

Brain Stories 5: My Overseas-Chinese Neighbors

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Abstract—Spanning the years of 1949 - 1976, the Chinese government repeatedly told us that two thirds of world population were living in great suffering but we Chinese people all live in great happiness. The Chinese government systematically carried out a plan to export Chinese revolution into those countries that have a considerable Chinese population, such as Indonesia. Being apparent victims of such policies, my overseas-Chinese neighbors never told me how they felt when they were in China. This is their story in the eyes of a child.

Index Terms—Overseas Chinese, Indonesia, Chinese foreign policies, absolute poverty

DURING my years of kindergarten and primary school, my family was living in a summer vila in Shanghai, rented from the government. The villa was a two-storey building, having 10 rooms, one balcony and one terrace, plus an attached ranch with 2 rooms. Because of the delay of the “Shanghai Gymnasium for 10,000 spectators” due to the so called “economical difficulties” of 1962, my father’s work unit allowed my family to move into this vila which was originally vacated for the planned construction. At that time, my family just added my little brother. It became a family of seven — my father, my mother, my grandmother-in-law, my two elder sisters, my little brother, and I. The room we rented before in the same city was apparently too tight for this increased family size.

Soon after we moved in, we had a family as our new neighbors.

I. THE NEW NEIGHBORS

One day, while I was playing in our room on the second floor after day activities in kindergarten, I saw a young couple inspecting the empty room next-door. They were just married. The man looked handsome and was somewhat quiet. The young lady was pretty with a sweet voice, commenting on the room. Her skirt waved when she moved in the room.

It appeared that the couple liked the room. It was considerably larger than our room, I thought.

Our room was located at the Southeast quadrant of the second floor, sharing a balcony with the empty room at the Southwest quadrant of the same floor. We were not allowed to rent both rooms on the second floor. Instead, we were permitted to rent only another room in the two-room ranch that is connected with the main building through a short roofed walkway. The roofed walkway is connected to the south room of the ranch, not our north room. I guess now that my parents picked up this arrangement for two considerations: the total area is larger and my parents had better privacy if my grandmother stayed in the ranch.

Regardless, we were happy that the empty room was available then because we were fortunate to get this young couple as our neighbors.

II. THEY ARE OVERSEAS CHINESE

Our new neighbors just arrived at Shanghai from Indonesia, which had a long history of clashes against Chinese Indonesians.

In 1955, Zhou Enlai declared that Chinese citizenship was *jus sanguinis* (right of blood). This led to a treaty between China and Indonesia regarding the legal status of Chinese Indonesians. This treaty required all Chinese Indonesians to choose between Chinese and Indonesian citizenship. The Chinese government had a plan to export Chinese Communist Revolution to its Asia neighbors, although the Third International was officially dismissed in 1943.

In the Thirtieth of September Movement of Oct. 1, 1965 (the same date of Chinese National Day), a self-proclaimed organization of Indonesian National Armed Forces assassinated six Indonesian Army generals in an abortive coup. Later that morning, the organization declared that it was in control of media and communication outlets and had taken President Sukarno under its “protectiLion”. In the days and weeks that followed, the army, socio-political, and religious groups pointed the coup attempt on the Indonesian Communist Party. Soon a mass purge was underway, which resulted in the imprisonment and death of alleged communists and communist sympathizers.

Our neighbors arrived in this circumstances. As a child, I had no idea about the political situation in Indonesia that time. I only heard from adults that Indonesians were against Chinese.

We called the couple Uncle Li and Auntie Li, a typical way we children call our neighbors. Although the young couple tried to keep a moderate living style, my grandmother-in-law told us quietly that they had a lot of money. I guess now that almost all oversea Chinese were considered rich compared with the poor living standard in China then.

III. THEY WERE “RICH”

Uncle Li was a technician working in the chemical industry. Auntie Li was a professional singer in the official Shanghai Choir. From time to time, Auntie Li would practice her singing at home. Her songs were so sweet to me, sweeter than the songs in the radio.

I guess that their salary in Shanghai would not be sufficient to make a decent living, just like my father’s salary in a college and my mother’s salary as a primary school teacher were not sufficient to make our ends meet. My grandmotor-in-law had to borrow money from our neighbors at the end of every month in order to have money to buy grocery for the day’s meal. When my parents get their monthly salary, she pays back her loans, without any interests.

The Li's soon got their baby girl named Wei. They employed a maid, in her 40's, to take care of the family. I never heard of hiring a maid then, but I learned that hiring a maid only happened before the so called "liberation" in 1949. Are they the bourgeoisie? I wondered.

Here is a "toilet example". The building had a western style flush toilet in the shared restroom on the first floor. However, because of the cost of water, we never used the flush toilet. We did not have enough money to buy food, let alone using flush toilet. All families used a bucket style toilet. Although the bucket style toilet sometimes bounced the waste back to my buttock, it saves money. Everyday, there is a toilet trolley passing by our house. The trolley man would collect waste from the toilet of every household.

Only the Li's used the flush toilet. Mrs. Li told us that the main reason that the family moved in here because it had a flush toilet.

However, the availability of flush toilet soon changed. Another family moved into the restroom as their main room. They partitioned the small hall room outside the restroom so that they can use a half of the partitioned space as their own. Please note that this was not their fault, as the Government's Housing Bureau is in charge of this matter.

Soon, I saw that the maid was carrying and cleaning a bucket style toilet. Different from all other wood toilets, their toilet is enamel, white, with a wood seat at the top similar to the seat of a flush toilet. I have never seen such an exotic toilet being sold anywhere in China.

Sometimes, I saw the young couple waiting at the front of our building for the mail delivery, probably for an important mail. Our building did not have any mailboxes although the building with its ranch attachment had seven families. I guess that they had to wait there to receive mails directly from the mailman, for some important mails, maybe containing money from their parents in Indonesia.

IV. HER BEAUTIFUL SISTER

One day in a summer, the young couple was greeting Ms. Li's mother and her little sister in her early 20's from Indonesia. In my eyes of a child, her sister was extremely beautiful. She had a pair of large eyes, kind facial outlines, white skin, and a medium height. I had never seen a woman

so beautiful before, not even in any movie that I had watched. We did not have mobile phones that time that could enable me to take a picture of her. In those years, we could not afford any cameras.

The second day, she came down from the 2nd floor to our ranch room. Sitting on the only chair in the room, she was so nice, soft speaking in Chinese, and dressed elegantly in yellow, semi-transparent skirts. On a wood bench, my grandmother-in-law was chatting with her, explaining everything about our family and how our life is. After she left our ranch room, I could not help sitting in the chair she had just used. The chair was full of her body warmth.

That day, my grandmother-in-law was knocking at the door of the ranch room while I was using the wood toilet. "Boy, are you done?, Auntie Li's sister needs to use our toilet because there are other guests in their room." I quickly finished, pulled up my slacks, let her in, and quickly stepped out. I was thinking about their white and enamel toilet — they had only a single room. Our wood toilet does not have even a comfortable seat, I thought. It was a shame to our country as the only flush toilet was wasted in a family's main room, unused at all. I could not help thinking that way.

I do not recall how soon after her visit to our village, I saw Li's couple was receiving Auntie Li's mother again at the front of our ranch room. Auntie Li's mother weeping, holding a framed picture of her beautiful daughter at the chest. My grandmother-in-law told me, tearing, she has passed away after being infected by Lupus erythematosus. She died so young.

V. DEPARTURE

After Mao Zedong died, China started a reform with open door policies. Li's family could legally leave China. So, Uncle Li, Antie Li, and their primary school age daughter Li Wei left China to join their relatives in Indonesia.

Their life in China must have been tough, although in our eyes they lived better than we did while they were in China.

It is a lack of knowledge for communists or socialists to demand excessive income equality because this demand has always led to over-control of government on individual lives, a severe lack of checks and balances of government powers, and absolute poverty in China and elsewhere,.