

Gu Jieming – A Life

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Translated by Nicky Harman

Twenty years ago

Twenty years ago, I got a place at university and left Gaoliang for good. That autumn, my family returned to Nanjing after nine years of banishment in this small county town¹. Four of my friends from middle school helped my parents with packing up, and Gu Jieming was one of them. Typically, he threw himself into the job and his army-style, olive-green jacket was soon soaked in sweat, the droplets pearling on his shoulders in the breeze.

I wasn't actually there that day but I can see it all in my mind's eye. My four friends were exactly the same age as me, 17 years old. They all poured with sweat – it was hard work cramming half a century's worth of three generations' belongings into one small cart. They were on their own. My father had been in poor health for years, my grandparents were both elderly and my mother's only contribution was to sort stuff out. And my parents had not asked anyone else for help apart from these four youths!

Naturally, Gu Jieming took command, blocking the doorway (though he thought it was unnecessary) to make sure my father stayed indoors. Having bigged himself up as the man for the job, Gu then had to work like crazy – and our three friends had to work like crazy too. This would have been all right if they had all been built on a scale like him but they weren't. They were puny teenagers who still had a lot of growing to do, like me in fact. Tears ran down my mother's face, just as if it was me whose sufferings she was watching...

The next year, Gu Jieming left Gaoliang too, to join the armed forces.

¹ During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), urban professional families were banished to the countryside to 'learn from the peasants'.

At first, we wrote often. Gu Jieming sent me a photo of himself. It showed him with a steely gaze, eyes round as ball bearings and lips bulging belligerently. He had an army cap on and was dressed in uniform, though you could only see the collar as this was a studio portrait. On the back of the picture, he had written some characters I didn't recognize, in a ball-point pen. Korean, he told me. He was studying Korean and learning to drive too. It was clear the army had spotted his potential and were training him up accordingly. Gu Jieming had great prospects. There was no need to worry about him, I told myself, and it didn't matter if I didn't write back to every letter. My real reason for not writing was that I had a new life now, not like at the beginning when I knew no one. However, Gu Jieming had left Gaoliang a year after me so he still needed his old friend. He was furious when I didn't answer his letters and declared that it was the end of our friendship.

Still, I kept that picture of him in my photo album, where his huge head filled an entire page. If Gu Jieming had seen it, he would surely have been touched. After all, how many pages did a photo album have? I stuck it right at the front of the album, after some pages of pictures of me as a bare-bottomed toddler. He cut a heroic figure, eyes shining, firm-jawed. That picture could never have been me.

I would open my album and show the photo: 'A childhood friend. He certainly was quick with his fists.' If it was a girl, she'd comment: 'He's a good-looking guy.' 'He's OK,' I'd say dismissively, though secretly I was pleased. 'Where is he now? Can you introduce me?' 'No, I can't! He was executed by firing squad.' She would look horrified, her lips parting as if in expectation of a passionate kiss. It worked every time.

A few anecdotes

Gu Jieming and I were at middle school together, and were really close. He lived by Black Bridge, in the first house as you entered the county town, and I lived in the compound of the food-processing factory, close by. There was a time when I met up with him every day and we walked along the lofty reservoir embankment to the East Is Red Middle School together.

No one believed we were good friends because we were so different. I was a quiet, thoughtful, rather weedy boy, while Gu loved to joke around and had enormous physical energy. Our differences meant that, apart from going to school, we didn't spend much free time together.

Actually, I really wanted to be in his gang. But I couldn't swim so I couldn't join them in the river, and I never got up early enough to go out hunting with them. But Gu still treated me like one of them, and he showed it by sharing the 'spoils' with me.

'Hunting', to Gu, meant taking pot-shots at the peasants' guard-dogs. He would drape his father's greatcoat ostentatiously around his shoulders, tuck a rifle under his arm and lie in wait for a couple of hours at a time in the snow. There was absolutely no need, but he did it for fun. Once he had shot a dog, he declared that he didn't want it and the corpse was divided up among other hungry people.

Every time, I got a leg dripping with blood and, out of respect to Gu Jieming, took it home with me.

'That's against the law!' my Mum said, meaning both shooting the peasants' dogs and using guns which belonged to the local government.

'You be careful who you make friends with,' my father would warn.

But when they met Gu Jieming in person, they really warmed to him. They even praised the dog meat: '... so good, so much better than meat from the market!'

My parents encouraged my friendship with Gu, reasoning that I needed him: it protected me from bullying and, besides, some of his bravery might rub off on me. They hoped I'd learn to swim and shoot, and even misbehave a bit. But all I did was stand in the main road with him yelling 'Ai! Ai!' at passing drivers.

The drivers looked round, thinking something had dropped off the vehicle. But we gazed off into the distance, still shouting 'Ai! Ai! Ai! Ai!' which we then made into a chant: 'Ai-ya-lai-ya! Ai-ya-lai-ya!'. 'You're off your heads!' the drivers shouted back angrily.

This was the only thing I learned from Gu Jieming. Apart from going to school together, we could stand in the middle of the road, yelling 'Ai! Ai!'.

‘Ai! Ai!’ We never tired of it, and the echoes of our shouts still linger in Gaoliang’s streets to this day. It might have been silly, but it was Gu Jieming’s great invention.

I don’t want to give you the wrong impression of Gu Jieming. He wasn’t just another street job. He stood out from the crowd even at that age – his love of freedom was one sign he was different. He may have loved joking around and been quick with his fists sometimes, but he refused to be under anyone’s thumb. He made up most of his games himself, and hardly ever got involved in anyone else’s.

He never joined in school sports, which is something I still find strange today. He never played ball games and had no special aptitude for athletics. Our class teacher, Mr Wang, put it like this: ‘He’s nothing but brute strength!’

One fine autumn day, about twenty years ago, it was sports day at our middle school. Our class was one short in the hundred-metre finals and Gu Jieming was told to go on as a substitute. ‘Look at those fine muscles,’ said Mr Wang. ‘Who else would I choose?’ But when the starter gun smoke cleared, Gu Jieming was nowhere to be seen. No, he hadn’t sped off in the lead – he’d actually fainted and dropped to the ground.

Gu Jieming didn’t like classes. He was better at self-education after school.

In Physics, the teacher painstakingly explained how electricity worked, the difference between direct and alternative current, how incandescent lights were fitted and their dangers. Gu Jieming fell asleep. But when class was over he went to the generator room to have a feel of the electrics. It was so silent, he couldn’t understand how so much energy could come out of wires as fine as those. He racked his brains without coming up with any answers, until finally he had to go and get the measure of it.

He knew exactly what Old Man Electricity did – Gu Jieming had electric lights at home and the generator room had the belt which drove the shaft round, all proof of its power. But he had never had the chance to get up close and personal, as it were. And Gu Jieming was stubborn – just knowing what electricity did didn’t count as real knowledge.

‘Get back!’ he told the people standing around watching. Then he struck a martial pose, knees slightly bent, and rolled up his shirt sleeves.

The old maintenance man tried to dissuade him. ‘What’s up, boy? Tell us! Don’t go killing yourself over it!’

There was a murmur of agreement. ‘He’s right, you know. You’re too young to die. It would be such a pity...’

Unsurprisingly, Gu Jieming got an electric shock and was hurled backward. He landed in a basket and looked very sorry for himself. But I can tell you he was back on his feet quicker than anyone else. (Not that was anyone else to compare him with as no one else wanted to have a feel of electricity.) I don’t mean to imply that he got up immediately because he was unscathed – he had a bad burn on his right hand. No, he stood up as if he expected Old Man Electricity to strike back... but nothing happened.

Gu Jieming balled his blackened hands into a fist and shouted at the circuit breaker: ‘Respect! Respect!’

Gu Jieming was a true hero, fearless, refusing to give in.

The All-Powerful Ones

My story so far has been about what Gu Jieming got up to out of school, how he went swimming in the river, hunted the village dogs, or stood by the road-side shouting nonsense. But if you concluded from this that the people of Gaoliang Town were simple, honest folk and the atmosphere peaceable and laid-back, then you would be gravely mistaken. Gaoliang in those days was a turbulent place, and life for the town’s youth, in particular, was fraught with danger!

The observant reader will have noticed that Gu Jieming went hunting with a rifle. Here was a middle-school student who found it easy to get hold of a gun, and bullets too. It was a good thing that Gu Jieming only used it to kill dogs and didn’t start picking off his enemies. Actually, plenty of students at the East Is Red School could get hold of guns. Gu Jieming was certainly not the only one, just the only one keen on hunting.

Generally speaking, two sorts of kids could get a gun. Either you were big and tough, or else you had guns in the family. The latter sort were basically government cadres' children, a powerful, ferocious bunch of bullies who sometimes fought pitched battles between themselves.

Not all the most-feared kids had guns though. Some were from poor families and had no guns, but were just big because they had started school later or developed earlier.

Like Lin Huazi, then twenty-one years old. He was a pimply youth, tormented by randy urges which kept him awake at night (according to other students who boarded at the school). They said he used to get up to dirty things with one of the girls in the school. The only place the pair could get any privacy was in the water tank in the kitchen. That earned him the nickname 'Water Tank'. Everyone in the school knew about Water Tank and his girlfriend but no one dared mention it in his hearing and Water Tank didn't even know that that was his nick-name. Just the sight of his biceps made our legs go like jelly and it required too much courage for any of us to call him Water Tank to his face.

Except for Li Guoqing. He blocked Water Tank's way and said: 'Did you know your nick-name's Water Tank. When you hear someone shout Water Tank, it's you they're talking about! Water Tank! Water Tank!'

Of course the two got into a vicious fight but in the end, Li Guoqing was no match for Water Tank. Clutching his broken tooth in his fist, he rushed home to get a gun. He came back with two, a rifle and a pistol. Rifles were not unusual in the village but the pistol meant that his Dad was a senior cadre. Not that there was any doubt about that: Li Guoqing's Dad, as County Party Secretary, was the most senior figure in the Gaoliang municipality.

Water Tank fled as soon as he heard that Li Guoqing had come back with two guns, and never dared show his face in school again. His girlfriend had to leave school too. The incident cemented their affair and they moved into a shack together on the embankment behind the school, where they had a vegetable patch. By the time we left middle school, their son was six or seven months old. They still had Li Guoqing to deal with, however. He would turn up at harvest-time looking for trouble, and rampage through their field like a wild boar. It made life very hard for the young couple.

The most feared of the All-Powerful Ones was Jin Binglong. He was not only as hefty as Water Tank, his family had guns too. But his real fame came from something else: he had joined a criminal gang in town. It was not just his fellow pupils who were scared of him, the school head was too.

It was an open secret that Jin Binglong had killed a man, and he did not bother to deny it. The gang had tricked their target into meeting them at the back of the distillery where they beat him to a pulp at the foot of the factory compound wall. Only two of the thugs were arrested for the offence. Jin Binglong was below the age of criminal responsibility and, besides, his family was powerful. He was not even expelled from school.

My readers may be wondering why I have described the All-Powerful Ones in such detail but have not mentioned the hero of our story, Gu Jieming, for some time. Was he one of the All-Powerful Ones? Their most powerful member, perhaps?

The answer is no. He may have been physically strong but he was in a different league from the likes of Jin Binglong.

I can see the All-Powerful Ones in my mind's eye – particularly Water Tank, Li Guoqing and Jin Binglong. They all looked very alike, tall and muscular, with tanned, gleaming skin. Gu Jieming, however, was shorter, only 1.7 metres in those days. He also dressed neatly and never went bare-chested. It was quite a shock when he did bare any flesh, when he went swimming for instance. His skin was as white as a girl's, a source of general amazement. He never bullied the younger children and no one bullied him, not even Jin Binglong or Water Tank. He had fought with electricity. You didn't mess with Gu Jieming without a very good reason. And he stayed well away from their power struggles. Like Jin Binglong, his life was outside the school gates but, unlike Jin, he was not in a gang. He was the cat that walked by itself. All he wanted to do was have fun.

Actually, Jin Binglong wasn't born fierce. He had been skinny little runt at nursery school, often bullied by a kid called Song Dawei. Maybe that was what made him start working on his physique, until he'd built himself up into a real thug. Back then, Song Dawei had been an overweight lump of a boy, but by the time he reached our class, he had stopped growing and was just a normal size.

Practically all the children had been beaten up by Jin Binglong. The only one he'd stayed clear of so far was Song Dawei. He was just waiting for the right moment, the tenth anniversary of the day when Song

had beat him into submission. In the meantime, he issued a warning: on such and such a day of such and such a month at such and such a time, Song Dawei was going to get it coming to him, and it wouldn't just be a bloody face either. He was going to end up half-paralysed at the very least!

Song Dawei came looking for me. He and I shared a desk in school, and he knew I was friendly with Gu Jieming. For my sake, Gu Jieming went to negotiate with Jin Binglong: 'If you're going to fight him, you fight me first. Song Dawei did wrong when he was a kid and he certainly owes you an apology. So he's booked a table at the Red Star and he's going to treat you to dinner. Do me a favour and come, and he'll show you some proper respect!'

Jin Binglong screwed up his face in a grimace until it went purple. Then he gave a sweet smile and said to Gu Jieming: 'Fine words, eh? OK, you set this up, we'll go out to dinner.'

But when the time came, it was Gu Jieming who wasn't happy. You could tell that from his expression. He spent the whole meal trying to wind us up. Song Dawei and I began to sweat nervously. Luckily Jin Binglong was being particularly deferential that day but, even though I was squiffy-eyed by then, sometimes I'd catch him staring at Gu Jieming. It made my blood ran cold. There was a green flash of hatred in Jin Binglong's eyes. And then it was gone.

The Wu Gui murders.

When I was at middle school, lessons were a relaxed affair. I used to spend my free time day-dreaming about the heroes of olden days, pretending the All-Powerful Ones were the Five Tiger Generals, or the Four Warrior Gods.

The Tiger Generals were Water Tank, Li Guoqing, Jin Binglong, Song Dawei – and Gu Jieming. Song was a reluctant 'general', fatty at nursery school, not fat any more, in fact quite a normal size, he needed Gu Jieming's protection to keep him safe. In fact, I thought he should be left out, leaving just the Four Warrior Gods. The next question was: who was the most war-like out of the four? I thought long and hard about this, and figured the only way to settle it was for them to get up there and slug it out between them.

Judging by past events, Li Guoqing would be no match for Water Tank, but then his two guns forced Water Tank off the field of battle. Neither of them had come to blows with Jin Binglong, not for lack of opportunity, just because they didn't dare. Gu Jieming had challenged Jin Binglong, to get Song Dawei out of trouble. Song Dawei had beaten up Jin Binglong when he was a child, but that didn't count... On the whole, I thought that the champions were Jin Binglong and Gu Jieming.

Of those two, who would come out on top? I just couldn't make up my mind. But it was vital to decide, because the winner would be top of the school. Top of the school meant the best in Gaoliang and that, in my childish eyes, meant top of the world. I so wanted the glory to go to Gu Jieming because he was my best friend.

Then there was a massacre in town. The perpetrator, Wu Gui, was so savage he put every one of the Four Warrior Gods in the shade.

Wu Gui was an unknown quantity to me. At the time when the Four Warrior Gods were making a name for themselves, he was in the army in Xinjiang. As a youth, he had been a nonentity. By the time of the murders, he had married and had a child, and was approaching middle age.

First he killed his wife, then he killed his son. Between the two of them, there was another casualty, a nameless baby still in its mother's belly. Wu Gui killed both mother and baby with a knife blow, muttering as he did so, 'Little bastard!', thereby offering up this third victim to his own son. (There is some disagreement about the tally of three, however. Does a foetus count as a person?)

We heard that Wu Gui had then gone out into the street, his knife dripping blood, and hunted around for the man who had introduced him to his wife.

He reckoned this man was to blame for his unhappy marriage, and now he was going to die too. However, the man escaped calamity because he was in the bath-house that day. Wu Gui burst in but there was so much steam that he couldn't tell who was who, and he couldn't kill off four naked men, even though they hadn't an inch of steel, or even a stitch of clothing, between them. So Wu Gui turned and left. Instead of killing the man, he went to his home and killed his wife, thus tallying up four deaths.

I didn't waste any more time thinking about the Four Warriors Gods. My head was full of these four murders.

The day of Wu Gui's trial finally arrived. It was to be a 'trial by the masses', held on the Gaoliang County target-practice field, and the whole of East Is Red School, teachers and pupils alike, were marched off to participate.

But Gu Jieming bunked off and instead cycled to Xudawan. This was a traditional-style execution ground, knee-deep in grass and surrounded by a mud wall. Here he waited patiently to catch a glimpse of the 'master murderer'.

Meanwhile, the rest of us were baking in the hot sun at the 'trial by the masses'. There was a sea of onlookers, and Wu Gui was too far away to make out clearly. The whole of the town had turned out for the occasion, and it was more bustling and crowded than market day. Later, I followed Wu Gui with my eyes as, flanked by enormous policemen, he was loaded onto a truck which was parked on the reservoir embankment. I stood on tiptoe and craned my neck until Wu Gui, or the truck, was just a black dot in the distance.

I felt no warmth towards Wu Gui but I was moved by the thought of his last journey into the great unknown. It took him down the town's one main street to the Gaoliang County target-practice field, then westward along the reservoir embankment. Then the truck turned south along dirt roads, until Wu Gui reached his destination, the execution ground at Xudawan. It was the very same route which Gu Jieming was to take, many years later, on his own untimely departure from this life.

I was in Xi'an City when that happened, but from what I heard, Gu Jieming too had a 'trial by the masses' which mustered huge, noisy crowds, and emptied Gaoliang's streets. Gu Jieming had been to Xudawan before. The first time was to see Wu Gui shot dead. This, the second time, it was to be shot dead himself.

The executioner wears dark glasses and holds a pistol. He fires from behind and the man falls to the ground. The firing squad lined up in front of the man is only for show, or rather in case there's a mishap. After the shot is fired, someone goes over and prods deep inside the bullet hole. When he pulls the prod out, it's all red and white, like a barber's shop flagpole.

I never went to Xudawan, so I only have Gu Jieming's excited descriptions to rely on. He never stopped going on about it, gesticulating and miming the scene and adding his own commentary: 'The man in the dark glasses fires at the condemned man from behind so the man won't recognize him and his spirit come

back and haunt him. The atmosphere's very tense and rushed, so there's a good chance the shooter will miss his target. That's why they need someone to examine the bullet hole with the prod. If the firing squad have to finish him off, they march forward, bayonets at the ready. They don't wear dark glasses and they don't sneak up from behind, but it doesn't matter because they all lunge together so no one man is responsible for the death. Why do they use bayonets not guns? Because bullets are expensive. Just that one pistol bullet costs 75 cents, and the family of the condemned has to pay the cost of it.'

Gu Jieming, my old friend, why were you so obsessed with Wu Gui's execution? Why did you find out so much about it? Why did you go into such detail?

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