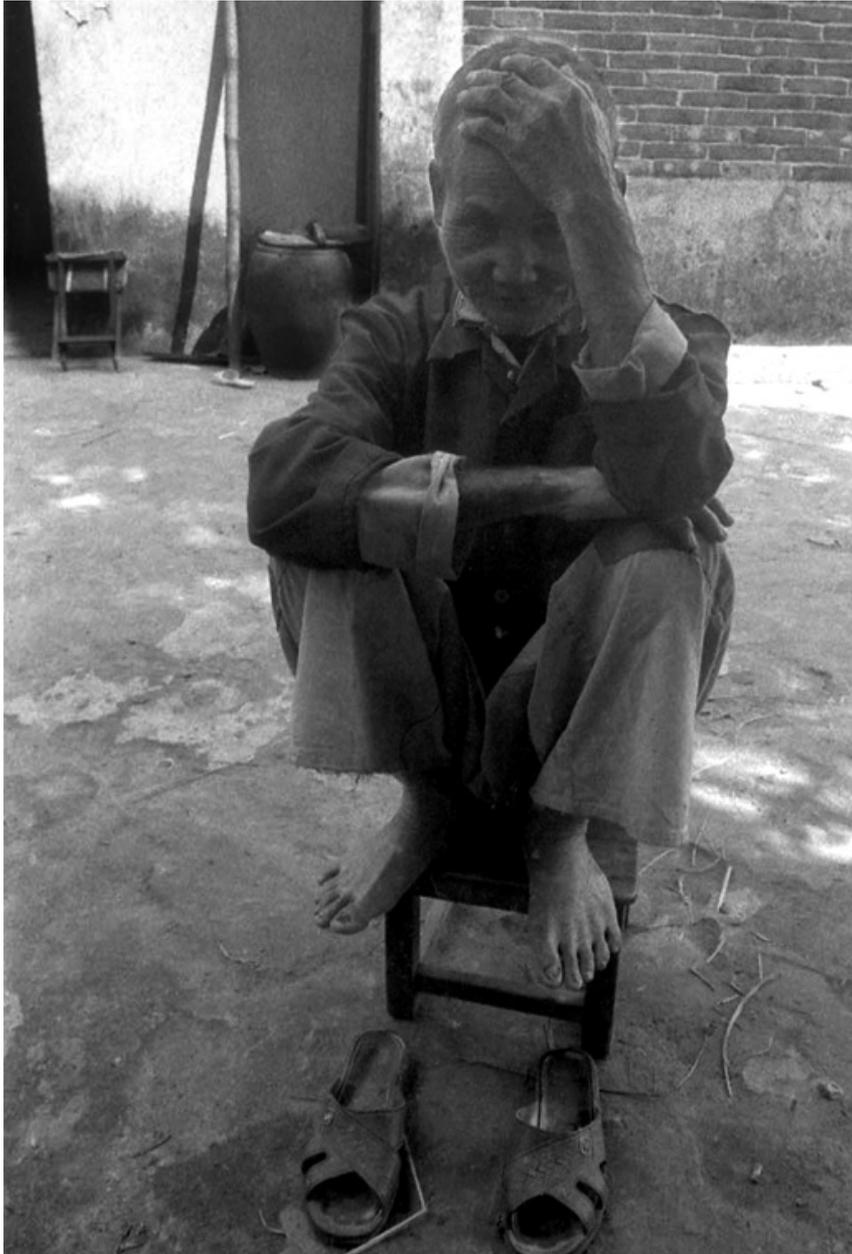


XVII



Alone in the Village

He uses a cane to steady himself as he emerges from a house at the edge of the village. A small child shuffles behind him as he inches his way across the courtyard.

The old man stops at a faucet and fills a pan with water before turning and disappearing inside again.

He and the child move down a long passageway toward the center of the house. Deep inside the house the gloomy light deepens. The rooms have hardened dirt floors and aging brick and earthen walls.

The long corridor opens onto an inner courtyard where the afternoon light and sky flood through an open roof. A flock of white doves flaps down from rooftop perch. The old man says his nephew sells the doves in the marketplace. The birds are the only sign of life in the dilapidated old house, a glimmer of what used to be. For a passing moment, the beauty of a long lost time flares back to life, awakened by the birds and the flooding light.

At one time the house must have been the home of one of the village's most wealthy families, but now it feels like a tomb, a house filled with ghosts.

The village children say that the old man - Liang Ni Fen - is a gong lao, a person who performs funeral rituals in the village.

Liang looks and feels older than his 73 years. He says he is the only family member who still lives in the house, which was built by his grandfather almost 100 years ago. Each room of the house is still reserved for a family member, but his brothers have their own village homes and seldom spend time there now.

In a faintly lit room near the courtyard, Liang stops beside a small ancestral altar with incense and candles. He says he often comes to the altar to pray to his ancestors.

During the Cultural Revolution the people had to pray secretly, he says. It's only in recent years that they have been able to pray openly again.

Liang says his life has not been a happy one. When he was a young man he married a woman who abandoned him soon after their marriage. He says he has been alone ever since.

He leans against the doorway and cries as he tells his story, but his crying almost instantly turns to laughter.

The old man wipes his eyes and moves deeper into the house. The child follows close behind him, watching with frightened eyes. The little boy is his brother's grandson, he says. He was frightened when he awoke from a nap and found his family's house empty. He was afraid to be alone and went looking for his great uncle.

Liang says his eyesight is failing him now and he can barely walk. He says he is always afraid of falling.

When he was a child, a wind passed through the village and lodged in his legs, he says. By the time he was in his 60s, he could no longer work in the fields. Now the village gives him 15 yuan a month for support.

Liang says his brothers live in the village but seldom come by to visit him. He says they ignore him and expect the village to take care of him.

Last year he was ill for two or three months, but his brothers didn't come by to care for him. He couldn't even walk to the communal toilets outside. Only his brother's wife came by the house to check up on him. She has a good heart, he says.

He says he felt so ill he wanted to die. He tried to kill himself by setting himself on fire, but he failed.

He starts to cry again as he recalls his illness, but a moment later his tears become laughter. Back and forth, back and forth he goes, alternating between tears and laughter.

Homeless

The house stands in a quiet, abandoned part of the village, on a narrow lane almost hidden from view. At first it appears to be vacant. An exterior wall has been charred by fire and the door of one room has been nailed shut.

But a man lying on a simple wood-frame bed and rattan mat occupies a second room at the back of the house. It is early afternoon and sunlight pours into the man's room and onto his bed. The wind blows gently, lifting the white curtain of the window behind him.

A pile of potatoes rests on the floor in the corner and a reed cover for steaming food hangs from the wall. Unlike many village rooms, which are crowded with clothes and furniture, the sleeper's room is empty and neat.

I recognize the man as a middle-aged villager who sometimes sits alone under a tree at the edge of the cane fields.

While the man has been resting on his bed, most of the villagers have been busy working in the rice paddies.

A woman returning from work in the fields passes the house and says the man who lives there isn't worth my attention.

He is a fool, she says. There is something wrong with his mind. Don't even bother to talk with him.

When the man hears what she says, he lifts his head and stretches his neck to see who is speaking. What she says is untrue, he says. I am not a fool. There's nothing wrong with my mind.

He speaks coherently and distinctly, casting doubt on the woman's assertion. He says he is a poor man who owns nothing. The house he lives in doesn't belong to him. He can't do farm work anymore because he doesn't have animals or tools.

The people in the village have made me poor, he says, taken everything away from me.

He doesn't explain how or why they have done this or why he can't obtain new tools and animals.

He says he must scavenge in the fields for food, at times steal from others; he says there's nothing he can do to change his situation.

I wait for him to say more but he doesn't. He rests his head on the mat and closes his eyes, returning to daydream and silence.

Waving a Sickle

Dressed in tattered clothes, he sits on a bench in front of his house on a sweltering summer afternoon.

He appears to smile as I approach him but it's hard to tell if he is smiling or scowling. His expression changes from moment to moment. He tries to speak as I approach but his words are unclear. When I move too close to him with my camera he picks up a sickle and waves it threateningly in my face.

I realize he must be mentally retarded. A neighbor sees me standing in front of his house and comes over to talk with me.

She says, yes, he's mentally retarded. The villagers take care of him, contributing money for his support each month. He can cook his own food but his relatives often come by to help him out.

If a person is handicapped or too old to take care of himself, the village government contributes food, money, and other assistance toward his support, she says.

Birdman

Ho Bo Xin stands in the dim light of his birdhouse surrounded by hungry doves. He holds one bird in his hands while others crowd around him, flapping their wings.

He says he will soon take the birds to Zhanjiang to sell in the market. There is a good market for pigeon in the city because the local people think the birds are tasty and good for health.

He says the birds fly off for short periods but eventually return to look for the uncooked rice he feeds them.

Ho Bo Xin says his life has had its ups and downs. He got married and became a father for the first time at around the time of the communist revolution.

But his son was born prematurely and the child's mother became ill. Five years later she died, not long after his mother and father had died.

At the age of 20 he found himself raising a five-year-old son without the help of a wife or parents. It was a strange, lonely time for him, he says. He still has vivid memories of that period of his life. He lived that way for a long time, raising his son alone in the village.

Then about 10 years later, a single woman with a child knocked on his door. She too had lost her spouse and was following a Chinese custom that allows a widow to approach a man who has had the same experience.

She ended up staying with him and they were married. She gave me four more children, he says.

Happiness returned to his life after he married, he says. He had always wanted to remarry but hadn't been able to find a second wife.

He says his life is in its final phase now. At 77, he leaves most of the farm work for his five sons and generally spends his days idly sitting in the shade of a tree or talking with other men in the village store. Sometimes he goes to a son or daughter's home for a visit. Every night at dinner he drinks a glass of rice wine.

He says he feels no need to leave the village like the young people.

They think that life in the city is more comfortable, he says. They know that in the city they won't have to work all day under the scorching sun.

A Village Bachelor

Ho Bo Xin's eldest son sits in his father's house surrounded by birds. The birds perch on tables and chairs and along a ledge at the top of the wall.

The son, who has his own home nearby, smiles faintly when he speaks ¾ the shy smile of a child, of someone who would like to crawl inside himself and not be seen by anyone.

He says he has only three years of schooling and has been working in the fields with his parents since he was a child. He had to leave school early because his family was so poor.

There has never been enough money in the family, he says. Leaving school made it possible for his younger brother to attend school but he never had the chance.

His brothers live with their wives and families in their own homes, but he lives alone. Of Ho Bin Xin's seven children, he is the only one who is still unmarried. He says his father didn't have enough money to find him a wife.

He says there are about eight unmarried men in the village. Some villagers say the unmarried are either pitied or disparaged, but the bachelor says he doesn't know what others think of him for not being married.

He believes the villagers accept him and don't speak badly of him, though he knows there will always be some who either pity the unmarried or look down on them.

Since he is already in his 50s, he says it's unlikely he will ever get married. He says he doesn't really know why he hasn't found a wife. It could be that his father wasn't rich enough to make marriage with him desirable for a girl. It could be that he wasn't handsome enough. He laughs uneasily when he says this.

He says one village bachelor recently got married, so there's one less bachelor than before.

The bachelor says he has come to accept his fate. Sometimes he feels lonely at night in the silent house but there's nothing he can do about it.

He says he seldom leaves the village, even to travel to the city. At night when he has finished working in the fields, he often goes to a friend's house to watch television.

A Bachelor's New Wife

She sits in the darkened room of one of the most dilapidated houses in the village. She's a short stout woman with a gentle face.

The house inside feels like a cave: the rooms are gloomy and disorderly, filled with worn-out furniture.

Her husband must be one of the poorest men in the village. The size and condition of a village house reflects the social status of a family, especially since the reforms, and this house is one of the most dilapidated.

The woman's child stands in the middle of the room while her brother, who is visiting from the north, sits nearby.

She says she recently moved to Long Wan from Guizhou Province to marry one of the village's long-time bachelors. Her husband was in his 40s when they were married, she says.

She says her husband paid her family 1,000 yuan to seal the marriage, but

she never received any of the money. Her family kept the money, she says. She says she knew her husband's condition when she came here: she knew he was very poor and had never been able to find a wife.

Before her arrival in Long Wan she had a husband and two children. She says her husband and first son died and she was left alone with the remaining child.

After she gave birth to a second son, the government forced her to have a sterilization operation, so she can no longer bear children.

But having children doesn't matter to her new husband, she says. He is in his 40s and has no interest in being a father now.

She says she agreed to the marriage because she thought life in Guangdong Province would be richer than life in Guizhou. People in Guizhou consider Guangdong a wealthy province.

But after she arrived in Long Wan she realized that life here was no better than what she had left behind in her Guizhou village. The food here is not as good as Guizhou food. The bean curd is more expensive and doesn't taste as good, she says.

Her brother interrupts her and says she hasn't felt well lately and may not be making much sense. She doesn't know what she's saying, he says.

She doesn't reply to her brother's comments, but seems unfazed by what he says about her.

Her brother says he came to Guangdong to do business. His plan was to buy products in Guangdong and sell them at a profit in Guizhou. But he says he hasn't been able to find anything worth buying here.

He is disappointed with the way his trip has turned out, saying he came all this way for nothing.

A Widow's Life

She sits on a small stool in the darkened house. Outside the sun shines brightly but it's as dark as a cave inside the house. The only light entering the room streams through a narrow window behind her.

The widow lives in one of the oldest houses in the village, a house with a thatched roof and a dirt floor, the kind of house the villagers no longer build. She is dressed in a gray shirt and pants and has a red kerchief covering her head.

Another elderly friend sits nearby surrounded by a group of small children. During the day the women care for village children while their parents are at work in the fields.

Both she and the other woman are widows and neither has a son to take care of them in their old age. She says she is more than 80 years old and lives by herself now. She has a daughter outside the village but her daughter seldom comes to Long Wan to visit her.

If she had a son he would be living in the village with her and she wouldn't have to live alone like this, she says.

Daughters marry and disappear, she says. They move to other villages and are no longer part of the family's daily life.

Yes, she's lonely, she says, but it's not too bad during the day. The villagers help her out. They cultivate land for her and bring her food. The village govern-

ment gives her 15 to 20 yuan a month to help her with her expenses.

The village leader and other villagers often come by to see if they can do anything for her.

Night is the most difficult time for her, she says. The house and the village get completely dark. It's then that she feels most alone.

But being alone isn't so strange either because she has lived this way for such a long time and has slowly become used to it.

Old Soldier

He sits in the darkened room of his small village house. Outside the sun is shining brightly today but inside it's dark and dusty.

Very little light seeps into the room through the paper-covered windows. The house is so dark that the old man has to turn on the light - a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling - to see where he is going.

His grandchild and another child sit beside him in the crowded room. He says he is 80 years old and one of the oldest members of the Communist Party living in Long Wan. He says he was a primary school teacher before he joined the communist cause in 1948.

In 1970 he retired from the People's Liberation Army and returned to his home village to live.

During the Civil War, the people of Long Wan supported the Communist Party, he says. In those days the Guomindang soldiers often came to the village to look for new recruits. But the villagers sympathized with the Communists and didn't want to join the Guomindang army. In those days the Communist Party tried to educate the people, arguing that the Guomindang demanded too much from them in taxes.

He was a village leader at the time and used to help the young people flee to the hills to hide from the Guomindang soldiers.

He eventually joined the People's Liberation Army, where he served as a medical assistant specializing in setting broken bones - a skill he learned from his father and that proved to be useful in the military. He says he still uses this skill today when a villager breaks a bone.

Too old to work in the fields now, he lives with his son and spends most of his time caring for children and growing medicinal herbs in a garden patch outside his door.

