

On Family and Ambition

Wei Xinyuan. Sauerkraut fish. Suzhou. 2026.

My father and I sat across from each other, just the two of us, in a nearby strip mall restaurant. I see him around once a year. We don't share much. He lectures about Chinese philosophers, scientific history, and his company. I share new reflections, goals, and questions. "One day, I'll go to your grandfather and great-grandfather's grave, and tell them: *I made it, you can rest easy now.*" Perhaps he thought I was finally old enough to understand.

Wei Xinyuan. Taxi ride. Beijing. 2024.

My sister Nicole and I finished eating *zhajiangmian*¹ at a local shop and booked a ride back to our hotel. Our taxi driver, perhaps attentive to our formal accent in contrast to the laid-back Beijing accent², inquired about our hometown.

"We're from *Shanxi* 山西, but we live in America," I responded naively. Mistake. Our driver sighed and exclaimed, "some people are born in the Roman Empire, while some people are born as horses." It's now a Chinese internet colloquialism that I'll never forget.

Nanpintou. Shanxi. 1914. Li Yu

My great-grandfather was born into a peasant family in *Nanpintou* 南坪头, a rural village in north-central province *Shanxi*. His name, *Li Yu* 李郁, was derived from the Chinese idiom *yu-yu-cong-cong* 郁郁葱葱, meaning a lush and vibrant landscape. He owned slightly less than two acres of land, a donkey, and a small cottage with three rooms. *Shanxi* and most of northern China is known for arid soil and harsh winter conditions, leaving only five months of the year for productive farming. Perhaps his father, my great-great grandfather, wanted the name to bring good fortune for his son's harvesting seasons.

But, the second meaning of the name *Yu* is melancholy or despondent. After the birth of their first daughter, my great-grandmother became infertile. With only a daughter, my great-grandfather's household quietly fell behind neighboring farms supported by multiple sons. On land already plagued by poor soil and short growing seasons, this misfortune pushed the family from subsistence to poverty. I imagine my great-grandfather's mind consumed every day not only by how to put dinner on the table but also how to store enough to last through arduous *Shanxi* winters.

¹ 炸酱面: A popular noodle dish in Beijing meaning "fried sauce noodles".

² The northern, or Beijing accent, is the standard dialect of mandarin Chinese, where an "r" is added to the end of words, augmenting its pronunciation.

Around this time, Japan invaded China, and the country fell into poverty and war. His father wished upon lush harvests, instead the desolate land claimed him. When there is no light down a tunnel, there is nothing to look forward to except tomorrow.

Wei Jicai. Yuncheng. Shanxi. 1932.

My grandfather's name was *Wei Jicai* 尉济才, which originates from the idiom *ji-shi-zhi-cai* 济世之才. It means using one's knowledge to save the world. He was born into a wealthy *Kuomintang* 国民党 family in *Shanxi Yuncheng* 运城 and studied English in college. He was fluent in Mandarin, English, and Russian, and spent his waking hours translating documents and compiling a trilingual dictionary. As such, he happily married into my grandmother's family after the Civil War³, one that tolerated his passion and family background. He crafted all his children and grandchildren's names.

Wei Jicai. University Center. Beijing. 1966.

In 1966, Maoist Communism and Cultural Revolution ideology proliferated in Peking and Tsinghua University, the academic center of China, and ravaged any semblance of both tradition and independent thought across the country. The Four Olds⁴ were targeted by *Mao* and his followers. His mob consisted of rambunctious college youth, prowling for their targets whom they evict, beat, and sacrifice for their savior *Mao Zedong* 毛泽东. Society flipped on its head. It was an infectious disease and global brainwashing like no other.

Wei Jicai. Village Center. Shanxi. 1966.

My grandfather was a victim of the Cultural Revolution. Labeled a Stinking Old Ninth 臭老九, a derogatory term used to target intellectuals, my grandfather was brought to trial in a Struggle Session⁵ by the local peasants, shaved a *yin-yang* head⁶, and ostracized by the village, dragging the rest of my family down with him. His love for reading, writing, and foreign languages were demonized by everyone around him, deemed dangerous to Maoist communism. Losing his only love, he fell into a deep depression and passed away when my father was still in college.

Wei Jicai. CCP. China. 1976.

³ The Chinese Communist Party defeated the Kuomintang Party in the Chinese Civil War in 1949, marking the start of the People's Republic of China (PRC)

⁴ The Four Olds 四旧: old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. These four groups were the targets of Mao's Cultural Revolution, which took place in China from 1966-1976. This included people of power, people with land, people from high society, people who are smart, people who liked Western ideals.

⁵ Struggle Session 批斗会: a coercive, public, and violent spectacle that fell into one of the Four Olds, or were deemed insufficiently loyal to Maoist ideology.

⁶ Yin-Yang Head 阴阳头: a forced haircut during the Cultural Revolution for the victims where half the head was shaved and the other half left long.

Ten years later, Mao passed away, and the revolution came to an abrupt halt. All the victims of the Cultural Revolution were wiped away from people's memories. The importance of education was emphasized once more, and the *Gaokao*⁷ was reinstated after an 11-year break. The CCP now labels the Cultural Revolution as a grave mistake and acknowledges the shortcomings of Maoist ideology. The party moved on. My grandfather's descendants, however, could not.

He was educated to save the world. The world went against him for his education. When there are greater forces at play, your destiny is written by others, and not you.

Wei Dongguang. Nanpintou. Shanxi. 1965

My father was born in 1965 in the same village as his ancestors. His name, *Wei Dongguang* 尉东光, originates from one of Mao's quotes from his little red handbook: "Mao Zedong Thought Shines Forever"⁸, where *Guang* means to shine light. That generation all grew up with Mao-adjacent names. My grandfather chose these names to protect his children. He never could have predicted the irony.

My father was determined to escape *Nanpintou*. Perhaps failing the *Gaokao* on his first attempt left a chip on his shoulder, or the sci-fi and fantasy novels that he borrowed opened a realm of imagination for a better life. Perhaps his father's tragedy lit a fire within him, a desire to leave the place that cursed his ancestors; a desire to end the tragic irony of a lineage of names. Whatever the reason, he never talks about his father.

The route to upwards mobility in China was now clear: a college education. Finally, there was light down the tunnel, and towards that light he ran.

Wei Dongguang. Post-Doc. University of Pittsburgh. 1998.

He attended college on his second attempt of the *Gaokao*, completed a master's and PhD, and earned a ticket towards the American Dream by way of his Post-Doc at University of Pittsburgh. He raised two kids, my older sister Nicole and me, in a stable suburban town in Massachusetts. He earned a cushy job as an industry research scientist, studying optics, the theory of light.

However, he has regrets: financial security came too late to allow him to chase his entrepreneurial dream as a young man; when, at age 55, he did start his own company, it meant leaving his 15-year-old behind.

His name protected him during the Revolution. It guided him through the tunnel.

⁷ Gao Kao 高考: the Chinese college entrance exams, which has its roots in Confucious ideology.

⁸ 毛泽东思想永放光芒

Wei Xinyuan. Livingston. New Jersey. 2005

I was born in Livingston, New Jersey in 2005, and moved to Acton, Massachusetts at age three. My Chinese name is *Wei Xinyuan* 尾心远, which takes root in the idiom *xin-zhi-gao-yuan* 心智高远, meaning “aspirations towards great heights”.

My father never talks about his hardships. He only tells me to dream as far as I can, to always seek out my passion. This family history was only slowly revealed to me through my gradual research into Chinese history.

Wei Xinyuan. Taxi ride. Beijing. 2024.

It's true. Some people are born as horses, peasants, victims of revolutions, and children in impoverished villages. Some people were born in the Roman Empire, and I was one of them. I was born in the United States into a stable middle class family, where everyone has a fighting chance.

For generations, my ancestors tried to escape the rural countryside of *Shanxi*. For generations, my ancestors have tried to defy their fate and control their own destiny. My father took on the last part of the road towards Rome, so that I could be born at the destination.

I look out the window of the bustling capital, a 3-hour train ride from my village, and a 14-hour flight from Massachusetts. A century of sacrifices has led me to this taxi.

Wei Xinyuan. Sauerkraut fish. Suzhou. 2026.

One day, I plan to go to my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather's grave and tell them about my life. I want to tell them about accomplishments they never could have imagined. I'm old enough now to understand.

I stand on the shoulders of giants. My ancestors dreamed of lush landscapes and intellectual freedom. I dream of self-actualization and purpose. I have one life, and I feel a terrifyingly wonderful determination to make the most of it.

Xin 心 means heart, and *Yuan* 远 means far. I like to think my grandfather crafted this name to suggest that I will be passionate and dream far into the future. He wishes I accomplish the goals our family could only dream about. That is my destiny.