CHAPTER THREE

Running

IN THE MORNINGS I often ran to the summit of Raise the Flag Mountain. As I ran, I studied the propaganda signs along the route, although at the beginning there wasn't much about them that was recognizable. There were three signs on the road out to the mountain, and to me they looked like this:

建设精神 **Culture** 更新生育观念

控 制 **People Mouth** 增长，促进社会进步

教育 **Is** 立 **Country** 基础

I finished my runs back in the center of campus, not far from the teaching building, where a stone wall served as a backdrop for an inscription of three-foot-high characters:

教书育 **People,** 管理育 **People,** 服务育 **People,** 环境育 **People**

That was how Chinese appeared in my first few months. I arrived in Fuling able to recognize about forty characters, all of them simple: people, middle, country, above, below, long, man, woman. There hadn't been time for more; the Peace Corps had given us an intensive

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course during our two months of training in Chengdu, but the emphasis was on learning enough spoken Mandarin to function. We had to study written Chinese on our own, and until I got to Fuling I simply hadn't had enough time.

I came to Sichuan because I wanted to teach, but I also had two other motivations: I thought the experience would make me a better writer, and I wanted to learn Chinese. These were very clear goals, but the way to achieve them was much less obvious. I hoped the writing would take care of itself—I would keep my eyes open and take notes, and eventually, when I felt I was ready, I would start to write. But Chinese was a different matter altogether and I had never undertaken something like that before.

That was one reason I had decided to come to China with the Peace Corps, because I knew they would try to teach me the language. Their Chengdu training course had been excellent; the classes were small and the teachers experienced, and it had been easy to make progress. In Fuling, though, language study was my own affair. The Peace Corps would pay for tutors, but I had to find them myself, and I had to decide which textbooks I would use and how I would structure my studies. It was a daunting task—essentially, I had to figure out how to learn Chinese.

For the first few weeks, Dean Fu searched for tutors who could help Adam and me. He was as lost as we were—he had never known a foreigner who was trying to learn the language, and I suspected that secretly he felt the project was hopeless. *Waiguoren* couldn't learn Chinese—everybody in Fuling knew that. Our students found it hilarious that we even tried. They would ask me to speak a little Chinese, or write a character or two, and then they would laugh at my efforts. At first this didn't bother me, but quickly it became annoying. They thought I was dabbling in the language when in fact I was serious: I knew that studying Chinese was one of the most important things I could do in Fuling. So much depended on knowing the language—my friendships, my ability to function in the city, my understanding of the place.

I also wanted to learn Chinese out of stubbornness, because as a *waiguoren* you weren't expected to do that. Such low expectations had a long tradition; even as late as the early 1800s it had been illegal for a

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Chinese to teach the language to foreigners, and a number of Chinese were imprisoned and even executed for tutoring young Englishmen. This bit of history fascinated me: how many languages had been sacred and forbidden to outsiders? Certainly, those laws had been changed more than a century ago, but China was still ambivalent about opening to the outside world and language was still at the heart of this issue. In good conscience I could not live there for two years and not learn to speak Chinese. To me, this was as important as fulfilling my obligations as a teacher.

But this need wasn't nearly as obvious to everybody else. Dean Fu took a long time finding tutors, and perhaps he was hoping that we'd forget about it. We didn't need Chinese to teach, after all, and we already knew enough to buy groceries and eat at local restaurants. That should be adequate, people figured. In some respects, we were seen as English-teaching machines, or perhaps farm animals—expensive and skittish draft horses that taught literature and culture. We were given cadres' apartments, and we had our own Changhong-brand color televisions with remote. Our bedrooms were air-conditioned. Each of us had a good kitchen and two beautiful balconies. Our students were obedient and respectful. It didn't matter that, even as we were given all of these things, the leaders also gave quiet instructions to our colleagues and students that they should avoid associating with us outside of class. *Waiguoren* were risky, especially with regard to politics, and in any case we didn't need close friends in the college. We could teach during the day and return to our comfortable cages at night, and, if we needed friendship, we always had each other. They even gave us telephones so we could call Peace Corps volunteers who lived in other parts of Sichuan.

Some of the more insightful students sensed that this did not make a full life. In his journal, Soddy wrote me a short note, politely addressed in the third person:

> Pete and Adam come to our college to teach our English without pay. We are thankful for this behavior. But we are worried about Pete and Adam's lives. For example: Pete and Adam know little Chinese, so they can't watch Chinese TV programmes. I think your lives are difficult. I want to know how you spend your spare time.

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It was a good question. My teaching and preparation time rarely took much more than thirty hours a week. I ran in the mornings, and sometimes I went for walks in the hills. Adam and I played basketball and threw the Frisbee. I wrote on my computer. I planned other diversions for the future—subjects I wanted to cover in class, possible travel destinations. Mostly, though, I knew that there was plenty of exploring to be done in the city, but at the beginning this was the hardest place of all to open up.

Downtown Fuling looked good from my balcony. Often I'd gaze across the Wu River at the maze of streets and stairways, listening to the distant hum of daily life, and I'd think about the mysteries that were hidden in the river town. I wanted to investigate all of it—I wanted to go down to the docks and watch the boats; I wanted to talk with the stick-stick soldiers; I wanted to explore the network of tangled staircases that ran through the old part of town. I longed to figure out how the city worked and what the people thought, especially since no foreigner had done this before. It wasn't like living in Beijing or Shanghai, where there were plenty of *waiguoren* who had discovered what the city had to offer. As far as foreigners were concerned, Fuling was our city—or it would be once we figured it out.

But once I got there it didn't look so good. Partly this was because of the dirt and noise; the main city of Fuling was an unbelievably loud and polluted place. There wasn't as much heavy industry as in other parts of China, but there were a few good-sized factories that spewed smoke and dust into the air. The power plant on the banks of the Wu River burned coal, as did all of the countless small restaurants that lined the city's streets, and automobile emissions were poorly regulated. In winter the air was particularly dirty, but even in summer it was bad. If I went to town and blew my nose, the tissue was streaked with black grease. This made me think about how the air was affecting my lungs, and for a while I wondered what could be done about this. Finally I decided to stop looking at tissues after I blew my nose.

Noise was even more impressive. Most of it came from car horns, and it is difficult to explain how constant this sound was. I can start by saying: Drivers in Fuling honked a lot. There weren't a great number of cars, but there were enough, and they were always passing each other

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in a mad rush to get to wherever they were going. Most of them were cabs, and virtually every cabby in Fuling had rewired his horn so it was triggered by a contact point at the tip of the gearshift. They did this for convenience; because of the hills, drivers shifted gears frequently, and with their hand on the stick it was possible to touch the contact point ever so slightly and the horn would sound. They honked at other cars, and they honked at pedestrians. They honked whenever they passed somebody, or whenever they were being passed themselves. They honked when nobody was passing but somebody might be considering it, or when the road was empty and there was nobody to pass but the thought of passing or being passed had just passed through the driver's mind. Just like that, an unthinking reflex: the driver honked. They did it so often that they didn't even feel the contact point beneath their fingers, and the other drivers and pedestrians were so familiar with the sound that they essentially didn't hear it. Nobody reacted to horns anymore; they served no purpose. A honk in Fuling was like the tree falling in the forest—for all intents and purposes it was silent.

But at the beginning Adam and I heard it. For the first few weeks we often complained about the honking and the noise, the same way we complained about blowing our noses and seeing the tissue turn black. But the simple truth was that you could do nothing about either the noise or the pollution, which meant that they could either become very important and very annoying, or they could become not important at all. For sanity's sake we took the second option, like the locals, and soon we learned to talk about other things.

I realized this in early November, when a college friend of mine named Scott Kramer came to visit. For five years he had lived in Manhattan, and yet the noise in Fuling absolutely stunned him; he heard every horn, every shout, every blurted announcement from every loudspeaker. When he left, we took a cab from the college to the docks, and Kramer, who worked on Wall Street and had a mathematical turn of mind, counted the honks as our driver sped through the city. It was a fifteen-minute ride and the driver touched his contact point 566 times. It came to thirty-seven honks per minute.

If Kramer hadn't been counting, I wouldn't have noticed, and I realized that I had stopped hearing the horns long ago, just like every-

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body else in town. In fact, Kramer was the only person in the whole city who heard them, which explained why he was so overwhelmed. The entire city had been honking at him for a week.

For me it wasn't the same, and after a month or so the discomforts of Fuling weren't important enough to deter me from going into town. Despite the noise and the pollution, it was still a fascinating place, and I still wanted to explore its corners and learn its secrets. But the language was an enormous problem, and in the beginning it made the city frustrating and even frightening.

Mandarin Chinese has a reputation as a difficult language—some experts say it takes four times as long to learn as Spanish or French—and its characters and tones are particularly challenging to a Westerner, because they are completely different from the way our languages are structured. In Sichuan, things are further complicated by the provincial dialect, which is distinct enough that a Chinese outsider has trouble understanding the locals in a place like Fuling. The variations between Mandarin and Sichuanese are significant: in addition to some differences in vocabulary, Sichuanese slurs the Mandarin reflexive sounds—*sh* becomes *s*, *zh* becomes *z*—and certain consonants are reversed, so that the average person in Sichuan confuses *n* and *l*, and *h* and *f*. A word like "Hunan" becomes "Fulan." The Sichuanese tonal range is also shorter, and most significant, two of the four Mandarin tones are reversed in Sichuan. If Mandarin is your starting point, it seems that the entire language has been flattened and turned upside down.

In addition, Sichuan is an enormous province where lack of development, particularly with regard to road and rail links, has resulted in vast regional differences. The Chengdu dialect is distinct from that of Chongqing, which is also different from that of Leshan, and so on. The town of Fengdu is less than thirty miles downstream from Fuling, and yet occasionally the residents of these places have difficulty understanding each other. At a Fuling restaurant, if you want the dish known as *hundun* in Mandarin—translated in English as "wonton"—you have to ask for *chaoshou*, but if you go another thirty miles to Fengdu you'll have to call it *baomian*. Or, more accurately, *baomin*, because the folks in Fengdu slur the *ian* sounds.

The result is a hell of a mess that I hadn't expected. I came to China hoping to learn Chinese, but quickly I realized there was no

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such thing. "Chinese" was whatever it took to communicate with the person you happened to be talking with, and this changed dramatically depending on background and education level. Educated people usually could speak Mandarin, especially if they were from the younger generation—the walls of our classrooms had enormous signs that commanded: "Use Mandarin!" But the vast majority of Fuling's population was uneducated and functioned only in the dialect. It made going to town a frustrating experience, because even the simplest conversations were difficult, and it also made my goal of learning Chinese seem impossible: I couldn't imagine learning both Mandarin and Sichuanese in two years. In fact, all I needed to do was improve my Mandarin, which would naturally enable me to handle the dialect, but in the early months I didn't know that. It seemed that I was in hopelessly over my head, and every trip into town was a reminder of that failure.

And Fuling was a frightening place because the people had seen so few outsiders. If I ate at a restaurant or bought something from a store, a crowd would quickly gather, often as many as thirty people spilling out into the street. Most of the attention was innocent curiosity, but it made the embarrassment of my bad Chinese all the worse—I'd try to communicate with the owner, and people would laugh and talk among themselves, and in my nervousness I would speak even worse Mandarin. When I walked down the street, people constantly turned and shouted at me. Often they screamed *waiguoren* or *laowai*, both of which simply meant "foreigner." Again, these phrases often weren't intentionally insulting, but intentions mattered less and less with every day that these words were screamed at me. Another favorite was "hello," a meaningless, mocking version of the word that was strung out into a long "hah-loooo!" This word was so closely associated with foreigners that sometimes the people used it instead of *waiguoren*—they'd say, "Look, here come two hellos!" And often in Fuling they shouted other less innocent terms—*yangguizi*, or "foreign devil"; *da bizi*, "big nose"—although it wasn't until later that I understood what these phrases meant.

The stresses piled up every time I went into town: the confusion and embarrassment of the language, the shouts and stares, the mocking calls. It was even worse for Adam, who was tall and blond; at least I had the advantage of being dark-haired and only slightly bigger than the locals. For a while we adopted the strategy of going into town

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together, thinking that between the two of us we could more easily handle the pressure. This was a mistake, though, because adding another *waiguoren* only increased the attention, and after a month of that we started making our trips solo. Finally, as the fall semester wore on, we did everything possible to avoid going to town. When I did go, I wore headphones. That was the only way I could handle it; I listened to the loudest and most offensive rap music I had—Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggy Dogg, the Beastie Boys—and it was just enough to drown out the shouts as I walked down the street. It made for surreal trips downtown, listening to Snoop rap obscenities while I dodged the crowds, but it kept me sane.

And so Soddy's question remained: How do you spend your spare time? When I finished teaching I would sit at my desk, which looked out across the Wu River to the city, and I would write:

学学学学学学学学学学

While I wrote, I pronounced the word over and over, as carefully as I drew it:

"Xue xue xue xue xue xue xue xue xue xue xue xue xue xue xue xue xue xue."

I would write the same character about a hundred times total, and then I would think of ways in which it was used: *xuexi, xuesheng, xuexiao.* I would write it on a flash card and put it on a stack that grew steadily on my desk—between five and ten a day, usually. I listened to language tapes and reviewed the text that we had used during Peace Corps training. I flipped through the flash cards. By early October, when Dean Fu finally found two Chinese tutors, I had learned 150 characters. The signs on the way to Raise the Flag Mountain were still unintelligible, but the one in the center of campus had changed slightly:

Teaching 育 People, 管理育 People,

服务育 People, Environment 育 People

OUR TUTORS were Kong Ming and Liao Mei, and we came to know them as Teacher Kong and Teacher Liao. They taught in the Chinese

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department, and neither of them spoke any English. They had never known a *waiguoren* before. Dean Fu had been unable to find tutors who spoke English, and at last we told him it wasn't important. We wanted to get started and we knew that Chinese department teachers had good Mandarin.

Teacher Kong was a short man who wore glasses and smelled of Magnificent Sound cigarettes. He was thirty-two years old, and he taught ancient Chinese literature. By Chinese standards he was slightly fat, which meant that by American standards he was slightly thin. He smiled easily. He was from the countryside of Fengdu, which was famous for its ghosts—legend said that spirits went to Fengdu after death.

Teacher Liao was a very thin woman with long black hair and a reserved manner. She was twenty-seven years old, and she taught modern Chinese. She smiled less than Teacher Kong. Our students, who also had some courses in the Chinese department, considered Teacher Liao to be one of their better instructors. She was from the central Sichuan city of Zigong, which was famous for its salt. Every city and small town in Sichuan claimed to be famous for something. Fuling was famous for the hot pickled mustard tuber that was cured along the banks of the rivers.

That was essentially everything we knew about Teachers Kong and Liao for months. We also knew about their Mandarin, which was very clear except for a slight Sichuanese tendency to confuse the *n* and *l* sounds. Other than that we knew nothing. To us they were like Chinese-teaching machines, or perhaps farm animals—a sort of inexpensive and bored draft horse that corrected bad tones. And to them we were very stupid *waiguoren* from a country whose crude tongue had no tones at all.

My first tutorial with Teacher Liao was scheduled for two hours, but I lasted less than sixty minutes. I went home with my head reeling—had a human being ever compressed more wrongness into a single hour? Everything was wrong—tones, grammar, vocabulary, initial sounds. She would ask me a question and I would try to process the language to respond, but before I could speak she was answering it herself. She spoke clearly, of course, and it was also true that during that hour not a word of English had been spoken. That was what I wanted, after all—a Chinese

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tutor. But I couldn't imagine doing that for seven hours a week and maintaining my sanity, and I looked at the pathetic stack of flash cards on my desk and thought: This is hopeless.

For a solid month it looked that way. I was too self-absorbed to even imagine what it was like from the other side, but later I realized that it was even worse for my teachers. They weren't under threat of execution for teaching the sacred tones to a *waiguoren*—that law, at least, had been changed since Qing Dynasty days. But theirs wasn't an enviable job. First of all, we underpaid them. This wasn't intentional; Adam and I had been given wrong information about the standard rate for tutors. Teachers Kong and Liao, of course, were far too polite to set us straight, which meant that for the entire first year they worked for two-thirds of what they deserved. Even worse, though, they were underpaid for seven weekly hours of boredom and frustration. The lessons in the book were simple—taking a train, going to a restaurant—and yet I botched everything, and they had no idea how to steer me in the right direction. How do you teach somebody to speak Chinese? How do you take your knowledge of ancient poetry and use it to help a *waiguoren* master something as basic as the third tone?

We were all lost, and that failure seemed to be the extent of our relationship. Other Peace Corps volunteers had tutors who spoke English, so at least they could chat together after class. They heard about their tutors' families; they ate dinner together; they became friends. My tutors didn't seem like real people—it was months before I learned that Teacher Liao was married and that Teacher Kong had a son. Here the language problem was compounded by the fact that at the beginning they were somewhat cagey and distant; they had never known a *waiguoren* before, and they weren't at all certain how to approach us.

Chinese teaching styles are also significantly different from western methods, which made my tutorials even more frustrating. In China, a teacher is absolutely respected without question, and the teacher-student relationship tends to be formal. The teacher teaches and is right, and the student studies and is wrong. But this isn't our tradition in America, as my own students noticed. I encouraged informality in our classes, and if a student was wrong I pointed out what she had done right and praised her for making a good effort. To them,

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this praise was meaningless. What was the point of that? If a student was wrong, she needed to be corrected without any quibbling or softening—that was the Chinese way.

I couldn't teach like that, and it was even harder to play the role of student. Actually, this became worse after my Chinese classes started to feel productive, which happened more quickly than I expected. The characters in my book's lessons had always been elusive, odd-shaped scratches of black that drifted in and out of my head, calling up arbitrary allusions that were misleading. They were pictures rather than words: I would look at 卡 and think of K-mart, and the twenty-seventh radical— 阝 reminded me of the letter B, or perhaps an ax hanging on a wall. 大 looked like a man doing jumping jacks. 点 was a marching spider carrying a flag across the page. I stared so long at those odd figures that I dreamed about them—they swarmed in my head and I awoke vaguely disturbed and missing home.

But at a certain point it was as if some of the scratchings stood up straight and looked me in the eye, and the fanciful associations started slipping away. Suddenly they became words; they had meaning. Of course, it didn't happen all at once, and it was work that did it—I was studying madly in an effort to make the classes less miserable. But I was so busy that I hardly had time to realize that progress was being made.

One day after more than a month of classes, I read aloud a paragraph from my book, recognizing all of the characters smoothly except for one. I sat back and started to register the achievement: I was actually reading Chinese. The language was starting to make sense. But before this sense of satisfaction was half formed, Teacher Liao said, *"Budui!"*

It meant, literally, "Not correct." You could also translate it as no, wrong, nope, uh-uh. Flatly and clearly incorrect. There were many Chinese words that I didn't know, but I knew that one well.

A voice in my head whined: All of the rest of them were right; isn't that worth something? But for Teacher Liao it didn't work like that. If one character was wrong it was simply *budui*.

"What's this word?" I asked, pointing at the character I had missed.

"*Zhe*—the *zhe* in *zhejiang*."

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"Third tone?"

"Fourth tone."

I breathed deeply and read the section again, and this time I did it perfectly. That was a victory—I turned to Teacher Liao and my eyes said (or at least I imagined them saying): How do you like me now? But Teacher Liao's eyes were glazed with boredom and she said, "Read the next one." They were, after all, simple paragraphs. Any schoolchild could handle them.

It was the Chinese way. Success was expected and failure criticized and promptly corrected. You were right or you were *budui*; there was no middle ground. As I became bolder with the language I started experimenting with new words and new structures, and this was good but it was also a risk. I would finish a series of sentences using vocabulary that I knew Teacher Liao didn't expect me to know, and I would swear that I could see her flinch with unwilling admiration. And yet she would say, *"Budui!"* and correct the part that had been wrong.

I grew to hate *budui*: its sound mocked me. There was a harshness to it; the *bu* was a rising tone and the *dui* dropped abruptly, building like my confidence and then collapsing all at once. And it bothered me all the more because I knew that Teacher Liao was only telling the truth: virtually everything I did with the language was *budui*. I was an adult, and as an adult I should be able to accept criticism where it was needed. But that wasn't the American way; I was accustomed to having my ego soothed; I wanted to be praised for my effort. I didn't mind criticism as long as it was candy-coated. I was caught in the same trap that I had heard about from some of my Chinese-American friends, who as children went to school and became accustomed to the American system of gentle correction, only to return home and hear their Chinese-minded parents say, simply, *budui*. That single B on the report card matters much more than the string of A's that surrounds it. Keep working; you haven't achieved anything yet.

And so I studied. I was frustrated but I was also stubborn; I was determined to show Teacher Liao that I was *dui*. Virtually all of my spare time went to studying Chinese, and the stack of flash cards on my desk grew rapidly. By the first week in November I knew three hundred characters. I had no clear idea what I was shooting for—I had a vague goal of reading a newspaper, which would require between two

and three thousand. But mostly I knew that I needed more knowledge than I had, and I needed it quickly.

In the mornings I ran to the summit of Raise the Flag Mountain, charging hard up the steps, my lungs burning high above the Yangtze. The effort was satisfying—it was challenging but uncomplicated, and at the finish I could look down on the city and see where I had gone. It was different from the work of learning Chinese, which had no clear endpoint and gave me more frustration than satisfaction.

There was a skill to running, and in some ways it was the only skill I had in Fuling. Everybody else seemed to have found something that he or she was good at: the owner of the dumpling restaurant made dumplings, the shoeshine women shined shoes, the stick-stick soldiers carried loads on their leathered shoulders. It was less clear what my purpose was—I was a teacher, and that job was satisfying and clearly defined, but it disappeared once I left campus. Most people in town only saw my failures, the inevitable misunderstandings and botched conversations.

And they always watched carefully. The attention was so intense that in public I often became clumsily self-conscious, which was exacerbated by my suddenly becoming bigger than average. In America I was considered small at five feet nine inches, but now for the first time in my life I stood out in crowds. I bumped my head on bus doorways; I squeezed awkwardly behind miniature restaurant tables. I was like Alice in Wonderland, eating the currant-seed cakes and finding her world turned upside down.

Mostly I longed to find something that I could do well. This was part of why the simple routines of the city fascinated me; I could watch a stick-stick soldier or a restaurant cook with incredible intensity, simply because these people were good at what they did. There was a touch of voyeurism in my attention, at least in the sense that I watched the people work with all of the voyeur's impotent envy. There were many days when I would have liked nothing more than to have had a simple skill that I could do over and over again, as long as I did it well.

Running was repetitive in this way, and it was also an escape. If I ran on the roads, cars honked at me, people laughed and shouted, and sometimes a young man would try to impress his friends by chasing

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after me. But crowds couldn't gather around, and none of the young men followed for long. I ran alone, and in a crowded country that sort of solitude was worth something. There was nobody in the city who could catch me.

Usually I ran in the hills behind campus, following the small roads and footpaths that wound around Raise the Flag Mountain. I ran past old Daoist shrines, and atop the narrow walls of the rice paddies, and I followed the stone steps that led to the mountain's summit. I liked running past the ancient stone tombs that overlooked the rivers, and I liked seeing the peasants at work. On my runs I watched them harvest the rice crop, and thresh the yellowed stalks, and I saw them plant the winter wheat and tend their vegetables. I first learned the agricultural patterns by watching the workers as I ran, and I studied the shape of the mountain by feeling it beneath my legs.

The peasants found it strange that I ran in the hills, and they always stared when I charged past, but they never shouted or laughed. As a rule they were the most polite people you could ever hope to meet, and in any case they had more important things to do with their energy than scream at *waiguoren*. And perhaps they had an innate respect for physical effort, even when they didn't see the point.

The air in the countryside was often bad, because the Yangtze winds blew the city's pollution across the Wu River, and I knew that running did my health more harm than good. But it kept my mind steady, because the fields were quiet and peaceful and the activity felt the same as it always had. That old well-known feeling—the catch in my chest, the strain in my legs—connected all the places where I had lived, Missouri and Princeton and Oxford and Fuling. While I ran through the hills, my thoughts swung fluidly between these times and places; I remembered running along the old Missouri-Kansas-Texas railroad pathway, and I recalled the rapeseed blooming gold on Boar's Hill, and the old shaded bridge of Prettybrook. As the months slipped past I realized that even these Sichuan hills, with their strange tombs and terraces, were starting to feel like home.

But still the signs on the way to Raise the Flag Mountain were foreign, and even as they slowly became familiar they reminded me how far I still had to go:

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Build 精神 Culture, New Give Birth 观念

Population Increase, 促进 Society 进步

Education Is a Powerful Country's 基础

DURING THAT SEMESTER there was a volatility to the written language; it constantly shifted in my eyes, and each day the shapes became something other than what they had been before. Spoken Chinese was also starting to settle in my ears, and soon I could make simple conversation with the owners of the restaurants where I ate. The same slow shift was also happening with regard to my tutors, who finally started to change from tone machines into real people.

As this happened, I began to sense an edge to Teacher Liao that I couldn't quite figure. It wasn't simply her tendency to say *budui*; she seemed slightly uncomfortable around both Adam and me, and there were moments when I almost thought she disliked us (which, given that we didn't pay her enough, would have been understandable). Later, I would come to recognize other reasons for this discomfort, but during that first semester I only sensed that there were complications in our relationship.

Once we had a tutorial the day after I had played in the faculty basketball tournament, and she asked what I had thought of the game. In fact, it had gone very badly—Adam and I were starting to realize that there was a great deal of resentment over our participation, because the English department team was now suddenly very good. To the other participants, the games were taking on a patriotic significance; it was a matter of China vs. America, an issue of saving face for the Motherland, and the games grew steadily rougher and rougher. The referees also took sides; they allowed our opponents to foul us while constantly whistling us for phantom violations. In the game before our tutorial, I had been whistled more than fifteen times for double-dribble—by the end of the game I only had to touch the ball and the whistle would blow. Adam and I were considering pulling out of the tournament, which we eventually did. It seemed the best solution for everybody involved.

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I knew that Teacher Liao had been at the game, and I assumed that she felt the same way I did. My students had been embarrassed by the poor sportsmanship, and they told me that the referee had a horrible reputation on campus. He was notorious for getting into fights—once he even threatened an administrator with a knife. His wife had recently divorced him; the rumor was that he had beaten her. And yet the college was unable to fire him, because of the job security that was promised to all state workers under the traditional Communist system.

I answered Teacher Liao's question honestly, telling her that I hadn't found the game much fun.

"That referee," I said, "is a *huai dan*." It was a common insult: bad egg.

"Budui!" said Teacher Liao. "It wasn't his problem—you were wrong. And you should not criticize the referee."

To me this seemed insult upon injury. I wanted to tell her: There are no tones in basketball and you have no jurisdiction over it. But she had more to say.

"You were dribbling wrong," she said. "That's why he kept penalizing you. You were doing this—" And she gestured, showing me that I had carried the ball.

"Budui!" I said. "That's not what I was doing. I was dribbling the same way I always do in America. That referee just doesn't like *waiguoren*. And he doesn't understand basketball."

"*Budui!* Here you can't dribble the same way that you do in America, because they have different rules in the NBA. That's the problem—you're accustomed to playing the American way."

She said it in hopes of ending the argument tactfully, because she saw that I was annoyed. But I had already heard too many explanations about "the Chinese way," and I did not want to be lectured about Basketball with Chinese Characteristics.

"Basketball is an American sport," I said. "We made the rules and I understand them. That referee just doesn't like *waiguoren*." After I spoke, I realized how stupid my words sounded, and I might as well have continued: And we Americans can study a language for only four months and already convey our arrogance. But I didn't have the vocabulary for that, and in any case it was clear that both of us wanted to

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talk about something else. We reviewed a lesson about going to the airport and nobody mentioned basketball again.

Classes were simpler with Teacher Kong, who alternated weeks with Teacher Liao. He was slightly less inclined to say *budui*, partly because he had a lazy streak, but also because the struggles of that semester were slowly teaching us to recognize each other as people. Eventually he would become my first real Chinese friend—the first friend who saw me strictly in Chinese. And even in those early months, before we developed a true friendship, I could see his interest growing. He sometimes asked me about America, within the limits of my vocabulary, and I sensed there were many questions he would ask once he had the chance. Certainly I had a few of my own that were waiting for the language to catch up with my thoughts.

We had classes in my dining room, where the morning light was warm after the sun rose above the shoulder of Raise the Flag Mountain. We drank tea while we studied—jasmine flower tea, the tiny dried petals unfolding like blooming lilies on the surface of the hot water. Before he drank, Teacher Kong blew softly over the cup, so the loose leaves and flowers floated to the far side, and this was something else I learned in those classes. If he sipped a leaf by mistake, he turned and spat lightly on the floor. I learned that, too—I liked living in a cadre's apartment and still being able to spit on the floor.

One sunny afternoon in December, I was preparing for class when I heard loud music blaring from the plaza below. There wasn't anything unusual about that—the campus loudspeakers were always vomiting noise. But today I looked down from my balcony and saw a crowd assembling in front of the auditorium, and I knew that some sort of important event was about to take place.

My balcony looked straight down to the plaza and I could see everything clearly. A banner had been unfurled and stretched above the steps. I couldn't make out most of the characters, but a few were recognizable: "Safety," "Environment," "Peace." A row of chairs materialized below the banner. The crowd grew larger. Tables were set in front of the chairs. A blue cloth was laid upon the tables; teacups were put on the cloth. Microphones appeared.

I had seen this sort of arrangement before—it was a nesting area

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for cadres. Soon six of them marched up the steps and took their places at the table. I strained to see who they were, but I couldn't recognize their faces, and all I saw was that some were in uniform. But many people in Fuling wore uniforms and that never told you anything.

The speeches began, echoing up to my balcony. A crowd gathered at the bottom of the auditorium steps—mostly students, but also people from the neighborhood outside the gates, old peasants and women with their babies. They listened quietly, and in their silence I could see that it was a serious event. The speeches reverberated in the plaza and I couldn't understand what they were saying.

Teacher Kong arrived for class and set his books on the dining-room table. "It's very loud," he said, smiling, and I agreed—too loud to concentrate on Lesson Thirty-one and its mindless description of a train ride to Guilin. We stepped out onto the balcony and watched the crowd. There were hundreds of people listening to the speeches now, and I could see groups of students hurrying down from the teaching building.

"All of the students have been excused from class," Teacher Kong said, and I asked him what the event was. "They're going to *panjue* two people," he said. "It's a public *panjue*."

I hadn't studied the word, and he explained its meaning until I was nearly certain I understood. I went into the dining room to double-check with the dictionary—"*panjue*: bring a verdict; judgment." They were having a public sentencing in front of the auditorium.

"Are they students?" I asked.

"No. They're from East River."

I asked what they had done, and he explained that there had been a series of fights between East River people and students in the physical education department. East River was a rough part of town, a seedy riverfront section of small shops and dusty warehouses. After the Three Gorges Dam was built, much of East River would disappear underwater, and few people would probably miss it. The dirty streets were depressing, and the residents, most of whom were poor, saw the students as privileged outsiders—spoiled kids who lived six or seven to a bare room, cleaned their unheated classrooms, and woke up at six o'clock every morning for mandatory exercises. Sichuanese town-and-gown tension was, like anything else, a matter of relative conditions.

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Recently this animosity had turned ugly; some of the East River men had used knives and sticks in the fights, and a couple of students had been hurt. I heard about it from my own students, who wrote in their journals about a weekend night when two physical education boys had been injured and their friends returned to the dormitory for reinforcements. They were collecting weapons of their own when the police arrived.

"None of the injuries was too serious," said Teacher Kong. "But they want to show the students that the college is safe, so today they're having a public *panjue.*"

The cadres finished their speeches, the crowd waiting in expectant silence. Two men appeared, flanked by policemen. They wore cheap suits and their hands were cuffed behind their backs. The police marched them halfway down the steps of the auditorium, where they stood between the cadres and the crowd. The two men's heads were bowed. The students had pressed to the front; at the back stood the peasants and the mothers with their babies. Everybody was quiet. In the background, from the Wu River, I heard the low growl of riverboat horns.

One of the cadres read from a sheet of paper. His voice echoed over the plaza, and in response the crowd shifted and murmured. The two men kept their heads down.

"A few days," Teacher Kong said. "Only a few days in jail. Not very serious."

And in that instant it was over: the cops took the handcuffed men out the front gate, where a bus was waiting; the cadres disappeared; the tables were whisked away; the banner was taken down; the students returned to class. The people in Fuling were extremely organized with public events and their rallies could materialize and disappear in the space of an hour. Within fifteen minutes there was no sign that anything had happened in the plaza.

Teacher Kong and I reviewed some vocabulary from the trial, and then we moved on to Lesson Thirty-one. There was something strange about returning so quickly to class after having watched the sentencing from high above, as from a luxury box at a stadium, turning somebody's public humiliation into a vocabulary lesson. But many things were public in Fuling and few locals would have found it unusual. I had Peace Corps friends at another Sichuan teachers college who, the following

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spring, had their classes canceled one afternoon for a pre-execution rally in the school's sports stadium. Student attendance at the event was mandatory, because the criminals were young drug dealers and their deaths would provide a valuable lesson for the spectators. The college gathered in the stadium, where the police paraded the condemned prisoners in front of the students. Afterward the criminals were taken away to the countryside and shot. Classes resumed as normal the next day.

NOT LONG AFTER the sentencing, I came back from a run and realized that the sign in the center of campus had become completely intelligible. This was a moment I had always looked forward to—from the beginning, I had seen that string of characters as a benchmark, and I traced my progress in the way those words became meaningful. And one day all of it finally made sense:

Teaching Educates the People, Administration Educates the People,
Service Educates the People, Environment Educates the People

I stopped and took a long look. I read the sign again, waiting for the sense of achievement. But nothing was there—it was simply propaganda, the same sort of trite phrase that could be found in the students' textbooks or on billboards all across the city. I would react the same way when the other messages on the way to Raise the Flag Mountain came into focus:

Construct a Spiritual Civilization, Replace the Old Concept of Giving Birth
Controlling Population Growth Promotes Social Development
Education Is the Foundation upon Which a Powerful Nation Is Built

All of it was the same old cant. Every time one of the signs became intelligible, I felt very little of the satisfaction that I had once imagined. Instead I heard Teacher Liao's voice in my head: Read the next one. You haven't achieved anything yet. And so I kept writing the characters over and over again at my desk, gazing out my window at the city.

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