To Consider Myself a Human Being

How China remembers the Cultural Revolution.

Photo: Thomas Fisher Library

Ji Xianlin | The Cowshed: Memories of the Chinese Cultural Revolution | *New York Review Books | Jan. 2016 | 26 minutes (6,690 words)*

What follows are three excerpts from Ji Xianlin's *The Cowshed*, courtesy of New York Review Books. As the publisher notes:

> *In contemporary China, the Cultural Revolution remains a delicate topic, little discussed, but if a Chinese citizen has read one book on the subject, it is likely to be Ji's memoir. When* The Cowshed *was published in China in 1998, it quickly became a bestseller. The Cultural Revolution had nearly disappeared from the collective memory. Prominent intellectuals rarely spoke openly about the revolution, and books on the subject were almost nonexistent. By the time of Ji's death in 2009, little had changed, and despite its popularity,* The Cowshed *remains one of the only testimonies of its kind. As Zha Jianying writes in the introduction, "The book has sold well and stayed in print. But authorities also quietly took steps to restrict public discussion of the memoir, as its subject continues to be treated as sensitive."*

The Cowshed is invaluable in its own right as a harrowing story of how the Cultural Revolution played out on an urban campus, but perhaps even more importantly as a glimpse into how those years of turmoil are remembered in mainland China.

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Introduction

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Everyone in China knew what the cowshed was, but no one knew its official name. We have come to value the rule of law, which requires things to be given their proper names. But how could a lawful name have been found for the cowshed, the very existence of which showed that the rule of law had broken down?

The term "cowshed" wasn't used much at Peking University. The "authorities" referred to the makeshift prisons in which professors were imprisoned on their own college campuses as laogai, or "reform through labor" camps. Later people started calling them "blackguard camps," and the name caught on. Blackguards, as the name implies, specialize in doing bad things and giving the Red Guards a hard time, so the place where they were locked up was nicknamed the "blackguard camp."

I had the good fortune not only to have seen a cowshed—or rather, to have been forced to see it—but to have lived in one for about nine months. It was no life of luxury, but I did gain a rare opportunity to witness the Cultural Revolution from the inside. The heavens were kind to me: another such opportunity would be harder to find than the proverbial needle in a haystack. Not only was I born in interesting times, I ended up in the most interesting of places, the cowshed, in the thick of the action. Would anyone these days build a prison for me, and ensure its security by guarding it day and night?

I study Buddhist history and precepts, but I've always been most intrigued by Buddhist superstitions, especially those concerning hell. These folk beliefs occasionally surface in canonical texts, but they truly come alive in oral tradition, where centuries of torture inflicted upon ordinary folk by ancient Chinese and Indian regimes have been refined into a masterpiece of sadism guaranteed to make the listener's hair stand on end.

Images of torture from the Jade Record // Archive.org Public Domain Image

Decades of studying an assortment of eastern and western hells have led me to the conclusion that the western hell is far too simple, naïve, tame. Take Dante's Inferno: his poetry may be sublime, but the hell he describes is superficial, unimaginative, merely comical. It has none of the depths of India's hells, which, amplified by wicked Chinese embellishments, are a veritable pagoda of horrors. Books like the Jade Record, a Chinese tract about hell illustrated with lakes of fire and mountains of knives, saws and vats of oil, bull- and horse-headed devils,

villains and props, dazzle the beholder and can only inspire awe. They prove the folk wisdom of the East to be superior to the erudition of western civilization.

I thought the imaginative powers of these anonymous storytellers unsurpassable until my time in the cowshed forced me to concede that the Red Guards' inventions far outstripped those of all their predecessors. The administration of the actual cowshed outdid that of the storied hell of ancient India. Dante himself would've learned a lot from these literary masterpieces.

My guess is that some of the students who became Red Guards used to attend my lectures on Buddhism. They may not have learned all that much about Buddhist history or beliefs, but they must have paid close attention to the Buddhist hell, because they managed to put theory into practice by building a cowshed in Beijing that was the envy of the land and widely emulated. Their success underscores how the student can indeed surpass his teacher, proving that the decades I spent teaching at Peking University were not in vain. As one of their victims, I have nothing but admiration for all of them.

In fact, my students improvised ingeniously on what they had gleaned from their studies. Without having to build mountains of knives, or fill vats with boiling oil, without any demonic aid, the Red Guards created an atmosphere of terror that far outstripped that of Buddhist creations. In the Narakas, devils follow the orders of Yan-luo, ruler and judge of the underworld, and spear their victims, hurling them into the oil and knives. But such physical torment cannot compare with the psychological cruelty practiced by the Red Guards in the name of combatting revisionism. For instance, at Peking University, the Red Guards forced their charges to learn quotations from Chairman Mao by heart. Buddhist devils don't force their prisoners to chant sutras and memorize them, punishing every mistake with a slap to the face. Their victims don't suffer through the daily lectures I remember so well: inmates assembled in rows each evening at dusk, the barking of guards, the sounds of beatings echoing in the clear night sky. Shadows flickered in the thin darkness by a hill outside the compound. To my dismay, I could sometimes make out—from of the corner of my eye—the few free citizens who had stopped by to admire the spectacle.

Red Guards // Wikimedia Public Domain Image

Indeed, the cowshed was a hub of new inventions, which made life for its inmates both exciting and terrifying. Our senses were sharpened to the point of paranoia. Never before had I experienced such a state of constant anxiety, and no outsider could possibly understand what it was like. Even though tens of thousands of people were incarcerated in the cowshed—no one knows exactly how many there were—they represented only a tiny fraction of China's vast population. As I have said, this was a rare opportunity. Aren't writers always advised to live life before writing about it? Of course, hardly anyone would volunteer to be imprisoned in the cowshed, and a willing victim wouldn't necessarily have met the strict entrance criteria.

As one of the happy few inmates of the cowshed, I almost paid for my good fortune with my life. Since then, I have felt that someone should write about what it was like. I suppose I could have done so myself: I am no writer, but I am a bit of a scribbler. Although I myself was unwilling to dredge up painful memories of that time, I hoped that another writer who had done time in the cowshed would record that terrible history. It would be a tremendous service to readers in China and beyond.

But I waited, and waited. I devoured all the books and articles I could find on the subject, but never found what I was hoping for.

Gifted writers among the survivors of the cowshed must number in the thousands. Why this silence? There is no time to lose: as each generation of survivors ages, these fleeting memories will be lost for good. That would be an immeasurable loss.

In 1992, not twenty years after the Cultural Revolution, people have already begun to forget what happened. When I tell young people about what happened to me, they stare back at me, their faces clouded with disbelief. (Sometimes even middle-aged people stare too.) He must be exaggerating, they think, he must have some ulterior motive—that can't really have happened. Although they are too polite to contradict me, I can read the incredulity in their eyes, and it distresses me.

> *Now that I've been baptized by the fires of the Cultural Revolution hell, I fear nothing, as running water cannot intimidate one who has crossed oceans.*

I mourn, because although I escaped with my life, no one understands my experience. Even to family or close friends, I've only revealed bits and pieces of what happened, most I've kept to myself to this day. I anticipate that my listeners will sympathize, and I mourn because they do not. The older I grow, the more alone I become. My elders grow frail like leaves in late autumn; young people are alien to me. Will my secrets die with me? The mere thought reminds me how alone I am. I fear that if society learns nothing from the collective experience of tens of thousands like me, we will have suffered in vain. And yet, setting these fears aside, I am convinced that an honest account of this period would be useful to all nations, if only as an example of what not to do and what to do. No ill can come of it.

After thinking long and hard, I've decided to take up the task myself. My account will contain no shade of untruth or exaggeration. I will not stoop to sensationalism. Rather, I will record events just as they happened, without adding or subtracting anything. I've never paid heed to idle criticism. The talent of lying to win favor is one that I neither possess nor desire. I am confident that my memory holds true. Now that I've been baptized by the fires of the Cultural Revolution hell, I fear nothing, as running water cannot intimidate one who has crossed oceans. If any of my readers wish to read themselves into portraits of certain individuals, to treat the scars pointed to in these accounts as their own, I can only say: be my guest. My account may not be literary, but it has been traded for blood and tears. I think my readers will understand that this book is not a novel.

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On the brink of suicide

I was getting nervous. I had assumed I was politically clean, but the Red Guards had proved to be experts at uncovering so-called evidence of my supposed errors. I had not lost confidence in myself, but I also knew that my opponents were blinded by factionalism, and I would not be able to convince them of my innocence.

In other words, there was no way out.

Photo: Ji Xianlin // 1952 // Wikimedia Public Domain Image

I lay sleepless for nights. All day long I waited apprehensively to be interrogated, and at night, I lay awake waiting for morning. I had no appetite. The future seemed dark to me, and I had no confidence that the darkness would pass. Days went by as if in a dream. At night, I would dream of someone charging at me with my own kitchen knife, rather than my using it to attack anyone, and awake with a start.

Dreaming that the basket of half-burned letters was ablaze and rushing toward me, I broke out in a cold sweat. I dreamed of the photo of Chiang and Soong Mei-ling. Chiang's mouth was open, dripping blood, and he bared his teeth at me, whereas Soong had turned into a snake woman. I nearly jumped out of bed.

Not only was I miserable, I was crippled by anxiety about the future. I could see that I was trapped, and that I would pay for my opposition to the Empress Dowager. *[Ed. Empress Dowager is the nickname given to the leader of New Beida, a campus faction.]* Most of my opponents were good people at heart, but I knew that partisanship would drive them to persecute me. I had served as department chair for more than twenty years, and either directly or indirectly hired all the lecturers and teachers in the department. I always strove to be fair and treat people well. I couldn't understand how a factional divide could instantly turn us into enemies. Even my own faction had turned against me.

Once New Beida had struck me down, Jinggangshan sent its own Red Guards to haul me off to its secret locations to be interrogated. *[Ed. Jinggangshan is an opposing campus faction, with which Ji had affiliated himself.]* I had thought we were on the same side, but now that it was too late, I knew better.

I was especially wounded by the betrayal of the two students I had mentored. One of them was from a peasant family and the son of a revolutionary martyr—he was as proletariat as it gets. Although his work was mediocre, I offered him a position as my teaching assistant out of a sense of "class awareness." There was another student from an impeccable class background who never fully grasped Sanskrit. Again, so as not to allow a single "proletariat brother" to fall behind, I always paid especial attention to him, calling on him more frequently in class. But now that I was an object of class struggle, these two men, both members of Jinggangshan, interrogated me, insulted me, and even pulled and twisted my ears. I knew I had brought this on myself, but I was still shocked. Even though I don't subscribe to the Confucian precept that "a teacher and student will always remain father and son," I couldn't help thinking that kindness deserves a little respect in turn.

Breaking With Old Ideas

III

I could see no way out of either my emotional distress or my political quagmire. For over a year, I had watched as capitalist-roaders were struggled against, beaten up, insulted, and literally kicked off the podium. The victim often ended up lying on the floor, unable to get up. Confucius had said that "the scholar can be killed, but he cannot be humiliated," and yet intellectuals were being humiliated to a degree unprecedented in Chinese civilization. Now that I was no longer an

observer but a target of class struggle, I was about to be subjected to the same humiliation. In fact, no one else had baskets full of half-burned letters, telltale kitchen knives, or photos of Chiang Kai-Shek. I could neither defend myself nor stoop to making a false confession. I knew that a worse fate awaited me than that of the capitalist-roaders I saw on stage.

There were only two choices open to me. I could either bear my fate or escape it. The former I didn't think I could do, and yet I could barely imagine the latter: even crickets have a survival instinct, never mind human beings. No one would choose to kill himself if there was even the slightest chance of another way out; as things were, I resolved to use the little strength I had left to take my own life. People would call me cowardly for "alienating myself from the people" by committing suicide, but I reflected that there was no point in caring what people said about you after you were dead.

Once I had decided to commit suicide, I became clear-headed and extraordinarily calm. I thought carefully about how to go about implementing this plan.

Scores of professors and cadres had committed suicide in the months since the Cultural Revolution had begun. One of the first was a Professor Wang in the history department. At the beginning of the Revolution, the Red Guards had barged into his home and questioned him. Maybe they also beat him up, though this seems unlikely to me, because the guards were gentler and not quite revolutionary enough back then. But Professor Wang was too thin-skinned to withstand even this moderate assault, too staunch a believer in the principle that "the scholar cannot be humiliated." He overdosed on sleeping pills, and was immediately criticized for having committed suicide. "Down with the counterrevolutionary Wang!" screamed a controversial poster pasted on the eastern wall of the main cafeteria after his death. I knew Professor Wang to be a good man and excellent scholar, one who had risked his life joining the underground Communist movement before Liberation. I could not understand how he could possibly be a counterrevolutionary. I had sympathy for his predicament.

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Then there was Cheng, the Party branch secretary of the Chinese department. I also knew him well. He had been a student leader in the underground Communist movement in his time, and later became a leader of the Peking University student union. Despite his youth, he was already a long-serving Party member. Yet he had killed himself too. He had probably been denounced as a capitalist-roader, since he was not senior enough to qualify as an academic authority. He had also been struggled against as a counterrevolutionary "devil" on June 18th, and made to wear a wooden placard while laboring on campus. That was too much for him. He was said to have taken a bottle of distilled alcohol and one of pesticide to the woods in the Western Hills just outside Beijing, and must have numbed himself with the alcohol before drinking the pesticide. I shuddered at the thought of him rolling on the ground in pain, with the pesticide burning his stomach.

I knew of people who had leaped off tall buildings and smashed themselves to pieces, or people whose bodies were ripped apart on train tracks. Although I had never seen anyone commit suicide, I had heard of countless instances and could barely imagine the inward struggle that each of these individuals must have experienced.

There were two professors who had thrown themselves into the Unnamed Lake on campus in the 1950s. The lake is so shallow that I couldn't work out how they had managed to drown themselves. Did they simply wade in waist-deep, and hold their heads underwater? One Professor Fang in the philosophy department had cut his wrists with a razor blade. The bleeding could not be stanched, and bystanders watched helplessly as he died a slow and painful death.

I thought back to ancient times and the suicide of Qu Yuan, the poet and court advisor who threw himself into the Miluo River in 278 B.C. Less than a century later, the warlord Xiang Yu slit his throat when his army was surrounded on the banks of the Wu River. The idea of cutting your own head off terrified me. Surely you'd have to be very strong. It seemed far more primitive than shooting yourself, which I'm sure Xiang Yu would have preferred had he had access to a handgun back then. The Germans would later apply their world-class chemical engineering to the problem of suicide; it was said that Nazi leaders all carried cyanide capsules so they could end their lives at any moment by biting into one. The Japanese, of course, are famous for hara-kiri, but since no one dies immediately of cutting their belly open, the warrior needs a second. I couldn't stop thinking about suicide. Sometimes I imagined these people so vividly that I thought I could see their corpses in front of me—a terrifying and yet alluring sight. Dying wouldn't make me happy, but there seemed to be no way to go on living.

Having never considered suicide before, I realized that if I was really going to kill myself I would need to do some serious research into suicidology. Every new branch of study requires a theoretical foundation, so I produced the following observations for my comparative study of suicide methodology.

There was no need to collect every known case of suicide; I could draw my preliminary conclusions from the few examples listed above. A historical materialist reading these cases observes that hanging and jumping into a well may be the oldest methods of committing suicide, and both are still going strong; as primitive societies progressed toward feudalism and capitalism, these early methods didn't die out. Cyanide is available only to fascists in industrialized countries. Hara-kiri and leaping into a volcano are unique to ancient and modern Japan, and difficult to put into practice. Cutting your wrists only seems to work if you are an educated person with a basic grasp of biology—most of these people don't succeed. Overdosing on sleeping pills, the classic capitalist method of suicide, is in fact employed by both capitalists and socialists, or perhaps only by nervous insomniac intellectuals; peasants who spend their days in the fields don't need sleeping pills. Since Chinese medicines for insomnia are too mild to have anything beyond a soporific effect, only western sleeping pills can be repurposed for suicide, which is why this is a "capitalist" method. Trust the capitalists to invent a safe, painless, convenient form of suicide.

So much for theory. Now for the practical application: as you may have guessed, I had settled on the capitalist method of killing myself. Given that I had already been branded a counterrevolutionary, I had no reason to avoid being further associated with capitalism. Now that I had chosen a method, I had to decide when and where to put my plan into practice. When was easy: as soon as possible. But as for where, I had two options—at home, or somewhere else. Of course, committing suicide at home would be more convenient. But my family only had two rooms, a bigger and a smaller one. I was afraid that if I lay in bed and swallowed the sleeping pills at night, my aunt and wife would be terrified when they discovered my lifeless body the following morning. I have always been too considerate, and even in planning to commit suicide I couldn't stop worrying about my family. Would they be afraid to live in the rooms in which I had died? If they did, they would have nowhere to go—surely they would be helpless and friendless if I died in disgrace. Not only had I been branded a counterrevolutionary, I would be vilified for having "alienated myself from the people." No, killing myself at home was not an option.

Nine Continents Clear and Calm, from the Forty Scenes of Yuangmingyuan [The Old Summer Palace] // CC AT-NC-SA License

The deed would have to be done elsewhere, which opened up a range of choices. Cheng, the Chinese department's Party branch secretary, inspired me to consider the thick woods of the Western Hills. Lying there under the wide sky on a bed of pine needles with a stream warbling in the background might have been a poetic way to end one's life. But it was some distance from home, and I would get in

trouble if any Red Guards caught me on the way. I considered finding a spot in Beijing's imperial Summer Palace, where the early twentieth-century scholar Wang Guowei had famously drowned himself in a lake. Not that I wanted to drown; I would prefer to find a cave, swallow a bottle of sleeping pills, and slip away quietly. But upon reflecting that I might startle the Summer Palace's many visitors, I decided that the Old Summer Palace, the Gardens of Perfect Brightness, just across the road from home, was a better option. There were large beds of rushes in the park, and at the beginning of winter, they would be in full bloom. All I would have to do was lie among the rushes and take my sleeping pills. It would be a quick, clean way to die. I was extremely pleased with this plan. Ingenious, I thought to myself.

I was surprised by how calm I was. I knew nothing of the psychology of suicide—after all, Qu Yuan had written about walking along the river where he was eventually to drown himself, but not about the actual drowning itself. I had thought that someone on the brink of suicide would be weeping hysterically, pacing up and down, plunged into inner turmoil. The fifth century poet Jiang Yan wrote that "anyone who dies does so with bitterness and weeps inwardly."

> *All I would have to do was lie among the rushes and take my sleeping pills. It would be a quick, clean way to die.*

I could not fathom why I was still so serene. To be sure, I was unsettled by the thought that I would be lying in the rushes in the Imperial Summer Palace the following day. Hardly anyone went there at this time of year and it would take days for someone to discover my body, already decaying or perhaps torn apart by scavenging animals. Right now I was still in one piece, but I trembled to think what my dead body would look like when discovered. I imagined the announcements that New Beida would broadcast over and over again: "The counterrevolutionary Ji Xianlin has alienated himself from the people by committing suicide instead of facing his guilt! Ji Xianlin has committed suicide!" I knew all too well that the Jinggangshan broadcasts wouldn't hesitate to compete with New Beida in denouncing me.

But despite all this, I was determined to go ahead with my plan. I had made my decision and there was no going back. In what were to be the last few hours of my fifty-odd years, I thought of my elderly aunt, who had suffered through so much with me, my wife of four decades, my children, family, and few loyal friends. There were many people whose forgiveness I would have to ask for taking this step, and all I could say was: "See you on the other side!" I took the few bank deposit certificates I had, and handed them to my wife and aunt without a word. "This is all you'll have to live on from now on, you poor things," I was thinking. "Please don't blame me for being selfish. I have no other choice." They seemed to understand me, and didn't weep or become emotional. I gave no thought to making a will or disposing of my treasured books, since these were my last moments with my family. Again, I was surprised by my calm.

I had suffered from insomnia for decades, and since I always lived frugally, I had a stash of Chinese and western medicines in both pill and liquid form. I put them all in a small cloth bag, planning to swallow the pills first then wash them down with the syrups. If I climbed over the back wall, crossed a stream, a road, I would be in the Old Summer Palace. Everything was ready, and I was about to step out of the door . . .

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In the Cowshed

I knew the Buddhist hell had eighteen levels, but it took a while before I discovered that hell in the cowshed might have deeper recesses than the one I lived in. To explain how I came to this realization, I must begin by introducing Zhang Guoxiang, a biology student who wasn't one of the original guards of the cowshed but had been sent there later by Nie's revolutionary committee. If I ever wondered

why, I knew better than to ask. Zhang stood out not because he was particularly high-ranking, but because he was always poking his nose into everything. The guards could take whatever they wanted from inmates' homes; just as our lives were at their mercy, our property was now theirs. Zhang confiscated a bicycle from a convict's home, and often rode it around the yard for fun. No one else did anything for fun in the silent terror that blanketed the cowshed, so this, too, attracted attention.

After the evening assembly, or sometimes even after the regulation bedtime of ten o'clock, Zhang Guoxiang could be found beneath the brightly lit tree in the center of the yard, sitting with his right leg planted on a chair. He'd be picking at the dirt beneath his toenails and railing at the unlucky convict who stood before him with bowed head. There was nothing special about his rants, but his unusual posture made an impression on me. One night I was surprised to find Lu Ping standing before Zhang. A principal target of the Empress Dowager's big-character posters, Lu Ping had previously been imprisoned elsewhere, and was only moved to the cowshed later on. I didn't know what he asked Lu, how long the interrogation lasted, or what came of it. But something about the whole scene looked suspicious to me.

Little did I know that I would be standing in Lu Ping's position only a few nights later. Not long after the curfew bell rang, I heard someone call my name from the direction of the Democracy Block. Even at night, I was always extremely alert, and I rushed to the front yard right away. There I found Zhang sitting with his leg perched as usual on his chair, cupping his ankle in his right hand:

"Why have you been corresponding with foreign spy agencies?"
"I have not."
"Why did you say that Comrade Jiang Qing has been giving New Beida morphine shots?"
"That was just a metaphor."
"How many wives do you have?"
I was taken by surprise. "I don't have several wives," I replied carefully.
We had a few more exchanges of this sort before he observed, "I have been very kind to you tonight."

He was right. I hadn't been beaten up or even yelled at, and I ought to be as relieved as the subject of an imperial amnesty. But the word "tonight" should have aroused my suspicions.

The following night, after the curfew bell had rung and I was getting ready for bed, I heard a voice yell: "Ji Xianlin!" I rushed toward the yard even faster than yesterday, and ran into Mr. Zhang just around the corner of the building. He was fuming: "Where have you been? Are you deaf?"

> *My eyes, mouth, and nose were burning with pain. I willed myself not to faint.*

Before I knew what was happening, a series of blows rained down on my head. I could tell that Zhang's weapon of choice was a bicycle chain wrapped in rubber. There was a ringing sound in my ears, and I seemed to see stars, but I stood there rigidly without flinching, not daring to move. My eyes, mouth, and nose were burning with pain. I willed myself not to faint. I was so disoriented that I could barely hear Zhang screaming at me. The convicts who lived on that block later told me that the beating had lasted longer than usual, and they spoke of the incident with fear in their eyes. I was barely conscious when I finally heard the command: "Get lost!" Realizing that the wrathful god was being merciful to me again, I hurried back to my room with my tail between my legs.

As soon as I recovered slightly, I became acutely aware of the pain. I examined myself: my nose and ears were bleeding, but none of my teeth had been knocked out, and I could still open my swollen eyes. I writhed in bed all night long, my whole body aching, my open wounds sticky with blood. Without a mirror, I could only guess what I must look like. When Zhang's victims appeared the following

morning, their faces were always swollen with bruises, and I figured I must be in an even worse state. The following day, I went through the usual routine of working and learning Mao's sayings, but my mind was blank. I didn't even think about suicide.

Mr. Zhang wasn't through with me yet. He barged into my hut at noon and ordered me to move to a different cell. It wasn't as though I had to pack: I simply rolled up my bedding and brought it to a room that faced the place where I had been beaten. By day it seemed no different to my previous cell, but at night I realized that this was the VIP (Very Important Prisoners) room. The lights stayed on all night, and none of the prisoners slept as we each took turns keeping watch. Were the guards afraid we would try to escape? Surely this couldn't be the case since intellectuals are the most timid of prisoners. This may have been a measure to prevent suicides, in case anyone wanted to hang themselves, for example. I realized that after my beating I had earned a promotion to a deeper level of hell, analogous to death row or to the Avichi circle of the Buddhist hell. Lu Ping also lived here.

Mr. Zhang forced me and one Professor Wang to fetch water for the entire camp. Three times a day, we hauled a cartful of drinking water from the public water tank back to the cowshed. I don't know how Professor Wang managed to end up in the same boat as me—he had committed no crimes and had never been a member of Jinggangshan. Fetching water was backbreaking work, and we did it together three times a day on top of our usual work and memorization.

We looked on hungrily as the other inmates ate. Whenever it rained, we got soaked. But Professor Wang always found a way to enjoy himself. When we reached the tank he would secretly make himself a cup of tea, and light up a cigarette.

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The guards were politically astute types. Having assembled all the cow devils and reformed us for more than half a year with memorization, lectures, and physical punishment, they decided it was time to cause divisions among us. They did so by selecting a group of convicts and designating them the Special Group.

The Special Group was housed in the Foreign Languages Building. Neither of the doors to the building could be opened, so a window was used as the entrance, and a long wooden plank served as a path into the classroom. I had no idea what the classroom was like, but I envied the convicts in this group enormously. I could endure beatings, hunger, and thirst for the time being, but it was the absence of hope that things would ever change which drove me to despondency. The future seemed to be an endless sea with no boat to board, no island in sight. Now that the Special Group was organized, it seemed like the boat that would carry me over the seas. Being selected for the group became my only ambition.

Members of the group had several enviable privileges. They were permitted to wear Chairman Mao lapel pins, and they could leave work early or arrive late. They may even have been allowed the privilege of paying Party membership fees. Whenever I overheard them singing songs in praise of the Great Leader, I imagined what it would be like to step onto that long wooden plank and find myself inside the classroom. It was unclear whether the Special Group was subject to a different set of rules, or whether the rules were just less strictly enforced. For instance, they actually crossed their legs in the cowshed, whereas I wouldn't dare. They seemed to hold their heads a little higher when walking. But for some reason, no member of the Special Group was ever released until the cowshed was dismantled.

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This individual had been a student at the eastern languages department in Nanking University before Liberation, and when he transferred to Peking University he stayed on to teach after graduating. He was talented, hardworking, and produced excellent academic work. When he was studying in Indonesia, his family had run into financial difficulties, and I had done what I could to help him. We were on

very good terms, and he always treated me with great respect.

But when Peking University split into rival factions, he joined New Beida. Overnight, he became extremely hostile toward me. He came to every struggle session that targeted me, and he glared with more ferocity and slammed his fists on the table with more vigor than anyone else, going out of his way to prove his allegiance to the Empress Dowager. Perhaps he was terrified that someone would discover he used to oppose the Communist Party and the Soviet Union. Although I had been warned about fair-weather friends, I found his betrayal particularly difficult to accept.

Class struggle eventually caught up with him. One morning I walked out of the cowshed and was about to bow my head as required, when I saw a big-character poster on the sidewalk: "Down with—, the counterrevolutionary!"

I was stunned. Not too long ago he had been aggressive and brimming with revolutionary zeal as part of a panel that interrogated me. It turned out that someone had finally discovered the skeletons in his closet. That night, he took a capitalist overdose of sleeping pills and "alienated himself from the people."

I took no pleasure in the news. Life is too complicated and terrible for gloating.

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After a few months in the cowshed, I could feel my emotions growing duller and my thoughts more stupid by the day. The cowshed may not have been hell, but it felt as close to it as I could imagine; I may not have been a hungry ghost, but I certainly was as hungry as one. I felt like neither man nor devil, or perhaps like both man and devil. I began to judge myself the way I knew other people judged me. I used to consider myself a human being, and treated myself as one. But to borrow a popular philosophical term, I now felt alienated from myself.

> *I felt like neither man nor devil, or perhaps like both man and devil. I began to judge myself the way I knew other people judged me.*

Without wanting to sound arrogant, I should say up front that if there are two kinds of people, "good guys" and "bad guys," as children say, I profess to be one of the good guys. I've never been particularly avaricious or stingy. When I was a young teenager, the pharmacist's clerk in Jinan once gave me one silver coin too many in change. A silver coin was a small fortune to a child like me, but I gave it back to him right away. The clerk blushed, and I later realized that he might have been embarrassed because he wouldn't have been so honest himself. In 1946, when I was about to return to China from Europe, while in Switzerland I sold a gold watch in order to send some money home, and exchanged the remaining francs for gold. The man made a mistake and gave me an extra ounce of gold; again, a single ounce was worth a significant sum of money, but I returned it right away. These are only small examples, but they mean something to an ordinary person like me.

In the cowshed, on the other hand, I gradually grew accustomed to the idea that I had become a cow devil, although I had initially resisted the transformation. I stopped distinguishing between man and devil, beauty and ugliness, right and wrong. As the proverb goes, a cracked jug may as well be smashed, and I had given up on myself as though I were a cracked jug. I was no longer tempted by suicide; nor did I think about the future. I had simply stopped caring who I was or what people thought of me.

I also had other, more pressing worries. The living allowance allotted to my family was pitiful, and even if we ate nothing but cornmeal buns with pickled vegetables, we would starve. A meager diet devoid of any meat meant that the hard labor made me constantly hungry. Sometimes I trailed the guards around, begging them for empty cartons of tofu, so that I could dip my cornmeal buns into the thin liquid at the bottom of the cartons. On one occasion, I was made to clean out Blocks 28 and 29, student dormitories that had been damaged during fighting by the rival

factions. In a large room littered with debris on the south side of Block 28, I found a couple of moldy steamed buns in a bamboo cooker. Without stopping to think about hygiene or germs, I pocketed my finds and wolfed them down furtively when the guards weren't looking.

I learned to tell lies. When I was at a worksite and unbearably hungry, I would tell the team leader that I had to go to the hospital. With permission to leave, I would scurry home by back alleys no one used, gulp down a couple of steamed buns with sesame paste, and hurry back to work as though I had just been to the doctor. Of course, I risked grim consequences if I ran into a guard or one of their informants.

I was once thrilled to find some ten-cent and twenty-cent notes on the road, and quickly stuffed them into my pocket. A convict was prohibited from holding his head up when walking; from then on, I turned the rule to my advantage and kept my eyes peeled for copper coins. When I realized the latrines in the cowshed were the best place to find coins, the outhouse shunned by everyone else became one of my favorite spots.

I wouldn't have believed I could do such unimaginably base things until I actually did them. I lost all sense of shame, as well as my sense of right and wrong. Just recalling those times makes me shudder. I used to wonder how one could morally corrupt a person, and assumed that some are simply innately depraved. Now I know from personal experience that the truth is far more complex, but that no one can be held responsible for another's evil.

* * *

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