10. Mr. Mao

My family name is Mao. I am 76 years old, from Bengbu, Anhui. I am a fortune teller. I’ve been a member of the Communist Party of China for over 50 years. People in the community know me by my family name—I’m our only Mao.

When I was young, I served in a performing arts troupe. It was quite something! I later joined the artillery in the 227th Unit, one of Lin Biao’s forces. We were transferred to Hebei as commissioned.

After the army was dismissed, all of us were desperate to find a living. I, luckily, had someone in Beijing and got to move here thanks to guanxi.

Since then I’ve never left the city. It’s been decades, and I’ve still kept my military uniform, as well as my Anhui accent.

I worked as a security guard at some company all the way until I retired at 50. The retirement pension of course was far from enough to support my family. I couldn’t find anything better so I started as a fortune teller.

I cover a bit of everything, like providing ideas for baby names based on the Five Elements, checking fengshui for people’s houses, telling young couples’ marriage prospects, etc. Marriage and career are the topics I get the most.

Though many fortune tellers take advantage of people, I never do that. I just charge 100 to 200 kuai each time. But sometimes I’ll let people pay what they feel like. If people are pleased by what they heard they might voluntarily pay more. The universal rule for us fortune tellers is that we never do this for free, because it’s said that foreseeing stuff goes against nature, so we’re trading our own life span, as exchange or punishment from the god of nature.

After decades in the business, I’ve seen all sorts. Many young people also come to me for relationship advice. They sometimes lose control and cry in front of me. What’s the big deal? It’s life! I always tell them to take it easy. But it’s easier said than done, especially when you’re young and not experienced. I myself didn’t see what life is all about until I was 50.

In fortune telling, sometimes I predict things right, but of course sometimes I get it wrong too. I’m a man, not a god. Fortune telling is actually more about psychology, which I’ve spent a long time learning, and I’m still learning. You get to continue learning and update your knowledge as a fortune teller. It’s a kind of job that requires a lot of mental work. My mind works faster and sharper as the years pass, unlike for most people.

I also stayed for some time in a Buddhist temple. I still worship on a daily basis. But if you ask me whether I really believe, I can’t give a definite yes. No matter how devoutly you worship or how hard you pray, the Buddha can’t really make your life any better. Only you can.

Many of my comrades-in-arms didn’t have any prospects after we disbanded, and so they returned to the countryside and spent their whole life there. Compared to them, my life’s not so bad. My wife is a Beijinger. We have two daughters and a son. Both of my daughters are in the clothing business in the south, and my son lives in Beijing. They all live well and don’t treat me poorly.

I’m this old and life is finally going well. I have nothing to complain about. But I can’t say I’m totally satisfied.

Why? Because I haven’t done as much for my country as I think I’m able to. I’d say I’m pretty smart, and I’m quite a talker. I should have been able to contribute more to the nation’s progress, but I never found my way. Instead, I’m in a business that’s as humble as begging.

China is a massive country. Nothing is too strange to be found here. That’s why the government needs to draw a red line, and anyone crossing that line gets punished. The good thing is that most people nowadays are living a much better life than before, because if they weren’t, there’s no way they’d be this civilized. During my early days in Beijing, there were so many fights, even women fighting. People tend to be more aggressive when they aren’t living well.

Life was tough when I was young, such a shortage of food. I’ve been a beggar. I’d eat tree bark. But forget tree bark—I even ate the meat of people. We harvested wild plants for stew, and that was our main food for a long time. You young people nowadays will never understand how that life feels.

My biggest hope now is to live longer. I just don’t feel my life is complete. I only get to enjoy a good life for a few years. Now that all the good stuff I’ve wanted is finally here, it’s already too late, and I’m old. It’s so unfair.

My life is filled with stories, enough for a whole big book. But who would read it?

Edited by David Huntington