

張辛欣：塵土

Dust

By Zhang Xinxin

Translated by W.J.F. Jenner

HAVE THOSE GERIATRICALS agreed to have only two things on their minds—retirement, and writing their memoirs?

“I’ll leave you a legacy of education in our traditions.”

The elder lays down his pen and rubs his hands. The sheets of paper rustle with irrepressible enthusiasm. The memory I have of him when I was a kid is of him always earnestly instructing me. He still feels he has a responsibility as an educator.

My head is bowed in silence and hidden admiration. I wonder if he still remembers all his articles that thundered at their age and then were all forgotten.

“If it wasn’t for that, I’d carry on going to the office.”

The old lady was pulling at my hand so hard she was almost dragging me under the table. It was like someone after a whole lifetime of circumspection suddenly opening up about some half-baked and childish reckless scheme. For all these years she had been drawing up the master plans for one modern city after another, and making models that set your head spinning just to look down on them. The first group of high-rise apartment blocks had very obviously been flawed. They looked as if someone had just scratched out some lines on the ground with a handful of straw and the builders had taken it from there. For year after year her dreams

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had drifted dangerously but boringly among drawings, official documents and hand written posters, then among official documents and drawings only. But she would be lonely if she didn't have to go to the office on the bone-crushingly crowded buses that she hated and take part in political study every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon. "Why don't you write something about improved building methods and the obstacles to innovation?" "No, I'll write about life with the guerillas in the old days." "Unless you have something new to say, you'd do better writing about your childhood." "Yes, and the way we used to live then." We haggled endlessly about what she was going to write about and how she'd organize it like traders in a cattle market bargaining by making finger signals inside each others' sleeves.

She had neither retired nor started writing.

"Oh dear"

A friend of mine was acting as amanuensis for a famous old man. My friend's extremely capable and writes very fast. He's finished it now and is revising it. Who really was in command at a particular victory. Who actually did or did not attend some epoch-making meeting. He was like an important emissary between great powers, shuttling from province to province with his manuscripts, weighing his words like a lawyer and endlessly revising his short period of history.

Privately he had been hoping to get a share of the royalties, but one morning the old man had handed them all over as party dues.

Another old man had retired. His heart trouble, the complicated factional struggles at his office and his own aversion to loneliness made all of us gang of youngsters who enjoy visiting him want to use the most frivolous and disrespectful language to bring him to his senses and persuade him to retire. He did retire, too. I don't know why, but I'm feeling really sorry for him again. He's a good man, and more than that—in the field he's responsible for he has a whole set of fresh ideas, and there's none of that revolting hidden opportunism about him.

"Recommend me some good books to read. I want to have a go at writing my memoirs too." He had a touch of a smile, as if he had reached the end of a chapter in his life and was willing to spend his remaining years quietly in his deep armchair with his unquiet soul.

I became for the first time a passionate onlooker. It was not just his extreme individuality and his most colourful past; there were also the ongoing experiments and controversies in which he was involved. I rushed back to him with an armful of books to find that he had already started to write. He leafed through the books then pushed them out of the way. I sat to one side, longing to ask him what he was writing. I might have been hanging around outside a little privately-owned handicraft workshop while the man inside was patiently beating and hammering, and I'd have been just as pleased whether he came up in the end with a shining piece of old-fashioned jewellery or a bomb. My old man kept his head down and carried on writing.

As I waited I stretched my hand out to leaf through the history books and biographies I had got for him. To my surprise something from my own memoirs

was in the pile.

People who get into books and print are all famous, even if it is just because of pure chance. Someone like him had played a big part in more than one event that shook China and the world. When the events he took part in had happened I'd been too young to understand that world for myself, or else it was long before I was born. Back at the time when I dug the blue ink from the end of the ball-point pen refill to draw glasses on his face I knew nothing at all about his life story, nothing at all.

It was a turbulent early summer, and we were aching to make revolution. For the first time I saw the sign over the privately-run Chinese medical practice in the street smashed to pieces. It had been a black wooden sign with gold writing on it—CHILDREN'S BLESSING—that was a natural match for the red lacquered doors. For the first time I saw the dark and chaotically untidy inner room where the white-bearded old man who looked like a sage lived. I was scared, excited and sorry that I had been too late. I was thirteen then, in the sixth year of primary school, and there was nowhere I could join the Red Guards for some organized mayhem.

So we raided him. By some strange inevitability he had been kept for us as our target of revolution. Perhaps it was because he was so famous that the Red Guards from the ordinary middle schools hung back from attacking this "democratic personage". Perhaps it was because an earlier phase of history had already ruled that he was a "big Rightist", so that as someone who could no longer stir up trouble he had no secret enemies. Or perhaps it was because the events he had been involved in had been so elevated that they did not impinge on the everyday life of the neighbourhood. Anyhow, he was in a quiet corner at the centre of the hurricane that had suddenly blown up, and for a time he had not been drawn in. And we thirteen-year-old sixth-year girls back home for the summer from our boarding primary school for senior cadres' children, all just as silly as I was, had heard a bit more political terminology than most kids.

Habit can't be swept away in a moment. We knocked politely on the gate, filed through the narrow entrance and the front courtyard, went round the screen wall, and reached the doors of the main room of the traditional Peking compound. It was all so quiet. There was nobody around. The old-fashioned wooden-framed house was too big for us. Two of the girls climbed up on the window-sill to peer inside and started yelling, "Hey, he's hiding under the bed!" Just what you would have expected, hiding under the bed. It was like a scene from any number of children's books we'd read. Indeed, it was so much like a story it made me a bit suspicious, though I was very soon convinced. When he came out he was holding a hardback book filthy with dust. "What you're doing is trespassing on a citizen's residence," he said, patting the book. "That's illegal." The book was the Constitution.

It stopped us in our tracks.

He was tall, plump, well looked after, beautifully dressed and a very impressive figure as he stood in front of his doors at the top of the steps with the Constitution

in his hands. We little girls in our sloppy old army fatigues at the foot of the steps, not even into puberty yet, were crushed and at a loss for a reply to these intimidating words. We all tried to hide behind each other and edged backwards till all of a sudden one of the girls who had a way of shrieking in quarrels started hurling abuse at him. We won an instant victory over the sacred Constitution.

We vandalized his house at once, and called on him to hand over the records he'd kept for when the counter-revolution came.¹ The main thing was to make ourselves look as revolutionary as possible.

But he did not admit that he was a Rightist, quoting what someone who's still admired and respected today had said to him about his problem being only one of amour-propre. "What's amour-propre?" "Being conceited," he'd had to explain to us kids.

I hesitated: that was the nearest I got to thinking deeply at the time.

When I got home I asked the first member of an older generation I met about him and was given a cut and dried answer: "A notorious rightist. The papers were full of him in 1957. So he's still trying to talk his way out of trouble."

I couldn't even read in 1957.

I went on turning his place upside down with the rest of them, my mind at ease. Then, as now, what we needed was a rational explanation for our actions.

The old man survived to have his reputation and everything else restored to him, then met a very respectable death. Since then I've consciously or otherwise taken an interest in his past. His whole life had been so full of drama that a single encounter with him left you admiring him for a long time after, not just wanting to apologize to him, but also full of uncontrollable curiosity. And it was not just the man himself. It was in his house that I first learnt something new about ancient bronze swords. I'd always imagined them as magical, invincible wonders, but once I'd held one in my hand I realized it was just a heavy piece of scrap metal without even a handle. That is something else I associated with his name. I reckon that no matter how often history is rewritten he and certain events he was involved in are now in print and will be in books for ever.

But it's not him I want to remember.

The longer I stand for a certain reason in front of the portrait of this famous man the more clearly I see the shadow of that unknown woman behind its eye-catching colours. I forgot her name long ago, and I can't even remember what she looked like or what she used to wear. All I can recall is that she combed her hair back tight and shiny. That was the style for housekeepers in top households, I suppose.

It happened one afternoon. Someone waved a hand and told her to clear off. Rightists didn't need servants. Fifteen minutes later someone else said she was a

¹ Notes on former land holdings and loans kept secretly by the landlord class in the hope that their properties would be restored to them in the future.

landlord and insisted on having her chased and brought back. We thought she'd gone to her daughter who lived in a remote corner of the municipality so far out you had to take a train. A bus rushed us to the station. We didn't have a cent between us, but when we had a word with the conductors we were given a free ride. A search of the station waiting rooms, going along all the long rows of benches, yielded nothing. When we checked the timetable we reckoned she must have caught an earlier train. We got on a train, didn't buy tickets for this either, and kept on after her all night till we found her in her daughter's village and took her back with us. By then we'd completely wrecked the Rightist's home and packed him off to live in a tiny flat. Our Red Guards had now dispersed, and we had nobody to hand our captive over to. So we turned her in to the "Red Guard Headquarters" for questioning. We didn't know and didn't care who had organized the Headquarters or who was in charge of it. All we knew was that it carried authority, and that was good enough for us. It was into everything: the "capitalists" whose homes had got raided, the street gang called Nine Dragons and a Phoenix, and the rumours of trouble and fighting . . . We were dead beat, so we went to a little place next door to the Headquarters for some breakfast. On credit. Everyone who had breakfast there did it on credit. I ate fried doughstrips and listened to an impassioned argument about a burning issue: another Headquarters had given this Headquarters an ultimatum. I didn't want to hear about news that could damage my faith, so I went into the kitchen of the cafe. On one side of the room the doughstrips were frying noisily in a great vat of oil, and on the other someone was being questioned beside the dough table. A little old man kneeling on the floor was leaning against the table and writing a confession. This was hard for him as his eyes were at the same height as the paper. Grey-haired, bespectacled women from the street committee were standing behind him with their sleeves rolled up and sticks in their hands, demanding that he confess how many guns he had hidden at home. None, he said, and the women all accused him of lying to them. One of them suggested teaching him a lesson, and he was marched out. Eating my doughstrip I tagged along too. By the gate of the Red Guard Headquarters there was something under a mat. The man was forced to lift the mat and look underneath it. It was a body, the woman owner of an ivory shop who had been brought in the previous day. Someone was making a speech about it. I still had my mouth full of chewed-up pieces of doughstrip. I didn't throw up, but I couldn't swallow either. It was the first time in my life I'd seen a dead body. There wasn't any blood, but all the exposed skin of her hands, wrists and face was white. The little old man passed out and was dragged back. Numbly I followed them back to the dough table, where I could see his pen make a lot of holes in the paper. "I confess, I confess," he kept saying, but he could not write a single word.

But what about the Rightist's housekeeper? I suddenly came back to my senses and hurried round to the Headquarters to look for her. I asked everyone I saw, but found no sign or news of her. Nobody knew anybody else there.

Now I find myself counting in big numbers and feeling that a lot of years have gone by. Seventeen years is a long time. I must admit that for ages I practically

forgot about the whole business. One of my elders who was educating me said in a kindly but superior way a few years after it happened, "You lot thought you knew it all then." I couldn't say anything, but I remembered that he had been the one who had told me what to think about that Rightist. I felt deflated and wronged, and forgot about that anonymous woman. As I grew older and gradually started looking back on that stormy era more coolly and from a wider perspective I began to put my sincere stupidity down to history's account. I expected history to settle it. My excuse was that these wrongs had all been done out of faith. Could the endless comings and goings across the junctions of my life ever obliterate those naïve first steps of mine?

No.

Quite the opposite. When it all happened seventeen years ago it made no deep or fresh impact on me. The impact had only revealed itself naturally, much later and without any external causes.

I suddenly stopped waiting for a splendid past to reappear. As I stood beside the old man so engrossed in creating his memoirs I was thinking about how I ought to write a letter and make some enquiries. But I knew perfectly well where such a letter would get passed on to and disappear, like all the letters that any unit receives from the public every day.

A friend came to see me. He'd once gone everywhere amid the gunsmoke to help people, though it all came to nothing. I asked him to give me a hand. Although I didn't know her name it would be very easy to find out about her famous employer.

"Did anything happen to her?"

"I don't know."

I really didn't know anything at all.

I could still remember what the little railway station and the village were called. On Sunday I took the slow train there by myself.

It was a dawn train. As the seats gradually filled their old brown artificial leather backs could no longer be seen. All that remained to show that carriages like this had probably been shuttling to and fro within a narrow range for a century was the old brown wickerwork of the fairly empty luggage racks. For a while I almost forgot the grim purpose of my journey. A crowd of young peasant contract labourers on their way home were talking dirty about the girl one of them had married, and I was enjoying it. The two rows of seats by the window opposite were occupied by a gang of workers going to a power plant. They were talking about someone too, a technician who was a loner, running him down and full of admiration at the same time because he knew everything. The local boy in the seat facing me didn't quite look like a peasant in the sort of garish two-tone nylon bomber jacket you can only get from a jobless youngsters' street stall in town. From the way he was keeping just too quiet and shooting me the occasional glance I started wondering whether he wanted to chat me up. The game went on for quite a while till the abstruse title of the book I was clutching finally persuaded him that I was dead boring. Outside the windows were all the usual fields and rows of poplars near

the city, then lonely mountain after lonely mountain, then orchards on both sides of the tracks, so close that the occasional branch brushed against the windows.

That time it had been a night train. I have no memories of lights streaming past the windows like fire. We'd shut the window tight as we were travelling with a counter-revolutionary being taken back home under escort. His bulging goldfish eyes really gave you the creeps. We had to put him in the corner because we were dead scared he'd run for it. I faced away from him towards the corridor. In those days I couldn't bear the sight of anything physically ugly. We spoke in low voices in the dimly lit silence of the carriage about one thing only: the rumour we'd heard that some Red Guards on the train were cutting women's plaits off. One girl was so horrified by the idea that she jumped off the train. We all thought that was going too far. The other thing that happened on the journey was that someone carelessly bumped into an old woman sitting on her luggage between two carriages and knocked her headscarf off, revealing a shaven head. That proved she had been a struggle target. There was a rule then that they had to go back to their home villages, but they weren't allowed to go by train. At a station along the way she was forced off. It was dark outside, and she was old. When the train started again I remembered that when we were looking for the housekeeper at the ticket barrier before we got on the train I had seen a middle-aged woman carrying the luggage for that old lady as she slowly made her way sideways down the long staircase, supporting herself on the handrail because of her bound feet. I didn't know why I'd watched those two silent figures making their way down the stairs for so long.

Now the train seemed to be crawling smoothly and rhythmically through the orchards between embankments that were higher than the rails. You felt that you were bending over looking for something in the orchard, and when your view wasn't blocked by the trees you could see their slender trunks stretching into the distance and their dark shadows on the brown earth.

What did it all mean, one woman being forced to go back to her village and kicked off the train while we were dead set on catching another and taking her back to town with us? But this question never even occurred to me then, even though the two things were happening in parallel at the same time. I used to think that it was because faith, however stupid and narrow, can make one carry out orders with absolute dedication. But it wasn't that. It may well take a long time after the sediment of the past has been deposited, perhaps even that long, before you can begin to make sense of the past, not just of the overall picture but of your own most immediate feelings. The real reason why we pursued her so far and brought her back was because we were dying for a train ride. Trains, long journeys, adventures and a lot of other such notions are all very closely linked to each other. Perhaps that boy who was a year older than me came into it too. He was our leader, and he had a really cute way of talking. I can see now that his humour wasn't up to much, but then it didn't take much to make me laugh in those days. There were four of us in our group—I can't remember who now—all from different schools. The new revolutionary base we'd set up was soon being shared by several other outfits who turned up when they heard about it. We were just a gang of little girls who'd been

shut up in schools for cadres' kids for the last six years: we never even thought of keeping the house to ourselves, and it never occurred to us that in the great revolution anyone might have any other ideas. Those antiques that today's black marketeers would be drooling over were left where they were, even though the bank passbooks disappeared. We weren't so greedy then.

I was worried I wouldn't be able to find my way back there after so long. When we'd got off the train the first time it was a pitch-black, starless night, and there was no way of telling whether we were surrounded by crops, trees, or monsters crouching ready to pounce. We groped forward along the railway lines, and all we could see was their faint gleam. The "counter-revolutionary" being taken home under escort had to show us the way: he'd said something when we asked his escorts and they hadn't been able to tell us. Once we found the way our leader and another boy kept hitting him with their leather belts. In the end he lost his temper and a fight started. The ends of the boys' belts hit me in the face. I and another girl saw that things were going badly, so we rushed off along the rail bed, tripping and stumbling, to get help. When we came to a road crossing we turned off instinctively and saw light. It was a courtyard. We rushed in and stood there shouting, "Quick! Catch the counter-revs!" Hundreds of people came tearing out, which gave us a terrible fright. As we ran back with them I found out that they'd been watching a film. I couldn't keep up, and had to turn back before I got to the junction because the counter-revolutionary had already been taken away. I now had an enormous, bulging black eye, much worse than his natural deformity. Finally we found the place we were looking for.

I was the only person to get off at the tiny deserted station. The black letters of its name stood out in sharp contrast with the white background on the newly painted signs, green railings and a red brick building that served as entrance, exit, ticket office and waiting room. A line of green hills ringed the distant horizon. I looked up the time of the return trains and found that there was only one, at noon. I was very pressed for time, but I didn't want to walk along the railway track because the evenly spaced sleepers would have forced my thoughts into their rhythm and depressed me even more. Goodness only knew what sort of news was waiting for me. I asked the way and cut across the fields. They'd only just been ploughed, so my feet sunk in deep; but when I picked them up again there was no mud on them, only a faint dusting of earth on my walking shoes. Next I followed a dried-up river-bed. I didn't know whether I was lost or not, but stubbornly carried on in what I hoped was the right direction. Yes, I remembered, there had been a river.

It had been quite a business, but we found her in the end. She and her grandson were playing with a new ball she had brought him from the city, and she nodded most politely to us all. When we told her that she'd have to come with us because she had been a landlord she was struck dumb for a long time. Finally she said she was a middle peasant. Her daughter and son-in-law protested that the family had middle-peasant status. Even the production brigade cadre who had taken us to her confirmed this. It was a bad let-down for us to have followed her all this way for nothing. Instead of accepting it with a good grace we talked things over and decided

to take her back to town with us all the same to confront the people there who said she had been a landlord. Not she nor her daughter nor her son-in-law nor the brigade cadre objected. Yes, we had walked back to the station along this river, not on the bed as I was doing now, but beside it as the waters were in summer spate, drowning the tips of the weeping willow branches and even lapping at our feet. Our leader had stayed in the village a little longer, though we didn't know why, so that our spirits were sinking lower and lower as time dragged on and there was still no sign of him. Suddenly I heard loud shouts behind us and saw him splashing through the water towards us, his eyes shining. He took us to one side and whispered that he'd found out through enquiries among the poor and lower-middle peasants that the housekeeper really had been a landlord. I could have somersaulted for joy, but the others wouldn't let me go round like a grinning idiot because they didn't want the secret to get out. Once she cottoned on that we knew the truth she'd have been bound to deny it and refuse to go back to town with us. We were no fools. She was completely in the dark as she walked slowly along in front of us, her hair still combed back all shiny.

The river-bed was all stones and pebbles. Puffs of white dust rose under the fierce sunlight. What had been forgotten and hidden was all clear to me now. After we'd handed the housekeeper over to the Red Guard Headquarters we didn't give another thought to checking up on the facts. We were proud and tired because we'd achieved exactly what we'd set out to do. I know now how unreliable such enquiries are: all sorts of chance factors and the personal motivations of witnesses affect them. How could anyone tell whether the "poor and lower-middle peasant" our leader questioned was saying what he really thought or simply shooting his mouth off. Did he have some old score to settle? Could our leader have hung back to make up a story in the extreme disappointment he shared with us? There were all sorts of possibilities, but I'd immediately preferred his unsupported story to the fact that three different witnesses attested to. Because of this and a whole lot of other damn fool things, I've more than once had to pronounce a judgement on myself: ignorant. But now I could remember very clearly walking behind her along the bank of this river and feeling furious with her for not being a landlord. I had actually been waiting for the conclusion our leader reached. Even if it had been based on even flimsier grounds I think I'd have grabbed at it and believed it. Landlords. Poor peasants. Good people. Bad people. Revolution. Counter-revolution. Could it be that the oversimplified ways we were brought up to think in and our love for what was good and beautiful had left us defenceless, like people who lay themselves wide open to aseptic dysentery by being excessively hygiene-conscious? We'd damaged ourselves and others too. If we had become aware a little earlier of the complicated make-up of our beliefs, held on to the essentials, and had a clear view of our own desires, even the most trivial ones, then perhaps we could have avoided those ignorant mistakes that we imagined were the firm and resolute thing to do. I was beginning to understand why dying people repent of what they have done in their lives. It wasn't just to ease their way to heaven; it was also because time shows you yourself as you really are. But maybe it would be too late then. It was too late now.

The village was there in front of me. The grunting pigs and clucking hens suggested a simple rustic idyll, but all the same they got at me. The way was blocked by a river that I crossed by jumping from stone to stone. *What if she'd disappeared back then?* I was three metres from the other bank and there were no more stones to stand on. *Will she be sitting on the brick bed-platform with the sunlight on her hair all combed back tight and shiny?* The water was full of tadpoles, their shadows rippling on the fine sand of the river-bed. *What if only her daughter and son-in-law are left? What sort of welcome will they give me?* I couldn't decide whether to get my shoes wet and wade across. Someone was calling to me. When I looked up from where I was standing on the last of the stones I saw a woman rubbing her washing on a rock in the shade of some big trees. "This way." Her voice was as liquid as the sound of water.

I'd thought I'd be able to find the house and remember it all, but I couldn't see anything familiar. I was almost there, but I'd forgotten the way in. What could I really remember of the surroundings? We'd come and gone in a great hurry, and the only impression I still had of it then was of low, adobe walls like so many other villages. Now, like so many other villages, it was one identical red brick tiled house after another. The brigade headquarters took some finding, and it was deserted. Perhaps nobody was prepared to sit there idle now that the land had been divided up. I had very little time. The courtyards of all the houses were deserted. There was only the occasional pig wandering about in the streets and some children playing with a dog. There would have been as much point in asking the dog as in asking the children about things that had happened seventeen years ago and about someone whose name I didn't know.

When I heard a tractor engine and voices at the other end of the village I rushed towards them, making hens that had been single-mindedly eating start flapping their wings and squawking.

A crowd had gathered on some open space at that end of the village where a tractor was standing. A row was going on. I squeezed in.

"Call that ploughing? It's just chicken scratching." An old man was beside himself with fury.

"Call it what you like, that's what you're getting." The tractor driver casually switched the engine off.

"I'd rather pull the plough and do it myself. You may be able to fool people, but you can't fool the crops."

"The government says it's got to be tractor-ploughed. Do you want to start a rebellion? Go ahead and plough it for him!" That sounded like a brigade cadre talking. I pushed through towards him.

The old man suddenly threw himself down in front of the tractor as it revved up. He lay on the ground, refusing to move. At once a group of people grabbed at him to drag him away. It was chaos.

The tractor moved a few paces, turned and drove off. "I wouldn't damn well plough it for you anyhow."

The old man scrambled to his feet and shouted at the tractor's rear end, "All you're worried about is not getting good enough food and drink off me."

“That’ll cost you a fifty *yuan* fine for refusing to let the tractor plough it.” The cadre’s expression was grim as a judge’s. With the main performer gone the row was left in mid-air. In the silence everyone’s eyes were on the old man. I could see that nobody was going to have any time for my problems and hurried back into the village again.

I did manage to grab a middle-aged man who tugged at his cheek as he took me to ask his mother. She went on and on about all the women from different families who had been or who still were domestic servants in the city. “They’re all with very big officials.” But she couldn’t name any names or tell me what the officials’ jobs were.

At the last house I tried the courtyard gate was open, but the front door was shut. A tiny girl who was lying under a cucumber frame lisped, “Me mam’th gone to wath the clothe.”

There was nobody under the shade of the trees, only the rippling of the water. I had a train to catch.

When I hear old people talking about retiring or writing their memoirs now I can no longer make the easy judgements of a detached observer.

I still fetch books for the old man writing his memoirs and hope that he’ll describe a marvellous past and its ongoing controversies. I don’t know why, but I wish I could ask him to put his pen down for a while, forget about our difference of age, experience, and attitude, and talk to me face to face. I’d politely interrupt the work he’s doing and ask, “What are you writing about?”

“My mistakes and failures.”

Will we really be any more clear-headed? I long to ask my question, but instead I keep my head down and my mouth shut. I stand up and tiptoe out, leaving the old man alone with himself, shut the door quietly and go away.

“Hey, I asked the old man’s son.” A phone call from a friend was waiting for me. “He said the old woman’s a housekeeper somewhere, but I can’t remember what the family’s called. He keeps asking me who you are and why you want to find her”

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