

**THROUGH MY EYES** NATURAL DISASTER ZONES

series editor Lyn White

# SHAOZHEN

WAI CHIM



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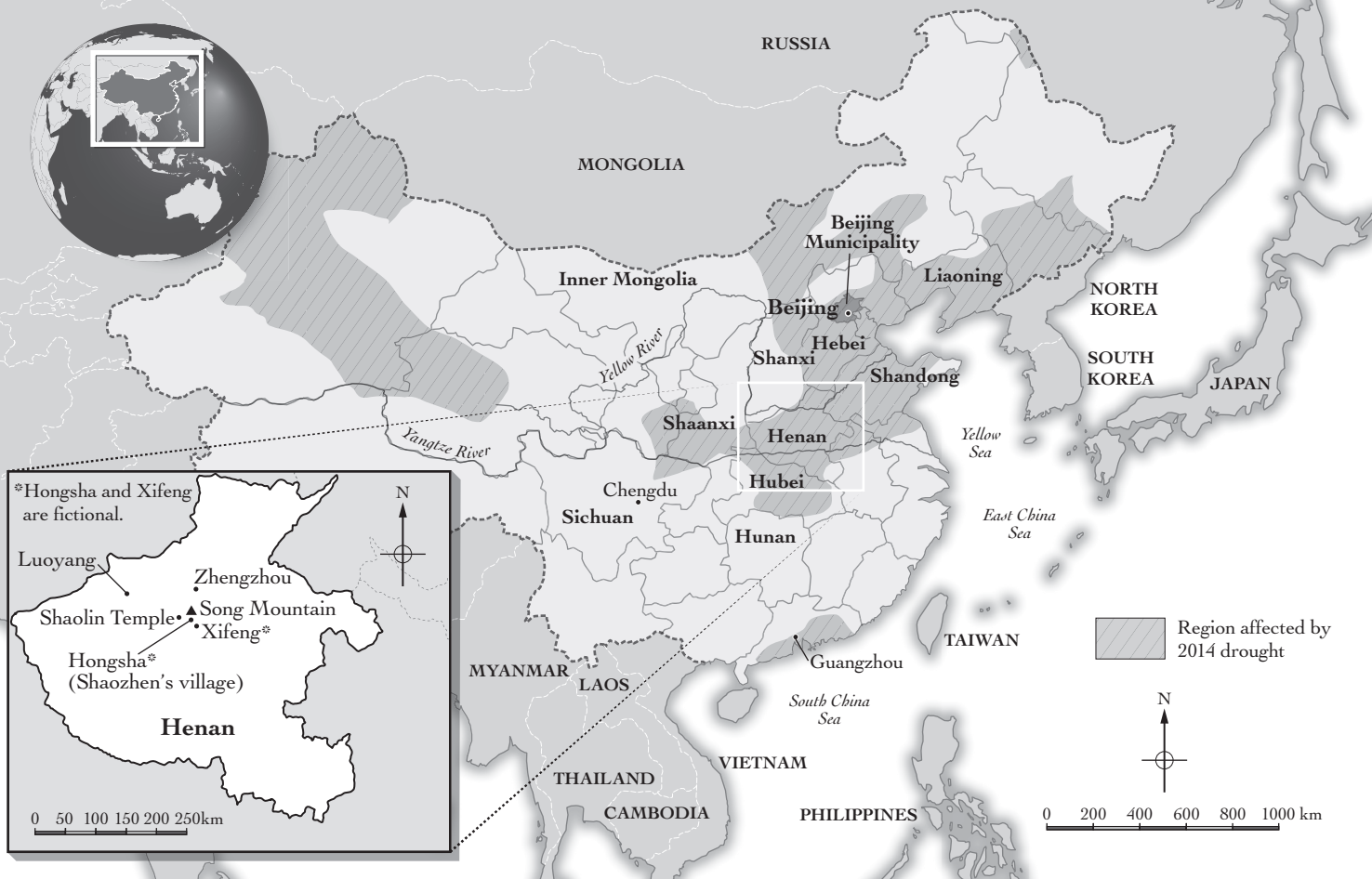
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# One



**Night had fallen over Henan** and the moon was high in the sky. The road unfurled into the darkness, a dull, muted grey. Shaozhen listened to the chittering of the mosquitoes and crickets, trying his best to match their rhythm as he dribbled the basketball.

He shifted the weight of his bedding and sleeping mat from one shoulder to the other, pulling his pack, bursting with clothes and worn textbooks, closer to his body. After a long and gruelling school year, he was finally heading home for the summer. Shaozhen boarded at Xifeng Junior Middle School, like many of his classmates, and only made the ninety-minute walk home for the weekends.

Shaozhen had mixed feelings about returning home. The market town of Xifeng had a few thousand people, a cotton mill and granary, actual restaurants and shops, while Hongsha had nothing but chickens and farmers.

At least school was over. His last exams had been brutal and his teacher had made him stay later than the

rest of the students to complete an additional assignment. ‘You need all the extra marks you can get,’ Master Chen had observed.

Shaozhen definitely wouldn’t miss the schoolwork. Unlike when he had gone to primary school, junior middle school was very difficult and he had to study night and day just to keep up. Over the past four weeks, Master Chen had insisted he stay at school over the weekend for extra tutoring instead of going home. He had been stuck in a dingy classroom with just two other boys, cramming for exams until he thought his brains would burst.

But that was finally over and Shaozhen was free. He had better ways to spend his time than solving maths problems or reading boring history books. Like playing basketball.

*Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.* Even with the heavy pack weighing him down, Shaozhen moved nimbly with the basketball. He practised lay-ups, dribbling and drills all the way home. He imagined himself as his idol, the greatest basketball legend in China: Yaoming. Shaozhen would sometimes fantasise about life as a player in the NBA – flying in private jets, signing autographs, making friends with the greats, the enormous crowds cheering him on.

*Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.* The ball struck the hard dirt of the road that led to Hongsha, one of eight small villages surrounding Xifeng that were set in the valley of the Song mountains. Near Xifeng, the main road was paved, lined with humble shops, apartment blocks and some

small houses. As he got closer to his village, the shops and houses gave way to sprawling fields and farmland.

On the other side of Hongsha, the road wound up the looming mountains and past some of the most remote villages of Henan, dotted along the mountainsides. Beyond those mountains lay the province of Shanxi. While the villagers went into Xifeng often, there was little reason to venture up the mountains and deeper into the countryside – they were removed enough as it was.

Hongsha seemed deserted when Shaozhen strode through the concrete gate with the words ‘Hongsha Village, Xifeng Township’ emblazoned in dull brass letters across the top. It was home to just under fifty families, most of them farmers. The village’s three shops were closed for the day, the primary school was silent, and there was a padlock across the iron bars in front of the village headquarters.

As he walked towards home, Shaozhen could hear chatter and laughter coming from the houses, rising above the loud and constant barking of some village dog. The weather was unseasonably warm, and many of the villagers were spending their evening outside on their stoops. Shaozhen weaved through the alleys. He nodded at the two old women squatting down and gossiping as they peeled vegetables and mashed ganshu, sweet potato, in a large bowl. He hurried past the billowing of smoke coming from a group of old men, smoking cigarettes and swapping stories in the dim moonlight.

Shaozhen turned the corner and stepped into the darkness of the tree-lined path that led home; the bright white light from his house beckoned at the end. A slight rustling came from one of the trees. He stopped in his tracks and pivoted slowly, seeking out its source.

A small form rocketed out of the trees and almost knocked Shaozhen off his feet.

‘Shaozhen, gege, big brother!’ The boy barely came to Shaozhen’s waist. He gazed up at him with big round eyes and wrapped his arms around Shaozhen’s skinny legs.

Shaozhen laughed and handed the boy his basketball, then picked him up and tossed him over his shoulder so that Xiaoping’s head dangled upside down across his back.

‘Wah, wow, Xiaoping! You’re getting heavy, little man!’ The boy shrieked with delight as Shaozhen took off. He carried Xiaoping to the end of the path and deposited him on the ground.

‘Are you being good for Auntie Wu?’

The boy nodded.

‘High five,’ Shaozhen offered, and Xiaoping slapped him on the palm before scampering back up the path. Shaozhen smiled and turned back to the line of houses. They were set away from the main residences in the village at the base of a hill. When Shaozhen had been young, the cluster of five families had formed their own mini-community in the village. But over the years the other houses had emptied as their residents moved away and their little cluster had diminished to just his family and Auntie Wu’s.

Hot steam drifted from the vent cut into the roof of the humble hut that Shaozhen called home. His house had thick, strong walls and a high-quality tile roof, which his family was particularly proud of. Shaozhen didn't care for the tiles, but he was pleased that he had a room of his own. His father had built an extension when Shaozhen had turned eight after saving enough money for the materials. He had spent most of the New Year holiday stacking mud bricks and sealing up holes, working well into the night so that Shaozhen could have his own room by the morning.

Shaozhen had been ecstatic when his father showed the room to him. It was only wide enough to fit a single bed, with a small window looking out over the pigpen, but Shaozhen didn't mind any of that, it was a room of his very own. He whooped and hollered like he had won the NBA finals. But before he even finished moving his few belongings into his new room, his father had taken his bags and rushed to catch the midday train back to Guangzhou so he could start work again the next morning.

Shaozhen quickened his pace, his arms looping the basketball behind his back. The sound of voices and clanking dishes could be heard from inside the mud walls. 'Ma must be making something delicious,' he thought and his stomach rumbled in agreement.

'Lu Shaozhen.' Auntie Wu was sweeping the front step of her house, two doors to the right.

'Auntie Wu. Wah, what a modern haircut!' Her white hair was done up in a fresh perm that she would have

gotten in Pingdingshan, the closest 'prefecture-level' city to Hongsha. Aunt Wu was one of the few villagers who ever journeyed further than Xifeng.

She patted her head with pride. 'You know how to make an old lady feel good.' At fifty-five, Aunt Wu was actually one of the younger members of the village and she was still tough as the strongest niu, ox. 'You're done with school?' she asked.

'Until next year!' Shaozhen declared, putting on a confident smile. The year had been particularly challenging and he hoped he had passed and could move on to the next level. He tried to forget Master Chen's stern face and warning. There would be nothing more embarrassing than getting left behind by his peers. His best friend, Kang, had been smarter than everyone in their grade. He'd already advanced to the next level and was now one year ahead of Shaozhen.

A squeal of laughter came from the path where Xiaoping was hiding among the trunks of the tall native plane trees.

'Xiaoping is getting big.'

Aunt Wu pressed her lips into a thin line as she watched her grandson play. 'He is. By the time his parents come back to visit, he'll be so big, they won't even recognise him,' she said in a sombre tone.

Shaozhen swallowed. Xiaoping was just three years old. *How long has it been since he's seen his ma and ba?*

'You're a lucky boy, Shaozhen.' Aunt Wu wiped the sweat from her brow. 'Your ma and nainai take good care of you. Don't forget it.'

‘I won’t, Auntie.’ He bid Auntie Wu farewell and hurried to his door.

‘Ma! Nainai! I’m back!’ Shaozhen threw the door open with a sharp bang, sending a gust of wind through the room.

‘Aiyah, oh my, shut the door, you silly egg! All the food will get cold.’ The shrill scolding came from a lanky, rail-thin girl around his age.

‘Don’t be such a sourpuss, Yangyang,’ Shaozhen retorted, stomping into the room as he bounced the ball in front of him, nearly knocking over the wobbly stand that held the family TV.

‘Baobei, precious son, you’re home.’ The gentle, soothing voice belonged to Ma. Her stout form was hunched over the muhuolu, wood-burning stove, that stood next to an ice chest set up in the corner of a cluttered room; this served as the cooking area. In addition to the stand with the TV, the only furniture in the room was a single lumpy lounge chair and a wooden cabinet with a glass door that held a few framed pictures. A small folded table with a stack of wooden stools in front of it was pushed up against the wall. There was a tower of plastic basins that Ma kept for washing up. A lone fluorescent tube flickered from the ceiling, the single source of electric light in their modest home.

‘Did you pass all of your exams?’ Ma asked. ‘Master Chen said you had a lot of catching up to do.’

Shaozhen could sense the urgency in Ma’s voice. He tried not to grimace. ‘I guess so. I won’t know for a couple more weeks.’

His mother's face crumpled but she forced a smile. 'I hope you thanked Master Chen for all the extra time he put in.'

Shaozhen shrugged, hoping she would drop the subject, and peered over her shoulder, more interested in the delicious smell of the cooking. 'Mutton?' His mouth was already watering. He loved his ma's cooking. As far as he was concerned her yucaï was the best in all of Henan.

'Your favourite.' She used a short metal spoon to stir the sauce in the pan. She pushed away a few loose strands of her blunt-cut hair before tasting the sauce, then held the spoon out to her son.

Shaozhen licked the sauce; it was tangy with a bit of fire, just the way he liked it. He smiled wide and Ma's bright eyes crinkled with satisfaction.

She checked the crackling wood burning beneath the stove then began scooping rice out of their electric rice cooker, one of the many gifts that Shaozhen's father had brought them from the city.

'Wah, what's the special occasion?' Shaozhen asked. The Lu family usually ate noodles, not rice, because they were cheaper and easier to prepare.

'Your homecoming of course, my emerging scholar. You haven't been home for a few weeks,' Ma said gently as she ladled rice into the chipped bowls. Shaozhen bristled with pride. 'And...I have some news. Big news. But for now, help Yangyang set up the table.'



# Two



**Shaozhen gripped the edge** of the folding table and dragged it into the middle of the room, the legs scraping against the packed earth floor. Yangyang took the four bowls that Ma had laid out and placed them around the table, one on each side. Shaozhen grabbed the stools while Yangyang added a neat pair of kuaizi, chopsticks, to each setting.

‘Wah. What a feast.’ Nainai, Shaozhen’s paternal grandmother, emerged from the room she shared with Yangyang. Ma and Ba had the third bedroom, but Shaozhen’s father only came home for the New Year holidays once a year.

Nainai came over and pinched Shaozhen on the cheek with her bony fingers. ‘Like a dumpling. Too much studying has made you soft, Shaozhen.’ The teen made a face but knew better than to respond. Nainai was small in stature but her fury was known to rival the biggest monsoons.

‘Aunty,’ Yangyang said to Shaozhen’s mother,

‘I’ve finished setting the table. Here, let me help you with the rest of the food.’ The girl brushed past Shaozhen, pausing to stick her tongue out at him on her way to the stove. He made a face to her back. Like many of the village children, Shaozhen was an only child and he was mostly grateful for it – imagine if he had a sibling like Yangyang!

Ting Yangyang had moved in with the Lu family just after winter last year. She’d come all the way from Sichuan, two provinces over, after her last grandmother had passed away. Yangyang’s parents were migrant workers in the same factory as Shaozhen’s father. When Ma had heard about the Ting family’s misfortune, she had immediately offered to help. ‘In this day, with all the parents in the cities and the children at home, family is more important than ever. Without family, how is anyone supposed to survive?’ She had made Yangyang part of their family, and was now raising her alongside her own son. Her parents wrote Yangyang the occasional letter and she had visited them in the city once, but she never seemed to miss them.

Since she’d arrived with her bundles of belongings and messy plaits, Yangyang had done her best to make herself useful around the Lu house, helping with the chores and even out in the fields. She called Shaozhen’s ma ‘Aunty’ and his nainai ‘Laobo’. She chose not to study, even though Ma had done her best to coax her into middle school with Shaozhen. ‘What can’t I learn from the land and life experience?’ she had challenged.

To Shaozhen, Yangyang was more than strange. She spoke a different dialect and her skin was much, much darker than that of any of the other girls from the village. She moved differently too, like a niu, not a girl. Sometimes, Shaozhen and the other boys teased her. He'd noticed her feet were flat and her toes splayed out, like webbing on a frog. Shaozhen told Kang and some of the others to call her 'Frog Feet', just to annoy her, but she didn't seem to care.

'You're such a good helper, Yangyang.' Ma was balancing the plate of mutton and another plate of vegies in her worn, knobby hands. 'I don't know what I would do without you. Shaozhen, be a good boy and help carry some plates.'

It was his turn to stick his tongue out at Yangyang as he made his way into the cooking area. She rolled her eyes.

Yangyang placed the simple dishes down on the table. In addition to the braised mutton, there were some ludou, green beans, and huangdouya, soybean sprouts, stir-fried and topped with cong, spring onions, and a bowl of lajiao, chilli, on the side. Being from Sichuan, Yangyang liked her food spicy while the rest of the family preferred a milder taste. The four of them sat at the table and Shaozhen snapped his chopsticks together, feeling ravenous.

'Wah, Lu Shaozhen, your mother spoils you rotten. You always pick the best cuts for yourself. The rest of us just eat gristle.' Yangyang remarked as she watched him pinch meat onto his bowl. 'Do they teach you manners in school?'

Shaozhen went red in the face. 'You're so ugly, like a toad,' he retorted. 'You're never going to find a husband.'

Yangyang just smiled and plunged her chopsticks into the food, picking up a few juicy pieces of mutton to pile onto Nainai's bowl. Yangyang never reacted to anything Shaozhen said, no matter how nasty he tried to be.

'You're going to have to be extra kind to each other, from now on. I have something to tell you,' said Ma.

Shaozhen was slurping ludou into his mouth but he stopped. The vegetable hung from his lips like tentacles. He swallowed them quickly. 'What is it?' He felt a tightness in his stomach and it definitely wasn't from the delicious food.

Ma sighed and set her chopsticks down. She looked from Shaozhen to Yangyang to her mother-in-law and then back to Shaozhen. 'I'm joining Ba in Guangzhou. There's a new position in the factory and they're willing to give me a trial.' She forced a smile. 'It pays thirty fen an hour. That's good money.'

A lump formed in Shaozhen's stomach and he hastily shoved some huangdouya into his mouth. His mother was leaving.

He wasn't that surprised. It wasn't the first time she had gone to the city for work. The last time she'd left, he'd just been seven years old and she'd gone to Chengdu to be a cleaner at the public bathhouses. But she had gotten very sick, an infection from the chemicals, and her leg had swollen to twice its size, thick with pus. She had come home after just three months and

she'd hugged Shaozhen so tight he could hardly breathe, promising him that she would never leave again.

Of course, that was six years ago and he was much older now. He knew he should be okay with his mother's decision. Because of the rules of hukou, the national residency system, lots of children were left behind in the villages with their elderly grandparents. In fact, his ma was one of the only mothers still left in the village. Most of his friends' parents had left for the city years ago, including his best friend Kang's. Shaozhen hadn't been 'left-behind' to grow up on his own, like Kang or Xiaoping.

He remembered Auntie Wu's remark: *'You're a lucky boy, Shaozhen.'*

Right now, he wasn't too sure she was right.

'That's very good money,' Yangyang said. 'Per hour is better than when they pay per piece.' Yangyang's parents had spent a good three years working at different factories in Guangzhou before they had arrived at the garment factory that Shaozhen's father worked at.

'The harvest isn't looking so plentiful this year. It will be better if I work,' Ma said.

'Yes, it will. There hasn't been rain in months,' Nainai complained. 'We're not going to have much of a harvest. The young people are all leaving, and this village is as good as dead.'

'Hush, Popo. Let's not be dramatic.' There was no mistaking the worry in Ma's expression. But she smiled again and looked at her only son.

'What do you think, Shaozhen?' she asked softly.

Shaozhen set his kuaizi down beside his bowl and gazed at his mother. 'Guangzhou's a long way away,' he said with his mouth full. 'It's almost a day's travel by train.'

'Nineteen hours. Your ba says the city is crowded and dirty, worse than Chengdu,' she added with a frown. 'But the money will be nice. Maybe we can send you to a top-ranked senior school or even university. Imagine that!'

Shaozhen lowered his head and returned to his food.

'Well?' She laid a hand on his wrist. Her eyes were big and round, her expression beseeching.

Shaozhen gave his mother a small smile. 'I think you should go. You can keep Ba company. I know he misses you.' He ignored the knot in his stomach and grinned. 'Maybe I can visit sometime.'

His mother looked relieved. 'Of course you can,' she said as she squeezed his arm.

'When do you leave?' he asked.

'Tomorrow morning,' was her strained reply.

They ate the rest of the meal in silence.



# Three



**The next morning, Shaozhen** refused to be sad. His mother had found a job in the city and she could be with his father. They would have more money and that meant he might be able to continue with school. Then he wouldn't have to be a farmer and be stuck in the village forever. This was all good, so why was there this niggling knot in the pit of his stomach?

Ma was up before sunrise, packing the battered suitcase with the broken wheel that his father had left behind. 'I'll have to get a new one in the city for when I visit. I'll be bringing lots of presents,' she said to her son, trying to lighten the mood. She folded up the few sets of clothes that she owned. With a couple of pairs of shoes, a frayed towel and toiletries, they barely took up half the space in the suitcase.

Nainai had stayed up all night preparing her son's favourite foods. She'd wrapped paper plates in plastic wrap and stacked them in a bag. 'The city is too busy. You two won't have time to cook,' she said as she

knotted the bag at the top and shoved it into Ma's hands. The handles at the top of the bag were uneven so the bottom plate was slanted. The whole thing smelled like garlic. Shaozhen wondered how Ma would keep it from tipping over in the train.

Ma hugged Nainai and Yangyang. 'Take care of my Shaozhen,' she instructed them both.

Usually, Shaozhen squirmed in protest whenever his ma tried to hug him. This time, he stood stiffly as his mother wrapped her soft arms around him and squeezed him so tightly he thought his ribs would crack.

'Be good, my baobei. I will call and write whenever I can.'

Shaozhen felt his lower lip tremble. 'Take care of Ba,' he finally managed.

And she was off, a jacket tied around her thick waist, the wonky wheel rattling as she dragged her suitcase down the path, Nainai's bag of pungent food balanced precariously on top.



Feeling a bit unstuck, Shaozhen grabbed his basketball from his bedroom, hoping he could find some friends and set up a game.

He went up the tree-lined path from his home to the heart of the village. A few chickens skittered between the houses, bobbing their heads. The maze of alleyways was abuzz with villagers going about their day. Most of the able-bodied farmers had gone to their fields. The ailing elderly were left to tend to

the small private gardens scattered throughout the village.

‘One, two, three, four...’ The rhythm and bounce of the ball was soothing and Shaozhen counted out each step. He liked to be in control, to feel the familiar texture of the rubber on the pads of his fingers, knowing what force the ball would bounce back with and how to send it hurtling to the earth once again. Everything was predictable and he didn’t have to pretend he was okay.

He focused on the ball, trying to erase the image of Ma leaving, broken suitcase in tow. But it didn’t work. In his mind, she was still heading out the door, slipping away, and his feet moved swiftly to follow, dribbling faster.

Shaozhen was running now, his shoes pounding the earth, sending up dust. He ran until he felt like he had left a bit of his uneasiness somewhere far behind him.

As he rounded a corner near the centre of the village, he spotted a thin boy in pants that were far too short for him. The boy was rolling up the door to a rickety wooden shack that sat among a cluster of houses. Shaozhen smiled and rushed over.

‘Kang!’

His friend turned, pushing his thick spectacles up his nose. ‘Shaozhen.’ The glasses were cracked at the bridge and held together with bits of twine. Kang was the only person Shaozhen knew in the village who needed to wear glasses.

‘Kang, let me help you,’ Shaozhen said, as he reached up to unfurl the faded red awning that hung over the

doorway to the shop. He noticed Kang had his school backpack, the corner of a worn book poking out the zippered front. 'Wah, Kang, we just finished school and you're *still* studying?'

Kang shrugged. He was used to being teased about his bookish ways. He went into the shop, grabbing a broom and using the handle to push up the flimsy awning, then secured it by wrapping a piece of twine around a rusty nail. 'I like reading,' he said simply. 'Besides, I have a lot to do if I'm headed for senior school next year.'

'Aw, come on, I was just saying you need a break. Don't want to hurt that big head of yours.' Shaozhen felt bad. Their mothers were best friends as well and they had started playing together when they were Xiaoping's age. They had spent hours on elaborate games: Shaozhen would pretend to be an imperial warrior and Kang, the emperor's scholar. Together the two boys had saved China from warlords and foreign invaders countless times.

But then Kang's parents had gone to nearby Zhengzhou, and later all the way to Beijing for work. They were back in Chengdu now, but they rarely saw their only son. Shaozhen had noticed his friend change: Kang stopped laughing and playing games with him. He'd had been left under the watchful eye of his strict gung, grandfather, Lao Zhu, who didn't have time for fun. He was in poor health and couldn't work in the fields, so he had opened a xiaomaibu, corner store, instead. There was already a general store and a snack shop in Hongsha, the only established businesses, and

unfortunately the pair didn't sell much. For the most part, they relied on a tiny vegetable patch for food, along with the money that Kang's parents sent them every month.

Kang moved a display of packaged snacks and potato sticks, Dabaitu brand candies and instant noodles, up to the front of the store. Shaozhen was pretty sure the same ones had been hanging from the hooks since Lao Zhu had first opened the shop eight years ago. The rest of the shelves held sacks of fertiliser, two shiny wheelbarrows and dusty farm tools.

'Where's your gung?' Shaozhen asked, peering into the cramped shack.

'He had business in Xifeng.'

Shaozhen's eyes lit up. 'Hey, that's great! We can have a game of one on one. I'll teach you some moves.' Kang had never really cared for basketball, but Shaozhen was hoping that he could be persuaded.

'Nah, I have to look after the shop.' Kang grabbed a plastic stool, set it beside the display of snacks and reached for his backpack.

'Come on,' Shaozhen whined. 'You can close up for a few hours. How would your gung even know?'

Kang shrugged. He settled onto the stool and grabbed his book out of his bag. 'He'll know. He always does.' He opened the thick book and started to read.

'What are you studying?'

'Physics,' Kang said without looking up. 'The headmaster lent me the book for next year. If I get ahead, I can probably go to senior school in the city. He said

if I'm good enough I might even get a scholarship.' He lost himself in his book, leaving his friend standing awkwardly outside.

Shaozhen toyed with the ball, passing it back and forth between his cupped palms. 'My mother left this morning,' he blurted out. 'She's gone to Guangzhou with my father.' He laughed nervously. 'I guess that makes me a left-behind now, like you.'

Finally, Kang lifted his head. His huge round eyes blinked behind his thick lenses and he frowned. 'I'm sorry.' His words were tender and heartfelt.

Shaozhen took a deep breath. He opened his mouth a few times, but no words came out so he just shrugged.

'Okay, book nerd,' Shaozhen said, 'I hope you get your scholarship.' He walked away. That weird feeling in the pit of his stomach was back. He had been looking forwards to finishing school and spending more time playing basketball than hitting the books, but Ma's sudden departure had changed all that. Shaozhen gritted his teeth and dribbled the ball so hard that at one point it sailed into the air above his head and he missed the rebound.

The basketball court in the village consisted of a simple hoop that had been placed next to the village headquarters alongside a concrete picnic table. There were also some benches and a lone street lamp. These had all been installed only a few years ago. The Village Secretary had called it the Party's great social endeavour, to ensure the local villagers had a recreational space to pass their time. Nainai had complained that it was only

ever used by the old men to play mahjong well into the early hours of the morning.

This morning, the picnic table and the court were both empty. Shaozhen lobbed a few lay-ups and practised shooting some free throws. His eyes followed the movements of the ball as he analysed the court and mapped out potential plays and strategies, as if he were playing an actual game. Basketball made him feel completely at ease; it was a game he understood in every fibre of his being.

He bent his knees and squared his shoulders, his gaze homing in on the lip of the rim, that sweet spot against the backboard that would allow his shot to cascade down into the hoop.

A rattle and a trundle – and the ball went in. There was no net but Shaozhen could still imagine the swish.

*And the crowd goes wild!* Shaozhen threw his fists into the air. He waved to his pretend fans, and hummed the tune that the Americans had created for the NBA star Yaoming, and sang his own name.

*Shaozhen. Shaozhen. Shaozhen. Shaozhen. Shaozhen.*

‘Shaozhen!’ That wasn’t a voice in his head. It was his nainai, calling to him from the road. Her thin limbs moved with brisk purpose, her mouth corkscrewed into a frown.

‘What do you think you’re doing, loafing about?’ Nainai was just over seventy, and despite her petite frame she still had a stern demeanour and a shrill voice that could evoke obedience from even the most stubborn niu.

She stormed over to Shaozhen and reached up to him with a bony hand.

‘Ow!’ Shaozhen tried to twist away as she latched onto the lobe of his ear. But Nainai held firm as she scolded him.

‘Your mother spoiled you rotten. Her baobei never had to lift a finger in the house as long as he studied. Well, not anymore!’ She marched back to the road, dragging Shaozhen with her.

‘Ow! Nainai, that hurts!’

His protests were ignored. She pulled Shaozhen through the alleyways in the village, past houses and gardens. A few curious heads poked out of the windows to see the boy being admonished by his grandmother. Shaozhen felt his face getting hot as he listened to the villagers sniggering at him.

‘Nainai, please,’ he said feebly, but she didn’t let go until they were almost at the main road that led out of the village.

‘That hurts.’ Shaozhen rubbed his ear but it was more his ego and his pride that needed soothing.

Nainai scoffed. She began picking up tools from a pile that she must have left by the roadside before she had gone to fetch him.

‘I won’t have you lazing about,’ she said. ‘Your whole generation lives in the clouds, your heads messed up with silly dreams. You haven’t done a day’s worth of hard work in your life. Meanwhile, your parents are slaving away in the city.’ She thrust a hoe into Shaozhen’s hands. ‘This stops today. Your grandfather was a farmer and his

grandfather before him. I don't care what your mother says. You're going to learn how to be a farmer too.'

Shaozhen was about to point out that the real jobs were in the city. That he was in school and even if he didn't love studying as much as Kang, he might still be able to go to senior school if he made the grades, even university. All of this was at the tip of his tongue but when he looked into his nainai's eyes, his protests and arguments fell away.

'I've already lost my only son to the city,' she said, her eyes shining. 'I'm not going to let it take my only grandson too.'

Shaozhen had no words, so he just nodded. However he felt about his mother leaving, his grandmother was feeling worse. There was nothing more to say. He fell into obedient step behind her as she headed for the fields.