

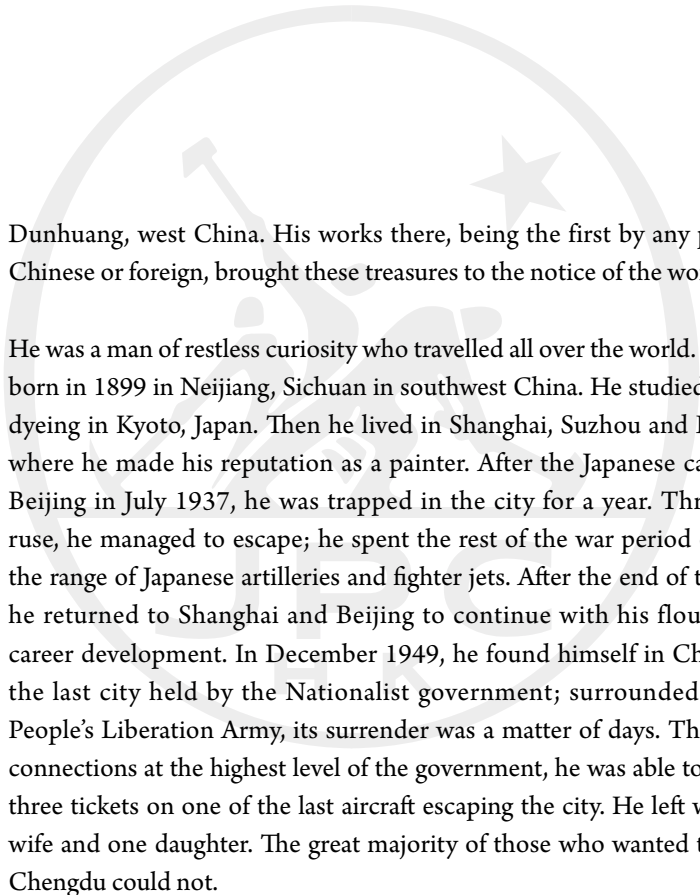
INTRODUCTION

Master Painter, Master Person

Many consider Zhang Daqian (Chang Dai-chien) the greatest Chinese painter for the past 500 years. Collectors around the world agree. Since his death in 1983, his works have attracted enormous prices at auctions. According to Sotheby's, in 2011, he became the best-selling artist in the world, surpassing Picasso. That year, his works earned US\$506.7 million from auctions. The record price for Daqian pictures was HK\$370.495 million (US\$47.216 million), set at a Sotheby's auction in Hong Kong in May 2022.

He was the first Chinese painter to earn an international reputation in Europe, the U.S. and East Asia, with his works selling for high prices in these countries. Major museums around the world proudly display his work. Exhibitions of his paintings are held every year. He achieved this by the quality and originality of his works and his ability to promote himself — rare among Chinese of his time.

He attributed his success to 70 per cent hard work and 30 per cent talent. During his life, he completed more than 30,000 paintings, an astonishing number. He worked intensively wherever he was, right up to his final visit to a hospital in Taipei; he died there on April 2, 1983. As a young man, he did meticulous study of ancient Chinese masters. His works combined their techniques and knowledge of their works with his own original style. This was enriched by his hard work during the two years and seven months from 1941 to 1943, copying historic Buddhist wall paintings in



Dunhuang, west China. His works there, being the first by any painter, Chinese or foreign, brought these treasures to the notice of the world.

He was a man of restless curiosity who travelled all over the world. He was born in 1899 in Neijiang, Sichuan in southwest China. He studied textile dyeing in Kyoto, Japan. Then he lived in Shanghai, Suzhou and Beijing, where he made his reputation as a painter. After the Japanese captured Beijing in July 1937, he was trapped in the city for a year. Through a ruse, he managed to escape; he spent the rest of the war period outside the range of Japanese artilleries and fighter jets. After the end of the war, he returned to Shanghai and Beijing to continue with his flourishing career development. In December 1949, he found himself in Chengdu, the last city held by the Nationalist government; surrounded by the People's Liberation Army, its surrender was a matter of days. Thanks to connections at the highest level of the government, he was able to obtain three tickets on one of the last aircraft escaping the city. He left with his wife and one daughter. The great majority of those who wanted to leave Chengdu could not.

Daqian did not want to live under the new government. Most Chinese who left the Mainland chose to live in Taiwan or Hong Kong — but not he. He spent a year in India and then migrated to Argentina, where he spent two years. Unable to extend his visa, he moved to Brazil in 1954. He spent US\$2 million to buy 18 hectares of land near São Paulo and

built a sprawling Chinese garden with a lotus pond and a large lake. He lived there for 17 years. It proved to be a good decision. He was the most productive there, with his fame spreading to Europe and the U.S. In 1956, in Nice, he met Pablo Picasso, the most famous European painter of that era. It was a masterstroke of publicity. The media revealed in stories the meeting of the top two artists of the East and West. In marketing his works to Westerners, Daqian showed a flair for publicity rare among Chinese of his generation. This was even more unusual because he had not studied abroad nor did he speak a foreign language. He adopted the persona of a Chinese scholar, with a long beard he had worn from the age of 25, a grey robe, a black hat, cloth shoes, a big smile and a gibbon monkey on his shoulder. When he walked along the banks of the Seine in Paris with historic buildings behind him, photographers could not resist it. Who would take pictures of a serious, clean-shaved Chinese in a business suit? This was an era when Chinese had a low status in the world. The People's Republic was closed to the outside and in the throes of terrifying political campaigns. Daqian overcame that; he became an ambassador of Chinese culture to the world.

He was devastated when, over his strong objections, the São Paulo city government decided to build a reservoir that drowned his beloved garden. In 1971, he moved to Carmel in Southern California and stayed there for seven years. In 1978, he moved to Taipei, where he spent the last seven years of his life. He was treated like royalty. He built a new home with a Chinese garden in Taipei where he continued to work intensively and entertain his many friends. His funeral was held at National Palace Museum in Taipei (NPM); it was attended by leaders of Taiwan and the civil society.

His personal life was no less astonishing. He had four wives, three concubines and 16 children. Of the concubines, one was Korean and one Japanese. When he left the Mainland in 1949, he took with him his fourth wife and one daughter. The other wives and children remained on the Mainland; thereafter they looked to him for financial support. As he earned large amounts from the sales of his paintings, he had little regard for money. He enjoyed an extravagant lifestyle; he liked five-star hotels and the best restaurants. In buying paints, scrolls and other materials, he spared no expense — one reason why his paintings have aged so well. The blues and greens are almost as bright as when he used them. He sold “futures” — a client paid him for a painting to be completed in the future. He was extremely generous; he gave paintings to many friends, as well as people in high places, doctors, writers and journalists who had helped him and others who had rendered him services. A nephew once told him that if he had been careful with money during his life, he could have amassed US\$100 million.

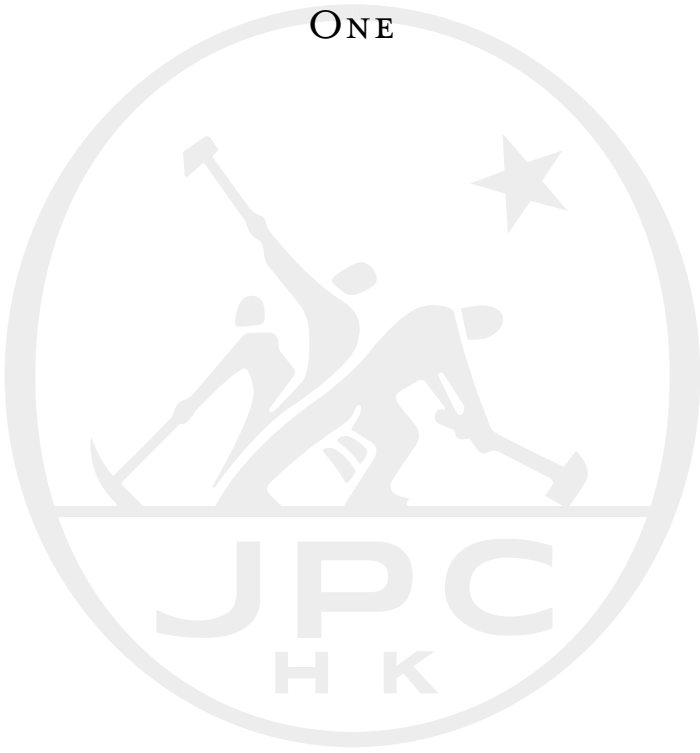
He was also an avid collector of art. This was one of his biggest expenditures. His studies gave him an intimate knowledge of centuries of Chinese art. When a piece he liked became available in the auction houses or art shops of Taipei, Hong Kong or Tokyo, he would fly from Brazil to try to buy it. He bought it whether or not he had the money. He amassed a large collection. In his will, he left this collection not to his family but NPM. He also bequeathed to the museum his Taipei home and its contents. When he left the Mainland in a hurry, he was unable to take everything with him. In 1953, on his instructions, his first wife gave 183 of his paintings and 83 seals to Sichuan Museum — the largest donation it had received in 72 years.

Daqian was a first-class copier — some would say forger. This was a result of his mastery of the techniques of ancient painters. They were of such high quality that many Western museums bought them. In the training of a Chinese artist, copying is an essential part of the study. Copying a master is considered a virtue and the mark of a good student. In the event, the museums do not do bad business. A copy by Daqian is often worth more than the same work by the original artist.

He was charismatic and sociable. He had many friends and loved to entertain them with stories, jokes and his favoured Sichuan cuisine. He was an accomplished cook and was demanding of those he employed to prepare food for him. Unlike many painters, he was happy to let others remain in his studio while he worked — provided that they did not speak out of turn. He was a master of “guanxi” (connections). These were essential for a young painter to build a network of clients, sponsors and galleries to support his works. He maintained these guanxi throughout his life, despite the fact that he lived in South and North America while most of his contacts were in East Asia.

The story of Zhang Daqian tells the life of one of the most gifted Chinese of the 20th century —in art and in personality. Today, his achievements are celebrated by his countrymen everywhere. His paintings are enjoyed and admired in galleries, museums and private homes around the world. Will we ever see his like again?

CHAPTER
ONE



Childhood:
Poverty and Talent

Zhang Daqian (張大千) was born on May 10, 1899 in Neijiang (內江), Sichuan Province in southwest China. He was the eighth of 11 children and 17 years younger than his second brother Zhang Shanzi (張善子 , sometimes written as 張善孖), who became the first son after the death of their elder brother. Shanzi became a famous painter and played an important role in Daqian's life. Of the 11 children, four died young, due to poverty, illness and a shortage of food. At the time of Daqian's birth, the family had eight members. His father was Zhang Huaizhong (張懷忠) and mother Zeng Youzhen (曾友貞) ; both were educated; his mother was a Catholic and a talented painter. The family lived in a courtyard house on the outskirts of Neijiang.

The family came originally from Panyu in Guangdong Province, south China. Their ancestor was an official of the Qing dynasty sent in 1683 to Neijiang as a county magistrate. Huaizhong was born in April 1860 as the fifth generation of his family living in Neijiang. He wanted to join Imperial Civil Service, but failed the exams. He decided to go into business. Neijiang is close to Ziliujing, a major salt-mining area. With a partner, he invested a large sum in a new salt mine. But, short of experience, he chose the wrong site and lost all his money. Even worse, his partner ran away, leaving him in debt. His hopes ruined, he returned to the family home. Without capital or another skill, he was forced to buy and sell rubbish he collected on the street. He carried water for people; he restored cotton mattresses used for several years, so that they could be sold again. He was a bitter and disappointed man having fallen from a cultivated family to this level.

Daqian's mother Zeng Youzhen was born in December 1861 to a prominent Neijiang family. She was gifted at calligraphy, painting and embroidery. Her paintings, especially of flowers and birds, became well-known in the town. After the failure of her husband in business, the family

mainly relied on her paintings and embroideries for its income; they were popular with rich families in the town. Their low income and large number of children drove the family into poverty. The family table was often short of food, and they were forced to borrow from friends. To feed his large family, Daqian's father worked long hours, sometimes far from home, and returned late in the evening.

After Daqian was born, his mother was exhausted from having many children and her heavy workload. She had no breast milk for her new baby; the family searched for a substitute. The wife of the third brother found a neighbour who had just given birth and had plenty of milk. Each day the wife carried baby Daqian on her back to the neighbour's home to be fed. Even better, the young lady did not ask for payment. The family diet was poor — thin congee, sweet potatoes and wild vegetables. With such a diet, Daqian grew up small and thin; he did not eat meat. Without a regular income, the family was living on the edge.

What saved the family was their intellectual and artistic talents. His parents were determined that despite their poverty, their children, both sons and daughters, would receive an education and learn traditional Chinese culture. From the age of six, Daqian began to learn characters from his fourth brother, who was a teacher. This brother was extremely well read; like his father, he failed the imperial exam to become a civil servant. He returned to the family home in Neijiang. He taught his little brother Tang dynasty poems and classical works. After setting him homework, he went to teach at a local private school. After he returned home, he read Daqian's answers; if he found mistakes, he would hit him with a bamboo cane. Daqian was blessed to have such a teacher, especially when his parents could not pay for an outside one. He was also blessed in his mother. She introduced painting to all her children. Some did not pursue it, but Daqian took to it like a duck to water. At nine years old, his

first paintings were of flower pots. To earn money, his mother and sister painted works for commission, often until late in the evening. To lighten their load, Daqian helped them. They were delighted and encouraged him; they taught him different styles and techniques. In addition to his studies, he helped with household chores, such as chopping firewood and looking after the animals. When elder brother Shanzi returned from Japan in 1907, he joined in instructing Daqian in painting, especially of portraits, animals and stories. His standard improved further. By the age of ten, Daqian was considered a child prodigy because of the quality and detail of his works; his mother and sister began to take them for public sale. He could paint flowers, birds, human figures and landscapes.

Neijiang is a pretty county town on the banks of Tuo River between Sichuan's two major cities of Chengdu and Chongqing. It is in the southeast of the Sichuan basin and traces its history to the Western Han dynasty (202 BC - 9 AD). This gave it a rich legacy of temples, monasteries and other ancient buildings. It attracted poets including Li Bai of the Tang dynasty who praised its hills and rivers in his poems. From the middle of the Qing dynasty (1644 - 1912), thanks to its fertile soil, its river and geographic position, it became a flourishing commercial port. It ranked first in Sichuan for the production of sugar cane. Outside the eastern gate of the city was a nine-storey tower. When Daqian reached its top, he could see the flowing waters of Tuo River, bamboo forests and mountains — it looked like an ink and wash painting. The hills leading to the river were covered with fields of sugar cane. This scenery left a lifelong mark on the young man; he carried it with him wherever he went in the world. Neijiang was also a salt-producing area; it was 40 kilometres from Ziliujing, the centre of the salt industry in Sichuan during the Qing dynasty. That was the business in which his father lost his fortune.

Gibbon Monkeys

Daqian had a lifetime affection for gibbon monkeys. In his later life, he often carried one on his shoulder. During his residence in Brazil in the 1950s, he bred them in the large property where he lived. According to one family story, before he was born, his mother had a dream — an elderly man handed her a shining bronze gong with a hairy animal lying in the centre. He told her: “this is a black monkey, who is afraid of the moon and the smell of fish and meat. Take good care of it.” Then his mother woke up. Her friends said that this meant that in a previous life, Daqian had been a gibbon. As a child, he did not like to eat fish or meat and never included the moon in any of his paintings. It was the start of the intimate association between him and the animal throughout his life. In Chinese culture, the monkey is an auspicious animal. One of the main characters in *Journey to the West*, one of the most popular Chinese novels, is a monkey. It is a fictionalised account of a Chinese Buddhist monk who went to India in the seventh century AD to collect Buddhist scriptures. In the novel, the monk is accompanied by “the Monkey King”, who is quick, cunning, powerful and good at combat. For Chinese mothers, a child born in the year of the Monkey is the second choice only to one born in the year of the Dragon. Chinese do not eat monkey meat. So, for Daqian, an earlier life as a monkey was an auspicious sign.

Close to Death

In the spring of 1910, Daqian contracted a serious case of typhoid; he had a high fever and bouts of unconsciousness. The family was alarmed. Fortunately, their economic situation had improved, with three of the brothers earning, two from teaching and one from running a small grocery store. This was in addition to what their mother and sister earned from their paintings. The family summoned a well known local

doctor to examine the young Daqian. He said the case was not serious. He proscribed medicine which he sold to them, took his fee and left. After taking the drugs, Daqian had all of his hair fallen out and fell into a deep sleep. Early in the morning, he started to shout and scream and was unable to sleep for the rest of the day. The next morning the family found pieces of his hair over the bed, his face was bright red and he was crying. They were terrified. A brother invited a traditional Chinese doctor to examine him. He said that the first doctor had made an incorrect diagnosis and proscribed the wrong medicine. He prepared a traditional medicine; Daqian took it and slept comfortably for 10 hours. The doctor made more visits and nursed him back to health. The family believed that he saved Daqian's life. To help his recovery, the family sent him that autumn to live in the house of his uncle, his father's elder brother, also in Neijiang. The family pampered him — he did not have to do homework, memorise characters or do housework. That allowed him to devote his time to his passion — painting. One morning, in front of his uncle's house, he was sketching at the doorstep of his uncle's home. A woman fortune-teller from Henan walked past; she saw his sketch which she found attractive. She asked him to paint 24 pictures as the covers she could use for fortune-telling books; she promised him 80 copper coins. He was happy to accept the commission and rapidly set to work. He used themes from folklore. The woman was delighted with the result and gave him the money. It was his first paid commission and the first time he had earned money through his own labour — at the age of 11. It set the pattern for the rest of his life. Another change that happened in his uncle's house was that he started to eat meat. During his first 11 years, he had not eaten it. After the family became better off, they bought meat; but his stomach was unaccustomed to it, and he threw up. The uncle's family gave him a dish of cured meat; he found the taste unfamiliar but pleasing. His stomach was able to digest it normally, without vomiting. From then on, he started to eat meat. Later in life he became a gourmet and an

accomplished cook. Restaurants in Hong Kong and Taipei even serve a dish called “Daqian Chicken”. Before Chinese New Year in 1911, Daqian returned to live with his own family. That year, the family experienced a tragedy. His elder sister, the talented painter, was married in March. In August, she died from a wrong diagnosis of Chinese medicine.

China was going through a period of tumultuous changes. In 1905, the Qing government abolished Imperial Exam System under which Chinese had studied for 1,000 years to join the civil service. For centuries, China’s ruling class had used this system of learning Confucian classics and rote memory to train its elite. But it was no longer suitable for the new world of science, industrial factories and battleships. China was hopelessly behind developed nations. In October 1911, the Qing dynasty was overthrown after 267 years of governance. It was replaced by the Republic of China. But the new government was unable to establish a unified government across the vast territory of China. This was especially true in Sichuan, then the country’s largest province in terms of area and population. The west of the province consisted of mountain ranges; the eastern part, where Neijiang was located, was a fertile basin with several rivers including the Tuo. In 1912, Sichuan had a population of 48.13 million. One factor making it hard to rule was its remoteness from Beijing and Nanjing, the centres of political and military power. Transport to the province from the rest of China was almost entirely by river. There were few railways and paved roads. Into the power vacuum stepped bandits and warlords; some aligned with the central government, others did not. They had a large degree of freedom in the areas of Sichuan they controlled.

King of Tigers

Elder brother Shanzi (Child of Goodness) played a key role in Daqian’s success in life. He was the second son of the family, born in July 1882,

17 years older than Daqian. At the age of 10, he entered a private school; like Daqian, he learnt painting from his mother. He painted mountains and rivers, flowers, fruits and vegetables as well as portraits. His favourite subject was tigers. He was an outstanding student. With the aid of friends, he was able to study at Neijiang Teachers College; he went on to teach at primary and secondary schools in the town. At the same time, he continued his study of painting. In 1900, the Boxers in north China rose in rebellion against foreign Christian missionaries and their Chinese converts. Considering himself a patriot, Shanzi led teams who attacked Christian churches and western missionaries in nearby counties. In the summer of that year, eight foreign powers sent an army to suppress the Boxers, who occupied Tianjin and Beijing. The Chinese government went after those who had taken part in the rebellion, including Shanzi. One night, soldiers came to the Zhang household to arrest him; fortunately, he was away at the time. They ransacked the house, but could not find the man they wanted. Fearful of arrest and trial, he had no choice but to leave China. Like many Chinese of his era, he went to Japan. His departure and the loss of the money he earned worsened the family's financial situation.

For several decades after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan was the first choice for thousands of Chinese students. It was the first Asian country to modernise. In war, it defeated China in 1895; ten years later it defeated Tsarist Russia, the first time an Asian army had defeated an Imperial European power. It made headlines around the world. For many young Chinese, it was the model which their country should follow, in terms of armaments, science, medicine, industry, education and military. Even better, the Japanese written language was based on Chinese characters; this made it easier for a Chinese to learn than a European language.

In 1903, Shanzi enrolled in the Economics Faculty of Meiji University in Tokyo; he also took courses in Fine Art. Japan was the centre of China's

exile movement to overthrow the Qing dynasty. It was the base of Dr Sun Zhongshan (孫中山, Sun Yat-sen), who lived there for a total of 16 years. In August 1905, in Tokyo, Sun established Tongmenghui (同盟會, United League) as his main revolutionary organisation. By 1906, it had nearly 1,000 members. As a patriotic young Chinese, Shanzi joined; he was one of the earliest members from Sichuan. In 1907, he returned to China and took part in revolutionary works in his home province. The dynasty finally fell in October 1911; the Republic of China was established in January 1912, with Sun as the president. Shanzi was appointed a major in the Sichuan division of the newly formed army. But Sun had no army of his own in Beijing. He remained the president for only two months and was forced to cede the post to Yuan Shikai (袁世凱), chief of Beiyang Army (北洋軍). Yuan was anything but a democrat and republican; he assumed more and more power for himself. In July 1913, Sun and forces of his newly established Kuomintang (國民黨) fought a battle against Beiyang Army, but lost. The next month, Sun escaped again to Japan. Shanzi was again put on a nationwide wanted list and went on the run. He hid in hills near Neijiang; Daqian secretly provided him with food and clothing. Shanzi decided that it was too dangerous to remain in China, so he returned to Japan.

In December 1915, Yuan proclaimed himself emperor. Had the years of revolutionary struggle and death of so many martyrs been in vain? This decision provoked nationwide outrage and opposition, even within his own army. In March 1916, Yuan abdicated and restored the Republic; he had been emperor for only 83 days. On June 6, he died of uraemia, a failure of the kidney. Many Chinese considered this divine punishment for his pride and arrogance in declaring himself emperor. His death allowed Shanzi to return to China; he went to Shanghai, where he began to earn a living as a painter.

Going to School

Daqian went with an elder brother to a private school in Zizhou where he was a teacher. Zizhou was a town 50 kilometres northwest of Neijiang. Daqian enjoyed the experience of living away from home for the first time. He studied characters and poems. In the evenings, below an oil lamp, he listened to his brother's stories of the history and people of Zizhou. On weekends, his brother took him for walks, to historical places and the countryside around the town. He greatly enjoyed the hills and mountains. In Neijiang, his parents opened a grocery store; it prospered and the family's finances became more stable.

Daqian's elder brother became a teacher at Qiujiang Middle School in Chongqing (重慶求精中學). In the spring of 1914, his parents decided to send Daqian to this school; it was safer than in Neijiang and would provide a better education. Qiujiang was founded in 1891 by American Methodist Episcopal Church, which gave it an annual subsidy of US\$10,000. It provided western education, with foreign teachers, some of them missionaries, who taught in English. In Daqian's time, the principal was an American. Daqian boarded there. As a private boarding school, it charged high fees. But Daqian came with a glowing reference from a Christian pastor in Neijiang; thanks to him, his parents only had to pay a small fee. The curriculum included Bible study, English, drawing, geography, chemistry, Confucian studies and Chinese history as well as geography. In Chongqing, it was an elite school. Its graduates went on to the missionary's West China Union University in Chengdu or to colleges in Canada or the U.S. If they could not afford to go abroad, they found posts in the Customs, Post Office or foreign companies in China. There were 30 students in Daqian's class; he liked all the classes except mathematics. In his spare time, he did painting and calligraphy in his room. During the scorching summers of Chongqing, teachers and

students went swimming in the nearby Jialing River.

Secretary to Bandit Leader

In the summer of 1916, Daqian had a traumatic experience. On December 12, 1915, Yuan Shikai proclaimed himself emperor, provoking a nationwide uproar; several provinces declared independence from Beijing. On March 3, 1916, Yuan was forced to rescind his proclamation. But, in the early summer, his army waged a war against rival armies in Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou. The managers of Qiuqing School feared for the safety of their students, so they declared an early summer holiday, to allow the students to go to their relatively safe hometowns. On May 27, Daqian and seven classmates set out on their journey home. Since they had no money, they decided to walk. They agreed that, when they dropped one off at his home, his family would feed them and give each of them one yuan to buy food for the next day. A few days later, they reached the hometown of one of their teachers; he was delighted to see them. But, when he heard of their plan to walk the whole distance, he warned that it was too dangerous with bandit gangs operating in the area. He urged them to return to Chongqing. But they decided to continue their journey, since they would be of no interest to the bandits with nothing worth stealing. The teacher was right — two days later, a group of bandits found Daqian and his classmates on a small road in the open country. They were angry that there was nothing to steal; all they could take was Daqian's belt, which came from Shanghai. Then they let them continue their journey. They walked to a nearby town and went to a church; they asked its pastor if they could sleep inside. He said that, during that day, town residents had killed two bandits during a raid; they were terrified of revenge. He advised them to leave the town as soon as possible. But the five students were exhausted and went to sleep outside the church. During the night, they heard shooting and screaming; they started running but were caught

by the bandits who bound them and took them away. From Daqian, they demanded 4,000 silver dollars from his family as ransom. Arguing his family's poverty, he bargained it down to 3,000. Being just 17 years old, he was shaking and weeping when he sat down to write the ransom letter himself. Looking over his shoulder, the bandit leader was amazed at the speed and elegance of his characters. He said: "No ransom is needed, you become our secretary — do our accounts and write our announcements and ransom letters." They threatened to kill him if he did not agree. Daqian discovered that he became a prisoner, living in the lair of the bandits and was not allowed to leave — a man stood guard at the entrance. But, in need of his skill, they treated him well and gave him good food; the sister of a gang member made him shoes. He did not know how long this would go on. One night, he was ordered to go on a raid; he did not want to take part, but the boss ordered him to — probably to implicate him. The gang went to the home of a rich man. The family fled; the gang entered and looted their belongings. One gang member told Daqian that it was against the rules not to take something. So he picked up an old book of poems. Back in the lair, he read it; it marked the start of a lifelong study of poetry. It was a happy way to spend time. He wanted to escape, but did not know how.

One day, while he was reciting the poems, he heard groans from a nearby hut. He went in and found an elderly man. The man explained that he had been a high official in the Qing dynasty. The gang had demanded 10,000 silver dollars for his release; but the family did not have the money. Daqian asked the man to teach him poetry, which he did. Daqian asked the boss to treat him better. One day, he found the room empty and the man gone; he never knew what happened. Another day, he found a school classmate among the hostages. The gang leader had demanded a ransom of 4,000 silver dollars, but the family was too poor. After other bandits spoke up for him, the boss cut the price to 800. He agreed to let him go