

## Chapter Three



Shuyuan had been locked in a cell for three days. Each day of her ordeal had felt like a week, but the worst had just begun. With year after year of study finally behind her, the time of reckoning was fast approaching. In twenty days, the examiners would release the rolls and her fate in life would be sealed. Until then, she could only wait and wonder, and recount what had happened.

She heard a state official summon her name. She thought it strange that a court official would attend a local exam. As she rose from the floor of the courtyard, she turned to look at a sea of other worried faces and heard them gasp to discover a female in their midst. Even she was very surprised to find herself there. She strained to lift her basket of brushes, ink, paper, food, candles, and blankets and silently followed an attendant down a long row of cells until they reached hers. Before she could enter, he searched her basket carefully.

And then she was alone, except for attendants who passed her cell every so often, sometimes thrusting their heads in for a quick inspection. She sat on a hard, wooden bench, which would also be her bed, and placed things on the board, which would serve as her desk. The only sounds were the occasional cough of a nearby scholar and an attendant calling

out names. In a short time, the questions would come and she would need to please the keepers of the Old Master. She would need to compose essays on the ideas of Kong Zi\* using her best brush strokes all the while being most careful not to offend the ruling elite by revealing political views they would not consider, much less accept.

Sealed off from the outside world and immersed in the tedious tasks before her, she then saw herself emerging from her cell dazed and downcast. She could barely walk without losing her balance, but at least she might be able to mingle with the other scholar candidates. Only they would have nothing to do with her. *Well, she thought with a weak smile, no point in fretting over loss of face. After all, no one expects me to succeed anyway.*

At that moment, Shuyuan heard an echo coming from a nearby mountain. “No one expects you to do well,” she heard repeatedly. “No one expects anything of you.”

She wanted to howl, but she knew that no one would have heard her standing there alone in the forest mist. Certainly not the young scholars who had passed the exam, who were being fêted at a grand banquet, dining on dishes that the lowly commoners had only dreamed of before. They would never know what it was like to gather their books and papers and burn them in a fire far from town, ashamed and regretful. They would never feel the sting of being cast aside, cursing bitterly until their voices were hoarse and their mouths were dry.

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\* **Kong Zi** commonly known as Confucius in English; China’s most influential ancient philosopher

But mercifully, the images running through her mind abruptly altered. Shuyuan now saw herself back in another scholar's cell a year later, more determined this time to concentrate like a seamstress painstakingly sewing a silk *qípáo*\*. She had indeed studied harder this time around, and words of encouragement had come from all the neighbors in her village.

“Bring us great honor!” they shouted in unison.

She also thought that she detected a trace of a smile on the usually solemn face of the examiner who summoned her this time.

And then, as she dipped her brush into the ink well, two attendants came to her carrying a heavy object covered by a red cloth. Gingerly, they placed the object on her desk and removed the cloth. She was stunned: the examiners had provided her with a computer! For a moment, she could barely suppress her glee until it dawned on her that she could not possibly use it. The screen remained dark no matter which buttons she touched.

Shuyuan shook the computer and suddenly awoke, shaking her pillow. Gradually, her senses returned and she realized it had all been a nightmare. Instead of an imperial exam given during the Qing Dynasty, she was now thinking about the entrance exam for senior middle school. Only she could not retake it, not this year or any other year. Half of

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\* **qípáo** formal, traditional dress made of silk with a print pattern; also called a *cheongsam*

the students who took the exam would not earn scores high enough to be admitted to a key senior middle school, and this meant having little chance to get into a key university\* later. Sure, a few private high schools in the capital now offered an alternative route, but Shuyuan knew her parents could never afford the tuition.

Then she shuddered with more dreadful thoughts. What if she was forced to attend a vocational high school to learn a trade? If so, society would label her a failure and question her values. Many wouldn't be surprised— *of course, poor children have poor study habits. They are sùzhi\**. She would be branded lazy because, after all, *good students love to study*. Or maybe others would regard her as just plain stupid. If that wasn't enough, a worse thought came to her: what if her score was so low she couldn't even graduate from junior middle school? Maybe the municipal office of education would send her documents back stamped with a rejection.

She began to worry herself sick, twisting the bedsheet in her hands. She squinted. Sunlight struck her bedroom window, reflecting off a metal lamp on the real desk that might soon hold a real computer. Sitting bolt upright, she remembered that on this late June day she was expected to go back to her junior middle school to find out her exam results.

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\***key university** an elite university (one ranked among the top 100 in the nation)

\***sùzhi** person of low quality

Reluctantly, she washed herself and then got dressed. Before she could tell her mother where she was going, her mother approached her.

“Shuyuan, you must return to your school now. The sooner, the better!”

It sounded more like a motto than a reminder, as her mother said it so often. Usually her advice was apt because lines for any public service were long. But Shuyuan felt today was different.

“Mama, it doesn’t matter when I go today. My scores won’t change.”

Her mother huffed. She was having none of it.

“*Zǒu, zǒu\**,” she nudged her daughter.

“*Děng yī děng\**,” Shuyuan replied respectfully, as she picked up the phone to call her friends to meet her there.



When she arrived at school, Shuyuan was glad that Wu Yu was already waiting for her outside the main office.

“*Nihǎo\**. Thanks for meeting me here,” Shuyuan said, taking a seat on a long bench for visitors.

“Of course. You’re welcome,” Wu Yu said, smiling warmly. She didn’t seem worried, which somewhat relaxed Shuyuan. “Wei Wen Ho will be here shortly.”

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· *Zǒu* command to “go”

· *Děng yī děng* “wait a moment”

· *Nihǎo* “Hello”

He was a nice boy in their homeroom who never tried to compete with them for a better class rank. He was lanky and a bit shy and awkward. Wu Yu was convinced that he was simply grateful to have friends, but Shuyuan saw a sensitive side to him, which she liked.

When it was her turn, Shuyuan went inside and approached the counter. The office secretary was brusque, no doubt wearied, she thought, by the repetitive task of informing so many students on the same day. Shuyuan gave the clerk the name of her teacher and was told that her teacher was ready to receive her. Lost in their own thoughts, the girls didn't notice Wei Wen Ho approach them until they heard his familiar, soft voice.

“*Nǐ hǎo ma?*” he asked, unable to read anything good or bad into their blank expressions. The girls got up, and then the three of them walked down the long hallway and up the stairs to the second floor until they arrived at their old homeroom.

Wu Yu poked her head in and saw that their teacher was awaiting her students. Her expression was serious but not unfriendly. For three years, she had moved up the grades with these students and had naturally developed a fondness for them. Without a word, she handed Wu Yu a piece of paper from a file box on her desk. Wu Yu left without looking at it first.

Then it was Shuyuan's turn. Her hands trembled slightly as she held the paper, which would determine her

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\**Nǐ hǎo ma?* “How are you?”

future for at least the next three years in senior middle school. Glancing at it, she quickly looked away, but then looked again, intently. *Thank Buddha, I have graduated from junior middle school.* Yet her score was too low to be admitted to her first choice at the nearby key senior middle school. She left the classroom with a bowed head. Crestfallen, she leaned against the wall outside the classroom door.

“Well?” Wu Yu whispered, as if trying to ease her best friend’s discomfort.

“Not enough.”

“*Duì bùqǐ*\*.”

“How about yours?”

“Not enough, either.”

Ever since she entered junior middle school, Shuyuan had grown accustomed to being disappointed in her grades and exam scores. Yet the results of the exam still stung.

“*Méi bànfǎ*\*,” she said, shrugging her shoulders and sighing.

“*Méi bànfǎ*,” Wu Yu repeated.

Then it was Wei Wen Ho’s turn to go inside. A minute later he returned, bearing the same gloomy appearance. Together, in solemn procession, they left the building and stepped into the concrete courtyard of the school, which was already filling with students. They noticed that most of the students had the same reaction as they did, but

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· *Duì bùqǐ* “Sorry”

· *Méi bànfǎ* an expression meaning that “nothing can be done” (about something)

others had a skip in their step as they exited the front gate and warmly greeted their parents with the good news. It seemed to the trio as if these lucky parents had made a point of accompanying their children because they were sure they would have a good result. Shuyuan recognized one of the jubilant students, Li Ai Min, who always boasted about her grades to others. They overheard her say “Sizhong” repeatedly.

Wu Yu put her hands on her hips and scowled. “So what if she got into No. 4? She will have to board there all week and eat bad canteen food all the time.”

Her tone surprised Shuyuan. Wu Yu wasn’t usually so dismissive of others’ misfortunes—even small ones. They all knew that Li Ai Min’s older sister attended the College of Foreign Affairs, which trained the diplomatic corps.

Sensing Shuyuan’s rising envy, Wu Yu mocked, “What does she know? She’s just a little empress.”

Now Shuyuan realized that her friend was only being harsh to comfort her.

Nonetheless, Shuyuan knew what she meant. Both the Li family grandfathers were old Party cadres who had the *guānxi* to bribe officials at the city education bureau.

“I heard that the cut-off score was raised one point this year,” Wei Wen Ho mumbled, changing the subject.

Shuyuan glanced at her score again; she had missed the cut-off by half a point. Until that moment, she wouldn’t have thought it possible, but now she felt worse than before.



Always the most cheerful, Wei Wen Ho offered, “Well, at least we can stop worrying about the results now.”

It felt like a silly thing to say, even to him, but the girls knew he was right. Wei Wen Ho tried to break the awkward silence. “It’s good that we’re going to the same senior middle school.”

But his friends weren’t consoled. All of them realized only too well that attending a *pǔtōng gāozhōng*\* meant little chance of getting into a key university.

Down and out, Shuyuan stared at the ground—a habit her friends had noticed whenever she was really dejected. Her friends gave her some space to sort things out in her mind and went to get their bikes. Then, they escorted Shuyuan to the bike rack to retrieve hers.

Wu Yu broke the spell by suggesting that they head to Xidan, the new shopping district far to the west of Tiananmen Square. Shuyuan smiled feebly, and Wei Wen Ho nodded to show his approval. They were glad to leave this school campus for the last time and silently headed east until they reached Caishikou Street. From there, they turned north and rode three very long blocks until they reached Chang’an DaJie, the main avenue that went east and west through the center of the capital, bisecting Tiananmen Square.

The new shopping area was bustling with buses and taxis. Cars had just begun to appear on the main roads,

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\* *pǔtōng gāozhōng* common high school whose graduates attend a three-year college

but not in larger numbers. Most of the crowd was only window shopping, wishing for the day they could afford the new merchandise on display in privately owned stores. The state-run department store, once the exclusive domain of the families of the Party elite, now stood out like a sore thumb between the glass and metal buildings. It was usually deserted except for a few sales clerks. Once the envy of the masses, they now scorned it. Predictably, the recently built Western-style fast-food restaurants were packed.

Too hungry to wait, Wei Wen Ho invited his friends to eat at a tiny Xinjiang restaurant at the entrance of a nearby *hútòng*. Shuyuan and Wu Yu politely refused, but he coaxed them into going. Considering that his father had a promising job in the growing private sector, they relented, thanking him profusely.

As they were about to enter the restaurant, they heard a shriek and looked up into an old oak tree. To their shock, a big monkey sitting high up on a wooden plank was tossing nuts down on unsuspecting passersby. Shuyuan gave out a squeal of delight, as she always did whenever she saw an animal, unless of course it was a stray dog. But as they got nearer, she saw that it was chained by its neck to the tree trunk, its fur missing around the shackle. Shuyuan quieted and shook her head as Wu Yu nudged her best friend inside.

It was early, and the place was empty. Wei Wen Ho ordered the *dīngdīng chǎomiàn*\*. Once again, Shuyuan was warmly reminded of how thoughtful her friends were not to order pork. They chattered as they ate, making modest plans for their summer break, though they all knew their parents would still make them review their old textbooks one last time when the new school year approached.



Not since her first semester of *chūzhōng* had Shuyuan dreaded coming home as much as she did now. The time before, she had to tell her parents about the first failed test of her schooling, in math, her best subject in primary school. But now the stakes were much higher, and her mother was expecting Shuyuan to share the exam results. Tense, she fumbled with the door lock but was relieved to hear her mother talking on the phone in the other bedroom. Perhaps she could slip into her own bedroom and avoid the questions that were sure to come until her father got home. *Wishful thinking*, she thought, sighing. The squeaking latch gave her presence away.

“Shuyuan!” her mother shouted, saying goodbye to her *mèimei*\*, Ma Zhi, who she talked to every other day. “Shuyuan!”

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· **dīngdīng chǎomiàn** dish of wide noodles with fatty mutton, green peppers, tomato sauce, and wine

· **mèimei** form of address for a little sister

“*Èn—*” she replied, mustering the energy to speak up.

Her mother approached her in the foyer. “That was your auntie.”

Shuyuan gave no reaction except a dull nod of her head. Her mother knew she disliked her auntie, and Shuyuan made no pretense about it.

“Your auntie told me that Chen Lei got accepted to No. 161.”

Shuyuan could feel her mother’s eyes bore into her, but she didn’t look up. “Good luck to her,” she replied feebly.

No. 161 was the key senior middle school to the west of Zhongnanhai, the central compound of the Party’s top leaders. Its campus was on a famous tree-lined *hútòng* not far from the west gate of the Forbidden City. Shuyuan was hardly surprised by her cousin’s good fortune, however. Chen Lei had breezed through junior middle school. Indeed, in her mind, everything in life seemed to come easy to her cousin. It didn’t help matters that Chen Lei would surely boast of her accomplishment at the next family gathering.

Shuyuan still could not make eye contact with her mother. It wasn’t so much shame as uneasiness that she felt at that moment. More than anything, she hoped her mother wouldn’t scold her after she revealed her exam results.

But Shuyuan didn’t have to tell her mother. It was as if her mother sensed it the second she stood near her daughter. Instead, her mother heaved out a heavy sigh, as if she had been

holding back her breath for weeks. Then she turned away and went to the kitchen to begin preparing dinner.

Shuyuan closed the door to her room softly and sat on the bed, scrunched up like a rabbit in its burrow. Every so often her mind drifted back to Nancaiyuan, her primary school. She saw herself sitting at her desk with her hands behind her back, dutiful and diligent. She and her cousin would sometimes see which of them could keep their arms in that position the longest. Then they would go to play at recess in the courtyard of the school with the other kids and laugh lightheartedly over silly things. In those days, their families lived only two blocks from each other, though her uncle had a better state job than her father, and so could afford to shelter his family in a more modern flat. In winter, Shuyuan waited to visit them after the government turned on the heat as their dwelling in the *hútòng* was usually cold and drafty.

Just then, her mother appeared at her bedroom door. “Not good, eh?” she asked in a half whisper, showing no hint of a scolding to come.

Shuyuan shook her head as tears welled up in her eyes. She handed her mother the paper with the exam results.

Letting out a shallow sigh this time, her mother retreated to the kitchen. Shuyuan dreaded the long silence that would likely ensue almost as much as the rebuke that would probably follow it. No sooner had her mother left her room than months of suppressed feelings burst out, as if there had been a small breach in the Three Gorge Dam then being built on the upper reaches of the great *Chángjiāng*\*.

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\**Chángjiāng* the Yangtze River, the longest in China

It started again. She began to wallow in self-pity rather than resort to *chīkǔ*\* as she imagined her parents had probably done at her age during the Cultural Revolution. She recounted in her mind all the teachers she had in junior middle school who didn't seem to care at all about her academic struggles. Sure, she conceded, there were a few good ones, but not enough to make a real difference and prepare her properly for the high school entrance exam. Then again, she had to admit to herself that she never asked questions out of fear of losing face, convinced that all her classmates already knew the answers.

But then, just as predictably, she reproached herself. *Wèishéme? Wèishéme?\** She knew the answer. Instead of studying that extra hour before dinner, she had napped or merely lay on her bed daydreaming. On Saturday afternoons, after school let out for the week, she would take her sweet time biking home, meandering down side streets. When Wei Wen Ho invited her to study with him, she demurred, not wanting to ride her bike out of the way to his home in the northwest corner of Xicheng District. Worse yet, she had allowed herself to become preoccupied with a boy whom she had a crush on but could never bring herself to talk to. Her teachers had repeatedly cautioned their students about dwelling on romantic dreams, and so too had her mother, but to no avail. Shuyuan couldn't help it; she wanted a boy to notice her.

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\***chīkǔ** literally: to eat bitterness; to endure hardship

\***Wèishéme?** “Why” (said imploringly, often in a sad tone)

Still upset but calmed down, her mind raced forward into the future, one thought stumbling over the next. Now she pictured herself in a local grocery store standing for hours hawking wares, her ears hurting from the incessant blaring of the speakers announcing this or that discounted product. In that moment, it seemed to her that years had gone by, and she was still standing in the same grocery store aisle dully motioning customers her way.

At last, the worst thought of all surfaced. She saw herself as a thirty-year-old, in the last year a woman could remain single without family prodding her to find someone to marry. A gallant young man was approaching her at a street vendor's stand. He smiled at her warmly and asked her which university she had attended. But she pictured herself tongue-tied, unable to mention the name of the common college from which she had graduated with only a three-year certificate to show for all her efforts. He frowned. Almost as quickly as he had approached her, he backed away and hurried down the street.

Shaking this succession of images, Shuyuan jumped off the edge of her bed and swung the bedroom door shut to study herself in the mirror. "I really must lose this baby fat," she whispered, pinching her arms. "The sooner, the better."

Then she stood at odd angles and focused on her face, first sternly and then approvingly. "Well, at least I'm pretty," she at last reassured herself, smiling despite herself. Cheered up a bit, she inched toward the kitchen to chop up the vegetables for dinner.