

Celebrating My Parents' Golden Anniversary; Commemorating Beidahuang (Great Northern Wilderness)

Kathy Keyi Jia

December, 2008

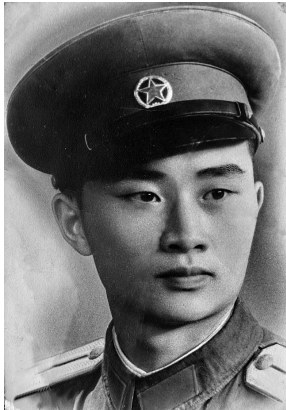


In China's Heilongjiang Province, there is a region called "Beidahuang"--Great Northern Wilderness, or China's version of Siberia. Despite the rich black soil, the severe cold weather was not inviting 60 years ago. It could reach 50 degree Celsius below zero in winter and two thirds of the year the land was frozen. There had been a few attempts to conquer the wild land in the past, but all failed. In 1947, the Chinese government took an important step. Realizing this region's great potential for food supply and its important political and military position, the government decided to cultivate the land and to strengthen this side of the Russian-Chinese border. Drawn from across the country, hundreds of and thousands of young people were sent to the wild land, many of them from politically incorrect families. Among them were my mother and father. As the region celebrated the 61st anniversary of its reclamation this year (In the summer of 2008) my parents are to celebrate their 50th anniversary. This article was written for my parents as well as for Beidahuang, where I was born and raised.



My mother grew up in Yan An, known as the cradle of Chinese revolution. As my grandfather worked closely with late Chairman Mao Ze-dong in the government, my mother attended the boarding school for the elite. However, her life changed

in 1954 when Mao Ze Dong accused my grandfather and the governing body of the North East region of being an anti-communist circle. After mother graduated from university, she was sent to Beidahuang.



My father's case was not better than my mom's. His father was a rich and powerful man as the head of a town in Central China. When the communists came, my grandfather was arrested, and later died in prison. His properties—houses and land—were all distributed to the poor. My grandmother shared a house with another family and was left to look after three children by herself. To survive, my father joined the Army at the age of 12. Despite 10 years of political and military training and his outstanding performance, due to his family background, his army career was ended and he was transferred to Beidahuang. In those days, a bad family background was viewed akin to a genetic disease. A person could be deemed to be correct or incorrect from birth. In the years that followed, their family backgrounds would affect not only them, but also us, the next generation.

When my mother came to Beidahuang in September 1958, my father had been working there since April as the head of a team of former army men. She was an instant celebrity. On the day she arrived, she was wearing a red silk scarf, a white dress and a pair of stylish leather shoes. All the eyes followed her wherever she went. Mother was naive, proud, romantic, and unprepared for the real world. But soon she would learn. That evening, a party official came to give her the first lesson. "Some new graduates are out of touch, too bourgeois, not good. They need to change", he said seriously. That night, she stayed in the tent that was open on the top. She curled up to keep herself warm watching the stars that seemed to be frozen in the sky.

As mother was a scientist specialized in soybean breeding, her first job was to monitor soybean growth. Looking at the soybean plants scattered here and there with no particular order she couldn't understand how the seeds had been planted. She asked a young man working nearby what kind of machines they used to

plant the seeds. He said, "Oh, the best one in the world--Hole-Punch machine, most advanced technology"! "Never heard of it", said mom. The man laughed, "There is no machine here so in the spring we just used a stick to dig a hole on the ground, put in a few seeds, and kick in some soil to cover them". Mother was speechless.

At the end of the year, it was customary to give a performance report in a meeting. A person would reflect on his/her year, including the strong points but concentrating on the weak ones. You had to be very critical of yourself in order to pass the group assessment. When it was mom's turn, she summarized her half year's work. Everyone agreed that mother worked hard; all liked her report except one girl who lived in the same dorm as mom. She criticized mother for being too bourgeois. For example, mother had to dust off her bed a few times before going to bed, she ate more rice than corn buns (rice was more valuable then), she paid attention to her clothes, and so on. Mother shot back: "This has nothing to do with work"! Everyone was shocked. "Looks like she has to reflect on her bourgeois life style". Mother refused, and her performance report didn't pass. "She needs more political education", the farm leader decided.

The educator, just as luck would have it, was my father.

My father had been one of her suitors, and the most determined and bravest one. They fell deeply in love during these "educational;" sessions. He became her defender.

Love transformed their lives. They got married, and Mother became pregnant. As food was rationed, each meal dad would give half of his bun to my mother.

The birth of the first child is a highlight for all parents. For my parents, I was even more special as I was the first child born to the newly established Scientific Research Institute. They named me Keyi meaning the first child of the science institute.

Mother recalled in her memoir: *"At that time, about 50 families lived in this place. We shared one well. There was no school, no hospital, no electricity, and no brick houses... After Keyi was born...we shared a house with another family...The room was divided into two parts: on the south side lived another family that just moved here with a one year old child. We lived on the north side—the colder side. Between the two families hung a curtain which served as a divider. The room was so cold in the winter that the walls were covered with frost, and a bucket of water would turn into a big chunk of ice next morning. Yet, this was our first home; we had many sweet memories."*

During their 50 years of marriage, my parents stood by each other. Together, they survived some of the most difficult times in Chinese history, such as the three years of famine and the Great Cultural revolution. Hardships only strengthened their love and bond. Overcoming all political barriers, they became very successful in their own careers.

Today, Beidahuang has put on a new face thanks to the contributions of many dedicated people such as my parents. The region has adopted the world's most advanced technology—for real—and become China's largest grain and soybean producer.

I left Beidahuang after living and working there for 18 years. I left China 18 years ago for Canada. The longer I live here, the more I feel that you can never put behind something that has formed you.

Happy 60th anniversary, Beidahuang!

Happy 50th golden anniversary, mom and dad! Many loving years to come!

