

## Blank Childhoods

### *Taiyuan, Shanxi*

In February 1969, Yuzhi and her husband, Renhe, awoke to dozens of big-character posters<sup>1</sup> plastered on their front door in Taiyuan, Shanxi. Known as the “West of the Mountains,” Shanxi is located on a plateau, a province that introduced Buddhism from India and a gateway to pastoral nomads on Mongolia steppes. Below, terraces dot the horizon, and the Yellow River once flowed into farmers’ reservoirs. The mythical hills reflect in the blue still-glass of Fen River, and the rhythmic chanting of Buddhists on Mount Wutai belie the city’s violence and limited world coverage that occurred in the late 60s. The flimsy pieces of paper, hastily stuck on overnight with homemade sticky rice as glue, fluttered all over the neighborhood in the bone-chilling Northern winds. *Dazibao*, or handwritten inky splashes, were posters that enabled people to anonymously accuse “counterrevolutionaries” – anyone the Red Guards didn’t see eye-to-eye with. Crucially, the posters were tacked onto the confession board that everyone gathered around each morning to see who would be the Cultural Revolution’s next victims. That day, the posters accused Yuzhi. Landlords stood in the way of Mao Zedong’s redistributive politics, and Yuzhi’s impurities had to be purged because her family once owned land. The zealous Red Guards demanded that Yuzhi vacate her home within 24 hours or be subjected to “revolutionary action,” which usually entailed physical force. Yuzhi was eight months pregnant with my mother.

When I asked my mother about our family’s history during the Cultural Revolution, she paused. The subject is an ominous, sensitive bubble that looms over conversations about my mother’s childhood and my grandparents’ early adult life. When the bubble does burst, it sends my grandmother into loud bouts of tearful fits condemning Mao. At the same time, my grandfather’s eyes glaze over as he seeks respite staring into the distance. I’ve only felt remnants of the past. I feel them in the shadow that crosses my mother’s face, in the slight crowfeet around her eyes, which are more pronounced as she squints, and in my father’s cautionary tone against my asking questions. When I was six, I hid in my room as my grandmother smashed every last plate and bowl in the kitchen, cursing at my mom and Mao and all her wasted years lived in fear and torment.

Mao instigated the Revolution, which spanned the 10 years from 1966 to 1976, in order to reassert his control over the Communist Party. The Party, which Mao started from scratch and led away from danger on the Long March with the Kuomintang hot on their heels, had turned “complacent.” Mao turned on his own party, shut down all schools, and called upon the nation’s youth to purge all impure elements of society: traces of capitalism, market forces, Western attire, and authority figures who lacked revolutionary spirit. The intellectuals were sent to the countryside to learn from farmers, while landowners were beaten up, then removed from their newly distributed land. Youth all over the country formed a personality cult around Mao, chanting with religious fervor his quotes from millions of Little Red Books all over the nation. Mao’s vision of constant and turbulent violence became the law of the land as neighbors and family members turned on each other, rushing to out other as “revisionist” or “rightist” to prove their own revolutionary worth. Backwardness became glorified as purgatory revolution.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Dazibao*, in Chinese, was commonly used during the Cultural Revolution to accuse “counterrevolutionaries” who were then publicly condemned and subjected to punishment.

“Why do you want to know about it?”

“I was hoping to write about it.”

“Do you know about Iris Chang, or Chang Shun-Ru?”

“No—who’s that?”

“She was a journalist, and grew up in New Jersey. She wanted to write about Chinese history, and chose the Rape of Nanking. She recorded hundreds of interviews and conversations with survivors. The atrocities were terrible, really. After her book was published, she shot herself through the mouth with a revolver. We brought you to Canada so you never have to experience anything related to the Cultural Revolution.”

I could hear a sour tinge to my mother’s voice, the tight squeeze of her nose right before hot tears threatened to overwhelm her vision.

“You don’t know how lucky you are today. How far we’ve come.”

Amidst the destructive chaos and liberating freedom, either you participated or you were against the revolution. Punished for her landlord ancestry, Yuzhi was barred from giving birth in Taiyuan to prevent her newborn from acquiring urban *hukou*, or city citizenship in the household registration system. To give birth, she had to return to her rural hometown, Henan, a province in central China’s Yellow River Valley. Compared to the 3 hours and 38 minutes to travel on today’s sleek, high-speed rails, the reality in 1969 was three days of walking on dirt paths and traversing valleys. The high-speed rail that now winds through Taiyuan’s forested green hills and rock formations is an insult to my grandparents’ utter destitution. Luckily, overnight, my grandfather located a cargo truck en route to Henan, and he packed up the minimal belongings that they were permitted to bring: his eight-year-old son, Hong, and my very pregnant grandmother tightly packed with the boxed goods within the truck. With no more space in the truck, they left my aunt, Xia, 10 years old at the time, alone in Taiyuan. She cooked for herself despite barely being able to reach the stovetop, or went to the neighbors for meals. The separation of families, especially leaving behind young children so that they could survive, was widespread at the time.

The journey unfolded over three full days through mudslides, flash flooding, knee-high river crossings, and torrential downpours; it culminated in the theft of all their meager belongings one night at a roadside hostel. My grandparents crossed the mountainous regions that are unsuitable for vegetation and people, where the terrain is shaped with sheer will. Traversing the same hills as Mao’s glorified Long March, my grandparents weren’t running from the Kuomintang, but the broken promises of revolution.

Leading up to the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong had already begun stoking the fires of dissent. Displeased at his Communist Party, over which he commanded absolute authority, Chairman Mao condemned the party as slow to change as “old women walking with bound feet.”

Following his catastrophic Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), Mao took little responsibility for his miscalculations and devastating state planning – he remained the glorious leader who defeated the Kuomintang, the party that ruled China from 1927 to 1948. Intended as an economic and social campaign to industrialize China in five years, the Great Leap Forward expended immense resources that produced little output, covered up with deceitful reports and party propaganda. 30-40 million people died from pervasive famine due to overestimates of productivity, when in reality there wasn't enough food to go around. A lick of oil was considered luxury. Amidst the widespread starvation in 1962, Yuzhi and Renhe joined the masses and adopted the rural countryside as their new home. In Henan, their hukou, or household registration system, became rural. Effectively, they were barred from accessing cities ever again. Illiterate and penniless, hunger persisting and home taken away, they had few prospects. They condemned the religious fervor surrounding Mao – a godlike saint or depraved tyrant depending on your family background and level of hunger.

Once contained to my history books I had purchased for class, the Great Leap Forward and the significance of places like Shanxi molded to the trajectory of my grandparents' lives. The once privileged and cautious distance I held from my family fell away. A prior choice to dissociate with the country now loomed over; historical processes shaped my present. Whether to escape children's bullying in school for my accented English or to assuage the crippling loneliness of new immigrants, I didn't want to have relevance to China; only my skin colour betrayed me. The thought of attaining more Bs than Cs on many years of report cards due to a language barrier was unimaginable, much less attending an Ivy League institution. I wonder if my grandparents had time to dream.

### ***Wuyang, Henan***

Upon arrival back in Henan, my grandparents were shocked to find peasants living in their home. Yuzhi's family used to own the entire street of homes, her father a well-respected and hardworking doctor until the Revolution. Later, he would be beaten and worked to death carting coal 80 times a day, as a self-improving exercise to strip him of class status. The Red Guards had distributed my grandparents' home to farmers poorer than them – “opportunity for all,” they said. Instead, special accommodation had been set up for people like Yuzhi: an abandoned barn 10 miles away. A windowless shack, farmers once raised chicks there, animal droppings littering the cold cement ground. Window frames shuttered futilely against the February draft, the thin sheet of straw my grandfather placed in vain barely hid layers of grime; frigid air seeped through holes in tattered clothing. My grandparents wondered what they had done wrong. The barn became a permanent residence for several years, their existence a reminder of their criminal status. Two months later, Yuzhi's water broke. But with little food and no insulation, her body also betrayed her. Covered in bloody rags and hovering at life's edge, Yuzhi remained in labor for three days and three nights. By the time my grandfather finally found a midwife in town, Yuzhi was fading in and out of consciousness. My mom was close to being a stillborn. It was -5 degrees Fahrenheit inside and outside.

In 1966, my grandfather had seen an opportunity to leave Henan and move to Taiyuan. His job was to assemble and build plane parts, the very first in China. That year, 300 miles north of Renhe, leftists in Beijing universities began complaining about the inefficiencies of the Communist Party of China (CCP). As party members hesitantly experimented with shutting

down dissent, Mao legitimized the protests by issuing his own *dazibao* to “bombard the headquarters.” Mao targeted his newly selected group for revolution – young people, who felt that they had missed the opportunity to participate in politics when the CCP defeated Kuomintang in their parents’ generation. Mao encouraged overthrowing order at all levels: challenging teachers and shutting down schools, rebutting local police, but most of all, purifying the ranks of the CCP to remove his enemies. In one incidence, hearing that Mao would appear to greet them, thousands of high schoolers flooded Tiananmen Square waving Mao’s Little Red Books, uniformly chanting “Long Live Chairman Mao!” One Red Guard, Song Bing Bing, who was 17 at the time, pinned the red scarf of revolution onto Mao’s arm and shook his hand. She didn’t wash her hands for days for come. Later, Song led a group of 13- and 14-year-old girls at Beijing Experimental High School, an all-girls elite school for officials’ daughters, in claiming the Cultural Revolution’s first death, Bian Zhongyun. The deputy principal was beaten to death with spiked wooden sticks by a group of pre-pubescent girls. To demonstrate their devotion to Mao, the young Red Guards instigated one of the bloodiest periods in Chinese history, completely breaking down family relations and social trust. As order collapsed countrywide, unrestrained anger and violence broke free.

Barely 30 days after giving birth, the Red Guards castigated Yuzhi for not labouring in the fields. They told her: “Just 30 years old, you think you can still exercise class privilege?” To demonstrate their commitment to the revolution, Red Guards punished accordingly. Physically incapable of working in rice paddies due to poor health, my grandmother was paraded around the streets with a placard full of big characters across her chest. “Anti-revolutionary revisionist,” “traitor,” “rightist” – labels that warranted brutal physical beatings and resulting trauma. Crowds gathered to chant and jeer at her appearance: heading a “tall hat,” Yuzhi balanced three bricks on her neck, held in place by a twisted iron chain cutting into her chest as blood trickled down. Her body was bent over at the waist into a right angle, and her arms tied behind her back, one hand grasping the other at the wrist – the classic “airplane” position. Crowds threw rotten vegetables and eggs, leering when they met the target. The chains were tarnished from past victims’ blood which oxidized with iron. Public humiliation supposedly enabled self-reflection. *The People’s Daily* editorial wrote: “Like the red sun rising in the east, the unprecedented Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is illuminating the land with its brilliant rays.” My grandmother walked with a bent back for the rest of her life.

In 1976, the Great Helmsman died. Thus ended 10 years of revolution and two million deaths. China was pitifully poor. The average income for citizens was one-third of Sub-Saharan Africa’s; 80% of the population lived in the countryside. Public sewage flowed openly in cities. Party members turned on each other, vilified, as each tried to escape responsibility for the Revolution. The party lost all legitimacy. Previously purged from the elite ranks, Deng Xiaoping assumed power after surviving hard labour in the countryside. In a classic turn of Chinese politics, rules changed on the ground before they became institutionalized. Already in his seventies, Deng was known for his pragmatism. Enacting improvisation through “crossing the river by feeling the stones,” Deng sought hard truths from the facts and began incremental rural reform. In some ways, this trial and error method was distilled to the individual level – uncertain of the country’s future, people remained adaptable and malleable, not by choice, but by very palpable hunger. As Deng said, it doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white so long as it catches mice. The effects of the Revolution were hardly over in the new era of gradual experimentation.

As Deng assumed power, universities resumed. Hundreds of intellectuals gradually returned home from exile in the countryside; they had kept their minds sharp by reading history, practicing math problems, and memorizing poems in the hopes that the university entrance exam would return. Many others committed suicide. Those who persevered were rewarded; education again became a possibility to escape farming. The night my aunt, Xia, top of her class, got into university, my grandmother stayed up all night rocking a fully-grown Xia in her lap, hysterically sobbing, “Thank you Deng Xiaoping, thank you Deng Xiaoping.” Xia later became a biology teacher at the most prestigious high school in Shenzhen, where she now resides, her daughter a graduate of the London School of Economics.

### ***Shenzhen, China***

When I ask my mother about her childhood, she hesitantly admits it’s a blank. For the first six years of her life, she had virtually no contact with the outside world. Each day, her parents would go to work and take her siblings to school. Before Yuzhi left, she always locked the door so that my mother couldn’t leave and get lost, or worse, get beaten up by other kids. Sometimes my mother was tied to a chair or a table leg so she wouldn’t run around and hurt herself by accident. Days passed where she would sit on the floor and wait until somebody came home. Barred from attending kindergarten due to her rural *hukou*, she couldn’t go to school until elementary school. Everybody spat on landlords, even if they were no longer.

The Cultural Revolution ended, but the stigma associated with those wrongly accused remained. My mother and her siblings grew up subjected to endless bullying, but all three of them placed into university: the only way out from a predestined life as a farmer. In 1980, Deng Xiaoping designated Shenzhen as China’s first experimental special economic zone, as part of his reform and opening up policy. In the 80s, all three siblings migrated to Shenzhen, a tiny fishing village with a population of 50,000 to seek job opportunities. Just 30 years later, Shenzhen’s population and growth exploded, and its GDP per capita grew over 24,569% from 1980. My parents met in Shenzhen, and they gradually worked their way out of the impoverished backgrounds they had grown up in.

### ***Vancouver, Canada***

My mother and I immigrated to Canada in 2006 seeking a better future. We struggled to acclimate – we didn’t speak a word of English, much less know where to buy groceries in the foreign land. Our bed, an old mattress abandoned by the landlord, was our only furniture for months. For my remaining five years of elementary school, I attended three different schools, moving almost every year. My parents’ advanced degrees meant little in Canada because of a language barrier, and rather than risk everything, my dad stayed in Shenzhen to support his fledgling business. My mom went back to school, and started from scratch working an entry-level, 9-6 job while raising me alone. Particularly vividly, I remember her taking my hand as we knocked on every door in the neighborhood asking if someone could pick me up from school and watch me until she came home from work. Daycare centers closed too early; we depended on the kindness of good Samaritans. During those times, my mom reminded me I was lucky to have a childhood different from hers. 50 years ago, the Cultural Revolution condemned my grandparents to abject poverty; today, in the shadow of that tumultuous period, I access opportunities utterly unknowable to them.

### *Providence, Rhode Island*

As a senior now, I often reflect on the weight of my family's history in the context of today's society. In some ways, our personal narratives of self-actualization are aligned with China's rapid economic growth and development. My grandparents' and to a lesser extent, my parents' suffering in the past enabled the opportunities I have now, and endowed me with the privilege to choose. But privilege also comes with a moral responsibility to right past wrongs. Few people discuss the Cultural Revolution now, a forgotten scar on China's tumultuous past. I may not have the power to change Chinese policy or lobby for redress for past victims, but I can and must live my own life to its fullest such that my family's sacrifices were not made in vain. This responsibility prompted me to choose Philosophy as my major, a discipline that is defined by inquiring what matters in life and what it means to live meaningfully.

While well-intentioned, were Mao's redistributive politics ethical at the cost of two million lives? Is it my moral responsibility to learn all that I can about how my family was affected by history Applied to a modern setting, I worry about politicians who lean towards socialism. While America's capitalist society is very different from China in the 1950s, I am wary of socialism's potential consequences if aggressive state intervention is involved. Equality through land redistribution from the rich to the poor is appealing in theory, but in practice, they unfairly targeted the wrong people who often had little to do with perpetuating inequality. Is it ethical that my aunt still remembers so vividly the day her neighbors broke into her home and stole her leather shoes? Is it fair that my mother was born in a barn so that people who did not have landlord parents could live in their home? Similarly, while Medicare for all and progressive taxation sound enticing, I am wary about potential consequences that may occur. Many policies are well-intentioned, but will their effects be just? I hope to pursue a career in public interest law to uplift individuals, like my grandparents, who were failed by society's safety net. I hope to champion the voices of minorities and those who are left out; I, too, did not have the cultural and social capital that smooths the path to success.

My grandmother passed away 5 years ago, and I pieced together her stories from the rest of my family. Her death threatened to remove a vital link to my past, and I voraciously began taking courses on Chinese history, literature and politics at school to better understand her life. I will never forget her walking me to kindergarten, or teaching me how to make dumplings by rolling the wrapping as thinly as possible and adding salt to boiling water. In some ways, this is not a story about me but a story of how the past generation informs my present engagement with ethics and politics. Ideology is enticing, but will it translate to good policy? My parents flew back and forth and lived apart for 10 years so that I could grow up in North America. My grandparents never bent their backs while being publicly humiliated, beaten and degraded in hope for a better day. They were tasked with survival, and I, two generations later, am tasked with self-actualization. From my generation onwards, I hope there'll be no more blank childhoods.