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A photograph of a young woman with long, dark, wavy hair, seen in profile from the chest up. She is looking out of a window, with bright light and green foliage visible in the background. She is wearing a dark, high-collared jacket with a white strap over her shoulder.

# Christianity, Femininity and Social Change in Contemporary China

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Li Ma

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*This book is dedicated to my mother, Shuxiang Zhao.*

# CHRONOLOGY

<i>Time</i>	<i>Event</i>
1912–1949	Republic of China
1927–1949	Chinese Civil War (Nationalist Party vs. Communist Party)
1949	Founding of the People's Republic of China under the Chinese Communist Party
1950	Land reforms
1952	US-Korea War
	China's Anti-US Supporting-North-Korea War
1957–1959	Anti-Rightist campaign
1958–1961	The Great Famine
1964	Down to the Countryside (Sent-Down Youth) Movement was nationally organized
1966–1976	Mao's Cultural Revolution
1978	National College Entrance Examination re-instituted
	Economic reform
1984	Household registration ( <i>hukou</i> ) system loosened, leading to rural-to-urban migration
	Disintegration of rural communes
1989	Tiananmen movement
1990	Township and village enterprises (TVEs) boomed
1992	China further opened up its economy following Deng Xiaoping's directives
1994	Internet spread to China on a permanent basis
1998	National crackdown on Falun Gong
1990s	Spread of Protestant faith in rural areas
	Disintegration of urban <i>danwei</i> (work unit) system
2001	China enters WTO

(continued)

(continued)

<i>Time</i>	<i>Event</i>
2000s	Spread of Protestant faith in urban centers
2004	Private property rights re-written into the Chinese Constitution
Mid-2000s	Housing market boom
2012	Xi Jinping came into power
2014	Cross-removal campaign in Zhejiang province
2018	China-US trade war began
	New religious regulations



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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

In May 2016, forty-two-year-old Li Yuan gave a public lecture at a top university in China; her speech entitled “My Awakening and Redemption” immediately went viral on the internet. One of China’s best-known actresses, Yuan is also unabashedly a professing Protestant Christian. She converted in her late thirties, left acting at the height of her career, and has since advocated for poor migrant workers suffering from pneumoconiosis, an occupational lung disease caused by working in high-dust environments like construction and jewelry manufacturing.<sup>1</sup> Li Yuan already had over 13.5 million followers on her Weibo, China’s equivalent to Twitter, but this bold speech of Christian testimony has won her more popularity among the younger generation.

In this speech, Yuan confesses that her once-privileged life as a celebrity used to make her utterly indifferent to the suffering of the poor and marginalized in society. She also owned many pieces of expensive jewelry. But after her conversion into Protestant Christianity, Yuan began to care more about the misery of other people. Once startled at seeing an X-ray picture of a migrant worker with pneumoconiosis, she could not wave the images away. Her guilt and conscience awoke. She began to advocate for this marginalized group, connecting their plight to the twisted desires and greed of urban consumers, herself included. Since then, Yuan has visited rural families with members suffering from this occupational disease. She has donated large sums to help them, including sponsoring a few lung transplants. Yuan later started her own charity foundation to assist this population.

The dramatic change in actress Li Yuan's life is among the many stories of China's Protestant Christian women working in the country's booming urban economy. Even in a media environment where Christianity has been one of the most censored themes, Yuan's story gained wide publicity on China's tightly controlled state media.<sup>2</sup> However, most stories of how the Christian faith has changed Chinese women's values, professional pursuits, family life, and social relationships fall into obscurity.

Historically, women have been crucial in the survivability of Protestant Christianity in China during years of religious persecution; today they are also active promoters of the faith in China's urbanizing society. This book is one of the first to address contemporary Chinese women and their encounter with Protestant Christianity, drawing on the methodology of oral history.

## PROTESTANTISM, WOMEN, AND CHINA'S URBAN ECONOMY

There are two reasons why contemporary Chinese Christian women's stories matter. Primarily, Protestant Christianity has been growing in China, and it has feminized disproportionately over the past few decades. In urban Chinese churches that are made up mainly of white-collar professionals, women have outnumbered men by a great majority.<sup>3</sup> Despite the numerical growth of women within the Chinese church, in scholarly research, they have been ignored or presented largely faceless up until now. The result is that women often appear marginal to the remarkable main story of Protestant Christianity in China.

Even within the history of global Christianity, women have indeed been an understudied group. For example, in South Korea, when institutionalization of the church began, it entered a "masculinization" phase that ignored its original faithful Bible women who had toiled to start church groups.<sup>4</sup> Christianity in China too is going through a similar stage. It is now time for the English-speaking world to hear the voices of women telling what it means to be a Christian woman in the twenty-first-century China. And the recovery of women's stories should automatically lead to new, enriched narratives of Chinese history. So this book is an attempt to incorporate women as historical agents into traditional narratives of Protestant Christianity in China.

Second, in the kaleidoscope of social change in contemporary China, women as a social demographic group have experienced the most dramatic ups and downs. As historian Jessie G. Lutz says, it is important to under-

stand “gender entanglements with politics, social structures and values, nation building, and even the economies of agricultural and industrial societies.”<sup>5</sup> But information on the great majority of nameless Christian women in today’s China is scant. As some scholars of American religious history says, “if historians do not become more self-conscious about who is included in their stories and who is not, they will perpetuate the fiction that male leaders alone have made history.”<sup>6</sup> How did gender influence their understanding of Christianity? How did the changing Chinese context alter their family relations and career choices? These are the main questions I seek to explore in this book.

Currently, Chinese women make up a significant proportion of the urban economy.<sup>7</sup> The upward mobility of some individuals and families within the past four decades of China’s economic reform is truly impressive and unprecedented. First, from illiterate, feet-bound grandmothers and semi-literate mothers, women by the third generation in modern China might well be attending college, achieving postgraduate degrees, or even studying abroad. And second, unlike Christian pioneer women who received education at missionary schools and joined work associated with the church at the turn of the twentieth century, today’s Chinese Christian women found a wide range of professional opportunities that were made available as China’s urban economy boomed. Achieving success in their professional realms, many women steadfastly commit to belonging to church communities and to supporting church ministry. Third, in today’s China, women’s identity is defined not only simply by their familial roles of daughter, wife, and mother, but also as urban professionals and Christian believers. Their participation in churches and social life has reached extraordinary levels.

Since the late 1990s, many oral history titles have been published about women in Chinese history.<sup>8</sup> But these works about earlier historical periods seldom include a religious dimension. Among books on contemporary Chinese women, most focus on the economic and political dimensions, leaving out the spiritual.<sup>9</sup> Other books that include women in the history of Christianity deal with much earlier times, not the contemporary Chinese scene.<sup>10</sup> This book fills in the gap by presenting a multidimensional picture of contemporary Chinese Christian women in China’s emerging and dynamic structures of opportunities in its political, cultural, religious, and economic realms. The religious and spiritual dimension plays a central role in their narratives as these biographical reflections present a new religious consciousness.

The spiritual transformation of contemporary Chinese women and its implications are intriguing. They converted to Christianity for a variety of reasons. For many, official atheism failed to answer the pressing questions about life's purpose and other significant big questions about life. Some were so disillusioned by official ideology and censorship that exposure to another worldview became a revelation of truth. Sometimes such exposure happened when women pursued higher degrees overseas, most often in America. Still others experienced trauma in family relationships and later found healing in the Protestant Christian faith. There were also instances of women who moved from other religions, such as Buddhism, to Protestant Christianity. A significant proportion of women converts, being first-generation believers in their family genealogy, led their family members to the Protestant faith. Such influence was often accompanied by new layers of strain in family relationships due to the faith. They also actively witness the faith in workplace where social norms are quite challenging. These women became spiritual pioneers in both family and workplace. Their stories are worthy to be presented.

Access to this group of Chinese professional women in urban China was mainly through personal contacts during my continued research on Chinese Protestantism over the last decade. Since 2006, I have studied the emergence of urban churches in multiple cities within China. Over half of the hundreds of people I interviewed, either formally or informally, were women converts in the tradition of Protestant Christianity.<sup>11</sup> I have long felt that a project about Christian women in urban China merited a full-length study. In fact, my own story echoes many of the voices I heard. As a doctoral student at Cornell University and later working as a university faculty in Shanghai, I myself, a newly converted returnee to China, was also a member of this group of urban professional women. So my understanding of the broader historical context is also informed by my own personal journey as well as more than two decades of sociological research in the area of China's market transition and urbanization. Personal friendships, mentoring relationships, and trusted referrals have provided me with the opportunity to delve deeper into the spiritual world of these Chinese Christian women. Over the years, I have maintained ongoing friendships with many of them. For example, one life story of my longest contact unfolded in countless conversations over a period of twelve years. Others took place in the past three to eight years. My conversations with all of them have continued to this very day. These enduring contacts enabled me to document their more complete personal tapestries in this book.



## THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP

Initially, in many of these informal conversations, the theme of mother-daughter relationship has been a re-occurring one. For many women, it has always played the most formative role. When I began to collect taped narratives for this project, I specifically asked these women to narrate their relationships with their mothers, including a biography of their mothers. As a result, in this volume, each woman's life story contains an embedded narrative about her mother's life story. Among the fourteen women that I interviewed, all but three are the only daughters of their families, mostly due to the one-child policy implementation after 1980.<sup>12</sup> Being the only child and daughter of a Chinese family, the mother-daughter relationship often became a primary relationship. Through this mother-daughter lens, I was able to encourage them to engage in more reflective accounts of how this younger generation are influenced by their mothers and fare differently from their mothers' generation, most of whom were born in the 1950s and 1960s. This intentionally designed research angle allows me to conduct a cross-generational comparison on two major themes: how social mobility between two generations of women reshaped their worldviews and attitudes toward social and spiritual reality, and how the Christian faith helped ameliorate or intensify the conflicting values held by these two generations of women.

Sociologists think that generational consciousness shapes individuals through shared experiences of historical events.<sup>13</sup> The term "age cohort" is often used to capture a generational unit who have had a collective memory and response to events that are often political and traumatic, such as the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) or the Tiananmen movement (1989) in China. A contrast of generational consciousness is also formed by China's economic liberalization, which provided women with more opportunities to work, travel, and associate. This generational lens through the mother-daughter relationship serves as a useful heuristic device in understanding China, a country which has been shaped by a number of significant and turbulent events from the 1950s to now. These decades have witnessed how political and economic changes shaped individuals' generational consciousness, especially women's.

In order to do justice to the mother-daughter relationships in contemporary China, it is imperative to situate them in the larger socio-cultural matrix of Chinese society whereby China is fast emerging as a global player with a booming economy, albeit not without hidden crises. The contrast

between these two generations is a major difference in lived worldviews, as they each experienced a drastically different China. Under Mao, young people's education trajectories (women included) were truncated by the Sent-down Youth Movement since the early 1960s and the later tumultuous Cultural Revolution.<sup>14</sup> In a time when education and knowledge accumulation were depreciated, marriage was a common destiny for women. Often it had to be approved, or sometimes even arranged, by cadres of the Chinese Communist Party. The economic status of women remained largely dependent upon the males of the households under the work unit *danwei* system.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, this generation of daughters (my generation) belongs to a post-reform China. Theirs has been a less politicized age, at least until the recent years of Xi Jinping's regime. They all had good educational opportunities in China's atheistic public education system. Most of their parents valued quality education for them and made sure these opportunities were there for them. Some women even obtained postgraduate qualifications or overseas degrees. Nowadays, they not only have the freedom to choose whom to marry or whether to marry at all, but their education and careers allow them to engage in an increasingly globalized and culturally diverse China. Their social identities are not tied with one work unit. They are even able to profess a different religious faith, a faith that may seem so foreign to their mothers. In the area of marriage choices, some of them live with the challenges of singleness because they want to marry men of the same faith, but there are not that many single Christian Chinese males around due to an imbalanced gender ratio in the faith community. In the Chinese culture, singleness comes with a sense of shame and failure. Social pressure from the family upon single members often escalates to hostility toward their Christian faith.

So, in sum, how these two generations of mothers (generally post-1950s) and daughters (post-1970s) fared and interacted with each other provides a unique empirical framework for understanding social change in contemporary China. These two generations of women are offspring of contrasting childhoods, one marked by political indoctrination, material scarcity, and social rigidity, and the other by post-communist disillusionment, economic opportunities, and self-fulfillment. This book uses the younger generation's personal accounts, collected as oral histories, to shed light on the historical complexities of the changing social role of women in Chinese society and how the Protestant faith has shaped that role.

The mother-daughter relationships as depicted in this volume also challenge stereotypical images in Chinese culture, one of cozy domesticity and shared confidences within the scope of a primary relationship between two generations of Chinese women. A strong belief still prevails that how a daughter turns out reveals much about how well her mother has done her job. But these stories also reveal a turbulent drama of unmet expectations, judgment, rejection, conflict, loss, and brokenness. Discrepancy with traditional expectations is partly the reason for deepening tensions between the two generations.

#### FOUR INTERPRETIVE MOTIFS

Based on biographical narratives from a diverse group of Chinese Christian women in urban professions, I drew into question four interpretive motifs—socialization in Chinese families, politicized culture, Christian conversion, and worldview conflicts. The first motif is a broader framework embedding the mother-daughter relationship. Traditional elements such as expected filial piety and preference over male heirs are still commonly observed in these accounts. The extended and nuclear family structures both sustain and bring tension to kinship ties. Next I will explain the other three motifs.

On politicized culture, as Susan L. Mann posits in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, “the reasons why any history of gender and sexuality in China must begin by addressing the role of the government will quickly become clear.”<sup>16</sup> During the Maoist era, women were elevated from the status of helpless victims of feudal forces to recipients of emancipation. As Mao famously said, “Women hold up half of the sky.” Females were brought out of the inner quarters of the household, dictated by a Confucian patriarchal segregation, to emerge in the public sphere as socialist workers, revolutionaries, and devout Red Guards. Their fate collectively was then subordinated to the cause of national revolution, just like other sub-groups in China. But, tragically, in this iconoclastic remolding of an egalitarian Chinese society, women, as well as other traditionally suppressed social classes such as peasants, freed themselves neither from old prejudices nor from new structures of suppression. Some memoirs and novels have depicted these realities and disillusionments.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, the new market economy since 1978 did indeed provide more social space for a younger generation of Chinese women. With sustained economic growth and urbanization, they now have the opportunity

to pursue a range of careers as urban professionals in business, education, non-profit, and so on. Among them are women who embraced the Christian faith through studying overseas, indigenous evangelism, and the re-entry of foreign Christians since the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> But even in today's Chinese society, gender is still embedded in everyday routines, cultural norms, and socio-political structures. A cliché example is the "One-Child" or later "Two Children" policy and its consequence in terms of people's gender-selective abortion choices.<sup>19</sup> These social-engineering and mandatory government policies exacerbated gender-selective practices, not to mention how the massive propaganda machine has maintained a tight grip on private information about procreative decisions by individual families. Take the more prevalent phenomenon of female singleness and the term "leftover women (*shengnv*)," for example. In 2007, the All-China Women's Federation officially defined it as "single women older than 27."<sup>20</sup> China's Ministry of Education even added this term to its lexicon in the same year. Since then, state-sponsored media launched a wave of campaigns about minimizing the presence of "leftover women." The stigmatization of single, educated, and professional women in China has reached a climatic point. Since the same force of marginalization also targets Christianity, politics is a primary parameter defining both femininity and Protestantism in China.

Interestingly, the suppressed and marginalized status of Protestant Christianity in China is one thing that merges these two generations back into a coherent reality. Although most of these young women converted in a decade of tolerance since the early 2000s, in recent years, they began to face increasingly hostile gestures from state-censored media, Party propaganda, and popular anti-Christian sentiments. With the removal of over 1700 crosses on state churches (also known as the de-crossing campaigns) that began in 2014, the release of a new religious regulation limiting urban house churches' worship space in 2018, and the closedown of a few high-profile urban churches toward the end of the same year, the informal but highly visible status of Protestant Christianity is likely to backslide.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, due to the Christian faith and its suppressed status, the mother-daughter relationship is changed, often challenged. Some daughters became political dissidents in the eyes of their mothers, who still believed Christianity to be an imperialist tool, as the Party propaganda has long claimed. Or some unbelieving mothers may fear that the Christian faith may bring disadvantageous to young professionals living in China's unpredictable future. Because of this enmity, the mother-daughter relationship

internalizes Chinese politics with regard to the role of women and the role of Protestant Christianity in China.<sup>22</sup> It forms a potentially fruitful sociological milieu for analysis, not just because the two generations are miniature laboratories embodying social mobility in China's contemporary history, but also because it allows discussions about how femininity interacts with Christianity on a theological level.

## HEARING AUTHENTIC VOICES

For a research project like this, the oral history method furthers the purpose well. Primarily, one cannot rely on official statistics and archives that censor data on religious beliefs and participation. What got recorded officially were public lives that suited the Chinese regime's rhetoric. Although the tradition of using biographies to educate Chinese women started as early as the Han Dynasty,<sup>23</sup> it has a minimal place in today's Chinese society. In a country where a Party-state peers into every corner through censorship, it can be challenging to collect data on historical facts that counter government-generated histories. For fear of political suppression, respondents would be sensitive enough to self-censor their memories for an outsider. Oral history methods assisted by a high-trust referral network are probably the only way to reveal authentic personal narratives.

Second, the oral history method helps give voice to this group of women whose stories are seldom heard, both in the history of Chinese society and in the history of Chinese Protestantism. Just as a feminist oral historian once said, "It is only when individual women talk about their lives that we are able to put the whole story together: the public and the private; the dramatic and the subtle; the gains and the losses."<sup>24</sup> The oral history method is able to "humanize events and articulate the drama of an era."<sup>25</sup> It allows each woman's true colors to be expressed as they narrate their unique stories of both anguish and flourishing. It also brings out the salience of individual personality and perspective. So, oral history allows the texture of everyday life to be woven into the political ethos of the day.

Theologically speaking, these personal histories, with their equal vividness, details, and experiences of self-reflection, are a participation in something much grander—that is, the history of God working amid the Chinese people. God's general revelation works itself out in human history, even in communist China. Human history and divine history each mutually condition the other. Therefore, by looking into this deeply personal and religious dimension of women's spirituality, one may gain a

greater understanding about God's work in His world. When these Chinese women begin to speak and articulate their understandings of God, they are articulating in accord with their dignity as bearers of *imago Dei*.

Third, this oral history presentation is also a response to the often disembodied and abstract methods of study in religion and theology. Doing theology in a holistic way which requires using not only experiential stories but also a critical analysis of how theological understandings affect people's real lives. Using our language to speak religious experiences (i.e., being capable of telling a history of individual spirituality) is part of being human. As Stephen Crites says, "The formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative."<sup>26</sup> In narrating one's life stories, the consciousness of personal experiences enables Christians to inevitably connect with the Divine. As Michael Novak says, "the more one tries to penetrate the depths of one's own identity, the more reverential one becomes."<sup>27</sup> One classic case is Augustine's brooding reflections in the classic work of *Confessions*.

Narratives open memories that integrate past, present, and future with one's self-identity. This sense of temporal succession is bestowed by human memory. Without memory, experience would have no coherence at all. Even Augustine is amazed at how people take the power of memory for granted. He stresses that memory is not a passive depository of facts, but also an ongoing re-orientation of meanings connecting people's past, present, and future.<sup>28</sup> Our sense of personal identity depends upon the continuity of experience through time, and our making sense of these experiences. Nevertheless, life is not a neatly organized artifact. We experience crude dramatic tensions or even unexpected crises. What happened externally does not always reveal what people experience internally. So, although the narrative form may seem primitive, it is by no means devoid of meaning. Our interpretation of these dramas is ongoing. A culture can offer an additional layer of interpretation. But in real life, only the narrative form can contain the tensions, the surprises, the disappointments, the reversals, and the achievements of actual, temporal experience. The story itself may contain symbolism or imagination particular to the subject's context. Thus, a person's life story is multidimensional, including not only one's search for self-identity, but also a rich moral cosmos.

Each personal oral history in this book is a compilation of multiple interviews given by one narrator. Most of these interviews were initially informal. After gaining considerable trust from my respondents, I asked for a more formal and tape-recorded conversation. In transcribing one

story, I often needed to do follow-up interviews with the narrator through subsequent phone conversations and email correspondences to confirm some historical details. Embedded in these personal narratives are memories of their mothers' life circumstances, making a cross-generational comparative perspective available.

I do not claim these young women's experiences as in any way representative of all Chinese Christian women today. But they do provide a cross-sectional view of religious life among this social demographic group that now makes up a highly significant, critical component of the country's urban population. By no means a homogeneous group, the individuals I interviewed undoubtedly had different expectations and life experiences than less educated, rural-based, and less resourceful members of Chinese society. Here are a few facts that are worth summarizing about the interviews:

- The women were born at around or after 1978, the year of the post-Mao economic reform. They ranged in age from their late twenties to their forties.
- All of them but two worked as white-collar professionals in China's urban centers. All have financial security.
- A large majority of the narrators are highly educated (with college and postgraduate degrees), and many have even been quite established in their careers, whether in business, industry, education, or non-profit sectors.
- All of them were converted during the early 2000s, when urban churches enjoyed relatively more freedom and experienced exponential growth.
- All of them are committed members of unregistered Protestant churches in China.
- Six out of fourteen women are single. Among these six women, one was divorced and one was widowed.

I asked four basic grounding questions in these interviews: What events and people shaped your outlook on life during your growing up experience? How did you become a Christian? What is your relationship with your mother like? How has the Christian faith reshaped this relationship? Within the realm of each question, I have the leverage to probe more into more details. Inquiries so deeply personal certainly require a high level of trust. As a woman, a fellow believer, and a researcher, I have been privi-

leged to obtain their trust. To protect their privacy, I use pseudonyms that appear as Chinese surnames in this book. Originally, I had planned to use short excerpts from the transcripts and arrange them into thematic chapters. Upon further reflection, I decided to use the long and free-standing model as most appropriate for narrators to speak out of their self-knowledge amid historical events and life changes. After every personal history in each chapter, I offer a concluding analysis with regard to the contextual factors in that story.

In doing these interviews, I asked my respondents to find out facts and details about their mothers, if possible. Many found that quite challenging. A few of them told me about how powerfully formative such a learning process became. Due to state censorship in media and textbooks, women of the younger generation had a broken sense of history. Even collective memories within one family have often not been shared. To some extent, the mother-daughter story-telling inside these personal narratives served to mend the broken links. From conversation to investigation, our understanding of the past was broadened.

The original oral transcripts were in Chinese. Translation into English has involved framing the materials for a Western audience. And as translated narratives, they may not read very colloquial like the way how English-speakers tell their stories. The Chinese colloquial language is often structured longer with more logical connections than in English. I followed a literary translation. In addition, things that immediately invoke responses from informed Chinese readers may need some background explanation to Westerners. I add such necessary information in endnotes. I reserved in parentheses the Chinese *pinyin* (official romanization for standard mandarin Chinese) for some special Chinese terms that deserve mentioning. In only a few places, I had to sacrifice some details that were too specific in the Chinese context but would require lengthy explanations for an English-speaking reader. Most of the time, however, I tried to provide faithful translation without changing the content and expression.

Lastly, this book has a straightforward structure with an introduction, followed by fourteen chapters of personal narratives and a conclusion. Within each narrative chapter, an oral history is presented in the narrator's voice, followed by my own reflections on the relevant themes that emerged from that particular story. The variety of experiences here defies the traditional treatment of Chinese women as an undifferentiated group. Some biographical narratives invite discussions on more feminist expressions of Chinese Christianity.



I hope that the personal histories and experiences of Chinese Christian women may launch a new paradigm of research into Chinese female religiosity. As some scholars put it, “China viewed through the lens of gender is not just more inclusive; it is different.”<sup>29</sup> The analytical lens of gender and social change through lived religious experiences may enable the researcher to gain more insight into the social processes by which these changes occur.

## NOTES

1. Workers with this disease have particles of mineral dust built up in the lungs, making the organs harder and darker in color. It is estimated that over six million migrant workers in China suffer from this disease. See “Survey details the hard road travelled by China’s victims of pneumoconiosis,” *China Labor Bulletin* (July 31, 2014). Xia, Ying et al. “Prevalence of Pneumoconiosis in Hubei, China from 2008 to 2013,” *International Journal of Respiratory Public Health* 11:9 (Sept 2014) 8612–8621.
2. The Chinese government uses censorship over all public media including television, print media, radio, film, theater, text messaging, instant messaging, video games, literature, and the Internet. Subject matters of censorship include historical, political, and religious themes. The government issues directives on a regular basis as guidelines for public media coverage. Media organizations comply with self-censorship or run the risk of being closed down.
3. David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2006), 98.  
Doyle, G. Wright. “Gender Imbalance in Chinese Churches.” *Christianity in China*, Global China Center. <http://www.globalchinacenter.org/analysis/christianity-in-china/gender-imbalance-in-the-chinese-church-causes-consequences-and-possible-cures.php>  
Ma, Li, and Jin Li. *Surviving the State, Remaking the Church: A Sociological Portrait of Christians in Mainland China* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 136.
4. Earlier, most churches were started and led by female leadership. Later patriarchal leadership took over to harvest the fruits of many faithful Christian women.
5. Jessie G. Lutz, *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2010), 13.
6. Catherine A. Brekus, “Introduction: Searching for Women in Narratives of American Religious History,” Catherine A. Brekus, ed., *Reimagining the Past: The Religious History of American Women* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 34.

7. In 2018, women make up 61 percent of the total labor force in China, according to World Bank statistics. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=CN>
8. Zheng Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Peipei Qiu and Su Zhiliang, *Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan's Sex Slaves* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Zhao Ma, *Runaway Wives, Urban Crimes, and Survival Tactics in Wartime Beijing, 1937–1949* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).
9. *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Mechthild Leutner and Nicola Spakowski, eds., *Women in China: The Republican Period in Historical Perspective* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005). Daria Berg and Chloe Starr, eds., *The Quest for Gentility in China: Negotiations beyond Gender and Class* (London: Routledge, 2007). Jiping Zuo, *Work and Family in Urban China: Women's Changing Experience Since Mao* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Roseann Lake, *Leftover in China: The Women Shaping the World's Next Superpower* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).
10. Jessie G. Lutz, *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women: Gender, Christianity, and Social Mobility* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2010). Cindy Yik-yi Chu, *The Chinese Sisters of the Precious Blood and the Evolution of the Catholic Church* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Lian Xi, *Blood Letters: The Untold Story of Lin Zhao, a Martyr in Mao's China* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).
11. Due to the scope of my research, I do not include women who follow the Catholic or other Christian traditions.
12. China's one-child policy was first introduced in 1979. Around the mid-1980s, it was modified to allow household in rural areas a second child if the first was a daughter. Ethnic minorities also were allowed exceptions. By late 2015, the Chinese government abolished it, allowing all families to have two children.
13. June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner, 'Introduction', in *Generational Consciousness, Narrative, and Politics*, ed. June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 1–7; Norman B. Ryder, "The Cohort as a Concept in Social Change," *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (Dec. 1965): 843–61; Larry J. Griffin, "Generations and Collective Memory" Revisited: Race, Region, and Memory of Civil Rights', *American Sociological Review* 69, no. 4 (Aug. 2004): 544–57.
14. Since 1955, Mao advocated for the Down to the Countryside Movement. The Communist Youth League organized the youth to participate in collective farming. From 1962, this movement was nationally implemented,

- impacting seventeen million urban youth. In 1977, when the National College Entrance Exams were reinstituted, many rusticated youth took the exams in order to return to the cities. The movement was officially ended in 1980. Since the late 1970s, a wave of Scar Literature (*shanghen*) emerged to tell tales of this generation of educated youth (*zhigqing*).
15. *Danwei* (work unit) refers to a place of employment in the context of state-owned enterprises. Self-contained work units were also the primary organizing method of community life where housing, child care, schools, clinics, shops, services, post offices were located. From the 1950s to the 1990s, as an all-encompassing social control system, work units had significant influence on the life of an individual in urban China.
  16. Mann, Susan L. *Gender and sexuality in modern Chinese history* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), xvii.
  17. Emily Wu and Larry Engelmann, *Feather in the Storm: A Childhood Lost in Chaos* (Anchor, 2008). Ji-li Jiang, *Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution* (HarperCollins, 2018).
  18. Chapter 4 of Ma, Li, and Jin Li. *Surviving the State, Remaking the Church: A Sociological Portrait of Christians in Mainland China*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017.
  19. China updated its “One-Child” policy to “Two-Children Allowed” in 2017.
  20. Fincher, Leta Hong. *Leftover women: The resurgence of gender inequality in China*. Zed Books Ltd., 2016.
  21. Lindsay Elizabeth, ““Purge Against Christians’ Underway in China as Persecution Ramps Up,” *CBN News*, May 22, 2018. <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/2018/may/lsquo-purge-against-christians-rsquo-underway-in-china-as-persecution-ramps-up>  
 “China Just Made Life Way Harder for Christians,” *Christianity Today*, May 7, 2018. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/march-web-only/china-christians-xi-jinping-religious-regulations.html>
  22. It is necessary to re-examine the term “dissident” in light of the main themes in this book. The Merriam-Webster dictionary offers this definition: “disagreeing especially with an established religious or political system, organization, or belief.” Using this word to describe the women featured in the upcoming chapters does not imply that they are activists (although some professions such as NGO work might be considered a kind of activism). It simply highlights the conflicting identity of these women, as Christians in a still-communist China, with the prevalent views of their mothers, families and society at large.
  23. The first biographies compiled by Liu Xiang (c. 77-6 B.C.) of the Former Han Dynasty became a classical tradition throughout the imperial dynasties in China.

24. Gluck, Sherna B. Rosie *The Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change*. Boston: Twayne, 1987.
25. Ye Weili and Ma Xiaohong, *Growing up in the People's Republic of China: Conversations between Two Daughters of China's Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), ix.
26. Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (September 1971), 291–311.
27. Michael Novak, *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove*, 1971, 73.
28. *Augustine, Confessions*. Translated by Maria Boulding. (New York: New City Press, 1997), 194.
29. Christina K. Gilmartin et al., "Introduction," *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 2.



## CHAPTER 2

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# Prodigal Daughter

“THEY DID NOT CONSIDER IT A PROPER TIME TO BRING  
CHILDREN INTO THE WORLD”

My life so far has been quite dramatic and eventful. I worked as a journalist and rose to the top of my field. I worked very hard and entered all kinds of upper-class social circles. I have experienced failed romances. I plunged into a messy marriage and then got divorced. I even lost my health for a while. I have traveled to Tibet five times; two of those times were when I thought I was dying. Christianity was my childhood faith, but it was after being beaten up by society that I returned to the church. That pretty much sums it up.

I was born in 1974, toward the end of the Cultural Revolution. My parents initially did not want to have children, because they did not consider it a proper time to bring children into the world. But later Mother got pregnant and gave birth to me. Afterward they wanted no more children. So, unlike most of my peers, I have no siblings.

I am lucky to have parents who valued education. We lived in Nanjing, a city where people generally nurtured the habit of reading. I began reading extensively even before starting elementary school. Back then, we had a limited number of books. As I recall, my home had subscription issues of

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*(Narration by Fang, age forty five, journalist)*

*Russian Literature*. We also had some historical books, such as the *Twenty-Four Histories* and *Five Thousand Years of Chinese History*,<sup>1</sup> since my father likes history. He bought me many books and a lot of literature books too, such as the *Four Chinese Classics* and other foreign classics. I read a lot by myself since I was young.

Being a bookworm also brought troubles in my early life. I often argued with my elementary school teachers, because they taught something that was not consistent with what I had previously read. I was naïve enough to point out their mistakes. As a result, my teachers at school did not really like me. That made the years of my early schooling kind of rough.

Another formative experience happened in the late 1990s when the internet spread into China.<sup>2</sup> The World Wide Web opened up a new window for me. I learned more about contemporary Chinese history, including the censored parts. I also had exposure to popular music.

In college, I majored in education and arts. Although I loved learning, my parents did not encourage me to pursue higher degrees in graduate school because they had both come from highly educated family backgrounds that led them to suffer persecution during the Cultural Revolution. So they considered more schooling to be potentially detrimental in China. Besides, real education was not found in schools, they thought.

My parents both grew up in families that were classified in the 1950s as “Old Military Officials” (*jiunjunren*), a category within the backward class.<sup>3</sup> My grandfathers on both sides were highly educated. In fact, they had much better education than my parents and I did. But my parents saw how they were persecuted under communist rule. They consider China as unfit for scholars or educated people. They would rather that I, their only daughter, live a simple-minded but peaceful life.

### “MY MOTHER ONCE HEARD GOD’S OWN VOICE”

I am a third-generation Christian. My paternal grandmother was the first Christian in our extended family. Her husband (my grandfather) was a high-ranking military officer in the Nationalist Party (also known as Kuomintang, or *guomindang*) during the Chinese Republic.<sup>4</sup> In the 1940s, my maternal grandfather worked as a high-ranking official for the Republican government in Nanjing. When the communists took power, they did not leave for Taiwan. As patriarchs of two big families, they felt they could not leave the rest of their households behind. My paternal grandfather gave his own chance of going to Taiwan to his Vice

Commander, who was also his nephew. He himself chose to stay and care for other family members in mainland China.

My paternal grandparents had many estates. They leased a housing unit to a missionary couple from Hong Kong. After 1952, when all our family properties were confiscated, we moved away with this missionary couple into smaller housing units designated by the new communist regime.<sup>5</sup> All of us lived together. This missionary couple first led my paternal grandmother to Christ.

My mother did not grow up in a Christian home. Her parents were worshippers of other folk religions (*baibai*). Due to their family backgrounds, both my parents were classified among the “Five Black Categories” (*beiwulei*).<sup>6</sup> Equal education opportunities were taken away from them, so they only finished junior middle school. Both of them were sent-down youth.<sup>7</sup> Mother married my father because she had no choice. Back then in rural China, a woman needed to marry in order to survive. My mother was weak and could not support herself through any kind of physical work. My father was physically very strong. By sharing the same family background, a kind of sympathy for each other’s ill fate brought them together in marriage.<sup>8</sup>

My mother was very attractive. Even today, she still loves and cares for her own appearance. Personally, I don’t think she was ever satisfied with her own marriage. Father is not the kind of man who understands how to please women romantically. My mother always had unfulfilled romantic fantasies, although she dared not cross the boundaries. She loved reading about dating, courtship and romantic missteps, such as in Jane Austen novels. I’ve had similar dreams. But having seen the big city, having lived a flamboyant social life, and having had a failed marriage, I found myself waking up from that dream. But she had always lived in that dream. On the one hand, my father spoiled her, so she never woke up from it. On the other hand, the Christian faith also protected her from sinning while staying married.

Mother once shared with me her moment of conversion to the Christian faith. The missionary who lived with our extended family had suffered twenty years of imprisonment. When that missionary was released from jail, his physical health had deteriorated. So he always rested in bed. This missionary couple lived in the same overcrowded tube-shaped apartment (*tongzilou*) as our family.<sup>9</sup> The space was so crammed that neighbors could often overhear conversations from next door. One day, when my mother passed through their door, she saw the missionary’s wife opening the win-

dow and saying, “How beautiful is the sunshine!” Then mother heard her husband who was lying in bed gently reply, “You are more beautiful than the sunshine.”

This conversation struck mother as very unusual. How could a person who just stepped out of prison utter such calm and poetic words? How could he respond to life with such enthusiasm instead of resentment? Why was there not a trace of sorrow? After all, they were the ones who suffered great injustice. So my mother considered them as very different people. During this time, this missionary couple also explained the gospel to her. She readily believed.

At that time, my father was sent down to the countryside. They both belonged to the Three Old Classes (*laosanjie*).<sup>10</sup> In the late 1970s, my mother first returned to the city to reunite with me. I was only two years old and had been living with my paternal grandmother.

Later, my mother once heard God’s own voice. Soon after her conversion, it was the Qingming Festival (*qingmingjie*).<sup>11</sup> Mother pondered whether she should burn incense at her parents’ grave. The missionary couple advised her not to. My maternal grandparents had both been executed, leaving Mother an orphan in her twenties. She struggled with it because not burning incense to her parents would make her an unfilial daughter. Her conscience was burdened. She was so greatly troubled by it that she could not sleep, because the next day would be the Qingming Festival. Then in the middle of the dark night, she heard a crystal-clear voice: “You shall believe.” With that, a powerful sense of peace entered into her heart. She fell asleep right away. Since then, Mother decided to follow the Lord wholeheartedly.

In the early 1980s, church buildings had not been re-opened.<sup>12</sup> Mother and the missionary couple held a home-gathering worship service. It was a small discreet group. Later, when the closest church building re-opened, they joined that church. It was a famous Three-self church in the city, Mochou Road Church (*mochoutang*). Few people knew that it was this missionary couple who had donated a lot of money to its ministry.

### “TO SOME EXTENT, MY CHILDHOOD FAITH PROTECTED ME”

I began attending children’s Sunday school when I was four years old. My father had not returned from the countryside, so Mother, Grandmother and I were living together and depended on each other. They all believed in God, so I also believed in a child-like way. Looking back, I think being



nurtured in the faith from a young age is very important. Even when I later strayed from Christianity and refused to attend church, the childhood faith was still there. There were boundaries that I dared not cross. I was sensitive to what were considered sins. Without a foundation in the faith, people can easily be tempted in society. So to some extent, my childhood faith protected me.

Since the late 1990s, through the Internet, I connected with some professional journalists online. I also found my first job on the Internet as a reporter. This job fascinated me, but it was also the reason why I left the church.

Being a reporter showed me many harsh social realities. I worked for ten years at *Oriental Morning News*, from 1997 to 2007. I wrote for its “Wealth” section and got in touch with many famous people, mostly the “nouveau riche.” In the beginning, I plunged right in. What appealed to me about this job was the possibility that I could imitate their success stories. Who did not want to succeed in life? Especially when you are in your twenties, the lives of the affluent looked exciting, including a generation of Dot Com start-ups. Some failed, but a few persisted. Their paths seemed replicable to me as well, because I had a higher starting point than they did. Besides, I found out that they were not particularly smart people. Many were plain in intelligence, but they excelled through hard work. They were not particularly shrewd and deceitful; many stayed in one industry and did down-to-earth work. Over the years they rose to the top. So back then, I thought to myself: “I could do this too!” But I stayed away from banking ventures. That appeared to me like a pretty risky industry.

Once I interviewed a female real estate tycoon. I was reporting on her life for the “People” section in our newspaper. I asked her, “How could I become you?” She replied with a meaningful look, “I suggest that you do not become me. This circle belongs to men. Even I want to withdraw and let my husband take the lead.” Her husband was, in fact, her chauffeur and not a capable man. Then she told me that as a woman, she paid her dues to get where she was. And she was clear about the costs from the beginning. What she meant by this was clear as day to me—she had slept her way to the top; she had sex with the key people to get the rewards that she rightfully deserved. That was what she meant. Because we were women, she was straightforward in sharing about that with me. Of course, I did not publish this part of her story.

Later I thought to myself: “I could never do that.” I had no desire to become someone like her. It was clear to me that I had some basic moral

standards in life that would not allow me to do these things. But then I figured, maybe I could marry someone in this circle. At that time, my ex-husband was a good friend of mine. He was among the very few down-to-earth people among those who I had interviewed. I did not see him as a proud person. As long as you don't have to live with him, he is a pretty decent guy.

After our marriage, my pride reached its climax. I was very proud of where I was. Before that, I used to value humility as a virtue, but then I just became more and more proud of myself. My career was going up smoothly. My social circles were upgrading. I married someone successful and important. I just got really puffed up, as if I was among those who I admired.

“I FELT LIKE THAT THERE WAS AN EVIL SPIRIT  
LIVING IN HIS BODY”

My first marriage lasted for about two years. My ex-husband is an outstanding and successful professional, from a secular perspective. We have known each other for many years. I thought that I had observed him well enough, but you don't know a person until you live together. I divorced him because I sensed that my life was in great danger by being with him.

He had a severe mental illness, but he was reluctant to seek medical help. For example, when he got mad, he would charge into my room in the middle of the night. He would ask me not to eat dinner. He feared shadows of trees at night, thinking that someone was plotting to kill him. Sometimes he smashed all the glasses at home and sat in the middle of broken glass, bleeding. I felt like there was an evil spirit living in his body. He would also beat me up. I divorced him because of domestic violence. In the middle of this mess, I had thought that I could save him from it. Sometimes I was thinking maybe I should pray for him more. After all, he is not a bad guy. But he often lost control of himself. It was too much for me to deal with.

During these two years, my health also deteriorated. I used to love spending money on leisure and luxury, so I had to work two jobs. During the day, I worked for my newspaper. At night, I worked from home for an aviation magazine. It was exhausting. I was overworking for too long, and I got sick. My illness was very serious but the doctors could not put their finger on what it was. My red blood, white blood and platelet counts were dropping rapidly. I could not sleep at night. When I did fall asleep, I woke

up the next morning to a bed wet from heavy sweating. Something was very wrong with my health! Then I went around the city, going to different hospitals for diagnoses. The doctors still could not diagnose my illness. Later they found a shadow on my X-ray. Before they could diagnose further, I quickly ran away. I did not want to stay in the hospital, for I wanted to die in a place with beautiful scenery. I also wrote up my will. Then I traveled to Tibet on my own.<sup>13</sup> I wanted to die there. I have traveled to Tibet five times in my life. A few of these times, I was expecting death.

After I came back from my trip, I became a sick woman with no job. I spent most of my days resting at home. I was not yet divorced but only separated from my ex-husband. Then a young colleague from my newspaper team came to visit me in my rented apartment. She was, in fact, a new Christian convert with... I would say ... very little faith. I was actually the one who recruited her into our newspaper. One day, she came and sat by my bed. Then after a while, suddenly she began to sob: "Sister, I have never seen someone as miserable as you!" She cried out loud for a moment and then said, "I think you should go back to church." She left in tears. I thought that was a moving reminder from God. So I went back to check out her church.

Even after I returned to church, my health did not improve much. I was left with no money. I found another job, working for the fashion magazine, *ELLE*. The church I joined was packed with college students. I was the oldest among them, even a few years older than their pastor. Later I switched to a lawyers' fellowship. Many members there were returnees from overseas, all highly educated. Their Bible study group was very helpful to me. Later, a sister in this fellowship led me to an inter-church prayer meeting. She thought that I needed a lot of prayer support.

There were many people at this prayer meeting. Afterward, a few of us left together for the subway train. There was a young pastor among us. I did not remember his face at all, but he later told me that I looked very needy that day. It was a time of great pressure for me when my ex-husband was going through some mental breakdowns. This pastor was very sensitive to notice signs of my stress. He said that after we parted, he prayed for me for a whole month and decided to find me again. He went to a sister in the lawyers' fellowship and asked about where I worked. Then he showed up at my workplace. I was surprised by his visit, because he introduced himself as a pastor. I did not recall having met him before. He appeared thin and weak. Then we sat down to talk. He told me, "God loves you." I replied, "No, He does not." Then he repeated what he said. I said no again. We went back and forth like this many times.

His visit triggered my serious wrestling with God. Before that, I ran far, far away from God. I dared not say that I no longer believed in God, because it was my childhood faith, but I knew that God was far away from me. I felt that He does not love me. The active outreach of that pastor was a turning point in my life. I reflected on my life's choices and felt deep regrets.

### “I ACCEPT HER AS AN IMPERFECT MOTHER”

The ups and downs in my career, my health problems, my marriage and divorce, these were things that I could not tell my mother. Even if you didn't tell her anything, she would put great pressure on you. She was very controlling. After my divorce, she checked on me more often. When she read in the news about people suffering from depression, she would call me and ask, “Are you still living by yourself? Why do you live by yourself? Do you have depression?” So it's like, she imagined that I had all the problems she read about in the news. It was hard to communicate with her. I never called home. It was already difficult to get away from her because she was determined to control my life.

Later, when I shared an apartment with a female colleague, Mother called and asked, “So you have a roommate now? Man or woman?” I replied, “A woman, my colleague.” Then she asked in a strange tone, “You are not a lesbian, are you?” I was speechless. The way she cared for me was by using a tone of accusation. She did not know how to care for people. Once she visited me and stayed for a while. When I worked long hours during the day and returned home around midnight, she requested me to stay up and watch over her. “I got a cold, so you should listen if I have shortness of breath,” she demanded. She always assumed that other people should take care of her. As her daughter, I was always the errand girl, taking orders from her. But she assumed that she had given me a lot of love.

Being a Christian does not mean that your life's circumstances will be completely changed. After I returned to church, my deepest realization was that faith is a process of pursuing God. It may change you a bit, but more often it makes you realize more about human sinfulness and finiteness. Human beings are so imperfect. No matter if they are parents, children or pastors, they have many imperfections and flaws. I returned to the Christian faith because I accepted this fact.

After I embraced this fact, God did something amazing—He started to change my mother. I sensed that my mother had found a spiritual mentor. It used to be that when we argued, she would cry and cry, with a lot of

tears. Then I would overreact to her hysteria. I wrote her notes and letters, full of accusations. It is funny that we both loved literature, and this love for words fanned our arguments. Every time I wrote her a combative letter, I made sure that it had the most hurtful language. This kind of fight usually took place during the Spring Festival every year.<sup>14</sup> After reading it, my mother would collapse on her bed in tears. Then my father went up to comfort her. She demanded my father to scold me. So, for many years, I did not want to go home for family reunions. I would rather die somewhere else. During my sickness, I wrote a will and made my best friend the executor of my estate, hoping that she would help with my funeral. When I nearly died in Tibet twice, I never wanted my mother to collect my body.

But something later changed between my mother and me. She stopped arguing with me. Whenever conflicts and arguments arose, she gave me a grin and then just ignored it. A moment later, I found her typing words on her cellphone using WeChat.<sup>15</sup> I learned that she now had a spiritual mentor, an elderly sister at her church. So now every time I return home, she is very tolerant toward my criticisms. This change took place after my relationship with God deepened. So our relationship has now improved to a historical high.

I am still tempted to apply my journalist's lens on my mother. She is still a princess, because that has been her personality. She continues to participate in ministry that I consider self-promoting and self-righteous. She has a lot of complaints about people at church. She exudes no joy in serving God. Her joy is mainly from people admiring her own singing performance at church. But I no longer criticize her for not glorifying God. I accept her as an imperfect mother.

As my spirituality grows, I have also begun to serve her more. I now lead her in Bible study every week. The church she attends lacks depth in teaching God's Word. Mother likes activities, and she invites many of her friends from church to hear me teach the Bible. Now every week, she sits in front of me with cheerful and curious eyes, just like a little school girl.

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The three-generation history of Fang's extended family spanned across the Republic of China, Mao's China and a contemporary China with exciting opportunities in its booming urban economy. Fang's literary interests were nurtured by parents who both favored and feared intellectualism due to the memory of past persecution of an earlier generation.

Fang's desires to be free of motherly control later materialized through online exploration and career choices that expanded her horizons. Entering the profession of commercial journalism, Fang immersed herself in a culture of achievement and materialism. She became so independent in her life's choices and in handling a series of personal crises that few of these happenings involved her mother.

Fang's narrative is full of imagery and memories that belonged to contrasting eras. The cramped but neighborly relationships in collective housing units in the 1980s contrast sharply with luxurious yet unfulfilling experiences in her soaring career and marriage. Reflecting on her life, Fang was both reminded by the endurance of simple faith and the unsettling transience of worldly approval. Even the image of her mother is presented with interesting complexity. On the one hand, Fang describes her as a naïve but spoiled princess who never grew up to care for her daughter in a mature and motherly way. On the other hand, Fang remembers her mother's revelatory moments as defining snapshots of her own Christian roots. The recounting of the missionary's testimony by Fang's mother became a formative anchor for both of them. Nevertheless, the relationship between Fang and her mother is still spiritually connected but emotionally estranged. As if wanting to give a heartwarming closure to this tension, Fang concludes her story by remembering its betterment through coming to the faith together.

Fang's worldview went through dramatic changes, from treasuring her childhood faith to embracing materialism with certain moral reservations, then to disillusionment with self-fulfillment, lastly back to deepening her spiritual allegiance to God. Since the mid-1990s, China's mindboggling phase of economic growth brought about a spiritual disorientation. Market opportunities were both exciting and perilous. A society-wide moral collapse followed disillusionment with the official ideology. It is in the midst of this larger demoralization trend where the micro-trajectories of many urban-professional-turned-converts are embedded.

For Fang, she went full circle like a prodigal daughter. In her most needy state of mind, Fang was attentive to God's signs in her life through circumstances and the outreach of various individuals. This openness taught her the lesson of humility. Toward the end of her narrative, Fang's relationship with her mother also returned to a healthier phase of interdependence in the same Christian faith.

## NOTES

1. The *Twenty-Four Histories* are also known as the Orthodox Histories in China, covering the period from 3000 BC to the Ming dynasty in the seventeenth century.
2. Around mid and late 1990s, people in China had access to the Internet. Online chatrooms and forums emerged as active virtual communities, especially among college students and young professionals in urban centers.
3. China's communist regime categorized people into different "class elements" (*jieji chengfen*) or "class status" in society. The class status of the head of a family is the categorization of all directly related family members in that household. Its purpose was to differentiate the politically reliable classes (e.g. poor peasants) from the unreliable ones (e.g. petite bourgeoisie). For example, middle-school and elementary teachers were categorized as the latter. This method of classification remained in place until 1983. See Guocheng Li, *A Glossary of Political Terms of the People's Republic of China* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1995), 190.
4. The Nationalist Party of China was founded in 1912. Its leadership included Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek.
5. Communist transformation of ownership in land and industry proceeded slowly after China recuperated from the Civil War. Urban collectivization included confiscating privately owned estates and relocating people into collective housing units.
6. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao identified groups as enemies of the Revolution, including landlords, rich farmers, counter-revolutionaries, bad-influencers, and Rightists. When the head of a household falls into such categories, children in the same family suffer social ostracism.
7. The "sent-down youth" are also known as "educated youth" (*zhìqīng*). They were young people, generally in their late teens, who willingly or under coercion left Chinese cities to live and work in rural areas of China. This sent-down reversed migration from richer to poorer areas lasted from the 1950s to the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). It resulted in truncated education, family separation, adaptation issues for this generation.
8. Because of social discrimination, young people whose family backgrounds were classified as among "Five Black Categories" usually found it difficult to find marriage partners.
9. The design of tube-shaped multi-family dormitory-style buildings was a product of China's central-planning economy. Its use lasted for half a century, shaping the collective memory of a few generations in urban work units.

10. This term refers to middle-school graduates in the three years of 1966, 1967, and 1968 from urban China. Most of this generation also participated in the Cultural Revolution as Red Guards. In the 1990s, this term popularized as part of a popular nostalgia. See Edward L. Davis (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 440.
11. Chinese Memorial Day in the spring according to traditional Chinese lunar calendar. It is a public holiday when Chinese people practice rituals of ancestor worship, such as burning fake money, incense, and kowtowing at the tomb.
12. See Li Ma and Jin Li, *Surviving the State, Remaking the Church: A Sociological Portrait of Christians in Mainland China* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 22–27.
13. In the 2000s, traveling to Tibet was considered as a spiritual pilgrimage among Chinese young people coming from a majority atheist background.
14. The annual Spring Festival, also known as the Chinese New Year according to Lunar calendar, usually falls between late January and mid-February. It is the biggest occasion for family reunions in China.
15. Since the Chinese regime blocked Skype, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, the super-app WeChat, which was designed for easy monitoring by the government, filled the void with over 938 million monthly users in 2017. See Li Ma, *Religious Entrepreneurism in China's Urban House Churches: The Rise and Fall of Early Rain Reformed Presbyterian Church* (London: Routledge, 2019), 11.





## CHAPTER 3

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# Lost Sheep

“IT WAS A VERY PAINFUL EXPERIENCE BECAUSE SHE HAD  
TO GIVE UP ON HER EDUCATION”

My mother’s own family experienced a lot of changes. Whenever I think about this part of my history, my heart is filled with lament. My maternal grandmother lived through two completely different times. She was the honorable daughter (*dajiagnixiu*) of a big wealthy family in Republic China (1911–1949). Her father was a local official in Hunan Province. When I asked her what it was like to be the honorable daughter of this rich family, she described the team of servants and workers. “We treated our workers well,” she said, “they used to eat with us at the same table.” She spoke defensively that wealthy families were not as cruel to laborers as the communists later propagated against the rich during the land reforms.<sup>1</sup>

When the communists took power, they executed my great-grandfather by shooting him. The fate of the family changed ever since. I learned about this history only in 2010 when my grandmother returned from Canada. She led my mother and me to the place where my great-grandfather had been executed. Because she witnessed the execution of her own father, my grandmother distrusted the Chinese Communist Party since she was young. So in the 1960s, when my mother became a Party

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(Narration by Wan, age thirty five, forest certification specialist)

member in her youth during the Cultural Revolution, my grandmother was greatly displeased. But my mother's peers all considered it a most honorable thing, and my mother was influenced by the trend.

My grandmother later married a railway-building worker. They were not from the same social class. My grandmother was educated and literate, but my step-grandfather was a semi-literate laborer. They had little in common, other than the harsh fate of poverty. During the Cultural Revolution, my grandmother's family background continued to become a source of public humiliation for her. In 1996, my grandfather died in a car accident. My grandmother became a widow and did not remarry. Later, she immigrated to Canada with her younger daughter, my aunt.

I know my grandmother to be a very quiet and gentle person. She never spoke loudly. She never cursed. She was very different from other elderly women I knew. She was even a little too cautious and timid. When I was young, I once had an argument with her, and I threw a glass cup onto the ground. Grandma went to the other room to cry over it. That was how reserved and timid she was.

My mother was born in Ma'anshan in 1959. Her family was very poor. My mother remembers that she sometimes picked up and ate apple peelings left around by neighbors. She enjoyed her studies, but her schooling was truncated by the Cultural Revolution. She was among the sent-down youth.<sup>2</sup> It was a very painful experience for her because she had to give up on her education.

After the National College Entrance Examination was reinstituted in 1977, my mother took the exams. When the admission letter arrived, she was working in the field. Somebody told her, "You have been admitted to a college!" She was thrilled. Immediately, she entered Anhui Labor University. It was there where she met my father. Colleges at that time did mainly agricultural research; she majored in vegetable research. I have childhood memories of her testing soilless tomatoes in our home. After earning a college degree, my mother worked for a research institute in our city.

### "MY MOTHER IS A VERY VIRTUOUS WOMAN"

When I was in third grade, I remember finding Mother crying in the kitchen. I asked her what was wrong. She said that it was because Grandfather wanted her to change jobs. My maternal grandfather worked in the biggest state-owned steel corporation in Ma'anshan city. Back then,

people considered it an honor to work for that company. It was an “iron bowl” job.<sup>3</sup> So Grandfather insisted on her changing her job. Mother had no choice but to give up her research work to enter this state-owned company. But it turned out that her new job was catering in the kitchen. My father once visited her and was shocked to find Mother serving in the kitchen. Of all the people working there, only Mother had a college degree. That was why she felt so distressed and struggled so much. Due to this incident, her relationship with my grandfather became tense.

Both my maternal grandmother and my mother had very gentle personalities. My grandmother was educated and worked as an architectural designer. I remember seeing design papers and compasses at home when I was young. I think my grandmother raised her children well. My mother is a very virtuous woman. She is hardworking, strong, wise, cultured, and well-mannered. She greatly respects my father. Both my parents grew up in very harmonious homes. My father has a good relationship with other relatives.

Later, when my father became the governor of our township, he used his personal networks to help my mother find work at a greenhouse research center. Mother could use her garden design skills there again. She loved the job so much! The pay was little, and she often needed to work overtime, but she liked it very much. That was the job she kept until retirement. Even after she retired, this research center hired her back. They had regular bids for the city exhibits. My mother’s design plan was often adopted. She liked garden designing. She is very devoted to what she likes. In order to learn how to use design software, she took night classes after her day work shift. Now she enjoys a good reputation in the city of Ma’anshan as a famous garden designer. Once we took a taxi, and the driver praised the gardening convention that year. My mother proudly told him that she was the main designer for that.

My mother and I are like friends. In middle school, I used to share with her about my crush on someone. My mother patiently taught me how to deal with growing up. She even played computer games with me.

A few other incidents in life have also shaped my personality and my way of thinking. When I was in junior middle school, one day I went out to play with a good friend of mine. We went up a small hill. A stranger appeared suddenly and seized me. He ripped my clothes off, trying to rape me. My friend took flight. A moment later, the attacker stopped because there was noise coming from the other side of the hill. This incident made

me doubt what true friendship is. My friend had deserted me, and she just watched the thing happening from afar. It was a shame that our friendship withered after that.

When I started high school, another good friend died in a car accident. It took me two years to recover from that tragic loss. It forced me to think about death for the first time. I used to write in my diary about how this world is so fickle, life is so fragile, and how death can be so sudden.

### “SHE INSISTED ON PROVING HER HUSBAND’S INNOCENCE”

My father entered into politics in around 1995. First he was the township governor and then the county governor. When I was a junior in college in Beijing, I called my father’s cell phone one day, but no one answered. I sensed that something might have happened to him. Then I called my mother. She said that father was in training for some overseas visits. Her tone was not natural, so it confirmed my fear that something had happened to my father. When I returned home, my mother told me that my father had been arrested. He was accused of embezzling thousands of *yuan*. Within the next month, the alleged amount doubled, tripled, and then went up to two million *yuan*. Rumors also spread that my father had mistresses.

After that, many of my father’s friends shunned us, but a few helped my mother to work with the lawyer. The lawyer first told us that this was a simple case, because father had obviously been framed. But later this same lawyer declined defending the case. He had received orders from above to stop. My (paternal) uncle worked for the Public Security Bureau, so it was easy for him to ask about the case. But later even he was reluctant to check on it, for fear that it could harm his own career. So, Mother faced a lot of pressure, mistreatment, and threats. She still insisted on proving her husband’s innocence. She untiringly sought legal assistance, taped her conversations with witnesses, and documented the evidences. Whenever I re-read the files and documents my mother kept, I admire her courage and endurance. During this time, she was very fragile too. She cried a lot in solitude.

Later, we learned that my father’s arrest was due to political struggles—Father was in the way of some high-ranking official. People came to search our home and found less than two hundred thousand *yuan* of assets. It was all confiscated, and we were left with no money. Father was sentenced

to eleven years in jail. It was not until a year later when I was allowed to visit him. Father told us that early on when he was detained, he was beaten and tortured to make him confess to the “crime.”

During the seven and a half years that my father was in prison, Mother and I depended on each other. I have never seen my mother cry so many tears before. The first one or two years were especially grueling for us. We also argued a lot because of this close interdependence. Mother had no one else to confide in: I was the only audience. Whenever she complained to me, I felt overburdened and unwilling to listen. After I moved away from home, such tensions were also common in our phone conversations.

“I WAS THE ONLY PERSON SHE HAD, BUT I COULD NOT  
COMFORT HER”

This whole situation brought about the collapse of the core beliefs inside me. Although I had never liked the Chinese Communist Party before, we were all taught core socialist values in our education system. My university years were spent in Beijing, the nation’s political center. I had never imagined that such an injustice would happen to me. “What is wrong with this world?!” I thought indignantly.

My mother’s core values were subverted too. She used to be a garden designer, working for a big state-owned steel corporation. She recalled her leaders becoming hostile toward her after hearing about my father’s arrest. My mother became the notorious “wife of a corrupt official.” Everything suddenly changed. Her employer even arranged for my mother to become a street-sweeper. She was greatly saddened. Beforehand, my mother had a deep devotion to the Communist Party, but since these events, she turned into the biggest cynic in our family.

When I graduated from college, my (maternal) aunt visited us from Canada. She is my mother’s younger sister. Aunt explained the gospel message to me. I recalled having seen a book with oil paintings of events from Jesus’ birth to his crucifixion before. That book had belonged to my aunt too. Because it presented the Christian faith as historical facts, I had always considered it true. Because I was very upset with the Communist Party, and Christianity is what they discouraged people from believing, I wanted to become a Christian! Then I followed the back of a gospel tract and said the “I accept Jesus” prayer.

When I was preparing for graduate school tests in 2006, I found myself unable to comply with the political portion of the exam. As a result, I scored only 20 out of 100. No more graduate school, so I started working. I found a job while all alone in a strange city. Then I began attending a church near where I lived. Hearing about the baptism service for the coming Easter, I signed up for it.

The morning of my baptism, I wanted to take a bath at home. I did not know what baptism means, so I thought that maybe I should clean myself for it first. But while I was taking a bath, there was a gas leak that day, and I was poisoned. Later, I remembered having had a strange vision while people were trying to rescue me. I remembered having a terrible headache and wanting to go to church for baptism. I saw some yellow light, then someone who stared at me with great sadness. My consciousness also shouted some words: "Lord, am I dying?" Then I woke up.

When I became conscious in the hospital, I found my Swedish colleague and his girlfriend standing by my bed. They told me that the hospital staff did not want to rescue me at first because I had been exposed to the gas for too long. They pleaded with them, and the staff agreed to do a favor because of these foreigners.

Since then, I began to ponder over death more seriously. I also took church more seriously, and I studied my Bible more diligently. At that time, I had only attended state churches. I did not know about house churches. Brothers and sisters in this state church were kind to me. Once, a sister gave me a ride home at night after our Bible fellowship. I said, "Thank you." She replied, "Don't mention it. You should thank the Lord." These Christian friends were very different from the other people I had met in life.

My mother was not against my Christian belief, because these were the hardest years for us. I was alone working at my first job in Qingdao. My mother was back home, also working. I could not leave my work, and she had to earn a living too. All our money had been taken away. So, we relied on each other and expected much of each other. Our relationship was both warm and full of tension and friction. In her workplace, she endured much mistreatment. Burdened by financial insecurity and uncertainty about the future, she often felt anxious and indignant. A perfectionist and new at work, I wanted to do my best; I was under great pressure to excel among my peers. I was also constantly jealous of my colleagues, thinking to myself, "Why did he get to go on business trips abroad, not me?" So, when my mother and I talked over the phone, we first consoled each

other, then vented our dissatisfaction about life. We often even accused each other of missteps. It was terrible. Afterward, I would also need to apologize to my mother. I was the only person she had, but I cannot comfort her. I felt very distressed too.

Two years later, I was on a business trip with another colleague. We watched a news channel about some terrible violence somewhere. I commented, "Without religious faith, people can do terrible things!" She asked me, "Do you have a faith?" I told her that I am a Christian. She said, "Me too!" It turned out that she was a member of a house church. I joined it too. That was where my faith deepened. The church was led by an Uncle Li. Some of its elderly members had been persecuted and imprisoned during the Mao era. So, they taught us about God's grace in a more profound way. Before that time, I only knew that I had a heavenly Father, but I was unclear about Christ's relationship with me. It was after reading the Gospel of John and listening to sermons in this house church that I suddenly realized that I am sinner in need of a Savior. I was no longer a nominal Christian. I truly believed.

### "MOTHER HAD CONCERNS ABOUT MY FAITH"

It was not until after I became a Christian that my communication with Mother improved. I no longer felt desperate after hearing my mother's complaints. I was more willing to listen to her. Although I could not help her, I believed that God is a father to orphans and God works justice for widows.

I invited my mother to visit the city where I worked. I also brought her to this house church. She saw how brothers and sisters were caring for me, especially when I had a rental dispute. I paid for an apartment room which I later found out was a sublease from a tenant. This tenant was living together with her boyfriend. I felt that I had to move out and then had nowhere to live. A sister of our church offered to host me. She also comforted me with kind words. Brothers and sisters of this church even went with me to negotiate with the tenant who withheld six months of rent from me. They helped me to get the money back. Through this incident, my mother liked Christians because they cared for me like a family. She also observed the changes in me—I became less radical and more cheerful.

Mother had concerns about my faith too. Once I signed up for an evangelistic meeting in Hong Kong. She was worried that I was entering some spy organization. She detests what the government does, but she also has

a fear due to years of believing government propaganda. Sometimes she also warned me against making the Christian faith an obsession. Another thing is the fact that I remained single for many years since my conversion. Later, I broke up with an unbelieving boyfriend because of the faith. Mother then became very concerned about my faith again.

Single women in the church face the challenge of marrying a man in the faith. In the city, even if you do not consider the Christian faith as a requirement, finding a marriageable and responsible man is already very difficult. One-tenth of our church members belong to the grouping of single females who are in their thirties and forties. Nowadays, female professionals in the city have very strong awareness about their equal rights. They favor men who respect women. When they suffer unequal treatments at workplaces, they speak up. They are independent. They have their voices. But at the same time, life might be more challenging for them.

I met my husband at an inter-church reading society. We read through some theological classics over the years. We have been married for five years now, but we have not been able to have children. So, we often reached out to single people in our church. In fact, the leader of our church encouraged every married couple to “adopt” a single brother or sister, just to care for them in times of need. My husband enjoyed doing this, and I like it too.

My father likes the fact that I became a Christian. After his release, Father told me that he had a mental breakdown in the beginning of his prison years. He felt indignant about the injustice because he did not commit those crimes. But after he heard stories from other inmates, Father realized that other people have suffered even greater injustice than he did. Compared to their cases, his was not the worst after all. Later, he asked us to send him books to read, all kinds of books. He got obsessed with psychology. Now he thinks that he knows a lot about psychology. When I explained the gospel and my changes to him, my father considered it a good thing. He even said that it was the Christian faith that saved his daughter. But he also responded: “It is good to have a faith. For me, psychology has helped a great deal!” My relationship with him became better too. Before that, we got along but there was fear in me. Later that fear was healed.

Mother saw how the faith has transformed me and her own sister (my aunt) to a different person. My aunt had previously divorced her husband, but they got back together after her conversion. Everybody around them saw how much they loved each other.



When it comes to her owning the Christian faith, my mother had reservations. She always says, “Someday I would believe, but not now.” She recalled a dream with Jesus holding a lamb in it. That was why she made that comment. I knew that she still had issues to wrestle with God. One day, I was chatting with her about God’s justice, when she suddenly said: “To hell with justice! Why was your father jailed for so long?!” It was something she would not usually utter. She tried to evade this question. Another time I also found a Bible under her pillow. She kept it as her company during the years when she lived alone.

### “I HAVE SEEN GOD’S GRACE ON HER”

Around 2013, I worked in Hong Kong. My parents visited me, and I took them to a church there. An elderly sister asked them incessantly: “When your daughter dies, she goes to heaven. Where do you go when you die?” She asked my parents that same question over and over again. At first they were silent and reluctant to speak. Then my mother said, “I would go wherever my daughter is.” Then the elderly sister asked her: “Are you sure that you can get there?” Since then, my parents refused to go to church with me. No matter how hard I tried to convince them, they were reluctant. Even when we visited my aunt in Canada, they refused to go to church with us.

Grandmother now lives with my aunt’s family in Canada. Ten years ago, when my aunt and uncle experienced a downturn in their careers, my grandmother was hit by a car while she was out walking. She was thrown up into the air and then landed on the ground. People who saw this accident all worried that this elderly woman must have broken many bones and would possibly die. However, she had no injuries and walked home. Later she told us that something held her when she was first hit by that car. She also saw a bright light in front of her eyes. Before that, she had heard about the gospel and did nothing about it. This accident changed her. She became a devout Christian in her eighties.

My grandmother and my aunt attend two different churches in Canada. I was intrigued by that, so I asked my grandmother: “Why do you prefer to walk all the way to a different church, instead of riding in a car with Aunt to her church?” Grandma told me, “Their church is Pentecostal, but my church is evangelical.” I was quite amused at how my eighty-nine-year-old grandma can tell the difference between these churches.

Because of what happened to our family, our previous trust in the Communist Party was shattered. But my parents still feared trouble due to the Christian faith. The only person who never got brainwashed in our family was my maternal grandmother. Maybe it was because she saw the execution of her own father in the 1950s. She knew from that moment on.

Among all women in our family, my mother is the one who still stays away from God. She is like the one lost sheep in the parable, but I have seen God's grace on her. Although I cannot explain how she healed from my father's imprisonment for so many years, I believe it was by God's grace.

Compared to my grandmother's and my mother's generations, we never faced war or political turmoil. Still, our lives are also haunted by an uncertain factor—we don't know what will happen to China, given the current economic and political conditions.<sup>4</sup> Anxiety is a major theme of urban life, even for Christians. Young professionals face great pressure to keep up with the standard of living. In our small group at church, many sisters spent their savings and their parents' savings to purchase an apartment in this megacity. Or they borrow money from the bank and worry about whether they can pay back the loans given their stagnated salaries. Many became so anxious that they had insomnia. A big challenge remains: maybe we have never been prepared for an impending crisis.

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Since the 1980s, official corruption arises from the post-reform double-track pricing mechanism compounded by collaboration between Communist Party officials and local business enterprises.<sup>5</sup> Crackdown on cadre corruption has since been an enduring theme of Chinese politics. Such campaigns were deeply politicized, often triggered by fractional struggles for power and followed non-transparent procedures.<sup>6</sup> Wan's father was caught in this net, and his long term in prison became a painful trial for Wan and her mother. This experience led to their disillusionment with the official ideology of the regime.

Kinship connections with diaspora Chinese are significant for Wan's conversion to the Protestant faith. She recalls details of how the spiritual lives of her aunt and grandmother became positive examples for her own soul search. Working for a foreign enterprise, she also had plenty of

opportunities to travel abroad. Such exposure and earlier disillusionment led to Wan's conversion, which she celebrated as a personal rebellion against the Chinese regime. Despite Wan's efforts to help her mother understand the Christian faith, her mother remains indifferent or fearful toward it—she simply cannot bring herself to reconcile the injustice her family suffered with a biblical concept of God's justice. Although Wan and her mother depended on each other in coping with life's difficulties, this difference of worldview creates new tensions between them.

In their professional careers, both Wan and her mother suffered the whims of external forces. They resorted to a diligent work ethic to fight against these controlling forces and eventually became specialists in the areas of their interests. To both of these independent women, work has been a source of satisfaction in life. Wan, especially, has been rewarded with collegial friendships and providential guidance. A strong belief in God's all-encompassing grace deepened Wan's hope for her mother's future conversion.

Most interestingly, Wan ended the story of her family with a sober sense of impending crisis for her generation. Ample economic opportunities in the midst of a shifting international political climate may also lead to undesirable changes in the loss of such opportunities. As a Chinese idiom goes, "It is easy to go from frugality to extravagance, but difficult to go from extravagance to frugality." Wan also foresees this potential happening as a trial for young Christian professionals like her. The end of her narrative captures the theme of anxiety among Christians in a China that shows signs of economic downturn and tightening ideological control.<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

1. From 1947 to early 1950s, communist mobilizers had a violent campaign against the landlord class, accusing them of having oppressed the peasants in rural China. Massive numbers of landlords were executed.
2. See note 14 in the Introduction chapter.
3. This term refers to a job with steady income, benefits, and guaranteed security. In China, such jobs usually include working in state-owned enterprises, military, or the system of civil service.
4. Since early 2018, China and the United States have been engaged in a trade war which shifted the Sino-US relationship into greater uncertainty. Afterward, anti-foreign sentiments arose on China's state-controlled media.

5. Guoping Jiang, *Corruption Control in Post-Reform China: A Social Censure Perspective* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2017).
  6. MaCabe Keliher and Hsinchao Wu, "How to Discipline 90 Million People," *The Atlantic*, April 7, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/xi-jinping-china-corruption-political-culture/389787/>
  7. Ruili Huang and Li Yuan, "China Censors Bad Economic News Amid Signs of Slower Growth," *New York Times*, September 29, 2018. [https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/business/china-censor-economic-news.html?\\_ga=2.183795808.798359596.1558545788-869220837.1430796594](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/business/china-censor-economic-news.html?_ga=2.183795808.798359596.1558545788-869220837.1430796594)
- Nectar Gan, "The complex reality of China's social credit system: hi-tech dystopian plot or low key incentive scheme?" *South China Morning Post*, February 7, 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/2185303/hi-tech-dystopia-or-low-key-incentive-scheme-complex-reality>



## CHAPTER 4

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# Little Comfort

### “SHE ESCAPED A STORM IN LIFE”

My mother was born in 1950. In a township of Jilin Province, her maternal grandfather was the richest landlord and owned over half of the land. I saw a few pictures that were taken of my grandfather's household. He was very rich, mostly by inheritance. My grandmother used to tell me that although the official propaganda told people that landlords were bad, local people respected my grandfather's father. He had earned the title of the Generous and Kind Mr. Li (*lishanren*).<sup>1</sup> His family opened free charity porridge stands all year long for the poor.

My memory of my maternal grandparents was that they were both very quiet people, speaking very few words. Whenever we visited them, my grandparents stayed in the kitchen to prepare good food for us. My grandmother usually did not eat at the same table with us. She still lived as if in the olden days, when women needed to be humble herself by serving others and not eating with guests at the same table.

The land reform began in the same year that my mother was born. My grandfather was taken away, hung from a tree by his thumbs. Then he was beaten brutally. I heard this from my oldest aunt. The home of my grandparents was also raided. All of their possessions were taken

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(Narration by Dong, age forty one, founding owner of a private day care center)

away. Even the walls were pulled open to see if some treasures were hidden inside them.

Before that raid, my grandmother burned all land contracts (*diqu*). Back then, people burned wood under a brick-laid stove to cook. Just to show you how many land contracts they had—by burning the paper contracts under their stove in the kitchen, my grandmother actually boiled up a whole big wok of water! That tells you that they owned much land. So, when the land reformers came, they did not find any land contracts in the home. Someone even pointed a gun against the back of my grandmother's head and demanded her to turn in those contracts. She did nothing, because those papers were already burned. They could only let her go.

When my uncle brought a bowl of food to my grandfather, who was kept in a shed by those who had beaten him, he wrote a small note under the bottom of the bowl, telling my grandfather that "All were burnt." My uncle wanted to remind him that they needed to tell the same story: no land contracts. Because of this, my grandfather's family was not classified as "landlords."<sup>2</sup> But they were not in the best category of "Poor Peasants" (*pinrong*) either. The family was still considered as "having bad elements" (*chengfen buhao*).

During the Cultural Revolution, my grandfather was taken away for struggle meetings. They put high hats on him to humiliate him, but there were no beatings like in 1950. While in school, my mother had a classmate who was put in struggle meetings and cursed publicly by others as a "bastard." My mother was appalled by what they did to this classmate. She was scared that she might be the next target. So, she went home and told my grandmother. At midnight, my grandmother sent her away by railway to a distant relative in another city. The next morning, Red Guards did come to find her for struggle meetings. That was how she escaped a storm in life.

She was also among the sent-down youth to rural Jilin. Twenty young men and women slept in a big room, with two rows of sleeping space. Surprisingly, my mother said that was the best memory of her youth. People were quite pure in the area of sex back then, and nobody fooled around. They took turns cooking. Eventually my mother took up this task because her food was most liked by all. She boasted about having made dumplings for over twenty people. She was that capable, willing and hardworking.

My mother finished middle school and found work in a bigger township's Communist Party School as a teacher. When she was considered for a promotion, investigation into her family background revealed that she

was not from the best class background of poor peasants. Her career was truncated. After that, she worked as an elementary school teacher in our township.

### “YOUNG AND PROUD, SHE REJECTED ALL OF THEM”

When I was young, I admired my mother a lot. I considered her a very strong woman. She was not successful career-wise, but in managing our home and taking care of children, I have never seen anyone who exceeded her abilities. Her husband and her family were at the center of her world.

When my mother was young, she was very good-looking. People who knew her all wanted to make a match for her. She remembered that there were around forty matchmakers who came to her. Young and proud, she rejected all of them. When she reached twenty-eight, family pressure became greater. She became anxious too. Then somebody made a match for her to meet with my father.

Photos of my mother and father in their youth show that the two of them did not match in appearance. My father is much shorter and thinner. He had a college degree in Chinese language. He was working as a reporter and writer for the county government. The matchmaker had high praises of his talents, so my mother took notice. They were soon engaged. But later, on a visit to my father's home, my mother read parts of his diary. My father's little sister had brought it to her. In that diary, she found something quite disturbing about my father's past association with women in college. That information made her regret the relationship. There were other things she did not like about him either, but after having declined dozens of suitors, she did not want to be a disappointment to her family.

After that, Mother realized that my father's own family was a completely different kind of people from hers. They were harsh toward each other, showing poor manners and selfishness toward people. A month after they got married, my paternal grandmother angrily brought complaints to my mother's family because the newly-weds (my parents) moved out to live by themselves. My mother later said that she had never seen such a selfish family before. Her own family was full of harmony and love. Her parents treated each other with respect. She did not remember her father getting angry at anyone. But my father's family was quite the opposite. My mother suffered a lot at the hands of her mother-in-law. After

they got married, both of their salaries had to be turned in to his parents. They were left with only food ration tickets. My mother said that a few times they even had to steal grain from someone's field in the fall. My father was very afraid of his own mother. Both my father and my grandmother had tendencies for violence.

My mother did not enjoy much happiness after marrying my father. Later, when he was promoted to be the chief of the county's broadcasting bureau, my father had more power. Our material circumstances were improved, but our family was always a battlefield. I grew up with fear of hearing them argue and fight. Especially during festivals and Chinese New Year, my parents always had big fights with each other because those occasions meant they had to visit my paternal grandmother. My father was violent toward my mother. He was brutal in the use of force.

#### “MOTHER LIVED WITH DAY TO DAY DIFFICULTIES”

When my mother gave birth to me, a girl, her mother-in-law lamented that the family did not have a male heir. Grandmother described how my father was full of sad tears when he saw the birth of a daughter at the hospital. She would say these words to my mother's face, days after her delivery. When my mother gave birth to a second girl, my sister, my grandmother even praised a neighbor who practiced infanticide when the family had a female baby.

My sister was eleven months younger than me. Mother had to work, so she put us into her school's day care when we were a few months old. When my father was absent and we were very young, my mother lived with day-to-day difficulties. For example, our family lived in housing units with public restrooms that were located quite a distance away. When she had to go use the restroom, my mother had to tie my sister, who was a crawler, on the bed up to the heater. She asked me to watch her, but I was only a toddler. Once when she returned, my mother found the baby sleeping on the floor, with her face covered in tears. My sister must have exhausted herself from crying all the time. Another time, after she went out to fetch some water, Mother found me playing with needles on my little sister's face.

In my memory, Father has always been distant from us. He never offered a helping hand when my mother raised us. In fact, he actively evaded a father's responsibilities. For example, when his workplace needed



someone to make a business trip to another city, although that colleague hesitated by saying that he had young children, my father was always ready to substitute for the task. He had no family values whatsoever. His trips were usually a few weeks long. The only happy memory I have about my father was when he helped correct my writing. He had some literary talents, so he liked to help me. Other than that, we were very distant from each other.

Mother recalled that once when both my sister and I were sick with fever at night, my father went fishing with his friends. She held two children on her lap, sobbing quietly and unable to sleep the whole night. She was worried to death as to what to do if our fevers worsened. People did not have cars back then. They used bikes when sending the sick to the local hospital, which was a forty-minute bike ride from our home. With my father absent, she did not know what to do with two sick young children. We were sick a lot. Usually when one of us got ill, the other soon caught it too. Mother had no relatives around, and my father's family never helped. My paternal grandfather was kind to us. He sometimes visited us secretly, for fear that his wife would find out.

Father forbid my mother from making friends. He showed displeasure with whatever Mother did. One year, a certain clothing style and color was in fashion, so my mother went to the tailors and got herself new clothes. When my father saw this, he beat her up. He accused her of intentionally dressing up nicely for other men to behold. I think it was because my father had always felt low self-esteem in front of my mother. Mother recalled that when they walked out as a couple, my father never walked side by side with her but rather lagged a few steps behind. Indeed, their appearances did not match. Although my mother never looked down upon him, my father felt insecure.

I now regret my own coldness toward my mother when she was suffering from these fights and beatings. I never went up to her or tried to calm her down. When my mother wanted to tell me about how my father mistreated her, I was reluctant to listen. I did not want to listen to the details that would make me angry but powerless. But my mother had no one else to tell about her hard life. I was her only audience. My younger sister was not willing to listen to her. When my mother began to say things about my father, my sister would begin to cry out loud, "Why was I born into this family? Why gave birth to me?! I do not want to live anymore." Since high school, my sister has suffered from severe depression.

### “SHE WAS LOSING SANITY”

When the city government set up a committee to oversee the communication technology business, my father was promoted to be the governing director. He rose to a position of power and had more gray-area income.<sup>3</sup> Soon afterward, he had an affair. This woman was notorious in their city. A few families of government officials who had had affairs with her ended with marriage breakups. She was married and had one daughter. Her husband actually prospered by her having affairs with resourceful government officials.

Finding out about my father's affair was a huge blow to my mother. All her life, she lived for this family. I was in the last year of high school. Mother told me about it, but I did not comfort her in any way. I did not know how. Looking back, I realize that I am a person who doesn't know how to love. Since I was young, I grew up in a cold, unkind home. I did not know how to speak words of comfort. Mother sank in deep despair. She indulged in chain smoking, one cigarette after another. She had not smoked before. She wanted to destroy herself. One day, she started walking outside. But then she realized that people were all gawking at her—she had nothing but underpants on. So, she was losing sanity.

My father? My gosh, I felt like watching a story one could only see in a movie. Not only did he show no shame at all, but he even felt justified. He was not even embarrassed by it. My father took that woman along to his college alumni reunion where he introduced the woman as “my second.” This is how shameless and boastful he was. Later my mother found this woman's husband, but he had nothing to say. That woman and her husband relied on this method to get money. She was a few years younger than my mother, but not as good-looking as my mom. I never articulated how I felt toward my father about his affair. When we as children were present during such a conversation, he would deny having an affair.

In 1997, my younger sister was in her second year of high school. She had been a girl of merry spirit. In comparison, I was the silent and introverted one. But since my father's affair, her temperament completely changed. In school, I had always been a top student in my class. My mother did not have to worry about my grades. Instead she often had to push me to play outside more often. My work ethics and good grades were well known among all our neighbors and my parents' colleagues. But that same year, when I was preparing for the national College Entrance Exam, my father took his mistress to Hong Kong for the reunification ceremony.

It was the time when Hong Kong was reunited with mainland China.<sup>4</sup> When I filled out applications for colleges, my first choice was Beijing University. Only two students in our high school were given the quota to apply, and I was one.<sup>5</sup> But my state of mind was utterly chaotic. I could not pull myself together to prepare for the exams. On the first day of the exams, my nose started to bleed right in the middle of the test. So, I failed my college entrance exams. It was impossible for me to do well because of the turmoil at home. I ended up going to my second choice college.

A year later, one day, my mother and I were walking home, only to find that woman standing in front of our apartment building, waiting for my father. It was the first time I saw her. She was wearing branded clothes and accessories from top to bottom. My mother murmured to me, "That is her! Let's beat her up!" I thought to myself, "But I do not know how to beat people up." Neither did she. That woman could not run away because she was wearing expensive high heels. So, my mother pushed her down, and I kicked her legs a few times. That woman yelled loudly, and we were immediately surrounded by passersby. She called out to the police, so my mother and I were taken to the police dispatch station. When the policeman heard about what happened, he was quite sympathetic toward us. Not much harm was done. She was scratch-less. When my father came to collect us from the police station, I yelled at him: "Look at what you have done! I am taken to a police station because of you!" My father's response was cold and indifferent, saying "What's the big deal?" I was angry but speechless.

A few days later, my father took that woman to a hospital. He bribed the doctors there to hospitalize her and issue a medical report saying that she was heavily injured. He also bribed the chief of that police dispatch station so that the police could detain my mother. Later, that woman also made phone calls to my mother's workplace, informing everybody of her affair with my father. My mother felt humiliated to continue working there. It was utterly unimaginable!

### "THEY TREATED MY MOTHER AND US AS A JOKE"

My mother wanted to find help. The only person she knew was a superior official of my father's, the vice mayor, Mr. Cheng. My mother had gone to Mr. Cheng when she first found out about my father's affair. He was sympathetic toward her. After this later incident, Mr. Cheng called up the chief of police dispatch station and warned him not to detain my mother. "She is a relative of mine, so leave her alone," he said.

Who would expect that years later this Mr. Cheng became my father-in-law? I was very grateful toward him. Not only did he help my mother avoid a legal dispute, but later when someone made a match between his son and me, Mr. Cheng did not hold the problem of my family against me. He did not even tell his wife, who might have despised me if she had known.

My father had always pushed my mother for a divorce, but she would not agree. The reason was us—she could not have raised both of us and supported our education if left on her own. “When it is time for you to get married, I do not want others to see that you come from an incomplete family,” she also said. She cared a lot about how our family looked to people. Later my mother always discouraged me and my sister from getting married. All men were hopeless in her eyes. “If you trust me, don’t get married, and don’t have children,” she would say.

All my father’s family, including my grandparents, uncles and aunts, stood by my father on his extramarital affair. Nobody ever spoke one comforting word to my mother. It was as if they were watching and hoping for our small family to fall apart. Once during a Spring Festival family reunion, my grandmother began to complain about how poorly my mother and we treated my father. I asked them to consider what my father did, hinting at his affair. They avoided it and defended him, saying that everybody has flaws. My grandmother had never liked my mother. She also did not even care to look at us, because we were girls. After my father’s affair went public, they saw that our (nuclear) family was disintegrating. My cousins all came to ask my father for money.<sup>6</sup> They treated my mother and us as a joke.

Since my college years, my father rarely returned home. My parents began to live separately. After we had our own families, my father’s mistress left him. I guess he was useless to her. Then he began to have more mistresses. He squandered all his money on them. During festivals, my father had to come back and stay with my mom because he had nowhere else to go.

Even after I became a Christian, I still find it hard to forgive my father. But I know that I need to bring the gospel to him too. I have also reflected on the role of my mother’s personality in their marriage. My father had low self-esteem, which is true. But my mother may have also been too strong-willed. Between husband and wife, everyone has his or her own sins and shortcomings to deal with.

“SHE WAS WORRIED AND SADDENED ABOUT  
THE PROSPECT OF MY MARRIAGE”

When I was twenty-six, I finished graduate school and applied for a doctoral program. I met my future husband for the first time during the spring festival break. I had heard of him as the son of Mr. Cheng. He had heard of me too. When someone tried to introduce us, I was positive. I thought favorably of his father, so I expected him to be like his father. Our first meeting was a little disappointing. He was very talkative, while I just listened. Our second meeting went much better. That day, he shared with me more about his experiences growing up. It struck me that he is a person who values his family very much. After that, we both returned to our schools. Through long phone calls, we got to know each other better.

In a few months, we got married in Beijing. We had a small formal dinner with my mother and my sister together. My mother began crying over the meal. She was worried and saddened about the prospect of my marriage.

For the first few years after I got married, we lived separately. He was in Beijing, preparing for bar exams to become a lawyer. I worked as a university faculty in Changchun. I had to commute and visit him frequently, usually for a week. Therefore, my work was neglected sometimes. Every time before I had to return, we always had a big fight. We did not want to be separated, but we had a lot of stress and struggled on our own. I also desired my husband to be successful in others' eyes. In the first three years of our marriage, he was busy with the bar exams. He failed every single time. In total, he prepared for five years but still failed. I studied for two months and passed it. It was like I had the strength, but I could not do it for him. I wondered, “How could something so easy for me be so difficult for him?” My husband was under great pressure too. He did not want to disappoint me, so he worked very hard at it. Both of us had chronic stomach problems because of stress.

When our first daughter was seven months old, my husband left for the United States for graduate school in law. In a few months, my husband called me that he had been baptized and become a Christian. Before that, I had never heard about Jesus. I was not resistant, however. Around the same time my husband became a Christian in the United States, my mother had also met some Christians. One day she was shopping at a local market and lost her wallet. She did not expect to find it. But when she returned to that market, a vendor came up to her with that wallet. He was very eager to return it. Nothing was missing. My mother was very grateful, so she bought some fruits as a token of her thanksgiving. The vendor told

her that since he is a Christian, he knew right from wrong. So, my mother had a very positive impression about Christians. After that, she even tried to talk me into the faith. Mother thought that the Christian faith could change both my introverted personality and my quick temper.

An American justice came to give a speech at my university in Changchun. I was the representative of the faculty of law. This justice wrote a recommendation letter for me to visit the same law school in the United States where my husband was studying. It was in the United States that my husband and I were reunited and lived together as a family. Still our marriage relationship was strained. Every week, a pastor spent a lot of time counseling us because we always fought. I had thought about divorce, but I feared it would disappoint my mother. My marriage was her only comfort at that time. I didn't want her to lose the only thing she could rely on. So, I hung onto the idea that Christians should not divorce. A year later, I also became a believer. Afterward, my mother saw some changes had happened to me and my husband. She also observed the contrast between the marriages of her two daughters. She is quite content with the state of my marriage.

If we had not been Christians, our marriage would not have lasted till today. My husband used to be intimidated by my strong personality. He put up with a lot from me and tried hard to live up to my expectations. When our marriage was rocky, he sank into utter self-blame and low self-esteem. Once he was so wounded by my words that he slapped himself or wanted to cut himself with a knife. He was not abusive toward me, but desperation did drive him toward habits of self-abuse. I had no awareness that my words had the power to hurt him so deeply. That was why becoming a Christian relieved him significantly. After his conversion, he felt more assured of himself. He stopped habitual self-abuse. I sometimes questioned him: "How come your temper has grown after your conversion?" His response was, "That is because I am no longer afraid of you." So, his faith required a lot of adjustment for me.

“IF I HAD NOT BEEN A CHRISTIAN, I WOULD HAVE SURELY  
FOLLOWED MY MOTHER’S WILL”

Two years later, we returned from the United States. My university job was still available, so I planned to go back and teach there. My advisor also agreed to find employment for my husband. But my parents-in-law strongly objected to our plan of working in Changchun, because it is a

third-tier city. My husband had worked in Beijing before, and moving to a smaller city would cause them to “lose face”. Children of their peers were either working abroad, or in top-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (known as “*bei shang guang*”).<sup>7</sup> My father-in-law even pleaded with my husband not to leave Beijing. “As long as you stay in Beijing, I would not mind what you do for a living,” he said. I was very reluctant to quit my job as a university faculty, but I had to choose between long-term separation from my husband and a job. After becoming a Christian, I knew that a married couple should not live separately. So, I gave up my faculty position.

My mother was upset about my choice: “Why give up such a good job? He listens to his parents, but you need to listen to me!” She insisted that I should keep my job, even if at the cost of losing a husband. If I had not been a Christian, I would have surely followed my mother’s will. I was in deep, deep frustration and struggle—I have never disobeyed my mother before, but God would not allow me to divorce my husband. When I kept silent, my mother knew that I had made my choice. She became upset and angry with me.

Since I was young, I have been very obedient to my mother. Whatever she said, I followed. I did not express my own opinions. My life’s trajectory followed the expectations of my mother, teachers and classmates. Then, society expects you to have status, so I went after that kind of recognition. I did not know what else I wanted. For a very long time, I lived under a lot of pressure—I should not disappoint these people around me. That was the goal of my life. Even after I got married, I considered satisfying my mother as the meaning of life. Because she had suffered too much in life, I wanted to compensate for that. “If I am well, then my mother will be well,” I reasoned.

My mother needed a medical check-up in Beijing, so she traveled with us. Then we needed to find a kindergarten for our daughter. We found a private-run Christian one. When my mother visited it with us, I was shocked to see its poorly sanitized facility in a residential apartment. It was winter, yet there were no carpet or seats on the floor. A few children sat on the cold marble ground. After a day in that facility, my daughter had a cold and fever. But my husband insisted on sending our child to that facility, simply because it was run by Christians. I stood by him on that choice. This made my mother very angry: “What kind of cult are you in?! There are so many good schools around. Why would you send your own child to such a place?!” My husband insisted. Then my mother asked

me again to divorce him. My mother even said to me, “Your husband or me, make a choice between us.” She also thought that we must have believed in a wrong kind of Christianity.

I did not want to break her heart, but I knew very well that divorce is against God’s will. I was again angry with my husband. “Why are things so difficult after he became a Christian?” I thought to myself. Later, he apologized to my mother. But our relationships were so tense that he had expected me to divorce him and return to Jilin with my mother. To his surprise, I did not act the way I used to. I stayed. My mother was so disappointed that she headed directly to the train station. Before she left, my mother said to our faces: “In vain have you believed!”

At that moment, I felt that I have lost all. Since then, Mother stopped contacting me. My department head at the university was also angry with my resignation. Two months later, an old classmate came to Beijing. She asked me to join a law firm, so I started working there. My husband began an English tutoring service. The workload was heavy for me. Sometimes I had to stay up late, working on legal documents. I began to lose weight. In seven months, I contracted acute nephritis. I had to stop working and began receiving medical treatments.

### “WE HAVE ALL BEEN DISAPPOINTMENTS TO HER”

Around that year, we noticed a growing need for Christian education. A missionary friend suggested that we could open a kindergarten for Christian families. We rented an apartment and began enrolling students. At the peak time, we had over thirty-five children, from age three to six. Tuition was around 2000 *yuan* a month for each child. With that, we had some income.

But our rented apartment was next to my sister’s home. One day, her husband spotted me working in this private kindergarten. This news traveled to my mother. But by then, my mother was more concerned about my health. She knew that I could not work in high-stress workplaces. So, she accepted it as a fact. I never told my father about the ups and downs of my career. He still boasts to friends that his older daughter works as a lawyer.

My sister worked in investment banking. She needed to travel for business for over half of the year, so her marriage suffered. She had symptoms of depression. After she had a baby, my sister quit her job and stayed at home. So, my mother considered both of us great disappointments. She



considered her own life wasted by marriage. Now she felt the two of us were lost in our marriages too. She could be more lenient toward my sister because she had depression. However, Mother's attitude toward me was one of harshness. She thought that I could have made wiser choices. She also considered my failures closely related to my "wrong kind of Christian faith."

The trauma in my family revealed to me how selfish I had been toward my mother. I had not kept her company; she gained little comfort from me. Many times, I chose to stay silent. After college, I chose to not frequent our family home. I wanted to escape from it. Looking back, I knew that my mother had walked a very lonely journey. Nobody sympathized with her. Nobody stood by her side. Nobody gave her comfort. She gained little comfort in life from us or from her husband. So, she has accumulated a lot of bitterness. These realizations came to me only after I became a Christian.

Now my mother lives alone. She has resentment and bitterness toward life. We have all been disappointments to her. She had no comfort from my sister. In her words, my depressed and suicidal sister could not even take care of herself. My husband and I were the only people she was willing to open up to. Although we did not satisfy her desire for money, status and recognition in society, she senses that we do love her. We also try to live near her and keep her company. Especially my husband is able to tolerate my mother's hour-long venting and never talks back. When we studied the Bible and prayed together, Mother was sarcastic about our faith. If it was earlier, I could talk back. But now I just bear with her words. She notices the change in me. Recently she has been willing to echo an "Amen" at the end of our prayer together.

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In the traditional Chinese cultural context, when a married woman fails to produce a male heir, her husband's whole family may join together in emotionally and verbally abusing her on the grounds that she has discontinued the "incense" (*xianghuo*).<sup>8</sup> Occasions of family reunion especially trigger such practices because the husband's family may feel inferior in comparison to other relatives. A marriage traumatized by such forms of collective domestic abuse in the extended family can shape the mother-daughter relationship in significant ways.

In this chapter, Dong tells the story about her intense but alienating relationship with her mother, who suffered collective abuse in the patriarchal extended family. They both needed to heal from past wounds. Before her healing began, Dong bore the burden of her mother's tragedy only at a distance. Even her companionship with her mother during her father's affair was a reluctant one. As a child, Dong could not rise beyond the fear and pains. But after becoming a Christian, Dong looked back with regret about her coldness and indifference toward her mother when she was in deep misery.

Gaining approval by comparison has been a social norm in China. In Dong's case, her later reputation as a model student with excellent academic achievements partly made up for the family's lack of status due to having no male heir. Her mother considered Dong the only comfort in life. This temporarily alleviated her mother's misery in a broken marriage. But in Dong's own marriage, she later came to the decision of whether to sacrifice her career in order to keep her marriage together. Dong was torn between her mother's expectations and the face-keeping expectation for her husband from the in-laws. She realized that as a Christian, she had no choice but to become her mother's disappointment. But years later, what the Christian faith also did was to give her the strength to more actively seek healing for her mother. With time, the gap between Dong's Christian commitments and her mother's worldview is closing up.

## NOTES

1. A way that Chinese people refer to local gentry (*xiangshen*) who were philanthropic toward the poor.
2. During the land reform in rural China, residents were classified into four groups: landlords (*dizhu*), rich peasants (*funong*), middle peasants (*zhongnong*) and poor peasants (*pinnong*). The last category was considered of good origin (*chushen hao*). Millions of landlords were executed.
3. Bill Bishop, "The Chinese Have \$1.5 Trillion in Hidden Income," *Forbes*, August 13, 2010. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/china/2010/08/13/the-chinese-have-1-5-trillion-in-hidden-income/#34ee53b4ec7c> Anthony Kuhn, "Lure of China's Gray Economy Reached Rich and Poor," *National Public Radio*, January 2, 2014. <https://www.npr.org/2014/01/02/259121416/gray-income-makes-up-an-estimated-12-of-chinas-gdp>
4. The transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong as a colony of the United Kingdom to a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China took place on July 1, 1997. The National College Entrance exam (*gaokao*) took place in early July of that same year.

5. In China, students who apply for universities need to do so according to the quotas different universities allocated for a local region.
6. In China, if someone in an extended household gained prominent power and status, he or she becomes responsible for the career advancement and economic benefits for other members in this family, especially young people in the next generation.
7. Popular destinies for young people to develop their careers. Working in these cities also becomes status symbols.
8. Hsiung Ping-chen, "The Flickering Fire: Retrospective Adoption and the Creation of Family Memory in Late Imperial China," in Lee Cheuk-yin and Hsiung Ping-chen, eds., *Evolving Cultural Memory in China and her Neighbours* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Educational Publishing Co., 2008), pp. 20–62.



## CHAPTER 5

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# Suicide

### “MY MOTHER HAD MANY SUICIDE ATTEMPTS, AND SHE WAS FINALLY RELEASED”

I was born in 1977 and grew up in rural Anhui. When I was eight years old, my mother committed suicide and took her own life. She was thirty-six that year. When her body was transferred back to the village, there were many people watching. We three siblings cried along with the moving of the car carrying her coffin.

Many people said that my mother did not have to die. She had a fight with my father and was physically beaten, so she drank some pesticide. The hospital would have been able to rescue her, but then they were short on a kind of fluid, so she did eventually die. Before this, she had attempted jumping into the river, hanging herself, and cutting her neck. I saw these incidents happen with my own eyes. Once she also rejected food for a long time, trying to starve herself to death.

Her body was laid open at home for eighteen days before the burial. It was because my maternal uncles had a legal dispute with my father. For a month after her death, our home was full of people, visiting and quarrelling. My mother's body just lay open in the bedroom. It felt cold. Every night I watched her body and touched her cold hands, feeling nothing but

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*Narration by Meng (age forty one, NGO worker)*

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coldness. This whole thing made me afraid of people deep down in my heart, no matter who they are. The experience was too complicated and horrifying. Another thought I had was that death is not too bad. My mother had many suicide attempts, and she was finally released. She finally got what she wanted. I saw death as a finishing point, an arrival. It meant no more burdens for her.

My mother's multiple suicide attempts did not make me scared of death itself. I did not value death or life. If the end of life is death, then you have to face it sooner or later. So I had no motivation to just enjoy the splendor of life now. I did not know how to enjoy life. And also because I did not grow up with a mother, I did not feel loved. I received no love from my family, so I had no idea how to enjoy love or how to love others.

My earliest memories have me being cared for by my paternal grandmother. It was the general practice in rural China. While the elderly generation watched young kids, the woman of the household took care of all chores. My mother was very busy with all the chores at home. Whenever I called for her, she just ignored me because she was too busy. She either ignored my calling or sometimes gave the coldest response, "Your mom is dead!" She said it with a very cruel and impatient tone.

The night when she passed away, I was beside her dead body, touching her hands. I felt that her death had much to do with me, because I always tired her out by my calling her or making requests. I said to myself, "I made my mother too tired, so tired that she wanted to leave. She would rather die than be my mother." She was too tired, tired of being a mother, tired of being a wife, tired of being a daughter-in-law, tired of being a woman.

Thoughts about my mother bring back fear too. Because she has had many suicide attempts that led to hospitalization, whenever I heard news about mother coming back home, I had a deep fear in my heart. I feared for something very bad. Sometimes when I came home from school, and saw people surrounding our front door, it was surely a big fight going on. She was beaten either by my father or by my grandmother. I could do nothing but cry. The world of the grownups is truly cruel and tiresome.

"SHE WAS CAUGHT IN A DEADLY CYCLE  
OF DEPENDENCE AND DESPAIR"

After the economic reform and opening up since the late 1970s, rural households were allowed to keep some land and to start small businesses. While rural women gained more independence, they lost the protection of

collective social life when rural communes disbanded. That is how I see it. My mother was fully exposed to the ill treatment of her husband and mother-in-law. It was as if when she finally got hopeful about life after decades of poverty, such short-lived hope soon turned into despair.

My mother got married at age twenty-five, which was considered late at her time. For her generation, women lived under two skies: first that of her own family, and later one of her in-laws. There was not much choice outside of the family. My mother grew up in a family of fishing laborers near the lake. She was the youngest of six siblings. Her family was poor. Living on the water was very unstable, so her social status was lower than rural villagers. I don't remember my maternal uncles being violent toward my father, who was the abuser. They did not intervene at all. I do remember them coming to visit us in our home. My father has a volatile personality, and so did my grandmother. My grandmother thought that the relatives on my mother's side wanted my father dead. Ever since my mother passed away, the two families lost touch.

My parents went away from our village to work at odd jobs after 1980. Before that, they mainly cared for the crops and raised cattle. I remember how my mother fed the ox and dragged a cart to work. After the opening up [reform], they began a small business. They purchased a boat to ship cargo. Our village was close to the Huai River (*huai he*) and the Yangtze River (*changjiang*). In the early 1980s, road construction was not good, so water routes had an advantage in transportation and logistics. Originally, they wanted to earn enough money to leave the village. That way my uncle's household [on father's side] would not depend on us.

But after our family's economic conditions improved, my father became more dissolute with women, bad company and gambling. That was a fatal blow to mother. If she wanted to make more money, she would have to leave the three of us young children with my grandmother. So she was caught in a deadly cycle of dependence and despair. Looking back, most of her suicide attempts happened during her conflicts with her husband and mother-in-law after the economic improvement of our livelihood. I sometimes imagine that if my mother had lived in a more collectivist commune, where women did not need to work so hard, things would have been easier for her. Cultural norms had more binding power on people in these collectives. Left on her own, she was not able to cope with the kind of complicated extended family relationship. Poverty was despised, so she had to work harder. However, when she did work harder, the money was snapped away by my father and my grandmother.

My only warm memory of her was once when she held me on her lap while talking with other people. That moment is always very fresh in my memory. Her face was clinging against my cheek, and I felt her skin, very soft and gentle. In that split second, she was a mother, a woman. She was not tired, hysterical or suicidal.

### “I HAVE ALWAYS HATED TO RECEIVE ATTENTION”

Now I can only guess what kind of person my mother was. When I was young, I seldom spent time with her. She was a beautiful and competent young woman who handled the household well. But my grandmother did not treat her two daughters-in-law fairly, and that brought much pain to mother.

My paternal grandmother herself was a child bride (*tongyangxi*). I heard that she was born into the family of a wealthy landlord. During the land reforms in 1950, she was sent down to rural relatives for fear of persecution. Then she became their child bride. Later, my grandfather died of starvation in the famine.<sup>1</sup> My grandmother had five children, but only two boys survived. So she had a hard life, and she kind of vented her own pain on my mother, the daughter-in-law from a poor family background. My grandmother spoiled her sons, especially my father's older brother. Later, when my father earned some money from running transportation business, she used it to support her older son's household too. While my mother was alive, she was always angry at seeing my grandmother carrying off our belongings to my uncle's home.

Because of her tragic upbringing, my grandmother had a very strong will to be in control. She always wanted to change other people. She always compared us three granddaughters with each other. I was the least pretty one. She always had the same logic in her mumblings: “If you do not do house chores well, you won't marry well. If you are not pretty, you won't marry well.” I was puzzled at why women had to marry, and why marrying well is so important. Because she raised me and accompanied me for over twenty years, these values also lingered to influence me, although I hardly accept them. I think my sense of self-loathe had a lot to do with her negative assessments. Still, I felt that she did care about me. She wanted to show love, but it came out in a very twisted way. Growing up as a child bride, she was always insecure, sensitive and easily angered. Living under the same roof with my mother, she definitely suppressed and despised her. When my mother passed away, she still grumbled about why

Mother wanted to die despite such a comfortable life. She complained that Mother had so many beautiful clothes but she still wanted to die. So I think my mother's burden was mainly an emotional strain, seeing her own savings being used by my grandmother to support my uncle's parasitic household. Plus my father's gambling and numerous affairs wounded her. The domestic violence by all of them was another weight.

My father was a very violent person. He listened to my grandmother more than to my mother. He gambled and kept bad company. These things all brought much pain to my mother. All she wanted was a peaceful and simple life. When my maternal grandmother passed away, she went to visit the tomb and had a hearty cry there. Her life was full of pain, loneliness and depression. Nothing was beautiful. She felt helpless. This led her to choose death over and over again.

My mother belonged to the first generation of rural migrants. She went away to find work, and that way she could feed the rest of the family. She was very self-involved, so she did not feel happy as a mother of three children. All three of us were raised by my paternal grandmother. My mother did not consider herself as the mother of us three kids, although she gave birth to us. So she found no comfort from her husband, kids or her own family. Years of migrant work did not win her any good friends to support her.

She attempted suicide seven times. The most common method was to reject food. After a fight, she would lie in bed, facing the wall and refusing to eat for a very long time. My grandmother then took up cooking, and she began to grumble her complaints and incite my father's anger again. Then the war resumed for a second round. So every time the fight began with my parents' quarrel, intensified with my mother's hunger strike and ended with my grandmother showing off her own competence. It was a vicious cycle that happened on a regular basis.

This scene of drama usually invited many spectators from the village. Because of this, I have always hated to receive attention. Every time when such a drama was on, I always waited until dark to enter home. I hated to be seen by neighbors. In their eyes, our home was a laughingstock. They told very cruel jokes about my family. I became scared of looking into people's eyes, and this problem lasted until I was in high school.

In a way, my father, grandmother and neighbors all wanted to be envied by others. Only my mother was more truthful to herself, to the point that she wanted to leave all these things behind. On the last try, she had what she wanted.



“DISILLUSIONMENT AND AVOIDANCE OF MEN HAS CREATED  
MANY HURDLES IN MY SOCIAL LIFE”

Since my mother's death, my brothers and I were placed in different foster homes. When I became a teenager, my older brother's surging hormones made me a frequent target for his sexual harassment. It bothered me greatly. Since then, I have had a physical repulsion toward males. My father was still violent and addicted to gambling. So I detest and hate males. I see them as having violent tendencies. This has hindered my interactions with all males. My basic instinct has been to avoid men. Even if someone says that he likes me, I would doubt it. So this disillusionment and avoidance of men has created many hurdles in my social life.

I liked to bury myself in books. I had planned to major in library management, so that I could work in libraries while earning an income. I wanted to do business with books, not people. But my academic records were not good, probably because my moods afflicted me. I had a weak physique and fainted a few times at school. Every time I woke up, I had been unconscious for hours. Entering college was a remote dream for me.

After graduation with a college diploma, I found a job in an advertising company. I did not like the job. The city was no more than a vanity fair to me, and I detested that too. After a few years, I decided to leave. I had heard about a volunteer-run school in rural Anhui, near my hometown. Many idealistic college students who were tired of the competitiveness and vanity of urban life were drawn to teach there. So I spent seven years teaching there as a volunteer. Lodging and food was provided, with a meager stipend of 300 *yuan*.<sup>2</sup>

These years of voluntary teaching also opened me up. I tried to focus and accomplish something. I did my best to get along with people. I also learned to have compassion for others and their situation. I felt needed because I saw many needs to fill. The most important thing for me was to learn how to love others and love the students at school.

As someone without a proper childhood, I had to grow up and bear things which I could not bear. The experience of working with a group of volunteers was not rosy. It did not live up to how it was promoted. I witnessed the evil of human nature even in an idealistic and secluded group like that. Those volunteers thought that they were doing good for society, but they created office politics to campaign against their own colleagues. I also experienced the maturing and disillusioning of my own emotions. This led to the collapse of my self-will. Relationships were not only vola-

tile, but transient as well. Volunteer teachers came and left. Some stayed a few weeks, some a year. I was the one who stayed there the longest. Later I became the most senior volunteer teacher there. So I was elected to be the principal of this school. Those seven years became a phase of disillusionment about life for me. I had hoped that volunteers would be a sacrificial group because they devoted their time and life to help these poor children. It made me realize that in this world there is no place that is quiet and pure.

### “ONLY GOD CAN HEAL ME FROM THE TERROR INSIDE”

Then in 2006 I met a few Christian volunteers who came to visit the school. It was a point in life when I wanted to grab onto something. I wanted a religious faith; otherwise I could no longer live on. Two sisters not only explained the gospel to me, but they had been friendly with me over the past decade. I could sense that their love toward me was steadfast and lasting.

Since my conversion, I have not been able to attend church regularly. The closest rural church was five kilometers away from our school. After I left that school in 2012, I took up a job in a charity located in the city. My Christian mentor brought me a book about Mother Teresa. Her example was inspiring to me. She had the same coarse hands due to a skin disease as I did. Reading that part of her story showed an affinity between us. Although charity is also a less than ideal environment in China, I find my place in it. My work now involves visits to rural areas in many provinces, and that prevents me from attending church regularly either. So although I have been a Christian for over twelve years now, I’ve always felt like a spiritual orphan.

The good thing is that, unlike my mother, I can now live as a single unmarried woman. I can almost have a life. What I mean is a life outside marriage. There is more tolerance in Chinese society toward single people, but not enough respect. If a woman my age is not married, people think that you must have physical or psychological problems. One is easily labeled negatively for singleness. The role of a single woman in life is mostly a spectator—watching other married couples live their lives and raise kids.

Singleness is fine until you come down with some physical illness. Once I was very sick and needed a surgery. I had no relative to sign the forms at the hospital. A sister from church came to sign it. It was at these kinds of

moments that my singleness hurt most. Another time, I was on a business trip with a founder of another NGO. At night, he was drunk and tried to break into my hotel room. He almost raped me. It was a painful experience knowing that I was a single woman without protection from loved ones.

I think the biggest challenge is self-closure and isolation. Attending church can also become too troublesome, and the church may treat you as a difficult member who needs lots of maintenance. It is easy for single people to become passive in fellowshiping at church. Single people themselves do not like to clique together. They are all quite independent, or prone to keep to themselves to say the least. I don't know what other people think, but I am like that. This makes the single a marginalized group whether in church, workplace or society. Facing oneself every day and every moment, one needs something to hope for.

What can overcome this sense of loneliness and fear? I can think only of the Christian faith. Only God can heal me from the terror inside. In the past few years, I have struggled most intensely with two things. One is whether I have the right to take my own life. I constantly wrestled with suicidal tendencies. The other is how to live on my own. I fear about getting old alone. I don't understand either of them. I actually fear both. Is it better to die than to live in pain? I am not afraid of death. I am most afraid of having to live with great sorrows. But God in the Bible has commanded not to kill or to commit suicide. This has filled me with fear and resentment over the past few years. If I do not have the right to claim my own life, how should I face my failing body and illness? This thought has been torturing me.

I am afraid that someday when I am too old to take care of myself anymore, I will have to depend on others, physically and financially. I will have neither health nor wealth. Why should I live on? My mind cannot pass around these troubling thoughts. In other words, I have discovered in the past years that I have not truly become a Christian. I do not trust God enough, and that is why I struggle with the issue of the right to die.

I think for single people, the most common question is about self-worth and the meaning of life. If one does not find the way, then it is easy to go to extremes. Depression follows. For example, I had been on a business tour for a long time. Whenever I went on a long-distance coach bus, I imagined myself being in a severe accident and nobody even knowing about it when I die. So if single people experience mental challenges, it is difficult for other people to offer help because there is no contact point for such help.

Because of what I experienced when I was young, anxiety and fear have become a normative state of life for me. I never had real contact with this world and the people in it. I do not have a healthy image of myself. I lack confidence, whether in terms of physical appearance or abilities. Whether in my biological family, foster families or schools, I had always been the marginalized one. I am used to putting myself into exile. I have never really lived for anyone. I have never tasted a personal intimacy with anyone. So most times I just stand there and become a spectator of life, including my own life. I am merely an existence. Family and marriage are beyond what I can bear. They are too complicated. I thus value my own career in the non-profit sector. I have intentionally looked for a job like this that uses my best skills but does not require me to interact much with people.

“I SEE MY FAMILY AS A MINIATURE OF THE TRAGEDY IN RURAL  
CHINA”

Today's China is in an age of money. Morality and ethics have to step backward. In the past, although living in collectives was highly political, there was at least a basic structure of control on morality. In contrast, people now are mainly driven by their desires. Many people have lost control in the pursuit of money or sensual pleasure. Despair and loneliness are taking lives every day. I had expected my own life to end in suicidal loneliness. As I have observed, the suicide rate among rural youth has been rising. Many people lived a rootless life. Families, schools and society have disappointed children in guiding their values. The whole society has been engaging in the catalyzing of evil and darkness. Rural youth are highly materialistic, prone to pursue sensual pleasure and self-gratification. Sometimes I became baffled at how this country is sacrificing the lives of millions of rural children in exchange for a so-called elite urban living.

Last year I wanted to settle down in a city and purchased an apartment. Because of the sudden change in housing policies, it became a trap for me: I could not legally own the apartment but neither was I able to withdraw my down payment. The only way to get my money back is through selling it again. This dragged on me heavily emotionally for a whole year. Finally, I was able to sell it. This experience opened my eyes to the many twisted ways how greed and immorality intertwined in the housing market.

NGO work is equally challenging. I now serve as the director of library programs for a private foundation. My job is to monitor and help increase library use in rural public schools. The biggest challenge is still political ideology within the education system. Public schools all follow nationalistic directives. They do not encourage students to develop a love for reading and a mind for independent thinking. So many good programs fell into disuse or stay with mere formalities. To describe the situation of the non-profit sector in China, there is a good Chinese idiom, “It is hard for the arm to bend down the thigh.” These children are inside schools, and schools are inside the communist system. So it’s like you have to penetrate a few thick walls in order for good influence to reach the children. Consequently, many non-profit reading programs feel powerless. Children in the cities now have more space, because of parents’ growing awareness and financial capacities. But overall, it is hard for NGOs to have long-term positive influence. Many outcomes are transient. This is also why many non-profit organizations choose to work on the formalities. After the Nineteenth National Congress, the central government began to exert more control on public space.<sup>3</sup> There is not much room for authentic and mission-minded NGOs to grow. Some organizations supported by private entrepreneurs may have broader perspectives, and they can serve in balancing with government intervention.

In the current moral climate, those who uphold their Christian faith and live it out certainly become anomalies. It’s not hard to imagine that in the near future those who profess their Christian faith will be considered dissidents. If one affirms the faith by his or her mouth, it will certainly be followed by actions. And the actions are not what the government wants to see.

For the past few years, I have been questioning myself if I am a true Christian. Every time I hear about Christians committing suicide, I plunge into a few days of deep depression. I know that the action is against God’s will, but then I admire it as a kind of relief. I have spent a few years in a church, but that has brought despair too. Seeing the darkness in others and in myself made me want to flee. Since then, I began to visit different churches. Whenever I step into a different church, I felt complicated emotions arising inside. Some churches are cold, but a few can be warm. I tried to persuade myself not to follow subjective feelings, but to receive the sermon messages, to meet God and to pray. But despair was always there. God did not see Adam being alone as something commendable, so he created Eve as Adam’s companion. Even God thought that loneliness needs

intimate relationships to heal. But this is something I could not get, whether from my family, workplace or church. As I reflect on this problem, I think the key fact was that I still did not have a real relationship with God. I have been a Christian for over a decade, but most of the time I was a hypocrite. I lived in my own emotions.

But I have to admit that even this watered down faith has changed me deeply, because I used to have so much resentment. I resented my mother for giving birth to me. I resented her for abandoning me after giving birth to me. Even today, whenever I run into mothers who do not care for their children, I become very angry at them. I was angry at my father and used to stay away from my brothers. But now because of the faith, I was willing to love and visit them. Although the experience has always been difficult, at least I want to give it a try.

From my family history, I see how sin passes down from one generation to the next. We were all like lost sheep, living according to our flesh, lust and greed. We never obtained love, and thus did not have wisdom to love our family or to build up real relationships. Since my grandmother's generation, sin and pain repeated themselves in cyclical ways. I see my family as a miniature of the tragedy in rural China. Today China's townships and villages are most fearful living spaces, with no moral restraints, but only money, lust and sin.

When facing life's troubles, my first instinct has always been to flee. I have been fleeing away from the thought of suicide, and I have also been fleeing away from God's love. How can I truly face God? I know that will be the moment when I truly face myself.

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Meng's story depicts multi-generational maternal relationships in rural China. Her grandmother, a victim of communist land reforms, later became an abuser toward Meng's mother, another fellow woman who came to an equally miserable fate. It paints a realistic picture of human nature that is devoid of compassion in the midst of struggles for survival. The fact that Meng's mother suffered more after the improvement of economic conditions in the family is telling of a typical but paradoxical phenomenon in China—social solidarity and morality do not automatically improve after economic betterment. Quite on the contrary, individualism broke loose, and traditional family values declined. A few thousand years of communal traditions disintegrated into a state of atomization.

As rural China plunged into demoralizing despair, children in rural families suffered the most from this change. Meng also belongs to the first generation of rural China's left-behind children. Experiencing little intimacy with parents, they grew up like a generation of orphans. Anxiety with regard to intimacy and maintaining social relationships tends to accompany them. With her mother's repeated suicidal attempts, Meng had been acquainted with the abyss of meaningless and death since a young age. Her mother's passing due to a final successful suicide defined Meng's later life trajectory.

The mother-daughter relationship is the first social context for a female to define herself. Its implication can be so powerful especially for women who experienced the loss of mothers at a young age. Meng never got over her mother's loss. According to Hope Edelman, motherloss is a distinctive kind of loss for women, one that has enduring effects on a woman's self of her selfhood, social relationships and sense of mortality.<sup>4</sup> In her narratives, Meng is finding ways to reconnect with her deceased mother, through broken pieces of childhood memories, and rare moments of gentle physical touches. The unfulfilled longing to reconnect with one's mother in some way creates anxiety in pursuing the meaning of life. Others also affirm that motherloss also impact women's spirituality, their images of and relationship to God.<sup>5</sup> In Meng's case, the impact of her mother's suicide on her own life was more profound and formative. She had to grapple with this traumatic incident her whole life. Aggravated by singleness, the cause of her mother's death, suicide, has even become a tempting thought for Meng herself. Meng struggles intensely with her suicidal tendencies. Her autobiographical account resonates with themes of rejection, disillusionment and yearning for hope.

Meng's glaringly candid self-reflections seem almost too harsh. She often sounded powerless. As Dorothee Soelle says, "The consciousness that one is powerless is a fundamental element in suffering. Every attempt to humanize suffering must begin with this phenomenon of experienced powerlessness..."<sup>6</sup> Meng is pressing hard on her soul about what it means to truly trust in God in a fallen world, even in China. In her personal emotional world, she seriously wrestles with the questions of life and death, meaninglessness and hope. Both Meng's innocence and moral standards destined her for charity and service, the only legitimate work in the world which she could bear. In fact, for many years, her selfless giving has inspired many in the non-profit sector. Charity work does help her to concentrate on the practical aspect of life. She shows positive determination and leadership in doing such work too.

## NOTES

1. The Great Famine was from 1958 to 1961 with an estimated death toll of thirty million. See Ralph A. Thaxton Jr. *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao's Great Leap Forward Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
2. Compared to average income of 2000 to 3000 *yuan* per month among Chinese individuals.
3. The Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China (*shi-jiu da*) was in October 2017. A new guiding ideology labeled Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era was written into the party's constitution, the first time since Mao Zedong Thought has been enshrined into it.
4. Hope Edelman, *Motherless Daughters: Legacies of Love* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1994).
5. Martha Bowman Robins, *Midlife Women and Death of Mother: A Study of Psychohistorical and Spiritual Transformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990).
6. Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. by Everett R. Klain (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 11.





## CHAPTER 6

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# Upward Mobility

### “THAT MADE ME SENSITIVE TO SOCIAL SNOBBERY AND HESITANT TO FOLLOW THE CROWD”

I was born in rural Shandong Province. My father joined the army in 1972. For the first few years, his rank was not high enough to allow us to relocate and live together. In 1978, when my mother visited him, they had a simple wedding. Mother always likes to recall the cost of twenty-eight *yuan* on their wedding. For the first five years of their marriage, my mother raised me and tended the crops in our village with my grandparents. Until I was four years old, my father only visited us once a year. Mother told me that I once cried and pushed him down on the bed, thinking that he was a stranger.

My father was the only one in our extended family to change status from rural *hukou* to urban *hukou*.<sup>1</sup> If not for his decision to enlist in the military, I would have lived the same rural life as my cousins. They just had junior middle school education, married young and are still living in the village and small townships now. In our hometown, father's life was an admired tale of personal success and upward mobility. His village took pride in having raised him, a son of peasants who became someone of rank and influence.

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*Narration by Wang (age thirty eight, translator)*

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When we moved to live with my father in 1983, his military base was also located in a rural area. I attended the closest village school until fifth grade. The school was poorly resourced, and teachers often had to work their land when there was a shortage of labor. When that happened, we were left on our own to play, to explore ponds and hills. My parents later told me that it pained their heart to see that I was in a substandard school like that one. But for me, those years gave me a carefree childhood. I had fun with the village kids, such as catching birds from their nests and exploring underground shelters near the base. My mother complained that I ran wild with the village kids and even brought home lice. She spent hours trying to rid my hair of those little white bugs. I also had fond memories of my first-grade teacher, who treated me kindly like her own child and even sewed my broken pants. So I have always had a longing for a rural environment because of these good memories. All we did was play.

When I was in sixth grade, father was promoted, so we moved to a small city. My parents valued a good education for me, so they enrolled me in the best elementary school of that city. It was what they called an “experimental” school.<sup>2</sup> Until then, I did not realize what a luxury it was to grow up as I did in a rural area. Children in city centers did not have the freedom or space to do what they wanted. Very few had ever seen mountains, ponds or waterfalls. They were tamed at an early age and also learned to become vain and snobbish, like the urban grown-ups.

In that school, the mayor’s daughter and I were in the same class. Teachers and all the other kids tried to flatter her. Students of humbler family backgrounds were despised and neglected. Once we had a transfer student whose dress and appearance had some rural features. The class began to tease her for her rural-ness. Thanks to my military family background, I was not teased. My gifts in Chinese composition became clear in the first test, and I got a top score. Teachers and classmates liked me. But deep inside me, I saw myself as different from these children from privileged background, and I had deep sympathy toward the transfer student. I guess it was the contrasting experience from a village school to an urban school that made me sensitive to social snobbery and hesitant to follow the crowd.

“MY BELIEF IN MY FAMILY AND MY PRIVILEGED  
LIFE WERE SOON TO BE OVERTURNED”

Two years later, when my father received another promotion, we moved into an even bigger city near the Yangtze River. I entered one of the best middle schools. Father had a private driver who took me to and back from school every day. I enjoyed all the material privileges. People treated me well because I had an influential father who held an important position. Father was also the pride and center of my life. Mother stayed home to care for me. However, during this period of time, my belief in my family and my privileged life were soon to be overturned.

When I was fifteen, one day, mother and I found a stack of photos with a beautiful woman on them from my father's clothing closet. Mother's smile froze at that moment. A dark cloud shadowed her. Since then, arguments and fights became more frequent in the family. My father's behavior also became more abusive toward mother. Since then, my carefree life, my whole world, everything has been overturned. My father, who was my hero, became someone I detested and resented the most. Their marriage became the biggest nightmare for me. Our home became a war zone. My depression began around when I was fifteen. I think I nurtured it myself—I liked to close myself in and listened to melancholy love songs. I also observed other dysfunctional families around us. Even then, we did not expect that my mother would continue to live with an unfaithful and abusive husband for the next twenty years.

My mother was born in 1951. Her own impoverished family in rural Shandong had eight children. Although my maternal grandfather was a school teacher, his own children had to drop out of elementary school due to poverty. Mother said that she could not even afford buying a pencil. So mother had only two years of education, and she could barely write. At age ten, when she was asked to leave school, mother begged her parents to let her learn a skill, such as sewing. She wanted to become a tailor someday. Somehow, my grandparents managed to buy her a used sewing machine. They had no more money to provide her any training or lessons, so she taught herself at home.

Mother had nimble and diligent hands. When I was young and active, neighbors always admired the beautiful clothes she had made for me. It was still an age of scarcity in the 1980s, but mother was creative in using materials to make small furniture and clothes for the family. She was a wise

and frugal housekeeper. All of my life, I have not met a woman who is as kindhearted and virtuous as my mother. And that is also why my father's betrayal seemed so unbearable and heartless to me.

When my mother was fifteen, the Cultural Revolution broke out. According to her memory, "anyone who wore a pair of glasses was dragged to be denounced." My grandfather wore a pair of glasses and suffered in what was called "struggle meetings." Mother herself as a young girl was recruited into the village militia. Although she sang revolutionary songs and was asked to worship Mao, in her later years she renounced these beliefs, unlike most people in that generation. After she became a Christian, mother acquired a refreshed caution against the comeback of Red songs. She loved to dance on the plaza with other elderly women after dinner, but whenever a red song was played, she stopped and walked away.<sup>3</sup>

When I was younger, I loved to ask mother about her love story with father. I still remember her rural accent when telling the story. Before they got married, my parents lived in two adjacent villages. They met for the first time when they were both sixteen. My father was a shy boy who scarcely dared to speak with her. But they remembered each other. Then, through a matchmaker, they were engaged at age nineteen. A year younger, father always called her "older sister" as an endearment. Soon afterward, my grandmother died of cervical cancer. Mother remembered at the funeral, my father was so grief-stricken that he tumbled and injured himself.

Later, because my father had to leave for the army, and because of China's policy that encouraged delaying marriage, they did not marry until ten years later, when my mother was twenty-nine. She was the last to marry among her peers. So they had a very strong foundation in marriage to start with, with all those years spent together.

When mother entered my father's big family, she became a guardian for his two younger sisters, aged eight and eleven respectively. She comforted and nurtured them. Later my grandfather remarried. My step-grandmother had been a widow with a daughter. She first picked on my mother a lot because mother was hardworking and not talkative. But later they got along well.

Even much later, after father's affair, when mother retold their story, she would add, "How could anyone have guessed what I was to suffer later?" All her peers in the village admired her for marrying well. She herself never expected that the person whom she had loved and known since her teen years, her first and only love, could have changed into someone unrecognizable.

Mother not only bore the pains of her husband, but also of the time. When it was time for them to get married, the new policy was to postpone marriage (*wanbun*).<sup>4</sup> So between age nineteen and twenty-nine, she entered into my father's household as a fiancé. She shared the major labor while father was in the army. Then after they got married and I was born, the one-child policy was launched. Mother actually conceived six times altogether and had five forced abortions. After one abortion surgery, she even had to ride a bicycle home from the clinic. Blood trickled down her pants. Then the rural commune forced her to be sterilized. The surgery did not go well, because of complications. Blood soaked her clothes, and since then she had chronic vaginal bleeding. That was what weakened her health in her thirties. When I was older, my father really wanted a son. They wanted to adopt one, but the procedures were too strict. The regret of not having a son became an excuse for my father to blame the both of us.

“IF EVEN A MARRIAGE LIKE THIS COULD COLLAPSE, HOW  
COULD I EXPECT ANYTHING BETTER?”

Mother's love story was a source of intimacy and self-identity for me when I was young. I admired her courage and tenacity under harsh conditions. She taught me character by her own life and example. But after father's affairs, these stories could only invite sadness and resentment. Mother has sacrificed so much, but then what? To me, if even a marriage like this could collapse, how could I expect anything better?

Seeing the near disappearance of my mother through repeated suicide attempts before my eyes was a terror to me. An indescribable terror. My father, who was my hero, now became someone I could not recognize. And I felt ashamed of what he has done to her. I felt that he had not only betrayed my mother, but me as well. I was filled with sadness and anger.

With the collapse of father as a hero in my life, my whole world collapsed. I began to resent men and worldly pursuits for success in general. Even my mother said frequently to me, “There is not a good man in this world.” I thus despised men as a lower species, prone to lust and unfaithfulness. And I was determined not to marry, because I saw marriage as a waste of time and trust. I swore to myself that my own fate would never become like my mother's.

Looking back, this crisis instilled in me a deep pessimism about human nature. At age fifteen, I sank into chronic depression. I came to this realization many years later. I tried different ways to cheer up

mother, who was locked up indoors most of time because father did not like her to have friends. He was afraid that a scandal would destroy his career. Compared to my peers, I lost interest in superficial things, such as good looks and dresses. I invested even more into academic study. I had nowhere else to turn. I wanted to prove that my father's usual comment "women are useless" was dead wrong. I also wanted to break out of this golden cage which father built for us. My biggest ambition was to earn an income after college and ask my mother to divorce him and live with me. There was anger and hope of revenge, and they fueled my pursuits.

Looking back, even father's extramarital affairs had much to do with the broader social climate. The economic reform after 1992 brought more opportunities for government and military officials to exchange favors with local business entrepreneurs. Bribes and women were usually the means business people used to lubricate their economic opportunities. The year 1992 was exactly when our family moved into a major city. Three years later, Father became someone different. Until today, he still has not shown any regrets or remorse, despite the fact that his multiple affairs have been widely known.

### "I REALIZED THAT I COULD NOT EVEN SAVE MYSELF"

In 1998, I entered a college very close to home so that I could check on mother from time to time. I still feared losing her. My relationship with father worsened as I began to stand up to him to protect my mother. I took on part-time jobs to support myself, for every time I asked for allowance from my father, a storm of humiliation awaited me. He was angry at my challenge of his authority in the family. He saw me as an arising opponent, and I saw him as an enemy. Since then, I began to live a very frugal life. In college, I seldom mentioned who my father is. My classmates all thought that I came from a not so resourceful family background. I did not want to have anything to do with my father. In the last year of college, girls in our English department began to date. Some cohabitated with their boyfriends off campus. I was one of the very few who stayed away from boys.

By the time I graduated and had a job, I had already become a feminist, who was determined not to marry. I worked as a research analyst in a marketing firm in Beijing, where I wrote statistical reports for businesses and state media. Financially, I could finally support my mother as long as we

lived frugally. So I asked her to divorce my father, who had been unfaithful to her all these years. To my surprise, mother hesitated. I urged her to make a choice between father and me. When she replied me, "I cannot leave your father," I was devastated. All these years, my tireless efforts to succeed and be independent were all because I wished to see her free from this pathetic and painful marriage. I felt so disappointed with my mother. How could she still be in love with such a husband like my father? I even began to resent her too. She seemed too weak, accepting whatever life had to offer and never striking back at it. I had a sense of loathing toward her. But when I felt that way, I hated myself too, because I shouldn't. Since then, my phone calls and visits home were fewer. I did not want to face them. Meanwhile, a question began to haunt me: What is the meaning of my life? If this world and my mother's life could still function without me, what is point of living?

I lost the motivating force in life and plunged into a year of deep depression. On the weekends, I would hang out with my colleagues and indulge in alcohol. It was often after a few drinks that I could vent my frustration in life out and be the real me. But since alcoholic is a depressant, it made me feel even worse. I was very unhappy. I wanted to indulge in life but that did not work for me. I had always wanted to play the savior for my mother! But I realized that I could not even save myself.

At around age twenty-seven, I began to date men. If a serious and meaningful life was not for me, maybe I could lower my standards and live whatever life had to offer. A few very brief romantic relationships followed, but none of them worked out. Every time I was fear-struck. Although I distrusted the opposite sex, I could not help but be very open about myself when in a relationship. That made me vulnerable, and it scared me. I found out that I had fashioned myself into an emotional monster: I secretly desired a pure and ideal relationship, probably not marriage, but I feared and almost foresaw its future brokenness. My desire for love was at war with my deep fear of betrayal and loss. These failed romantic relationships forced me to rethink my relationship with my father. I had to look again into the ugliest scar in my heart.

### "I WAS A FEMINIST AND A MAN-HATER"

It was at this point of my life when I met some Christian people. They were very friendly to me and took me to a Bible study. I was ignorant and proud, and I argued for the futility of religion. Once we were reading a

verse from the Bible that said, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son (John 3:17–18).” It hurt my pride, and I felt greatly offended. Who is this God to condemn people like me? I had always thought of myself as someone with very high moral standards. How could I already have been condemned? So, I left the group of Christians.

Later, I had a colleague who was a Korean Christian. He was the only male whose morality won my respect. Not only was he calm and gentle in manners, but he was an exemplary husband and father of three. His example overthrew my rigid stereotype of males. I thought to myself, “So Christians do have higher standards to live by.” Since then, I began to sort out my atheistic prejudices against God. I brought the major questions to this colleague: Why is it that you believe in a God but I don’t? What makes God the one to know our hearts and judge? Why trust the God of the Bible?

What really made me surrender my life and pride to God was a very “random” incident in 2006. I was particularly lonely and depressed that day, but I could not book an appointment with my counselor. I walked down to a restaurant to grab a meal. A stranger sharing the same table began to chat with me. He was very friendly, but I was cautious and hesitant to talk with strangers. Then over the meal, he told me the pains of his life, including being abused as a child and losing his first wife in an accident. Since he was very candid with me, I lowered my guard. In the next twenty minutes, this total stranger answered the most intense questions in my life. He described the fatherly love of God. When parting, he said a prayer for me. All of a sudden, I was having goose bumps, wondering how this stranger could have known what I needed. It was too “random” an encounter. Later after I became a Christian, I called it “providential.” At that moment, for the first time in my life, I asked myself with all seriousness, “Could there really be a God?” Afterward, I returned to the church. I listened to sermons with less prejudice. In a few Sunday worship services, I found tears running down my cheeks.

Before my conversion, I had turned myself into someone who only believes in and relies on herself. I was a feminist and a man-hater. But in many real-life situations, my own judgments were dead wrong. I was so tired of having been in control of my own life. I felt humbled and wanted God to take control of life, if He is a loving God who was willing to die for me. The thought of surrender was very real, challenging and intense to



me. On the morning of my baptism, I almost hesitated. I was very nervous, but looking back, it was the right decision.

After that, I began to spend a lot of time reading my Bible and attending church. I felt regretful that I had missed out on the most important thing in life, that is, to know God. The church I attended had a few sisters who mentored and prayed with me, and I grew very solid in the faith over the next two years.

“ALL HER SUFFERINGS HAVE ALSO BEEN MY SUFFERINGS. MY  
COMFORT AND RELIEF SOON BECAME HERS”

Since then, big changes began to show in me. I became exceedingly joyful. God’s presence was so real to me that I delighted so much in knowing Him as my heavenly Father. Before my conversion, the word “father” brought complicated emotions to me, both pain and longing. Knowing God as the faithful father brought much healing to me. I felt so secure emotionally and truly joyful. A few friends saw the change in me and decided to find out about it in church. One day when I was waiting for the bus to go to work, my cheerful countenance must have seemed inviting and a young woman besides me wanted to make friends with me, so I brought her to church too. I began to have a heavy burden to share who God is with former classmates and other people around me.

Then I realized that the next lesson was to reconnect with my parents and bring them the good news. I traveled home to spend time with my father. I told her about my newfound faith, and he was not as angry about it as I had expected. His anger broke out later at hearing about the fact that we are all sinners in God’s eyes. My mother’s response was receptive. For years, she attended a Buddhist temple twice a month, on the fifteenth and month’s end. She sought peace and even had a Guanyin shrine at home. However, Buddhism did not provide an outlet for her pains. When I shared my written testimony with her and called her, she sobbed on the other end of the telephone. All her sufferings have also been my sufferings. My comfort and relief soon became hers.

When I brought her to church with me for the first time, the preacher gave a sermon about tithing. That topic made her a little uneasy. Later a few times she dozed off while listening to sermons. I never pushed her to believe, because it had to be the work of the Holy Spirit. While away in another city, all I did was to pray for her. I asked God to surround her with faithful sisters. Six months later, mother told me joy-

fully that she had decided to receive baptism at church. It was her own initiative, and I was very thankful to God. God did something for her that I could never do.

Mother has a very innocent personality. She easily trusts people and is very giving. That is probably also the reason why she was often hurt by people who took advantage of her. Before finding this new faith, she questioned her giving and selfless nature. Now mother herself found a strong foundation to back her moral values too. She once said with a sudden realization: "Haven't I always been a Christian?!" Her innocence deepened her longing for and dependence on God. I am so glad about that—God would never disappoint her. So, after her conversion at age fifty-six, mother's life became a living testimony of joy and piety. Even our long-time neighbors were amazed at how such a gloomy woman had changed into someone so cheerful.

By then, my fear about marriage had been largely healed by God. I began to pray for a life partner who is also a sound Christian. Although friends and relatives suggested unbelieving but good-mannered men to me, I insisted on waiting for a Christian brother. Around that time, churches had more sisters than brothers, and I became the oldest single sister. I worried about staying single all my life, but all I did was to pray about it. Two years later, I met my future husband on a short-mission trip. He was an upright godly young man. I had never imagined that someone like him would exist in this world. We have been married for many years now, and I still think of him that way.

Lack of education was always a regret for my mother. But she became very diligent at reading the Bible. Whenever there was a character she could not read, mother would ask and find out about it. Her life also underwent a significant change for the better. She became very joyful. Her depression was gone, although marriage relationship did not improve much. Mother seemed to have found someone to protect her, a God who is powerful, and that gave her security. Once when my father became abusive toward her again, she knelt down to pray right there. It must have shocked him to such an extent that he never raised a finger against her again. For the first few years after her conversion, she tried her best to live with my father. She served him meals and bore all the verbal abuse against her faith. After my father retired, he returned to his birthplace. Mother stayed in the city. So they have been separated since then. Mother liked to stay in the city because of the church she regularly attends. She serves in the choir and sometimes helps with cleaning work

too. She has made many friends in the church. Although they have not officially filed for divorce, I think the current separation between them is for the best.

“HE IS EVERYTHING I HAD DESIRED IN A MAN”

After getting married, I served with my husband at an urban house church. We both devoted much time and efforts to evangelizing and mentoring others. We felt God’s call to ministry. I quit my job as a research analyst and began to work as a theological translator. I am also writing devotionals for some Christian media. My husband started seminary a few years ago, so we have been living on a tight budget. Now we have to support our two young children. My mother is sometimes worried about our financial condition, but I assured her that we live by faith in God’s provision.

My downward mobility in career invited hostility from my in-laws. They were hardcore Communist Party members who disdain Christianity. Although their youths were spent in puritanical observance of communist ideology, the post-reform economy has offered them much material luxury and comfort. Retired, they still receive handsome stipends from their old positions. Because they expect material abundance in our life, our frugality makes them lose face.<sup>5</sup> Seeing our meager income, they often scoff at our inability to move upward the social ladder. They consider the years of education they invested in us have been wasted.

I had not expected the same drama in my husband’s family. They are angry at both of us because our Christian faith contrasts so strongly with their values—they scoff at upright moral principles and expect us to bribe and flatter, in order to get ahead. Any talk about serving the church would enrage them. For many years, my in-laws became more verbally abusive than my father was toward me. They kind of blamed me for leading my husband “astray.” We had a few painful years living close to them, but when my husband began seminary, we moved to another city. Distance helped improve the relationship a bit.

Having my husband by my side with the same firmness in following God’s leading is a big comfort. I have never seen a man as determined as he is. Most men I knew were ambitious and unsteady, always trying to realize their self-importance through worldly careers. But my husband is a man who refuses to be defined by the world. Our early years of marriage had rough days. Sometimes he told me that I was treating him with

demeaning attitudes similar to how I treated my father. Then I had to adjust my ways.

He is everything I had desired in a man. If God did not save me, I would never have dreamed about having a marriage like this. It is comforting to think that even if we lose everything, worldly accomplishments and respectability in the eyes of our earthly fathers, we still have each other.

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China's transition from a central planning economy since the late 1970s changed its opportunity structures for people.<sup>6</sup> In the 1980s, there were only a few ways to gain upward mobility in the dualistic rural-urban citizenship system: entering into college, marrying an urban resident or enlisting in the military.<sup>7</sup> With the collapse of *danwei* system in the 1990s and the development of an urban economy, migration and urbanization have brought many people upward mobility.<sup>8</sup> Wang's fate changed as her father's career advanced. But because Wang had a memory of rural life in her early years, the contrast in values between these two worlds (rural and urban China) could not be sharper for a young child. She favored the innocence and simplicity of rural life, and these values set a moral baseline for her to judge what was happening in the more glamorous urban scene later in life.

Similar to the story in Chap. 4, the abundance of economic opportunities also created fertile soil for corruption among those who had power and status. Wang's autobiographical account shows how families suffered internal disintegration when corruption and sexual immoralities happen in the perilous market economy. Her mother's suffering and suicide attempts were a wake-up call for Wang to rise from her comfortable life, defend her mother and enter into premature adulthood. She tended to her mother's needs and even defended her against male dominance in the home. However, this experience left her with an emotional phobia toward men that lingered for the next decade. Her outlook on marriage, manhood and fatherhood became distorted. It was when Wang's social relationships were most strained that she opened up her heart to the Christian message. Wang's conversion narrative also shows how deeply meaningful conversions through unplanned encounters in the transient urban space often carry that sense of divine providence.

After Wang became a Christian believer, the mother-daughter bond became a channel of grace when her mother was soon converted. Faith in God who created marriage also realigned her views about marriage and manhood. In the torrents of materialism, Wang and her husband determinedly swam against the tide, even though it was frowned upon as downward mobility by her materialistic in-laws. For many married Christian young couples who are first-generation believers, expectations and pressure from their unbelieving parents can be testing trials.<sup>9</sup> Thanks to the urban economy which provides increasingly opportunities for ministry-related work, they are able to follow God's calling.

## NOTES

1. In China, since 1958, *hukou* (or household registration system) identifies an individual as a resident of either in the agricultural or non-agricultural category. It became a rigid form of social control over residential and labor mobility. It is also an inherited class status. In the 1970s, the only way to upgrade from an agricultural *hukou* to a non-agricultural one is through entering into college, marrying an urbanite or joining the military.
2. Experimental schools are usually the best schools in urban China.
3. Plaza dance (*guangchangwu*) is the most common leisure exercise in urban China.
4. After 1978, accompanying the One-Child Policy, China had a "Late Marriage and Late Child-Rearing" (*wanbun wanyu*) campaign.
5. The Chinese have a culture of "face-keeping," which means a communal preservation of a family's reputation or prestige. To cause someone to lose face means to deprive them of a sense of pride or respect.
6. Victor Nee, "A Theory of Market Transition: From Redistribution to Market in State Socialism," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 54, No. 5. (Oct., 1989), pp. 663–681.
7. Yanjie Bian, "Chinese Social Stratification and Social Mobility," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 28 (2002), pp. 91–116.
8. Li Ma, *The Chinese Exodus: Migration, Urbanism and Alienation in Contemporary China* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018).
9. See Chapter 10 "Marriage" in Li Ma and Jin Li, *Surviving the State, Remaking the Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018).



## CHAPTER 7

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# Mustard Seeds

“I SEE MYSELF LOCKED INSIDE TWO DOORS:  
ONE WAS FEAR AND THE OTHER POVERTY”

Mother was the person who sowed the seed of faith in our family. She was also the person who prayed for this family. She had very little schooling, but her literacy began with reading the Bible. My own spiritual experience began with helping her hand-copy some hymns. Later I went to church with her in the evenings, a church in our village. Back then, my handwriting was very crooked. I knew nothing about God or what prayer means. But I liked to attend church. For myself and my younger brother, it was part of our childhood routines.

Recalling images of my childhood, I see myself locked behind two doors: one was fear and the other poverty. Both isolated me from people and the world. But both also pushed me to step out and face the world and people. I longed to explore the world, to know myself, to love and to be loved.

My parents were peasants in China. They had a few *mu* of land, which was later taken by the village cadres and sold to build factories.<sup>1</sup> My parents got some meager compensation for it. Before that, it was already impossible to raise the family just by working on the land. Grain was

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*Narration by Wen (age thirty seven, editor for a Christian publishing company)*

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cheap, but seeds and fertilizers were expensive. There were also lots of agricultural taxes. When they transferred the land, our family was paid 4000 *yuan*. Since then, all the farmland in our village belonged to that factory entrepreneur.<sup>2</sup>

My mother grew up in a rural family of eight children. She had two brothers and five sisters. She was born second. Mother liked to tell us about grandfather, because he had passed away before my brother and I were born. Her father, a street food vendor, was upright, wise and open minded. Mother only had two years of schooling. The family was too poor to support her further education. But she was good at account-keeping. She had to travel with my grandfather to sell food. Other siblings of hers stayed at home to tend the crops. So because mother had to work as grandfather's account-keeper, she traveled widely and saw many things. My mother was an optimistic person. In her own home, she enjoyed "democracy" and "freedom" because her parents were gentle in their temperaments. That was all before she got married.

Then a matchmaker came—my grandmother's sister. The matchmaker told mother about this other village where there were coal mines, open-air movies and festivities. Mother often told us that she regretted being "fooled" by these external temptations.

Father's family was also very poor, and he had a sharp temper. This temperament later led to much violence in our home. After giving birth to me and my younger brother, mother worked in the coal mines with my father. Those were hard years, with little sleep and little pay. Sometimes when they came home, their bodies were so covered with black dust that we could only see their two eyes. Those eyes were bloodshot. The rest of their faces were covered with dust and coal.

Mother had a small physique. She was only four feet and nine inches. Father was five feet and nine inches tall. But they all did the same work. Those were hard days for her, but compared with the beating and endless cursing she suffered from her husband, even that was better. People would comfort her by saying that it was because father did hard labor that he was quick tempered. But actually mother did the same kind of drudgery.

When I was five years old, I remember being locked inside by a wooden door. My mother curled her small body on the ground, trembling while making low and painful wailing sounds. She suffered a lot of beatings from my father. We, her two children, could only wail beside her. The heavy wooden door locked all of us inside, and nobody could escape. In a dark

and closed room, my fear, despair and hopelessness were magnified and solidified. Maybe my fearful personality that has troubled me for the past thirty years was born behind that door.

It was also because of poverty that my mother often locked my brother and me indoors by ourselves. It was through this closed door that we heard street vendors' hawking to sell commodities that we could not afford. My later life seemed to be motivated by an urge to push doors open, visible and invisible ones, doors of this world and doors of the heart.

“THAT LITTLE WAILING BODY OF HERS, ABANDONED  
AND HUMILIATED ON THE GROUND, LEFT ME WITH DISGUST”

I did not get along with my mother very well. We are not like other mothers and daughters who can hug and enjoy intimacy with each other. Since I was young, I have seen my mother's weakness, wailings and sacrifice. My emotions toward her are very complicated. As a child wounded by domestic violence, I have also wounded my mother, who had to bear the pains in her marriage alone. Although I have hated myself for being like this, it had always been the way we lived.

When I was young, every time mother was cursed and beaten by my father, she would collapse on the ground, head dropped and hair tangled up in a mess. Her eyes were looking somewhere else. She cried with tears and a runny nose wetting her face. It was not a kind of loud crying, but a low and monotonous wailing, as if she had endless sorrow, pain and shame inside her. Her small body was humiliated and trampled by hands full of cruelty. For some reason, this image reminded me of that Lu Xun wrote in *Wild Grass*: “The clay of life was abandoned on the ground, yielding no fine wood but wild grass. Such is my sin.”<sup>3</sup> But at that time, I considered the sin to be my mother's, not my own. That little wailing body of hers, abandoned and humiliated on the ground, left me with disgust. All I wanted to do was to escape and run far, far away from her, instead of stooping down to hug and comfort her. This image was the reason why I hate to see my mother's tears.

My father grew up in a rural family with many siblings. My grandparents could not afford him to go to school. As the oldest son, he did hard labor since he was about fifteen or sixteen. He helped support the family and his younger brothers' and sisters' schooling. Even after my father got married, he still worked as a coolie laborer, digging coal in mines, driving



tractors in stone quarries, and working shifts in steel factories. Mother said that the first two years after they got married, father did all these tasks. In 1986, when I was four years old and my younger brother was only one, father borrowed some money and purchased a tractor. For the next decade, his job was to transport coal from mines to factories. He has been doing hard labor for the past few decades.

Around 1996, our village sold the farmland to a private entrepreneur, Mr. Wang, from another village. He set up a porcelain factory. Later there were many other factories. By then, the stone quarries had depleted the mountains, so my father began working at Mr. Wang's steel factory in 2002. He worked there for sixteen years. Villagers without land had to find work. Meanwhile, our underground water resources were polluted. We were left with no clean water to drink. People either carried water from over another mountain or bought bottled water. Before this crisis, we had tap water or well water that was safe to drink. But around that time, even the air was polluted, and you could smell the smoke and burning scent in the air. It was no better than Beijing's terrible smog these days. Most likely it was worse.

My father is sixty-one now. Due to hard labor for decades, his fingers became deformed, and so is his spine. When he felt despair, father would smoke unceasingly for a whole day. Sometimes his words also became profane. It was only when he could not bear with the pain in his legs that he cried out to God. During those times, God did show mercy to him. My mother always told me that God loves my father dearly because whenever he prayed to God in pain, God would have mercy on him and make the pain go away. So Father dared not stay too far away from God.

Many years later, when I was working in Beijing, my parents took a night train to visit my brother and me. At the first sight of me, my mother came up and hugged me. I saw fatigue and tears in her eyes, but I abruptly brushed away her reaching arm. It was as if I chose to escape her arms which had tried so hard to uphold a home but had failed. At that moment, inside my heart, there was wailing and collapse too. This best captures my relationship with Mother. She had always tried to shelter me from storms in life by her weak arms. She raised me with a persevering love and silent patience, but I had always disdained her. I cried over her misfortunes. I accused her of not standing up. I avoided her. It was only after I met my Savior Jesus that this changed. Isaiah 53 verse 5 says, "He was pierced for

our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Here, this “we” includes myself and my mother. With her frail physique, she had always tried to shelter me from life’s storms. It was also with an enduring and silent love that she raised me. But I have been retreating while lamenting her misfortune and raging against her cowardice.<sup>4</sup> I had to escape from her because I misunderstood her. This did not change until I met Jesus Christ. Then I realized that mother and I are two women who both needed his healing.

When my brother and I were little, we followed mother to church after dinner. It was a meeting place in some auntie’s home at our village. There were not many places where children could go in the evenings. We could certainly play freely in the field like other kids did, but it felt more interesting when we followed mother to church. We just sat there and listened to the Bible reading, hymn-singing and prayers. My mother had only two years of schooling, so she is half-illiterate. I began to help her hand-copy the hymns. Gradually, I got to remember some lyrics, which mostly came from the book of Psalms. Before I entered into junior middle school, most of my evenings were spent in this way.

So it was my mother who passed on the faith to me. I had always assumed that Mother went to church as a way to escape domestic violence. But later I learned that it was because once my mother heard an elderly neighbor singing a beautiful hymn. She felt attracted by it, so she went to church with this neighbor. Whenever she was in pain, she went there in search of her Savior. Years later, her daughter also began to sing hymns.

Even though our family was poor, my parents provided schooling for me and my younger brother. They insisted that we continue our education as long as we wanted to. After I entered elementary school, we were no longer starving. Father and Mother provided everything we children needed through hard labor.

Since junior middle school, academic work became more demanding. I seldom went to church gatherings with Mother anymore. But whenever there was a test, I asked my mother to pray for it. She always replied by saying, “Wisdom and intelligence all come from God” and “Your test score is in God’s hands.” I lived with this kind of utilitarian prayer for many years, until high school, college and even graduate school. I did study hard, so my scores have been good.

### “I KNEW THAT I WAS ONLY USING GOD”

In the 1990s, my parents worked hard to save enough money in order to buy township *hukou* for me and my brother.<sup>5</sup> A township *hukou* was priced at 5000 *yuan*. So they worked day and night in coal mines. Later these *hukou* papers proved to be useless after all. After graduate school, I did not land a job with a Beijing *hukou*, so my *hukou* eventually was returned to our home village.

In 2005, I graduated from college and continued graduate school in Beijing. I began my first romantic relationship, which lasted for seven years. This relationship brought me back to the God I believed in and had prayed to since childhood. Only this time, my prayer was no longer for good test scores. Instead, I prayed: “God, I long to be loved. Please help this man love me just the way I love him.” He was one year ahead of me in graduate school. Later we entered the same doctoral program in this university.

In our public English course, a foreign teacher and his wife invited my boyfriend and me to celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas with them. At this couple’s home, they learned that I grew up going to church, although I did not consider myself a Christian. I asked them to pray for my relationship with my boyfriend. We knew another dating couple who were Christians. They showed me that Christianity is not a religion participated in only by elderly people, but also for well-educated young people. This couple later brought me to church. Hearing a hymn about finding God, tears rolled down my cheeks. My mother’s God was no longer just a God who blessed me with good test scores. I learned that God is a God of love. On one occasion, God entered into my heart.

During Thanksgiving of 2009, my boyfriend and I were once more invited to the home of our foreign teachers. They asked again what God meant to us. I remember clearly saying that God is love and I think He loves me. It was a kind of love I had always desired but was not sure how to express. That night, my boyfriend and I said a prayer to become Christians. But my prayers for our relationship were still very self-centered. I wanted God to help me, and to change my boyfriend’s heart so that he could love and protect me more. I knew that I was only using God.

Our dating relationship had many problems. Because I grew up with an extreme sense of insecurity, I considered him as the person who could satisfy all my desires for love. Later, I realized that I had made this young

man into an idol. Our relationship was pure in the beginning, but we later also crossed the boundary of physical contact. But these physical desires intertwined with the emotional, which drained us greatly. Both of us were very immature. He was idealistic and cynical, detesting social ills. Later I realized that I did not understand him at all. All I wanted was to marry someone as innocent and child-like as I thought he was. During those years, I laid down my self-respect and independence. We were simple-minded. Our relationship was intimate, but also naive and unthoughtful. This relationship ended after his graduation in 2011. When he left for a job in Xiamen, he suggested to break up with me. Afterward, he cut off all connections with me.

I was devastated and could not pull myself together to work or live my life. An old friend came to visit and brought me to church. After a month, just before I turned thirty, I received baptism. I hit rock bottom, so I grasped whoever came to my rescue, including people at the church. I knew back then that I was still not putting all my trust in God.

Later after I terminated my doctoral study, I found work as an editor in an independent Christian publishing company.<sup>6</sup> This was my first job. I have also considered seminary education or other ministry organizations. And due to my failed romantic relationship in graduate school, I feared marriage.

A few years into my first job, I got to know a colleague who was eleven years younger than me. We got along very well, and some of our conversations became very deep and personal. For a moment, he gave me the impression that our relationship was becoming a romantic one. I feared that I was imagining things; after all, I was many years older than he. He wrote me a note promising to consider our relationship seriously. I also prayed hard about it. But a few weeks later, he stopped talking to me. By then, I realized that I was already in love with him. It became very painful to see him at work while pretending nothing had happened between us.

Later, my boss had a conversation with the two of us. He suggested that one of us quit our jobs, because our personal tension had affected the work environment. It was very hurtful for me to hear that young man describe his lack of romantic feelings toward me. I quit the job right away. Maybe I had let marriage become an idol again. After a month, I changed to another publisher. But I began to guard my heart against any romantic ideas about the men around me.

### “HE BLAMED GOD FOR MY SINGLENESSE”

Since I was young, I bonded well with my younger brother. Since he was shaped by my father and our family situations, his temperament is much like Father's. His optimistic and talkative side resembles my mother, though. My brother dropped out of school because he played video games too much. He did not finish high school. Later he regretted it and studied for a technical school diploma. When I entered college in Qingdao, he followed me to live in the same city. He had an attachment to a school setting. When I entered graduate school in Beijing, he also came with me.

He was experiencing a lot of despair back then. His own marriage was suffering, and they had a very young child. He had a lot of confusion in work and life. I brought him to church with me once, but he later refused to go, because he learned that I shared his marriage difficulties with the preacher in that church. At the time he was not ready to share it with others, so he felt ashamed. Since then he never went to church. I tried to convey the familial care of the church for him, and I introduced members of the church to him. For example, I asked him to teach people how to play tennis. I really wished that he does not leave God altogether. But my efforts were limited, and most times without visible success. In some difficult times, whenever I brought up the Christian faith to him, he would attack me and blaspheme God. So later on, I did not talk with him about faith directly, not because of other concerns, but because I did not want to hear more of his attacks and blasphemy. What I have done for my family is to pray to God in tears while holding unto the faith that is like a mustard seed.

After a few years, whenever my brother met up with me, he would still encourage me to change my job and urge me not to go to church. But his words became softer. In his wallet, he always carried the scripture card I gave him: God is love. He showed it on WeChat one day, commenting that “this has been in my wallet for many years.”<sup>7</sup> That day, he was talking with a Christian brother about teaching tennis. Within an hour, they spent most of the time talking about the Christian faith and his sister (me). Since then, his heart opened up. He stopped hiding his marriage problems from his friends. So God's timing and intervention were evident. Now when he taught his own child, he would mention the Christian faith. He also shares on WeChat about Christianity. When he met some people who tried to evangelize him, he would share with them too. When he is invited for Bible study, he no longer resists. Now I am convinced that God answered my prayer.

My brother's own family has now become the home I frequent in Beijing. I help babysit their five-year-old son. My sister-in-law gets along with me well. Seeing that I am content with life, they no longer push me into marriage.

Father has always been very distant to me. To be honest, my Christian faith did not impact my father very positively. For example, I am currently working in a Christian publishing company. He did not appreciate my job, so he constantly urged me to find a higher pay job. Another thing is marriage, which was the biggest pain for him when thinking of me. He blamed God for my singleness. But in fact, I am not willing to be in this unmarried status. At the same time, I know it is not a sign that God is withholding His blessing from me. My father always scolds me by saying, "It is fine to believe in God, but don't become too superstitious! Can faith be bread?" I do not know how to positively influence my father with my faith. I have always hoped that when my life and work improve, maybe he will be more open. But I also know that those are not the real causes. His heart had not been renewed and changed by God. He had little knowledge of God. His values are of this world. This is where I feel totally powerless, and only God can work in him.

In recent years, my mother frequently brings up the book of Job in the Bible with me. I know she must be feeling weak lately because her physical strength is failing. She also told me a lot of things that she never uttered before. Because of these changes in her, I now fear losing her. So my constant prayer to God is, "Strengthen me so that I can strengthen my mother." My mother is also a sister in the Lord to me. Because of the mercy and help from our Heavenly Father, we can have communion in the Lord, as two women. I sometimes tell her not to worry because God has His timing. I taught her how to pray for my younger brother's marriage and family. Before I did not allow her to pray about marriage for me. But now I also ask her to pray for my future husband. God has been healing me through her regarding things I felt ashamed of. She appreciates what I do, and she prays for my daily work. "You are working for God," she said. Mother passed her faith to me, as well as her resilience and strength.

Two days ago, Beijing had a big snow storm in early spring. It was so sudden that few people were prepared for it. I was soaked in rain and snow too. But while I was waiting at the bus stop in my thin clothes and snow boots (I looked ridiculous!), I felt extraordinarily warm and safe. It felt like the fears and anxieties since my childhood had altogether vanished. I was aware that these darkness and fears have always been part of me even

after my conversion. My strong desire to live a bright life and the dark temptations behind these fears were strangely mixed within me. Whenever I was faced with big and difficult decisions and trials, the competition between these two sets of emotions became extra fierce. But there were moments like two days ago in the snow when I felt completely free.

A lot of things are different between women of my mother's generation and of my own. I desire to be an independent individual with dignity. I have a job. I know the meaning of my life and my own worth. I think there needs to be love, understanding and sacrifice in marriage. The self-denial and sacrifice need to be mutual. You are in me, and I am in you, but we are at the same time independent individuals. My mother had none of these qualities in her marriage. But she persevered with life and became very resilient. My generation also faces the temptation of secular feminist values, which also offered independence and self-worth. But true independence and dignity should be grounded in our identities before God.

\* \* \*

Before the collapse of the central planning system, most Chinese lived with a rigid set of state-assigned identities, such as urban or rural residents according to socioeconomic status. Institutions like *hukou* confined people's choices in life, including education, marriage and residential mobility. With the accelerating economic liberalization, new and more pluralistic identities began to replace the old categories. Since the 2000s, Christian identity has become an emerging one, as shown in a nation-wide 2007 survey.<sup>8</sup>

Wen's life trajectory was a search for identity and belonging. Wen's peasant parents worked hard to purchase her a township *hukou*, hoping for her to break free from the bondage of inherited class status. She succeeded academically and became a member of the urban professional community. But these advances in life chances gave no more satisfaction than the conviction of being a child of God. Having grown up in a peasant home characterized by poverty and domestic violence, Wen longed for a freeing love. She witnessed how her father, a victim of structural injustice in the economy, could also subject his own home to physical oppression. The Christian faith of Wen's mother belonged to an unbelievably enduring but silent type. Lack of education limits her self-expressions of unspeakable pains in an abusive marital relationship. Semi-illiterate, she favored the books of Job in the Bible. As a child, Wen began to hand-copy the Psalms as

demanding by her mother. The Christian faith gave both the mother and daughter a language to lament and to express the unspeakable emotions in their difficult life.

Wen's longing for marriage was wounded by two failed romances. She reflected more on how her ultimate identity as a beloved of God. Singlehood remains a challenge for Wen's sense of identity and belonging. The pressure from peers, society and churches can be overwhelming. Her singleness remains an embarrassment to her father. Away from her parents, Wen worked on her relationship with her brother, who became open to the Christian message after years of hostility. The same childhood faith passed down from their mother, like mustard seeds that were planted years ago, has grown to sustain them during rain or drought.

## NOTES

1. *Mu* is the Chinese unit of land measurement which equals around 920 square yards.
2. Loss of productive farmland to industrial enterprises was a serious problem in rural China since the 1990s. See Wei Song and Mingliang Liu, "Farmland Conversion Decreases Regional and National Quality in China," *Land Degradation and Development*, March 27, 2016. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/ldr.2518>
3. Lu Xun (Lu Hsun) is a leading Chinese literary critic in the 1930s.
4. Here she uses a Chinese idiom, *nu qi bu zheng, ai qi bu xing*.
5. See note 1 of Chap. 6. About the *hukou* system in general, see "China's Hukou System," *The Diplomat*, July 14, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/chinas-hukou-system/> About black market for urban *hukou*, see "Scandals over Fake Hukou Reveal Black Market," *Xinhua News*, quoted in *Shanghai Daily*, January 30, 2013. <https://archive.shine.cn/opinion/chinese-perspectives/Scandals-over-fake-hukou-reveal-black-market/shdaily.shtml>
6. Since the 2000s, many independent Christian publishing companies mushroomed in urban China. Although only state-owned publishers are granted ISBN numbers by the government, these smaller Christian publishers can purchase unused numbers from these state publishers. With this came many opportunities to translate Christian literature from the West and publish for popular distribution channels. John Maust, "Publishing for China's Millions," *Lausanne World Pulse Archives*, June of 2011. [https://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/international\\_publishing-php/1426/06-2011](https://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/international_publishing-php/1426/06-2011)
7. WeChat is a popular social media in China. Since the Chinese regime blocked Skype, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, the super-app WeChat,



which was designed for easy monitoring by the government, filled the void with over 938 million monthly users in 2017. Hillary McLauchlin, “We (Chat) the People: Technology and Social Control in China,” Harvard Politics Website, December 31, 2017. <http://harvardpolitics.com/world/wechat-the-people-technology-and-social-control-in-china/>

8. A 2007 Chinese Spiritual Life Survey was conducted by an independent marketing research company Horizon Research Group.



## CHAPTER 8

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# Negative Emotions

### “MOTHER GREW UP WITH A LOT OF TRAUMA AND DISCRIMINATION”

Born in 1977, I grew up with my maternal grandmother until I was old enough to go to school. She influenced me in a significant way. Before I reached the age for middle school in 1990, I had always regarded her as the mother figure who raised me. She was a middle school teacher, so I grew up in a middle school facility in Sichuan Province. I was very active and liked to run around with kids from other families. My grandmother set me loose. She was liberal minded, and not very restrictive toward me. But morally she taught me a lot, such as becoming someone who makes great contributions to society. That was a big part of my education with her.

My grandmother was a very strong and assertive woman; she had to be that way in her time in order to get resources and schooling. Born in the 1920s, my grandmother was very rebellious in her family. Girls in her time were not allowed to enter school, but she cried and fought for an education. She graduated from a Catholic high school in Chengdu City. She was indeed a new woman. Later, she even entered into a teacher's college. That was a great achievement for women of that time. At age thirty (much older than her peers), Grandmother gave birth to my mother, the oldest of her six children.

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*Narration by Huang (age forty two, university professor)*

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During the Cultural Revolution, my grandmother attempted suicide several times. My grandfather, the headmaster of that middle school, had been struck down by Red Guards as a spy. Later my grandparents divorced because Grandfather could not take the domineering attitude from his wife anymore. After their divorce, my grandmother obtained emotional support from her oldest daughter, my mother. Although Grandmother suffered a great deal during the Cultural Revolution, she did not complain against the Communist Party. She still considered the governance under the Chinese Communist Party to be much better than what it was under the Nationalist Party.

In 2009, after I returned from America, Grandmother was sick. I feared that she might pass away. So I went to visit her and explained the Christian gospel to her. She recalled having heard about this message before in school, and she immediately accepted it. That was very comforting and encouraging to me in my faith journey.

Being the oldest in the family, my mother has a very strong personality. According to my aunt, mother was always the center of their home. Whatever she said could not be changed. Even my grandmother depended on her a lot when her own marriage later disintegrated.

Coming from a divorced family, and with a father who was considered a spy, my mother grew up with a lot of trauma and discrimination. Later she was sent down to the countryside for four years. It was through a random opportunity that she found a job in Chengdu. First, she worked as a laborer, lifting steel beams and doing other hard labor. Then my mother learned that a medical college was recruiting students. She took the exam and gained entry. That was how she became a medical doctor.

My mother always had a keen sense of crisis. Maybe it was due to a combination of causes: a pervasive fear due to ongoing political conflicts, her personality, and so much adversity in the family's life circumstances. She became very anxious. Any bad news would seem to her to be bringing down the whole sky. She lived through a time that was very different from ours.

Her personality was also related to her medical profession, I think. She was a meticulous and diligent doctor, who took every detail seriously. She was also very capable. In fact, mother worked in a clinic of a state-owned factory. It was not even a hospital. But she attended to details and took pains in dealing with all kinds of requests. All the people she met with were desperately seeking help. Patients, pains, and death—she has seen it all. That is why she discouraged me from going to medical school, because it was too much responsibility and led to great desperation.

“I ALWAYS SENSED SOMETHING QUITE DEPRESSING IN HER”

In 1977, six months after my mother gave birth to me, she entered into college. China re-opened higher education institutions after closing it for eleven years since the Cultural Revolution. My father also went to graduate school in Ha'erbin. He was the first cohort of China-trained scientists in computer science. My mother was also the eldest among her classmates. Going to college had always been her dream, so she had to pursue it.

Emotionally, I had always considered my maternal grandmother as the one who nurtured me. Then in the second semester of my second grade in elementary school, I left my grandmother to live with my parents. Not having lived with them, I was fearful toward them. On the one hand, I was emotionally tormented by the separation from my grandmother. On the other hand, living with my own parents was exciting and sweet. But I was fearful because we were like strangers. But I knew that they were my biological parents, so I wanted to get close to them.

My father was still in graduate school in another city. My mother lived in the dormitory of Chengdu 719 factory, a military manufacturer. As a wife and mother, my mother took everything so seriously. I always sensed something quite depressing in her. She rarely spoke with me. There was minimal emotional communication between us. I could not figure out why she lived in such a suppressed mental state. Maybe it was common for her generation. She valued her work because the opportunity was rare. She had to work meticulously. It was not easy! She invested all her emotions and attention into that job.

Having grown up with my grandmother, I had a cheerful temperament when I was young. My grandmother retired early, so she used all her time to care for me. In comparison, when I lived with my mother, things were very depressing. She did care for me physically, but almost too much. Whenever I felt discomfort or illness, she would give me medicine. So, I had taken a lot of medicine growing up. I was still sick often. She did her best to care for me physically, but emotionally, she was not good at expressing love. I now understand that Mother had to be strong and tough as the head of her family. She was not used to showing her vulnerability. She also took that from my grandfather, I think. I recall that my grandfather often sat in his study room, silent. My mother did that too.

I was a people person, but I could not open my mother's heart. I remember once I was so saddened by the realization that my mother no longer loved me. What I felt toward her was more fear and tolerance.

I tried my best to be a very obedient child so that she could love me more. One day, my grandmother came to visit us in the city. I told her that mother no longer loved me. My grandmother had a conversation with both of us. She scolded mother. That one time, mother hugged me, almost reluctantly. So, in my parents' home, I had to bury my true self very deeply. It was only with my grandmother that I expressed my natural self, like hugging and laughing. But not in front of my mother.

My parents fought a lot too. Even the night before my college entrance exam, they had a big fight. Whenever conflict happened between them, it seemed that the rest of the world does not matter. I heard my father crying to mother, begging her to stop because the next day would be the most important exam for me. My father was often the one to give in. I don't remember what caused it. It might have been related to my paternal grandmother. My mother did not get along with her in-laws. That night I felt that my mother's heart was very hardened. She was unreasonable and hysterical. When she got angry, Mother would get out of control. She always had trouble with anger management. It was horrific watching her getting angry. She would smash and throw things at people. She would lie down on the ground, kick her legs, and wail. Nobody can comfort her in that situation.

At my parents' home, I was also greatly influenced by my father. In the 1980s, Father was sent to the United States by the Ministry of Aviation. He was an engineer in a military enterprise in China, and he went to study at Honeywell, an American company. After he returned to China, he has been talking to me about his very positive impressions about America. My father has a mild and kind personality, and I have always considered him a role model. So, I wanted to enter the university he once attended in Wuhan and did so. I also wanted to study abroad, like he had done. But I felt incompetent in college, so I finished graduate school in China before going abroad to study. So, my father's influence on me consisted of: "America is a good place, with advanced technology, free thought, and nice people."

My parents used to complain a lot about the Communist Party. Sometimes I thought they talked about this too much. Resentment really loomed large in our home. For example, when we were eating dinner, it was a sweet thing. But then they began to complain and complain so much that it made me lose my appetite. Because I am mild in temperament, this also made me feel nervous. But they have always been that way. Although they both worked inside the public system, they held such deep

grudges against the Cultural Revolution that they could not forget or let them go. Some injustices that their friends experienced in life may have intensified that resentment too. Maybe they have the right judgment about things, but to me, from a Christian perspective, you can't just complain all day. If God places you in a certain environment, it really depends on how you positively face it. But maybe they have seen too many things. Sometimes, on one same issue, my mother sees all the negative, which has much to do with her mentality too. She then dumps all her emotional garbage on me and my father. Although she cooked and kept the home clean for us, my father and I had to bear a lot of negative emotions from her.

They, of course, resented Mao and the Cultural Revolution. They also had a lot of complaints about Deng Xiaoping. I remember that in 1989, I was in fifth grade. I saw how my parents clutched the door tightly, turned on the radio, and listened to the Voice of America.<sup>1</sup> It shows that they supported the students, but they never talked about it for fear of political trouble. My parents are fearful of many things in China, but at the same time they also detest a lot of things. So that fear and detestation begin to ferment inside of them. Especially given their public positions, their only safe place to lash out is at home.

I left home for college and then graduate school. In 1995, my father founded his own research institute in Guangzhou. I was a graduate student in Guangzhou Foreign Language University, so we lived in the same city. I longed to unite with them, because inside my heart, I wanted to feel close to my family.

“OUR RELATIONSHIP DETERIORATED BECAUSE OF THEIR  
OBJECTION TO MY CHRISTIAN FAITH”

In graduate school, I got to know another female student from Yunnan. We taught English part-time at a language training institution called New Oriental.<sup>2</sup> On the way to our staff training in Beijing, we had a lot of deep conversations. I felt a great strength in her, which was her faith. She explained to me about the Christian faith. Back then I was visiting temples and burning incense to many gods. So, I thought any religion is good. But it was from knowing her that I was struck by the fact that people with faith can be so different. Burning incense brought only self-comfort. So, I really enjoyed spending time with her. Later through her, I met more Christians on campus. I also attended their student fellowships.

After I began my doctoral study in America, I continued to know more about Christianity. The leader of our graduate student fellowship was a staff member with InterVarsity.<sup>3</sup> Every other week, he would meet with me for an hour in the student center. He asked about my life and sometimes turned his Bible to share some verses with me. That was very helpful. I was in the communication department, and I also met a PhD student from Taiwan who was studying psychology. She had been a Christian for ten years, a very mature sister. From her, I saw the self-giving love of Jesus. She cared for people and offered help whenever there was a need. So, I was willing to hang out with her. We also formed a prayer group among international students on campus. That was a great support during my doctoral studies. We also went to the same church there, a non-denominational congregation.

In 2006, I was considering baptism, and I phoned home. My father was supportive, but my mother had doubts. She mainly worried about my finding a future marriage partner. Nothing else. After I returned after graduating, our relationship deteriorated because of their objection to my Christian faith. They warned me that it would be fine to be a Christian while I was in America, because most people went to church there. But in China, being a Christian has political risks. Moreover, they thought that anything good would become twisted in China, including Christianity. When I wanted to join a house church, they strongly objected.

I persuaded them to join two retreats organized by my church, which is a house church of around 100 members. These experiences of seeing a choir singing and dancers praising God triggered their memories about the Cultural Revolution. I could not blame my parents for feeling that way. The pastor's mother-in-law used to be a communist propaganda cadre, so her self-expression through singing and dancing, although in Christian content now, took on much of a Maoist flavor. So, it was very awkward and unpleasant. Later my parents commented, "Anything that comes to China, no matter how good it is, tends to be distorted, including Christianity."

My parents were also keen to observe that the whole church was a stage for the pastor's own family. Church members praised and applauded their performance. The sharing of testimonies was not ideal either. When people shared how they came to the faith and publicly confessed their sins, this ritual also reminded my parents of some Maoist rituals. My mother had a leg injury, so she was feeling depressed. She stayed in her hotel room a lot. Few people in that church reached out to her with care, so that was another reason she became repulsed by church activities.

What intensified their detestation about church was the pastor's mother-in-law's match-making for me. She introduced to me a Christian brother who was twelve years older than me. He was in his fifties and had never married. In fact, he looked even older than he was. But he was mild and gentle, so I went out with him a few times. This appeared to my parents similar to the arranged marriages in the Communist Party in the old days. Usually such arranged marriages were between very old men (cadres) and younger women. My parents felt greatly offended because the looks, job, age, and ability of that man could not match those of their daughter. At the same time, a university colleague of mine also introduced a Chinese medical doctor to me. My mother liked that man very much, but he was not a Christian. My meetings with him were full of debates and arguments. I did not want to date with him any longer. This decision made my mother think my church was pressuring me. They treated the older Christian brother from my church poorly. They almost humiliated him. Ever since then, my mother became very resistant to my faith. It was mainly against that house church. They considered me as having been brainwashed by it.

I still went out with that older Christian brother, but the pressure from my parents became really unbearable. Whenever they found out that I met with him, Mother would become extremely angry. She cursed, smashed things, wailed, and threatened to kill herself. What was worse, she called up many church members, threatening that she would tear down the roof of this house church. Many people were scared. She would curse me for hours, non-stop. It was horrifying to watch her getting so angry. The reason I broke up with that older Christian brother was that we did not have much in common to talk about. He was mild but too silent. After that, I stayed single and never dated anyone. Two years later, when my parents worried about me getting older and still unmarried, they agreed with me dating that older man, but it was already over.

“THERE IS STILL A DEEP SHAME IN ME  
ABOUT MY SINGLENESS”

The main problem with my mother's personality was anger. When my father did not allow her to get her way, she would jump up in rage. I think she also realized the problem, but she had no way out. She had two suicide attempts, both triggered by other people's words about her. One time it was triggered by me during the Chinese New Year festival. She burned incense to commemorate my grandparents. I just commented, “What



pollution, this incense!” Then I also added that this was idol worship and not pleasing to God. My mother burst into rage and cursed me. I left her home and returned to my own apartment. At night, my father called and asked me to come back. He said that my mother was drunk. When I went to their home, my mother did not open the door for me. So, I called my aunts to help. In fact, none of my aunts wanted to have anything to do with her in such situations.

We both tended to use the worst words toward each other during a fight. Very recently, we had an argument. She called me “an unmarriageable spinster.” I retaliated by calling her “an elderly woman.” But when that rage was over, two days later, I bought her some gifts and apologized.

The tension between me and my mother is not only a matter of different generations. A second layer of it is between cultures, because I had lived overseas. Then lastly there is also an additional layer of Christian versus non-Christian beliefs.

She knew which button would hurt me, so she would push that button. I know I always felt offended by her because there is still a deep shame in me about my singleness. Not being able to marry brought great shame to my parents, especially when they were with relatives. During our big family reunion, my mother watched how her siblings were holding their grandchildren. She was the oldest among them, but other five sisters all had grandchildren. Even my youngest cousin was married. I sometimes felt guilty about this too. In her eyes, I am living a hard life. Once my mother said, “Why do you still believe in that God of yours? Your life is so hard. You pray to Him, but you get nothing. Why do you still believe?” I asked her back, “Don’t you think that you are the one who is living a hard and bitter life?” In my eyes, there are a lot of unhealthy, abnormal things in their marriage. So, I began to challenge her about her own marriage problems. We gave each other “tit for tat” in our conversation. We accuse each other of being bitter. We are not used to seeing each other’s ways. We feel pity toward each other.

Over time, I have learned to live with my singleness. It’s getting better. Now I see things more clearly—marriage is not necessarily easy. According to my personality, I would prefer to be left alone. Of course, I do feel lonely and desire a marriage that pleases God. But at this stage, when I have not met someone suitable, I consider singleness a good thing.

When my mother’s mood is calmer, we can get along and talk very well. She now sees that I am living a very peaceful life. Before, she used to find me crying in secret because of some emotional trauma, but now I have

recovered. Compared to the roller coaster rides during my several relationships, loneliness seems fine.

Two years ago, I changed to another church. I could no longer bear with the pastor and his wife in my earlier church. Many things about that church were less desirable. Leaders had no ethical boundaries. For example, if you want to talk with the pastor's wife about something, you need to make an appointment with her and pay for her hours. She said that she had formal trainings for being a counselor, so the service comes with fees. Once I received research funding from my university and mentioned this to her during a consultation. She immediately asked me to purchase a laptop for her counseling organization. She went on and on about how financially needy a house church can be. I was convinced and made the purchase. She later did the same with a few other church members. When you confronted her or her husband, they began to talk ambiguously until it made you feel guilty about having confronted them. In a way, my parents' negative impression of them had some legitimacy.

After I changed to a smaller church, I became much happier. But our church leader often says that God uses families to bless people, so marriage is always the correct goal in life. The two house churches I have attended both had so many single sisters, yet the church cultures marginalize this group. I hope that my current church leader can see from my example that marriage is not the only way. I am now coordinating activities for this singles' group. Many sisters see from my example that a single Christian woman can also glorify God with her joy and trust.

“THE FREEDOM I NOW HAVE IS A RESULT  
FROM MY OWN NEGOTIATION”

Most of my friends now are house church Christians. In the university, the political atmosphere has turned more and more depressing and hostile. But overall, if you do not touch the Party's bottom line, you can still keep your post. Sometimes I also wonder, should I serve God in this environment? But working in public universities is better than being a white-collar worker. The freedom I now have is a result of my own negotiation with my department. For example, when there is a central policy passed down, even when it is during our legal time off, the department would ask us to go back for meetings. I insisted on not attending. We play a tug of war for a while, and then the department head gave up. So, I tried hard to keep my boundaries.

I also know that I will not have administrative opportunities to become a chair or a dean. That would be impossible, because they know that I am a Christian. I do not want to ask for these positions, and there is no such channel either. Each of us faculty with overseas degrees has a main contact person. Mine is our vice dean. He regularly checks on me, asking about my thought, updates, complaints, or difficulties. He is like a political counselor (*fudaoyuan*) to college students. As a way to dispel the awkwardness of this kind of work, he would also explain that he is just doing his job. He needs to take notes and submit them to his superior. When I get impatient with his questions, he asks for my pardon. Nobody likes that kind of job, spying and reporting on your colleagues.

Internet censorship has been a hurdle to scholarly research in China. I have always used a virtual private network (VPN) called Blue Light.<sup>4</sup> Very few of my colleagues know about this device. But I introduced it to them during our meetings. They appreciated the tip, which is a public secret. I even talk about using VPN in small meetings and large meetings. If you need to do academic research and do Google scholar searches, then you need it. It's only 200 *yuan* a year, so quite affordable. This VPN automatically upgrades. Like during the Two Councils (*lianghui*), it cannot be accessed.<sup>5</sup> But then later it upgrades.

Leaders of my department mainly warned me not to evangelize, either among students or colleagues. Some students know that I am a Christian. If they add my WeChat, and see my posts, they would know. I'm sure most of my graduate students know. Now the new directive warns me not to even mention which church I attend. No intentional mentioning of your Christian identity in any occasions is permitted, even when asked.

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In China, many children are raised by grandparents as their own parents continue working full-time.<sup>6</sup> In Huang's childhood, her parents even worked and lived in different cities. Separation of married couples due to work requirements was considered a common and necessary lifestyle before the state-owned *danwei* system disintegrated in the 1990s. Huang's early socialization at her grandmother's home later became a source of alienation in her relationship with her mother.

Huang's mother embodied a soul traumatized by China's past political movements, particularly the Cultural Revolution. Her constant venting of negative emotions reveals the many emotional scars that failed to heal by

themselves. Research also confirms that people whose lives were affected by the Cultural Revolution tend to exhibit symptoms typical of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as intense anxiety, depression, emotional eruption, and avoidance behaviors.<sup>7</sup> Dorothee Soelle describes social avoidance as a form of “mute suffering” that can “reduce one to a silence in which no discourse is possible any longer, in which a person ceases reacting as a human agent,” and that those who “vegetate in such conditions cannot be reached by others.” The only way to express oneself is by “numb brooding or sudden explosion.”<sup>8</sup> Although Huang’s family stayed together and did not suffer physical harm, such emotional suffering changed the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship. In a country where even collective memories of political traumas are censored, there are no trauma-healing institutions or rituals to help family members. No language from beyond oneself is provided nor is there a learning process that could rescue one from this type of strain.

The overseas experiences of Huang’s father and later her own opened up opportunities for them to seek a different lifestyle. Huang’s conversion in America and her later disillusionment about house church spirituality form a contrast. She seems to allow that her parents’ distrust toward people and caution about being taken advantage of had legitimate reasons. Although the Christian faith helped Huang face life’s challenges, it has not opened up the hearts of her parents for healing.

Huang’s experience as a Christian returnee with an overseas degree also shows how churches in China are unable to spiritually nurture these highly educated new believers. Seeing less than ideal witnesses within churches, returnees tend to shift from one church group to another. Even in her new church, Huang was disappointed to find out that the church never encouraged women to dream in terms other than being wife and mother. The pressure to marry becomes intense for most women in their late twenties and thirties. Church leaders fail to reflect on whether marriage is spiritually necessary, especially for women. They might teach strongly about what a biblical marriage means, but there is lack of a theological understanding of the legitimate role of singlehood.

In Huang’s walk with God, the fear of lifelong singleness has been a constant challenge. She feels that the group of single believers is being marginalized in the church. What’s worse, Chinese culture also sees singleness as unnatural and against human nature. This compounds with the church’s “marriage-minded atmosphere” in creating more intense pressure on believers who stay single.<sup>9</sup> As Christina Hitchcock observes,

“marriage presents both an appealing lifestyle and a powerful picture of who God is and what he is doing, while singleness does neither. ... this kind of thinking is not only a recipe for disappointment; it often leads to spiritual crisis.”<sup>10</sup> Even in this discouraging spiritual environment, Huang became a pioneering leadership figure in ministering to other single females.

## NOTES

1. Since 1949, Voice of America was considered as “the enemy’s radio station” (*ditai*) in China. People who listened to it may face risks of persecution.
2. Since the late 1990s, learning English and studying abroad became a popular trend among college students in China. Responding to this need, the market for the study of English saw a “New Oriental phenomenon.” Studying at this education institute became the first step to owning the language of success: English. New Oriental Education and Technology Group Inc. became the first private enterprise in China’s education industry to list on the New York Stock Exchange.
3. On college campuses, organizations that reached out to Chinese students include InterVarsity, Campus Crusade for Christ, and The Navigators.
4. Netizens in China use virtual private networks (VPNs) to evade the “Great Firewall” of censorship. In recent years, the Chinese government issued bans on VPNs. So from time to time, netizens need to update their knowledge about which VPN is still working.
5. This term refers to the annual plenary sessions of the national People’s Congress and the national committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. They usually take place in March.
6. Kelly Yang, “In China, It’s the Grandparents Who ‘Lean In,’” *The Atlantic*, September 30, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/09/in-china-its-the-grandparents-who-lean-in/280097/>
7. Helen Gao, “A Scar on the Chinese Soul,” *New York Times*, January 18, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/opinion/a-scar-on-the-chinese-soul.html>
8. Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. by Everett R. Klain (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 68–70.
9. Christina S. Hitchcock, *The Significance of Singleness: A Theological Vision for the Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 7.
10. Ibid.



## Looming Tragedy

### “MY SELF-ESTEEM WAS BOOSTED EVER SINCE”

When I was in elementary school, my teachers did not like me much. I was thin and small, and my grades were ordinary. Teachers favored the good-looking and the overachieving students. But in third grade, one day I was late for class. When I arrived, two teachers were in the classroom, holding an envelope. They looked at me nervously, and I felt very anxious: “Did I do something wrong?” It turned out that they just received a letter to me from a newspaper. They have never dealt with such a matter. I was just a kid. Why would the press write me a letter? So they opened it and learned that this newspaper had invited me to be a student reporter. I went home and told my mother about it. Then I discovered that it was mother who turned in my writing to this newspaper. Since then, for many days, my teachers used me as an example for the whole class to do well in their writing. My self-esteem was boosted ever since. I abandoned my self-pity and low self-esteem. I began to shift my attention to more meaningful things.

Sometime later, I attended a wedding with my parents. Afterward, I walked home, passing a rural household. There were a few girls of my age playing on the roadside. My presence caught their attention, and one came up to make trouble for me. We got in a little tug of war. Then my mother showed up. An older boy accused me of having hit his sister, which

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*Narration by Zhou (age thirty three, lawyer)*

was not true. I was humiliated and angry at his lie. My mother said nothing. She just led me away by the hand. She apparently trusted me, because she never blamed me for it. Since then, I began to doubt the innocence of children. Later when told that even children are sinful, I totally agree with that.

In sixth grade, in order for me to get into a better middle school, my mother changed my *hukou*.<sup>1</sup> With that, I was transferred to a township elementary school. In the first semester, I did really well and ranked No. 3 in my class. Praises came from teachers and parents. My pride began to swell. In the next semester, I paid less attention in class and did little homework. Then, I scored poorly on the final exam and failed the score line for key middle schools. My mother did not blame me much, but I felt shame in front of my classmates and teachers. One day, I was informed that I did get accepted into a key school. Because the school which received me decided to close down, its new students all got into a nearby key school. That was pure luck! Many years later, whenever I looked back on this free gift, there was a sense of being favored by fate. No matter how bad the circumstance, the memory of this incident always brought me warmth and strength. It encouraged me not to give up hope easily. After my conversion, I realized that it was God's providence and loving care for me.

“I CRIED IN FRONT OF MY MOTHER AND BEGGED  
HER NOT TO ABANDON ME”

In junior middle school, after entering into a boarding school, I came home every two weeks or every month. In my second year, something felt weird among my relatives. My father would often call me up, asking whether mother had called or not. I said no. Later my aunt (on mother's side) suddenly showed up to see me at school, asking if I have seen mother or not lately. I replied no. When I asked what happened, she said nothing. I felt strange, but then she took me out to buy some clothes. I was happy enough to not to dwell on the uneasy thoughts. Today I can still remember her pitying look toward me when I was trying on new clothes. When I returned home on the weekends, I saw little of my mother. At first, my father and relatives lied to me, saying that she was away. After she was arrested, I returned to live with my aunt on the weekends. I forced myself to be strong. But for a time, I felt like a child with no home.

Then one day, a colleague in my father's work unit, who was a chatterbox, came to my school. She asked me, "Do you know that something has happened to your mom?" I asked her what it was. She replied that my mother was arrested by the police for practicing *Falun Gong*. I was shocked. I had known that mother practiced *Falun Gong* for many years. I also remember seeing on TV one day in sixth grade that all channels were broadcasting that *Falun Gong* was a cult. Later some people came to our home to do some investigation into mother's speech and actions. But why would she be arrested now? Does this mean that my mother is now a criminal? This aunty told me that she would bring me to see my mother, and maybe I could turn her around. I was confused that she was the person to tell me this, and not any of my relatives. But I felt that I could not reject her request, because it felt gravely important, although I felt very scared and resistant inside.

So that was how I walked into a detention center at age thirteen in 1998. I saw rows of small housing units. I dared not peek inside. My mother was sitting on a long bench outside of the rooms. My father was sitting next to her. They were surrounded by police and people from my mother's work unit. Father was shocked to see me. It was obvious that he had intended to hide all these things from me. But since I was there, he said nothing. Then people around us began to ask me to persuade my mother. They said that as long as she would acknowledge her mistakes, and promise to never practice *Falun Gong* again, she would be released. Her work unit would also not fire her.

Later I found out that my mother had led many *Falun Gong* practitioners to Beijing by airplane. They planned to join the sitters who protested outside Zhongnanhai against the government's suppression of *Falun Gong*.<sup>2</sup> But their group was stopped by local police before they arrived at Zhongnanhai. Back then, the government's attitude toward them was: as long as they disassociate, no legal suits would be laid on them. So, I cried in front of my mother and begged her not to abandon me. At first she said nothing, and just held my hands.

Before that, I have never thought about one question: How important was I to my mother? To a child who felt happy about life, this was not a necessary question. But at that moment, when I was begging my mother and she did not reply, this question tortured my heart. I complained about her, about her abandoning me and my father. So, I cried even louder and begged even harder. After a long time, my mother finally spoke. She said perfunctorily that she was wrong and she would



quit. Nobody knew what her heart was like, but as long as she spoke those words, everybody felt safe.

To my mother, *Falun Gong* was her religion. Otherwise, she would have said something to appease others. But she wouldn't, because she considered it life and death. But after my prolonged begging and crying, she struggled to choose me. Later it turned out that her choice was just temporary. She spoke to me after her release: "This time, I did this for you."

Recently, insomnia became the new manifestation of this fear for me. But it made me think back on myself. I have always feared tragedy. I have not faced the trauma of my mother's tragedy until now. Before I was fully healed from this trauma, I always denied that it had any influence on me. Lately I thought more about it. That experience did shape me in significant ways, because it made me feel insecure whatever circumstance I was in.

For example, a memory came to me recently. We lived in the compound of a hospital staff community. Some doctors and nurses had the habit of lining up at the entrance, chatting. Every day when I returned home from school, I had to pass through that crowd. They gawked at me, pointing fingers and murmuring words, as if I was a zoo animal. I could imagine them saying, "Look at her, what a tragedy!" Since then, I became afraid of being in the spotlight in a crowd. I was very scared of being different from others. The last thing I wanted was to have anyone's attention on me. I cared a lot about how people looked at me. This also became a motivation for me to achieve well academically.

I also became scared of becoming a tragic figure. That has been a core fear in me. My mother and my whole family had become tragic in the eyes of neighbors and co-workers. Later this fear of live and looming tragedy led to my anxiety over petty illnesses, accidents or unexpected happenings. Even when something good happened to me, I tended to reserve that looming catastrophe mentality for myself. I used to think to myself: maybe I will never date; even if I date, I would never marry; even if I marry someone, we might never have children...

### "I TRIED MY BEST EVADING HER AND EVERYTHING ABOUT HER"

I went back to school, hoping to hear no more news from home, because it might be bad news. My father also discouraged me from going back home during summer break. He asked me to live at my aunt's. A few

months later, one day, I found out that my mother had disappeared completely. Father did not want to tell me anything more. Nor did my relatives. It was much later when I learned that my mother had been sentenced for the crime of incitement to subvert the state political power. Prior to that, she had even joined many local and regional protests.

During this whole time, I was very afraid of facing her. She was no longer the mother with whom I was familiar. Her words and actions exceeded my understanding. She never talked with me about why she made those choices, but my life has been impacted by them. Father sighed every day. He had more gray hair. People looked at me with strange looks. My life's trajectory was completely changed. We even moved home. It felt really strange living in a newly purchased apartment. From then on until college, I tried my best evading her and everything about her. I became very resistant toward the problem of religious faith. And I greatly feared the Communist Party. I cared more about how people looked at me. So, I studied harder and tried to do my best in all things, because that would give me security. I had no period of adolescent rebellion. I became a role model for other parents to teach their children about. The things about my mother brought only sadness to my life. Although my father gained respect from people because of me, I was not happy.

As I used to tell my mother, all that I remembered about her was about how she beat me up. When I didn't eat well, failed to score high, or when I caused her to lose face, she beat me. She beat me with knitting needles, hands, branches. I was beaten, kneeling, facing down, standing. But all the things that led to her beating me, I recalled later and realized that those were related to her love for me. Although I was beaten often, I never hated her for that. My father seldom cared for me, so mother managed all the details about my life and study. She invested a lot in my education. She read my stories, read me fairy tales by Andersen and the Brothers Grimm. She subscribed to children's magazines for me. She paid for me to take calligraphy classes. She let me learn musical instruments. She brought me to the zoo regularly. In our small town, very few people had the same knowledge that she did. So, I got used to my mother's arranging everything for me. I depended on her and trusted her. She was good at implementing plans.

But mother also did things that were unsatisfactory, especially in interpersonal relationships. Sometimes I felt that she was very awkward and weird. Once, she left 200 yuan on the table and forgot about it. The door was left open, so the money was gone. I had not taken it. It was most likely

my neighbor who did. So my mother cried and cursed in the hallway. I was returning from school to overhear this, and I did not want my neighbors to see me. Another time when she asked a favor from her leader, she pulled him aside and bribed him with packs of cigarettes, in front of many people. Of course, the leader declined her bribe. So, before my mother's arrest, I had a strange mixture of emotions toward her. On the one hand, I felt that she loved me and I could depend on her. On the other hand, her behaviors sometimes really embarrassed me. There was a tension between these two kinds of emotions.

After my mother's arrest, the love that I felt she had toward me evaporated. What was left was embarrassment. She became the last person I wanted to face. She became the strangest person to me, but she still cared for me persistently. While she was in prison, mother wrote to my teacher and asked about me. My teacher considered her a great mother. But I was embarrassed to know that she revealed a lot about our family situation to my teacher without my consent. Mother also wrote to me. She said she was sorry. The letter ended with some moral stories that read like Buddhist teachings: a person's actions reveal his or her heart. I felt repulsed, because what she did was not out of true love. Otherwise, she would not have left me. I never thought of visiting her in prison because I feared facing her. However, a relative coaxed me into visiting her. She appeared very excited to see me, but I was at a loss. I hoped to leave as soon as possible. Of course, none of these emotions showed on my face; I never mentioned these thoughts to her.

When I was in senior high school, mother received an early release from prison. By then she had already divorced my father. I lived in a school dormitory, so she often visited me. She spent more time with me. A sense of love was slowly coming back. Until the time when I got married, however, our relationship was still strained, at least from my perspective.

“CHRISTIANITY MAY NOT BE A BAD TUMOR AFTER ALL,  
BECAUSE IT CAN EXIST IN SUCH A BEAUTIFUL PERSON”

My father's side of our extended family are Catholics. My paternal grandmother especially is a very devout Catholic believer. But when it came to my father's generation, although he and his siblings were once baptized, they have lost the core of the faith. It became icons that were pasted up in the living room. They prayed to these icons for visible blessings just as people do to Buddha. They had little concept about sin and grace.

I was the oldest among the grandchildren. My paternal grandmother especially stressed “religious education,” so I was taught to recite some prayers. I also often followed her to mass. I was never baptized. It was not until after my conversion that I reflected on this experience and found out what those prayers meant to me. Praying to Jesus, the Holy Mother or God and reading scriptures were only a way for me to please the grown-ups. Later, because of my mother’s experiences, I strongly resisted any religious faith.

My maternal grandmother’s life has been full of tragedies. Her first daughter died in a car accident soon after she had a child. The father of that child was irresponsible, so the infant almost ended up in an orphanage before my grandmother took him in. In order to raise this child, Grandmother had to relocate to a different city and to take up a cleaning job. Later, the boy’s father also died. Then her second daughter, my mother, was arrested for practicing *Falun Gong*.

My mother is, in fact, well-educated. She had the opportunity for education because that year in 1977 the national college entrance exam resumed. Her family’s political status as “poor peasants” caused no problems.

After my mother was released from prison, she wanted to support my grandmother. They had a year of peaceful time together, but my grandmother later died of cancer. At her passing, my mother was heartbroken and regretful.

Becoming a Christian in college was a turning point in my life. When I was in second year of college, one early morning, I was reading on campus. Two women approached me. They did not look like bad people. One of them introduced herself as a graduate from Southwest University of Politics and Law. She was a major in legal English, and now worked as a full-time translator. The other woman was Malaysian, and she spoke only English. She wanted to make friends with Chinese people and help those who wanted to learn English. That morning, I was reading something in English, so I was glad to practice with them.

In the beginning, we chatted about Chinese culture. But later in this conversation, they changed the topic and asked me if I had read the Bible. My nerves got tight instantly, thinking that this was apparently no free lunch—they were peddling Christianity to me. But because we had a really good conversation a while ago, it was hard for me to quit. So, I braced myself to listen to what they had to say about the Christian gospel. Suddenly, I felt pain in my stomach. I thought to myself, “Now I have the best excuse to leave.” To my surprise, they said that they wanted to pray for me. I closed my eyes, thinking “Could there really be a God? Could it

be that this prayer can heal my stomach?” It just happened that the sickness in my stomach went away after this prayer. But I still quenched the fire inside me on the spot. Later when they invited me for a Christmas party, I went. But I was very stubborn and grew cold to them despite their frequent phone calls to show care for me. After a while, we lost touch.

The second time I was touched by the gospel was through a classmate in college. I considered her very brilliant. We had major classes together and chatted often. She struck me as a very normal, rational, sentimental and promising person. But then she told me that she believed in God and that her parents were believers too. This made me think that Christianity may not be a bad tumor after all, because it can exist in such a beautiful person. So, she began to explain to me what the gospel is. She shared her experiences. I was open to that, and I listened carefully. Once I said to her, “I think someday I would become a Christian, but now I am not ready for this.” That happened at the end of my third year in college.

I volunteered with this friend in an event promoting a Christian magazine. In fact, that was a poorly organized event. The way people from the host organization treated volunteers was really disappointing to me. Still, I met two friends during this time. One of them invited me to a baseball group on Saturday mornings. In the afternoons, I followed her to a Bible study fellowship. I stayed in this fellowship until my baptism.

In the beginning of my spiritual journey, I was more attracted by the beauty presented in the Bible and the gospel. Ever since I was young, I never cared about the communist beliefs. I think very few people in our generation treated it as truth. But the power and domination of the government had become so rooted in my heart that I took it for granted that any anti-government attitude is dangerous. Before I became a Christian, I regarded what happened to my mother and my family as merely the faults of my mother, just as it was written in the verdict. I had never entertained the thought that my mother might have been wronged. But deep inside, I considered it a great injustice. The whole society is full of injustice. So, the justice and beauty of God had great appeal to my heart. I also immediately accepted the sinfulness of humanity, because I know about the filth inside my own heart. But the grace of Jesus can even be for me. From a rational point of view, the meaning of the existence of God and His goodness combined with the good testimony brought by Christians around me, these became motivating reasons for me to believe in God.

“SHE THOUGHT OUR CHRISTIAN WEDDING  
WAS TOO STRANGE”

When I was young, my mother used to complain to me a lot about my father. They often had arguments and fights. When I was a teenager, I even told my mother that seeing the example of their marriage, I would never get married myself. She later told me that my words broke her heart.

As the only child, I was expected to follow the trajectory my mother arranged for me. She thought her plans were superior. But after years of independent living, I was convinced that the matter of a religious faith was my personal choice. I worried little about objections from my parents, but I did tell Mother about my decision. Her initial response was: it is good to have a religious faith. Her reaction was both expected and unexpected. Her favorable tone did not last. Later I had many deep conversations with her about faith, and we argued a lot.

My mother changed a lot after her release from prison. I knew that she still practiced *Falun Gong*, because once she asked my husband to help repair her computer. On it, we saw teaching materials of that sort. When we had the chance to talk with her about religious faith, she actually has a big theory about it, including some metaphysical and scientific elements. Hers was not a folk religion, because she really thought a lot about life. She was looking for some ultimate truths. To me, her beliefs were a mixture of many things. She was quite reflective. She even regretted that her noncompromising attitude about *Falun Gong* in the beginning was quite foolish.

What she regretted most was that it had cost her almost everything, including marriage, family and work. But she still hated my father, because he did not wait for her. She felt that my father abandoned her. She hated him for many, many years. Mother's second marriage was with an uneducated man, but he treated her very well. Mother's other relationships were strained too. My third aunt did not like my mother because her mother-in-law joined *Falun Gong* through my mother's influence. But when my mother got out of prison, this aunt still cared for her.

Later, I joined a small college student fellowship led by a Korean missionary. There were definitely some language barriers. As new believers, we were asked to serve right away. But over time, the more we served, the more lethargic we became toward church ministry. I was in a place of contradictions: I should not feel this exhausted, if I was willing to serve God. My boyfriend felt the same too. Then we realized that the church was not

pastoring us well. We began to look for other churches. We thought that we needed to be nurtured first before committing to serve the church.

When I began to date, mother objected to that too. Her reasons were simple: my boyfriend had no car and no apartment. I regarded her complaints as too vulgar, but she continued to object. She even said in front of my boyfriend that we two were not right for each other. We never listened to her objection, but visiting her became a most tortuous thing for us.

When we were planning our wedding, I had another huge argument with my mother. She thought our Christian wedding was too strange. For example, a sister at church lovingly designed the invitation cards for us. But my mother loathed them, because the colors were yellow, white and black. She said those were for funerals and demanded they be changed. But our time was running out for that. Her harsh words hurt me deeply. I cried out loud in front of her, asking her when she would be satisfied.

For a time, I did not want to see her. I did not pick up her phone calls. Yet she persisted in participating in my life. She gave me gifts and asked me about my work. I was still impatient with her. However, one time, my words were too sharp, and she was hurt. She did not contact me after a long time. When I called her up, she poured out her complaints against me. She blamed me for speaking with cruelty while claiming to be a Christian. I gave her an earnest apology. After that, I was greatly pained by how my words had harmed her. I was very disappointed with myself. So, we lost touch again for a long time. Then she called again with words to comfort me.

One day, I was struck by an intense realization that she loves me, and her love for me was warm. Although she acted assertively and clumsily, she did truly love me. Motherly love can be taken for granted, and not everyone experiences and appreciates it. Before I knew only on a rational level that she loves me. But emotionally, I was resistant to such love. I did not want to acknowledge her love; instead I wanted to run away from it. That day, all of a sudden, I felt that kind of love that transcended the barriers between us in the past years. I imagined her state of mind whenever taking a trip to visit me. Maybe she rehearsed on the bus how to talk with me. Maybe she stopped to buy some of my favorite fruit on her way. Her love became visible scenes, like a movie before my eyes. Watching it made me realize the sincerity and preciousness of this mother's love. I realized it at last.

Although her behaviors still hurt me, these became mere scratches to the skin. They healed automatically without treatment. Later when I became a mother, I began to appreciate her more. I recalled hearing her

say, “You are still young, but later you will understand.” At the time I was stubborn and insistent on my fuller understanding, but later I found her to be right: I was indeed too young. Immature faith made me full of pride, looking down on her perspectives. Later I realized that faith is not something that is devoid of common sense. Her wisdom in life also had God’s common grace in it. So, I began to humbly accept her suggestions in life. Now we finally arrived at a mutual acceptance. Even when we made contrary decisions, she could still accept mine. She trusts me more, and I have more acceptance and tolerance toward her too. Without my Christian belief, I would not have mended the strained relationship with my mother.

“I WAS AT LOSS ABOUT HOW TO BALANCE MY FAITH  
AND WORK”

Two years after I became a Christian, my fiancé and I decided to switch to another church. The new church was stronger in theology. Intellectually, I felt satisfied by the teachings. But I soon found out that women were not allowed to lead as elders and deacons. These were considered “holy offices.” If some women wanted to actively serve, they were given the title of “associate deaconess.” The pastor even emphasized that this is only a service role, not a “holy office.”

For a long time, I have been bothered by some of these teachings. The church encouraged professional women to be witnesses in their workplace. But such witnesses were strictly “evangelism” or not crossing ethical boundaries. It was not about demonstrating more expertise in what you do, or to pursue excellence in your job. Most my colleagues in the law firm were not Christians. I found it hard to mingle with them without being too intentional about my faith. So, I had a very passive attitude toward my work.

Women in China pushed household chores, including child-rearing, to the older generation. Christian women were taught not to do that. The church teaches that you should raise your own children; otherwise you are not devout enough. I was told that I would regret the loss of not walking alongside of my own children.

In my work as a lawyer, there were also lots of situations where the temptation to lie was present. Once the Beijing-based headquarters of our law firm served a business in Hangzhou. The client insisted on using lawyers from Beijing. But the headquarters sent us three lawyers in the Chengdu office to meet with the client. Our boss intentionally reminded



us to appear as a group from Beijing. Our team leader who happened to be a Christian did not lie. She said that we were from the law firm's Chengdu office. The client got dissatisfied at our boss, and then our boss got mad at us.

While I was at loss about how to balance my faith and work, I found myself to be pregnant. Then our law firm moved to a newly renovated office building. I could smell the scent of formaldehyde in that place. So, I told my boss that I had to think of my unborn baby first, so I could no longer work in that office building. I asked his permission to working from home. He agreed. My business trips were short and local too. This continued after I was done with my maternity leave a year later.

After I became a mother myself, I began to understand the anxiety and the will to control which I used to observe in my mother. Since then, although my mother sometimes still upsets me, I no longer feel hurt emotionally. I had more empathy toward her. The biggest difference between our generation and my mother's is that we grew up in an information age, and we had many more choices since our youth than they did. We are more malleable, but we are also more selfish. Without siblings, our generation is more selfish than theirs.

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Since the early 1990s, Chinese society saw a wave of spiritual revival, including many folk religion and various forms of *qigong* (life-energy martial arts).<sup>3</sup> Among these religious practices, *Falun Gong* gained a large following across China.<sup>4</sup> The government's systemic crackdown on this quasi-religious group affected many Chinese families.<sup>5</sup> The regime's fluctuating policies restricting religion became eruptive social structures that determine many people's life trajectories.

In the sudden storm of her mother's arrest due to the government crackdown on *Falun Gong*, Zhou's family disintegrated. Her teenage years lapsed without a mother's presence. Compelled by circumstances and her stubborn loyalty to the religious group, Zhou's mother was not emotionally available for her. This shaped her mental capacity for pessimism, expecting more looming tragedies around her. She excelled in academic studies but lost a sense of grounding and direction in life. Most important of all, Zhou doubted her mother's love for her, despite early childhood memories of her attention and care.

Zhou had multiple exposures to the Christian message before she came to the faith. She describes this journey as God's providence. As a young adult, Zhou's desires for emotional intimacy were soon fulfilled by reliable friendships from Christian believers and later her Christian boyfriend. The beauty and justice of the Christian message also appealed to her. It was liberating for Zhou that her conversion enabled her to look back and name her mother's experiences as an injustice. The blame for her mother's absence was alleviated. New tensions in their relationship emerged when Zhou's mother objected to her choice of a marriage partner.

When the couple changed to a new church, which they considered as more theologically equipped, Zhou was confronted with a complementarian teaching that discouraged women from working as professionals.<sup>6</sup> This trend was in fact contrary to what the Chinese society generally believes. Becoming a new mother herself aggravated the tension between being present in her children's life and her work. She tried to find a middle way. Zhou's occasional anxiety and insomnia also compelled her to re-evaluate the costs of motherhood paid by her mother. The experience of young women's motherhood as a compassionate starting point for mother-daughter reconciliation is shared by many women in this volume.

## NOTES

1. See note 1 in Chap. 6.
2. *Falun Gong* is a Chinese religious practice originated in the early 1990s which combines meditation and *qigong* exercises with a universalist moral philosophy. (In traditional Chinese culture, *qigong* is a practice to balance "life energy" through a combination of martial arts, philosophy and Chinese medicine.) In July 1999, the Chinese government initiated a nationwide crackdown to eradicate Falun Gong practices.
3. David Palmer, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Utopia in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
4. David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
5. Xinhua News, "China Bans Falun Gong," *People's Daily*, July 22, 1999. <http://en.people.cn/special/fagong/1999072200A101.html> Dean Peerman, "China Syndrome: The Persecution of Falun Gong," *Christian Century*, August 10, 2004. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2004-08/china-syndrome>
6. About the theological trend of complementarianism, see Li Ma, *Religious Entrepreneurism in China's Urban House Churches: The Rise and Fall of Early Rain Reformed Presbyterian Church* (London: Routledge, 2019), 88–90.



## “Schizophrenia”

“I USED TO CONGRATULATE MYSELF FOR NOT BECOMING  
PERVERTED IN SUCH AN ENVIRONMENT”

I was born in 1985 and attended public schools in Shanghai. My elementary school class had a poor atmosphere. For example, male teachers attempted to take advantage of pretty female students; teachers verbally and physically abused students. Personalities, family backgrounds and appearances—these could all become reasons for kids being scoffed at. Teachers managed the class by appointing class cadres (*banganbu*) among students. And that led to framing, whistleblowing, fawning, among other things. I used to congratulate myself for not becoming perverted in such an environment. But now looking back, I realize that my tendency to enjoy teasing and bullying others is probably still related to this early experience of schooling.

Since I was young, I loved reading *A Dream in Red Mansions* and *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*.<sup>1</sup> As a result, my personality has many contradictions. On the one hand, I favored the logic of “winner-take-all” and longed for a kind of heroism. On the other hand, I was softened after reading the *Red Mansions* and became quite sentimental and even pessimistic. Later, in high school, I became fascinated with Stephen Hawking and

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*Narration by Zhang (age thirty four, foreign firm manager)*

decided to devote my life to scientific research. I did not want to be in a common career working for a regular paycheck. I should be doing something that is relevant to ultimate and eternal truth. So, I wanted to devote wholeheartedly to science. Now I am actually living the mundane and mediocre professional life that I despised in my youth (laugh...).

My parents liked to spend time conversing with me about politics over the family dinner table. Unlike other parents, they did not talk much about daily living. So this had shaped me, I think, into someone with high ideals, sometime who is talkative about current affairs, but in fact someone powerless in real life. My parents were zealous devotees of Mao. Their influence turned me into a Maoist believer too. I deeply absorbed the Red education at school so much so that I even stood up reverently at home whenever hearing the National Anthem being played on CCTV.<sup>2</sup>

In 1978, my father took the re-instituted National College Entrance Exam. With a college degree, he took a position with a state-owned airline enterprise. He later married my mother. In the late 1980s, he changed to work at a joint venture in Shanghai, then a foreign firm. His outlook toward state-owned firms, coming from his own experiences, is quite schizophrenic: knowing how bad the business climate is in China, and even swearing not to do business with state-owned firms, yet he believes in what the *Global Times* says, such as how American imperialism is plotting against China's economy.<sup>3</sup> Most of his college classmates who used to work in China's airline sector have left this line of work. A few who have managed to stay and get promoted in these state-owned airlines are high-ranking Party officials with mistresses around them. One of these "uncles" (the way I refer to my father's colleagues) later even became a sugar daddy for one of my female colleagues. Despite witnessing these instances of corruption, my father still thinks that China should overcome the Americans by closing the trade and producing her own computer chips and air planes.

At home, my parents taught me to love Mao and hate Deng. They were aware of the 1989 Tiananmen movement and talked much about it. They understood it as an anti-Deng incident by people who strongly yearned for the Mao era. They did not abandon the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from what happened in 1989, and still held to the belief that the Party was China's only salvation. They were repugnant of Deng's straying away from Mao's ideals. My father thought that people in China had lived a wonderful life during the Cultural Revolution when everyone got along with everyone else and there was a good social welfare system. My mother

had always lived in the city. So she knew better how violent the Cultural Revolution had been. For instance, a neighbor's child was thrown down-stairs and died. She knew that, but she still loved Mao. In our home and car, they put up Mao's iconic photos. They even wanted me to have one dangling in my car, saying that otherwise there would be an accident.

Ever since I converted from Maoism and after many quarrels with them, we now do not talk about political topics in the home. But they would occasionally hint at their belief in Mao through social media, which I could see. Whenever I think of this about my parents, my heart is filled with disgust and resentment.

“THE FREEDOM I EXPERIENCED OVERSEAS  
WAS STILL FRESH FOR ME”

In 2006, after graduating from college, I went to the United States to study for a master's degree. I was a “Little Pink” (*xiao fenhong*) back then,<sup>4</sup> just like almost all my classmates. Most of them study in Europe or the States now, but they love the CCP and China. Some even tweet messages about the Boxers' Rebellion [to show their anti-foreign views].<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, exposure to information on the other side of the world did not change me. I still objected to my Taiwanese friends calling Taiwan a nation. But what made me quit being a Little Pink happened after I returned to China. The main reason was that CCP propaganda had become unbearably low intelligence and self-contradictory that it was hard for me to believe any more. The freedom I experienced overseas was still fresh for me, so I guess I was half-enlightened.

When I was in the States, though I was still a Little Pink, I was not without sincere inward reflections. One such experience was going to church for the first time in my entire life. I attended an American church for two years, twice a week, uninterrupted for the purpose of learning about Western culture. I did not want to attend a Chinese church. Families in that American church treated my very nicely. A Taiwanese family gave me rides twice a week and often invited me for meals in their home. The church made me feel warm and I missed that affection after returning to China. But it was not the church experience itself that converted me. Inside, I was still convinced that I would never become a Christian. The spiritual atmosphere in that church, and the way they were so convicted about their future destiny in heaven, evoked in me some pity toward them, but not without a slight sense of admiration.

Another triggering experience was the fact that I took a course in law. Before that, I had little knowledge about law as an academic discipline. When I was learning about the First Amendment, I was deeply shocked. Another time, in class, a Chinese student presented research methods and used selective abortion practices in China as an example. He began to describe how women in China may freely choose to give birth or to abort the baby after conception. He then compared it to doing research, where you also make choices for optimal results. The professor immediately interrupted him and suggested he not use such inappropriate metaphors. Incidents like these removed much prejudice I had about the West from CCP propaganda.

So it is fair to say that my conversion had much to do with my rejection of CCP ideology. My parents have always been making this connection, and they increasingly charge me with being infiltrated by a Western sort of opium. I cannot deny the correlation of these two, but they did not automatically connect in me either. I read about the contribution of Christianity to world civilizations, which served as a detox from what our middle school history textbooks taught. I was also aware that love, freedom and equality are at odds with communist ideology.

“I REALIZED THAT THE CHRISTIAN FAITH WAS NOT  
SYNONYMOUS WITH LOW INTELLIGENCE”

After I came back to work in Shanghai, I missed church but could not access any local house church congregations. I was working in a state-owned firm, where a new colleague professed to be a Christian. I asked him for a referral and went to visit a house church. That experience was very disappointing. It was nothing like what I experienced in the United States—no nice food or family hosting, but only people who were aggressively trying to convert me. A leading female introduced me, saying about me that “she came to the Christian belief in the U.S. but has not told her parents yet.” I almost jumped up at this flat lie, because I did not consider myself a Christian believer. I said to myself, “How could I have believed in this sham of yours?”

She was very aggressive and even pressured me to do the “I accept Jesus” prayer. I felt repugnant, but I conformed. When they were praying, I secretly wanted it to end sooner. Then she asked me how I felt, and I lied to her. I mimicked the spiritual language that was used there. Maybe because that I did not fake it very well, she kept pressuring me. I kept

telling more lies, and swore to myself secretly that I would never to go back again. But as I drove away that day, my car was rear-ended. Then I interpreted as a consequence for telling lies at church. A thought suddenly struck me: "Could there really be a God?"

After that extremely disappointing experience with a local house church, a year passed and I got to know this colleague better. He left me with an impression unlike that of others. For example, my colleagues and I used to gossip behind people's backs, but he never participated in anything like that. I respected his character, but also saw him as someone of a different kind. But he was also unlike other Christians I have met before; he never tried to evangelize me. Neither did he ever pray before meals. Just because he was not like other aggressive Christians trying to convert me, I felt more at ease with him around. I asked him many questions about the faith. He was very articulate and thoughtful in his responses to me. For the first time in my life, I realized that the Christian faith was not synonymous with low intelligence.

Later, he recommended a book *Mere Christianity* to me. Reading it was the first time when I understood the meaning of the Christian faith. It made me wonder why, after as much time I had spent in church life, nobody ever explained the true gospel to me. Nobody told me that Jesus died on the cross to save sinners. I had always thought that Jesus' death was due to a strategic failure in politics. My colleague wrote something on the inside cover of this book to me: "Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and life.'" I was surprised by this, and touched by it too, knowing that he wrote it especially for me. But I also felt afraid, because this statement was too extraordinary.

I remember telling my mother about my amazement after I finished reading *Mere Christianity*. I said to her, "So this is what Christianity all about! I almost want to believe in it!" My mother had an expression of contempt on her face. I caught sight of that facial expression, then dropped the idea of conversion. At that time, I greatly trusted my mother's judgment. But my heart could find no peace, and I became very interested in the faith.

Later my colleague brought me to an evangelical meeting of his house church. The pastor did not preach a surprising and high-sounding message; it was about a prayer being answered. Pretty down-to-earth. Afterward, we were grouped into small numbers, and a few Christians surrounded me to share their answered prayers, hoping to convert me. My favorable impression of the faith almost faded before their too-eager testi-

monies, such as praying while waiting to buy some bread. She feared that the bread was sold out, but her prayer was answered. I saw them as somewhat naive and foolish, so I began to ask them a lot of questions, such as whether the forbidden fruit was an apple and whether God had something to contribute to sin. They were not able to answer clearly. One of them even said that it was an apple. I turned to the Bible and showed them that answer was wrong. So I despised them down in my heart since they appeared too superstitious to me.

Despite all these happenings, the sister who prayed to buy bread then turned and said to me, “Surrender your worries to God! Trust Him! He will lead you.” Strangely, my heart was softened by this. I did not know why, but I did pray. It was a moment when I was not willing, and decided not to believe that I believed. I could not make sense of what happened. But I knew that from that day on, my heart was filled with sweet honey. My whole person was in such a silly, joyful condition that even my colleague became worried about me. Others mocked me to quit my new faith, but I did not.

“SHE POURED A COLD BUCKET OF WATER RIGHT ON TOP  
OF MY NEW FIERY FAITH”

My relationship with my mother had been very close emotionally. We chatted a lot, and I accepted whatever she taught me. In college, I was always overjoyed to have my parents visit me. I attended a university in Hefei of Anhui Province, and they traveled a long distance from Shanghai to see me. Once I was eating lunch in my dorm when they visited. I dumped my lunchbox and joyfully hopped downstairs to see them. Even when I was studying abroad, we still chatted a lot through video chat. Sometimes I even shared my romantic encounters with her. Occasionally, I would tell her that I missed her, although verbal intimacy was not the norm in our family. Now things are very different. I have moved out and now feel very hesitant to make a trip to my parental home. Every time it consumes my emotional energy. I could not bear spending too much time with them.

My relationship with them plunged right after I became a Christian. When I was seeking the faith and when I first believed, I considered it the most joyful thing in my life. So I shared it with my mother. She poured a cold bucket of water right on top of my new fiery faith. She also voiced strong objections. Father, to my surprise, was the supportive one. Since



that, I no longer shared the steps in my spiritual journey with her. Even on the day of my baptism, I secretly organized my clothes and went out without my mother being aware of it. After that, I was zealous and earnestly studied God’s Word. I imagined myself transformed by the faith, such as having a greater integrity, living out a good witness at home, which would turn my parents around to follow Christ too. But things happened quite the contrary. I did not know why, but my relationship with my mother just got worse and worse, to the point that it was impossible for us to communicate with each other. We bickered about everything in life. When I first realized this, I thought bad of myself and wanted to repent. I believed that by trusting the Lord, everything would turn out good. Nevertheless, things still got much worse.

In my first year being a Christian, I took my mother on a trip to Israel with a Christian package tour. So our fellow travelers were self-acclaimed Christians, including a few pastors. I wanted this opportunity to make her feel more favorable about the faith. But as it turned out, we had drama along the road. Some “Christians” behaved terribly and one even fought and cursed a pastor with foul language. A few Christians learned that my mother was not a believer and tried too hard to convert her. Sadly, their messages were all crude and imprecise, like the typical content being circulated among uneducated Chinese Christians, such as Premier Wen Jiabao is a Christian. Or some of them told her that hell is filled with fire and worms. My mother was repulsed by them. Then later someone also told her, as I learned four year later, that if she does not believe, then our relationship as mother and daughter will not be genuine because we belong to two destinies.

I was very close with my maternal grandparents. They have been practitioners of Falun Gong.<sup>6</sup> I also practiced it for a while with them in elementary school. My Christian faith did not enter into much conflict with them even though there were things that showed my commitment to church, such as I would not date non-Christians, and I had to attend church on Sundays. My grandparents were very firm in their Falun Gong beliefs, and they tried to spread it to everybody in our extended family. So in the eyes of our relatives, I was just like them, another religious fanatic brainwashed by some belief system. Once I brought a Christian female friend to visit my grandparents, but before we were able to talk with them about the gospel, they preached Falun Gong to us first very zealously. No matter what I said, they would always smile and say, “Yours is good too. We are a family. But our master is the most

powerful.” Then they would always say that human nature is good so they do not need forgiveness of sin. In any case, their logic was very messy.

“EVEN THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION DID NOT HINDER  
HER LOVE FOR MAO”

My mother is the kind of woman who just likes to have an easy and comfortable life. She would obey whatever my father said. Since she did not have much education, and her life has centered around cooking and housekeeping, she followed my father’s influence in loving Mao. She has a soft nature, but because she always watched anti-Japanese TV shows, she sometimes uttered horrible things, such as curses against America or praise for the 911 bombing. She believes that Chinese young people are too passive because they had never gone to war, and if there had been a war that killed more people, things would not be like this—she simply had not the slightest idea what she was saying! When she watched news, she would say something like, “If more people like them get executed, then there won’t be any crime.” It was not until recent years that I realize how much hatred I grew up with and received in my formal education. I resented my parents for that.

My mother got along very well with other relatives. My parents are not like those who are greedy or who scheme behind people’s backs. That is a part of their good influence on me. Since I was young, they have placed these pursuits for justice and uprightness in my heart. But the prime manifestation of seeking fairness and justice came through their love for Mao. In their eyes, Mao was a protector of justice, which implies that being upright is to love Mao. And they treated other relatives and their own parents with kindness and responsibility, despite the fact that sometimes others did not treat us well. After my grandfather passed away, my three uncles (brothers of my father) fought for the inheritance. They lied, quarreled and competed for things. I was in high school back then, and I detested them. Because my parents did not fight for anything, they did not get much. An uncle on my mother’s side was not a responsible person either. His character was brought up whenever my mother accused me of abandoning them for the faith. And I felt repulsed by her saying this. I never thought of it as abandoning them, but I just felt that our family life was full of boredom, with lots of bragging, vain comparisons about wealth or possessions, and urging the young to get married.

I think my parents' generation lived a kind of schizophrenia. My mother was born in the early 1960s. She recalled that her dream was to "protect the borders of the motherland (*baowei bianjiang*).” Memories of singing “red” revolutionary songs and shouting “Long Live Chairman Mao” at the top of her lung bring back happiness. But she also witnessed violence upon violence during the Cultural Revolution. My grandmother lost in a political struggle and came back to hide her children in some place. But her neighbor who did not do the same thing saw her own child being thrown downstairs, dead. But even the Cultural Revolution did not hinder her love for Mao. Due to communist influence, she always desired to become a worker and gave up her teaching career, something she regrets now. Deep down she also longed for a well-to-do life.

“I WAS OVERWHELMED WITH A SENSE OF MEANINGLESSNESS”

In 1989, my parents were in Shanghai and saw student demonstrators; they also knew about the bloodshed. But these experiences did not make them think poorly of the CCP, as though the CCP had lost its morality; instead they saw it as Deng Xiaoping's personal failure. Until now, whenever there are news stories about police or national security hurting people, torture, private imprisonment or our chaotic jurisdiction system, my mother has not believed anything of this kind. She used to believe some of it, but now that I am staunchly against the CCP, she is more firmly resolved that the CCP is good, and the state is treating the people kindly. My parents' outlook on such things is fragmented and isolated.

After my overseas study, my parents secured a job for me at a state firm. My mother had hoped that I would work there for all of my life, because it was a so-called an “iron-bowl” job.<sup>7</sup> Although I was a little “red” at the time, I never believed in any “iron-bowl”. Later I was, so I secretly changed jobs. Three years in a state firm gave me no skills to present. Many people said that it was a good place to get married and have kids, because people there had great benefits package. My father's friends were in the leadership of the firm, and they wanted to put me near their offices. I declined the offer. They felt upset. Until now, my mother still complained about my career change, while I celebrated it. She said all jobs are mainly to obtain a comfortable and stable life; it has nothing to do with the meaning of life or ideals. But this is again the exact opposite of what they had tried to instill in me since my childhood about “having noble ideals.” I again complained about their split personalities and hypocrisy.

A supplier of my old firm, Honeywell, had an open position. I applied and got the job. I always counted it as God's gracious help to me, because I quit my first job on the second day after I became a Christian. In a foreign firm like Honeywell, however, there was the same office politics. But the people there are real talents. I felt challenged to live out my newfound faith. But at the same time, I was amazed at the high salaries and luxurious lifestyle most people are having. My heart felt compelled to follow the trend. I had planned to get another MBA, then promotion and so on. I also began to enjoy buying luxury commodities like my colleagues. The real change occurred after a period of crazy party time with them. Going to KTV, drinking, telling obscene jokes, and so on. Anyone who has not had rich sexual experiences was made fun of. One had the pressure to make up something in order to fit in. Women were all buying luxury bags. After I bought my first 9000-*yuan* bag,<sup>8</sup> I was overwhelmed with a sense of meaninglessness. I did not know what I was doing. I never even used that bag. Since then, my consumption habits switched back. I was pulled back from that kind of lifestyle.

In urban churches, we are often taught that our occupations ought to glorify God, and that we should not only be content with earning an income. Luther's concept of divine vocational calling, you know. But the modern urban economy has become such an enormous commercial machine. It is centered around efficiency, and highly impersonal. I sometimes doubt that if I am taking part in "pulling in the trains to Auschwitz," you know. Am I contributing to this high-tech Babel, with its big data and networks of logistics? They can be interesting sometimes, but I am fundamentally pessimistic about the whole picture. Its complicatedness and vastness make me feel meaningless.

Although my mother and I never discussed the faith directly, I could not get along with my mother any more. Any word or action would easily trigger a big argument. For me, I "sincerely" began to loathe my own mother. Although I knew it was wrong, I could not help it. The mere thought of spending time with my parents gave me physical discomfort. I also blamed my own character defects and my wasted years on them, because I had been so influenced by them... to decidedly love the Party and to love China. Whenever they were watching their standard fare—CCTV and some idiotic anti-Japanese drama on [state-controlled] TV—I found myself having muscle cramps on my face. I was so disgusted that I could not sit there and watch with them.

So, I decided to move out and rent my own apartment. It was also because I needed a place to live closer to work. Although they consented to my decision, my mother later acted hysterical about it. During one fight, she wailed at me, asking if I had decided to disown them. Whenever I heard this Xianglinsao-style wailing,<sup>9</sup> I had no pity or love for her in my heart, but only disgust. During the first two years after my conversion, we argued often.

"SHE BLAMED MY FAITH FOR MAKING ME UNMARRIAGEABLE"

Another potential cause for the friction was probably also the fact that I have not been able to marry. My mother blamed me for not taking this matter seriously. Or she blamed my faith for making me unmarriageable. "All you think is about Christianity, not getting married," as she always scolded me. She could not understand why I resolved not to marry non-Christians. She even sent me messages saying that Christians actually are allowed to marry unbelievers. In any case, any conversation with her on this topic will light up a forest fire. Even if my facial expression was not as pleasant as she expected, which in most cases was not even related to her, she would be so sensitive as to think that I was unhappy with her. Then words from the revolutionary lexicon would jump out of her mouth, something like "Are you treating me as class enemies?" It angered me more when hearing "class enemies," because it was she, being stupid herself, who taught me to be stupid for so many years, and even now still uses such disgusting and internalized political language in her life! I thought she was hopeless! So I got more and more angry with her. Since then, my mother constantly accused me of disowning them after becoming a Christian. Or she would poke at my weak spots by saying "see now you don't even have friends except those of your kind!"

But there was a turning point: I took my mother to our church meetings. Once I had other errands and was not able to stay till the end of a service. I left early also wishing my mother would stay there and experience it for herself. She talked with my Christian friends about the trip to Israel and what those "Christians" told her about our doomed mother-daughter relationship. Our pastor corrected this by saying that whether or not a mother becomes a believer, the daughter should always love and respect her, because the Bible never taught us to disown our parents. So that turned things around a bit.

Since then, our attitudes toward each other have become more polite and careful. But I always found it intense emotional work to determine what to talk about and how to talk together. Every conversation took massive mental preparation, just like entering a battlefield. Afterward, there always needs to be some recovery time. And our time together had to be short enough not to leave room for bickering. Marriage remains a most sensitive spot; whenever that button is pressed, I always end in an angry mood.

I could sense that Mother still views the Christian faith unfavorably. She is retired, does not like books and is not an outdoor person either. So all she does is watch TV, and all that is broadcast on [state-controlled] TV now is “red” or “toxic” drama. Whenever she is watching TV, I do not sit beside her.

I know very well that inside her mind, my mother attributes my single-ness and my hate for the Communist Party to the Christian faith. She is highly sensitive to these two matters. Once I took her to a church camping activity. Suddenly she pointed at all of us and said, “You are all cult, because this church is underground. I know other Christians who go to Three-self churches, and they say that these are all cults. You should only attend churches that are approved by the government.” She even accused our pastor of being a lunatic, because the pastor asked a question in his sermon: if the police broke in at this moment, would you be willing to pay the cost? My mother thought of this teaching as crazy.

“THEN YOU WILL REALIZE THE EVIL AND ABSURDITY  
OF THIS WHOLE SYSTEM”

Compared to my mother’s generation, my own is more secular, or apolitical and unconcerned about affairs of the state. I am deeply influenced by my family, but my female peers are all easily satisfied with living a bourgeois life; they have little concern for things beyond food and fun.

As Christians, if we see reality only as fragmented pieces and issues, such as abortion, atheistic education, persecution, it would still be problematic. With each one of these issues, if one keeps on pursuing truth, it can no longer be examined as one isolated case or one singular social problem. Then you will realize the evil and absurdity of this whole system. Information closure almost since birth made us unthinking animals, parroted what has been taught us. Without freedom to dialogue and to live in communities, even Christians live without the awareness or competence to discern such systemic evil. The better informed ones among Christians

would at best voice complaints about Three-Self churches and family planning policies. Very few even knew about the plight of human rights lawyers. Reading and reflecting on how Christian ethics cover all areas of life have naturally nourished my mind to retreat from old conceptions taught by the Party.

But I also want to do my best to love my parents. For example, now I still accompany them for the annual tomb-sweeping. This year I informed mother of my decision of not bowing at the tomb. My father showed more understanding, but my mother replied antagonistically by saying, "This is Chinese culture, and you are a Chinese. Foreigners pray and Chinese bow. That is the way it is." My only response to her was, "Prayer is cosmic."

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Mothers are naturally endowed with authority to guide young children. But what they know about social reality has been conditioned by prevalent ideologies in their sphere. This makes many mothers born under Maoism, a totalitarian system, channels of propagating the official ideology.

This account about conflict of values and worldviews between two generations is common phenomenon in China. For a period of time, before Zhang became exposed to the outside world and an alternative lens to look at reality, her mother's teachings had lasting influence on her moral and political outlook. Both mother and daughter looked forward to a prosperous life in post-reform China. But what fractured the consistency of this ideological system was exactly rising materialism and the accompanying injustice in all society. The communist ideals of equality and justice, which appealed to an older generation living in artificial egalitarianism and scarcity, are losing allure to a younger generation, who are enjoying material abundance. Moreover, it also became disillusioning to observe prevalent social phenomena of injustice in today's China that go unchallenged by the deflating ideals of radical socialism. As Zhang wittily describes, her mother could not straighten her logic consistently to reconcile these realities.

Overseas exposure to different ethical structures often serves as a catalyst for rethinking these inconsistencies. Although Zhang's reaction, like many other Chinese students studying abroad, was to cling even tighter to her patriotic Chinese identity, it was still a sign of their psychological turbulence after such a cultural shock.<sup>10</sup> The reverse cultural shock after

returning to China worked out many inconsistencies too. But of all her encounters with Western culture, the experience of a genuine Christian faith community became a channel for awakening spiritual longing.

Although it took Zhang years to experience a meaningful conversion into the Christian faith, she nevertheless was able to put all these pieces together through heartfelt reflections. She was even able to analyze the Chinese reality afresh through this new faith and to detect the systemic evil behind fragmented social phenomena.

## NOTES

1. Two of China's Four Great Classical Novels.
2. CCTV stands for Central China Television, the Chinese regime's biggest media outlet.
3. *Global Times* is one of China's Party-state media that propagates anti-foreign sentiments.
4. Little Pink (*xiao fenhong*) refers to nationalistic young people in China who are easily offended by allusions to problems in China.  
 "The Rise of Little Pink: China's Angry Young Digital Warriors," *South China Morning Post*, May 26, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2095458/rise-little-pink-chinas-young-angry-digital-warriors>
5. "The East is Pink," *The Economist*, August 13, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/news/china/21704853-online-mobs-get-rowdier-they-also-get-label-east-pink>
6. It was a violent anti-foreign, anti-colonial and anti-Christian uprising in late Qing between 1899 and 1901.
7. It is a spiritual practice that combines meditation and *qigong* exercises with a moral philosophy centered on the acclaimed tenets of truthfulness, compassion, and forbearance. Around 1998, the Chinese government launched a national crackdown on its members.
7. missing footnote?
8. Roughly 1200 dollars.
9. Xianglinsao means the wife of Xianglin, a fictional rural female figure in Lu Xun's novel *Blessings*. Have experienced many tragedies in life, including her son being eaten by a wolf, Xianglin always appears babbling and wailing about her son.
10. Henry Chiu Hail, "Patriotism Abroad: Overseas Chinese Students' Encounters with Criticisms of China," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 19 (4), January 12, 2015. Zhonglu Li, "Does Studying Abroad Make Chinese Students Less Patriotic?" *Sixth Tone*, May 4, 2018. <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1002214/does-studying-abroad-make-chinese-students-less-patriotic%3F>





## Estranged

“I GREW UP VERY COMPLIANT AND SENSITIVE  
TO OTHERS’ ATTITUDES AND EMOTIONS”

I was born in Xinjiang, a far western province of China. My maternal grandparents relocated there from Shanxi in the 1950s to support the socialist construction of the frontier. That was the second marriage for my grandmother. During the Civil War, her first husband went to Taiwan and never came back, so she raised three children on her own. Then she met her second husband and moved to Xinjiang, where my mother was born.

Because of the Cultural Revolution, Mother never had a good education. After finishing elementary school, my mother was sent down to the countryside. She seldom thought much about life. She had no values of her own and was part of these continued movements and campaigns. All she did was hard labor.

When I was two or three years old, my own (biological) father was killed during a personal dispute. I have little memory of it. I remembered mother being very melancholy, and people around us looking at me and treating me with great sympathy. Maybe it was because of this, but I grew up very compliant and sensitive to others’ attitudes and emotions.

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*(Narration by Yang, age thirty five, former auditor; stay-home mom)*

My mother had a colleague who cared for her and loved her. They remarried a year later, and he became my stepfather. In fact, I did not know that he was not my biological father until I was told in high school.

When I reached five years old, my parents returned to Shanghai, my stepfather's hometown. We left our circle of kin in Xinjiang. In Shanghai, we lived in a dilapidated and crowded shanty area.<sup>1</sup> There was not a lot of space. Mother was not content with it, but that was all my stepfather could afford.

My stepfather's personality also influenced me in significant ways. He was very strict. My surname was changed to follow his name, and he never treated me as if I was not his own daughter. Still, we were not close emotionally. Relatives in his family usually looked at me with strange looks on their faces.

I grew up in a home dominated by negative criticism from both parents. My mother then started a salesperson's job, commuting between Xinjiang and Shanghai. For many years, she left me with my father. When she did spend time with me, my mother most often spoke in a scolding tone.

My personality has always been hesitant and sentimental. I was afraid of people; I cared about what they expected of me. Deep inside, I tried really hard to please my parents and to live up to their standards. I longed for their affirmation.

In school, I tried to be a good student and worked hard. In high school, I fell in love with a classmate who became my husband ten years later. From the beginning, our relationship met with strong resistance from both sets of parents. We broke up and got back together many, many times.

When I entered college as a freshman, a few female Christians approached me and shared their faith. Immediately I accepted it as truth! I think God had prepared my heart for it. I then asked them how to become a Christian and how to grow as a Christian.

A big healing and relief for me was my compliance due to the fear of people. Because I grew up in a family full of criticism, I always wanted to please the people who were around me. Over time, that part of me was quickly renewed by the gospel. I realized that God loved me and saved me not because of how good I was. I felt released from the fear of people and was greatly unburdened.

When I became a Christian, my parents objected vehemently. First, they angrily argued with me and blamed me. Then they took away my Bibles and forbade me from attending church on Sundays. Seeing no changes in my activities, they refused to talk with me.

“THEY NAGGED AND SCOLDED ME UNCEASINGLY FOR NOT  
BREAKING UP WITH MY BOYFRIEND”

My boyfriend Cheng and I entered the same university. Our relationship has also formed me. Having grown up in a relatively healthy working-class home, he has a personality full of laughter and optimism. His personality is quite the opposite of mine. He had helped me change from a melancholy temperament to having a moderate and healthy self-image.

After my conversion, I shared with him passionately about my new-found faith. I did not expect that he later would become a more devoted Christian than me. We spent our college years going to campus fellowship together. Toward the fourth year, he decided to become a full-time evangelist after graduation. At the same time, a physical exam brought us some bad news: it showed that he had Hepatitis B.

Having Hepatitis B and his decision to become a preacher brought on the most intense opposition came from my parents. They seemed to have found good reasons to strongly object to our relationship. They objected to Cheng's job choice, for they simply could not understand it. Being a Christian minister seemed to promise no future, no financial guarantee. Cheng's illness was the primary cause, but they also spent time learning about his family's financial background. They were upset to find out that he did not come from a wealthy family.

By then, we had been dating for five years. Although I found a well-paying job as an auditor, my parents were not happy. They pressured me to break up with my boyfriend. I did not expect this battle to last for the next five years. When working, I lived with my parents, since renting an apartment near my workplace was too expensive in Shanghai. Every evening, they nagged and scolded me unceasingly for not breaking up with my boyfriend. Then for the next three years, my father refused to talk with me. When I went back home and greeted him, he was always silent and looked away. He was angry with me because I did not change my ways, and I was unwilling to walk the path that he desired for me.

My boyfriend and sisters in church knew about my sadness. We were not the only dating couple who faced pressure from parents. Becoming a first-generation Christian equaled open defiance to them. Dating another Christian was even worse. Sometimes when a sister is older than her boyfriend, parents on that side would make a big case out of it too. In our situation, it is somewhat understandable given my boyfriend's illness. In China, people with Hepatitis B are often discriminated against. My parents

were thinking for my good. As a support group at church, we all longed to have our parents' blessings before entering into marriage. So, although the parental opposition continued, many couples persisted for years and waited for hearts to soften.

My mother was a woman of her own time. She barely finished elementary school and did not have any good education. Then, like every other young person in China, she joined the sent-down movement.<sup>2</sup> After that, she worked to make ends meet. She had always been critical of me, from my appearance, clothing, to my scores in school, and then to my dating relationship. My mother always had a lot of complaints about me; everything was negative. We had more unpleasant memories and conflicts than happy ones.

Mother's whole value system was based on this world: You need to be rich, and as a woman, you need to be beautiful. Then you need to marry well. The male side needs to own real estate and have a good job. In all these areas, she never succeeded in any of these areas. So, she wanted me to have them. While my values are so far removed from these pursuits, she grew dissatisfied, disgruntled and critical.

I had complaints about her too. She left me for business trips when I most needed her care. She liked making more money more than being a mother. She was absent when I needed a mother to be around. My stepfather had to be both mother and father to me for more than ten years. Deep inside, I was bitter toward her too. It is through these frictions with my mother that I see more of my own sins. I know that my original family has shaped me, but these sins of bitterness and resentments were also of my own commission. I had a very high standard, an expectation for my mother to be more than what she could be. I was her thorn too. God also showed how proud and controlling I had been.

### “THEY BLAMED ME VEHEMENTLY FOR HAVING CHOSEN TO MARRY HIM”

In the tenth year of my dating relationship with my boyfriend, my mother realized that I was growing older and that I would never leave him. She traveled back to Xinjiang to visit her family. My maternal grandmother talked to her about accepting my future marriage. Grandmother pleaded with my mother to make peace with me and bless my marriage. She also reminded my mother that they were in the same place before when my mother wanted to marry her first husband (my biological

father) against the family's will. That conversation somehow softened my mother's heart. After she returned to Shanghai, Mother agreed to our marriage.

Because my fiancé was a preacher, many Christian brothers and sisters knew about our love story. Our wedding had over 400 guests. I was so grateful to finally have my parents' blessings. They even danced at our wedding. My mother liked the attention from the crowd, and she laughed heartily.

After we got married, my parents began to worry about whether we could have a healthy baby. My husband was receiving medical treatment. We waited to have children because of that. Our parents on both sides had terrible interactions with each other. They met once on the day of our wedding. Then at my stepfather's funeral, Cheng's father came, representing his family.

Two years after we got married, in 2013, Cheng suddenly fell very ill. He was hospitalized for two months. He had a weak liver that succumbed to a virus, causing the organs to swell up. The hospital sent us a critical illness notice due to multiple organ failure. He was in a coma for many days.

Instead of being there to help, my parents were in an uproar with me. My parents felt their previous worries were being confirmed by this turn of events. They were very upset and resumed their pattern of blame. They blamed me vehemently for having chosen to marry him. It was as though everything they had feared would happen was happening. They said, "This was exactly why we forbade you to marry him!" They were not willing to see me suffer in caring for a sick man, so they pushed me to get a divorce. When I said no, they cursed and wailed, as if I was already a widow. I had to care for my husband in the hospital, but at the same time, the words my parents said were stirring like knives in my heart. I began to believe what they said. Their words overshadowed my belief in God. The great pressure they put on me nearly broke me down. I began to cry and complain to my sick husband, blaming him for causing the misery.

Worse still, my parents made a phone call to Cheng's parents. Even under that circumstance, they blamed Cheng for marrying their daughter. They also demanded a divorce over the phone to Cheng's parents, who felt greatly saddened.

Many brothers and sisters in different churches prayed and donated money to help care for Cheng. It was truly a miracle that he lived. The recovery took six months. After that, his parents and my parents became very hostile toward each other.

God used this experience as a mirror to me. When my husband needed me the most, I spoke words of harm to him. I hurt him greatly. God showed me how utterly depraved I was, how selfish and bitter. I had always thought of myself as a good person and a good wife. But when adversity came, I only wanted benefits for myself. I wanted to live an easier life. My words wounded my husband. I can blame my actions on the pressure from my mother, but I cannot deny the corrupt nature inside myself.

“I DID NOT KNOW HOW TO HOPE WHEN MOURNING MY  
STEPFATHER’S DEATH”

From 2014 to 2016, my husband went to the United States for theological training. We had our first child there. My parents went to help; it was the first time they stepped out of China. They were happy to travel to the United States. In an entirely different social environment, they saw how so many churches, one after another, are worshipping out in the open. They got to know more Christians. The president of the seminary even invited them to his home. They were amazed by his personal library in the basement. So, they saw many things and heard many people talk about the faith. Some American brothers and sisters who know how to speak Chinese also shared with them zealously. In that kind of environment, the name of Jesus no longer made them uncomfortable. Before that in China, my parents got uneasy and upset whenever hearing the mention of Jesus. They got unconformable when hearing the mention of Christian churches too. But in America, it seemed that their horizons were broadened. They became more relaxed. They were also proud of Cheng, because he obtained a master’s degree, no matter what discipline it was in. It was something they were happy about. Another joy was seeing their American-born granddaughter. So, we had a brief time of peace living together.

After we returned to Shanghai in 2017, I was pregnant with our second child. To care for our children, I decided to be a stay-at-home mom. My parents were greatly displeased. Last year was a big change for us. My husband and I were just beginning to set a rhythm for our small family. Then my stepfather suddenly passed away. The shanty area they lived in was ordered to be demolished by the city government. Each family was given an amount of compensation to relocate. Within a few months’ time, my mother lost both her spouse and her living space.

My stepfather's passing was very sudden. It reminds me of a verse in the Bible: "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (James 4:14). I felt very sad. I remembered that he attended my husband's graduation from seminary in the United States. We had the opportunity to explain to him what the gospel means. My father was the only one among our four parents to have heard the most complete version of the gospel. But even after that explanation, he explicitly rejected it. He refused to acknowledge that he was a sinner. He said that he did not need Jesus' salvation.

After his passing, I feel saddened whenever thinking of him. It has been over a year now, but I do not know how to hope when mourning my stepfather's death, especially when thinking that he might end up in hell. Amazing Grace used to be one of my favorite hymns. It says, "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun. We've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun." It used to be that whenever I sang it, my heart became so full of hope and longing. But now after my father's death, singing this hymn brings only unspeakable sadness in me.

My mother was widowed twice. My biological father died suddenly when I was only two and a half years old. Then this second time, her second husband also died very suddenly. Both were heavy blows to her. She is a poor woman who has lived a tragic life. It was only after my stepfather died that she began to say nice things about him. She recalled how much he loved her and how well he treated her. But when they were living together, there were many arguments, just as you'd expect among any two sinners. They tolerated each other.

My mother needed to move in with us, because she was bereaved and needed care. I felt hastened to a new battlefield. It has been stressful living with her. We cannot even relax in our own home. We now live in Yangpu District of Shanghai City. My husband pastors a church. He is often busy and exhausted, still needing to take medication for Hepatitis B.

After my stepfather passed away, my mother has been sad and anxious. Although she is living with us in a rented apartment, that does not give her a sense of belonging. During the day, she used to like visiting places and friends. Staying at home and watching me care for my children usually make her upset. So, she is not doing well. Although others might expect a live-in grandmother to help care for the children, I would not ask her to help with anything. She does not like doing chores. Occasionally when she is in the mood to make some food, she buys something from the market. My mother has friends and neighbors to hang out with, but she is not close to anyone.

“SHE CONSTANTLY COMPLAINED ABOUT MY HUSBAND  
AND MYSELF”

Having been a mother myself did not help me appreciate her motherhood much. I was never close to her. Even my maternal grandmother and relatives said, she argued and fought with her first husband a lot. After she gave birth to me, mother did not want to care for me. She always left me with my grandmother. She had a lot of work to do, and she did not enjoy doing the chores in the house as a mother would. A year after my father passed away, she remarried. My stepfather brought us to Shanghai, but Mother was not content with her financial situation. She thought it was easier to make money in Xinjiang, so she traveled back there, leaving me with my stepfather. She has been absent when I most needed a mother to be around. This had shaped my growing up experiences and my personality in significant ways. I felt very abandoned, unwanted and hurt. It is due to this trauma that I decided to become a stay-at-home mother for my daughter. I was determined: no matter how hard it becomes, no matter how much work it takes, I want to raise up my own child, and I want to be there for her. But when I quit my job and stayed home, my mother despised me.

As an individual, mother was born with a cheerful personality. But she is never very thoughtful and always relied on other people. One of her most obvious sins is complaining about people around her. She never reflects on her own faults. I don't know whether this is due to her lack of education, or just human sinfulness. She does not examine herself. But then she is like most women in her generation, at least the friends she always hangs out with. Most of them are like that: When they get older, they are happy and content with finding good food to eat and good clothes to wear. Nothing else interests them much.

Although we live together, we feel estranged. Living with Mother is very difficult. She constantly complained about my husband and myself. When she saw how pastors are being respected in America, Mother was willing to consider it as a career choice, but after we returned to China, things are different here. We do not meet her expectations. She is picky with every detail in our life. She reads into the smallest gestures or tone and tells me that my husband does not love me. Every day there are many negative opinions from her. Her favorite complaint is that Cheng's job is not a normal job, at least not in China's social environment. She also feels embarrassed when she has nothing to boast about her only daughter and son-in-law. And she vents about all these things while with us.



This year we decide to enroll our daughter in a public kindergarten. I had considered homeschooling, when there was just my husband and me. But after mother moved in, it would be very challenging. I had no confidence in myself either. Cheng is beginning his position as pastor at church. He cannot devote too much time and energy to homeschooling either. Another option is private Christian schools, but we are not satisfied with some church schools here.<sup>3</sup> The locations are distant, and tuitions are beyond our financial abilities. Then we are left with public schools. Some Christian families consider public schools too detrimental to their children, but we have different opinions about that. I think parents can have more influence on children even when they attend public schools. Some ideological differences can also serve as contact points for dialogues. In this way or that, a child will be influenced by the world because that's unavoidable. In fact, we all grew up in the public education system. But it is only when the light of the gospel shines on a person that one comes to own the faith. That is also through God's sovereignty and power.

I have been pondering the meaning of "carry your own cross and follow Jesus." I had tried hard to change my own behavior so that my mother will be unable to find fault with me. But I exhausted myself to death, and my mother was still critical about me. Later I realized the problem was inside myself—I always wanted to resist her complaints and negative criticisms. But I can never change my mother. Until God shines a light in her heart, she will never come to see her own problems, and the depths of her desires can never be satisfied. So maybe her complaints are a part of my life. Maybe they are what God uses to train me. They are part of the cross I need to carry. I cannot avoid this part, unless I push her out of the door. But that is impossible for me to do.

\* \* \*

Motherhood in China is closely related to social mobility in an increasingly materialistic society. In the 1980s, before the total collapse of the socialist *Danwei* system, husband and wife of a household were expected to prioritize work productivity over parenting. The patriotic and materialistic demands from work units alienated relationality within the family. It is not uncommon for mothers to abandon motherhood in order to seek a career or income. In the 2010s, there began a trend of biblical motherhood among first-generation believers who started new families. Young professional Christian women prefer to give up their career, some temporarily, in order to raise young children with their full presence.

In Yang's life, mother has been a restless but demanding presence. When Yang longed for emotional intimacy, her mother was absent in the home, choosing to commute across the continent for work. Later Yang's mother became obsessed with marrying her daughter to someone rich and promising. After Yang converted to Christianity and later began a committed romantic relationship with someone from a less resourceful family background, she and her mother stood on two opposing ends of the value system.

As China plunged into secular materialism, people do not blush when announcing that men marry for beauty and women "marry up" for money. The role of the mother-in-law cannot be underestimated in making dowry requests that usually start with a well-paying job, an apartment and a car. A popular joke says that in Shanghai, it is the mother-in-law who is to blame in driving up the real estate prices.<sup>4</sup> So in many ways, Yang's mother makes requests that are commonplace to people in metropolitan Shanghai. Many Christian young professionals who do not make materialism their top priority in making life's choices experience similar conflicts with their demanding parents. But how Yang's initial compliant personality was transformed by her newfound faith and how she endures daily confrontations with her mother is an amazing story.

In China, people with Hepatitis B suffer from blatant discrimination in all aspects of life.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Yang's husband, even if he did not choose to be a Christian minister, his chances of finding formal employment would still be slim, as many workplaces refuse to accept Hepatitis B patients. As a result, many people had to work in the informal economy and suffer from economic insecurity. Most parents would consider the concerns of Yang's mother against marrying a Hepatitis B patient to be legitimate. But to Yang, the bond of faith is much stronger than the illness that threatens this young man's future.

The years of objection from Yang's parents against her choice of marriage partner were a grueling trial. For almost a decade, it seemed that all of them were subject to the will of Yang's mother who did not want her daughter to "marry down" as she once did. Her dramatic turnaround in reckoning Yang's marriage was taken as a sign of God's mercy toward this young couple, who probably did not expect the sudden change. Their love story inspired many young Christian couples who were suffering similar pressure from unbelieving and domineering parents.

Yang's own commitment to motherhood at the expense of her career became another triggering event to new conflict in the already estranged

mother-daughter relationship. By living out a completely opposite set of values, Yang made choices in life that appeared to her mother as outrageous and reproachful. Widowed for a second time, Yang's mother has no choice but to live with Yang under the same roof. Verbal attacks and complaints became the only weapon Yang's mother had to guard her own values. In this most estranged mother-daughter relationship, it is simply amazing to see how Yang endured all these hardships. Life is soberly painful, but she is taking hold of a hope that surpasses all this pain.

## NOTES

1. Shantytowns in Shanghai are slum areas where low-income Shanghai households and rural migrant families tend to live. Real estate development projects often led to demolitions of these areas. See Max Margan, "Shanghai residents refuse to budge from their dilapidated homes," *Daily Mail and Reuters*, May 5, 2016. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3574454/Guangfuli-residents-Shanghai-refuse-budge-dilapidated-homes.html>
2. See note 7 in Chap. 2.
3. Due to China's policy constraints against private religious institutions, most Christian schools operate in the gray area without legal status. A wave of mini-church schools among urban house churches began in around 2013.
4. Peng Li and Shunfeng Song, "Why are housing prices so high in urban China?" *Journal of China and Global Economics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring, 2012) pp. 39–42. About the so-called mother-in-law demand, see April Rabkin, "Is China's Real Estate Bubble about to Burst?" *Architect Magazine*, June 1, 2013. [https://www.architectmagazine.com/practice/is-chinas-real-estate-bubble-about-to-burst\\_o](https://www.architectmagazine.com/practice/is-chinas-real-estate-bubble-about-to-burst_o)
5. Shako Liu, "China's Struggle with Hepatitis B Discrimination," *The Atlantic*, December 3, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/12/chinas-struggle-with-hepatitis-b-discrimination/281994/> Bingfeng Han, "The Experience of Discrimination of Individuals Living with Chronic Hepatitis B in Four Provinces of China," *PLOS One*, 2018; 13 (4): e0195455. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5896961/>



## Cautionary Tale

### “I BECAME VERY CAUTIOUS TOWARDS PEOPLE OF MY SAME GENDER”

I was born in 1985 in a small township of Jiangsu Province. When I was four or five years old, my parents were too busy with work, so they left me with my maternal grandmother. I lived in her village for two years, attending the kindergarten there. I was a very good-looking little girl, so the teachers liked me a lot. I was even chosen to be the class leader (*bazhang*). There was another girl attending the same kindergarten, a relative of my grandmother. She was jealous of me. One day when I was passing by her home, she grabbed me, pushed me down and beat me. She asked a few other children to beat me. I recall her saying, “You are not from here. How can you be the class leader?”

This incident startled me greatly. I was traumatized by it to the extent that since then, I became very cautious toward people of my same gender. I found it hard to get along with female friends. I seldom shared or chatted with them, and I had very few female good friends later. This made me inclined to befriend and hang out with boys.

When I got to high school and college, this became difficult for me too. What started out as good friendships later often turned into something

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(Narration by Long, age thirty four, editor)

different. My male friends tended to develop romantic feelings toward me. Whenever someone confessed his affections for me, that friendship ended. So, I have always had this longing to develop intimate friendships.

At home, despite being the only child, my mother has been indifferent toward me. She has a quick temper. She has always beaten me, grabbing whatever she could get her hands on, such as a sandal or a feather duster. She made sure that she only spanked my bottom, because the wounds would not be too noticeable. So before middle school, I was beaten by her on a regular basis. Sometimes it was not my fault. It was only because she was in a bad mood.

My mother is the eldest daughter in her family. She helped raise her two brothers and a sister. Born in 1961, she finished high school, the highest level of education in her family. She managed the household well. Members of her own family got along well. They all respected her. She liked to “save face” (*ai mianzi*) in front of relatives.<sup>1</sup>

My parents were classmates in high school. They began a courtship on their own, without match-making. My mother has been very obsessive and controlling toward my father. She liked to give orders. But compared to many divorced families my classmates came from, my parents’ marriage was fine. I did not have a fear for marriage per se. But I found out in junior middle school that my father once had an affair. Although mother never brought it up, I heard Father talking over the phone with another woman. He also bought a lot of things for her.

### “MOTHER REGRETTED NOT HAVING TAKEN BRIBES”

Around 1990, my parents worked in a township enterprise.<sup>2</sup> My father was the factory manager. He handled a lot of business. Some people came to our home with gifts, and my mother never took them. I remember once someone brought us wild ducks and other rare poultry. My mother sold them to the nearby restaurant and returned the cash to that person who had tried to bribe my father. At that time, she was very upright. She never coveted other people’s things.

But in the mid-1990s, most township-owned enterprises failed. My father’s factory went up for auction. He started his own business. Over time, their values changed. Mother regretted not having taken bribes. She blamed her past actions (of not accepting bribes) on being too naive. Words coveting power and money came out of her mouth. She was

changed. After father became a business owner, he often had dinners with clients at restaurants. They also got drunk and frequented places of entertainment.

I liked to read since young. My reading habits were influenced by a female cousin of my father. I called her “aunt.” She taught history in a local elementary school. There were many books and video tapes in her home, so I always went to read at her place. Later her husband had an affair, and she divorced him. She also quit her job and went to Shenzhen.<sup>3</sup> Since then she only returned to our hometown twice a year. Every time she brought back books and commodities that I had never seen before. My relatives liked to gossip about her. Still, I admired her a lot. She was different from other women I saw around. She was very independent and carefree. She also had a taste for cultures and fine arts. She encouraged me to read widely. Before I entered into college, this aunt was my role model. Later I learned that she remarried a man who was twelve years younger than she was.

In elementary school, I lived with my parents. They were busy making money, which was very important to them. They wanted to give me a good material life. Basically, they bought me anything I wanted. They considered that enough; I should be content with that. When I got to junior middle school and high school, I desired to share my thoughts with them. But my parents would respond like, “We have given whatever you asked for. What else are you dissatisfied about?” When I wanted to communicate with them, they perceived it as expressing discontent toward them.

In junior middle school, one day, I shared something with my mother. I told her that a friend of mine in the same school got herself pregnant. Mother’s face became downcast when hearing this. Then she looked at me vilely and responded: “If it were you, I would beat you to death!” The look on her face was just vile. It scared me. Since then, I never shared any secrets with her. She is a very tough woman. I also recall her twisting my father’s arm when he was speaking. She maintained close control over my father too.

### “I HAD ALWAYS BEEN AWARE OF MY CORRUPT NATURE”

In high school, I liked to watch a famous TV news anchor, a reporter. He had graduated from the Department of Law in Beijing University. So my goal was to major in law or journalism. I entered into a law program at a small college near my hometown.

After the National College Entrance Exam, I did not get into my ideal college. I was left with my second choice. My freshman year was a mess. I felt that life was meaningless. I had been searching for meaning before that. I had read many books about religions, such as Buddhist story books and Christian story books. I was interested in these. People in my hometown were practicing Buddhism and other folk religions. I had never met a Christian believer before middle school. However, I've always had a longing for the mystic and the transcendent.

During the first summer break in college, I spent some time on the Internet. In a chat forum, I got to know a male friend. We chatted about everything, and he mentioned Liu Xiaofeng, a Christian writer.<sup>4</sup> He also shared with me that he was a Christian. He explained the gospel to me. Later when I was alone at home, I prayed the "I accept Jesus" prayer. Then I began to read the Bible. I found it online. I also had a Chinese Union Version (*heheben*) hard copy at home.<sup>5</sup> When my sophomore year began, I found a campus fellowship. We studied the Bible regularly together. On Sundays, a sister also invited me to worship at a nearby church building.

Before my conversion, I had always been aware of my corrupt nature. I experienced much guilt. Some came from my lack of sincerity when interacting with other people. Some came from lying to my parents. My heart was always burdened with a strong sense of guilt and self-loathing. After I became a Christian, this guilt became intensified as if I could see clearly the Law of God written inside me. Once I remembered that the guilt was so heavy that I could not bear with it anymore. I was sure that God would not accept me. Then I turned my Bible to the parable Jesus told about the Lost Sheep. I read about how the shepherd left the ninety-nine sheep in search of the one lost sheep. Reading it immediately released me from a kind of bondage. I felt assured that God was speaking to me. But for the next years, probably even until today, my spirituality has been weak—the Christian faith has been a way to solve my day-to-day problems.

When I was a freshman, my parents required me to join the Chinese Communist Party. In order to pass the Civil Servant Exam to land a good job in the government system, one needs to join the Party. But I became a Christian that year. I refused to become a Party member. I explained this to my parents. Since then, they became very resistant to the Christian faith. Later, despite their persistent pressure, I did not waver. Then they gave up. They only asked me not to bring up the faith in their presence again.

### “MY LIFE WAS A HUGE DARK AND EMPTY VOID”

After college I continued on to graduate school because one of my professors in college encouraged me to pursue a further degree. He was the advisor of my graduation thesis. He took a position at a larger university and invited me to apply for his program of religious studies. I did and got accepted. I did not tell my parents that my master's program was in religious studies. I told them that I studied social problems.

My advisor was in his fifties. He treated students well, and we all respected him. I considered him the most honorable person among all faculty. It was partly because of his attention and encouragement that I imagined myself becoming an academic in the future. But one day, he asked me to go to his office. There he first complimented me on my academic progress, and then he began to confess his romantic love for me. He also touched me. I was shocked. I pushed him away and fled the office. Since then, my dream of pursuing academic research collapsed. Mentally, I was a mess. I guess I was very disoriented. I was under tremendous pressure not to offend this professor. I tried my best to avoid seeing him; I also felt disgusted at what he had done.

Soon I wanted to find a boyfriend who could save me from my emotional turmoil. I found one. He was a zealous young man who loved reading Leo Strauss and Liu Xiaofeng.<sup>6</sup> He was not a Christian believer. I wanted to depend on him emotionally, but he could not bear my burden. He was passionate but very immature. When we broke up, he cursed me with foul language. I cursed him back. It was an ugly breakup.

During this period, my paternal grandmother passed away after a tragic car accident. It was a huge blow to me. I felt that my world has suddenly become dark. My life was a huge, dark and empty void. At that time, I also got to know a group of Christian graduate students. Among them was a young man in a doctoral program of economics. He liked me a lot. I was in a desperate state to find just anyone who liked me. I felt anxious because if I said no to him, I might never date a Christian brother. So I grabbed hold of him as a drowning person grabs a life buoy. When we started dating, I was very grateful toward him. Later, our married life confirmed that he was the kind of person that I could depend on. He treated me with gentleness, but I did not expect that God would soon remove him from my life.

When I decided to marry him, my parents objected because they learned that he came from a peasant family. When I brought him home for the first time, they were not happy with the fact that he was thin and dark-



skinned, not good-looking enough. But I rebelled as though it was the first time I had said “No” to them out loud. They realized that they had lost control of me.

My rebellion did come very late. I had been indifferent toward their material provision. Our conversations took place only when I needed money from them. Whenever I asked, they sent money to me. It was a one-sided relationship with minimal communication. They never knew how to express their love to me in words. I have some memories of a warm emotional bond with my father, but Mother had always been very cold. All my memories of her involved being spanked by her when I was little. I did not have much to say to her either. My mother wanted to be in control of my life. That was the reason I escaped from home.

Within a short time, I married the young doctoral student. My *hukou* registration was with my university, so I did not need to obtain paperwork from my parents to register for marriage. After we registered and obtained our marriage certificate, my parents had to acknowledge this fact. When my husband came to my home, my mother arranged all his clothes, from underwear to outfit. She wanted him to impress the relatives. That was how controlling Mother was. My husband was first surprised but then conformed. He had an easy-going personality.

“SHE COMPLAINED TO ME THAT I CHOSE THE WRONG  
MAN TO MARRY”

After finishing my master’s degree, I found my first job as an editor for a publishing company. The pay was meager, but I was responsible for some Christian titles. I considered it more meaningful to work for God than to work for higher pay. My mother asked me to return and work for my father, but I wanted to stay in the same city with my husband. He was working on his doctoral dissertation. My mother seldom visited us, for she did not like our living conditions. She complained about my husband’s low housing stipend from his university.

After I gave birth to our son, mother came to help me for the first three months. In fact, she worked very hard to help us. She stayed up for the baby, cooked and did household chores. My husband just worked on his dissertation, so she accumulated more discontent toward him during this time. She complained to me that I have chosen the wrong man to marry, because he did not care for me. I blamed her for messing up our relation-

ship. It was a most painful three months for me. On one hand, I argued with my husband, blaming him for not helping. On the other hand, I argued with my mother, blaming her for disrupting my marriage.

Two years later, after my husband defended his dissertation, he began to lose his hearing. A medical diagnosis came out showing that he had nose and throat cancer. It was terrible news for us, but many brothers and sisters at church supported us through visits and prayers. When I told my parents about his cancer, my mother erupted into a loud howl. Again, they blamed me for having chosen the wrong man to marry.

After a lengthy period of chemotherapy, my husband's cancer worsened. When he was critically ill, we prayed more fervently for a miracle. I had to be strong for both his parents and my parents. I comforted his parents by encouraging them to attend church. Thank God that they listened. They wanted the God of their son to save him.

But my parents were very stubborn. Sometimes I forced myself to be a positive testimony in front of their unsympathetic accusations. I said that God would heal my husband. I continued to plead with them to consider the Christian faith, because sooner or later, death would be everyone's destiny. Once hearing this, my mother just sneered at me and said, "Believe in Jesus? I have never seen anyone who became so miserable like you after having believed in Jesus!" Because her words and attitude wounded me so much, I replied angrily: "Without Jesus, you would go to hell!" Then our conversation again ended in another disaster. Afterward I cried in front of God because I failed again to love her. I regret using words to wound her.

In fact, during the two years when my husband felt very ill, my mother underwent a depression. She was in great pain and was struggling. I know that she lamented my loss. She feared that I would become a young widow. "If you had heeded my warning, your life would not become like this!" was her usual summary.

"THEY ALWAYS BLAMED MY FAITH AS THE ROOT CAUSE OF ALL  
MY MISERY"

Mother felt pained because her only daughter was not someone she could show off in front of relatives or townsfolk. Instead, she used me as a cautionary tale when talking with my young cousins who were yet to marry.

My parents had very clear expectations about my life. They expected me to stay closer to them geographically. Since I majored in law in college, they

hoped that I could find a job in our hometown's court. So, I should take the Civil Servant Exam.<sup>7</sup> I should find someone with a good career to marry. They liked to envision me living a comfortable and peaceful life. I had a good friend who came from our township. Her life followed this trajectory: she passed the Civil Servant Exam after graduation from college, worked in the local court system and married someone quite wealthy and capable. My parents often used her example to blame me, saying, "Why didn't you choose to live such a life?" They thought that my appearance and education were better than that girl's. But why did I choose to live otherwise? In the end, they always blamed my faith as the root cause of all my misery.

My husband passed away last year. During his last months, I bonded well with his parents. They were simple people who felt more like family to me than my own parents. My mother never visited us when my husband was ill. She said that she could not bear it. "You have to bear the burden by yourself, because it was your own choice," she later explained. I thought she was right. I did not blame her. She also pleaded me not to tell my grandparents about my husband's passing away. They are now in their nineties. I agreed.

With a young child to care for, I did not give myself time to grieve. I kept my husband's room the old way, with books on the desk. One day, I was suddenly overwhelmed with grief. It took me a year to finally realize that my husband was not coming back.

Last month I visited Mother in our hometown. I brought my five-year-old son to see his grandparents on both sides. For the first time in my life, I saw my mother softened in front of me. Her words were not sharp anymore. She even expressed an apology for not sharing my burden in the past few years when my husband was going through cancer treatment. She felt that she was not there for me, as a mother should be. She also said that seeing many Christian brothers and sisters helping us made her feel incapable because she did not have the faith. While she was talking, I cried. My mother was never soft before. But her words touched the softest part in my heart. At that moment, I felt that Mother did love me deeply. We made peace with each other.

\* \* \*

With marketization and urbanization, Chinese families have undergone significant changes. What used to hold kinship ties together, which often centered around revolutionary ideology in family rituals, has given way to

materialistic values.<sup>8</sup> Similar to Chap. 11, this account also reveals how binding these materialistic values have become to professional Christian women in China. The mother-daughter relationship in Long's story is also estranged mostly by obsessive parental expectations based on values of achievements and success.

Long's parents offered her a comfortable material life and a good education, expecting her to become admired by peers and neighbors around. But Long's promising trajectory changed after she converted to Christianity. She was content with a lower paying job that she considered meaningful and a Christian husband she saw as dependable. These all caused her mother to lose face in front of relatives and friends. When Long's husband had cancer and passed away, her mother could not bring herself to face the reality or show some compassion.

Due to early childhood trauma with jealousy arising from the same gender, Long preferred to have male friendships. With this preference came more restless socialization with other females. She was constantly pursued by young men. She also experienced sexual harassment from a previously respected professor. Long described the years before her marriage as a long, agitated storm of undesirable relationships. All these made her eager to settle with a reliable Christian man as soon as possible. Her "flash-style" marriage (*shanhun*) became a life preserver.

The terminal illness of Long's husband did not invite compassion from her parents. The idea of their daughter's widowhood became an unbearable "face loss" to their status among relatives and friends. It was not years after Long's husband had passed away when this mentality of vain comparison gave way to compassion for Long and her young son. Among first-generation believers in China, restoration of kinship ties that were alienated by conflicting worldviews and values has been a recurring theme.

## NOTES

1. The concept of "saving face" is key in Chinese etiquette. It means giving honor and respect to others. Letting someone "lose face" means failure to do that.
2. Township and village enterprises (often known as TVEs) have played a significant transitioning role in the growth of the Chinese economy since 1978. TVEs were considered more efficient than comparable state-owned enterprises (SOEs). For a time, they were competitive workplaces.

3. In the 1980s, Shenzhen in Guangdong Province was China's first special economic zone. In the 1990s, Shenzhen, a manufacturing center, was home to one of the fastest-growing urban economies in the world. So going to Shenzhen for work means being on top of one's entrepreneurship.
4. Liu Xiaofeng, a contemporary Chinese academic, has been considered a pioneering figure in an emerging "cultural Christian" phenomenon in the 1990s. Being a cultural Christian means that someone identifies with the Christian culture without affiliation with a Christian church.
5. The Chinese Union Version (CUV) of the Bible is the most widely used translation by Chinese Protestant believers. It was first published in 1919.
6. In Chinese academia, the political thought of German-American political philosopher and classicist Leo Strauss has become popular since the late 1990s.
7. This exam is considered one of the most popular and competitive tests in China. Only one out of every sixty-three candidates who passed this exam is expected to get a government job. See *Xinhua*, "Nearly one million people sit China's civil servant exam," *China Daily*, December 2, 2018. <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201812/02/WS5c03fee3a310eff30328e850.html>
8. Dongchao Min, "From the Revolutionary Family to the Materialistic Family: Keywords for a Contemporary Social History of China," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Center for Women's Development Studies, Vol. 20 (3), pp. 393–413, October 2013.  
 Song Yang and Bruce W. Stening, "Cultural and Ideological Roots of Materialism in China," *Social Indicators Research*, Vol. 108, No. 3 (September 2012), pp. 441–452.



## Familial Harmony

### “MOTHER ALWAYS WANTED TO COMPENSATE FOR THIS PAST MISTAKE”

Among my family members, my elder sister was the most influential person in my life. Four years older than me, my sister has always performed better academically than I. She is very strong-willed, and I always had low self-esteem in comparison with her. Given her personality, my parents often asked me to yield to her when it came to our competitive wills. I got used to that; otherwise, there would be conflicts in the home. I was the weaker one, so my parents considered me easier to handle. I was a very obedient child. But over time, my sister became more and more domineering. Her temperament got more and more irritable. She always considered herself the big boss in our home.

My mother grew up in Nanjing with five siblings. They really got along very well. It was a big harmonious family. My maternal grandfather married twice. His first wife gave him three daughters. One day after he went out to work, there was a fire in the home. His first wife and one daughter were killed. Later he married again and had four children. So, my oldest aunt had a different mother than my mom did. My uncle (elder brother of my mother) respected this elder sister very much. Every time at our big

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*Narration by Xu (age thirty nine, former art editor; stay-at-home mom)*

family's reunion, he would reserve the best seat for my eighty-three-year-old aunt.

My maternal grandfather favored boys over girls. So, the best food was always given to my old uncle to eat first, even though there was an elder sister from the first marriage. Sometimes it was just a bowl of fried rice with eggs. The same was true with education. My elder uncle finished school and entered into a foreign commerce company. My mother finished only elementary school. Her favorite memory was taking train rides to Beijing's Tiananmen Square to see Chairman Mao in 1966. Like most people in her cohort, her education was truncated by the Cultural Revolution.

My elder uncle has always been very kind toward other siblings, and he shared the food with other younger ones. Following his example, my mother's siblings all had close bonds with each other. Maybe the youngest uncle, who was the most spoiled one by my grandparents, is an exception. He is twelve years younger than my mother. He had good grades in school and wanted to enter into the Nanjing Foreign Language School. Twice he scored lower below the admission threshold. Later, this younger uncle became mentally ill. With medical treatment, he got better. Later he got a job, got married and had a daughter. This female cousin of mine (fourteen years younger than me) spent a lot of time with us, because both her parents needed to work. My elder sister and I helped take care of this cousin.

When this cousin entered high school, her father (my younger uncle) became very sick mentally because he stopped taking his medication. One day, he went to my elder uncle and attacked him with a knife. The police were called, and my younger uncle was sent to a mental hospital. Family members decided that he should stay there, for fear that he might harm other people again. This incident was very tragic for my mother's own family.

My maternal grandfather was a truck driver for a factory in the city. He wanted his daughters to marry urbanites. My aunt married a professor in Southeast University. Then they got to know my father, who was working as a technician in a science lab at the same university. My father had migrated from rural Nantong of Jiangsu province. Before finding the job at this university, my father had served in the military for three years. Then the military arranged this technician job for him. My father's parents passed away when he was very young, so his two brothers and he became orphans. During those harsh years, his elder brother led my father and another younger brother in begging for food in the neighborhood. My

father recalls that they even ate mud for a while during a famine. This difficult childhood trained my father's character: he is very frugal and hard-working.

When the match was made, my maternal grandfather really liked my father because he was an urbanite. It was also because my father had no burdens in his original family. My father is also very handy. When he first came to see my mother, he worked around the house doing all kinds of chores. This impressed my grandfather a lot. In my mother's family, they all respected the opinion of the elderly. So my mother did not object to the plan. My parents got married in 1976. The big family (mainly my mother's side) emphasized harmony, which has influenced me not to compete with anyone.

When my sister was taking tests for high school, my mother worried about her becoming like my younger uncle, who became mentally ill after failing the test twice. She changed my sister's application to a less competitive school that trained future elementary teachers. This way, my mother changed my sister's future career direction. However, my sister scored very well, even higher than what was required for the best high schools in Nanjing. Later, mother felt a little regret, knowing that my sister's academic achievements could have landed her a better career. Although my sister never blamed my mother for this, Mother always wanted to compensate for this past mistake.

“I GREW UP SEEING MY MOTHER ALWAYS  
HAVING TO DEFEND MY FATHER”

I never considered myself smart. I was rather blunt and unsophisticated. Although lacking self-esteem in school, I later ended up with more education than my sister. My mother wanted me to enter into a nursing school, but I insisted on taking tests for high school. My mother did not want to make the same mistake as she did with my sister, so she agreed. I had high school and then college education, while my elder sister did not. She later studied on her own for the college entrance exam and got a bachelor's degree in education from Nanjing University. After that, she taught in a key elementary school.

In high school, I had a very good art teacher, so I began to like visual art a lot. This led to my decision to major in art in Southeast University. In the National College Entrance Exam, because my father worked there as a staff, the score threshold for me was ten points lower than that for



other students. Tuition was very high for art students, almost three times that of other majors. We learned graphic design, so I had to buy a computer. My parents invested a lot in my education. My elder sister helped finance it too. Although I lived in the shadow of my smart elder sister, I later felt pity toward her.

My mother experienced difficulties in life because she had to speak up for my father in his university. Father is a simple, submissive person without any ambitions. He never competed for any benefits at work. To use Chinese slang, he is a “soft persimmon (*ruanshizi*),” too easy to pick on. Even when he was pushed around, father did not mind. There were people who took advantage of him, and mother had to speak up against that. For example, some neighbors asked my father to fix things in their homes. He was always ready to do it for free. When it took him hours to do the work, they did not even offer him anything to eat or drink. Mother blamed him for neglecting meals, and she blamed those people for taking advantage of his kindness. Father just smiled and waved it away. Or sometimes, when there was garbage in the hallway of our compound, a neighbor complained wrongly that it came from our home. Mother protested, accusing them of saying so just because my father would not argue back. I grew up seeing my mother always having to defend my father. Or even worse, my father’s superior at work took away the bonus that rightfully belonged to my father. My mother had to confront them and claim the money back. This made me realize how snobbish people are, even in a prestigious university environment. They fear the strong but oppress the weak.

Later, to supplement the family income, my mother started a food stand in our neighborhood, selling steamed buns and breakfast items. Every morning at 4 AM, she and my father got up, delivered food and set up the stand. At that time, she was diagnosed with benign ovarian cyst. She continued this small business despite great discomfort and constant bleeding. Rumors spread that my mother earned a lot of money in this way. Some neighbors got jealous and set up their own stands to compete with my mother. Even the suppliers found my parents easy to pick up. They favored other sellers and sold items to my parents at unfair prices. So, my mother always had to defend her own rights. She also blamed my father for being too weak. A few years later, when city administration forbade food stands, she found work in the kitchen of a kindergarten. Once she had an accident when there was a fire in the kitchen that burned her face and neck.

I got along with my mother very well. To use a Chinese slang, she is “knife-mouthed but tofu-hearted” (*daoizizui doufuxin*). She is very smart, but she married someone kind of dull and easily bullied. Whether it was in our own home or helping with others’ home repair, my father would keep fixing things on an empty stomach for a whole day. He is both stubborn and dull-minded.

On the issue of marriage, my mother advised that since my elder sister has a sharp temper, she would need to marry someone who is mild mannered. My brother-in-law definitely fit that category. But after having their first child, their marriage became rocky and they divorced.

“I FOUND THAT I WAS BEHAVING WORSE  
THAN BEFORE MY CONVERSION”

My first job was at an academic art journal. My colleagues were all in their forties and fifties. Our editor-in-chief was about to retire. Thus, I was the only young person. A faculty couple in my father’s university knew my parents. I grew up with their daughter, and they really liked me. My mother asked them to make a match for me. She had always hoped that I could marry a young professor. I was not opposed to this because my social circle was limited and opportunities to meet with single men were slim. I was fine with following the advice of my parents or match-makers. In public universities, single male professors are rare. Whenever there is one, he is likely to be surrounded by many match-makers. So, I went out with a lecturer in the English department. My parents liked him because he was very handy. But I wanted to meet someone who was more artistic. He struck me as too pragmatic and task-oriented. Seeing my lukewarm attitude, he said maybe we should end our relationship. He suggested there might be other opportunities and we should not waste each other’s time.

A month after our breakup, I met my future husband through the same match-maker. When I first met this young philosophy professor, he looked really short and thin. But I learned from my previous experience that looks do not matter that much. He knew a lot about art history, and he appreciated art. On our first date, we debated about the role of art commentators. He thought that it is important to have art commentators, but I disagreed. Every time we dated, we would argue about some art or philosophical topic. That set the tone for our continued bickering in marriage, I guess. The turning point was his father’s passing away. He asked me if I was willing to return home with him. That trip helped us bond well.

After getting married and having had our daughter, I went back to work. My mother came and lived with us to care for the baby. I had to pump milk at my work and then save it for the baby. Later my mother-in-law also moved in with us. So for a time, my mother, my mother-in-law and I cared for the baby together under the same roof. There were certainly frictions. A few times, when my husband came back from work, he found the three of us in tears, telling him what happened. He had to act like a judge. Most of the time he listened well and made fair decisions to help alleviate the pressure of living together.

My husband became a Christian and started going to church around 2010. Many things changed about him. Before he always despised people who did manual labor or technical work. He considered being a philosopher the ideal life. We argued a lot about the meaning of craftsmanship. After his conversion, he became humble and never compared people in that way. Another change was that he became willing in apologizing for what he did wrong. For example, after he yelled at our daughter, he would soon apologize to her later. He is a very loving father in general. Our relationship healed too.

In 2013, my husband was offered a visiting scholarship in the United States, so we spent a year there.<sup>1</sup> When I first stepped into an American church and heard a hymn, I wanted to cry. Another Chinese friend sitting next to me said that this was from the Holy Spirit. After that, I began to read the book of Matthew. Before I considered myself a good person, but after reading the Bible, I was convicted of every single sin that was listed. A few months later, I received baptism in a Chinese-speaking church.

The few months after this were quite challenging. I found that I was behaving worse than before my conversion. The more I tried to correct my own problems, the harder it was. I got frustrated. I asked my husband to help me, but he said I should ask God for help. I don't think he was well equipped to counsel me at that time, either. After all, he was also a new believer. But later I was relieved; many previous burdens were taken from my shoulders. I also no longer planned things ahead in an exhaustive way as before. Life became much lighter when I tried to get close to God. But my spiritual life also fluctuates, just as our moods go through ups and downs. Before my conversion I always relied on myself. Now I know that I need to depend on God in all things. But the matter of faith is still very difficult.

“MY MOTHER REGARDED MY SUDDENLY BECOMING  
REBELLIOUS AS A DIRECT CONSEQUENCE OF MY CONVERSION”

But my relationship with my mother deteriorated after I became a Christian. She could not accept the many decisions we made. For example, when we first got married, we bought an apartment that allowed our child to enter into a key school (*xuequfang*). A few years later when our daughter reached kindergarten age and after I became a Christian, we decided to homeschool her. We no longer wanted her to enter public schools, where an atheistic curriculum has been strengthened by a Red revival. So we sold our apartment and moved in with my parents. My mother was greatly displeased at this decision. When our daughter reached school age, and we still insisted on homeschooling her.

In the beginning weeks of September when public schools were enrolling, my mother argued with me almost every day. She even went to register at an elementary school and brought back textbooks. A few weeks passed and her insistence did not change our decision, so my mother had to give up. She also complained about my giving up a good job to become a stay-at-home mom. I could understand her emotions because my elder sister, herself an elementary school teacher, also pulled her son out of school and entered him into a private Waldorf school. It was mainly because the boy's eyesight was deteriorating when studying at a competitive public school. A few years later, my sister grew dissatisfied with the private school, so she began homeschooling. My mother helped us raise these two grandchildren, and she strongly protested our practices as though we were wasting both our own careers and our children's education.

My husband and I explained to her that it was due to our Christian faith that we decided not to send our daughter to public schools. My mother regarded my suddenly becoming rebellious as a direct consequence of my conversion, which was partly true. It caused her to resent Christianity a lot. Before this, she was neutral, neither resistant nor supportive. Now she always wondered: “What kind of religion has made you so obsessed?” But these decisions made us very different from other families. My mother detested our taking a distinct route. Her usual counterargument toward us was: “Others do not live this way. Why do you choose to live like this?” She just could not understand why we did not allow our daughter to go to school. To her, we seemed like rational people and our daughter was a normal kid, but our decisions seemed irrational. She reasoned that if you sent her to school and returned to a job, wouldn't that be easier? We

explained to her it was because of our Christian faith. She could not understand our choice because she could not simply accept the answer.

I had never expected that our relationship would become so strained because of my Christian faith. To avoid more conflicts, I tried not to bring up the topic of my daughter's academic progress and future education options. When we talked about other topics, my mother was fine.

At the beginning of our homeschooling, I was not very patient with my daughter. Sometimes I yelled at her, especially when overseeing her practice the piano. My daughter cried and had meltdowns. It was quite messy. My mother could not bear seeing this: a jobless me making her grand-daughter's education go nowhere. Mother often left home and spent time outside. My father was less volatile. He did ask me to send my daughter to school, but he kept his calm whatever happened. My daughter had a difficult transition too. When she went outside to play, neighbors would ask why she did not go to school or which grade she was in. We taught her to explain about her homeschooling. But it took a while for her to understand why she could not go to school like other kids. For about a year, that was the worst time for my relationship with my mother. I was under great pressure and noticed how my mother's hair turned more gray during this time. It was a great discouragement to her, and even her eyes became dull.

In Nanjing, many Christian families were homeschooling.<sup>2</sup> There are advantages because one can find many educational businesses offering classes. Our daughter's ability to speak English was maintained after returning from America because of a weekly class with foreign teachers. She also took Taekwondo and piano lessons. The only disadvantage is the lack of a socialization group. In our house church, I also formed a co-study support group with two other mothers. Each week we spent a day doing lessons together. Yet resources were few, from textbooks to activity space. Not all Christian mothers followed the group rules either. One often asked me to teach her daughter and then left to go shopping. Her daughter had behavior problems, but I was not in the place to discipline her. This sometimes made my own daughter wonder why I seemed to have a double standard with them. After two years of experimenting, I quit the support group.

My husband and I value the church's education to the next generation very much. I am also a Sunday school teacher. Our church did not have very many children. In it there are more families where the wives are Christians but their husbands are not. Some families are Sunday Christians.

Apart from church time, their values and lifestyles are unchanged. They are very self-involved. I don't think kids who grow up in Christian families necessarily behave better.

“MAYBE SHE IS FEELING THE SAME PITY TOWARDS ME”

When our daughter reached eight years old, my mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. First she thought her chest pain was due to the continued smog in Nanjing. After mother's diagnosis, my cousin, son of my eldest aunt, was also diagnosed with cancer at the age of about 40. He passed away in three months. During our last visit in the hospital, my husband wanted to talk with him about the Christian faith. I was quite hesitant, knowing that my aunt herself was a Buddhist. Then at the funeral, this aunt held my hands and said, “Your cousin is pitiable, because he will pass into the Netherworld (*yincao difu*) alone. If only he had believed in your Christianity! That would have been so good!” I felt regret at not explaining more to my cousin. Later when I visited my aunt, she told me, “I can see my baby boy sitting at the table.” She was referring to my cousin. She began to ask more about how Christians see life after death.

My mother was shocked at getting cancer, but she quickly accepted it. It did change her temperament. I downloaded the sermons of a Chinese pastor who survived the same kind of cancer for her to listen to. She enjoyed them, saying that they were just like stories. When she was quite sick, we wanted to encourage her to receive baptism. So, I had a conversation with mother about the basics of Christianity, like sin, grace and prayer. She nodded, saying that “I know this, I know this. Everyone is a sinner.” She heard these things from sermons. After some time, she no longer had nightmares. I asked her to pray when she became sleepless or fearful at night. “Prayer is just plain talking with God, so you can say whatever you want to say,” I said.

Last year, my sister sold her apartment because she applied and received Hungarian citizenship.<sup>3</sup> She had been hoping to emigrate because air pollution and food problems in China were getting worse and worse. Better education for her son was another reason she was attracted to another country. We were not sure how she was going to support herself by moving to Hungary. Later she sold her apartment and moved in with my parents. Probably she is not ready to immigrate abroad yet.

My mother's generation was more able to persevere through adversity. They are also more self-giving, compared to our generation. My mother had very few opportunities, even though she was very smart. I felt pity for

her. Well, maybe she is feeling the same pity toward me, seeing that I gave up my job and chose to homeschool my daughter. Our generation could afford to make some choices that my mother's generation found hard to understand.

\* \* \*

The harmony of family life is a key Confucian ideal in traditional Chinese culture. Deferential obedience to members of the family who are senior in age is seen as a virtue. Xu's extended maternal family exemplifies this picture even in testing times. Being the favorite firstborn son of this big family, Xu's elder uncle treated all family members with respect. His example became a legacy that shaped the next generation. Xu's mother upheld this ideal for her own family life, which put its roots down in an urban environment. Having married a man of compliant temperament, Xu's mother became the pillar of her home.

The relationship between Xu and her mother had much to do with how a mother treated two sisters differently. For fear of another tragedy being repeated in the family, Xu's mother arranged a less ambitious path for her elder daughter. Acknowledging this elder daughter's competency, Xu's mother later regretted it and compensated the elder daughter for the choice. All family members gave in to the elder daughter's demands, making her more strong-willed and eruptive in temperament.

Xu experienced less frustration in life before her conversion, which happened a few years after her husband's. Visiting the United States brought about Xu's conversion and the deepening of this couple's faith. Resisting China's public school system, both Xu and her sister pulled their children out of public schools. Xu even gave up her career and began to homeschool her daughter. Since they also sold the school-district apartment, Xu's family lived with her parents. This led to a crisis in the home.

In China, educational choices of a nuclear family often involve input and financial contributions from grandparents. This is partly because after two generations of the One-Child Policy, every four grandparents now enjoy the presence of one grandchild. Xu's mother could not understand why these young mothers would truncate their own child's education, especially when compared to her own generation that did not have the luxury of going to schools. She tried every way to coerce them into changing their mind, but it did not work out. Because of her Christian faith, Xu was more determined not to send her daughter to public schools. The previously harmonious relationship between Xu and her mother had been

disrupted. Xu's mother attributed this younger daughter's mid-life rebellion due to her newfound faith.

The hostility at home did not resolve until after Xu's mother had a cancer diagnosis. I remember how Xu began to tell me about her mother's whole life after getting the medical report. She wept over her mother's labor and sacrifice to support the family. It gave Xu more pain thinking that as the more obedient and understanding daughter, she had to act against her mother's will in many choices. Fortunately, Xu's husband became a strong support at home. With attention and care from this couple, her mother gradually opened up to the Christian message.

## NOTES

1. Since the mid-2000s, China has funded the sending out of many visiting scholars (including professors and doctoral students) from state-sponsored universities and research institutes to the United States. By late 2010s, suspicion towards China's overseas academics has grown. See Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "China's Long Arm Reaches into American Campuses," *Foreign Policy*, March 7, 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/07/chinas-long-arm-reaches-into-american-campuses-chinese-students-scholars-association-university-communist-party/>

Also Emily Feng, "FBI Urges Universities to Monitor Some Chinese Students and Scholars in the U.S.," *National Public Radio*, June 28, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/28/728659124/fbi-urges-universities-to-monitor-some-chinese-students-and-scholars-in-the-u-s>

2. Dandan Ni, "Outlaw Educators: China's Growing Homeschooling Movement," *Sixth Tone*, December 13, 2017. <http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1001294/outlaw-educators-chinas-growing-homeschooling-movement>

Elaine Yau, "The Chinese Parents Who Homeschool Their Kids, and Why They Reject Public Education," *South China Morning Post*, July 5, 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/families/article/2153883/chinese-parents-who-homeschool-their-kids-and-why-they-reject>

3. Emigration from China has increased after Xi Jinping's rule since 2012. See "Wealthy Chinese Are Fleeing the Country Like Mad," *ChinaFile*, February 3, 2015. <http://www.chinafile.com/multimedia/infographics/wealthy-chinese-are-fleeing-country-mad>

About Chinese emigration to Hungary, see Marton Dunai, "Hungary Welcomes Wealthy Chinese Despite Migrant Hostility," *Reuters*, October 5, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-china-hungary/hungary-welcomes-wealthy-chinese-despite-migrant-hostility-idUSKC-N1250RN>





## Impartial Love

### “HER GENERATION HAD A BARREN SPIRITUAL AND INTELLECTUAL LIFE”

I grew up in Chongming Island of suburban Shanghai. I never stepped off the island before high school. I was the only child of my parents. My paternal grandparents also lived with us. They all gave me a lot of love. When I was five, my grandmother led me to attend church. She was a believer, and she asked me if I had anything to pray about.

My mother was born in 1958, in the middle of the Great Famine. Her own father passed away due to cancer when she was sixteen. She had an elder sister and a younger brother. My mother took on traditionally masculine tasks in her own home. My grandmother relied on her with heavy house chores. That experience shaped her personality.

Due to the Cultural Revolution, her education was truncated, like most people in her cohort. Both my parents only had a few years of elementary school education. My father later studied on his own to acquire more knowledge and skills. Later, Mother entered a sports school for training professional athletes. She trained to be a long-distance runner. So, my mother is an energetic extravert. We were very different from each other in many ways. She liked to speak in front of groups with a loud voice. My

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*(Narration by Lian, age thirty seven, university administrator)*

mother is very active and always on the move. She is hard working and makes the home very tidy every day.

As single people in the 1970s, my mother and father worked on a farm together. That was how they met each other. After getting married, she returned to my father's township. My paternal grandmother did not expect her to work outside the home. So, my mother mainly cared for me, while father tended the fishponds. Chongming Island is a remote rural area, so later political movements did not affect their lives that much.

My mother's generation did more manual labor work than we did. They faced tremendous pressure to survive and support their family's basic needs. She had the same strength as a man and worked like one. But her generation had a barren spiritual and intellectual life. She thought little of life's meaning. She also had limited options of leisure. After manual labor work, there is not much left to do that is satisfying in rural areas. That was how she got into card games. People had little taste for reading or other pastimes.

In my memory, when I was four and five, mother was always busy playing card games. She did not give me a lot of attention, as my father later did. She never communicated well with me. When I wanted some intimacy with my mother, I once jumped on her back while she was chatting with others. She was startled and scolded me harshly for it. Overall, my mother was not very approachable. She never sat down to talk with me about issues. I never felt very close to her. So, I did not understand motherly love. When she was coercing me to do something, mother would always say, "I am doing this for your own good." That puzzled me. Later I became rebellious toward her orders. My father was the opposite—he often asked for my opinions and discussed issues with me gently. He respected my own will. So I can understand fatherly love better.

In our village, playing card games had been common, especially for housewives and retired elderly people. People mostly gambled with small amounts of money. But this trend became so dominant that the local police had to come and put a stop to it. They considered this activity unproductive. Some people were even arrested for gambling at card games. So, it was not just a waste of time, but it could also contribute to crimes. My grandmother had also played card games with neighbors after her retirement. When the ban on all card games in our town was imposed, she was very afraid and frustrated. But she still wanted to find another pastime. Some people told her that she could find rest in the Christian faith, so she followed them to church. There she found peace of mind and heart, so she believed in Jesus.

My father at that time had already been a believer. In the 1970s, when he was twenty years old, father listened to the Voice of Friendship (*liangyou diantai*), based in Hong Kong.<sup>1</sup> Back then, such radio programs were considered “stations of the enemies (*ditai*)” by the state, so he listened in secret. Soon Father converted to Christianity, but he did not attend church regularly. So my father and grandmother became Christians independently as part of their own life trajectories. But it was my grandmother who first gave me the earliest exposure to Christianity through a church in our village. I liked going there because it was a place to play with other children.

“HE CONSIDERED IT A SIGN OF DISCIPLINE  
ON OUR FAMILY FROM GOD”

My parents fought a lot when I was young. During harvest time, there was a lot of work to be done in the field. My father had a love for the arts, such as music, Chinese calligraphy and poetry. My mother then would scold him for not working hard enough on the crops and the fishponds. They would have arguments. That was my only fear in life. So when my grandmother asked me if I had anything to pray about, my prayer was that God would stop my parents from arguing with one another. My understanding of God back then was only that He is a loving Heavenly father, and that He, in fact, listens to my prayers.

When my parents had an argument, my paternal mother always favored my father. The most common cause for their argument was my mother’s obsession with card games. Most of the time, I stood by my father and accused my mother of wrongdoing. It was later in my college years that I realized my own partiality toward my father. I had seldom stood in my mother’s shoes and thought of her. On some family matters, my father used a voting method. Since there were three of us, and I always stood by Father, Mother seldom had her way in this family democracy.

One turning point was when an accident happened in our home when I was in fourth grade (1991). My parents had just rebuilt our two-story house. My mother had had an injury on her fingers when sewing things. She had surgery on it. After that, she had a lot of pain and could not sleep. So, a few neighbors wanted to help her. They thought playing card games together could distract her from the pain, but card games were banned by the authorities. Therefore, they set up a place for playing card games in a hidden attic of our new house, where light was very dim so nobody could find out about their activities. At night, while going down the stairs, a woman who was our

neighbor fell from the second floor. Our house did not have railings. My father heard some wailing sounds. When he went out, he found the woman badly injured on the ground. Soon afterward, she passed away.

My father had put up a wooden cross on our new house. So, after this accident with our neighbor, he considered it a sign of discipline on our family from God: if you claim to be a child of God, why do you still act like the rest of the world? Since then, my father began to attend church with me. My mother also went because she experienced guilt and fear due to the accident. For six months, my parents and I went to church together, and we prayed every night together. In my memory, it was the happiest time of my childhood.

My father was someone who shaped me in significant ways. Every Sunday morning at 5 AM, he rode his bike with me on it to church. It usually took us an hour of biking. On the way back, he always shared with me what the sermon message was about. So, he was my first spiritual mentor. My father also paid close attention to what happened to me in school. Every day he asked me about what bothered me in school. When I shared with him, he would help me think through these troubles. My father's temperament was milder than my mother's. She had a quick temper. It was through my father that I found it easy to accept God as my Heavenly Father who cared for me unceasingly.

My mother was an extravert, who had many unbelieving friends. In our village, if you converted to Christianity, you would be considered "weak" and "vulnerable." People looked down upon Christians. So, my mother later decided not to attend church with us anymore. My father and I felt very sad about it. When my father and I continued attending by ourselves, she tried to stop us from going to church. My parents had arguments. My mother locked up our bike, and we eventually gave up that time. But other times, we persisted in going.

### “MOTHER CONSIDERED HIS ADVICE AS UNTHINKABLE AND RIDICULOUS”

My later life's trajectory was all around my schooling. My parents did not have high expectations for my academic achievements, but I scored very high in junior middle school. Our school publicized the rankings of students every semester, and I was usually the second or third in rank. Interestingly, girls were usually at the top of the class. Toward the end of my junior middle school, I even scored No. 1 among hundreds of my

grade peers in our school. I considered it a great encouragement from God to me. That achievement qualified me for the best key high school on Chongming Island.

A challenge to my Christian faith in junior middle school was the requirement of joining the Communist Youth League (CYL).<sup>2</sup> Teachers chose candidates based on grades, such as being in the top five of a class. First, I felt honored. But after I told my father, he responded that as a Christian, I should not join the CYL. He told me that there would be a ceremony when you joined the CYL where you needed to say a vow of atheism. That vow is in conflict with our Christian faith. He was very critical of this. But my mother considered his advice unthinkable and ridiculous. She even asked our neighbor to draft a petition statement for me to join the CYL, and all I needed to do was to hand-copy it. But I respected my father's authority more. Although I desired the honor of my teachers, eventually I told my teacher that since I am a Christian, I want to give up this opportunity. In the key high school, I was the only student who was not a CYL member. A general secretary of CYL even came and talked to me about joining. I responded in the same way.

Also in high school, I became very proud, thinking that I might be quite talented in many ways. It was a boarding school, so I left my parents and only returned home on weekends. I was both proud and lonely. Every weekend, I longed to return home to see my parents. Since it was a very competitive high school, my ranking for grades was average. I felt a lot of despair. I had some troubled thoughts, and God used that time to calm me down.

Our teacher encouraged us to practice calligraphy. My father suggested that I could hand-copy some scripture to practice my handwriting. He copied from the Book of Proverbs, so I began to hand-copy his writings of the Proverbs from the Bible. The book of Proverbs has a lot of day-to-day observations about life, and that taught me a lot. This humbled me to persevere in my academic study. I now think that Proverbs is a great book for teaching young people. Later, in my second year of high school, my final exam score ranked No. 2 among all same grade students. That gave me a lot of confidence.

During that time, my mother found work in a township enterprise manufacturing stainless steel cutlery, so she became quite busy. Father mainly managed the fishponds. When they both had work to do, our family relationship improved a lot. At church, the pastor invited Father to join the choir several times choir, but he always declined. He was too much of

an introvert. There were very few young people or middle-aged males in that church, so the elders and pastor appreciated my father's piety.

When choosing universities and majors, my father thought that because I was an introvert and inexperienced about society, I could possibly study sociology. That might teach me to be more open-minded in the future. I had little idea about what kinds of majors one could take. His understanding of sociology was also not very informed. I lifted a prayer to God that if He grants me to enter my ideal university, I would then give myself to serve Him. Later my father told me that he also had this prayer.

### “SUCH RECOGNITIONS BROUGHT TEMPTATION AND BONDAGE TO MY SOUL”

I did get into my ideal university as a sociology major. However, I did not expect my college years to be a roller coaster ride in terms of my spirituality. Looking back, I see clearly that my earlier faith in God was mainly for tangible benefits. There was an innocent dependence on God from my part, but I did not truly know Him.

In college, I did not know where the church was. For a long time, my sense of self-worth and value had always come from other people's approval of me. So, I worked very hard to pursue that kind of approval. I continued to do very well in college and even won a Top Student Scholarship, which covered my tuition for a whole year.

Such recognitions brought temptation and bondage to my soul. In my second year of college, I sank into great anxiety. I wanted to pursue recognition and approval from others, because that was how I had always measured my value. But I was not a very sociable person. I got along with my classmates, but I did not feel that I belonged. Maybe it was also because of my rural family background, but I was not used to city girls' shopping routines as a pastime. I was always the only one who stayed in the library. In earlier stages of my schooling, I had always had good friends to confide in. But such friendship did not happen to me in college. People around me did not share their lives in a deep and satisfying way. Since I was lonely, I just studied harder. My spiritual life was at its lowest level. The only spiritual conversations were with my father over the phone.

Two years into college, I felt that I was at the brink of mental collapse. I spent all my time in the library with minimal interaction with others. Worst of all, I began to doubt the Christian faith. Does God really exist? I used to think that God answered my prayers by giving me good grades,

but now I thought it might have been my own hard work. In the first twenty years of my life, I had never met another Christian at school. At the same time, the public school curriculum has been teaching atheistic content. I used to treat these as theories, because I had considered my belief in God true. All my schoolmates knew about my Christian faith. But in college, the challenge of being the only Christian in school became increasingly overwhelming. My doubt about God's existence led to many internal struggles. I no longer wanted to pray or to read the Bible. I believed that all my achievements were due to my own hard work. That was more tangible, while the Christian faith was too abstract and uncertain to grasp. All I wanted to do was to work hard and to boost my GPA. With these changes, the peace and calm in my heart was lost.

In my junior year, my university collaborated with a university in Singapore. I got the opportunity to study there for six months. It was God's grace to deliver me from my previous anxious and unbelieving stage. First, it was very challenging to adapt to the English-speaking environment. Second, due to cultural barriers, I felt even more lonely. I also realized that I had nothing to boast of myself. I had been too proud before. I was still the not-so-smart student among my classmates. I still needed to try harder.

I took a Bible with me to Singapore, even though I no longer considered myself a Christian at that point. Soon after my arrival, people from the campus fellowship invited me to their Bible study group. I did want to study the faith one more time, just to know about the God which I had claimed as my own for such a long time. Before that, the word "fellowship" in the Christian sense never existed in my vocabulary.

When I felt a loss of peace in my heart, I began to read through the Bible for the first time, starting from the Book of Matthew. Then I learned that Jesus was God's Son, who did all these many miracles. I considered them unbelievable. My heart was lingering between belief and unbelief. I also thought that many of Jesus' words were not in line with normal rationality. Before this, my Bible knowledge had been very shallow. The Book of Proverbs was a most familiar one, but any other books remained little known to me.

During this systematic self-study of the Bible, I began to question what I had seen in life as truth. The famous professors that taught me in college each had a theory. They all claimed to have a reason for their theorizing, but none proclaimed "truth." In comparison, Jesus points to himself as "truth" and calls those who follow his ways "blessed." That was shocking

to me. In my heart, I made a decision to try following Jesus' words. So, I began to practice Jesus' teachings in life, and it dispelled the anxieties in me. I then reasoned with myself: even if the Bible is not true, but my practice of Jesus' teachings did bring me peace, isn't this still a better outcome than atheism? So, I re-committed myself to God. In my academic studies, I practiced "Do your best and let God do the rest." Gradually, I learned to shift the burden to God through prayer and accept the outcome with peace. There was joy and peace in my life.

After coming back to my university in Shanghai, in 2002, I began to look for a campus fellowship. There were very few Christians on my campus. I prayed to God, asking Him to prepare a group of believers so we could fellowship together. A few weeks later, after a Sunday service at a state church, a young female student found me, inviting me to join their campus fellowship. I said yes to her, but my heart was quite alert about what kind of fellowship she belonged to. In Singapore, I learned about the existence of cult groups. I prayed to God, asking for His guidance to an orthodox Christian fellowship. A moment later, I overheard her talking to another young male student at the church entrance. The young man was trying very hard with enthusiastic gestures to persuade her, a fresh new believer, about quitting her cult group. Later, I asked the young man about which fellowship group he was attending. His was a Christian fellowship on my own campus.

Our fellowship gathering was semi-discreet. Members called it "a small home." A sister led me to do daily devotions and to study the Bible. So this fellowship helped lay my foundation. They were very encouraging to me. After some time, I also had to lead others and do evangelism. So, I became more outspoken. It was years later that I learned this group was started by Campus Crusade for Christ in the 1990s. Around the time I graduated, a group of members from this fellowship devoted their lives to serve God full-time as evangelists. I was truly amazed. We all considered "full-time evangelists" as a very honorable calling. But these people had to be discreet with their work.

My graduation thesis was about the Three Gorges Dam migration project. A French scholar at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences wanted to hire a research assistant to help with his research in this area. He was a Catholic. My thesis advisor introduced me to him. The two of us went on research trips together to suburban Shanghai, Chongqing and Hong Kong. Through sociological research, I also learned how to communicate with people. I have made progress in my social life.



“SHE THOUGHT THAT UNBELIEVERS DO BETTER THAN  
CHRISTIANS, SO WHY BOTHER TO BELIEVE?”

Since attending college, I began to feel more responsibility to influence my mother with the Christian faith. I began to examine my love for my parents. For example, I used to buy presents for my father, thinking that my mother would not appreciate them anyway. But later I intentionally did the same for both of them. Before I learned to treat them impartially, my mother had been resistant to my evangelistic efforts to her. Generally, she thought that unbelievers do better than Christians, so why bother to believe? Although she observed changes in my father, she was reluctant to admit the positive side of the Christian faith. I think her reluctance was in fact also due to the pressure from her friends who considered Christianity unfavorably. She has a strong personality. She cared about saving face in front of friends. It is hard for her to change.

I realized my mother's love toward me after I got married and had children. Before our wedding, when I left home on a shuttle bus, my mother suddenly thrust an envelope of cash to me through the window when the bus was leaving. After the birth of my first child, she cared for the baby nightly at great expense to her own health. My mother does not communicate her love to family in words. But with her actions, she loved us.

I met Lin through Campus Crusade for Christ campus fellowship. He was a graduate student in my university. When he came to teach us for the first time, the leader of our group introduced him as a fourth-generation believer from Wenzhou.<sup>3</sup> His prayer struck me as different. I liked him immediately. More importantly, given his spiritual maturity, Lin is not a domineering person. He is open to hear others' opinions. I admired this quality of his. Later we were in the same morning devotion and prayer meeting on campus. A year later, we began a committed dating relationship.

When Lin and I brought our wedding plan to parents on both sides, they all objected. My parents considered Wenzhou too remote. Lin's parents had the same concern too. The first time Lin went to our home, I was wearing an engagement ring. My mother took a look at it and ran upstairs. My father knew that she despised this informality. He proceeded to lambaste my boyfriend for taking customs lightly. According to the Chinese customs, his parents should have come to “propose” in the first place. My boyfriend later wrote a letter of apology to my father; however, my father did not read it and threw it away. Later Lin's parents came to our home, and things went well.

After our wedding, my mother began to like her son-in-law a lot. She discovered a lot of good qualities in him. So, my mother found herself surrounded by another family of Christians. Her resistance against the faith waned. When my children were old enough to ask her to sing hymns, she was willing to do that and to pray with them.

Two years ago, my mother was diagnosed with uterine fibroids. She was anxious because one of her best friends was dying of late-term cervical cancer. My mother had a surgery to remove her uterus. She was in pain, afraid and sleepless. My aunt and I were watching her in the hospital. I asked my mother if she could pray to God with me. If it had been before, with her own sister watching, she would not have been willing to pray. But she held my hands and prayed with me. While we were praying, she fell asleep. It was a great testimony of God's power for my aunt too.

After this illness, my mother changed dramatically. She now considers a lot of things futile. For example, she commented that although my cousin who enjoys a middle-class life in Shanghai had purchased an expensive apartment, this cousin soon complained that it was not spacious enough. My mother considered life too short for these unimportant and meaningless pursuits.

“THEY REALIZED THAT AN AUTHENTIC WALK WITH GOD  
MATTERS MORE THAN MATERIAL SUCCESS”

I entered graduate school in 2006. We got married when Lin and I both finished our programs. My husband worked as a university faculty in Wenzhou. The head of his college is a Christian believer. So even when the political environment tightened up, my husband did not have much pressure from top-down. I also had a position in the provost's office in the same university. My husband applied for government funding to do research about Christianity and Wenzhou's local economy. To his surprise, this funding got approved. Since then, he was tenured and his department put less pressure on him. A few years later, he was promoted to be the vice dean of his college. These advancements are all by God's grace.

We had two children in a row, so I was content caring for them and doing some administrative work. Our realization is that if we continue this trajectory, our lives can be smooth and comfortable. There might be a good pension after we both retire. Our children will grow up, and our parents' expectations for our career success would be fulfilled. Nevertheless,

there was something not very fulfilling in our commitment to God. We could have done more. So a few years ago, we started our own church as lay leaders. After that, my husband quit his administrative duties as vice dean. He is just content to be a teaching faculty.

We now devote half of our time and energy in serving this church with over sixty members, mostly medical professionals (doctors and nurses) and university faculty. Over sixty percent are females. In the past few years, ten couples married in this church. Many female members who dated unbelievers were able to influence their husbands in the faith.

Although my parents-in-law are third-generation Christians, they have been immersed in a secularized culture where people chat about real estate and cars more than spiritual things. Church members also compare their children's achievement with each other. But God did amazing things in this family too. For example, my sister-in-law married someone who is a nominal Christian. When my sister-in-law had her first children, her husband had an affair in which the other woman also became pregnant. It was a heavy blow to my husband's parents. They realized that an authentic walk with God matters more than material success. Without the former, you have nothing left.

Since then, their attitudes toward our service in church have changed too. Their walk with God went to a much deeper level. Now when we do video chat, they always remind us to pray more when making decisions in life. My mother-in-law also reminds my husband that his ability to teach and preach is by God's grace, not by his own competence.

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In post-reform China, opportunities of upward social mobility have been available to a younger generation through pursuing academic excellence in schooling. By achieving well and making use of the open channels of education resources, even children of rural households may enter into universities and even overseas institutions. Lian's story presents how more flexible social structures help further Chinese women's life chances. As a second-generation believer, she faced new challenges before being able to own the Christian faith for herself.

In rural China, villagers who practice Christianity are looked down upon as a marginalized and even superstitious group.<sup>4</sup> Lian's mother remained distant from the faith, because she cared about "saving face" in front of relatives and neighbors. She is a woman of few words but who has

a lot of physical strength. She had an obsession with card games and would not care to ponder life's important issues. Lian had a closer emotional connection with her father who became a thoughtful Christian through self-study. He patiently walked with Lian through different seasons of her life. He also planted the seeds of faith in her. A parent's changing spirituality may become noticeable to the child. Lian recalls her father's insistence on her not following suit in joining the atheistic Communist Youth League in school.

As in many young Christian women's experiences, the exposure to on-campus Christian groups and overseas faith communities became turning points for Lian. Through studying at a top university and later an overseas program in Singapore, she went through a spiritual renewal in life. She began to own her childhood faith in a deeper way. By then Lian also had reflected on her relationship with her mother.

Marrying another believer who grew up in a Christian home, Lian saw from her husband's Christian family how priorities in their life were reshuffled by God experientially. Like in the West, nowadays Christian communities in China are also embedded in materialism and an achievement culture that produce many conflicting values. Lian and her husband later became positive Christian influences in both families.

## NOTES

1. Voice of Friendship is a Christian radio broadcast by Far East Broadcasting Corporation since 1949.
2. It is an organization run by the Chinese Communist Party for youth between the ages of fourteen and twenty-eight. One needs to be a member of Communist Youth League in order to join the Chinese Communist Party later in life. Today in China, middle school students are encouraged to join the Communist Youth League.
3. The city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang province is known as "China's Jerusalem" because it has a dense Christian population. After centuries of missionary activities, Wenzhou is the place where it is more common to see multi-generational expression of Christianity. See Minnie Chan, "Christianity in Wenzhou rose from humble beginnings to one million adherents," *South China Morning Post*, July 23, 2014. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1557358/christianity-wenzhou-rose-humble-beginnings-one-million-adherents>
4. In the 1990s, there was a brief revival of Christianity in rural China, especially agricultural provinces such as Henan. In other parts of rural regions, there has been continued intolerance and hostility toward Christian believers.



## Strong Woman

### “MOTHER WAS ALSO THE SPIRITUAL LEADER OF OUR WHOLE EXTENDED FAMILY”

Before 1949, my maternal grandfather was the president of a workers' union. Later in his career, he was framed by competitors and lost his position. My mother was born in 1962, a year after the Great Famine. She recalls the Cultural Revolution to be very cruel. There were Big Letter Posters (*dazibao*) and struggle meetings everywhere. She once said, “How could people have so much hatred towards each other?” When there was a political campaign, my grandfather would escape to the suburbs. So he was never deeply involved.

Because of the Cultural Revolution, my mother did not have a good education. She finished only high school. Later, she studied animal husbandry and worked as a veterinarian in rural Shanghai. Then she worked in Nong Gong Shang, a state-owned chain store. My mother is a very capable woman. Everybody who knows her would agree with that. So by the 1990s, she was promoted all the way up to high-level management.

Mother was the first daughter in her own family. She helped raise her younger brother. That might explain why she has a strong personality. When she was working in the state-owned company, a few gangsters came

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(Narration by Ye, age thirty one, pastor's wife)

to her office with a knife, threatening her life for money. My mother said that she did not even blink and calmly asked them to get out. They feared her and left.

People who know my mother tend to think that she looks calm and friendly. But she is very strong-willed in our home. My parents' marriage was a match made by mutual acquaintances. At home, my father is the weak one. He always listened to my mother. She is the pillar of our extended family too. For instance, when my cousin was going through a divorce, they had to split the assets, and it was my mother who negotiated with my cousin's ex-husband. She is an exceptional negotiator. She can appear tough so that people can't take advantage of her family. Whenever family members ran into some trouble, she was always there to back them up. My maternal uncle (mother's younger brother) has a weak personality. He relied on Mother a lot. So Mother was also the spiritual leader of our whole extended family. My grandparents and other relatives always called upon her to pray for their concerns.

When I was young, my parents argued a lot. They also had many fights, physically. So their marriage left a shadow on me. But after my mother became a Christian, the change in her was very noticeable. She began to treat my father better. After seeing those changes, my father also converted soon.

My relationship with my mother got much closer because of our Christian faith. But when I was young, we were distant because she had to work long hours, went out for business dinners and so on. I spent more time with my father then. When I had secrets or intimate things to share, Mother was seldom around. I was very close to my father.

### "I NEVER FIT IN WITH MY PEERS"

I was born in 1988 and grew up in rural Shanghai. When I was young, my parents were busy with their jobs. I was often left at home, so I had little contact with people. Because of that, I became timid and afraid of people. After finishing elementary school, I entered a private junior middle school in the city—a boarding school. Because I was a shy introvert coming from the rural area, my classmates bullied me. For example, in the winter, they poured water in my bed. They assigned me to do most of the dormitory chores, such as getting hot water and cleaning. When I brought some snacks from home, they snatched them out of my hands. This was an expensive school for children from rich families in the city. These children were often spoiled, and they looked down upon people from the countryside. That was why they bullied me. My parents enrolled me in this school

because the principal was a distant relative. But because I was such an introvert, I never went to the principal for help. I did not like to talk much. This experience had shaped me in significant ways. My self-esteem was low. I did not like crowds. I never fit in with my peers.

My parents both worked as managers in state-owned enterprises. Both of them were the general secretaries of the Communist Party branches in their workplaces. So as key cadres of the Party, they had to follow the national policy and have only one child. That is why I never had siblings.

My mother, especially, has strong leadership skills. Around the year 2000, she opened her own factory, making bubble tea. The factory had one hundred workers. A few years later, she partnered with a foreign investor, a Canadian Chinese man. So her factory became a joint venture.

My mother was a devout Buddhist back then. She visited temples and burned incense on important calendar dates. This Canadian partner is a Christian believer. He was doing “business as mission” in China. Over time, my mother was impressed by this man’s character. She had never met anyone so selfless and kind. This “uncle” kept inviting her to church. When my middle-school exam was approaching, my mother participated in a lot of superstitious activities: fortune-telling, *fengshui*, burning incense. On a particular day, she would discourage me from wearing clothes of a certain color. On another day, she decided to move our bed to face a different direction. She did all these, wishing to bring good luck to my test. When this Canadian uncle invited her to church again, she decided not to offend this Christian God.

So my mother and I went to church for the first time. It was a big church building. When my mother heard the choir singing hymns for the first time, she was awe-struck. Tears came down her cheeks. I had tears too. That experience totally changed her. Since then, she decided to become a Christian.

I did very well in my middle-school exam. My mother considered that result to be a prayer answered from God. She then threw out all her old idols, Buddhist statues and Taoist symbols. The Canadian business partner probably had told her about not worshipping idols, so she destroyed all previously-owned articles of devotions with determination. This uncle was a great influence on us. We are still in touch with him to this day.

After her conversion, my mother wanted to quit the Party, but she did not succeed. The woman at our street committee even paid her Party dues for many years. That lady said that it would be very difficult to report up to her superiors about my mother’s quitting. It would have been a disqualifying mark on their work too. This woman also told my mother, “Go

ahead with your religion. It is fine. Our Party won't mind." So she did not quit her Communist Party membership although she very much wanted to.

In high school, I began to go to church with my mother every Sunday. But every time I fell asleep during the sermon. My mother did not blame me. I still continued to attend. So I napped in church for three years! Nothing entered my head. After my college entrance exam, my mother took me to a summer camp in Wenzhou. It was a closed camp high up in the mountains for Christian college students across China. By then, my mother had started to serve bi-vocationally. She brought an Australian Chinese speaker to present there.

This summer camp was a transformative experience for me. I discovered for the first time that there were so many young Christian believers around my age. Before that, I always considered this faith to be relevant to the elderly or to my mother's generation. I had met very few young people in church. In that camp, I observed how these college students led worship. Their zeal was moving to me. Every morning they had devotional time. It was very powerful to me. I realized that the Christian faith has much to offer people of my own generation.

#### "MY TEAM LEADER OPPOSED OUR DATING RELATIONSHIP"

My real conversion took place after I entered a house church. It was near my college. Someone my mother knew connected me to a college student on that campus. I saw him only once. Then when I joined the church, the leader did not know this contact person. So in the end, both sides lost track of this person, but there I was. The college student fellowship in this house church was just starting up. We had only four people. It was where I learned to pray out loud for the first time. It was also where I began to learn about the basic truths in the Bible. I began to enjoy evangelism. My personality changed a lot from my past shyness. We were a small team, and we had to take initiative in expanding. So it was very transformative for me.

Two years later, a brother joined our fellowship from another gathering place under this same house church. He became my boyfriend. My team leader opposed our dating relationship. College students' fellowship is often characterized by emotional entanglements. My team leader had been trying to pursue me too. He said that my boyfriend was just a new believer, so we were not fit for each other. That was a very unpleasant experience. We felt very hurt. After another year, we quit this group and joined my mother's church. She mainly pastored migrant workers.



Before I knew my boyfriend, I had been very patriotic. My mother had always planned on sending me to study overseas, but I always refused. To me, studying abroad meant betraying our motherland. One had to love one's nation first. That was me earlier. I had been brainwashed since I was young. I never reflected on the things that were taught to me. My mother was not particularly unpatriotic or anything. She just thought that studying outside China would be good for my career.

My boyfriend (who later became my husband) quit a military college because he could not bear the heavy indoctrination. He later entered a master's program in religious studies. He is very critical of Chinese politics, so his thoughts brought about a big change in me. Later, he wanted to go to a seminary for full-time ministry. This was how he reasoned: "If this faith is true, then I ought to serve full-time. If it is false, then there is no reason to believe at all." It was the first time ever I heard someone say something like this. He truly believes that if this religious faith is true, then he needs to give up everything and serve God.

After I graduated from college, we got married in my mother's church. Mother accepted my husband. If she weren't a Christian, I could imagine that she would have acted differently, given the fact that my husband came from rural Shanxi and that as a student he has no job. But because of the Christian faith, my mother accepted him gladly.

I started working at the Gymboree early-education center. Many urban families desire their children to have an American-style education, and this learning center catered to children from ages three to six. During my time working there, I had a student whose parents are Christian believers. However, they did not find any church to attend. There was a small group in their home. My husband and I began to lead this small group. We hosted it in our home. Helping with this fellowship of believers was a big change for us. It was our first leadership training together.

**"MOTHER HAS BEEN VERY SENSITIVE  
AND GIFTED TO SERVE THEM"**

My mother worshipped in Three-Self churches at first. In 2006, she closed the factory and started to serve full-time. She mainly reached out to migrant workers in suburban factories. Then in 2008 she met a Chinese person from Singapore who was in charge of a British organization. This Singapore woman was on her first trip to China. She came from a

Pentecostal background, so the organization was also Pentecostal, specializing in healing. She teamed up with my mother. Later she chose my mother as the China representative.

After my conversion in college, my relationship with my mother improved a lot. I began to chat more often with her. We chat about our understanding of the faith, matters in our church and fellowship. Now we talk everyday over the phone about what happens on an ordinary day. This is a big change for us.

My mother does have a strong personality, but she has also experienced a lot in life. One incident was particularly revealing of her character. When she was serving a migrant workers' church full-time, one day she was driving on the road, and she sensed the Holy Spirit reminding her: "You have led many migrant workers to the faith, but why not lead your grandmother to Christ?" At that time, her grandmother (my great-grandmother) was over ninety years old, lying in bed.

Mother felt greatly saddened, and she drove overnight for a few hours to her hometown. She explained in great detail the gospel message to my great-grandmother. The elderly woman appeared to be approaching death, weak and lying in bed. Mother asked her, "If you understand what I said, just move your eye lids." My great-grandmother blinked a few times. Then my mother said, "Do not be afraid. When you see angels coming for you, you can follow them in peace." My mother's parents were observing as she did all these things. They were not believers yet.

After my mother left, my great-grandmother did not eat for a whole week, still unconscious. Then on her back were some marks of injury as if she had been flogged. My grandmother phoned my mother and described it to her. My mother kept praying about this. Then the Holy Spirit reminded her that it was time to baptize my great-grandmother. She then found an Australian Chinese pastor. They drove overnight to her hometown. My great-grandmother was baptized. Mother saw that there were indeed injury marks on her back. When the pastor said to my great-grandmother, "Now you have been baptized, you may leave in peace. You will be with Lord Jesus." The elderly woman even opened her eyes, excited, as if she had words to say. The second day, she passed away in peace. The marks on her back were gone. Because of this miracle, both my grandparents and the rest of our extended family all became believers.

There have been many similar miracles in the church she pastored. Some people were possessed by evil spirits. Some had terminal cancers. Mother has been very sensitive and gifted to serve them. In 2011, she was

ordained as pastor by the same Pentecostal organization in Singapore. They also sponsored a Christian retreat and healing center in our hometown. The center has one hundred guest rooms and has been nicely renovated. Many churches use it for various activities.

### “THEIR THEOLOGIES WERE AT ODDS WITH EACH OTHER”

Because of my mother’s Pentecostal leanings, there used to be some friction between her and my husband, who likes reformed theology.<sup>1</sup> He used to argue a lot with my mother about theology. Their theologies were at odds with each other. He could not accept these miraculous healings. But to my mother, they were things that truly happened. Once my mother brought us to a big healing conference in Malaysia. She asked the lead pastor to pray for my husband. He fell to the ground, trembling all over. Later he did admit that it was an experience of the Holy Spirit, but he could not explain it rationally. Now they no longer argue about things like these. My husband is more open to my mother’s theology.

From 2012 to 2015, my husband attended a seminary in the United States. Three months before his graduation, my husband made up his mind to stay in America. It was not out of fear, but rather detestation of living in a country like China. My mother went to attend his graduation ceremony. We talked about our future plans. My husband then changed his mind. A house church in Beijing had called him. My mother was very supportive of our plan to return. She was not particularly upset about our choosing another city from hers. Her attitude was one of openness and understanding.

I have been married for ten years now. We have three young children. My mother came to help me every time after I gave birth. But most of the time, I raised my children on my own. She is very busy with ministry, so even if she wanted to help, it would not be possible. So unlike many Chinese mothers, she is not controlling toward my marriage and family life. The only way she shows some domineering tendency is through communication with my husband—she wants to counsel and advise him. We do seek her advice when issues in ministry come up. She is always ready with answers, since she is a very capable leader.

It is not common for young people like us to have three children. When I learned that I was pregnant with my third baby, I was very gloomy. Because very few young couples in China have these many children.<sup>2</sup> I was at a point of getting tired with raising young children. So I did not talk for

a whole day. I did not want to eat for a whole week. But when I told mother, she was very supportive. She said this pregnancy is a blessing from God. That was a big relief for me. In contrast, my mother-in-law always complained that we have too many children. So, looking back on my relationship with my mother, she has always offered positive support. I would say that she is the only person I have met in my life who does not show a lot of negative emotions. She has always been full of faith. No matter what comes up in life, she always gives me great encouragement.

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Historian Philip Jenkins describes global Pentecostalism as “the most successful social movement of the past century.”<sup>3</sup> Christians with Pentecostal leanings believe that God continues to work supernaturally in their lives, bringing spiritual gifts such as healing, speaking and interpretation of tongues, exorcism and prophecy. In China, charismatic and Pentecostal miraculous healing services meet the needs of many Chinese who went through family or political traumas. Charismatic women leadership is a noticeable trait in this development.

Ye witnessed how her mother changed from a Buddhist to a powerful Pentecostal minister, whose entrepreneurial gifts in business contributed to the growth of a local Pentecostal movement in urban China. Ye saw how her mother was lifted by God to be a faith pioneer for many believers. Ye is not particularly articulate and expressive like her mother. That is why this account is the shortest among all. In fact, Ye eventually encouraged me to interview her mother, who is more articulate and expressive. “She has many stories to tell!”

The formation of various Christian social networks also plays an important role in this story. Ye’s mother maintained extensive connections with Diaspora Chinese Christians. The young people’s retreat was a pivotal experience for Ye. She found out that the Christian faith has spread beyond a critical mass among her own generation. The fact that so many young adults were taking ownership of their faith became a catalyst to Ye.

Having a taciturn personality, which is quite different from her mother’s, Ye is content with being married to a young preacher. Her decision in being a pastor’s wife and a stay-at-home mom for three children had full support from her mother. If it was not for the faith, as Ye reflects, her mother would not have reacted positively to her choices. But Ye also notices that her mother’s tendency for control is manifested in her attempts

to influence the theology of the son-in-law who bends toward Reformed theology. This shows that even within one extended family who all embrace the Christian faith, there is a lot of theological diversity and tension toward disunity. Overall, this mother-daughter relationship is the most positive case in this collection of memoirs.

## NOTES

1. Reformed theology is a major branch of Protestantism which follows the tradition of Protestant Reformers such as John Calvin. About Calvinism in China, see Li Ma and Jin Li, *Surviving the State, Remaking the Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 116–135; Li Ma, *Religious Entrepreneurism in China's Urban House Churches: The Rise and Fall of Early Rain Presbyterian Reformed Church* (London: Routledge, 2019).
2. Even after the One-Child Policy was later relaxed to Two Children Policy in 2015, fertility rate has not increased much because families consider it unaffordable to raise two children given China's rising level of living expenses. See Anna Fifield, "Beijing's one-child policy is gone. But many Chinese are still reluctant to have more." *The Washington Post*, May 4, 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/beijings-one-child-policy-is-gone-but-many-chinese-are-still-reluctant-to-have-more/2019/05/02/c722e568-604f-11e9-bf24-db4b9fb62aa2\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.b440afdfdd2a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/beijings-one-child-policy-is-gone-but-many-chinese-are-still-reluctant-to-have-more/2019/05/02/c722e568-604f-11e9-bf24-db4b9fb62aa2_story.html?utm_term=.b440afdfdd2a)
3. Daniel H. Bays, a noted historian of Chinese Christianity, has highlighted the significance of these groups. See Bays, "The Growth of Independent Christianity in China, 1900–1937" in Daniel Bays, ed., *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 309–10. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8. Also see Robert Menzies, "Pentecostals in China," Vinson Synan and Amos Young, ed., *Global Renewal Christianity: Twenty-first Century Trajectories, Vol. 1: Pentecostal-Charismatic Movements in Asia* (Lake Mary, Fla.: Charisma House Publishers, 2015).



## CHAPTER 16

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# Conclusion

*The body, hair and skin, all have been received from the parents,  
and so one does not dare damage them—that is the beginning  
of filial piety (xiao).*

—Master Zeng (Zengzi, 505-436 B.C.), *The Classic of Filial Piety*  
(Xiao jing) (Revered as one of the Four Sages of Confucianism, Zengzi  
was an influential Chinese philosopher and disciple of Confucius)  
*For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against  
her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ... Anyone  
who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.*

—Matthew 10:35, 37 (NIV)

*...in Christ, she must be the final place where freedom is rediscovered,  
and the one responsible for the rediscovery of the values  
freedom expresses.*

—Jacques Ellul, *Les Combats de liberté*

In this concluding chapter, I revisit the four interpretive motifs listed in the book's introduction: socialization in the Chinese family, politicized culture, Christian conversion, and worldview conflicts. Maybe each of the terms needs some contextualization. For example, socialization happens in family life, schooling, workplaces, and for some, marriage life in relation to the family of the spouse. I hope to discuss how socio-economic changes in different spheres affecting the Chinese family have significantly remolded these women's socialization. By politicized culture, I refer to a comparative

lens between two generations with regard to how ideological loyalty is required of individuals by the regime. The motif of Christian conversion includes the causal processes of individual conversion to Christianity as well as the ongoing consequences such conversions had on their social relationships. Lastly, by worldview conflicts, I specifically discuss the points of friction that had to do with Maoist values versus Christian ethics between these young women and their mothers' generation.

### SOCIALIZATION IN CHINESE FAMILIES

Most women whose stories are included in this book grew up in homes with two wage-earning parents. Their mothers, whether educated or not, engaged in the labor force as taught by Maoist liberation theory and required by the nation's industrialization plans. Before the disintegration of the *danwei* system in the 1990s, it was common for married couples to work in different cities, living separated lives. A few accounts had similar themes of young children being left at home alone. In China, with no legal prohibitions, such child neglect has been commonplace, even to the time of writing. A significant implication of these social arrangements led to a comparatively unique Chinese phenomenon: not only the extended family disintegrated with industrialization and political movements, but many nuclear families also became fragmented with emotionally alienated children. This cultural and economic context plays an important role in the socialization of Christian women and the familial loyalty that was expected of them.

In traditional Chinese society, filial piety (*xiao*) has been a much-admired virtue of those who demonstrate respect and deference for one's parents and ancestors. In fact, by using a word with religious connotations ("piety") in the English translation, it shows the quasi-religious nature of this virtue. According to a quote from the Confucian classic shown above, children owe their very physical existence to the parents. Such is the foundation of the reason children should always remember their indebtedness to the parents. By attributing the very being and existence of descendants to the generation that begot them, it instills a sanctity upon parenthood.

Chinese ancient sages believed that the principle of filial piety served as the foundation stone of a good and orderly society. When families are in harmony, society has harmony. In practice, however, this mechanical view of unconditional submission often leads to the understanding that children are their parents' property and that their duty is solely to carry on the

honorable family name. Such an ideal is arguably the source of Chinese authoritarianism.<sup>1</sup>

It is in this context that the story of nézhā in Chinese folk legend can be viewed as a shocking and radical departure. When enmity between nézhā and his father grew, the boy wanted to return his physical body to his parents, a way of severing his indebtedness. As the legend goes, nézhā even deboned and killed himself. Later his teacher used lotus roots to construct a human body for nézhā's soul. Thus, the reincarnate nézhā is also known as Third Lotus Prince. The transformation of nézhā is a phenomenal one, from submission to independence or even disobedience.

In today's China, despite the predominance of nuclear families, residential and social mobility, the virtue of filial piety is still upheld by parents or the extended family. As a result of decades of official atheism, young people no longer face pressure from their parents in the area of ancestor worship. But the specific forms of such expected reverence may include accepting parental preferences in their decision-making of major life choices, ranging from career and marriage to religious faith.

For mothers who lived through the Mao era, their daughters' conversion to Christianity may bring about the same shock and radicalism as that of nézhā. As these young believers claim to owe even their physical existence to a Creator God as their Heavenly Parent, it seems that their indebtedness to the earthly parents is severed. Parents are no longer the supreme authority in their lives. In any case, the mother-daughter relationship remains the most formative one in a woman's life, either before or after conversion to Christianity. It undergoes great transformations with the lapsing of time and the new spiritual dimension.

### POLITICIZED CULTURE

China's politicized culture from the 1950s to the 1970s also shaped a generation of parents who belong to a post-traumatic generation. They lived through a traumatic experience but remained unable to remember or interpret it. As Jewish scholar Michael Berenbaum reflects on the Holocaust, "only a generation more distant from the immediate catastrophe could dare approach it. Like Lot's wife, survivors could not afford to look back while fleeing."<sup>2</sup> Very few families that suffered political oppression can rise beyond bitter memories of what happened to them as individuals. Suffering that is inflicted by society can often be perceived as one's personal destiny, for "... traumatic experiences *overwhelm* human pro-



cesses of adaptation. ...One of the enigmatic aspects of trauma is the way in which the effects of violence transmit between human persons. ... (as) a kind of traumatic interdependence.”<sup>3</sup>

For many Chinese, fear of political persecution led to avoidance of remembering or intentional forgetting, which then formed a habitual survival strategy. As Louisa Lim says in her book, *The People's Republic of Amnesia*, “Chinese People are practiced at not dwelling on the past. One by one, episodes of political turmoil have been expunged from official history or simply forgotten... [they] have learned to avert their eyes and minds from anything unpleasant, allowing their brains to be imprinted with false memories—or allowing the real memories to be erased—for the sake of convenience...”<sup>4</sup> There is a culture of ambiguity about historical injustice since the communist regime. Censorship at the state level has internalized a habit of self-censorship inside them.

Augustine's theology of memory helps the Chinese understand why the habit of censored memory has been working against them.<sup>5</sup> Memory can be so powerful in connecting the past, present, and even future expectations that it significantly shapes the present emotional state of selfhood.<sup>6</sup> People who intentionally practice forgetfulness, the suppression of one's memory, do it out of a habitual fear under state surveillance. But the internalization of such censorship has turned themselves into accomplices with the watchful state apparatus. When one's memory about true historical events is first erased and then re-explained by political ideologies and cultural narratives, it produces a passive resistance in the form of nihilism or cynicism. Some term it a “post-communist apathy syndrome.”<sup>7</sup>

Apathy is understood as a social condition in which people are so dominated by the aim of avoiding suffering that it becomes a goal to avoid human relationships and contacts altogether. Thereby public life becomes demoralized, if not vanishing altogether. This moral crisis is at its root a crisis about human memory, which was later aggravated by the mind-boggling rise of materialism. Correspondingly, the passion for life had vanished and then been replaced by hedonistic enjoyment and materialistic comparison. People live with an aversion to the mention of pain and suffering. As German theologian Dorothee Soelle analyzes, “The consequence of this suffering-free state of well-being is that people's lives become frozen solid. Nothing threatens any longer, nothing grows any longer, with the characteristic pains that all growth involves, nothing changes.”<sup>8</sup> In China, many people still spend their whole lives recovering from past traumas. Unable to speak and interpret the past, their pain

became a form of “muted suffering.” In some accounts, mothers who suffered unspeakable psychological consequences shape their family lives into ones lacking emotional intimacy. Repressing the articulation of suffering also led to wider social consequences. The Chinese society now sees more and more relational issues among family members. Reality TV shows such as *Gold Medal Mediation* have been aired prime time since the mid-2000s, attracting millions of viewers in mainland China.<sup>9</sup>

Intergenerational storytelling, to a certain extent, has preserved part of Chinese history during this censored and apathetic post-reform phase. In the personal accounts of this volume, although most mothers lack reflective education to overcome their limited capacity for self-expression, they were able to pass on the memories of some family events, often traumatic ones, to the next generation.

### CHRISTIAN CONVERSION

What do Christian women in twentieth-first century China learn from their mothers’ suffering? How does their newfound Christian faith help make sense of their often-strained relationships? Aided by this third interpretive motif, I find that in general, the Christian faith enables women in this volume to enter imaginatively into the suffering of their mothers. Equipped with theological convictions about justice and love, they acknowledge the reality of emotional or cultural alienation in the home. However, their compassionate understanding takes on a more analytical lens with regard to the changing sociopolitical contexts of two generations. They are aware of how lack of education in the mothers’ generation contrasts greatly with the wider spectrum of opportunities in a nonetheless fiercely competitive education environment. They sympathize with the way a quick and confusing transition from their mothers’ impoverished youths to a time valuing material success may influence the human psyche and behaviors. But if they were to dig further into family history, this generation who grew up in a more liberal social environment would come to a shocking realization of what happened in Mao’s China.

Over half of the narratives in this book also show the importance of overseas experiences. Global economic and technological integration places these stories into an even broader picture. While mission scholars often critique globalization as being underpinned by values and assumptions with no transcendent dimension (secularism),<sup>10</sup> the exposure to societies with enduring traces of Christian influence in social life (particularly the

United States) did help many women reconsider issues of values and life's purpose beyond secular materialism. Credible individual Christian witnesses in other cross-cultural contexts help catalyze the conversion process.

After conversion, the teaching of Christian ethics focusing on family relations influences them to face the strains in their own families, including the re-examination of the mother-daughter relationship. The Christian faith gives them a new language to deal with the trauma and dysfunctions in life. It may be a language of lament, of pain, of honest descriptions about what the situation was like. Reflecting on the past gives voice to people in the midst of happiness or pain. Compared to their mothers, these young women can find a way to express and identify their affliction. They work with their suffering. They remember. They perceive. They express themselves. They weep. By articulating their journey, these women began to overcome the cultural incapacity to own their suffering. Such practices also help them become more sensitive to the pain of others. As Dorothee Soelle says, "To serve the pain of God by your own pain is to lead suffering out of its private little corner and to achieve human solidarity."<sup>11</sup> Close fellowship and storytelling in church nurtures a healing environment toward strong solidarity.

In some cases, the daughters' conversion may influence their mothers positively with regard to the Christian faith. Past traumas caused by family tragedies or political episodes found healing in the justice and love of God. In a few stories, we read of the mother-daughter relationships that became a satisfying spiritual companionship or even something akin to Christian collegiality and sisterhood. In a few accounts, the congenial mother-daughter relationship has made the practice of lament through storytelling a mutually beneficial one. Encouraged by their Christian daughters, their mothers also walked this liberating journey. "Our hopes can die or they can grow in suffering."<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, more often than not, Christian conversion of young professional women is only the beginning of a troubled family relationship. Usually following such conversion, these young women who take the newfound faith seriously no longer consult their parents when making major life decisions as eagerly as they did before. The ones with evangelistic zeal even want to influence their parents with a faith that claims also the latter's indebtedness to God. They now consider bringing their parents into God's plan of salvation as the ultimate task of being both pious and filial. This change creates a tug-of-war in the family with regard to the

Christian faith. The tension can sometimes be compounded by the fact that the parents' generation owned a set of moral values shaped by a drastically different formation than that of the younger generation.

### WORLDVIEW CONFLICTS

Many accounts in this book show that conflicts between mothers and daughters may increase after these young women's conversions. Primarily, these two generations of women enjoyed drastically different opportunities in terms of education and cultural exposure to the outside world. Out of cultural hostility or political aversion, sometimes the older generation were quick to directly attribute such conflicts to the Christian faith itself. While these young women reckon the faith as the ultimate salvation, their family members may regard it as a further alienating factor. Due to the marginalized, hidden church networks and sometimes lack of credible Christian witness in China's sociopolitical context,<sup>13</sup> it is difficult to show the older generation what a respectable and harmonious Christian life could look like.

Many of these post-conversion tensions and conflicts are expressed in exchanges of strained emotions in family life. "The punishment of every disordered mind is its own disorder,"<sup>14</sup> wrote Augustine. So, to become a Christian is to re-order her love, which also means a re-ordering of authority. The Christian faith, if taken seriously, serves as a force that re-orientes the order of love and emotions within a young woman. She travels a spiritual path similar to that of St. Augustine, realizing that frustrations in the past may be due to disordered love. As philosopher Sara Ahmed writes, "Emotions are not 'afterthoughts,'" and they arise from the clashing and re-assembling of our priorities.<sup>15</sup>

Stories in this volume are about social change and spiritual transformations. They also present contrasting images of two Chinas (Mao and post-reform eras) as remembered by Christian women. Social change is a rare topic for theological reflection. But as Canadian ethicist Douglas John Hall writes, "the being of the creature *anthropos*, that is, its *becoming*, implies movement, openness, the readiness to exchange one moment for the next, one experience for the next. ... if anyone wanted truly to love God he or she would have to love *change*."<sup>16</sup> By plowing through the agonies of conflict, waiting, and disillusionment, their journeys have "the prospect of transformation."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, these accounts can also be viewed as a series of theological reflections responding to specific cir-

cumstances in Chinese families as they are embedded in rapid social change. Woven together, they exemplify the rich ways Chinese women grapple with the profound existential and moral questions raised by circumstances of conflicts and compromises and their long-term effects on relational and personal formation. The reality of grace exists in the midst of different forms of suffering.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Much that is theologically significant about women's experience has been overlooked in today's emerging field of studies in Chinese Christianity. Central to the overall theme of this volume is a presentation of the myriad ways that societal change affects women's capacity to relate, to act, to love, and to remember, and how those various circumstances potentially challenge their theological understandings of how divine grace is experienced. Narratives of trauma, eruptions of drama, and tales of grace are evocatively juxtaposed to provoke reflection.

This select group of personal accounts is not meant to be representative. The limitation of this research is that it is unable to cover other important issues facing Christian women in China, such as sexual violence and gender-based discrimination at workplaces. The main focus of this volume is to show a hope for the future. With the growing presence of Christian groups in today's China, the Christian faith grants moral courage for women to recall and remember the past. While there have been numerous philosophical and theological attempts to explain suffering, it is through the retelling and reinterpretation of actual experiences that the depth of the topic is made manifest. Thus oral history becomes a practice that helps restore truth, selfhood, and human dignity.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Page numbers followed by ‘n’ refer to notes.

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