

Heroic Choice of the First-Generation

By Yuting Tu

I had never seen him, the man who wore a pair of black-rimmed glasses, combed his hair neatly and exuded a gentle temperament in his gestures. Looking at his straight nose, bushy eyebrows, and upturned mouth in everyday photos, I can say that his handsome appearance is the least of his virtues, even though I only know him from a photograph, a diary, and the words of my elders.

I was always very naughty when I was a kid. When I was happily playing the game of peek-a-boo with my friends at home, I accidentally bumped into the old cabinet in my home, and after a sound of brushing, a green diary that looked some years old fell out—obviously, this is not like my era, with colorful cartoon patterns; it should belong to an older era. The passage of time made its surface dirty. But my mischievous curiosity made me want to go ahead and open it. I felt very nervous, but also excited in that small and enclosed space. I could hear my racing heart, because the old cabinet was usually locked, which meant that some very important things were kept inside, such as my mother's sparkling diamonds and important identification of our family, which was not allowed for me, the naughty child to touch. I opened it carefully like I was ready to discover a dust-sealed secret. I paid special attention to make sure I didn't destroy it, but after I read it, everything around me seemed less important at that time. On the pages, which were turning yellow with time, was written in strong handwriting: "Knowledge is everything in life, and diligence is the doorway of knowledge. Opening the door of knowledge requires the key to diligence." This reminded me

of what my father once said to me: "You once had an uncle who was the highest achiever in our family. He went to Peking University, one of the top universities in China, and he is a role model for all our brothers to follow." I still remember that image; I watched my father's slightly red eyes, which he rarely showed, and his voice, which was getting smaller and smaller; I followed his eyes and looked out the window. The sun at that time and even now is so bright that my eyes are illuminated.

At first, I just respected him, respected my clever but prematurely departed uncle—probably God liked his talent. As my father said, he was admitted to Peking University, the best university in China and was the most academically accomplished person in my family. I think his talent and strength are very admirable; he must have been able to find the best solution to the most difficult mathematical problems; he must also have been able to understand the most difficult concepts, such as the concept of "cross elasticity of demand,"¹ which now bothers me. But let me think about why he chose to go to university; where did I hear my father say that so many students, especially the eldest son of the family, would stop his studies and earn a living for the family? People in the late 1970s in China were very poor so even though my uncle's family was better off, earning money was still attractive. But what made me want to know about him making these choices was a quiet but difficult night; I was puzzled about whether to choose to study abroad. That day, I turned and turned without feeling sleepy, so I got up and sat on my little windowsill, staring at the shining moon in the sky, and my tangled thoughts drifted to the empty valley, the lush forest, and the slow-

¹The cross elasticity of demand is the percentage change in the quantity demanded for good X caused by a 1% change in the price of good Y.

flowing stream.

Perhaps we need to go back to the 1970s when “leader Deng restored the university entrance examinations in 1977” (History). It opened the doors of post-secondary education to nearly a generation of youth (my uncle’s generation) who lacked this opportunity because of the Cultural Revolution. Before that moment, many young people were unable to obtain an education; coming of age as a “lost generation,” their schools had been closed, and they found it harder to be employed and integrate into social life. Maybe because of the background in the Chinese environment at that time, my uncle had the choice to continue his studies: “Leader Deng elevated the social status of intellectuals from the lows of the Cultural Revolution to become an integral part of socialist construction” (History). Leader Deng actively promoted the development of scholars and contributions to society because knowledge is eternal, and with knowledge, people will better integrate into society to know the truth of the world. My uncle may have been driven by the national policy to seize the opportunity to take the college entrance examination, but also achieved a very impressive, good score—today we will still be excited about the good score and entering Peking University. Yet my uncle may have also hesitated to go to school, not only because his peers chose work, but also because of the lingering prejudices left from the Cultural Revolution. I heard a teacher in modern Chinese history say that because of the mistakes of the government in the idea of building a new China at that time, most young people's attention was diverted to the class struggle instead of continuing to study. People began to deny knowledge and even cancel education, delaying the growth of a whole generation of teenagers, exposing them too early to participate in the class struggle to earn more money and improve their social status.

Although this phenomenon had been improved by Deng's decision, there was still a fog in people's minds, and people's minds were crazy about whether to continue to make money in order to maintain their newly established status or to further their studies in an academic community with uncertain prospects for future development. This was too difficult; many scholars in the academic progress were stopping here. My uncle was must have also thought about the two choices for a long time. He was like sitting in the boat that was experiencing a storm. When the boat met the wind and rain, people shook from left side to right side. By that time, my uncle had lost his peers. He was still thinking, tightly grasping the railing, but did not let himself fall; he wanted to persist, just when there was a little light ahead, the fog was clearing, he held on, which was his choice in silence.

There is a famous saying in China called "the right time, the right place, and the right people", which means that on the road to success, there are three key elements. Respectively, the right time refers to the blessings and opportunities given by God; the right place means that people are in a situation or condition that is favorable to them; the right people means the mind of a person is firmly in peace and harmony to keep going. Although now it seems my uncle might have had the opportunity created by God to choose and the favorable conditions when China's new society re-attached great importance to education, these two external factors alone may not have been enough for my uncle to make the right decision. So, I come now to the last and most important point—the right people, because people's inner attitude is usually more realistic than these uncertainties that need to wait for opportunities.

Perhaps it was my uncle's spontaneous curiosity, and unwavering determination not to be swayed by the decisions of others that made him decide although just a few of his peers

would go to universities at that time. My uncle was not very strong from the beginning; my father said that he didn't review well for his political exam, so he got a very low grade; it led him to mope all day and be ashamed to speak to others. But the next day, my father said that he vaguely saw my uncle in the half-dream and half-awake get up early in winter, rubbing his hands and standing beside the frosted glass window, reading a political book whose words endorsed my uncle's determination to do better on his exam. The white breath from his mouth gradually melted the frost on the windows until the sun warmed the earth at noon and the snow slowly melted on the ground. Generally, every winter, people like to hide in the warm bed and then lie on the bed, and my uncle will not. In general, when people encounter failures in the discipline, they will find problems and solve them, but they will not say that "politics is the soul," which shows his heartfelt love for and reflection about politics. He once wrote to himself in one of the pages of his diary, the little green book: "May you be the pine and cypress at the summit of the mountain; may you be a wonder in the greenhouse; may you be the fish in the raging waves; may you be a bird to the biting wind." Perhaps this is the attitude that he will stick to his heart instead of following the crowd. At that time, most of his peers chose to work to earn money and integrate into society as a young person; he chose to continue to complete his education. He chose to be the first generation to accept the new look of China.

My uncle died in a car accident a long time ago, before I was born. At that time, all the items of his that they could find were burned and went with him; the whole family's mood and state became silent and dark, and this green diary happened to be the "lucky person" who was not found at that time, which was a treasure for me and my big family, so this is why it

was locked. Although I didn't get to talk to him personally, discuss with him about academics or ask him about studying abroad, which has troubled me for a long time, as I explored the mystery of his choice to go to university, we had countless silent conversations—I could understand his struggles with his choice, and he could teach me how to stay true to myself in the face of my choice. The question is like the one that many people struggle with today when faced with the choice of whether to follow the crowd or to stick with themselves; if you asked me before, I couldn't give you the answer, but now my answer would be to stick to your heart. Although I was not the first generation of students to study abroad—most of my peers stayed in China to finish their studies, this was a fresh start for my family as a child—no one ever had the same experience as me and there were a lot of things I had to explore on my own. But I still felt happy that studying abroad would give me a better education than most children who chose to stay in China, so I persisted.

Now, the small green diary left by my uncle was formally given to me by my father to keep; as I grew up and sensible, he hoped that my uncle's ideas could inspire me to face the difficulties in study and life and remind me to pay attention to the problems in study. I cherish it very much; it is just like a good partner in my study, sweeping away the dust in front of me, letting me be the fish that strives upstream; the little bird who do will not be blocked by the wind and rain, and grew into an eagle.

Works Cited

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