

GOD'S DOUBLE AGENT

The True Story *of a*
Chinese Christian's Fight *for* Freedom

BOB FU
with Nancy French



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Bob Fu with Nancy French, *God's Double Agent*
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Christianity in China has been confined to the history
section of the museum. It is dead and buried.

JIANG QING, WIFE OF CHAIRMAN MAO

Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

1

It was midnight. I placed my fingers on the bottom of the window and gently, quietly tried to pull it open. But years of paint had cemented it shut, so I held my breath and gave it a sharp yank. It opened at last—but not as silently as I'd hoped. I prayed that none of the police officers stationed by my building's door had decided to take a cigarette walk around the block and that none of my neighbors were awake. If I was going to do this—and survive—there could be no witnesses.

Heidi, my wife, had just left our apartment on the sixth floor, wearing a silk scarf and different clothing than she normally wore. The agents were used to seeing us as a couple, so she'd have a better chance of slipping past them without me. There were three exits to the gigantic building, but the government had shut down two of them when they began watching us. The only remaining exit was next to a room full of security guards who watched our every move. Whenever I left the building, they sent out an alert and another guard would inevitably pick up my trail. I couldn't remember what it was like to be outside in the open air without surveillance.

If Heidi's disguise didn't work, I wouldn't have much time before the agents would be on their way up to the sixth floor to arrest me—but I wouldn't be there. Heidi had purposely

left on the light to mislead the spies into thinking we were still awake and milling around before bed, and I was already on the fifth floor, where I had entered the restroom. Everyone on the floor shared the same bath, and the doors to the restrooms were always unlocked. I looked out the window and couldn't see a thing, but I knew I wasn't getting the full view. My chances of survival would increase with every floor I could safely descend without being detected. I quietly slipped out of the restroom and back into the stairwell, watching the numbers decrease. Fourth floor. Third floor. Second floor. That's where I stopped. The agents were on the first floor, and at this point there was no turning back.

I gently opened the door of the stairwell, looked left and right, and slowly walked down the corridor to the bathroom. I entered a tiny toilet stall and climbed on the ledge of the window, which fortunately was already open. Even though it was August in Beijing, the breeze wafting over the sill sent a chill through me. I placed my feet as close to the edge as possible. The jump was close to twenty feet and though I couldn't see the ground, I knew there was vegetation there to help break my fall. As long as I didn't die or break any major bones, I'd be all right.

After our experience of prison and house arrest, death wasn't the worst option, but now Heidi and I had reason to fight for life. She was pregnant. In China, the government's "one child" policy meant we would be forced to abort our baby because we didn't have the proper permit. Consequently, we weren't celebrating with a baby shower, a new nursery, or by telling our parents they were about to become grandparents. In fact, if we were successful they'd probably never see their grandchild—or us. But we had no choice.

When I looked over the ledge, my glasses slipped down my nose and I pushed them back into place. Using my left hand, I held on to the windowsill, feeling woozy from the height. My legs quivered. Would I be able to do this? What would happen

to Heidi and the baby if I died? I took a deep breath, said a prayer, and stepped into the darkness.

As soon as I left the ledge, I forgot all of my ideas about how to fall strategically. The wind rushed over my face, my stomach shrunk, and I felt I'd left my heart back in the building. I flailed my arms and even though I was desperate to remain silent, a yell escaped from deep within me. It sounded like it was from someone else. My glasses flew off and I vaguely remember reaching up to touch my face before everything went black.

2

My life's journey began even before I was born—when my mother's first husband approached her with a shocking request.

“You and the children need to leave.”

Really, it wasn't a request. It was more of a demand, a desperate plea. They lived in a small house in the Shandong province of southeastern China, in the lower reaches of the Yellow River. The province is bordered by the Bohai Sea and the Yellow Sea, but their small mud home was inland, next to the wheat and corn fields so they could process—and keep watch over—the food supply. Her husband worked a small patch of land in the commune, where they lived with their two small children.

“Where will I go?” she asked, but she didn't wait for the answer. She knew. My mother shuffled around the house and picked up a few things. She could only take what she could carry, and she had to carry the younger child, just a baby, too.

That's how my mother's marriage ended, which is certainly not the way many marriages do—in the west. There were no affairs, no dramatic confrontations. Rather, the government, led by Mao Zedong, had laid its heavy hand on the villagers and strangled the life out of their marriages. In 1958, Mao performed a gigantic cultural and social experiment called the Great Leap Forward—so named because it was the “great leap”

into communism. This meant my mother's husband and all of the other villagers had to give up their private property to live communally. Without personal land, they couldn't farm their own food and had no control over their own food supply. Mao, who introduced his new program by promising his nation, "It is possible to accomplish any task whatsoever," assured everyone he could produce more food through communist techniques. The government built large communal kitchens for the villagers where they would gather to eat every meal. Wonderful weather in the first growing season created much sustenance for the villagers. However, in the following years droughts and floods caused the community grain supplies to run dangerously low. That's when my mother's husband felt he had no choice. "Just go," he told her as she stood there with the kids. "I cannot feed you anymore."

She shuffled through the house one last time, and stole a glance at the bed where she had slept with her husband and kids. The children certainly wouldn't have such comforts on the street. She brushed away a tear. There was no time for such emotion now. The house had no sustenance in it anyway. The large pot that had baked their bread had long sat empty. In fact, the house had been stripped clean of everything valuable, including all metal.

Metal indicated strength, at least according to Mao, who believed a nation with more metal could build more ships, weapons, and buildings. When he ordered that all citizens give up their metal to the state, my mother had dutifully searched through her house for every ounce. She had collected pots, pans, and previously valuable farming tools and taken them to one of the many backyard steel furnaces that had popped up across the countryside. The metal scraps from all the villagers were turned into one large pile of metal, the weight of which was measured and proudly reported to the central government. The reports may have been proud, but the product was pathetic. My family's

few valuable earthly goods weren't turned into battleships. Instead, they were turned into an unusable chunk of trash. These large, worthless piles sat in the villages as supposed symbols of strength, but instead they only symbolized the pain, heartache, and inefficiency of the Great Leap Forward.

They also began to symbolize death.

I don't know whether my mother was heartbroken, angry, or terrified—perhaps a combination of all three—but she took the hand of my older sister, put my brother on her back in a sling, and said, with forced cheerfulness, “Let's go for a walk.”

For close to four years, she walked from one village to another, asking for food from people who couldn't spare it. Millions of people were dying in the Great Leap Forward, some say close to thirty million. That is double the number of people killed in the holocaust.

When there was nothing else available, everyone, including my mother, ate the bark off trees. But eventually that too ran out, and the once-lush countryside was full of naked trees and no vegetation. When winter came, it was even more difficult. One particularly harsh afternoon, my mother trudged through heavy snow for miles, carrying my brother and dragging my sister by the hand. Fighting for every step, they walked slowly, leaving tracks of despair across the frozen countryside. When my mother finally saw a collection of houses off in the distance, she muttered a Chinese proverb under her breath.

“Even a blind donkey can find its way home because of the guidance of heaven.”

Though she was an atheist, she frequently said this proverb when it seemed as if someone were watching out for her and her two children. She'd stayed alive so far because of the kindness of strangers, and she hoped someone in the upcoming village would show her mercy as well. This slight possibility of food was enough to propel her forward through the deep, icy snow.

“Any food to spare?” she asked in the courtyard of a small

house in the village. A kind man offered her a bowl of rice soup and a little bit of shelter from the elements in his courtyard. Though it wasn't much—in fact, it wasn't enough for all three of them—its warmth would help them shake the ever-present chill and possibly help them make it through another night. My mother carefully prepared to offer the broth to her infant son and daughter first. She didn't want to waste a drop.

However, just as the spoon reached the baby's mouth, a rooster came barreling toward them. Mom screamed as the big rooster knocked her down into the snow, biting and scratching at her to drive these unwanted visitors from his yard. After a scuffle, the rooster proved victorious and Mom emerged covered in blood and, even worse, the precious rice soup.

Although my mom and siblings were fighting for life each day, others had it worse. Some people boiled leather to soften it into edible strips. Many of them died as they tried to swallow the leather, and the ones who didn't choke had to ask for help to pry the solid waste from their bodies. People ate mud. Even more shocking, some ate their elderly relatives and children who'd passed away, either from natural causes or murder. In Chinese history textbooks, this time period was known as "Three Years of Natural Disaster," which, of course, hid the government's role in starving its own people. My mother did everything she could to make sure she and her children didn't become just another statistic, a number lost to history.

However, one day she began to cough, like millions of other people who'd become desperately sick because of the paucity of food and the unsanitary living conditions. Her cough got worse and never really went away. Day after day, she struggled for breath and had pain in her chest. Then one day, she coughed up blood. That's how my mother, the only caretaker of two homeless children facing down a famine, realized she had lung disease.

"Even a blind donkey can find its way home because of the guidance of heaven," she said between coughs. For years, she and

the children had survived. She continued to believe something would guide her, even though her circumstances had gotten drastically worse. Someone, somewhere had taken her this far.

And she would go farther. Over the next few months, coughing and gasping, she made her way around the same little region, receiving the kindness of strangers. Eventually, she found a tiny countryside village called Shiziyuan, which meant “Persimmon Garden.” This is where life changed for my mother in a very unlikely way.

“Any food to spare?” she asked, knocking on the door of a small home. The courtyard was full of fragrant persimmon trees. She was just getting ready to turn around and go to the next home when the door opened.

A tiny, hunchbacked man opened the door. He had only one good eye, which he used to assess the desperate visitors on his step. He was Fu Yubo, the village’s bookkeeper.

“This is all I have,” he said, offering bread to her and the children. His compassion on the sick woman with two small children was evident. Not only did he give her food, he also gave her a new life. Before long they married and my mother, after several years of living on the street, had a home. She and her new husband soon had children together. First, they had a baby girl named Qinghua, and then on July 12, 1968, they had me. They named me Xiqiu, which means “Hopeful Autumn,” because July in the Chinese calendar is the fall.

Additionally, parents in the village gave their children nicknames to stave off evil spirits and bad character. Superstitiously, they believed ghosts roamed the countryside looking for children to haunt. They feared ghosts and demons might take a liking to their kids if they had nice-sounding names. Because of this, they created terrible-sounding monikers for their children. Two of my friends, for example, were called “Ugly Leaf” and “Silly Donkey” to make them as unattractive as possible to the spirit world. My nickname was Pianyi, which is translated as “Cheap.”

Everyone believed children would develop qualities that were the opposite of these nicknames, so I imagine my mother wanted me to have a future of soaring wealth and comfort. The indignities of begging impacted her, and she yearned for something better for us. Maybe my nickname would do the trick.

Despite my mother's illness and my father's disability, our lives were so much better. As the youngest child, I was looked after with great care by my parents, brother, and sisters. Our house had a bedroom that we all shared and a sitting room, separated by a small kitchen. The kitchen was always a place of warmth. Mom put flowers around the iron stove. We had vegetables, and flour for bread. After the main meals were cooked, the aroma of freshly baked bread would drift through the small house. We also had a little courtyard surrounded by persimmon trees.

I loved the smell of those trees as much as the smell of bread. They had glossy, broad leaves and bark like the hide of an alligator. As a small child, I would climb those trees and select the perfect persimmon specimens. The yellow persimmons weren't ripe, but the red ones . . . those were ready. I held them to the sun and looked at the sky through them like kaleidoscopes. The sky looked crimson through the ripe, tender fruit. When I think of my childhood, I can taste the sugary and tangy flavor and smell the spring flowers that attracted big honeybees.

Dad kept the books for the entire village. He walked to work every day with his hands clasped behind his back, like a man on a mission, moving so fast I couldn't keep up with him. He worked all day and came home in the evenings, making the equivalent of an American dime per day. He was quite adept with the *suàn

án*, a calculating tool used in China for thousands of years, known in other areas as an abacus. His hands moved over the beads like magic. He could add, subtract, and even divide with the beads. Dividing was very complicated but his hands did not falter as he calculated the harvests and determined the

amount of food each family would receive. Though he only had six years of education, he was considered a rather educated man. He even read to me in the evenings before I went to bed.

Harvest time was the busiest season for everyone. Because agriculture was collective under Communist law, farmers couldn't grow for themselves. Instead, they grew for the government. The farmers harvested the wheat and the corn and took it to another location to process for distribution. Dad was in charge of distributing the shares of food according to head count and production, and gave families a piece of paper, similar to a coupon, which allowed them to get food like wheat, corn, sweet potatoes, and potato chips. After all of that intense work, the workers gathered to share a meal during the night. Sometimes, because they respected my father, they let me eat with them too.

Dad, because of his position, had the ability to give the poorer families a little extra without being detected. We were poor, but there were people even worse off than we were—much worse.

In particular, the Communist leader Mao hated former landlords, because of their “capitalistic” past. Absolutely despised, millions were murdered or driven to suicide. The few who still lived endured lives of absolute humiliation and persecution. One of our neighbors was known as an “enemy of the people,” as the government had labeled him.

Back then, the village children called any older man “Grandpa” as a sign of respect, even if he wasn't actually related. I didn't see any difference between my family and the family of this Grandpa, who didn't seem to deserve the harsh treatment he received. But every morning, when the sun was barely up, I heard the party secretary of the village bark out his name.

“Get up!” he would shout. “It's time to sweep the street!”

After a few moments, I'd hear the sound of the old man's door opening and shutting. He and the other former landlords swept every square foot of the village each morning. My parents were full of compassion toward his family. Every evening, my

mother would make a little extra food, wrap it up in a cloth, and hand it to me with a whispered warning. “Don’t get caught.”

I knew the stakes.

If I got caught, the authorities would destroy my family. Instead of being afraid, however, I was invigorated and perfected my nightly secret food missions down to a science. I would hold on to the food as long as I could, then slip out of my home as quietly as possible.

Casually, I would walk down the road, looking to my left and to my right. If I saw someone near me, I would meander away from my neighbor’s home. Sometimes this process would be quick. Most of the time, however, my caution caused me to stroll through the night as I made sure of one thing: that I was utterly alone. Only then would I slide the food under their door with as little motion as possible before scampering back home, my heart racing.

I was never detected.

My parents helped many people in the village, and word of their hospitality quickly spread. Every day, a beggar would knock on our door.

“Pianyi,” Mom instructed me from her bed. “Bring food for them—get the best we have.” Only the revered people in society, parents and elder villagers, could address me using my nickname. If my friends or peers called me “Cheap,” it would be a real dishonor. But when my mom called me that, it was a sign of affection and even hope, especially when her hopes of my future comfort were juxtaposed with the beggars at our door.

Though we scarcely had enough for ourselves, we always managed to have enough to share just a little with a courtyard full of beggars. I served them the best we had to offer and listened to their stories as they ate their food. Sometimes they laughed as they told their tales of woe, but sometimes they wept. Because my own mother had been a beggar, their stories of poverty

penetrated my heart. There, in my courtyard, is where I learned compassion. It's also where I learned resistance.



Sadly, my parents' generosity came at a great cost. Both of them had true hearts for the poor, but they frequently gave away much-needed food. Financial stress is said to be one of the greatest causes of marital strife. Add disability and an oppressive government into the mix, and things really get hard. At night, my sister Qinghua and I would huddle in the sitting room and hear them arguing through the thin walls. The shrill bitterness scared me. When things got really bad, however, the quarrelling didn't stop with shouts in the night. That's when my mom would wake my sister and me, grab our hands, and say, "We're going!"

Sleepily, we would put on our shoes and trudge out the door, up and down hills, and through graveyards on our way to my maternal grandmother's house. She lived fifteen miles away and was my mom's safe haven whenever she and my dad fought. In the moonlight, our feet sometimes faltered. We tried not to cry. After a few miles, however, Mom's anger would give in to fatigue and she'd kneel down and weep with us. We never made it all the way to our grandmother's house in one night. The distance was too far and our legs were too short.

My mother would knock on the doors of complete strangers in the middle of the night. "Do you have a place for me and my two children to stay?" she would ask. Nothing scared her. Years of begging had created a hard shell around her. Me? I was a different story. I wanted to be home, in bed, with our whole family, in peace. But that was elusive. Oh, we'd go back. After a time, Mom would calm down and we'd begin the long walk home. Things would generally be the same, but Mom struggled. Gradually, it was like the strong survival instincts that had kept her alive during her years of begging on the street evaporated.

Formerly a strong, determined woman, she seemed to have lost the will to fight through her hard life.

A few times she tried to commit suicide. There were no guns to end life quickly, no sleeping pills to pass unconscious into death. Once she ran to a well used for the community's water source, and we had to convince her not to jump. During another bout of her sadness, my sister and I ran around the kitchen, confiscated all the knives from the drawers, and buried them in the backyard.

Her life was challenging. Without any medical care for her lung disease, she never could quite catch her breath. But the worst part was her cough.

"Go down to the garden and bring me a sweet potato," she'd tell me, between heaves.

Absent any real medicine, she felt that somehow a steamed sweet potato seemed to settle her throat.

But even when her coughing subsided, she laid in our bed, called a *kang*, which was made of baked mud and concrete. It was connected with the kitchen stove in the next room. Heat transferred through the bed and warmed the room without having to build a fire. My mom was on one side of the bed, and my father slept on the other. We stuffed ourselves between them. Believe it or not, this was cozy, especially in the winter when the kitchen stove kept us all warm.

Mom, however, was in agony. She'd spit the mucus from her lung infection onto the floor all day. Whenever I heard her begin a particularly bad coughing fit, I would grab a shovel and run to her bedside. My job was to scoop up the spit off the floor to take it outside. And then one day, as my mother's health deteriorated, my dad woke up in the morning with a terrible realization. He was paralyzed.

For two full years, he joined my mom in the *kang*, not able to work. This left us without an income. We had some food to eat, but we had to ration it so strictly my stomach never felt full. Once

I walked by the community kitchen where people were preparing food for the harvesters. Since my father couldn't work, he couldn't be part of the harvest festivities. That day, an aroma seized me. They were making fritters, long pastries made of special dough. After they're fried, the little confections are light and airy, almost hollow inside. I instantly desired them above all else. Since I was so little, I decided, I could probably get into the kitchen without anyone seeing me. I stood outside the kitchen acting nonchalant. My heart was beating fast, but at the right moment I slipped into the kitchen and found an entire stash of these sweet treats. I ate them like a wild animal, one after the other, hoping I wouldn't get caught. No one noticed, and I walked home with—for the first time in a very long time—a full stomach.



Every few months, the government would set up a projector to show a movie. It was a major social event, because the producers had to cross dangerous mountains and rivers to travel to all of the small Chinese villages. Roads in our impoverished region were challenging to navigate and were only accessible via bicycle or horseback. I don't recall ever seeing a car in my childhood. We rarely had visitors of any kind. That's why everyone, especially the children, really anticipated the arrival of the movies. The movies were usually stories about Communist Party heroes, but we loved them. The movies were advertised for weeks in advance, so the children got up early to put chairs in the best spots. One morning, I woke up early enough to snag a premiere spot for my little chair, right in the front row.

As the sky darkened enough for the movie to begin, I left my sick parents at home and made my way to the movie site. The other kids had the same idea I'd had, and we settled in for the night's festivities. For whatever reason, probably because they noticed my clothes were tattered and threadbare, the other kids made fun of me that night.

“Look at Xiqiu’s clothes,” one boy in a group of my friends laughed, pointing at me as the movie began. We never had new clothes. Neighbors gave us their old clothes, and our hand-me-downs were mended with obvious patches.

“Are you sure that’s a shirt, or is it just some threads trying to cover his little chest?” another piped in.

I didn’t listen to them and looked straight ahead, trying to pay attention to the movie. When I finally got to the point where I could tune them out, however, I suddenly felt a warm sensation on my back. They had gathered together and urinated on me.

As I walked home, my sticky clothes clinging to me, my heart ached.

Why did people have to treat us with so little respect? We were already poor and without social status. Why, on top of that, did we also have to deal with such mockery? Poverty, I decided, was the reason we suffered. As long as I didn’t have money, people were going to bully me. On that walk home from the mobile movie, I made a decision. I needed to become a millionaire. The fact that I was a urine-soaked peasant didn’t deter me. Education was highly prized in China, and after Mao’s reign, could be a road out of poverty. If I studied diligently, perhaps I could get into college and make enough money to get rich and support my family.

When I was eight years old, I went to a Communist Party–controlled school where I learned about reading, writing, and atheism. Studying was easy for me because I had a knack for quickly understanding issues and remembering facts. Also, my teachers recognized leadership qualities in me and appointed me classroom monitor year after year. This was a prestigious title because presumably it was always given to the most responsible student in each class who could maintain order if the teacher stepped out, report anyone who dared to break a rule in the teacher’s absence, make sure everyone worked, and help out the teacher in the classroom.

I loved the attention.

“Xiqiu.” My teacher called me to the front of the class toward the end of fourth grade. “You’ve been a very good student. You’re very capable and eager to work.” I tried not to stick out my chest in pride, but this made me feel very special. Then he said something very surprising. “In fact, I’m going to hold you back so you can do another year in my class. You will repeat fourth grade.” We were taught to never question the teacher. So when the headmaster visited our classroom later that day, I was silent as my teacher pulled him aside soberly. “Xiqiu has some terrible hearing problems, so he hasn’t understood very much academically this year,” he said. “I recommend he repeat this grade.”

Of course, I could hear just fine. But what made me valuable to the teacher was that I could run errands. Instead of progressing into the fifth grade with my friends, I repeated the fourth grade to essentially become my teacher’s unpaid personal assistant. For example, when his mother needed wine, I traveled to town and bartered for it. My teacher was taking advantage of me. Who was I, after all? However, in that culture, it was considered a privilege to work for the teacher and his mother, so I actually enjoyed it. After all, not many fourth graders could barter like me.



But the joys of school never quite isolated me from the problems at home. One afternoon, I came home and heard my mom coughing. I grabbed my shovel and ran in to her, ready to perform my normal clean-up duty. This time, it sounded different. Her cough was relentless and overpowering. In fact, as I watched her double over in pain, I knew one thing. She was dying.

I can’t remember how long it took Qinghua to come home, but it seemed like she’d never arrive.

“Mother is dying,” I whispered, as I ran out to meet her in the courtyard. “What do we do?”

Of course, we had very few options. Actual doctors wouldn't come all the way out to our area, and we definitely couldn't afford to travel hours away to the county hospital. Our only source of medical help was a local "barefoot doctor," who wasn't a doctor at all. In fact, barefoot doctors got their name because they were farmers who worked without shoes in the rice paddies and just did the best they could to treat villagers' basic ailments in their spare time.

My sister dropped her books and we ran to our local barefoot doctor's home. "Help us, please," she called from the courtyard. He and his wife opened their door and looked at our tearstained faces and our tattered clothing. With one glance, they knew we weren't good for the bill. The doctor, completely absent of regret or any other emotion, shook his head no. I cried, kneeling in front of the main gate, but the door began to close.

"I offer myself to you!" my sister said, desperately trying to figure out a way to entice them. "I'll work in your fields during harvest time for free! I'll pay you back!" They didn't even acknowledge her offer before they slammed their door in our faces, leaving us to deal with the impending death of our mother alone.

"We can't stay together," my sister said, getting up and dusting off her knees. "I'm going to go find help in the next village. Go home to check on Mom, while I see if another doctor will have mercy on us." The nearest barefoot doctor was three miles away, in my eldest sister's village.

I watched her hurry away as I ran back home to Mom. My heart pounded with every step. But when I opened the gate, I stopped right beside large bales of hay stacked for winter. What would I find when I went inside? Would my mother be dead? If not, how could I break the news that the doctor wouldn't be bothered with her because we couldn't pay?

Overcome with emotion and fear, I stood completely still. Confucius had hailed from my Shandong region more than two thousand years ago, but his philosophies offered no personal

god to whom I could appeal. Mao's communism certainly didn't allow for any divine helpers. The only "faith" we had in the village was a collection of superstitions, and we'd tried them all.

For example, when both my parents were bedridden they asked my sister to take a glass bottle and walk ten miles to a mountainous area. There, she took the lid off the bottle, put water in it, knelt on the mountain, and prayed to the gods along with thousands of other people also desperately seeking a solution to their various problems. She burned incense and even money to appease the gods. Then she explained our predicament to whatever supernatural deity might've been floating by.

"Mom has lung disease; my dad can't walk," Qinghua had said. She hoped a god might hear her and, according to superstition, send a sign from heaven by dropping something into the water: a twig, ashes, anything that wasn't there when she arrived. She prayed mightily, and opened her eyes. To her delight, a miracle had occurred—there were ashes floating in the bottle! Quickly, she put on the top to protect the magic water and ran home to my parents. "Drink!" she yelled as she pushed the bottle into their faces.

Of course, as promising as dirty water in a bottle sounds, it didn't have the healing powers we'd hoped. And so Mom tried other superstitious rituals. She had a ritual that consisted of bowing down to the floor, flat on her face, seven times in a row. Then she got up, took seven steps, and did it again. Starting at our home, she'd sometimes make it all the way out to the street, bowing over and over. When she got home, her head would sometimes be bleeding because she bowed so low and with so much passion.

Apparently, the gods rewarded her piety with pain.

It all seemed slightly odd to me. Of course, if you have an open bottle of water near thousands of people burning incense, you might have some sort of ashes fall into the bottle. But I never

said, “The emperor has no clothes.” I wanted it to work. Faith, no matter what its object, might help a bit.

As I stood next to the hay, however, I knew in my heart that the superstitions were powerless. That’s when my mother’s proverb came to mind: “Even a blind donkey can find its way home because of the guidance of heaven.” After years of hearing her say this, I wondered if maybe—just maybe—there was someone in heaven who might actually be able to guide and protect me.

For the second time that day, I fell to my knees. But this time I wasn’t asking a heartless barefoot doctor for help. Right there, beside the hay bales, I called out to my *tian*, which means “heaven,” and *laoye*, which means “grandpa,” to indicate respect for elder people.

“Heavenly Grandpa,” I said, “I’m so scared, and I don’t want my mom to die. Please . . .” I wasn’t even sure of what to say, but I hoped whoever was up there might extend his hand to help, if I asked earnestly. “Please help my mother.”

It was my first prayer.

After getting up, I grabbed my shovel and went into my mother’s room. She was in even worse condition than when we left her, so I sat by her side, shoveling up mucus and spit, until my sister came back. When she returned with a barefoot doctor in tow, I cried out in relief.

He rushed to my mother’s side, gave her some sort of herbal remedy, and told us how to take care of her. He didn’t have much to offer, but we obeyed every one of his instructions to the letter. He was all we had. My mother amazingly recovered and somehow managed to survive this episode.

Deep down, I couldn’t shake the feeling that maybe my secret “Heavenly Grandpa” had something to do with it.