

Xiuwu R. Liu

# **Wandering from China to America**

A Life Straddling Different Worlds



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A bamboo grove in the author's home province, Hunan. Photo by Chen Jingdong.

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For Haiyan,  
the freest spirit with the kindest heart



# Contents

Author's Note on the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Edition.....	9
Author's Note on the 1 <sup>st</sup> Edition.....	10
1. A Family Both Red and Black . . .	11
2. Docile Country Boy .....	20
3. Budding Learner, Avocational Food Shopper .....	40
4. An Unwasted Youth.....	59
5. Misbehaving Factory Worker.....	79
6. Cavalier College Student .....	98
7. Self-Taught America Hand.....	120
8. Semiwild Instructor .....	138
9. Visiting Scholar-cum-Handyman.....	150
10. Recovering Student, "Single" Father.....	159
11. Comp TA, Lonely Divorcé.....	169
12. A Cross-Cultural Marriage, an Interdisciplinary Dissertation .....	182
13. Halfhearted Academic .....	200
14. The Tenure Farce.....	216
15. Coda.....	234
Appendix 1: A published record of Grandpa.....	238
Appendix 2: Grandpa's autobiography.....	239
Appendix 3: Grandpa's demobilization certificate.....	277
Appendix 4: A published account of Aunt's activities and death .....	278
Appendix 5: Published records of Paternal Grandpa (Ding) .....	281

Appendix 6:	<i>The Three-Character Classic</i> as remembered by Grandpa Wang, p. 1.....	283
Appendix 7:	Grandpa’s annotations of the <i>Illustrated Four-Character Classic for Females</i> , p. 1.....	284
Appendix 8:	Grandpa’s annotations of the <i>Illustrated Improved Classic for Girls</i> , p. 1.....	285
Appendix 9:	Grandpa Liao’s poems .....	286
Appendix 10:	Teacher Liang’s evaluation of and advice for me.....	288
Appendix 11:	Haiyan and I getting married in my office building.....	291
Appendix 12:	N. T. Wang’s letter to the P & T Committee.....	292
Appendix 13:	My former teacher mentor’s letter to the P & T Committee .....	294
Appendix 14:	My response to the dean’s annual evaluation of me.....	300



## Author's Note on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition

It's been sixteen years since the publication of this life story. Meanwhile, I've discovered some errors in spelling and punctuation. (About the latter, adopting an informal tone, in the 1<sup>st</sup> edition I often omitted the comma after an adverbial phrase at the beginning of a sentence. In revising the text for this edition, I saw many of these places flagged by MS Word and so added a comma, sometimes reluctantly.) Going through my old files uncovered factual inaccuracies, too. Altogether, I've made over five hundred changes to the 1st edition, including corrections, deletions, additions and wordsmithing. The subtitle is new. Besides, I thought it would be informative to include some historical documents related to the story for readers of Chinese. I present these as appendices in photocopies, displaying the authors' drafts with their own revisions for authenticity's sake. Three English documents are also appended. For word divisions in *pinyin* I've followed *Xiandai hanyu cidian* (Modern Chinese Dictionary), 7<sup>th</sup> edition (2016), which differs from the *ABC Chinese-English Comprehensive Dictionary* (2003), especially in idioms. A brief coda brings you up to date.

I'm grateful to my former teacher mentor Richard Quantz for the permission to include his letter from 1999 as an appendix. If you enjoy the book, the credit goes to Jakob Horstmann, commissioning editor at *ibidem* Press's London Office. If not, and if you think your taste isn't to blame, then it's all my fault.

## Author's Note on the 1<sup>st</sup> Edition

Chinese names are transcribed the Chinese way, i.e., family name first, given name second.

Three consonants in *pinyin* are confusing to English speakers. Their approximate pronunciations follow: C is similar to "ts" as in "rats," Q is similar to "Ch" as in "Chinese," X is similar to a relaxed "sh" as in "shop."

Friends, colleagues, former teachers, former students, and editors gave me encouragement, advice, and feedback, and a peer reviewer's comments led me to cut out a third of the manuscript. I thank them all.

Nancy Nicholson, M. P. P. D. W. (Model Poor Peasant Digital Worker), was responsible for the book's appearance.

## 1. A Family Both Red and Black . . .

I was born in March 1957 according to the Chinese traditional calendar, whose dates are about a month apart from those of the Western or Gregorian calendar, so the birth date on my driver's license or the forms I filled out for the Immigration and Naturalization Service is not what it seems. It wasn't until 1997 that I bothered to find out my birth date on the Gregorian calendar, April 21, 1957.

When I was six months old, my mom took me from Hubei to her parents in Hunan to be raised as their "adopted" (*guoji*) grandson. They wanted to raise me so that when they grew old, I would help them with housework and care for them. But since my maternal grandparents' only son went to Taiwan before Liberation, continuing my grandpa's family line might also have been behind the decision to adopt me. Anyhow, I got my maternal grandpa's family name, and my generation name, the "Xiu" in "Xiuwu," came from his lineage. "Xiu" means "to cultivate," and "Wu," martial or military (arts). Obviously, I didn't live up to my name, as I ended up cultivating literary or cultural arts (*wen*). As if to make the connection between word and essence (following Karl Kraus), later on my middle school classmates gave me the nickname "Xiuzi" (with "zi" meaning both person and master), and my factory pals gave me the nickname "Ink." (In China, "middle school" included grades 7 through 10 or grades 6 through 9 in my time.)

My grandma was born in 1900 into a "middle-peasant" family, that is, one with just about enough land to support itself. She had some private schooling in the old style called *sishu*. After marrying Grandpa in 1931 (second marriage for both), she had an unsettled life as Grandpa lost and obtained various positions in the Nationalist Army and moved from one city to another. Grandma remained a housewife her entire adult life.

Grandpa was born in 1899. When his grandma, an able matriarch of a large family in the country, died, the family waned in wealth and luster. Still, Grandpa studied thirteen-and-a-half years with private tutors before sojourning to Changsha to attend a school with a strange name – Hunan Special Prison School, where he studied law and military affairs. After the prison school he returned to his native place, where he helped organize a local militia to deal with bandits. In 1926 and 1927 he participated as a company commander in the Northern Expedition, the northward campaign to rid China of the blight of warlords. In 1928 and 1929 he received more military training in Nanjing. In the next two decades he served the Nationalists or KMT mostly as a noncombat officer and was unemployed several times. In 1949, through a friend's recommendation he became a deputy commander of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Division. By this time the Nationalist Army had suffered one defeat after another; while a lot of troops had fled to the island of Taiwan, others had risen

in revolt. Due to the intervention of Bai Chongxi's troops, Grandpa's first attempt to surrender to the People's Liberation Army in Shaoyang, Hunan, failed. He was forced to seek another appointment in Chongqing, Sichuan. After a month's service in the Defense Ministry, he was assigned to the 144<sup>th</sup> Division, stationed at Jiangyou, Sichuan. When his troops moved to Mianzhu, General Pei Changhui, commander in chief of the Seventh Army (*bingtuan*), secretly ordered his officers to revolt. Grandpa agonized all night (on December 4, 1949) in part because the division's commander, who had been a protégé of General Hu Zongnan, was reluctant to betray Hu. The next day, with coercion and persuasion, Grandpa and the chief of staff managed to make the commander and another deputy commander agree to revolt and go over to the People's Liberation Army (see app. 1). Grandpa wrote about the insurrection in his autobiography, which was mostly a confession of his service under the Nationalists, especially his misdeeds (see app. 2). I asked him in the early 1970s when I read a revised version of his confession why he hadn't gone to Taiwan. He said, "Falling leaves return to their roots." I wondered: "Had he gone to Taiwan, what would have become of me?"

Demobilization and reeducation followed his revolt (see app. 3). When he was transferred to civilian work in 1952, given his rank he could have gone to Changsha, the capital of Hunan Province. But a hundred and fifty kilometers was still too far from his roots, so he returned to Yueyang, an ancient city by Lake Dongting, only sixty *li* (a *li* is half a kilometer or about a third of a mile) from his native village (even though he rarely visited it). After clerking for a couple of years in a salt company, he was made resident member of the Standing Committee of Yueyang County's Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, an organization (not a meeting) in charge of those who had worked for the Nationalists in the old society.

Grandpa was tall and handsome, the latter especially in his uniform. A good swimmer, in his youth he survived a shipwreck by swimming with a piece of the wreckage from morning till dusk in Lake Dongting. Having been a soldier in his prime, he kept a soldier's habits throughout his life: his gait was brisk, his posture erect, and his quilt always folded with straight edges and pointed corners. His handwriting was graceful—firm but not stiff, flowing yet not unsteady. For years it served as an exemplar as I practiced to improve my own. On occasion he composed *qiliu*, an eight-line poem with seven characters to a line and a strict tonal pattern and rhyme scheme. He would pace back and forth while humming a particular line he was composing. Though I enjoyed reading classical poems (and see free verse as broken prose), the idea of learning how to write one never occurred to me.

If one has made something of oneself, it is customary for one's relatives to feel proud. Grandpa was on the wrong side of the Communist Revolution, but he left his native

village, traveled far and wide within the country, and became a major general. So, when relatives from his village came to visit us in Yueyang, they would speak of Grandpa with pride and admiration. However, Grandpa's autobiography and his conduct after 1949 did not show him to be a man of great ambition, ability, or integrity. His promotion in the military was far from rapid and his career was punctuated with periods of unemployment. His conduct was characteristic of someone who had been brought up and lived in a society with an age-old oppressive atmosphere, with circumspection as his motto. For example, shortly after Liberation, he donated his big old house in the native village to the government as private property became ideologically suspect.

One target of the Cultural Revolution was the "four olds" — old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. My grandparents had an old-style bed with painted glass and carved wood panels, a likely target of the Cultural Revolution. To show that he was with it, Grandpa smashed up the panels, leaving an unadorned bed, to Grandma's protest.

More revealing of Grandpa's circumspection were the series of requests he made during the Cultural Revolution. According to his personal documents in my collection, on September 3, 1966, he submitted a report to the United Front Department and the county's Committee of the Communist Party requesting early retirement. He said that he understood that the People's Political Consultative Conference was an outdated organization; besides, Red Guards from Yueyang No. 1 Middle School had ordered his organization to be disbanded. He added that he was already sixty-eight years old and should no longer occupy his post just to make up the number (*lanyu-chongshu*). Nine days later, on September 12, 1966, he submitted another report to have his salary cut so that the extra money he didn't deserve could be used for building up the country. Before Grandpa got any response from the authorities, for September 1966 he only took fifteen *yuan* (Chinese dollars) of his regular salary of 74.5 *yuan*. Because he and Grandma didn't have any savings, by October he had already borrowed forty *yuan* to cover their living expenses. Then on October 7, 1966, he submitted yet another report, in which he described his rather difficult financial situation but insisted on needing only forty *yuan* a month.

Soon the Political Consultative Conference was disbanded and his salary was cut more than once. To make ends meet, he sold the few possessions of his, including a serge army uniform he treasured. By 1970, the withheld salary added up to over one thousand *yuan*. On March 1, 1970, Grandpa submitted yet another report to the county's Revolutionary Committee, the body in charge of the county at this time. In that report he offered to donate the withheld salary to the state so that a world without exploitation could be built, etc., etc.