

Guizhen – A Life in a Tumultuous Time

I will attempt to tell what I know of the life of Guizhen, my sister Leepo's nanny, the person closest to her in her childhood. On the occasion of Leepo's 84th birthday (6-25-2023), I wrote this story for her grandsons, Graham and Malcolm, as a way to remember her and the people around her. It is part of our family history, indeed, a part of the history of China in the 20th century.



Guizhen with one-year-old Leepo



With 54-year-old Leepo

Her family name is Qin, given-name Gui-Zhen¹ (秦桂貞). I do not know her birth/death years; my best guess is 1915 – 1998. Some people, including us kids, called her “Ai Gui, 阿桂” a sort of diminutive often used by families for servants. She came into employment under my mother (born in 1905) for more than ten years before Mother's marriage to my father in 1937. She could have been as young as 12 years old – this sounds about right to me. Yes, child labor was prevalent in those times in China. Recall that my mother (from a middle-class family), feeling unloved by her own birth mother, started living on her own (after graduating from a missionary

¹ An easier way to pronounce the Pinyin spelling of “Qin Gui-Zhen” in English would be “Chin Gue-Jing.”

junior high school) by working as an assistant to her brother in the Dutch Consulate of Shanghai, when she was about 15 years old.

Guizhen was a peasant girl sold (yes, that's what was done to her and many such poor girls in those days in China) to another farmer family as "a child bride" (童養媳) – really a slave, who eventually would be the daughter-in-law of the family (just another slave role) but could be bought even cheaper and easier to control (and to exploit) when they were young, as young as seven, eight-year-old! Guizhen was one person who described to me in her own words what was like to suffer from real starvation. She told me: *"I was forever hungry then. Whenever the 'father-in-law' got up from the table to get his second bowl of rice, I thought maybe this time he would get another bowl for me too!"* Of course, this never happened. *"Once a year, during the New Year feast, I would be given a piece of meat. But it was too precious to eat it, so I would put it in my pocket. Once in a while, when I was alone working in the field, I would tear a string from it and place it in my mouth to savor the flavor..."* Remember that she was describing life in the relatively well-off farming region² of the Yangtze River delta where Shanghai and Nanking are located!

Guizhen felt she was extremely fortunate that her city employer, my mother, was a kind-hearted person and treated her with dignity. Mother, herself not much older than a teenager, and Guizhen became very close (both felt unwanted by their own families?) and, I would say, became mutually dependent. On my mother's part, being freed from the necessity of doing mundane tasks herself and, by her own nature (not inclined towards the traditional female pursuits such as cooking and sewing), she depended on Guizhen for all domestic activity (to the point she was afraid of going to the kitchen to boil water for herself!) Guizhen was sent to my aunt's (sister of Mother) house to learn all about cooking – to the degree that she became well-known in my parents' circle as a great chef who could prepare impressive banquets³.

I have already mentioned in my sketch of my parents that Mother was a very enterprising person. While working as a secretary in the Dutch consulate, she supplemented her income by being a "sublet landlord" (called in Chinese 二房東, a "second landlord"). In China, especially in Shanghai during that era, people tended to lease a house long-term and then rent out parts of it to others on short-term contracts. The house is one in the compound called "Shanghai Villa" 上海別墅 on 南昌路 (before 1943, known as 环龙路 in the French Concession part of the city.) There were several renters, all in pretty crowded quarters. In later years, Guizhen would tell the

² I recall my paternal grandmother, who grew up in the relatively poor north, describing her delight in tasting the white rice she first had after arriving in the Shanghai region. "Oh, I never knew such wonderful food – it just slides down my throat!"

³ While writing this, I was struck by how impressive this feat was. As stated above, prior to coming to Shanghai, Guizhen had known nothing but dire poverty. Presumably never have seen, not to mention tasted, a banquet. It is amazing that, somehow, she had acquired this skill. We should keep in mind that she was illiterate prior to working for Mother, who encouraged her with a few lessons; still, she could never read and write very well.

story that in a particular period when all rooms were rented out, she and Mother would occupy a bathroom⁴ with her sleeping on the floor and Mother on some wooden plank over the bathtub.⁵

I have also told the important family event of how my parents met, with Father being one of the renters. Here, I will recount the story that had become even more consequential for Guizhen: one of Mother's renters was Jiang Qing (江青), the wife of Mao Zedong. That is when she was still a Shanghai movie starlet (going by the name of Lan Pin, 蓝苹 "Blue Apple") before she joined the communists in Yan'an (延安) and later married Mao. (For the first twenty years of Jiang Qin's marriage to Mao, she kept a very low public profile because that was the condition the CCP hierarchy demanded before granting their approval of Mao's divorce from his second wife to marry JQ.) Then, a couple of decades later, she became the leader of the infamous "Gang of Four" -- the principals of China's disastrous Cultural Revolution.

It was the last year or so before she left Shanghai in 1937 when Jiang Qing was still married to Tang Na⁶ (唐納), another film person, in a stormy marriage full of ups and downs. But Guizhen got along well with Jiang Qing; in fact, she often secretly cooked meals for her and even, on occasion, lent money to her from her own meager savings. So, after the communists triumphed, Guizhen was overjoyed that the wife of the Chairman was her friend. During the few months (1950-51), while she accompanied Leepo living in Beijing⁷, she tried to see Jiang Qing. Finally, she was received by Madame Mao with a brief interview at which Guizhen expressed her wish to "serve the people." Jiang Qing's reply was essentially: *"Life working for the Party would not be easy; you would be better off staying with the kind Mrs. Cheng. If you still want to, I will find you something."* Thus, a few months later, when they were back in Qingdao, the word came that Guizhen would be given a job working in Beijing's Beihai Park at an exclusive childcare center for kids from high-cadre families. That's where Guizhen spent the years from 1951 to 1965 when she retired and returned to Shanghai.

We stayed in touch while our family's fortune underwent drastic changes -- the so-called "Three-Anti- and Five-Anti-Campaign" 三反五反 (mass movement against private businesses) took place in 1951-52. Fortunately, my father had already left for the then-British colony of Hong Kong. We were all sure that he would not have survived it. But my mother, whom some regarded as the brain behind the company, was hit hard --- put through the torture of round-the-clock verbal and physical abuse (she attempted suicide but was sent to a hospital in time to have her stomach pumped.) We left Qingdao for good and returned to Shanghai in 1952, and two years later, Mother was permitted to join Father in Hong Kong. In 1956, Leepo and I also obtained our exit visas. In HK, Leepo finally could attend school (the first time in her life), graduated first of

⁴ Other rooms were equipped with portable potties.

⁵ I chuckled to myself: I now understand why Mother was always so good at designing storage spaces in every house and apartment she owned – an ability necessitated from years of living in cramped quarters!

⁶ It's interesting to note that one would find Tang Na being a restaurant owner in Paris by the early 1960s. But as soon as Jiang Qing became a prominent character in the Cultural Revolution, Tang just vanished from the public. There was no report of misdeeds by some Chinese spies; more likely, the fear of such potential harm led to the decision to hide.

⁷ The dry climate of Beijing (being close to the Gobi Desert) was supposed to alleviate Leepo's asthma.

her class, and came to the US to go to college on a full scholarship... Leepo and I were separated from our parents for more than two years. But as I see it now, our good fortune was that we left just in the nick of time before the onslaught of the "Anti-Rightists Movement"反右运动, the "Great Leap Forward"大跃进 and the "Cultural Revolution"文化大革命... Our lives surely would have been completely different.

By 1967, we were very worried about Guizhen when she did not respond to our letters. Mother asked one of our relatives to check on her and got the news that her apartment unit was sealed, and no one could tell what happened to Guizhen. We feared the worst, knowing that Guizhen "knew too much of the private life of a very powerful woman, ... someone would want to silence her." There was nothing much one could do as the whole country was in chaos, and we lost contact with most of our friends as it was too dangerous for them to communicate with the outside world.

Viewed from the outside, nothing much hopeful could be seen of this closed country -- except a brief blip of optimism generated by Nixon's 1972 visit. The Gang of Four (Jiang Qing and three of her associates) held on to power, and the Cultural Revolution continued until Mao's death and the arrest of the Four in 1976. Soon after that, we got the news that Guizhen was released in Beijing. Mother managed to contact her and assured her of our financial support -- offering, among other things, her residence in the house Mother still owned in Shanghai. "You will always be part of our family!" All this Guizhen gratefully accepted. But she was told by the government that there would be no possibility of traveling outside the country -- clearly, they did not want her story to be widely known ...

The real political repercussion of Mao's death was the downfall of the radical wing of the Chinese Communist Party and the rise of the pragmatic side headed by Deng Xiaoping, who wanted to advance their cause through the "Reform and Opening Up" program. Deng said, "*It doesn't matter whether the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice.*" There would be a series of steps indicating China's opening to the West: establishing diplomatic relations with the US, permitting and encouraging foreign investment (e.g., setting up Special Economic Zones, such as Shenzhen), and the invitation of scientists from the West. ... I took part in one the last-mentioned activity: the 1980 Guangzhou Particle Physics Conference: a gathering of all the physicists from the country with the overseas Chinese physicists. Afterward, they flew every visitor to Beijing to meet Deng Xiaoping ... The purpose is propaganda for the new policy -- we were the headline news for almost a month of January that year. For me, it's a chance to visit friends and relatives. After leaving the country for 24 years, I finally had a chance to see and hear from Guizhen about what happened to her in those terrible years.

Understandably, she was very emotional -- for so many years (>8), she was locked up in isolation -- to the point that she lost her ability to speak. In the beginning, when she was beaten (she showed me the blood-stained shirt she kept), all she could do was yell, "*Long Live Chairman Mao!*" -- as she was never told what crime she had committed! She was not even given a mock trial. The State simply kidnaped her. One day, there was a knock on her door in Shanghai. Some officious-looking people told her that Comrade Jiang Qin urgently wished to see her, then rushed her onto a waiting airplane, flew to Beijing, and locked her up there -- without any word of

“explanation.” Oh, no one deserves such a fate: out of the goodness of her heart, she befriended a woman in distress and ended up with such cruel treatment.

Soon after Mao’s death, Jiang Qing was arrested⁸ in a bloodless coup led by Mao’s security general, Hua Guofeng. In 1981, she was put on trial. Not showing any sign of repentance, she fired the lawyer appointed by the government and stated her defense: all she had done was to defend Chairman Mao, with the famous quote: *"I was Chairman Mao's dog. I bit whomever he asked me to bite."* She was given a death sentence, which was commuted two years later to life imprisonment. Ten years on, she was diagnosed with throat cancer and transferred to a medical facility, where she committed suicide by hanging. It was in 1991; Jiang Qing was 77 years old.

I don’t know all the roles Guizhen played in the 1981 trial. Leepo’s son Albert remembered that JQ denied any involvement, saying she did not know this accuser. The authorities then arranged for the two of them to meet. Then JQ recognized Guizhen, calling out her name, “Ai Gui?” To me, it is possible that in these tumultuous years, she had completely forgotten about Guizhen; it is even possible that her underlings had carried out these dark deeds without bothering to tell her. With so much destruction going on all around them, who would care about the life and death of this poor woman?!

To end on a happier note, while Guizhen was not allowed to go to Hong Kong, Mother had to overcome her own aversion and fear of going back to the communist mainland. But Mother was finally able to conquer her anxiety, and they did have a triumphal reunion in Shanghai in the mid-1990s, not long before Guizhen passed away.



1984



1993

⁸ Jiang Qing was sent to Qincheng Prison, apparently the same one Guizhen was confined. According to some reports, she was given the same treatment -- beaten, starved, and tortured.

Two vignettes from Guizhen's life

A Mahjong game got busted.

My pre-puberty sister Leepo suffered from severe asthma. Mother was forever seeking medical help, hoping there were ways to alleviate the burden of Leepo's debilitating illness. In 1948, Mother brought her to Taiwan. The standard of medical care was supposedly higher there. It was not successful – but I got a chance to visit that beautiful island. A couple of years later, Mother arranged for Leepo, accompanied by Guizhen, to live in Beijing – the dry climate there was thought to ease her severe symptoms. At first, they were living with friends at the faculty housing of Yenching University⁹, and then they found a small house of their own nearby. The incident I describe here took place in this rented house. On a summer evening in 1951, Guizhen, Leepo, and two neighbors were playing Mahjong. It was an immensely popular game¹⁰; the clever eleven-year-old stay-at-home Leepo loved playing it. But playing Mahjong was forbidden, labeled as “old culture gambling” by the communists. So, they played it quietly on a padded table with heavy drapery covering all windows. Then, all of a sudden, they were startled by the noise of green-uniformed persons dropping from the ceiling, crying, “Raid! Raid!” Somehow, the local police got the wind that a household was secretly playing this game, and they decided to launch a raid – by climbing the roof and lifting the roof tiles ... all these operations just for the purpose of stopping a Mahjong game. Well, Guizhen was not above dropping names to gain whatever advantage she could. “*You know, I was at Zhongnanhai¹¹ visiting Comrade Jiang Qing last month ...*” Afterward, they did not suffer any negative consequences from that raid.

“I am going to divorce you as soon as we liberate Taiwan!”

Guizhen was married for a while, around 1950. I do not know much about it. Her husband did not reside permanently in our city (but worked on a ship?) Guizhen continued her work in our family. As the story would suggest, it must have been around the time of the Korean War (before the Beijing sojourn). All I could remember was that they quarreled a lot. A memorable episode for me was hearing Guizhen yelling at that man: “*I am going to divorce you as soon as we liberate Taiwan!*” Even to an eight-year-old boy, it made no logical sense. But all of us just said, “*That's Guizhen!*” She was regarded as a person with a good heart, but a simple mind. Telling her life story here, I cannot be but mindful of the deprivation she suffered as a child. All that malnutrition surely must have had its effect. She was utterly devoted to Mother, to Leepo, and to the rest of the family. She also fell for Jiang Qing and was taken by the CCP propaganda, lock, stock, and barrel. In the end, a simple person so shafted by the heartless....

⁹ A private Christian institution with a beautiful campus formed from an old imperial garden. It was taken over by the government, which moved the public Peking University to this campus in 1952.

¹⁰ The family legend had it: the only way my mother could stop her “morning sickness” during her pregnancies was by playing Mahjong.

¹¹ Zhongnanhai (中南海) is a compound that houses the offices of and serves as a residence for the leadership of the CCP (such as Mao). It was a former imperial garden and is located adjacent to the Forbidden Palace, with another end connected to the Beihai Park – the location of the nursery school in which Guizhen worked.