A LETTER FROM AN HONEST MAN

真挚的一封信

For the next generations,

This letter is written to you from experience and truth. You know society is changing faster than ever and circumstances are ever moving in a better direction. However, some things are timeless. We write to you with the perspective of Mr. Li Yaohua, relaying his story to you in hopes that you, too, can grow and face your challenges with the same resilience, honesty, and fairness as he had. To face the future, here is wisdom from the oldest alleys and homes of Shanghai's longtangs.

Yaohua reached his adolescence in mid-20th-Century China, as young and impressionable as any other child. In his youth, he recalled playing with elastics and catching cicadas for leisure, which may have seemed like foreign ways for a child to spend their free time, especially in the 21st Century. Above all the smaller dissimilarities, though, he was raised by a family that operated in a vastly different way than most modern ones, in a society that might come off as alien to contemporary minds. Yet, this upbringing has instilled within him a wide set of values that not only helped him live his life, but can be applied to our lives—your life—today.

For Yaohua's family, ancestry was above even religion. Genealogical records were kept and updated, noting the members and movement of each generation, how the bloodline diverged and converged through time. Even the southern migration of Yaohua's grandfather's ancestors starting in Guangdong during the Southern Song Dynasty was documented with clarity. Throughout the centuries, a set of unique values and rules would rise within each family—loyalty, piety, philanthropy, integrity, and modesty became integral to Yaohua's bloodline—and it would govern the choices they make, the lives they lead. Those who practiced witchcraft, adultery, prostitution, antiquated thinking, and other acts of counterculture were dashed entirely from family records. The rules were cold, ancestral, and long-standing, and anyone who flouted them was punished.

Built around these pillars of virtue and discipline, the Li family was stringent from the start. Yaohua remembered, during his childhood, taking an extra apple for himself and lying to his parents about it. After finding out, his mother had beaten him with the rattan side of a feather duster—rendering him unable to wear shorts the next day due to heavy redness and bruising.

"You said you took the apples and I believed you, but why did you have to lie about only taking one?" she asked.

Honesty was one of the core principles of Yaohua's family, and his parents took strict measures to make sure he recognized its importance from a young age. It wasn't until Yaohua reached adulthood, though, that he realized things were much grayer than the black and white disciplines his parents had taught him. Absolute candidness was difficult, and it frequently brought judgement and—in extreme situations—persecution.

Growing up, Yaohua lived a life of relative comfort. Yaohua's father was a professor with a steady income, which allowed the Li family to live as part of a well-off community of middle-class teachers, lawyers, doctors, and small business-owners. Coffee and bread were common and popular commodities, whereas in the cases of poorer families it was considered a luxury. As children, Li and his peers had ample time outside of school to play. More specifically, they often drew great entertainment from poking bird's nests with sticks and playing

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with the eggs that fell out.

When Yaohua's mother was informed of this, she had reprimanded him: "Think about it. If you break the mother bird's eggs and their nest, what happens when the old bird flies home? It's like when you go out and someone hits you and kidnaps you. Isn't it the same?"

When Yaohua told this to the other boys, they countered him with, "So? You're not the bird."

Often times, Yaohua had learned, there would be people who disagreed with you and refused to even attempt to understand you. Often times, your thoughts and faiths may isolate you from your peers. However, here it's even more important for you to hold to your own truth in the circumstances that threaten you to pretend otherwise.

Yaohua's upbringing, enriched by the unyielding rules and the guidance of his family, had taught him to be resilient in the face of conflict, and similarly unyielding in holding true to his own values. Hardship was familiar since the beginning, especially for a child who was born during the height of the Sino-Japanese conflict. Yaohua grew up on stories of Japanese air raids in Chongqing, the bombings that snuffed thousands of Chinese lives within a split second. Yet even so, the Li's had carried on like it was just any other day. And why? Because conflict was perpetual and inevitable, and they decided it did not do to dwell on things that they couldn't change.

During times of both civil and international warfare, the liberties of the people were often constrained. Yaohua was a student when Chinese language and history classes were discontinued in school. Teachers said to the children, "When the Japanese soldiers invade and they see you speaking and acting Chinese, they will kill you." Yaohua was always a lover of messy, rich things like language and religion, so even as a student, he was enraged by this. How could the Japanese have terrified them so easily into stifling China's priceless culture? He remembered the incident of the bird's nest, of his mother telling him to carry through with the right thing even if those around him thought otherwise. What had happened then

was being mirrored by what was happening now.

The Cultural Revolution, which happened decades later, was when he finally spoke up against this casual injustice. In its core, the Cultural Revolution had committed the same act to Chinese history as the war had. The destruction of the "Four Olds" by the Communist government—old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits—had succeeded in wiping away much of China's olden history.

"When we attempt to change or inhibit history, we have no roots, no identity, and therefore no country," Yaohua argued. "But when I said this out loud, I was called a counterrevolutionary. In those days, dissenters were often incarcerated and punished severely, but I did not relent. My father and his father taught me to stay true to my values, and my mother taught me to be honest no matter how afraid I was, however the crowds might oppose me. It was the values of strong will and integrity I had picked up from my guardians that gave me the drive to finally use my voice."

During this time, Yaohua's friend Tibet was imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit. After years of serving his sentence and finally being released, he was asked, "When you sat in that cell, what was your worst fear?"

They thought he would've responded with hunger, or suffering, or death, but he had said, "I'm scared that when I come out, I would've lost all the mercy in my heart."

There are many injustices in the world, and it's inevitable that you will be demanded to endure these injustices. In times of threat or hardship, it becomes more important than ever to not lose sight of who you are and what is the most important to you. The wronged man didn't come out of prison angry, cheated, or vengeful, but grateful that he still had his morality—a great part of his identity. He held onto his values and remained kind, even circumstances made doing so difficult. When war and the Cultural Revolution effaced much of the history and identity of his country, Yaohua spoke out despite being intimidated because he remembered the ideas of honesty and genuineness that his parents had taught him so well. He remembered his family's rules and values. He remembered being flogged because he lied. He remembered his mother asking him if he would've done what he had done to the bird if the same thing had been done to him.

"Often times, though," Yaohua said, "you might be the aggressor. You might be the child poking the bird's eggs that fell from the nest. In these times, think about what you truly wish to gain from doing this, and does doing it agree with your core values? It's often difficult for you to stop, question, and defy when the will of those around you might be different, but I ask you to try. To lead a true life, I have learned, you must have values, and you must abide by these values regardless of whether or not other people shun you for it."

"Finally, do not be afraid. Swallowing hesitation, abiding by your values, and stomaching the judgement and response—it's daunting. I grew up on stories of bombings and war crimes. I lived in times of paranoia and wartime hysteria. I spoke out against the status quo, knowing consequences might be grave. Why? My family and I knew not to be afraid over things that we alone cannot change; this was naturally the way we lived. I was taught the importance of values, so I stayed loyal to mine. I loved, and still love, my country's culture, history, identity, so I will take risk to defend it."

After retirement, Yaohua often hikes for leisure. He recounts one event when he and his group went mountain-climbing up to 4,600 meters in altitude, and a woman had died from anoxia.

"I carried on, because these things no longer scared me," he said. "When you've scaled the highest mountain, cliffs and hills no longer intimidate you. When you've tamed the angriest sea, lakes and streams no longer strike any fear. You must live life knowing that all the hardship you were and will be made to endure are simply to toughen you into a stronger version of yourself. From then on, all else would be easier."

As our parting word, we ask you, on behalf of Yaohua, to relax. Obstacles and difficulties are unavoidable, so let them roll off your back. Only take to heart the things that are most worthy. People who do not wish to understand you will never understand you no matter how hard you try to explain yourself, but people who wish to understand you will understand you even if you don't say a single thing. Take the high road. People come and go. Listen to your heart, but always let it rest. Remember what you care about and keep walking.

"Find time to relax now and then," Yaohua advised good-naturedly. "I always ride bikes for fun because I don't like ball sports, or dancing, or stocks. Learn new things, keep up with the ever-changing world around you. Don't be like me. I try, but I still don't know how to use a computer."

All our best,
Unsung Shanghai