3. Li Jianglun

My name is Li Jianglun. My birthplace is in Shandong. We escaped from the famine in Shandong back then to Beijing when I was only four. I spent my whole life in Beijing after that and never went back. I’m now 78 years old

Shandong saw a severe famine back then. We were desperate for food. We had no choice but to escape to other places. Members in the family escaped to different places. My maternal relatives fled to Dalian, while my paternal relatives fled to Dongbei.

There was no telecommunication back then, so we never heard from each other after we left. I have no idea where they live exactly, only know it’s some places in Dalian and Dongbei. How is their life going? I’ve wondered sometimes but there’s nowhere to get an answer.

After we left, the village government took over our house. We put a lock on the gate, and the government thought that meant we were never coming back, so they assigned the house to a veteran. We don’t own any land either because of the commune system. And all of our relatives went somewhere else. So there’s basically nothing for us back “home.” We never went back to Shandong afterwards.

People always get nostalgic and picture life decades ago with idealistic beauty. Sure life was much simpler back then, but it was such a hard time. We barely had time to take a breath. We worked all day long with an empty stomach. It was the same for almost everyone, no matter whether you were a peasant or working class in the city. Our minds were hungering for food, no mood for entertainment. A day with steamed corn buns and some pickles would be heaven for us.

When we were forced to escape for a better living, the majority chose Dongbei, because of the black soil there. As long as you can get your limbs moving, you can lead a starvation-free life. My mom had six younger brothers,most of them bound for Dongbei never to turn back.

Over a year after we escaped to Beijing, my mother passed away. People could die so easily so young back then. I wasn’t even six years old, so my father sent me to be raised by a couple living near Yuanmingyuan (the old Summer Palace). Back then the Yuanmingyuan area didn’t count as a part of Beijing city. It was only a village. I stayed with my adoptive parents for over a decade until I’d grown up enough to find a living for myself. I went to the city area and joined my older brother there. My adoptive parents passed away not long after I left.

Back then, my brother was my only remaining family member. We had no one to count on but each other. That of course hugely strengthened the bond between us. People nowadays rarely share such a bond anymore. Everyone is busy dealing with their own issues.

My wife has been gone for four years. I’m living on my own, with some goldfish, if you call them company. I live in a hutong near the Lama Temple. Been living there for over 50 years. I don’t see much change in that area. But the former Xuanwu district has been totally swept from the city, the Haidian district too. It only exists as the same name, but with a brand-new look.

I have two sons, both living in Beijing. They visit me sometimes, not that often. Sons are just naturally less emotionally sensitive than daughters.

My brother was gone years ago. He lived a long life though. He was over 80 years old when he passed away. So the only family I have now are my two sons, my sister-in-law and also two nephews. I barely get to see them though. As I said, everyone is so busy dealing with their own issues.

How did I start as a hairdresser? I apprenticed for three years after I was 13. I was assigned to a company as a hairdresser after my apprenticeship. The job lasted forever until I retired. I retired in 1992.

After that, I started a private salon at home, which lasted for a decade, and then I travelled around selling groceries. That lasted for several years before I started setting up a stall to give haircuts.

I’ve parked my stall near here for over a year. I used to do it somewhere else, but sometimes the city management officials shooed us away. But here is allowed. I’m providing a service to people. It shouldn’t be banned really.

I prefer living on my own to not feel like I’m being a burden to my sons. I’ve kept a Golden Retriever as company. He lived for 17 years. I took him in as a family member, which made his death so painful for me to accept. I decided not to keep dogs any more after losing him. I don’t want another heartbreak.

Now my companionship is fish and birds. I take a daily walk with the birds.

I only open business in the morning. In the afternoon, I stroll around or chat with neighbors. I take life leisurely.

Am I satisfied with my life? What’s there to be dissatisfied about? I live well with retirement pensions. I don’t need to worry about medical fees when I’m sick. It’s an all right life indeed.

I’m only one drop in the sea of people here. I don’t like talking about politics because that’s not something we have control of. It’s dangerous just to chat with politicians. But I like to keep an eye on foreign politics. That new American president, what’s his name again? He’s doing a terrible job as a president.

Edited by David Huntington

**Note from Kuang:**

There are several barbers near Ditan Park, with their booths ready early even on a weekend morning. Most of their clients are old people living nearby. Among them is this silver-haired man, whom I bought a haircut from for seven kuai.