



## Remembrances

### Fang Lijun

The first thing I can remember is being a toddler, bawling and making a fuss when my mother had to go to work. My granny used sweet beans or something else to distract my attention and my mother hurriedly got on her bike and left for the factory.

My father often said he was the first graduate of the Railway College to be made a cadre, but as far as I remember, because of the problem of the class status of our family, he had already become an engine driver.

Before too long, a whole lot of capitalists, landlords, members of a National Party, and counter-revolutionaries were dragged out and struggle sessions started to happen all over the place. Being a stupid kid, I went along with the grown-ups shouting out slogans and was happy to go to every denunciation session. One day, when like before I was shouting with the adults for the overthrow of who knows who, my grandfather was forced onto the stage. Around his neck was a placard with the words "Landlord Fang." The grown-ups towering around me were shouting out angrily and shaking their fists. I felt I would like to sink into the ground with shame. I don't know what I was thinking at the time, I was afraid and felt ashamed because my own grandfather was this kind of person. Although I knew that he was good and honest, although I loved him, I knew his class status was that of "rich peasant."

Life rapidly grew worse. On the back wall of our house in letters taller than me was written "Down with Landlord Fang." A crowd of poor, children yelled out "Down with Landlord Fang," the back window became a window for the hatred of the poor and we were constantly beaten.

My father, who was happy with a few poems or essays in the paper, became very cautious. He quietly cared for the family's beloved tropical fish, until one day when there was a big storm he took the most valuable angel fish, which was bigger than his palm, quietly away. This job done, the once filled and lively goldfish bowl was now dark and gloomy and unpleasant to look at.

Claiming they were looking for valuable things in our house, our poor neighbors repeatedly ransacked our property. Each time the searches took place other kind-hearted neighbors looked after me and protected me.

As the struggle progressed, the violence became worse. For a time, as early as possible every evening, mothers would cuddle their children on the bed to protect them from the soldiers' gunfire outside the window as people tore each other to shreds in the name of ideology.

In this ruthless struggle, the ability to find weaknesses in other people was rapidly taken up by the children. The

discovery by my group of friends of my fatal weakness was the key to their success; my grandfather was a "landlord." At first they made use of it spasmodically and unconsciously, but very soon my status was destined to fall. Whatever game I played I could never win; I never even had a fair chance. In happy games with my close friends, I had probably suddenly become some kind of strange creature. Sometimes when I joined their games, they antagonized me for their own amusement.

To keep me at home, my father used his job as an engine driver to buy me a book of white paper and thick chunky pencils. This was very strange at the time. I stayed at home drawing — my father had succeeded in keeping me at home. Although I wanted to run out outside and be with the other kids, I actually spent all my time with my new book and pencils so that I could get new ones when they were used up.

As a result, I unwittingly, but not unhappily, began to draw. My father introduced me to Cao Zhenhuan, who did propaganda work for the trade union and would teach me to draw, although Mr. Cao couldn't draw very well. It became my ambition to draw well enough to do propaganda work for the trade union when I grew up. Until I was over twenty, I thought that the labor union was the propaganda instrument of the Party.

I remember clearly how happy I was the first time I copied a picture of Li Yuhe in the revolutionary opera *Red Lantern*, and how proud I was to be able to come and go freely in the trade union offices.

To escape the struggle sessions and denunciation meetings, my grandfather took me away. We got off the train and went to stay at a Muslim uncle's house. In the evening I was woken up, made to stand up, and my feet were put into thick cotton socks. My grandfather and I lay still on quilts in a donkey cart. All around was the horizonless snow and freezing wind of the north, and the moonlight made the world a dazzling display of white. My grandfather took me quietly back to Huituo village in Fengnan county, the place of his original domicile.

I had a very good time, doing all kinds of things with my grandfather and playing all kinds of games with other kids. Although my grandfather was very careful, I was still aware of the class struggle.

It was soon time for me to go to school, and I had to return to Handan. When I returned to my previous life, the "Down with Landlord Fang" sign on the back wall was still there. The characters were still thick and new. The cries of "Down with landlord Fang" still sounded from dawn until dusk.

I soon entered primary school and started to receive an education. I don't know if it was the kind of education my father hoped for.

I found the criticism essays assigned by the teacher extremely difficult. Criticizing the exploiting classes wasn't difficult, but there was no way of removing my grandfather from this class. Life always reminded me that it did not stop with my grandfather, but also applied to me,

destined to be a member of the exploiting classes. Father helped me a great deal on the side; whenever I had an essay, it was almost all his work, and as a result I was the best in the class at composition and reading. The teacher often asked me to write class criticism speeches, but I couldn't go onto the stage to deliver my speech because of my own class background.

The struggle sessions continued and spread. The school, my grade, and my class had criticism meetings that lasted for days or even weeks. The criticism of the sports teacher Yang Huajian was like this. Classes stopped right at the beginning, the only task the students had was to write criticism of Yang and later to read them one after the other in front of him and then stick them up on the four walls of the classroom. Later the criticism sessions escalated and the whole grade criticized Yang. All other lessons were suspended, and criticisms were written and read aloud. After one criticism session, Yang sat stiffly in the last row of chairs, and all the children went out to play on the sports field; as usual Yang was the key to their game. I saw that there was no one else around, and screwing up my courage I grabbed Yang's shoulder to comfort him. Some years later when several schoolmates were discussing this affair, almost half the kids said this was the first time they felt sorry for Yang.

These struggle sessions had a devastating effect on the children's inner world. A beautiful young teacher quickly appeared who was well aware of this formidable weapon and frequently made use of it. If I arrived late or somebody saw me throwing stones at sparrows outside when it was time for class, the teacher immediately stopped lessons, for two periods, four periods, perhaps for a whole day or two days, and led the other students in denouncing me.

Finally one day she found another target, and, like the others, she organized a criticism meeting against Li Aiguo. When she confidently seized Li by the scruff of his neck and encouraged the students to attack him, Li twisted his body and bit her delicate finger, seizing the opportunity to escape through the window. Li came from a poor peasant family. Two days later his poor peasant father brought him back and the affair was settled.

Once when I was in class I noticed a photograph in a newspaper one of the students was holding. It showed the leader of a foreign country who was visiting China. "He looks very much like Chairman Mao," I whispered. A student assistant pushed me up against the wall, alternately slapping my face with his hand, screaming that I was a counter-revolutionary and spitting in my face.

I had already learned to keep my mouth shut. I had already decided that there was no point in letting on to my parents what happened to me outside, so I didn't tell anyone, I didn't cry. When I reached 20, my father happily told guests sitting around the table that since I was a child I had never been unhappy. Some time later, when he saw the scraps of writing from my childhood, he wept.

When father quietly told grandfather "Lin Biao is

dead," there was an anxious look in grandfather's eyes. He glanced fearfully at me, and said tersely to my father, "Don't talk nonsense." He was rebuking my father, but he was also warning me.

Next came the movement to criticize Lin Biao and Confucius. I wrote an outstanding composition and was admitted to the school writing group, it was titled "Dick head Confucius is a Stupid Pig." A young village boy takes a light stone and throws it into the water where it floats on the surface. This problem baffles the sages; Confucius; the conclusion is that Confucius is a stupid pig. Sometimes I think I was a thoroughly nasty person, because before I could even write more than a few Chinese characters I shamelessly dishonored the ancient sage like this. But, after all, I received encouragement, and this essay was very well received in criticism sessions at school, in the kindergarten, in the waiting room at the train station; the youngest grade writing group always saved the day.

Liu Maoming was, like me, a humiliated child. When he was a child his mother died, but like other small children he was also capable of yelling out "Down with Landlord Fang." The children punched Liu yelling out "Serves you right your mother died." We therefore became good friends, we escaped the other children, and solitary and contented we played together. When we had a fight, we cursed each other, yelling out "Down with Landlord Fang" and "Serves you right your mother's died." Each time this happened, our hearts and eyes filled with sadness, each of us regretting what we were saying. Although we insulted each other many times, we were actually the best of friends, and we couldn't carry around resentment because of that abuse. Several years later, I saw the Japanese film *Muddy River*, and in the scene where the boy takes secret pleasure in burning a small animal to death I saw the image of two small boys, lonely and forlorn, on a day long ago. I thought of how people will not miss a chance of persecuting someone else even if they know how much it hurts to be persecuted themselves.

Once, when my mother, father, and brother were out of the house, the neighborhood kids came to our house to ask me to play. I couldn't and didn't want to refuse, because I was proud of my home and besides it was safe. However, my last citadel was violated, and the kids started to beat me up. I was no match for them in either strength or spirit. At that point my brother came home. When he saw what was happening he became angry and beat the oldest kid mercilessly. The grown-ups came home one after the other when they left work. We heard angry shouting and the sound of footsteps. The kid's father charged into our house with a kitchen knife and a stick. My brother, who had long ago been frightened by a neighbor had already run away and been hidden by another "exploiting" family. I thought my world was about to end, with this guy waving his knife and stick around, standing at the entrance to our house hurling

abuse. My parents clutched me tightly, at the same time praying that he wouldn't catch my brother.

Once, in a downpour, the neighbor's shed where my brother had taken refuge collapsed and I could hear him calling out in pain. My terrified father was hysterical. I was shocked to discover that he was such a good person.

When I first started primary school, I had put in an application to join a Little Red Soldier organization. By now I was in the third grade and my application was finally accepted. I was part of the last batch to be admitted and I could finally go to school wearing a red neckerchief. Throughout those three years my teachers' reports always said "We hope that in the future young Fang learns to be a man acts up to what he says."

In 1976 Mao Zedong died. When my father quietly passed on the news to my grandfather, I saw on my grandfather's face a fleeting smile that was impossible to hide. When we queued up to pay our last respects, I caught a glimpse of my father's face. I understood that look. I didn't feel like crying, but once I was standing in front of the portrait of Mao I started bawling loudly and howled all the way back to school. I didn't dare look up for fear that my teachers would see through me. I was making a great racket but there were no tears. But then I really did start bawling for real and the whole thing was uncontrollable. The teacher was worried I was getting hysterical and raised by head. My face, chest, and sleeves were saturated with tears and snot. Because I had cried the most in the class I was warmly applauded. This is probably the time my suspicion of tears began.

My grandfather died soon after Mao. When I went with my parents and grandmother to the funeral home, my grandfather seemed as calm as ever. I felt his hands, which only yesterday had given me sweets, and they were icy cold. I felt his face, and it too was icy cold. I didn't cry. I didn't want to cry. The adults who were crying seemed to be putting it on. I didn't understand that death meant forever. Many years later as it gradually dawned on me that my grandfather had left me for ever I often cried in private for myself. And then many years later, after I had become a painter, and felt those big cold faces on the canvas, I would have the same horrible feeling that I had when I touched my grandfather's face.

Like everywhere else in China, my school got caught up in the feverish study of Mao Zedong's selected works, and our teacher would lead us all in reciting them word for word, and would explain their meaning. But it was all such a slow process that somehow we never seemed to catch up with the enthusiasm of the masses for Chairman Mao's works. So the teacher drew up a progress chart with all the kids' names on it. Little red arrows were put in boxes for each of his essays we mastered. The little red arrows gradually increased in number, much to the delight of the kids, and the teacher. My classmates making the best progress began to discover how their own feeling correlated exactly with each word of our glorious leader. The number of little red arrows rapidly

increased. The height of the row of arrows indicated the depth of your feelings for the Chairman and the extent of your political consciousness. Praise was showered on the kids making the fastest progress. Within several weeks we went from mastering short passages to mastering his thought, and the teachers and school were amazed by our progress.

During the final term before graduation, I went with one of my classmates to visit what would be our new school. In the middle of the empty sports ground, we discovered that the younger brother of our primary school teacher would be in the same grade as us at the new school. We beat him up and told him to go home and tell his older sister all about it. He was in tears, but never went to the school. We were delighted. Although we had never been completely squashed, we wanted to get back at those who had got at us.

After the Cultural Revolution came to an end, large numbers of landlords, the wealthy, reactionaries, miscreants, and Rightists were rehabilitated. My family applied to get back the precious things that had been confiscated, but our poor neighbors told us they were only kidding when they said that they had our things. Were they kidding us then or were they kidding us now? We didn't push the matter; we were too exhausted. We had had enough of all the talk.

I was happy. I had finally got into the art group at school and had Wang Yongsheng as a teacher, and then a series of good, hard-working teachers — Zhang Yichun, Zheng Jindong, Zhou Diehui. Another teacher, Liu Jingsen, registered me in the art course at the Hebei Light Industry College. I made good progress and then had Li Xianting as a teacher. I took part in the China National Art Exhibition and entered the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing.

Once I had grasped the techniques of painting, I lost my direction for a while. Aestheticism, idealism, and formalism — my interest in all these was waning. Even though they were all so attractive to many other artists, as far as I was concerned they were becoming increasingly insipid.

In 1988, I worked on the series of Drawings, still lost in my direction.

The events of 1989 made me feel a new wave of suspicion, and I felt the same suspicions as when I was a kid. I felt doubts about the same things that had troubled me before. I was fascinated by those people who seemed to be just fooling around. To make sense of other people, I concentrated on myself. After all I was just one of them. If I couldn't make sense of myself the next best thing was to have a feeling for other people and to hope that I was somehow enclosed in their existences. But whenever I felt I had made some sort of discovery, everything would just become a blur again. That was when I began my work.

## Selected Biography

**1963**

Born on December 4 in Handan, Hebei Province. His father, graduate from the Railway College, became a cadre in the Machinery Division of the Ministry of Railways. His mother was a worker in a textile mill.

**1966**

Outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. Because Fang Lijun's parents are classified as rich peasants, his father is transferred to the post of locomotive driver.

**1968**

At the peak of the Cultural Revolution, his grandfather is criticized because of his class background. Fang Lijun witnesses his grandfather's labeling as "Landlord Fang."

To spare his son humiliation by his peers, his father organizes private tuition in painting at home. His first paintings are copies of a scene from the poster for the revolutionary Peking Opera *Red Lantern*. His father continues to drive locomotive trains and in his spare time drinks and cooks with two colleagues who are disgraced "professionals."

Fang Lijun is daily forced to intone the slogan "Down with Landlord Fang," which is pasted to the wall in a prominent position by the Red Guards. The family home is subject to regular ransacking by the Red Guards, although the neighbors lend emotional support. To avoid denunciation, Fang is taken away to Huituo Village, the place of grandfather's original domicile.

**1971**

Returns to Handan to assume his studies at a time when the Red Guard denunciation of "Down with Landlord Fang," continues. Enters a school in Handan for the offspring of railway employees, and his father encourages his writing skills, even though his writing efforts are confined to denunciatory politics. Unable to read his essays out aloud in class. Fang Lijun applies to join a Little Red Soldier organization, but is classified as politically retrograde.

**1973**

Fang is finally acclaimed as part of a writing team in the Movement to Criticize Confucius and Lin Biao. Articles elaborating on the vicious nature of "Dick head Confucius" begin appearing in schools, kindergartens, and railway stations, while his cartoons of Lin Biao and Confucius aroused such public mirth that Fang vows to summon up his painting skills for the cause. His request to join the school's art group is constantly turned down, and so Fang, and a group of fellow students, form their own group. His teachers express the hope that henceforth be a man who acts up to what he says.

**1974**

Fang Lijun is part of the final group in his school to become a Little Red Soldier.

**1975**

The movement to study the Works of Chairman Mao is in full swing, while gang warfare is a regular feature of Beijing adolescent urban life. Fang Lijun-bashing is also in full swing.

**1976**

Tangshan earthquake, and the deaths of Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong. Fang Lijun urged by his father to publicly display grief, is at first unable to weep, but finally affects uncontrollable tears, for which he is applauded by his teachers. Fang Lijun's grandfather dies.

The "Gang of Four" falls from power. Hua Guofeng assumes power, and a power struggle ensues.

**1977**

Termination of the Cultural Revolution. Enters the middle school in Handan for the offspring of railway workers. He enters the fine arts group in the school, and studies painting under Wang Yongsheng. The school, however, proves to be disruptive, but the Workers' Cultural Palace provides artistic relief and there Fang Lijun also studies painting with their fine arts group, and acquires two new teachers — Zhang Yichun and Zheng Jindong. It's plaster casts, portraits, and still life by day, railway station sketches by night. He meets his teacher, Ms. Zhou Diehui, for the first time.

**1980**

Enters the Hebei Light Industry College, program for ceramics. Fang Lijun begins studying the techniques of Realism. His reading includes *My Life* by Isadora Duncan, *Confessions*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Quatre-vingt-treize*, *Lettres de Vincent Van Gogh*. He undertakes painting field trips to the Taihang and Yanshan Mountains. He begins studying woodcuts. Zheng Jindong introduced Li Xianting to him. At the time, Li Xianting was on the editorial board of *Meishu* and intended publishing Fang Lijun's woodcuts, but in the wake of Li Xianting's appointment as abstract art editor, the magazine was shut down. China embarks on an ambitious program of opening, and colleges begin professionalizing.

**1984**

On graduating, Fang Lijun is assigned to work in an advertising company in Handan. He participates in many regional and municipal art exhibitions. He wins the grand prix at the province-sponsored art competition. His *Country Love* series is exhibited in the "6th National Art Exhibition."

**1985**

Formal and systematic training in art fundamentals and woodcut begins at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing.

**1986**

He travels throughout China, gathering materials for his works.

**1987**

He reads many books on modern Western philosophy.

**1988**

He completes his set of shaved head Drawings, *Pencil Drawing No. 1-3*.

**1989**

He takes part in "China/Avant-Garde." He experienced the Tian'anmen Incident as a student.

**1990**

After graduation, remains in Beijing, and pursues his career as a professional artist. Begins working in oils.

**1991**

Marries Michaela Raab (German).

**1992**

Exhibition in Beijing at Beijing Art Museum with Liu Wei.

**1993**

He starts participating in many Chinese art exhibitions abroad and major international art exhibitions, where he wins critical acclaim from art circles in Europe and the United States.

## Exhibitions

New Collection of Commissioned Works on the Theme "Hiroshima," Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Hiroshima, Japan

**1996-97**

China!, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Germany (traveling exhibition)

## Solo Exhibitions

**1995**

Fang Lijun, Galerie Bellefroid, Paris, France

Fang Lijun, Galerie Serieuse Zaken, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

**1996**

Fang Lijun: Human Images in an Uncertain Age, The Japan Foundation Asia Center, Tokyo, Japan

## Group Exhibitions

**1984**

6th National Art Exhibition, Guangzhou

**1989**

China/Avant-Garde, China Art Gallery, Beijing

**1991**

Fang Lijun/Liu Wei private exhibition, Beijing

**1992**

Fang Lijun and Liu Wei Oil Painting Exhibition, Beijing Art Museum, Beijing

**1992-93**

New Art from China/Post-Mao Product, The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney/Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane/City of Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat/Canberra School of Art Gallery, Canberra, Australia

**1993**

China's New Art, Post-89, Hong Kong Arts Center, Hong Kong

Mao Goes Pop, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia

Passagio ad Oriente, 45th Biennale di Venezia, Italy

New Art from China: Post-89, Marlborough Fine Art, London, U.K.

**1993-94**

China Avant-Garde, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany/Kunsthal Rotterdam, the Netherlands/The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, U.K./Kunsthallen Brandts Klødefabrik, Odense, Denmark

**1994**

Welt-Moral, Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland

Chinese Contemporary Art at São Paulo, 22nd

International Biennale of São Paulo, Brazil

New Chinese Art, Hanart T Z Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan

**1994-95**

4th Asian Art Show, Fukuoka Art Museum, Fukuoka/Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan

**1995**

Visions of Happiness-Ten Asian Contemporary Artists, The Japan Foundation ASEAN Culture Center, Tokyo, Japan

Unser Jahrhundert, Museum Ludwig Köln, Germany

1st Kwangju Biennial, Kwangju, Korea

Couplet 4, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Avantguardes Artistiques Xineses, Centre d'Art Santa Mònica, Barcelona, Spain

**1996**

Begegnungen mit China, Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany

Beijing/No No Soap Opera?, München, Germany

## Public Collections

The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

Museum Ludwig Köln, Germany

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Henie-Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, Norway

Fukuoka Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan

Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art,

Hiroshima, Japan

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方力鈞—物語なき時代の人間像

Fang Lijun: Human Images in an Uncertain Age

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