bedside table. One of the legs slipped from its brick support. That table and a bed were the only furniture in the cramped room. “We can’t rely on your dad. He is useless, and Nai is getting old. She nearly died from the stroke. It hurts me to look at her hunched over the embroidery, like an old shrimp. After you become a worker, I can find another job, and our lives will be better.”

Irritated by my wooden expression, Ma raised her voice. “But above all, Little Li, let me tell you I’m doing you a big favor! I simply don’t understand why I have to beg you to take over my treasure.” She blew her nose. “Your mouth still smells of breast milk; you don’t know what’s good for you! You’ll go to work at the factory next week. That’s it!”

She got up and walked out, her back straight and erect. For me, her back always spoke volumes about her proud, stubborn nature. Once she had set her mind on something, a four-horse cart couldn’t hold her back.

I followed her lamely to the main room and met Nai’s concerned look. Wide-awake in her usual place, she was still clutching her embroidery.

Ma banged and clattered around the flat for a while, voicing her displeasure, and then went into her room.

“You didn’t agree?” Nai whispered.

I didn’t answer. If I’d been wearing a hat, the force of my rage would have shot it into the air. Agree? What was the difference if I agreed or not? Everything had been decided. Although it was common practice for parents to decide what was best for their children, I still felt shocked, even wronged. But how could I bring myself to say anything unkind to Nai, the dearest person in my life? After raising Ma, her only surviving child, Nai had

cared for her grandchildren like a faithful servant. We called her Nai, slang for paternal grandmother: Chinese people held paternal grandmas dearer than maternal grandmas.

“Dingzhi is the best for you,” said Nai, her soft eyes focusing on me as I sat down heavily. “If you can’t go to university, no point in finishing senior middle school, right?”

My semiliterate grandma would not make such a connection herself. Ma must have fed her the lines.

Despite myself, I thought she must be the most beautiful grandma in the world. Since no manufacturer still produced garments as elegant as her traditional-style jacket, which buttoned to the right, she had to seek out a village dressmaker. But she clung to her dressing habit like a child to its comfort blanket, regardless of how tricky it was to tie the butterfly button. My sister and I loved admiring a particular black-and-white picture of her in her youth—one of the few pictures to survive ransacking by the Red Guards—and wondering why Nai’s striking good looks hadn’t been passed down to us. In that yellowing image, Nai’s beauty had a nostalgic quality. Her perfect oval-shaped face, sweet dimples, and naturally wavy hair recalled the stylish film stars of 1930s Shanghai. Now well into her sixties, she still had smooth skin and pitch-black hair. Even the mild stroke she’d suffered the year before had failed to leave any marks on her.

I knew there was no point in asking Nai to plead my case since she absolutely respected Ma’s authority in the household. Ma was the queen, the sole decision-maker. Even when Father was around, his opinions rarely counted.

“I’ll have to think about it,” I said.

## 2

### The Weight of Adulthood

At sixteen, I still shared a bed with my brother and grandma, but when Weijia was away at college, I was upgraded to her single bed. For once, however, I couldn't enjoy the treat of sleeping alone. The bed's creaking legs groaned in complaint as I tossed and turned. There had to be some way out of this.

Would Weijia like to take over Ma's job? I brushed the idea aside. After two years' study, she would be assigned a teaching job. My thirteen-year-old brother was too young. So, just about old enough, I was the only candidate.

How I envied my older sister's certain future! She even had a boyfriend in the village, which was why she tried to sneak home whenever possible. I thought about that Foreign Languages School. If only I had passed the censorship, I would have been studying there, on the way to university. My future would look rosy and certain, too. If only, if only.

Instead, my life was about to take an unwelcome turn.

So far, it had been highly uneventful, despite the drama convulsing China. I was only two years old when the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966. My earliest

recollections were of lighthearted, even comic moments: muddling along behind Nai as she tried to mimic the “loyalty dance” steps to express her devotion to our great leader Chairman Mao, neighbors up and down the street gathering in the morning to bow three times before his portrait; catching cicadas in the treetops with my brother.

An inch long, with big, globular eyes and transparent wings, the cicada chirps loudest when the world swoons under the midday sun. My brother and I used to roast the ones we caught over a small bonfire. The slightly burnt smell was so inviting that we often devoured them before they were properly cooked.

But the tidal wave of politics and terror soon began to sweep China’s citizens. In Nai’s arms, I was too young to remember, but later I learned enough to imagine the scene at the public struggle session: the accused would line up on a raised platform, their hands tied behind their backs, their heads bent low by placards around their necks that read “capitalist roader”—that is, one who has chosen the capitalist road—or “counterrevolutionary.” Activists from neighborhood committees, the lowest and most interfering arm of state control, would invite everyone, including the family and friends of the accused, to denounce them, spit on them, or kick them. Already troubled by Parkinson’s disease, my granddad was nervous, like a bird that could be startled by the mere twang of a bowstring. He feared that his business background would land him in one of these struggle sessions. One morning, Nai woke to find the old man’s stiffened body hanging from a wooden beam in the communal hall of the traditional courtyard they shared with several families.

A year later, Ma secured a flat in Wuding New Village. I was too young to understand the pain caused by Granddad’s

suicide. Indeed, the adults had tried hard to shield us from troubles. Sometimes there was no hiding place.

In 1971, a group of young workers with red armbands burst into our flat and ransacked it. They took pictures from a photo album, Nai's antique porcelain bowls, even a spoon carved with the letters “USA.” Harmless in normal times, these items were suspect in a nation wild with xenophobic and anti-feudal rage. Then, they took my mother. We children hid behind Nai, terrified into silence, fearing the sky was going to collapse.

It was a ghostly version of Ma that finally came back to us, half of her hair missing, her face death-white, and her body bruised and purple. The ghost acted strangely too, hugging us tight—as a typical Chinese parent, Ma had rarely showed emotion to her children. “I would have committed suicide if not for you,” she said between sobs. For several months, she was locked in a dark room inside the factory. Interrogations stretched for days to deprive her of sleep and weaken her resistance.

Ma had been accused of being a member of the so-called “May Sixteenth Faction,” a counterrevolutionary group that might never have existed, except in the minds of Mao's ever-more-hysterical disciples. She stubbornly denied involvement. She was lucky to get out alive—millions lost their lives during the Cultural Revolution. Makeshift courts were set up everywhere, and executions often took place without any legal proceedings. All in the name of making revolution.

Yet this was the only dark shadow on my childhood memories.

There was usually enough to eat, though the cicadas we roasted revealed a craving for meat not sated by the one gram of pork rationed monthly for each of us. Everyone was poor, and we were only a little poorer than our neighbors. We didn't have

any toys, but we didn't know to miss them. Father was away; our indulgent grandma let us do whatever we wanted; and Ma, if not in trouble, might not have let us run wild in the rice paddies and vegetable fields of Red Flower Commune, the real village just a slingshot away from the concrete of Wuding New Village. On hot summer afternoons, I would sneak out with Xiaoshi and other boys to swim and play in the Pig Pool, a small tributary of the Yangtze. Soaking on the other bank, water buffalo watched our tanned naked bodies slip in and out of the water like eels. There were shrimp too, delicious to stir-fry, if you dared to stick your hand in their holes below the bank. Xiaoshi had once pulled out a water snake. In 1972, I went to the village primary school, and later its middle school. By then, the revolutionary fever that could turn children against their parents or students against teachers was cooling.

On the first day at school, my teacher asked me to shout: "Stand up!" when she entered the room. Only later did I realize this was my appointment as class head. I guessed this was partly because Weijia was doing so well, and in any case I didn't let my teacher down. Good memory was the key to success in a system that demanded learning by rote, not creativity.

My reward was political. At the age of twelve, I was chosen to lead the school's Young Pioneers, the Chinese communist version of Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts. My family's less than pure background did not count against me here: so many parents had black marks on their records that their children usually were not affected at school. Only prestigious places like Nanjing Foreign Languages School enforced strict political censorship.

For me, this honor meant wearing the Young Pioneers' red scarf to school each day, giving speeches, and holding flags at open-air ceremonies. There were plenty of them that year. Our

“great leader Comrade Mao Zedong” passed away in September 1976. Then the radical Gang of Four was arrested, convenient scapegoats for Mao’s worst excesses. It would come to mark the end of the Cultural Revolution.

I could remember grieving over Mao’s death—he had been the only leader my generation had ever known.

But I grieved more for the time wasted embroidering at home when other kids played outside. With little financial support from Father, our family was obliged to try all sorts of ways to make ends meet, from peeling garlic and making matchboxes to shelling peanuts and babysitting. Eventually, we settled on embroidery: the work was demanding but stable, and the pay better. To reward my siblings and me for our efforts, Nai would make us sunflower seeds or sweet potatoes. When she was empty-handed, she told scary stories full of ghosts and fox fairies. “Suddenly, there was a gust of wind. The young scholar put his book down and saw a beautiful girl in front of him, smiling sweetly...”

“Is she that fox fairy?” I would ask keenly. There were two types of fox fairy, good and evil, but both were beautiful women skilled at seducing men. The good ones would fall in love with young scholars and even bear them children; the evil ones would suck out scholars’ souls so that they could live longer themselves. Sometimes, I was so lost in Nai’s stories that I would stab my finger with a needle. Nai, like most women of her generation, never went to school. Her only education spilled forth in countless folktales passed down for generations through word of mouth. I found such tales, officially regarded as “feudal poison,” deliciously entertaining.

As the four years following Mao’s death slipped by, China sought to “bring order out of political chaos,” the state-run

newspapers explained. Many of those wronged in previous political movements, like my parents, were rehabilitated. Once Deng Xiaoping, China's most pragmatic leader, was back in power, he launched dramatic economic reforms, opened closed doors to the outside world and demanded the "Four Modernizations" in agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defense. I sensed that a better education would bring more opportunities in this new environment. The rest of my class would charge ahead with the rest of the country. But Ma wanted to drag me out of the race.

In Weijia's single bed, self-pity gripped me, and I began to weep, silently at first. Not satisfying enough. I left the room and went out to the toilet down the corridor, the only place that guaranteed some privacy. Squatting over the smelly hole, I had a good cry, letting my tears flow freely. My eyes grew swollen and red. Resolved to savor my right to play the tragic drama queen, I wanted to rest my head against the wall, completing the melancholic image. But the wall was coated with dried phlegm and worse.

I went to the kitchen to wash my hands and face. We shared both the small toilet and spacious kitchen with two other families, although we had individual sinks so we could pay for water separately. Before I could use the tap, I had to shift a large basin brimming with water—Ma had been stealing it for years. She would place the basin under a tap dripping too faintly for the meter gauge to notice. I had tried to dissuade her: water cost next to nothing, and a whole month's hassle probably saved just a few *fen* (cents), enough for just one oily breakfast doughstick. But every morning she saw herself getting that huge basin of water for free.

So typical of Ma, I murmured to myself resentfully. She thought she was smart, yet she failed to see the bigger picture.

Why couldn't she see that I was a brilliant student? If she let me stay at school and get a good education, I might become successful, even rich, and then I would give her more money and pools of free water! My eyes began to water again.

Roused by my noise, Nai padded quietly into the kitchen. She poured some hot water into another basin, and handed me a hot towel. “Tinghua!” Patting my thin arms, Nai added, “Arms will never be as strong as legs.”

I returned to bed chewing over her idiom. Why can't the weak contend with the strong? What if I disobeyed? Ran away? But where to? Our relatives in another province? Even if I could make my way there, why would they keep me? Why run away anyway? I just wanted to continue my studies, live the life I was living.

If I absolutely refused, Ma would probably throw me out, as she had Xiaoshi, several times. Spoiled by Nai, he tried his first cigarette, stolen from Father, when he was just eight. He engaged in countless fights and caused endless headaches for the family. Just a few months earlier, after he smashed up our home in an argument, our heartbroken mother tried to disown him and leave him in a juvenile delinquent center. But he was too young. If she disowned me, I wouldn't be able to support myself.

When I calmed down, I reached the sad conclusion that I had no choice but dingzhi. I never had many choices anyway. Ma decided on my hairstyle and chose clothes for me. She owned me.

Eventually I drifted into sleep, with a Russian hero as my comfort blanket. Pavel Korchaguin was the inspirational character in *How Steel Is Made*, a Soviet revolutionary classic set in the Great Patriotic War. Pavel's motto became mine, too: “One's life should be spent like this: when a man recalls his life,

he will not regret wasting his youth or achieving nothing. He will be proud that he has devoted all his life to the magnificent cause of Communism.”

I had written out this motto in large characters and posted it on the wall beside my bed—or rather our bed. I loved Soviet literature, not that I had much choice, for China’s isolation was such that foreign literature basically meant Soviet literature. Pavel’s creator, author Nikolai Ostrovski, never went to university either. Perhaps my firsthand experience with the sweat of the proletariat would enrich my life and writing too?

No farewell party for me. I was too embarrassed to tell my classmates from Number Forty-two School that I was about to become a worker.

The last day of 1980, sunny but cold. In the morning, I went to the factory to register and the world went on as normal.

Three dozen new workers gathered at Liming headquarters. Some looked young, fresh from school, but most were considerably older. With darker skin and coarse hands, they had clearly been “repairing the earth”—their scornful term for tilling the land. Now they looked happy, and with good reason. In 1968, after using the young Red Guards to spark the fire of Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao decided to send all students, upon graduation, to the countryside to be reeducated by the peasants. Maybe the Great Helmsman felt his disciples had caused enough trouble; maybe it was just an easy way to keep them productively occupied. At the end of the 1970s, millions of sent-down youths somehow made their way home and found themselves competing for what few jobs were available with recent graduates. The dingzhi policy was initially aimed at resolving their unemployment.

I was too young to be sent to the countryside. Without tasting the hardship of rural exile, or the bitterness of unemployment, I couldn't appreciate the joy of holding this “rice bowl” in the city. Sitting among my fellow workers inside a meeting hall, I observed the proceedings as if watching a play.

With a speech of welcome and an air of importance, a factory official lectured us on the rules. One aim was to instill us with a sense of secrecy. Under no circumstances could we reveal to outsiders that the Liming factory produced rockets, nor could we say its code name, “105” (like all military factories in China, ours had a code). “For any violation, severe punishment will follow, as it may jeopardize national security,” the official warned. I paid greater attention to his unusual hooked nose. He reminded me of a parrot and behaved like one, constantly repeating government slogans.

He told us not to come to our posts late and not to leave early. Each new worker had to serve three years' apprenticeship, during which time courting was strictly forbidden. Any violation, once discovered, would delay the apprenticeship. All factory property belonged to the state. Anyone picking a flower or taking a nail home would be heavily fined.

“*Aiya*, are you from another planet?” hissed my fellow villager Chen Songling, furiously scribbling down notes. I was pleased to have bumped into him that day. “To leave a good impression on the leaders, get yourself a notebook and scribble something!”

New employees all had to go through such a training session. Mine had only just begun.

My mind soon wandered with my gaze out of the meeting hall, and up the high walls that encircled the compound. Since this was a military factory, security was tight, with armed

soldiers guarding the gate leading to the production area. It all looked so forbidding and grown up.

Later that evening, my mother held a symbolic handover ceremony at home. With two hands, she passed her toolbox to me, as if it were a treasure chest. "Take it," she ordered solemnly. "Working at a factory, you can always make use of these tools. I no longer need them." I thought I saw tears lingering in her eyes, and I wondered why.

In my dreams, I always saw myself grasping a pen, writing beautiful, compelling things. Now I was holding a rectangular metal box, its green paint peeling around the edges. A metallic smell rose as I opened the lid: no shining jewels or treasure lay within, but pincers, pliers, wrenches, and screwdrivers, plus half a dozen bicycle wheel spokes—Ma never wasted anything. I picked up a wrench and shivered at its cold touch. The tools coated my hands in a thin layer of grease. Had Ma been happy as a young turner, standing in front of a turning machine; then as a foreman's assistant; and finally as a middle-aged acid-pickling worker?

When I lifted the box to put it away, I felt its heft again. As a young girl, I was ever so impatient. "When can I grow up, Ma? When, when?" Now. At this moment. Unwilling and ill prepared, I was thrust into the adult world.