The Death of My Father: A Diary

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Abstract

I completed editing my film *Heiqi* (黑漆) in mid-May 2021. Two weeks later, my father died. After dealing with my father's funeral, I took my grieving mother by my side and continued to complete the colour grading and the sound processing for this film. At the same time, I wrote text, which formed my daily writing before and after my father's funeral. It doesn't matter if people notice, but even dust particles can reflect light in the sunshine.

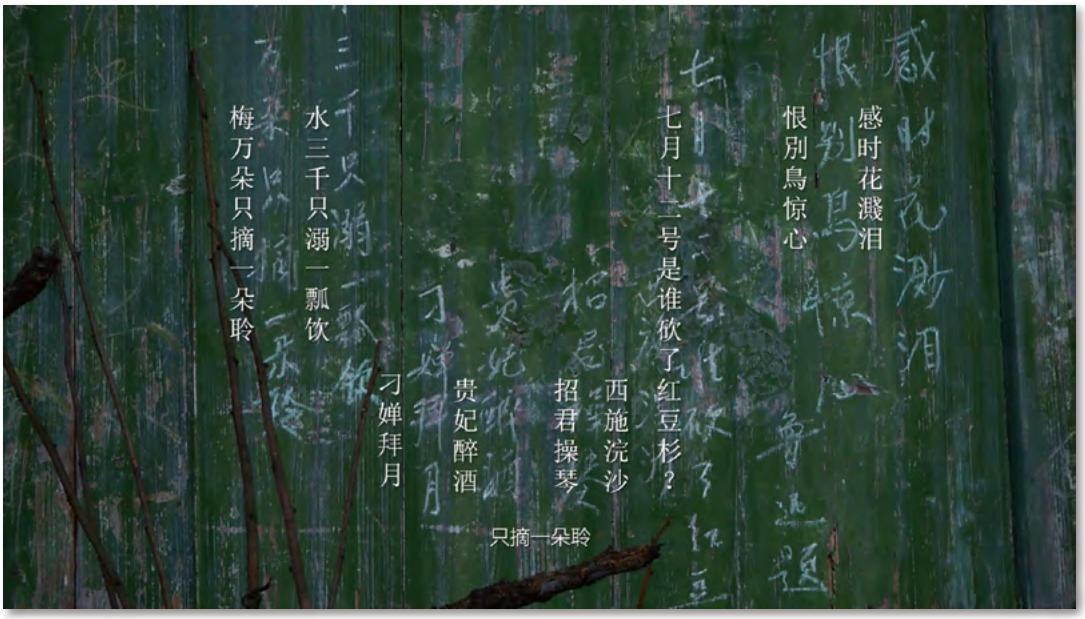
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Zhang Ping

During the time leading up to my father's death, I completed a series of films from 2014 to 2021. These include *No Land* (冬天回家 , 2015), *Healing Balm* (土质没药 , 2017), *Love Song for the Living, Love Song for the Dead* (青白 , 2019), and *Heiqi* (2021). All these works are about my father, but each with a different theme: *No Land* talked about his aging process in connection with the death of a village; *Healing Balm* described how my mother desperately tried to find herbal medicine to save my father's life; *Blueish-White* revolved around a resurfaced rightist apology letter; and *Heiqi* recorded the final stage of my father's life, focusing on the dialogues between the dying and the living.

It would be fair to say that my father's final years coincided with the early development of my filming career, as I got nourishment from him to contain my ever-growing anxiety and hunger.







Stills from *Healing Balm*

1

I forgot when I got home. It's 3 June according to my calendar. Here's the main timeline:

3 June: arrived home.
8.30 am, 7 June: father passed away.
13 June: father's funeral.

On his ID card, my father was born in 1933, but on his funeral portrait it says 1932. Now I think 1932 is the correct one, as he was eighty-nine years old when he died.

The world was filled with unexpected illnesses and deaths in 2020 and 2021: these were truly cursed years. Death had nothing to do with morality or destiny: it just meant the end of a life.

Both my parents were in their eighties, so in a way the spectre of death was already looming large. Yet when it finally presented itself, my world collapsed.

Back to early May, 2021: my father had a heart attack, then ended up in the ICU. My brother was the main care-taker at the hospital. 'You take care of him, and I take care of the money,' is what I told my brother. My mother also fell ill, but went home after spending several nights at the hospital. She refused to eat or sleep. Maybe she wanted to go before my father.

After a fortnight, my father left the hospital, and walked home. The homebound mountain trail was in fact rather short, but he had to make several stops to get his breath back. Later, when we had a video call, I saw he had become quite thin, but was still arguing with my brother, panting. He looked better, though.

By the end of May, my father was confined to bed all day. My mother was still determined to save him, by any means. On the phone, she was crying, and asking for money to buy the 'magic cure'. That's fine by me, because at that time, I was just commissioned for a project. She cried on the phone, 'Your father loves you dearly,' which also sounded a bit pushy. 'I know, mom, I'll have the money sorted,' I replied.

As I told my friend, such an extension of life may actually make my father suffer more. However, this was no longer important, because these efforts must be made. Otherwise, it would make my mother desperate, and she would eventually destroy herself.

It was almost June, and I was feeling restless and constantly holding my heart. So on the morning of the third, I hopped on a bus to go home. I was trying to finish my work before my departure, but it turned out to be unrealistic, so I took some of the work with me on the road.

It was 7.00 pm when I reached the village, and it was getting dark. I took the mountain trail, which was buried by knee-high wormwood grass. Upon entering my family house, I noticed the mud wall encircling our vegetable garden had already collapsed, which almost blocked the entrance.

Pushing the door open, under the dim light, I saw the room was covered by layers of empty medicine cartons, and the whole place had a strong urine smell. My father was wrapped in a dirty blanket, extremely

emaciated. I called him, he opened his eyes, but was unable to turn his neck. He looked at me, opened his mouth, but there were no words.

My brother said, ‘He’s getting much better now; it was dangerous several days ago.’

‘Where is mom?’ I asked.

‘She already went to bed.’

I walked to my mom’s bed. She already got up after knowing I was back. She looked weak and thin, and her hair looked like a haystack. She was a bit wobbly, so I held her.

‘I didn’t know you were coming back,’ said my mother, with tears in her eyes.

‘Don’t worry now, I’m back now. Go to sleep. Don’t cry!’ I comforted her.

I turned up the light, and opened the door so that cold air could come inside. I began to tidy up the house. I expected it to be hot, but in fact it was quite cold. I was told it had rained for half a month. I put on a down coat. Hopefully my body temperature would warm away the moisture in it. I set up the power socket, lit a mosquito-repelling incense, and then turned on my laptop. As the feedback was already sent to me, I immediately plugged in my Wacom and started to work: this had to be finished tonight.

The next morning, I went straight to see my father. He was still lying there, immobile. His legs were already outside the blanket, so I could notice the shape of his bones underneath the wrinkled skin. I saw his incontinence pad, and the disposable bed sheet from the hospital. I touched his forehead, and he was already soaked in sweat. I tried to turn his head, but it was stiff. My brother and I worked together to change him, and I pushed from the back to support him. This was when I realised how heavy my father still was. It was tiresome work to undress and dress him, as my father’s arms were too stiff to stretch out. I had no idea if my father was in fact resisting something. He refused to be fed by my brother, so my mother served him half a bowl of rice porridge. I also held his hands, and I could still feel the grip. I then wiped his sweat off.

My mother mentioned there was a highly competent doctor, whose medicines could make my father walk again.

‘So, you really believe this doctor, don’t you?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Alright then.’

After cleaning out the front yard, I went to the backyard, which had many bamboo trees. After my father got ill, the backyard was neglected, which was evident by the thick layers of fallen leaves and twigs. The ground crinkled as I set foot on it. Normally, the first thing in the morning for my father was to attend to

the backyard plants, so I used to have this illusion that the trees there were evergreen. Every time I came back home, I would spend time filming the dancing bamboo leaves in the sun, and capture my father's images in the light. For the past years, my father had gotten used to us hugging each other, and I could somehow sense that he not only accepted it, but enjoyed it.

I understand that we are destined to get old and die, and I also understand how my mother exhausted all means to postpone the finale. My mother once told me, my father promised to treat her like his younger sister, and would be good to her for the rest of his life. The promise was well kept, for six decades. Regardless of the seismic changes of the outside world, their affection remained the same. My father cared for her and was obedient to her all the time. I remember once my mother was angry, so my father apologized, 'Please point to me where I did wrong, and it will never happen again!'



Still from *Love Song for the Living, Love Song for the Dead*

2

For the following two days, my father remained in bed, with occasional spasms of the fingers, and mild sweat on the forehead. I helped him sit up, and he then took some herbal medicine, while my mother kept saying, 'It will get better soon.'

There was a sheer sense of breakdown in the house, from what I saw and what I felt.

The 'treatment plan' then started, for which almost all medicines available were bought, together with several pieces of medical equipment.

My mother and I tried to figure out how much money was needed. She said we ought to save my fa-

ther's life at all costs. I could see her eyes were swollen, but they also emitted a certain heat, like in the sun-scorching, cicada-singing weather: despite the sleep deprivation, her eyes were still as bright as light.

6 June was a surprisingly happy day. After having a half bowl of porridge, my father broke the silence and said, 'I think I've recovered. Now the cornfield in Mojiaping (莫家坪) must be covered in weeds, let us all go and cut the weeds.'

Mojiaping was in fact our ancestral home, and also the family graveyard. The place enjoys a very favourable location, as it is backed by a mountain, and surrounded by a creek. In winter, it is mild; in summer, it is cool. There's also a well—a perfect spot to keep watermelons cold in summer. In winter, there is steam rising from the well, and the water is not too cold when doing laundry.

Here, the deceased family members, my sisters and brothers, the old plum tree, the little snakes were all long gone, leaving only building remnants, wild flowers, and bushy weeds. Memories associated with Mojiaping were still there, like a dream, flickering at the bottom of the creek, soothing our restless souls.

Before his health deteriorated, my father would go there after breakfast, with a hoe on his shoulder, and come back briefly for lunch, then go there again, and would stay until sunset. He later built a small shed there to store his tools, with a lock. During all these bed-bound days, he was unable to make the trip, but he never stopped thinking about it.

In hindsight, these were his last words.

I woke up at around 6.00 am on the seventh. I saw sunshine outside the window, dispelling moisture in the room. It felt like a good day to unwind, so I tried to fall asleep again. When I was still half asleep, I heard my brother screaming 'Dad! Dad!' I suddenly bounced from the bed, and crashed into the bed board.

'Your dad is gone,' goes my mother's voice from the next room.

My father was still lying in bed, like he always did, immobile.

'Can I take a picture of dad?' I asked mom.

'Yes, you can,' mom replied calmly. She then sent my brother to Mojiaping to get some water from the well, to wash my father's body for the one last time.

I contemplated my father through the lens. That was what death looked like: there's no drama or pain. I reached out for his hands, and I could still feel some warmth. My mother appeared in the lens: she was leaning towards the wall, and spoke to me, 'Don't cry, Manzai (满崽), don't cry.'

Not before long, my brother came back with the water, and started to warm it up. They also removed the paper bedsheet and pad, and then undressed my father.

'Can I come in?' I asked from outside the room.

‘Why not? You are still his daughter,’ my mother responded.

She also took out the funeral clothes for my father, and instructed us, ‘wipe every area three times.’

That was literally my first time laying eyes on my father’s naked body. It was lean, pale, and with little body hair. I began to wash his face with a hot towel. When we turned him around, it felt like he was lighter, and the back was as flat as a board, without the normal curve. I was told that, at the last hospital visit, he strongly rejected the female nurse’s help with his stool, as he was angry, or embarrassed, or more embarrassed than angry. That confrontation was fierce and heavy-handed. But now, his body was completely presented, devoid of any moral standard he had tried to protect, and it was light.

At one second, I had an epiphany that both birth and death come in a blueish-white colour. Nothing is attached to life, therefore it is light and swift. Gravely ill is also ‘heavily’ ill. Once, I saw my father’s stiff hands shaking drastically, and he was unable to complete a sentence; judging from his face, he was suffering a lot of pain. No more pain, and no more burden, Dad.

3

I used my hand to check his breath; there was no breath. That body, also my father’s earthly embodiment, had become an estranged item for my mother and me.

For quite a few years before 2021, my father had fallen ill several times, and each would be seen as a rehearsal of his final death. In a way, I was mentally prepared for this moment. I had mentioned to my mother several times that if ‘success’ was defined by cheating death and living long enough, then my father was truly a winner.

In 1957, when my father was twenty-five years old, he was branded as a ‘rightist’ (右派). During that campaign, many people died, but he survived.

In 1959, he was twenty-seven, and suffered from a serious illness that almost killed him.

In 1961, he was twenty-nine. In order to save a co-worker at the reservoir construction site, one of his eyes was blinded by explosives.

From the sixties to the seventies, many people in my father’s age committed suicide in the big political turmoil. But my father escaped the danger by hiding in the countryside.

In 2004, he was seventy-two. After the factory was privatised, he went back to the countryside with my mother, and he slowly recovered from his long-lasting occupational disease.

In 2010, he was seventy-eight. After suffering from a stroke, he fell down a slope, and one of his legs was punctured by wood, but he survived.

In 2014, he was eighty-two. He lost his vision, but after the surgery in Changsha (长沙), his vision was restored.

In 2019, he was eighty-seven. The heart attack also failed to claim his life.

But this time …

Indeed, the chronicle of life is composed of various encounters with death.

I later told my mother, 'You've done such a great job taking care of my father. No one could have done better than you. You are like a warrior fighting death, and you have shouldered all responsibilities out there.'

My father, a nobody, had also experienced quite a few dramas in life, and some of them were soul-stirring. In his eighty-nine years of life, since he didn't ask for dramas, then each one coming to him would be a life-and-death moment.

For the past two years, I have been studying my father's life in my editing studio. I could remember each image and line of him. I think I know him, and I have inherited some of his characteristics, such as the sense of hunger, feeling helpless, panicking, and acting aloof.

I also know that my father had his moments in life, as he enjoyed the process of completing mundane tasks, such as grave digging, cutting grass, harvesting, and cleaning.

What is wrong with a humble life? Three years ago, I named a film about my father, *Blueish-White*. *Blueish-White* is also pronounced the same as 'clean and innocent' in Chinese. I think it's a fitting label for him.

My father, without any breath, had entered a state of total emptiness, and had no further significant interactions with the world. 'Death is the last adventure,' said Yeats. For my father's adventure, he was on his own path, but we were unable to make his body follow his mind. His coffin was too heavy, and how could we put his soul into that wooden space?

It was customary to give out an obituary notice on my father's death—but to whom should I send it? I had no idea. But I knew, if I kept looking, relatives would be cropping up from everywhere, because it was a big family. Even though we lived in a remote village on a mountain-ridge, my father could still have seen some of the houses down in the valley, and he might have certain connections with these people. So a get-together was warranted on the mountain ridge.

4

Ancestors.

More than a hundred years ago, after her husband's death, my great-grandmother came to this mountain with her three sons. Two sons stayed in the Peng's settlement in Pengjialing (彭家岭), which later became our family's ancestral home: Zhang's courtyard house in Heixi (黑溪张家院子). Another son worked for the Chen's family in Xiexi (斜溪陈家), and settled in the valley of Gulaiping (古来坪).

For those who once lived in the Zhang's courtyard house, my father was the last one in his generation to pass away. There were however some of his cousins still living in Gulaiping. So, Gulaiping was the first place to go. Even though we hadn't talked much in the past, this would still be a standard procedure to follow.

So, I went to my uncle's house in Gulaiping and asked him to lead the funeral. When hearing this, my mother burst into tears, which got on my nerves. I asked her to stop it, because it was totally useless. At that time, I had decided to cry only in private, and not to drop one tear on my father's funeral, regardless of how strong the emotion would be. My mother and I then went to the town to find my cousin Yueying (月英), who was involved in the funeral business. Yueying told me she was also dying because of heart problems. Well, how could we ask a dying person to arrange the funeral?

Alternatively, we found Xiangbao (香宝), the daughter-in-law of one of my uncles. She also worked as a funeral planner in town. So when we found her, and told her about my father's passing, she cried aloud, and then promised she would organise the funeral.

It was already lunchtime when we had arranged this, so Yueying sent her husband out for grocery shopping. Xiangbao took me to purchase some funerary cloth, incense, and candles for the funeral. She asked the shop owner to lower the price, as it's a family matter. A moment later, my mother started to cry again as she saw Yueying and Xiangbao. I said to her, 'This is not the time yet!'

When we returned home, I saw there were already a number of guests gathering in the front yard, with most of the men smoking cigarettes. My father was still lying in bed, and we needed to move him into the coffin.

Before I left for the town earlier that day, I asked my brother to dress my father, but I saw it wasn't done properly. So I stepped up and tied the buttons, whispering to Dad: 'I'm now putting the clothes on you.' I once again felt that his body was light, so it was easy to dress him.

The men carried the coffin into the main room, and put it against the north wall. They also opened the coffin to clean it. Somebody asked, is the pillow ready yet? According to tradition, the pillow must be filled with the ashes of joss paper money. Since we hadn't prepared any, we improvised by burning the paper money in a big cauldron in the room. I overheard someone saying, 'They don't know how to do it. The tomb is not ready yet.' Then another one argued, 'There are fewer and fewer people who know how to do this now—certainly not the young people.' The pillow was eventually filled with paper ashes, the seams were sewed, and then my father was carried inside the coffin, onto a cyan sheet.

After this, someone asked me again, 'So where is the money? The copper coins? The wallet?'

'What wallet?'

'A triangular wallet.'

'What about copper coins?'

‘Who still uses copper coins these days?’

‘How about ordinary coins?’

‘Don’t have any.’

‘Can someone find nine coins?’

Off someone went.

‘We also need a mahogany stick.’

‘I’ll go and chop one.’

Later on, my father was in his coffin, with the new pillow, filled with coins, and there was an evil-repelling stick.

‘His spirit is now on the road.’

‘Where to?’

‘He will spend three days visiting all the old places.’

Yueying’s husband returned with a big bag of meat and fish, and then began preparing lunch. It was a simple family meal but it still produced many meat dishes. The key matter was to appoint the man in charge of the funeral. Apparently, Wenzhi (文治), the grandson of my second uncle, was the leader of the extended family, but he and my mother didn’t get along well, which was known by all. Still, people at the lunch table suggested that he take the lead in the first place. Wenzhi, however, said Wenzhong (文忠), the grandson of my sixth uncle, would be more appropriate, since my sixth uncle and my father were brothers. So it was decided.

Wenzhong was a hen-pecked, weak-willed man. He wasn’t popular in the family, as he was kicked out of the house by his wife Xiangbao（香宝）because of his gambling problem. Wenzhi’s hidden agenda was fulfilled, and no one dared to object. However, the funeral must be arranged by good hands, so Xiangbao offered to help. In the end, Wenzhong was tasked to do grocery shopping, with my brother in charge of money, and Xiangbao would coordinate the whole thing.

Catering, grave-digging, and carrying the coffin from the mountain: these were the key tasks in the funeral. Based on the tradition, people in the same village would help out with these, but since most young people were working elsewhere, only the older ones were there to dig the grave and carry the coffin (for a fee, of course). For catering, a team of caterers were engaged, but they were only here to cook, so that we wouldn’t be charged for the materials: a common practice in the countryside.

In private, I gave the money to my brother, and told him, ‘You are the front man, and I will only take care of the candle and lantern.’

In the afternoon, my brother went to report my father's death to other families, and Xiangbao said we should expect the iced coffin to be delivered. The next morning, the band was scheduled to set up the stage, and the mourning hall would also be set up by the MC. The funeral business had become a major source of income, as there were several teams in the town running funeral planning, employing more than forty people. But I still asked Xiangbao to be careful, and she said she knew these people, so they would be practical with those matters.

After lunch, the iced coffin arrived. It was a tradition to keep the deceased in mourning hall for seven days, so it simply wasn't possible with an iced coffin. With a daily rental rate of 500 yuan, it was portable with an external compressor and internal ice tubes. After buzzing for one hour, the coffin was cold enough with visible condensation on the outer panes. The internal size of the coffin was about 1.8 metres by 0.5 metres, so my father was stuck into this narrow space, with the ice tube on his chest. Could he still see this? Oh, right, he already left.

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In the front yard, we removed the fences and plants, and set up a big tent with bamboo and a plastic cover, under which seven or eight tables could be accommodated for catering guests.

There were four or five middle-aged women in the catering team. Since their arrival, they had kept complaining about the mountain trail, and how difficult it was to transport their equipment. In order to appease them, my brother raised their commission (eighty yuan per table) and asked them to stop it. Xiangbao said, 'If my cousin wants a decent event, decency is what he will get.' A while later, the MC and the band also arrived, and they went straight to setting up the mourning hall. The mourning music was being played on the loudspeaker, and my father's portrait and name plate were served: these were his last physical attachments to this world.

I got a phone call, and it was from Qin (琴). She said she was at the foot of the mountain, but forgot the road to our home. So, I went to pick her up. I said, 'You don't have to come, because it's merely a procedure now.' Much of my involvement was over, except for the vigil for the next several days. In a way, this was a countryside social gathering in the name of death. 'If you didn't come, I would be calmer. I might not be able to control my emotions now,' I said to her.

Then, she asked about the arrangements.

My father had wanted to be buried in the earth.

This was the flow of activities: changing the clothes, bringing in the coffin, reporting the death, building the mourning hall, summoning the spirit, receiving tributes, closing the coffin, burying the coffin, and circling the grave. For the first six days, the coffin would not be closed, and on the third day it was for summoning the spirit, and all the close relatives (whom I barely knew) would come for the 'running-water feast' (流水席). The sixth day would be the most lively and demanding, as there mourning ceremonies and performances. On the seventh day, the coffin would be closed and put in the grave, which effectively wrapped up the whole event.

It's somewhat funny that my father led a simple and quiet life, away from crowds. Yet his death brought along so much noise. I went to turn down the music because my ears already hurt, but later someone cranked it up again.

Such a process in total would cost 30,000 to 40,000 yuan in the countryside. If the family would like to have a more dignified funeral with a band and dragon dancing, then at least 50,000 yuan was needed. This was a big number. But villagers, regardless of their income status, would cover this cost by all means. This was because funerals are considered a showcase of a family's strength. If done poorly, the whole family would be humiliated for the rest of their lives.

'In big cities, who would have the time to do this?' Qin asked. Indeed, in cities, the deceased would simply be transported to a funeral home, followed by a short memorial, and that's it.

But it was a completely different story in the countryside: we needed a whole set of activities, and not one less. I sometimes wondered, this might have something to do with the traditional farming culture, in which participation and collaboration of the fellow villages were essential during major life events including marriage and funeral, which also ensured stability in the countryside.

My understanding is that people enter a parallel universe when they died, but I wasn't impressed. What's the point if one still lived in an identical world in the afterlife? For example, my father's spirit is now on the road, and might be lingering at his favourite scenic places. I ought to tell him, 'Old man, tomorrow is the third day and you have to reach the Cliff Overlooking Home (望乡台), don't dawdle.'

Summon the spirit.

The mourning hall had a gate decorated with paper and twigs, so it looked fairly solemn. A simple flower bouquet was lying before the coffin, which was made from thin plastic sheets and one could still see the brand logo in the back. In the hall, relatives paid tribute. My half-brother, whom I hadn't seen for ten years, showed up with his family of five. My niece also came. Fresh food and drinks filled the offering table, and we were kneeling in front of it to thank all the relatives. Some older relatives were accompanied by their children, and seeing their weeping was quite distressing for me. My mother had cried so hard that her eyes were swollen, and she even had difficulty walking.

If feasting meant seeing my father off, then my father would be content since the yard was filled with people eating and drinking.

My brother asked me to write a funeral notice on the village bulletin, but I didn't take it seriously since I thought he had already visited each and every household. Later when my brother found out it hadn't been done, he was angry with me. I, in turn, argued back, fiercely. Why did I do that? Maybe I just needed a moment to let off some of my feelings. I told Qin that people were fighting for the leadership. It's understandable, but enough was enough.

After the first three days, Qin left for work. When she had departed, I remembered once telling her that I wanted her company during this time, and she didn't forget. Things became quieter after day three, ex-

cept for the extra tables and chairs in the front yard. Other than that, it felt like nothing had happened. Sometimes it struck me, my father was in the coffin, so I would go and touch the outer pane: it was cold. I knocked on the pane, and said, 'Get up and take a look, old man.'

I also remembered an anecdote. Two years ago, my mother told me she would like to 'marinate my father with salt'. It happened when my father was assisting her in the kitchen, when my mother grabbed his ear and said, 'You are not allowed to die, otherwise I would marinate you with salt, so that you could still keep me company.' Well, she could still keep this frozen body as company, if she was fine with it.

I sat on a low stool to do some reading. It was a good book, but I wanted to doze off after only two pages, then I burned some joss money from time to time. If joss money was the currency in the underworld, who came up with such a brilliant idea? On the spirit-summoning day, we were given a lot of joss money, with copper coin stamps on the yellow paper. My father didn't have much money when he was alive, but now we were sending him all this 'money'. Were we blaming him for something?

During these days, when I went to bed at around 2am each night, I could always hear a weeping sound coming from the main room, and I knew it was my mother, grieving while trying to keep her voice down. My mother had become a blade of frostbitten grass, and she needed to be carried. My mother used to be energetic, strong, and happy as a witch. She was no longer her. I listened to her weeping, quietly. Something in life was destined to come.

6

Over the past five days, disagreements had grown considerably between my brother and Wenzhong. My brother blamed Wenzhong for his low efficiency and spending money without discretion (particularly on cigarettes), whilst Wenzhong complained that my brother was bossing him around. It was interesting to see those two men in discord. It would be fair to say that Wenzhong had no obligation to work for us wholeheartedly, but at least he spent time and energy on the work, so he should more or less be rewarded. My brother took my advice, and gave Wenzhong some money. At least, on the surface, they patched things up, but Xiangbao eventually took over the job to supervise the caterers.

Wenzhong came to me in private, and said, 'Do you know you also have to contribute money to pay for the funeral? In the past, you would have to buy each one of them a pair of shoes. We don't do that now, but you should pay the sheep money.'

'What sheep money? What did you mean when you said I didn't give money?' I asked.

'Well, because you were married, so you are no longer in the family. But at least you should chip in some money,' he responded.

I was furious, so I challenged him, 'Let me get to the bottom of this: which one of your eyes saw I didn't give money?'

'I didn't see it, but I guessed.'

‘If you didn’t see it, why did you guess it? What is wrong with you?’

As it turned out, a sheep was needed as an offering during the ceremony. But why was it the responsibility of the female family members? I was angry.

I asked my mother: ‘Do we need the sheep or not?’

‘Yes, we do,’ she said.

‘Well, in this case, I will buy it, but in the name of Dongqin (冬琴). Because she still lives in the village, and this will make her look good,’ I suggested.

My mother then told me, ‘Your father said he wanted a decent and presentable funeral.’

‘That’s not right. My father only wanted to be buried in the ground, and he didn’t ask for a decent funeral. You want a decent funeral for him,’ I said.

‘Yes, I want a decent funeral for him,’ she responded.

Later that day, I wired the money to Dongqin, my niece, and told her to bring the cash to Wenzhong on the day, and make sure it’s seen by everyone.

It began to dawn on me that these events carried an extra function: they defined and reinforced individual identities and regulated social interactions.

7

The sixth day was an important day. So, I had to pull myself together, in spite of the little sleep I got over the days.

A black-skinned sheep had already been delivered to us earlier, whose limbs were tied to my front porch. The sheep had screamed the whole night.

The cooks arrived at 4.00 am, because they had to start early to prepare. The feast was fully loaded with various dishes: chicken, duck, fish, beef, lamb, pork, steamed meat in rice powder, meat balls, and egg omelettes, which were all made on site. The cooks complained about the inadequate fire in the stove, but were more or less restrained, because of the higher pay they got.

Their money was indeed hard-earned: when the sun came out around 8am, the whole cooking area became inhospitable, as it was really hot, and filled with cooking oil fumes and dusts: it’s like a big steamer. In the past, some funerals were catered in restaurants, but guests were not happy with the food (which was also pricey), so now these independent catering teams took over. These cooks did not rely on their farmland to make a living, but they provided catering service at different places. In addition, they became very sophisticated and knew how to please the customers with compliments.

With the sound of firecrackers, people started to come in. I saw the people who dig 'gold wells' (i.e. graves) were here. Speaking of which, my father wanted to dig it by himself several years ago, but he didn't complete the task. Instead, he planted corn there, and made the road wider. Now this team of six to seven people were tasked with digging a grave in the cornfield.

The band also arrived early. Normally, they would perform for three days: the third day, and the last two days, in which the sixth day was the most important. They had an MC, a Suona (唢呐) player, an Erhu (二胡) player, and a drummer, and they went straight to performing. Approaching lunchtime, two more bands showed up: a dance band, and a band run by Xiangbao, which also did dragon dances. Xiangbao told me in private that her band was free of charge, but we needed to throw tips to them during their performance so Xiangbao would look good. I immediately agreed and asked three of my nieces to prepare tips in red envelopes. Over the past several days, we also had chitchats about our childhood anecdotes.

Before the guests' arrival, we moved the coffin to the centre of the main room, facing directly to the door. After a while, flower bouquets given by relatives filled the room. With the firecrackers booming outside, we kneeled down beside the table to show appreciation to the guests, whilst the MC made notes of the names of guests and the amount of their tribute money.

It was almost lunchtime, and there were altogether ten tables in the front yard. It seemed everyone who had a relationship with my father was present. It was crowded and noisy, as more than a hundred relatives and friends were gathering at this place which used to host only two people. I toasted around the tables to thank them for their presence.

At 1.00 pm, lunch tables and benches were removed to create a space for the ceremony. The MC first read some incomprehensible script aloud, then two men carried the sheep to the memorial table. One man held the sheep's head still, and the other slashed a knife into the sheep's throat. The sheep blood dripped on the paper money, before it was burned up. At this point, my father had formally entered the rank of ancestors: he needed to be worshipped, and worshipping became the only relationship we might have.

I suddenly remembered what my mother used to chant a lot, as she was pleading with the ancestors to bless us. So, this was how it all started. The social norms in life were duplicated to the underworld, and a new connection came to existence: deceased people became ghosts, and people alive would worship them with offerings; in return, ghosts were obliged to dispel bad luck for those alive. So, the fears in this life were shared with ghosts. It seemed that my father's ghost could be very busy: watching us over, finding reincarnation, and worrying about different things.

A vital component of the tribute-paying ceremony, the stage performance, commenced at 1.00 pm. The singing was in the form of karaoke with portable mics, a keyboard, and a loudspeaker, and the accompaniment music was from a mobile app. Three or four singers were on the stage, singing and making small talk between songs. By this time, those with other commitments had already left, so the singers had to perform in front of mostly empty tables and benches. The MC said, 'At this moment, with a heavy heart, we are saying farewell, through songs and melodies, to …'

Xiangbao's dragon-dance squad were equipped with more performers, ten to be exact, all in yellow silky dresses, and there was also a yellow silky dragon. Whereas a singing band was considered adequate these

days, a dragon-dance squad would be deemed extravagant. The hiring price of a singing band would be around 2,000 yuan, whilst that of a dragon-dance squad was above 3,000 yuan. In this sense, it was a generous gesture from Xiangbao.

The dragon dance in the afternoon marked the highlight of the day, and almost everybody showed up again. With such a crowd, it wasn't easy for the squad to perform. In the drumbeats, one performer held a giant pearl in front of the dragon, and the dragon followed, with its body moving in waves, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly. Meanwhile, some scriptures were called. After the performance, I saw Xiangbao was soaked in sweat.

Before dinner, my brother, who had been supervising the work at the grave digging site, telephoned us and requested our presence. I supported my mother and we went there together, and found a pit two metres long, half-a-person's-height deep. My brother was furious, and argued intensely with the diggers that the hole was too shallow. My mother bowed to them, and said, 'Please, dig deeper, otherwise the corpse toxin might leak, which would be bad for everybody.' Then, the diggers compromised and followed her instruction.

Corpse toxins. These two words caught my nerves. It must be the foul smell generated along the corpse's disintegration process. What a horrifying image! Hence the expression, I thought.

After dinner, people removed the tables again to pay tribute. However, I didn't expect the skirmish at the digging site to continue here. A brawl almost broke out at one table, involving my brother and one of my uncles. My uncle shouted and asked all relatives from Gulaiping to leave with him, and the scene was quite messy. Suddenly, my mother dashed towards my uncle with a headbutt, only to be pulled back by others nearby. My mother then criticised my uncle, 'You want to be the big boss now? Why haven't I seen you around before? If you want to take my son down, kill me first. See, I have nothing to lose, so I certainly don't care about my own life!' This had effectively put a stop to the brawl, and people went back to their tables for the lamb dishes that were just served. Well, decency was restored for the moment, but this episode would surely be discussed in future village gossip.

Then, the tribute-paying session began. First it was my brother's turn. He took out an obituary he had been preparing for days and started to read it out. It mentioned that my father was a loving parent, a loyal communist, and that he lived life with devotion, sacrifice, and diligence. When it was Xiangbao's turn, her eyes were filled with tears, and she said that the person my father saved at the reservoir was in fact her father. Well, it made perfect sense now. I was deeply touched by Xiangbao's kindness to mention this. My mother said to me later that Xiangbao's words meant a lot to her too.

At dusk, it was time for the fireworks show. Glittering flowers emerged in the dark sky. It was a little too lavish for my father. So, I knocked on the coffin, 'Get up, old man, the show's on!'

The night performance lasted until 1am the next day, with both bands performing alternately. Most of the performers were already in their fifties or sixties, so their powdered faces and clumsy moves were not that inviting. Instructed by Xiangbao, I handed out some juicy red envelopes to my nephews and nieces earlier, so they danced with far more enthusiasm, which greatly pleased the crowd. Approaching the end of the show, some programmes became more or less age-restricted, which helped to keep people amused.

Xiangbao was also on the stage as the lead dancer. She was a bit chubby, but her moves were swift and expressive, with her cheeks flushing with vitality. I recalled a dozen years ago, when she was still with Wenzhong, she was physically and mentally spent. But now she had become a different person. So, my lens followed her, and for a moment, I even forgot it was my father's funeral.

It was the night of the vigil, but I asked my brother to sleep, because he must be exhausted. All alone, I wandered around to pick up rubbish, put out the incense, and replenished candles. I then sat on a chair in front of the main room, looking into the valley of darkness. Frogs were chirping in the vicinity. I noticed the spruce trees were growing very fast, which almost blocked the view. In a few more years, this house might be completely hidden in the trees, thus reaching the unity between humans and nature.

8

On the seventh day, the coffin must depart for the grave before 10.00 am. As usual, the cooks arrived at 4.30 am, and later, the dawn broke. It was a cloudy day. Soon, those in charge of firecrackers also showed up, as they had to deploy firecrackers along the route. It was a dry day, so the firecrackers wouldn't get moist.

Before breakfast, the MC asked me to prepare eggs, tea leaves, and rice to make 'grain jars' (粮米坛). After breakfast, the iced coffin's power was cut off, and the coffin was opened. We walked around the coffin to see my father for the final time. I touched his face, it was soft, and a bit bouncy. I closed his eyes, then covered his face with yellow paper. Then the MC sealed the 'grain jars' and put one above my father's head, and one below his feet, respectively.

When nailing the coffin, we discovered only iron nails were prepared. According to tradition, the spirit couldn't leave the coffin if metal nails were used. So, we found some bamboo nails to do the job. The coffin was sealed, separating *yin* with *yang*.

Eight people were working as pallbearers. With a 'Go!' chant, they lifted the coffin on wooden poles. The procession had the dragon-dancing, drums-beating squad as the head, and people holding flower bouquets as the tail. In the middle, my brother and other male members of the family walked in front of the coffin, holding my father's portrait; and female family members walked behind the coffin. In the deafening blast of firecrackers, my father left the house. I followed the coffin, with my camera in hand. Occasionally, the procession would stop, and my brother and my nephews would kneel down and kowtow. Each metre of the road was littered with firecracker remnants and empty firework boxes. The smoke had formulated a white passageway, as the procession moved towards his grave.

I was stopped at a fork in the road leading up to the grave. So, I took off my mourning gown, broke a twig, and started to go back. The sound of firecrackers became more and more distant, and I realised my father was leaving us behind. I finally cried out aloud, feeling nothing but emptiness. When arriving at the house, I saw the mourning hall had already been removed, so I threw the twig into a fire, and walked over it.

So go farewells.

The guests had left, and the chairs and benches were taken away. After lunch, my brother said the grave would be formally closed tomorrow.

My father was gone.

Before dinner, my brother went out to put a lantern at the road junction. It was for lighting up the path for my father's spirit when it came home.

The spirit went to heaven, while the flesh went to earth.

Away he went.

9

Mojiaping was bathed in sunshine, and the cornfield was vividly green. Together with my brother, sister-in-law, nephews and nieces, we went to visit my father's grave, aka his residence in the underworld. The graveyard was delineated by 108 concrete bricks, and in the morning, we would cover the tomb by shovelling dirt onto it. During the process, we also burnt incense, fired up the flower boutiques and joss money. The smoke was playfully circling above the grave, and we joked my father was behind this.

When we later reached home, the psychic was already there, with a two-storey paper villa, paper money, paper home appliances (printed on paper), cars, and other items to be offered to my father. My brother said there would be paper prostitutes, but there weren't any, and the closest thing was an image of a pretty girl on the paper television. There were some people wrapping paper money into the shape of gold ingots, and the others prepared lunch. When the food was ready, a basket of gold ingot was ready too.

The psychic requested from me a special plate to put offerings and three white candles. Since I couldn't find the exact type, I used a drawer as a substitute. I then put the drawer on my father's bed. My brother was again burning paper money next to the bed, and the psychic chanted some words, probably about calming the spirit down, things like 'people are destined to die, take it in peace, but don't trouble those alive.' My brother didn't control the fire well, so the room was filled with smoke. The psychic, trapped in the smoke, tried to contain his urge to cough, so he moved towards the door. As soon as he finished chanting, he told my brother, 'Alright, that's enough!' After this, the psychic led the session to solicit oracle readings, and we obtained a fortune oracle after a number of attempts.

The psychic was dressed in a regular outfit, but with a tall hat. So, I asked if he is a Buddhist monk, and he said yes. He was a regular at local funerals, and he studied Buddhist scriptures from his mentor. His fee was 800 yuan. He also requested two roosters for the session, but he only chose one.

In the front yard, a stack of bamboo twigs and straws were set up, beneath the paper villa, gold ingots, and other items. The psychic instructed us to support the stack with sticks, then he offered incense; at the same time, my sister-in-law killed the rooster for its blood. After the preparation, the psychic set the stack on fire, then began to chant scriptures again. Not before long, the paper became ashes, and the psychic said, 'All is well received, all is good.'

The psychic wrapped up the ceremony rather efficiently, then left with the money and the other rooster. My brother left with his family. My niece also took off.



My father's village (photo by Zhang Ping)

I dragged a dozen bags of rubbish in the backyard down the mountain.

The tent, made of a plastic sheet, was on the brink of collapse.

The outstanding bills were cleared.

The end.

10 January 2021, Beijing