

## COUNTING

As often as Li told Mao to be careful, the head librarian would always find out, if not today, then tomorrow, or the day after, and without warning, she would emerge from behind a stack or cart and the two of them would have to answer her same question repeated again and again. “Why are you here, to work or read?” “If you just want to read, go home and read.” “Think, think, why are you here?” No answer was acceptable—she was the head librarian.

After the two of them were caught in the modern history section for the third time in as many days, both Li and Mao were sacked from their library jobs, thus ending their formal education at Beida. “You must remember we were very young then,” Professor Li reminded me almost exactly seventy years later, “over there, there,” pointing his walking cane towards the city below us without looking.

So out of the students’ dormitory, the two of them carried all their belongings, bedrolls on their backs, some clothes, their *fanhes*, but mostly books secreted out of the library in their imaginations, and went into the Beijing streets that early May, 1919, looking for a place to stay. Some friends took them in, after

they promised not to hold any secret meetings, a rigidly enforced covenant that was beginning to see some disappearances.

Li knew it was doubtful the two of them would stay there long, but they were determined, not wanting to involve their friends in something irreversible. In fact, after the first two days, Li and Mao never returned, leaving everything, everything except their chance.

Our teacups were shaking on the table. At first I thought Professor Li had hit a leg of the table with his cane again.

“Tremors, just tremors,” he said. “It happens here a lot.”

But in 1900 there was more, but more was not enough, so it shook again in 1911, 1919, 1928 and 1966. Now his granddaughter cared by his side, though he could well do it himself, his count still reliable. A doctor of the heart, she had requested a work unit transfer here to be close to her grandfather. What she counted was entirely different, if she counted at all past the pulse, that she allowed me to see in her eyes just once on the second day of the interview.

After 1919, Li and Mao separated, occasionally reappearing together in the most unusual of places. When Mao took his arduous hike to Shaanxi Province in the winter of 1935, Li welcomed him at Yan’an and invited him to his son’s wedding. On a flight over the Hump in 1944, a Flying Tiger pilot must have seen the two of them huddled together in the cargo hold, planning strategy amidst the filing cabinets and Steinway CD he was hauling around China for Madame Chiang just one gas tank ahead of her imminent defection to Taiwan.

“What was he like? What was old *huxi dai you suan wei* like, standing there on that autumn afternoon at the Gate of Heavenly Peace?”

His close friends and trusted theoreticians called him *garlic breath*, his doctors advised him to quit smoking, and one warm night that summer, he personally rode around the capital putting his initials on every one of its forty-nine trolleys and five buses. But on October 1, 1949, nothing else seemed to matter. He was already a monument there atop the review stands at the Gate of Heavenly Peace, facing south in the tumultuous afternoon sunlight, the city thronging with a million red and yellow chrysanthemums. Professor Li and his son were with him, standing to his right, sharing his limelight, but they all knew the work had just begun.

“I was born the next year,” Professor Li’s granddaughter added, her only words within my hearing that weekend.

“Yes,” Professor Li added, “yes, and she would have been baptized by the bishop at Nantang if the Vatican had not ordered the Chinese Catholics to stop reading Chinese newspapers and wearing red scarves, wearing red scarves, red scarves, as in 1966, under red banners, there suddenly appeared at Beida’s south gate, teenagers all, storming the gatekeepers, chanting, grabbing the head librarian by her hair and beating her to death, along with her father, my only son.”

Yes, his granddaughter was in the middle of high school that year, and some of her classmates were responsible. Nevertheless she blamed Mao for doing nothing, Professor Li said, and looked away.

“And in two years she went away to medical school, what there was left of any healing.”

There were no benches. “Count them,” he said, “there were no benches, not one, not a single one.”

The three of us sat there counting, one empty space after another in the yellowing photograph of that October afternoon.

It must have reminded her of the night her father died, I imagined, as she bent down to kiss him this one last time with no smell of tobacco on his breath, on the night he died, baby, come hug, come hug and say goodbye, come baby, come hug.

Sometimes our nerves are like that, brought about by our own carelessness, ignoring storm warnings, plain forgetting, or just looking the other way for no reason at all.

“What did you think, what did you think though as you stood there next to him with your son who would soon father a daughter and then be beaten to death by her classmates before she finished high school?”

“There were no benches in sight, that is to say, there were no benches. Everyone was standing up, shouting, waving tiny red flags. It’s true, RKO News was there, recording it all. Edward Murrow too, but I don’t think he saw any benches either. Even if he had seen any, he would not have mentioned it in his broadcasts, since nobody in America would have cared.”

“So why were you counting benches when you knew there weren’t any on the review stands or in the square that you could not see anyway?”

In the past perfect tense of Chinese grammar, he suggested that while he stood there between Old Garlic Breath and his son,

he had anticipated this inevitable calamity. That is the price. There is no other way to translate this.

What eventually brought us back could have been anything, the granddaughter getting up to replenish our tea, a tree in the courtyard shimmering in the light, anything at all. Who was there to say why the breathing stopped, if it had stopped at all? Why were our voices filled with double meanings?

“You know,” Professor Li added, “he was always afraid of the cold.”

Yes, we know, yes, though sometimes not by name, yes. Baby, come, come say hug, come say goodbye. The heart is such an extravagant organ.

(On October 1, 1949, when photographers were busily taking historical pictures of Mao Zedong proclaiming the establishment of the People’s Republic of China atop the review stands in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, Professor Li Weibin, Mao’s confidant and trusted advisor, was standing by his side. You can see him in his long coat and glasses in the photographs that were shot from the west.

Last month [1989] I interviewed him in his home in the Fragrant Hills outside Beijing, the same location that prompted much of Cao Xueqin’s *Dream of the Red Chamber*. More than ninety years old by most accounts, Professor Li was collected, lucid, and did not make a single error of time, place or identity.

The visit extended over the entire weekend, and as he and his granddaughter bade their farewells at the gates

on Sunday evening, he confided to me his wish to see his story published as soon as possible.)

## DEFINITIONS

**S**hun Min was assigned the news anchoring position right after graduation from the national broadcasting institute. At three hours a day, ten days a month, no writing or editing or reporting stories, just show up in time for makeup before noon and before six to read the news, it was easy enough, the envy of his classmates who were given jobs as video librarian, station timekeeper and boom operators.

For the first two years he put all of himself into his work, each story he read, however short and sometimes ambiguous, carried his most sincere and believable expressions, his voice pulsing with heart-felt humanity, assuring his viewers of the safe passage of another day. *Trust me, trust me* he said at least five hundred times a year in the privacy of four million Beijing homes, *I will not lie to you*, and the people in the capital believed him, even when the lights sometimes reflected off his glasses. On the streets he was easy to recognize, and pedestrians would stop him and express their trust, sometimes touching a hand or sleeve, and once, in this country where things numinous have been banned since its liberation in 1949, an elderly woman limping on her left side lightly tugged one of his ears just to make sure he was not divinity itself.

This April when he was reading a brief story on the evening news about the student gathering at Tiananmen Square, a wisp of anxiety appeared in his eyes, and for the remaining minutes before the camera shifted to the international weather map, his voice sounded distracted, then stumbled once on the temperature between Karachi and Cairo.

After the broadcast, the news producer approached him, concerned about his health and diet. The station manager offered a car to take him home. Slightly cautious from all this attention, he said *I'm all right* carefully three times before they believed him, then rode his bicycle home after wiping off his makeup going down in the elevator. In the approaching twilight of another promising spring sunset, Shun wondered about riding downtown to see the students, but not being a reporter, he went home instead, mentally counting the number of times these students have gathered here in Beijing: 1900, 1911, 1927, 1966, 1976, and now in 1989, seven times this century although he was not sure 1966 should be included.

That evening as he continued reading another reformist novelist preoccupied with the scar on the national conscience left there by the three years of political aberration between 1966 and 1969—a wound so deep even now a generation later people still refuse to talk about it, as if it had completely vanished, or had not happened at all, which Shun knew was not true—he heard a loud knocking on his apartment door. All evening he had heard the repeated sirens of police and emergency vehicles passing in the streets, and the excited but low voices of his neighbors who had gone to investigate the rumors, but as a news professional, he knew that such compulsive curiosity could wait until the

## Definitions

stories came into the studio in the morning, after they had been gathered, sorted and vetted by knowledgeable persons trained and experienced in interpreting these dramatic events. All he would have to do was read them, all there in the past perfect tense.

A tall man in a long coat introduced himself politely, though he did not need to since Shun recognized him as a key and very public member of the central party's policy-making bureau. Over his shoulders, Shun could see the shapes of two other men standing in the background, away from the light.

*I can only stay a minute, the bureau member said, let's not waste it on ceremony. From your broadcast tonight, we were worried about you.* He paused, letting his message enough time to settle. Then he asked, *Have you been wondering what's happened to the students?*

*No, I don't think so.*

*Do you think like your neighbors that some students have disappeared? That the PLA is responsible?*

*No, I didn't know my neighbors thought that. I didn't even know there were any soldiers.*

*Those are only irresponsible rumors uttered by peasants. You have done a famous job on television, and we want to encourage and help you.* Then he flashed open his long coat.

Its folds were lined with sheets and sheets of stamped official papers. *Here, he said, removing a set from the left side and handing it to Shun, Here, he said again, this will help you understand our deliberated position. This is your new definite dogma on disappearance. But there's no need to read it, it's official, he added. It says that information transmitters are*

*forbidden to convey stories about disappearances, ever. They're demoralizing; they can panic the people and destabilize the government. Besides, it's not true; it's not scientific, people don't just disappear.*

They both stood there a moment thinking about what had just been said. Shun could hear a man outside his apartment thumbing a butane cigarette lighter, *click, click, click*, before it was lost in the sound of another passing siren, before that too was replaced by a soft but distinct knocking on his door.

*I must go now*, the bureau member said and shook Shun's hand.

After he left, Shun continued standing in the middle of his apartment until the official papers dropped forgetfully from his hand. He then spent the rest of the night in a living room chair thinking about what the bureau member had said. Was his visit a warning? It definitely was not a routine visit announcing a policy change—that would surely have gone to the station manager or news director. Anyway why me, he thought. I just read the news that's handed to me ten minutes before I go on the air. Did I betray something when I read the student story tonight? And soldiers? And disappearances? There was no mention in the script. Besides, how would one read a story about disappearances, after all? What would be its effect? And who would believe it? Who can authenticate it, Shun asked himself, until he remembered some stories he had read in a gray-market American newsmagazine one day when he was waiting for someone in a downtown joint-venture hotel lobby, some stories about people disappearing in green Ford Falcons in Argentina and others losing themselves in Los Alamos, New

## Definitions

Mexico just before Japan surrendered in 1945. But maybe these were not the same things. Maybe, just maybe, he repeated to himself until it was beginning to get light outside.

The news director was not in his office when Shun went to see him the next morning. All of the drawers of the news archivist's filing cases and desks were opened however, overflowing with papers, as if someone had been trying to stuff them back into their files. Shun picked up a sheet from the many that were scattered on the floor. *Dateline Buenos Aires, August 7, 1977. Disappeared today, Pepe, Marianna and Angela Mendoza, father, wife and daughter, 27, 24 and infant, witnesses said, whisked away in a green Ford Falcon while they were walking along Avenida Florida in broad daylight. No known political activism or membership.* Shun picked up another one, another, a similar disappearance, Shanghai 1937, then Selma 1966, Warsaw 1945, and on and on, the room full of it, until he got to Hiroshima and Nagasaki 1945.

Dazed, he walked into the lobby and did not see anyone there at all, only gaps where they should have been. When he started out the sliding glass doors of the station building, he noticed too that everything on the outside had entirely disappeared, all of Beijing had absolutely vanished, except for his exact double, another Shun Min, walking up the sidewalk to the building as if it too had disappeared. He knew this to be true, he said to himself, because he could tell his story now in the first person, to an American stranger who had come to Beijing to teach translation to his niece.

(I met Crazy Shun shortly after the crackdown on Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989, in the downtown apartment of a friend who had arranged for my teaching appointment in Beijing months ahead of its political spring, which I accepted against the travel warning of the U.S. Department of State. In our conversation that lasted well into the evening, he was very forthcoming about his duplicity in the media dissemination of news about the student unrest, and his brief encounter with the state security apparatus. For his protection, the details of his story and position have been altered to fit the narrative shape of this interview. He remained the model voice of China Central Television and Radio news well into the 1990s.)

## COMING INTO BEIJING, 1997

for Moling

Don't tell anyone this  
But I feel as if I'm coming home  
Grass browning, coal smoke drifting  
In this even November sunlight

Concrete block buildings in all colors  
Dark figures in narrow *hutongs*  
With less than a little money to spend  
They have been here for generations, sweeping

Everywhere the carefully planted trees  
Tendered rows of elms, willows and locusts  
Above them the flitting magpies and higher  
Always the crows that have witnessed all

And all have come to this, like me  
Stones and people from every province  
Still able to be astonished  
Still doing wrong or right in different directions

MY PRIVATE CHINA

Did I arrive with the right currency?  
And enough cigarettes for everyone?  
Unlike the Hong Kong I've just left  
My Chinese is better understood here

The familiar, differing warm expressions  
Their all-day tea jars warming in the sun  
In the shadow of another Mao talisman  
Or any other remediable mistake

I enter the city writing this poem  
That has become important to remember  
Holding back tears the entire ride  
A 30-km trip I used to bicycle every weekend

At every intersection hundreds of bicyclists  
Negotiate past truckloads of cabbage  
Testament to another government surplus  
Distributed free to every work unit

The same traffic signs are still cautious  
Saying the exact same thing to cyclists  
And the working horses that have refused  
To pay attention for centuries in their toil

Next morning I will watch early dancers  
Face the rising sun at the pavilion  
As if they've just jumped out of prison  
Onto the back of a dragon vexing everywhere

*Coming into Beijing, 1997*

Early next morning I will also pick up  
A fallen ginkgo leaf, wipe off the dew with my fingers  
And press it deep into my passport  
So dear, where it will stay, where I am not