

LU- CHENG

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RETURNING TO A PLACE
THAT I INHERIT
BUT BARELY KNOW.



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Occasionally, tall stacks of chimneys or bridges leading to rare high building complexes lie far in the distance. Otherwise, there is only wind, rocks, snow, and space. Lucheng is a quiet city. Whether driving or walking, I rarely see anyone on the streets. If I were to scream, I thought, it would bounce around and reverberate endlessly across the open fields.

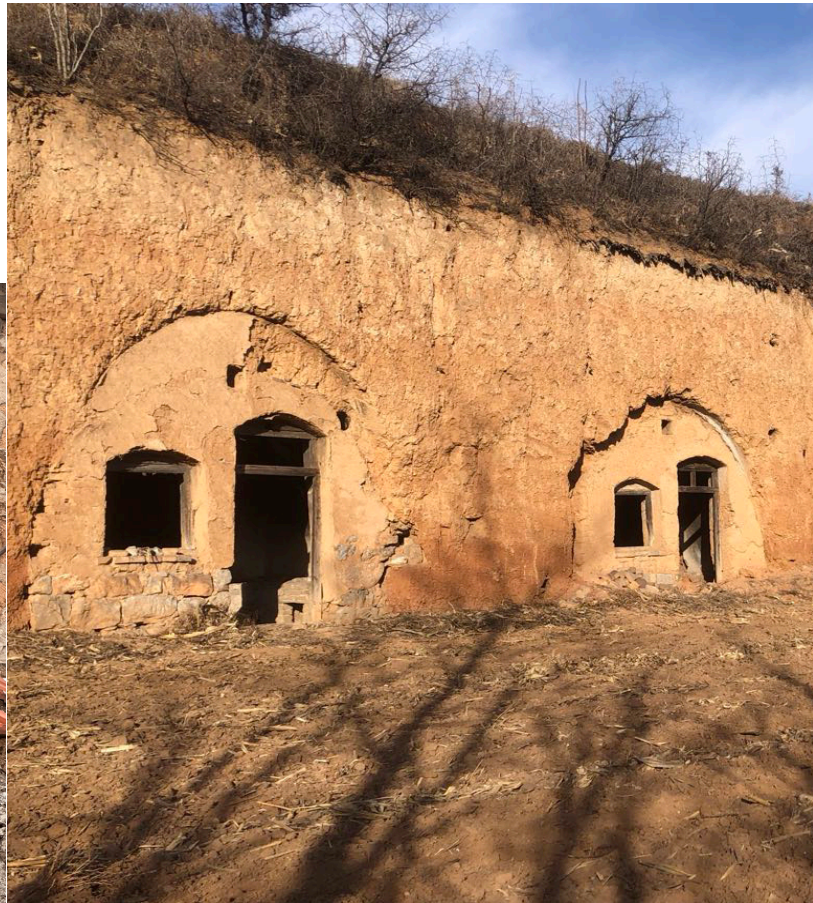


There was no snow on the drive back to my father's village. Only thin traces of white clinging to the edges of roadside stones and low metal rooftops. The road stretched wide beneath the clear, azure sky.

I was wedged between Auntie and Mom in the back seat of Uncle's car. They picked us up from the railway station after a 4AM seven-hour ride from Shanghai. I was disappointed. I had expected a blizzard like the last time I came—the first time I came. Last year we arrived at night right before Spring Festival after my father drove north for two days straight and crossed five provinces. His body no longer allows this journey this year; we take the train now.

My first memory in Lucheng was the snow glistening like the Milky Way turned bright white under the cold, sparse streetlight. And, oh, the stars, when I looked up again as I entered our courtyard for the first time, the sky was crowded with them. I couldn't even count them with both hands. I could feel my pupils dilate and my eyes widen. I never knew my eyes could take hold of so many stars in the night sky at the same time.

Lucheng lies in the loess highlands of Changzhi, Shanxi, where Dad and his brothers and sisters grew up. Lucheng feels desolate during Spring Festival. To the right, layers stretch upon layers of loess plateaus dotted with wild grass and scattered rocks; to the left, the plateaus flow into the horizon.



I SHARED THEIR SURNAME, NOT THEIR MEMORIES.

Last year I came for Grandpa's eightieth birthday, but he tripped and fell on New Year's Eve. He was rushed to the hospital, had two nails hammered firmly into his thighs, and has since lost the ability to walk. When I returned this year, he traveled around on wheelchair and had to be helped around everywhere.



He was hardly as voluble as Grandma, but I don't remember hearing a complete sentence from him ever since our grandparents left us five years ago; for years, Alzheimer's disease stripped away his speech bit by bit until all he could utter were phrases, syllables, and muffled grunts.

The next afternoon after my arrival, snow finally came. My parents were napping in the adobe cave house when the sky turned white. I looked up from my computer and saw flakes falling thick and fast and quickly erasing the lines of our courtyard. Ignoring reminders to change into my shoes or put on my overcoat, I screamed and bolted right out of the door. Within minutes, I was outside on the streets with my arms outstretched and tongue stuck out, trying to taste the snowflakes.

Snow was quickly piling up. I was called back into the courtyard by Auntie because she brought snowball molds and said I could play with them. Grandma and Auntie shoveled up large clumps of snow, and I clumped them together into duckies, snowmen, and hearts. I bit into a snowball out of curiosity and spat it out, laughing—they tasted no different from regular snow cones. My relatives called me childish and said to themselves I had never seen snow like this before, and I let them believe it.

The fact is, I was not as excited as I showed myself to be. After all, I'm seventeen years old, I'm going through puberty, and I deem it appropriate to act unbothered and unamused by everything childish such as playing with snow. But here, I understood what role I could most appropriately play. The curious granddaughter, the girl who rarely comes back from the city, the only child of the fourth generation. When I lined the ducklings in careful rows and handed them out for inspection, I watched their faces soften. It pleased them to see me small again; it pleased me to know that I pleased them.



On New Year's Eve, my uncles drove Dad and me to a cornfield beyond the village. Under fir trees in the distance were tattered black granite graves, each with a couple of bright artificial blooms next to them. I was introduced to each of the graves—first the ancestral tomb bearing our surname, “Li,” then the grave of my great-grandparents. There was a line of tombstones next to us for our relatives since everyone in our village is related, and some of our relatives from our village were making their visits there as well. Dad instructed me to lay out five buns, bread, and biscuits in front of every tomb. My uncles and Dad handed around a steel pot and poured broth around the offerings. They talked quietly to those beneath the earth. Paper money was burnt together with some golden papers, and I stood watching silently as their ashes drifted forward into the corn field.

The men took turns kneeling in front of the stones. Father took a drag off a cigarette—promising he'll never do it again, only this time because of the occasion—and said I should kneel too. And I did. I knelt and bowed four times in the snow in front of both the ancestral grave and my great-grandparents' graves. You kneel once for elders, twice for dead people, and three times for deities. I prayed the same way I was asked to pray to deities in temples back in Shanghai—for familial prosperity, for health, and for achievements and luck. But the ritual felt somewhat unnatural not only because I am an atheist and have never really knelt publicly before, but also because I knew absolutely nothing about the people beneath the earth, despite being the only daughter and the only child of the fourth generation of my lineage. I shared their surname, not their memories.

By contrast, Dad moved through the village with fluency. He knew every face we passed. He could point to a field and recall who once farmed it, and an abandoned cave house that looked like an ancient relic for those who once owned it. He remembered the beloved faces of those now buried in the same ground we stood upon. His sense of self had formed here, among these plateaus, these graves, these adobe cave houses, and the smell of a thousand different firecrackers each for different purposes.

My sense of self formed elsewhere. Both my parents were from northern China, but they migrated eastward for better opportunities and lives after the Gaokao. I was raised in Shanghai, but not in an inherited Shanghai. I did not grow up in an old longtang or a multigenerational compound. I grew up in high-rise apartments, ten-minute bike rides away from classrooms oriented toward international exams, in a district where remembering the names of my neighbours and relatives is never as important as remembering how to spell “accolades.” I rarely felt homesick because I have grown accustomed to cultural clashes and being caught in transit, but the cost of this ease is a sense of disconnectedness from my own roots. Shanghai is where I live; Lucheng is where I descend from. In neither place do I truly ever feel culturally rooted.

It's seven months till my adulthood and I still can't remember all the relatives on my mother's and father's sides. There are just too many of them. It wasn't until very recently that I finally understood the difference between calling uncles on my father's side and my mother's side ; after all, there is no such distinction in English, and I rarely contact my relatives. I had so many difficulties trying to remember everyone I met. I had to search up “Relative Calculator” on WeChat mini program every time I enter someone else's house in my village. When I confess that I didn't know how to address them either, my father would taunt me in front of my relatives. I was always left embarrassed, and in the meantime, awfully confounded. Do others from my generation have to deal with all this embarrassment, too?

Regardless, by the time I have put this all down, I have just finished a huge family meal with my relatives—perhaps the largest family meal I've ever been to while being crowded in such a small space—and I was finally with Grandpa for his 81st birthday. I was the friendly granddaughter who had nice table manners and who successfully befriended my fourth cousin, who was 12 years older than me. my “brother-in-law” , and with this knowledge in mind, I could address him and ask where he comes from. He has newly married, comes from Anhui. It is his first stay here in our village in Lucheng.

What does it mean to inherit a place you do not know well? Perhaps it is to return to it deliberately—to respect the traditions, to learn the names slowly, and to learn to step into what doesn't automatically embrace you.