In the early 1970s millions of teenagers from China’s cities were forced to leave their parents, friends, and homes to labor in the rural countryside. The narrator of this story and his best friend Luo were two of them.
MEET THE AUTHOR:  
Dai Sijie  
BORN  
1954, Funian, China  
LIVES  
Immigrated to France, 1984.  
RE-EDUCATION  
At 17 was sent to spend three years in the Sichuan province to be “re-educated.”  
EDUCATION  
Completed high school after his release.  
WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE RE-EDUCATED  
“It wasn’t exactly a holiday camp! And the work was very hard. But we had our own weapons. We knew how to read and the villagers were illiterate, so we had a certain power over them. For instance, we knew how to tell the time so we could manipulate them to our advantage.”

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TAVIS COBURN

Literary Cavalcade NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2003
Just about everyone in the village had come to the house on stilts way up on the mountain to witness the arrival of the city youths. Men, women and children swarmed inside the cramped room, clung to the windows, jostled each other by the door. When nothing fell out of my violin, the headman held his nose over the sound holes and sniffed long and hard. Several bristly hairs protruding from his left nostril vibrated gently. Still no clues.

He ran his calloused fingertips over one string, then another . . . The strange resonance froze the crowd, as if the sound had won some sort of respect.

“It’s a toy,” said the headman solemnly.

This verdict left us speechless. Luo and I exchanged furtive, anxious glances. Things were not looking good.

One peasant took the “toy” from the headman’s hands, drummed with his fists on its back, then passed it to the next man. For a while my violin circulated through the crowd and we—two frail, skinny exhausted and risible city youths—were ignored. We had been tramping across the mountains all day, and our clothes, faces and hair were streaked with mud. We looked like pathetic little reactionary soldiers from a propaganda film after their capture by a horde of Communist farm workers.

“A stupid toy,” a woman commented hoarsely.

“No,” the village headman corrected her, “a bourgeois toy.”

I felt chilled to the bone despite the fire blazing in the centre of the room.
“A toy from the city,” the headman continued, “go on, burn it!”
His command galvanized the crowd. Everyone started talking at once,
shouting and reaching out to grab the toy for the privilege of throwing it on
the coals.
“Comrade, it’s a musical instrument,” Luo said as casually as he could,
“and my friend here’s a fine musician. Truly.”
The headman called for the violin and looked it over once more. Then
he held it out to me.
“Forgive me, comrade,” I said, embarrassed, “but I’m not that good.”
I saw Luo giving me a surreptitious wink. Puzzled, I took my violin and set
about tuning it.
“What you are about to hear, comrade, is a Mozart sonata,” Luo announced, as coolly as before.
I was dumbfounded. Had he gone mad? All music by Mozart or
indeed by any other Western composer had been banned years ago. In my
sodden shoes my feet turned to ice. I shivered as the cold tightened its grip
on me.
“What’s a sonata?” the headman asked warily.
“I don’t know,” I faltered. “It’s Western.”
“Is it a song?”
“More or less,” I replied evasively.
At that instant the glint of the vigilant Communist reappeared in the
headman’s eyes, and his voice turned hostile.
“What’s the name of this song of yours?”
“Well, it’s like a song, but actually it’s a sonata.”
“I’m asking you what it’s called!” he snapped, fixing me with his gaze.
Again I was alarmed by the three spots of blood in his left eye.
“Mozart . . . ,” I muttered.
“Mozart what?”
“Mozart Is Thinking of Chairman Mao,” Luo broke in.
The audacity! But it worked: as if he had heard something miraculous,
the headman’s menacing look softened. He crinkled up his eyes in a wide,
beatific smile.
“Mozart thinks of Mao all the time,” he said.
“Indeed, all the time,” agreed Luo.
As soon as I had tightened my bow there was a burst of applause, but
I was still nervous. However, as I ran my swollen fingers over the strings,
Mozart’s phrases came flooding back to me like so many faithful friends.
The peasants’ faces, so grim a moment before, softened under the influence
of Mozart’s limpid music like parched earth under a shower, and then, in
the dancing light of the oil lamp, they blurred into one.
I played for some time. Luo lit a cigarette and smoked quietly, like
a man.
This was our first taste of re-education. Luo was eighteen years old, I
was seventeen.
A few words about re-education: towards the end of 1968, the Great Helmsman of China's Revolution, Chairman Mao, launched a campaign that would leave the country profoundly altered. The universities were closed and all the “young intellectuals,” meaning boys and girls who had graduated from high school, were sent to the countryside to be “re-educated by the poor peasants.” (Some years later this unprecedented idea inspired another revolutionary leader in Asia, Cambodian this time, to undertake an even more ambitious and radical plan: he banished the entire population of the capital, old and young alike, “to the countryside.”)

The real reason behind Mao Zedong’s decision was unclear. Was it a ploy to get rid of the Red Guards, who were slipping out of his grasp? Or was it the fantasy of a great revolutionary dreamer, wishing to create a new generation? No one ever discovered his true motive. At the time, Luo and I often discussed it in secret, like a pair of conspirators. We decided that it all came down to Mao’s hatred of intellectuals.

We were not the first to be used as guinea pigs in this grand human experiment, nor would we be the last. It was in early 1971 that we arrived at that village in a lost corner of the mountains, and that I played the violin...
for the headman. Compared with others we were not too badly off. Millions of young people had gone before us, and millions would follow. But there was a certain irony about our situation, as neither Luo nor I were high school graduates. We had not enjoyed the privilege of studying at an institution for advanced education. When we were sent off to the mountains as young intellectuals we had only had the statutory three years of lower middle school.

It was hard to see how the two of us could possibly qualify as intellectuals, given that the knowledge we had acquired at middle school was precisely nil. Between the ages of twelve and fourteen we had been obliged to wait for the Cultural Revolution to calm down before the school reopened. And when we were finally able to enroll we were in for a bitter disappointment: mathematics had been scrapped from the curriculum, as had physics and chemistry. From then on our lessons were restricted to the basics of industry and agriculture. Decorating the covers of our textbooks would be a picture of a worker with arms as thick as Sylvester Stallone’s wearing a cap and brandishing a huge hammer. Flanking him would be a peasant woman, or rather a Communist in the guise of a peasant woman, wearing a red headscarf (according to the vulgar joke that circulated among us schoolkids she had tied a sanitary towel round her head). For several years it was these textbooks and Mao’s “Little Red Book” that constituted our only source of intellectual knowledge. All other books were forbidden.

First we were refused admission to high school, then the role of young intellectuals was foisted on us on account of our parents being labelled “enemies of the people.”

The Back Story
THE EVOLUTION OF THE REVOLUTION

By the time Mao Zedong lead the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution in 1966, his Communist government had already uprooted traditional life in China. A decade after grabbing power in 1949, Mao initiated the Great Leap Forward (1958-60), which transferred millions of people into industrial and agricultural jobs. But the frenzied rush of the Great Leap Forward became a catastrophic disaster. Bad weather and poor management of huge communal farms caused productivity to plummet. Twenty million people starved in the worst famine in China’s history.

The Cultural Revolution was an attempt to purify the regime and its people. All “non-revolutionary” music from the West and literature that criticized Communism was banned. Many teenagers, eager to sabotage adult authority, formed groups called the Red Guards and informed on their teachers and parents if they suspected them of the slightest anti-revolutionary behavior. Those accused would often end up in prison.

Mao also suspected the Chinese academic system of elitism, so in 1968 Mao closed the universities and began sending students to the countryside. He claimed that his goal was to expose Chinese youth, who were too young to remember the revolution of almost 20 years earlier, to the hardships of peasant life and to bridge the gap between educated and uneducated.
Their crime was that they were “stinking scientific authorities” who enjoyed a modest reputation on a provincial scale.

My parents were doctors. My father was a lung specialist, and my mother a consultant in parasitic diseases. Both of them worked at the hospital in Chengdu, a city of four million inhabitants. Their crime was that they were “stinking scientific authorities” who enjoyed a modest reputation on a provincial scale, Chengdu being the capital of Szechuan, a province with a population of one hundred million. Far away from Beijing but very close to Tibet.

Compared with my parents, Luo’s father, a famous dentist whose name was known all over China, was a real celebrity.

One day—this was before the Cultural Revolution—he mentioned to his students that he had fixed Mao Zedong’s teeth as well as those of Madame Mao and Jiang Jieshi, who had been president of the Republic prior to the Communist takeover. There were those who, having contemplated Mao’s portrait every day for years, had indeed noted that his teeth looked remarkably stained, not to say yellow, but no one said so out loud. And yet here was an eminent dentist stating publicly that the Great Helmsman of the Revolution had been fitted with new teeth, just like that. It was beyond belief, an

**Classic Connections**

**THE BOOK** | **THE STORY** | **THE STYLE**
---|---|---
IRON AND SILK (1987) by Mark Salzman | A Mandarin-speaking American martial arts champion goes to China to teach English and becomes closely entwined with the local wushu master, teacher Pan. | While the plot is similar to *The Karate Kid*, this story takes itself much less seriously. Short, funny scenes in rapid succession will keep you turning pages.

WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS (2000) by Kazuo Ishiguro | Christopher Banks, an English boy born in Shanghai, becomes an orphan when his parents mysteriously disappear. He is sent to live in England, becomes a detective, and returns to Shanghai to try to solve the mystery of his life. | Ishiguro writes in first person, in fluid and restrained prose, but the narrator is not reliable, and the story begins to show cracks. The reader must also become a detective in order to solve this mystery.

RIVER TOWN: TWO YEARS ON THE YANGTZE (2001) by Peter Hessler | In 1996, China’s leader of 20 years had died, Hong Kong became part of the mainland again, and a young man named Peter Hessler arrived in a remote town in Sichuan province as a Peace Corps volunteer. | Hessler writes his misadventures against a backdrop of political and historical significance, contrasting his American self with his Chinese alter ego, Ho Wei.

SHANGHAI EXPRESS (1935) by Zhang Henshui | A wealthy banker traveling on the Orient express from Beijing to Shanghai falls in love with an alluring young woman against a backdrop of gender and class differences. | Henshui tells this dramatic story through detailed descriptions of clothing, mannerisms, and states of mind that reveal the state of Chinese society in the 1930s.
unpardonable, insane crime, worse than revealing a secret of national security. His crime was all the more grave because he dared to mention the names of Mao and his consort in the same breath as that of the worst scum of the earth: Jiang Jieshi.

For many years Luo’s family lived in the apartment next to ours, on the third and top floor of a brick building. He was the fifth son of his father, and the only child of his mother.

I am not exaggerating when I say that Luo was the best friend I ever had. We grew up together, we shared all sorts of experiences, often tough ones. We very rarely quarreled.

I will never forget the one time we came to blows, or rather the time he hit me. It was in the summer of 1968. He was about fifteen, I had just turned fourteen. That afternoon a big political meeting was being held on the sports ground of the hospital where our parents worked. Both of us were aware that the butt of the rally would be Luo’s father, that yet another public humiliation awaited him. When it was nearly five o’clock and no one had yet returned, Luo asked me to accompany him to the hospital.

“We’ll note down everyone who denounces my father, or beats him,” he said. “That way we can take our revenge when we’re older.”

The sports ground was a bobbing sea of dark heads. It was a very hot day. Loudspeakers blared. Luo’s father was on his hands and knees in front of a grandstand. A great slab of cement hung round his neck from a wire so deeply embedded in the skin as to be invisible. Written on the slab were his name and his crime: REACTIONARY.

Even from where I was standing, thirty metres away, I could make out a dark stain on the ground made by the sweat dripping from his brow.

A man’s voice roared through the loudspeaker.

“Admit that you slept with the nurse!”

Luo’s father hung his head, so low that his face seemed buried in the cement slab. A microphone was shoved under his mouth and a faint, tremulous “yes” was heard.

“Tell us what happened!” the inquisitor’s voice barked from the loudspeaker. “Who started it?”

“I did.”

“And then?”

A few seconds of silence ensued. Then the whole crowd screamed in unison: “And then?”

This cry, raised by two thousand voices, was like the rumble of thunder breaking over our heads.

“I started it . . .,” Luo’s father confessed.

“Go on! The details!”

“But as soon as I touched her, I fell . . . into mist and clouds.”

We left as the crowd of fanatics resumed their mass inquisition. On the way home I suddenly felt tears running down my cheeks, and I realized how fond I was of the dentist.

At that moment, without saying a word, Luo punched me. I was so taken aback that I nearly lost my balance.