adhered to this discipline totally. He believed that the revolution could not be preserved and sustained if it were challenged openly. In a revolution you had to fight for your side even if it was not perfect – as long as you believed it was better than the other side. Unity was the categorical imperative.

My mother could see that as far as my father's relationship with the Party was concerned, she was an outsider. One day, when she ventured some critical comments about the situation and got no response from him, she said bitterly, 'You are a good Communist, but a rotten husband!' My father nodded. He said he knew.

Fourteen years later, my father told us children what had almost happened to him in 1957. Since his early days in Yan'an, when he was a young man of twenty, he had been close friends with a well-known woman writer called Ding Ling. In March 1957, when he was in Peking leading the Sichuan delegation at a Public Affairs conference, she sent him a message inviting him to visit her in Tianjin, near Peking. My father wanted to go, but decided against it because he was in a hurry to get home. Several months later Ding Ling was labeled as the number-one rightist in China. 'If I had gone to see her,' my father told us, 'I would have been done for too.'

12. 'Capable Women Can Make a Meal without Food' — Famine

(1958–1962)

In the autumn of 1958, when I was six, I started going to a primary school about twenty minutes' walk from home, mostly along muddy cobbled back alleys. Every day on my way to and from school, I screwed up my eyes to search every inch of ground for broken nails, rusty cogs, and any other metal objects that had been trodden into the mud between the cobbles. These were for feeding into furnaces to produce steel, which was my major occupation. Yes, at the age of six, I was involved in steel production, and had to compete with my schoolmates at handing in the most scrap iron. All around me uplifting music blared from loudspeakers, and there were banners, posters, and huge slogans painted on the walls proclaiming 'Long Live the Great Leap Forward!' and 'Everybody, Make Steel!' Although I did not fully understand why, I knew that Chairman Mao had ordered the nation to make a lot of steel. In my school, crucible-like vats had replaced some of our cooking woks and were sitting on the giant stoves in the kitchen. All our scrap iron was fed into them, including the old

woks, which had now been broken to bits. The stoves were kept permanently lit – until they melted down. Our teachers took turns feeding firewood into them around-the-clock, and stirring the scraps in the vats with a huge spoon. We did not have many lessons, as the teachers were too preoccupied with the vats. So were the older, teenage children. The rest of us were organized to clean the teachers' apartments and babysit for them.

I remember visiting a hospital once with some other children to see one of our teachers who had been seriously burned when molten iron had splashed onto her arms. Doctors and nurses in white coats were rushing around frantically. There was a furnace on the hospital grounds, and they had to feed logs into it all the time, even when they were performing operations, and right through the night.

Shortly before I started going to school, my family had moved from the old vicarage into a special compound, which was the center of government for the province. It enclosed several streets, with blocks of apartments and offices and a number of mansions; a high wall blocked it off from the outside world. Inside the main gate was what had been the US Servicemen's Club during the Second World War. Ernest Hemingway had stayed there in 1941. The club building was in traditional Chinese style, with the ends of its yellow tiled roof turning upward, and heavy dark red pillars. It was now the office of the secretariat of the Sichuan government.

A huge furnace was erected in the parking lot where the chauffeurs used to wait. At night the sky was lit up, and the noise of the crowds around the furnace could be heard 300 yards away in my room. My family's woks went into this furnace, together with all our cast-iron cooking utensils. We did not suffer from their loss, as we did not need them anymore. No private cooking was allowed now, and everybody had to eat in the canteen. The furnaces were insatiable. Gone was my parents' bed, a soft, comfortable one with iron springs. Gone also were the iron railings

from the city pavements, and anything else that was iron. I hardly saw my parents for months. They often did not come home at all, as they had to make sure the temperature in their office furnaces never dropped.

It was at this time that Mao gave full vent to his half-baked dream of turning China into a first-class modern power. He called steel the 'Marshal' of industry, and ordered steel output to be doubled in one year – from 5.35 million tons in 1957 to 10.7 million in 1958. But instead of trying to expand the proper steel industry with skilled workers, he decided to get the whole population to take part. There was a steel quota for every unit, and for months people stopped their normal work in order to meet it. The country's economic development was reduced to the simplistic question of how many tons of steel could be produced, and the entire nation was thrown into this single act. It was officially estimated that nearly 100 million peasants were pulled out of agricultural work and into steel production. They had been the labor force producing much of the country's food. Mountains were stripped bare of trees for fuel. But the output of this mass production amounted only to what people called 'cattle droppings' (*niu-shi-ge-da*), meaning useless turds.

This absurd situation reflected not only Mao's ignorance of how an economy worked, but also an almost metaphysical disregard for reality, which might have been interesting in a poet, but in a political leader with absolute power was quite another matter. One of its main components was a deep-seated contempt for human life. Not long before this he had told the Finnish ambassador, 'Even if the United States had more powerful atom bombs and used them on China, blasted a hole in the earth, or blew it to pieces, while this might be a matter of great significance to the solar system, it would still be an insignificant matter as far as the universe as a whole is concerned.'

Mao's voluntarism had been fueled by his recent experience in Russia. Increasingly disillusioned with Khrushchev

after his denunciation of Stalin in 1956, Mao went to Moscow in late 1957 to attend a world Communist summit. He returned convinced that Russia and its allies were abandoning socialism and turning 'revisionist.' He saw China as the only true believer. It had to blaze a new path. Megalomania and voluntarism meshed easily in Mao's mind.

Mao's fixation on steel went largely unquestioned, as did his other obsessions. He took a dislike to sparrows – they devour grain. So every household was mobilized. We sat outside ferociously beating any metal object, from cymbals to saucepans, to scare the sparrows off the trees so they would eventually drop dead from exhaustion. Even today I can vividly hear the din made by my siblings and me, as well as by the government officials, sitting under a mammoth wolfberry tree in our courtyard.

There were also fantastic economic goals. Mao claimed that China's industrial output could overtake that of the United States and Britain within fifteen years. For the Chinese, these countries represented the capitalist world. Overtaking them would be seen as a triumph over their enemies. This appealed to people's pride, and boosted their enthusiasm enormously. They had felt humiliated by the refusal of the United States and most major Western countries to grant diplomatic recognition, and were so keen to show the world that they could make it on their own that they wanted to believe in miracles. Mao provided the inspiration. The energy of the population had been eager to find an outlet. And here it was. The gung-ho spirit overrode caution, as ignorance triumphed over reason.

In early 1958, shortly after returning from Moscow, Mao visited Chengdu for about a month. He was fired up with the idea that China could do anything, especially seize the leadership of socialism from the Russians. It was in Chengdu that he outlined his 'Great Leap Forward.' The city organized a big parade for him, but the participants had no idea that Mao was there. He lurked out of sight.

At this parade a slogan was put forward, 'Capable women can make a meal without food,' a reversal of a pragmatic ancient Chinese saying, 'No matter how capable, a woman cannot make a meal without food.' Exaggerated rhetoric had become concrete demands. Impossible fantasies were supposed to become reality.

It was a gorgeous spring that year. One day Mao went for an outing to a park called the Thatched Cottage of Du Fu, the eighth century Tang poet. My mother's Eastern District office was responsible for the security of one area of the park, and she and her colleagues patrolled it, pretending to be tourists. Mao rarely kept to a schedule, or let people know his precise movements, so for hours and hours my mother sat sipping tea in the teahouse, trying to keep on the alert. She finally grew restless and told her colleagues she was going for a walk. She strayed into the security area of the Western District, whose staff did not know her, and was immediately followed. When the Party secretary of the Western District received reports about a 'suspicious woman' and came to see for himself, he laughed: 'Why, this is old Comrade Xia from the Eastern District!' Afterward my mother was criticized by her boss, district chief Guo, for 'running around without discipline.'

Mao also visited a number of farms in the Chengdu Plain. Thus far, peasant cooperatives had been small. It was here that Mao ordered them all to be merged into bigger institutions, which were later called 'people's communes.'

That summer, all of China was organized into these new units, each containing between 2,000 and 20,000 households. One of the forerunners of this drive was an area called Xushui, in Hebei province in North China, to which Mao took a shine. In his eagerness to prove that they deserved Mao's attention, the local boss there claimed they were going to produce over ten times as much grain as before. Mao smiled broadly and responded: 'What are you

going to do with all that food? On second thought, it's not too bad to have too much food, really. The state doesn't want it. Everybody else has plenty of their own. But the farmers here can just eat and eat. You can eat five meals a day!' Mao was intoxicated, indulging in the eternal dream of the Chinese peasant – surplus food. After these remarks, the villagers further stoked the desires of their Great Leader by claiming that they were producing more than a million pounds of potatoes per *mu* (one *mu* is one-sixth of an acre), over 130,000 pounds of wheat per *mu*, and cabbages weighing 500 pounds each.

It was a time when telling fantasies to oneself as well as others, and believing them, was practised to an incredible degree. Peasants moved crops from several plots of land to one plot to show Party officials that they had produced a miracle harvest. Similar 'Potemkin fields' were shown off to gullible – or self-blinded – agricultural scientists, reporters, visitors from other regions, and foreigners. Although these crops generally died within a few days because of untimely transplantation and harmful density, the visitors did not know that, or did not want to know. A large part of the population was swept into this confused, crazy world. 'Self-deception while deceiving others' (*zi-qi-qi-ren*) gripped the nation. Many people – including agricultural scientists and senior Party leaders – said they saw the miracles themselves. Those who failed to match other people's fantastic claims began to doubt and blame themselves. Under a dictatorship like Mao's, where information was withheld and fabricated, it was very difficult for ordinary people to have confidence in their own experience or knowledge. Not to mention that they were now facing a nationwide tidal wave of fervor which promised to swamp any individual coolheadedness. It was easy to start ignoring reality and simply put one's faith in Mao. To go along with the frenzy was by far the easiest course. To pause and think and be circumspect meant trouble.

An official cartoon portrayed a mouselike scientist whining, 'A stove like yours can only boil water to make tea.' Next to him stood a giant worker, lifting a huge sluice gate releasing a flood of molten steel, who retorted, 'How much can you drink?' Most who saw the absurdity of the situation were too frightened to speak their minds, particularly after the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957. Those who did voice doubts were immediately silenced, or sacked, which also meant discrimination against their family and a bleak prospect for their children.

In many places, people who refused to boast of massive increases in output were beaten up until they gave in. In Yibin, some leaders of production units were trussed up with their arms behind their backs in the village square while questions were hurled at them:

'How much wheat can you produce per *mu*?'

'Four hundred *jin*' (about 450 pounds – a realistic amount).

Then, beating him: 'How much wheat can you produce per *mu*?'

'Eight hundred *jin*.'

Even this impossible figure was not enough. The unfortunate man would be beaten, or simply left hanging, until he finally said: 'Ten thousand *jin*.' Sometimes the man died hanging there because he refused to increase the figure, or simply before he could raise the figure high enough.

Many grass-roots officials and peasants involved in scenes like this did not believe in the ridiculous boasting, but fear of being accused themselves drove them on. They were carrying out the orders of the Party, and they were safe as long as they followed Mao. The totalitarian system in which they had been immersed had sapped and warped their sense of responsibility. Even doctors would boast about miraculously healing incurable diseases.

Trucks used to turn up at our compound carrying grinning peasants coming to report on some fantastic, record-breaking achievement. One day it was a monster cucumber

half as long as the truck. Another time it was a tomato carried with difficulty by two children. On another occasion there was a giant pig squeezed into a truck. The peasants claimed they had bred an actual pig this size. The pig was only made of papier-mâché, but as a child I imagined that it was real. Maybe I was confused by the adults around me, who behaved as though all this were true. People had learned to defy reason and to live with acting.

The whole nation slid into doublespeak. Words became divorced from reality, responsibility, and people's real thoughts. Lies were told with ease because words had lost their meanings – and had ceased to be taken seriously by others.

This was entrenched by the further regimentation of society. When he first set up the communes, Mao said their main advantage was that 'they are easy to control,' because the peasants would now be in an organized system rather than being, to a certain extent, left alone. They were given detailed orders from the very top about how to till their land. Mao summed up the whole of agriculture in eight characters: 'soil, fertilizer, water, seeds, dense planting, protection, tending, technology.' The Party Central Committee in Peking was handing out two-page instructions on how peasants all over China should improve their fields, another page on how to use fertilizers, another on planting crops densely. Their incredibly simplistic instructions had to be strictly followed: the peasants were ordered to replant their crops more densely in one mini-campaign after another.

Another means of regimentation, setting up canteens in the communes, was an obsession with Mao at the time. In his airy way, he defined communism as 'public canteens with free meals.' The fact that the canteens themselves did not produce food did not concern him. In 1958 the regime effectively banned eating at home. Every peasant had to eat in the commune canteen. Kitchen utensils like woks – and, in some places, money – were outlawed. Everybody

was going to be looked after by the commune and the state. The peasants filed into the canteens every day after work and ate to their hearts' content, which they had never been able to do before, even in the best years and in the most fertile areas. They consumed and wasted the entire food reserve in the countryside. They filed into the fields, too. But how much work was done did not matter, because the produce now belonged to the state, and was completely unrelated to the peasants' lives. Mao put forward the prediction that China was reaching a society of communism, which in Chinese means 'sharing material goods,' and the peasants took this to mean that they would get a share anyway, regardless of how much work they did. With no incentive to work, they just went to the fields and had a good snooze.

Agriculture was also neglected because of the priority given to steel. Many of the peasants were exhausted from having to spend long hours finding fuel, scrap iron, and iron ore and keeping the furnaces going. The fields were often left to the women and children, who had to do everything by hand, as the animals were busy making their contribution to steel production. When harvest time came in autumn 1958, few people were in the fields.

The failure to get in the harvest in 1958 flashed a warning that a food shortage was on its way, even though official statistics showed a double-digit increase in agricultural output. It was officially announced that in 1958 China's wheat output had overtaken that of the United States. The Party newspaper, the *People's Daily*, started a discussion on the topic 'How do we cope with the problem of producing too much food?'

My father's department was in charge of the press in Sichuan, which printed outlandish claims, as did every publication in China. The press was the voice of the Party, and when it came to Party policies, neither my father nor anyone else in the media had any say. They were part of a huge conveyor belt. My father watched the turn of events with alarm. His only option was to appeal to the top leaders.

At the end of 1958 he wrote a letter to the Central Committee in Peking stating that producing steel like this was pointless and a waste of resources; the peasants were exhausted, their labor was being squandered, and there was a food shortage. He appealed for urgent action. He gave the letter to the governor to pass on. The governor, Lee Da-zhang, was the number-two man in the province. He had given my father his first job when he had come to Chengdu from Yibin, and treated him like a friend.

Governor Lee told my father he was not going to forward the letter. Nothing in it was new, he said. 'The Party knows everything. Have faith in it.' Mao had said that under no circumstances must the people's morale be dampened. The Great Leap Forward had changed the psychological attitude of the Chinese from passivity to a can-do, get-up-and-go spirit, he said, which must not be imperiled.

Governor Lee also told my father that he had been given the dangerous nickname 'Opposition' among the provincial leaders, to whom he had voiced disagreements. It was only because of his other qualities, his absolute loyalty to the Party and his stern sense of discipline, that my father was still all right. 'The good thing,' the governor said, 'is that you only voiced your doubts to the Party, and not to the public.' He warned my father he could get into serious trouble if he insisted on raising these concerns, as could his family and 'others,' clearly meaning himself, my father's friend. My father did not insist. He was half convinced by the argument, and the stakes were too high. He had reached a stage where he was not insusceptible to compromise.

But my father and the people working in the departments of Public Affairs collected a great number of complaints, as part of their jobs, and forwarded them to Peking. There was general discontent among the people and officials alike. In fact, the Great Leap Forward triggered off the most serious split in the leadership since the Communists had taken power a decade before. Mao had to step down from the less important of his two main posts, president of the state, in favor of Liu Shaoqi. Liu became the number-two man in China, but his prestige was only a fraction of that of Mao, who kept his key post as chairman of the Party.

The voices of dissent grew so strong that the Party had to convene a special conference, which was held at the end of June 1959 in the mountain resort of Lushan, in central China. At the conference the defense minister, Marshal Peng Dehuai, wrote a letter to Mao criticizing what had happened in the Great Leap Forward and recommending a realistic approach to the economy. The letter was actually rather restrained, and ended on the obligatory note of optimism (in this case, catching up with Britain in four years). But although Peng was one of Mao's oldest comrades, and one of the people closest to him, Mao could not take even this slight criticism, particularly at a time when he was on the defensive, because he knew he was wrong. Using the aggrieved language of which he was enamored, Mao called the letter 'a bombardment intended to level Lushan.' He dug in his heels and dragged the conference out for over a month, fiercely attacking Marshal Peng. Peng and the few who openly supported him were branded 'rightist opportunists.' Peng was dismissed as defense minister, placed under house arrest, and later sent into premature retirement in Sichuan, where he was assigned a lowly post.

Mao had had to scheme hard to preserve his power. In this he was a supreme master. His favorite reading, which he recommended to other Party leaders, was a classic multi-volume collection about court power and intrigues. In fact, Mao's rule was best understood in terms of a medieval court, in which he exercised spellbinding power over his courtiers and subjects. He was also a maestro at 'divide and rule,' and at manipulating men's inclination to throw others to the wolves. In the end, few

top officials stood up for Marshal Peng, in spite of their private disenchantment with Mao's policies. The only one who avoided having to show his hand was the general secretary of the Party, Deng Xiaoping, who had broken his leg. Deng's stepmother had been grumbling at home, 'I was a farmer all my life and I have never heard of such a nonsensical way of farming!' When Mao heard how Deng had broken his leg – playing billiards – he commented, 'How very convenient.'

Commissar Li, the Sichuan first secretary, returned to Chengdu from the conference with a document containing the remarks Peng had made at Lushan. This was distributed to officials of Grade 17 and above; they were asked to state formally whether they agreed with it.

My father had heard something about the Lushan dispute from the governor of Sichuan. At his 'exam' meeting my father made some vague remarks about Peng's letter. Then he did something he had never done before: he warned my mother that it was a trap. She was greatly moved. This was the first time he had ever put her interests before the rules of the Party.

She was surprised to see that a lot of other people seemed to have been tipped off as well. At her collective 'exam,' half of her colleagues showed flaming indignation against Peng's letter, and claimed the criticisms in it were 'totally untrue.' Others looked as though they had lost their ability to speak, and mumbled something evasive. One man managed to straddle the fence, saying, 'I am not in a position to agree or disagree because I do not know whether the evidence given by Marshal Peng is factual or not. If it is, I would support him. Of course, I would not if it were not true.'

The chief of the grain bureau for Chengdu and the chief of the Chengdu post office were Red Army veterans who had fought under Marshal Peng. They both said they agreed with what their old and much-revered commander had said, adding their own experiences in the

countryside to back up Peng's observations. My mother wondered whether these old soldiers knew about the trap. If so, the way they spoke their minds was heroic. She wished she had their courage. But she thought of her children – what would happen to them? She was no longer the free spirit she had been as a student. When her turn came she said, 'The views in the letter are not in keeping with the policies of the Party over the last couple of years.'

She was told by her boss, Mr Guo, that her remarks were thoroughly unsatisfactory because she had failed to state her attitude. For days she lived in a state of acute anxiety. The Red Army veterans who had supported Peng were denounced as 'rightist opportunists,' sacked, and sent to do manual labor. My mother was called to a meeting to have her 'right-wing tendencies' criticized. At the meeting, Mr Guo described another of her 'serious errors.' In 1959 a sort of black market had sprung up in Chengdu selling chickens and eggs. Because the communes had taken over chickens from individual peasants, and were incapable of raising them, chickens and eggs had disappeared from the shops, which were state owned. A few peasants had somehow managed to keep one or two chickens at home under their beds, and were now surreptitiously selling them and their eggs in the back alleys at about twenty times their previous price. Officials were sent out every day to try to catch the peasants. Once, when my mother was asked by Mr Guo to go on one of these raids, she said, 'What's wrong with supplying things people need? If there is demand, there should be supply.' Because of this remark, my mother was given a warning about her 'right-wing tendencies.'

The purge of 'rightist opportunists' rocked the Party once again, as a great many officials agreed with Peng. The lesson was that Mao's authority was unchallengeable – even though he was clearly in the wrong. Officials could see that no matter how high up you were – Peng, after all,

was the defense minister – and no matter what your standing – Peng had reputedly been Mao's favorite – if you offended Mao you would fall into disgrace. They also knew that you could not speak your mind and resign, or even resign quietly: resignation was seen as an unacceptable protest. There was no opting out. The mouths of the Party as well as the people were now tightly sealed. After this, the Great Leap Forward went into further, madder excesses. More impossible economic goals were imposed from on high.

More peasants were mobilized to make steel. And more arbitrary orders rained down, causing chaos in the countryside.

At the end of 1958, at the height of the Great Leap Forward, a massive construction project was begun: ten great buildings in the capital, Peking, to be completed in ten months to mark the tenth anniversary, 1 October 1959, of the founding of the People's Republic.

One of the ten buildings was the Great Hall of the People, a Soviet-style columned edifice on the west side of Tiananmen Square. Its marbled front was a good quarter of a mile long, and its chandeliered main banqueting hall could seat several thousand people. This was where important meetings were to be held and the leaders were to receive foreign visitors. The rooms, all to be on a grand scale, were named after the provinces of China. My father was put in charge of the decoration of the Sichuan Room, and when the work was completed he invited Party leaders who had been connected with Sichuan to inspect it. Deng Xiaoping, who was from Sichuan, came, as did Marshal Ho Lung, a famous Robin Hood figure who had been one of the founders of the Red Army, and was a close friend of Deng's.

At one point my father was called away, leaving these two and another old colleague of theirs, actually Deng's brother, chatting among themselves. As he came back into

the room he heard Marshal Ho saying to Deng's brother, while pointing at Deng: 'It really should be him on the throne.' At that moment they spotted my father and immediately stopped talking.

My father was in a state of intense apprehension after this. He knew he had accidentally overheard hints of disagreements at the top of the regime. Any conceivable action, or inaction, could get him into deadly trouble. In fact, nothing happened to him, but when he told me about the incident almost ten years later he said he had lived with the fear of disaster ever since. 'Just to have heard that amounts to treason,' he said, using a phrase which means 'a crime bringing decapitation.'

What he had overheard was nothing but an indication of some disenchantment with Mao. This sentiment was shared by many top leaders, not least by the new president, Liu Shaoqi.

In autumn 1959 Liu came to Chengdu to inspect a commune called 'Red Splendor.' The previous year, Mao had been highly enthusiastic about the astronomical rice output there. Before Liu arrived the local officials rounded up anyone they thought might expose them, and locked them up in a temple. But Liu had a 'mole,' and as he was walking past the temple he stopped and asked to have a look inside. The officials made various excuses, even claiming that the temple was about to collapse, but Liu refused to take no for an answer. Eventually the big, rusty lock was clicked open, and a group of shabby peasants stumbled out into the daylight. The embarrassed local officials tried to explain to Liu that these were 'troublemakers' who had been locked up because they might harm the distinguished visitor. The peasants themselves were silent. Commune officials, though completely impotent regarding policies, held awesome power over people's lives. If they wanted to punish someone, they could give him the worst job to do, the least food, and invent an excuse to have him harassed, denounced, even arrested.

President Liu asked some questions, but the peasants just smiled and mumbled. From their point of view it was better to offend the president than the local bosses. The president would be leaving for Peking in a few minutes, but the commune bosses would be with them for the rest of their lives.

Shortly afterward another senior leader also came to Chengdu – Marshal Zhu De – accompanied by one of Mao's private secretaries. Zhu De was from Sichuan and had been the commander of the Red Army, and military architect of the Communists' victory. Since 1949 he had kept a low profile. He visited several communes near Chengdu, and afterward, as he strolled by the Silk River looking at the pavilions, bamboo groves, and willow-embraced teahouses along the riverbank, he waxed emotional: 'Sichuan is indeed a heavenly place. . . .' He spoke the words in the style of a line of poetry. Mao's secretary added the matching line, in the traditional poets' fashion: 'Pity that damning gales of lie telling and false communism are destroying it!' My mother was with them, and thought to herself: I agree wholeheartedly.

Suspicious of his colleagues, and still angry about being attacked at Lushan, Mao obstinately stuck to his crazy economic policies. Although he was not unaware of the disasters they had been causing, and was discreetly allowing some of the most impracticable ones to be revised, his 'face' would not allow him to give up completely. Meanwhile, as the sixties began, a great famine spread across the whole of China.

In Chengdu, the monthly food ration for each adult was reduced to 19 pounds of rice, 3.5 ounces of cooking oil, and 3.5 ounces of meat, when there was any. Scarcely anything else was available, not even cabbage. Many people were afflicted by edema, a condition in which fluid accumulates under the skin because of malnutrition. The patient turns yellow and swells up. The most popular remedy was eating chlorella, which was supposed to be

rich in protein. Chlorella fed on human urine, so people stopped going to the toilet and peed into spittoons instead, then dropped the chlorella seeds in; they grew into something looking like green fish roe in a couple of days, and were scooped out of the urine, washed, and cooked with rice. They were truly disgusting to eat, but did reduce the swelling.

Like everybody else, my father was entitled only to a limited food ration. But as a senior official he had some privileges. In our compound there were two canteens, a small one for departmental directors and their wives and children, and a big one for everyone else, which included my grandmother, my aunt Jun-ying, and the maid. Most of the time we collected our food at the canteens and took it home to eat. There was more food in the canteens than on the streets. The provincial government had its own farm, and there were also 'presents' from county governments. These valuable supplies were divided between the canteens, and the small one got preferential treatment.

As Party officials, my parents also had special food coupons. I used to go with my grandmother to a special store outside the compound to buy food with them. My mother's coupons were blue. She was entitled to five eggs, almost an ounce of soybeans, and the same amount of sugar per month. My father's coupons were yellow. He was entitled to twice as much as my mother because of his higher rank. My family pooled the food from the canteens and the other sources and ate together. The adults always gave the children more, so I did not go hungry. But the adults all suffered from malnutrition, and my grandmother developed slight edema. She grew chlorella at home, and I was aware that the adults were eating it, although they would not tell me what it was for. Once I tried a little, and immediately spat it out as it tasted revolting. I never had it again.

I had little idea that famine was raging all around me. One day on my way to school, as I was eating a small

steamed roll, someone rushed up and snatched it from my hands. As I was recovering from the shock, I caught a glimpse of a very thin, dark back in shorts and bare feet running down the mud alley with his hand to his mouth, devouring the roll. When I told my parents what had happened, my father's eyes were terribly sad. He stroked my head and said, 'You are lucky. Other children like you are starving.'

I often had to visit the hospital for my teeth at that time. Whenever I went there I had an attack of nausea at the horrible sight of dozens of people with shiny, almost transparent swollen limbs, as big as barrels. The patients were carried to the hospital on flat carts, there were so many of them. When I asked my dentist what was wrong with them, she said with a sigh, 'Edema.' I asked her what that meant, and she mumbled something which I vaguely linked with food.

These people with edema were mostly peasants. Starvation was much worse in the countryside because there were no guaranteed rations. Government policy was to provide food for the cities first, and commune officials were having to seize grain from the peasants by force. In many areas, peasants who tried to hide food were arrested, or beaten and tortured. Commune officials who were reluctant to take food from the hungry peasants were themselves dismissed, and some were physically maltreated. As a result, the peasants who had actually grown the food died in the millions all over China.

I learned later that several of my relatives from Sichuan to Manchuria had died in this famine. Among them was my father's retarded brother. His mother had died in 1958, and when the famine struck he was unable to cope as he would not listen to anyone else's advice. Rations were allotted on a monthly basis, and he ate his within days, leaving nothing for the rest of the month. He soon starved to death. My grandmother's sister, Lan, and her husband, 'Loyalty' Pei-o, who had been sent to the inhospitable countryside in the far north of Manchuria because of his

old connection with Kuomintang intelligence, both died too. As food began to run out, the village authorities allocated supplies according to their own, unwritten priorities. Pei-o's outcast status meant that he and his wife were among the first to be denied food. Their children survived because their parents gave their food to them. The father of Yu-lin's wife also died. At the end, he had eaten the stuffing in his pillow and the braids of garlic plants.

One night, when I was about eight, a tiny, very old-looking woman, her face a mass of wrinkles, walked into our house. She looked so thin and feeble it seemed a puff of wind would blow her down. She dropped to the ground in front of my mother and banged her forehead on the floor, calling her 'the savior of my daughter.' She was our maid's mother. 'If it wasn't for you,' she said, 'my daughter would not survive. . . .' I did not grasp the full meaning of this until a month later, when a letter came for our maid. It said that her mother had died soon after visiting our house, where she had passed on the news that her husband and her younger son were dead. I will never forget the heart-rending sobs of our maid as she stood on the terrace, leaning against a wooden pillar and stifling her moans in her handkerchief. My grandmother sat cross-legged on her bed, weeping as well. I hid myself in a corner outside my grandmother's mosquito net. I could hear my grandmother saying to herself: 'The Communists are good, but all these people are dead. . . .' Years later, I heard that our maid's other brother and her sister-in-law died soon after this. Landlords' families were placed at the bottom of the list for food in a starving commune.

In 1989 an official who had been working in famine relief told me that he believed that the total number of people who had died in Sichuan was seven million. This would be 10 percent of the entire population of a rich province. An accepted estimate for the death toll for the whole country is around thirty million.

One day in 1960, the three-year-old daughter of my

aunt Jun-ying's next-door neighbor in Yibin went missing. A few weeks later the neighbor saw a young girl playing in the street wearing a dress that looked like her daughter's. She went up and examined it: it had a mark which identified it as her daughter's. She reported this to the police. It turned out that the parents of the young girl were selling wind-dried meat. They had abducted and murdered a number of babies and sold them as rabbit meat at exorbitant prices. The couple were executed and the case was hushed up, but it was widely known that baby killing did go on at the time.

Years later I met an old colleague of my father's, a very kind and capable man, not given to exaggeration. He told me with great emotion what he had seen during the famine in one particular commune. Thirty-five percent of the peasants had died, in an area where the harvest had been good – although little was collected, since the men had been pulled out to produce steel, and the commune canteen had wasted a large proportion of what there was. One day a peasant burst into his room and threw himself on the floor, screaming that he had committed a terrible crime and begging to be punished. Eventually it came out that he had killed his own baby and eaten it. Hunger had been like an uncontrollable force driving him to take up the knife. With tears rolling down his cheeks, the official ordered the peasant to be arrested. Later he was shot as a warning to baby killers.

One official explanation for the famine was that Khrushchev had suddenly forced China to pay back a large debt it had incurred during the Korean War in order to come to the aid of North Korea. The regime played on the experience of much of the population, who had been landless peasants and could remember being hounded by heartless creditors to pay rent or reimburse loans. By identifying the Soviet Union, Mao also created an external enemy to take the blame and to rally the population.

Another cause mentioned was 'unprecedented natural

calamities.' China is a vast country, and bad weather causes food shortages somewhere every year. No one but the highest leaders had access to nationwide information about the weather. In fact, given the immobility of the population, few knew what happened in the next region, or even over the next mountain. Many thought then, and still think today, that the famine was caused by natural disasters. I have no full picture, but of all the people I have talked to from different parts of China, few knew of natural calamities in their regions. They only have stories to tell about deaths from starvation.

At a conference for 7,000 top-ranking officials at the beginning of 1962, Mao said that the famine was caused 70 percent by natural disasters and 30 percent by human error. President Liu Shaoqi chipped in, apparently on the spur of the moment, that it was caused 30 percent by natural disasters and 70 percent by human error. My father was at the conference, and when he returned he said to my mother: 'I fear Comrade Shaoqi is going to be in trouble.'

When the speeches were relayed to lower-rank officials like my mother, President Liu's assessment was cut out. The population at large was not even told about Mao's figures. This concealing of information did help keep the people quiet, and there were no audible complaints against the Communist Party. Quite apart from the fact that most dissenters had been killed off or otherwise suppressed in the past few years, whether the Communist Party was to blame was far from clear to the general population. There was no corruption in the sense of officials hoarding grain. Party officials were only marginally better off than the ordinary people. In fact, in some villages they themselves starved first – and died first. The famine was worse than anything under the Kuomintang, but it *looked* different: in the Kuomintang days, starvation took place alongside blatant unchecked extravagance.

Before the famine, many Communist officials from landlords' families had brought their parents to stay with them

in the cities. When the famine hit, the Party gave orders for these elderly men and women to be sent back to their villages to share the hard life – meaning starvation – with the local peasants. The idea was that Communist officials should not be seen to be using their privileges to benefit their 'class-enemy' parents. Some grandparents of friends of mine had to leave Chengdu and died in the famine.

Most peasants lived in a world where they did not look much beyond the boundary of the village, and they blamed the famine on their immediate bosses for giving them all the catastrophic orders. There were popular rhymes to the effect that the Party leadership was good, only the grass-roots officials were rotten.

The Great Leap Forward and the appalling famine shook my parents deeply. Although they did not have the full picture, they did not believe that 'natural calamities' were the explanation. But their overwhelming feeling was one of guilt. Working in the field of propaganda, they were right in the center of the misinformation machine. To salve his conscience, and to avoid the dishonest daily routine, my father volunteered to help with famine relief in the communes. This meant staying – and starving – with the peasants. In doing so, he was 'sharing weal and woe with the masses,' in line with Mao's instructions, but it was resented by his staff. They had to take turns going with him, which they hated, because it meant going hungry.

From late 1959 to 1961, in the worst period of the famine, I seldom saw my father. In the countryside he ate the leaves of sweet potatoes, herbs, and tree bark like the peasants. One day he was walking along a bank between the paddy fields when he saw a skeletal peasant moving extremely slowly, and with obvious difficulty, in the distance. Then the man suddenly disappeared. When my father rushed over, he was lying in the field, dead of starvation.

Every day my father was devastated by what he saw, although he hardly saw the worst, because in the customary

manner local officials surrounded him everywhere he went. But he suffered bad hepatomegaly and edema – and deep depression. Several times when he came back from his trips he went straight into the hospital. In the summer of 1961, he stayed there for months. He had changed. He was no longer the assured puritan of yesteryear. The Party was not pleased with him. He was criticized for 'letting his revolutionary will wane' and ordered out of the hospital.

He took to spending a lot of time fishing. Across from the hospital there was a lovely river called the Jade Brook. Willows bent over to stroke its surface with their curving shoots, and clouds melted and solidified in their many reflections. I used to sit on its sloping bank gazing at the clouds and watching my father fish. The smell was of human manure. On top of the bank were the hospital grounds, which had once been flowerbeds, but had now been turned into vegetable fields to supply the staff and patients with additional food. When I close my eyes now, I can still see the larvae of the butterflies eating away at the cabbage leaves. My brothers caught them for my father to use as bait. The fields had a pathetic look. The doctors and nurses were obviously no experts on farming.

Throughout history Chinese scholars and mandarins had traditionally taken up fishing when they were disillusioned with what the emperor was doing. Fishing suggested a retreat to nature, an escape from the politics of the day. It was a kind of symbol for disenchantment and noncooperation.

My father seldom caught any fish, and once wrote a poem with the line: 'Not for the fish I go fishing.' But his angling companion, another deputy director of his department, always gave him part of his catch. This was because in 1961, in the middle of the famine, my mother was pregnant again, and the Chinese regard fish as essential for the development of a baby's hair. She had not wanted another

child. Among other things, she and my father were on salaries, which meant the state no longer provided them with wet-nurses or nannies. With four children, my grandmother, and part of my father's family to support, they did not have a lot of money to spare. A large chunk of my father's salary went for buying books, particularly huge volumes of classical works, one set of which could cost two months' salary. Sometimes my mother grumbled slightly: other people in his position dropped hints to the publishing houses and got their copies free, 'for work purposes.' My father insisted on paying for everything.

Sterilization, abortion, and even contraception were difficult. The Communists had started promoting family planning in 1954, and my mother was in charge of the program in her district. She was then in an advanced stage of pregnancy with Xiao-hei, and often started her meetings with a good-humored self-criticism. But Mao turned against birth control. He wanted a big, powerful China, based on a large population. He said that if the Americans dropped atomic bombs on China, the Chinese would 'just go on reproducing' and reconstitute their numbers at great speed. He also shared the traditional Chinese peasant's attitude toward children: the more hands the better. In 1957, he personally named a famous Peking University professor who had advocated birth control as a rightist. After that, family planning was seldom mentioned.

My mother had become pregnant in 1959, and had written to the Party asking for permission to have an abortion. This was the standard procedure. One reason the Party had to give its consent was that the operation was a dangerous one at the time. My mother had said that she was busy working for the revolution, and could serve the people better if she did not have another baby. She was granted an abortion, which was dreadfully painful because the method used was primitive. When she became pregnant again in 1961, another abortion was out of the question in the

opinion of the doctors, my mother herself, and the Party, which stipulated a minimum three-year gap between abortions.

Our maid was also pregnant. She had married my father's former manservant, who was now working in a factory. My grandmother cooked both of them the eggs and soybeans which could be obtained with my parents' coupons, as well as the fish which my father and his colleague caught.

Our maid gave birth to a boy at the end of 1961 and left to set up her own home with her husband. When she was still with us, she would go to the canteens to fetch our food. One day my father saw her walking along a garden path stuffing some meat into her mouth and chewing voraciously. He turned and walked away in case she saw him and was embarrassed. He did not tell anyone until years later when he was ruminating over how differently things had turned out from the dreams of his youth, the main one of which had been putting an end to hunger.

When the maid left, my family could not afford another one, because of the food situation. Those who wanted the job – women from the countryside – were not entitled to a food allocation. So my grandmother and my aunt had to look after the five of us.

My youngest brother, Xiao-fang, was born on 17 January 1962. He was the only one of us who was breast-fed by my mother. Before he was born, my mother had wanted to give him away, but by the time he arrived she had become deeply attached to him, and he became the favorite. We all played with him as though he were a big toy. He grew up surrounded by loving crowds, which, my mother believed, accounted for his ease and confidence. My father spent a lot of time with him, which he had never done with his other children. When Xiao-fang was old enough to play with toys, my father carried him every Saturday to the department store at the top of the street and bought him a new toy. The moment Xiao-fang started to cry, for any

reason, my father would drop everything and rush to comfort him.

By the beginning of 1961, tens of millions of deaths had finally forced Mao to give up his economic policies. Reluctantly, he allowed the pragmatic President Liu and Deng Xiaoping, general secretary of the Party, more control over the country. Mao was forced to make self-criticisms, but they were full of self-pity, and were always phrased in such a way that it sounded as if he was carrying the cross for incompetent officials all over China. He further magnanimously instructed the Party to 'draw lessons' from the disastrous experience, but what the lessons were was not left to the judgment of the lowly officials: Mao told them they had become divorced from the people, and had made decisions which did not reflect ordinary people's feelings. Starting from Mao, the endless self-criticisms masked the real responsibility, which no one pursued.

Nevertheless, things began to improve. The pragmatists put through a succession of major reforms. It was in this context that Deng Xiaoping made the remark: 'It doesn't matter whether the cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice.' There was to be no more mass production of steel. A stop was put to crazy economic goals, and realistic policies were introduced. Public canteens were abolished, and peasants' income was now related to their work. They were given back household property, which had been confiscated by the communes, including farm implements and domestic animals. They were also allowed small plots of land to till privately. In some areas, land was effectively leased out to peasant households. In industry and commerce, elements of a market economy were officially sanctioned, and within a couple of years the economy was flourishing again.

Hand in hand with the loosening up of the economy, there was also political liberalization. Many landlords had the label of 'class enemy' removed. A large number of

people who had been purged in the various political campaigns were 'rehabilitated.' These included the 'counter-revolutionaries' from 1955, 'rightists' from 1957, and 'rightist opportunists' from 1959. Because my mother had received a warning for her 'right-wing tendencies' in 1959, in 1962 she was raised from Grade 17 to Grade 16 in her civil service rank as compensation. There was greater literary and artistic freedom. A more relaxed general atmosphere prevailed. For my father and mother, as for many others, the regime seemed to be showing it could correct and learn from its mistakes and that it could work – and this restored their confidence in it.

While all this was going on I lived in a cocoon behind the high walls of the government compound. I had no direct contact with tragedy. It was with these 'noises off' that I embarked on my teens.