

This pandemic reminds me of the Tangshan Earthquake in 1976 in China, when I was a child. Now that I am a parent with a child of the same age, I can relate to how my parents experienced back then from a completely different perspective. Though times and conditions are different, the perseverance and resilience are the same. We will go through this.



When the earthquake hits after mid-night, I have no idea what's happening, as I have never experienced anything like it in my merely seven years of life. I just feel the room is shaking, and my bed is squeaking. And there's this loud noise like the roaring bulldozers in the construction site nearby. I have no idea what to do except screaming like a little baby. In about a seemingly eternal minute, dad rushes into my room, swaying from side to side like a drunk man. Standing in the middle of my bed, I start screaming and crying all at the same time, without being able to even utter a single word, not even "DAD!!!" Without any words either, dad scoops me up and carries me in one arm, while feeling his way along the wall towards the door. He stops by the door for a few seconds, as I wonder why, he finds the switch. A big flash, then everything is again pitch dark. Dad rushes out of the deformed door and runs downstairs with both arms holding on to me. I don't know how he does it but it seems like we are teleported from the 4th floor to the ground level in no time.

Out of the old, shaky Soviet style apartment building, a huge crowd is already downstairs in the open. All our neighbours, many of the adults with already pretty big kids in their arms, are walking around, with almost no one talking. I'm still shaking like a leaf in dad's arms, while dad is just walking

briskly from this end to the other looking for mom. I never knew our building could hold this many people, it must be like a thousand! Where can we find mom, in such a big crowd, in the dark?

Suddenly, someone puts a big towel around dad and me – it's mom! She carries a military green satchel, not very full, with the belt strapped across her chest. Dad just asks briefly, "Got the papers?" Mom gives him a nod. I have no idea why mom was so slow in taking time to just grab some paper – what if the building collapsed? I do appreciate the warmth of the big towel though.

The ground seems to have stopped shaking. I don't know how long has passed, but now I feel so tired and sleepy. Smelling dad's body odour and feeling his heavy breathing, I doze off in his arms.

Summer nights are short in Northern China. About 4 or 5 a.m., the sun is already out. In the bright morning sun, a huge bus comes to a stop right in front of our building. This is the largest bus the Philharmonie keeps – for transporting musicians like mom and dad as well as their instruments to and from concert performances. All us boys love its roaring noise. We call it the "Big Yellow River" – the brand of its Chinese maker. As the doors open wide, my four-year-old little brother Yuan dashed out with a bunch of little munchkins. They were just picked up from their all-week boarding kindergarten in downtown Beijing. He immediately sees me and runs towards me at top speed – HIS top speed, while screaming excitedly, "Big Bro, Big Bro, I've found the earthquake! And I told the teacher!" saying the "I" so emphatically. He always calls me "Big Bro" instead of by my first name Fang.

Without waiting for me to respond, he continues, "We saw our ceiling peel off; then we grabbed our little stools and sat in the courtyard with our teachers; we counted stars in the sky; and some of us were so sleepy, they fell off their stools! Oh, oh, and I saw a huge crack on our kindergarten wall!" For a moment I'm quite jealous of him that I've missed so much excitement!

Heavy rain in summer Beijing would come suddenly, but would dissipate in a matter of 10 minutes. As day broke, it started to rain, non-stop and getting heavier. Fang and Yuan were still running by the “creek” with their little friends, having completely forgotten the horror of the earthquake, enjoying their games of building mud castles or catching dragonflies with bare hands. Now where was my husband? The kids were getting all wet! No, they were not! They were hiding in one of the dozens large cement pipes scattered around near our building, nicely shielded from the rain.



The “creek” was in fact a ditch by the southern side of our apartment. A small wooden bridge connected the neighbourhoods on both sides. Every summer it would be filled with muddy water and swarms of mosquitos would gather by the feet of the bridge. Yet that was our boys’ favourite spots, as they could catch so many dragonflies and little frogs. It was so filthy and stinky, the city decided to fill it up and pave it into a road. Hence the bunch of sewage pipes. We were lucky, as the cement pipes were closest to our building – not every family got this solid shelter. With the help of a colleague, my husband Ming-liang pulled apart Fang’s small bed, carried the board downstairs and wedged it in the bottom concave inside the pipe, at least a flat surface we could sit on.

The rain subsided a little as morning turned to noon. The kids were getting tired. We still hadn't eaten anything yet. Some makeshift tents were already erected along the main road, made of bed sheets, even plastic table cloth, propped on bamboo poles and chairs. Someone shouted, "Food is here!" as a few tricycles carrying buckets of rice and simple stir-fries ringed cross the new village of "earthquake tents" – it was the Philharmonie canteen staff, who had prepared lunches at the request of the Party Committee. Almost all of us Philharmonie employees lived in the same neighbourhood, typical in the 50s through to 80s when all organizations were state-owned and all "units" had a Party Committee that decided on and took care of everything from providing housing (free for us) to running its own canteen. At this moment, all were appreciative of the hot meals "The Party" provided – one less worry about sneaking back to the shaking buildings and risk turning on our own coal gas stoves.

As dusk fell, Ming-liang had already built a plastic curtain at each end of the pipe, and he even managed to sneak back to our apartment and brought out some bedding to put on the board. The cement pipe was just about 1.5 metres in diameter, for Fang, he could only lie down diagonally, with his head tilted on the curved wall; little Yuan could stretch flat comfortably completely across the board; for me, I was just small enough to sit awkwardly inside the entrance, with my head already touching the top, shielding the boys in the middle. On the very end, Ya-ping, the boys' teenage cousin, was crawling up like a ball. Ming-liang couldn't fit at all. Holding an umbrella and with a plastic sheet on his back, he just sat on a stool in the rain through the night.

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Days passed. We had heard from the radio that the epicentre was in Tang-shan, a mid-sized city 150 km to Beijing's southeast; that over 260,000 people were killed in the 7.8 Richter scale earthquake on July 28, 1976; that the epicentre might move to Beijing. Nobody knew what was news, what were rumours. More people sneaked back to their apartments to grab something, either to reinforce their tents, or even to take a quick cold shower.

A letter from Ya-ping's father arrived from Shanghai, "Now you are in the same boat with Uncle Ming-liang and Auntie Wen-jun. You must be good and not give them trouble."

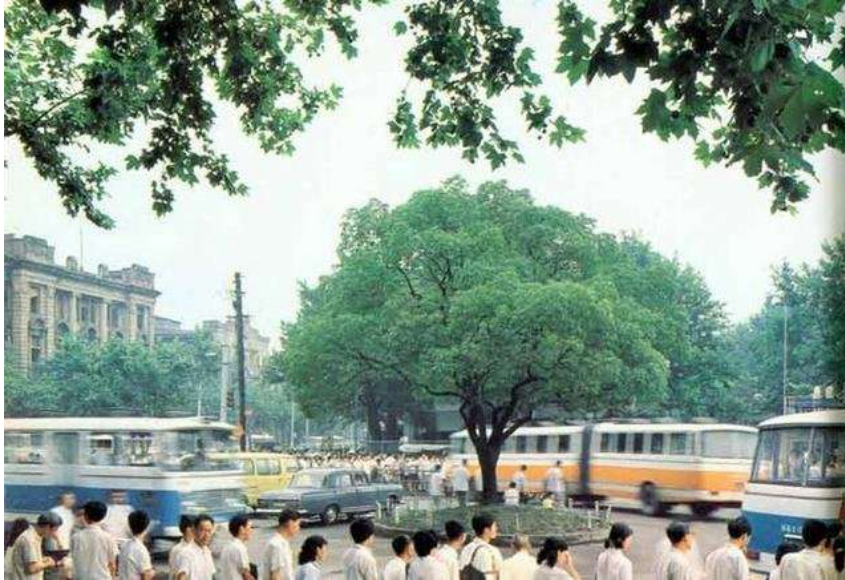
"Wu Wen-jun," my husband and I always called each other by the full name, like revolutionary comrades, "We can't keep Ya-ping here. We must send her home. And we must send Fang and Yuan to Shanghai, too."

"What are you thinking, Sheng Ming-liang?!" I protested. "How can we leave the kids to Ya-ping? She's only 16! We must stay together, even if we die, we die together!"

"Wu Wen-jun, you must be rational!" almost yelling, Ming-liang cut me off, "Look around and think, big disaster must be followed by big pandemic. It's for the kids!" Ming-liang went downtown to arrange train tickets. The ticket booths at the train station were all out of tickets. He had a cousin, whose husband worked at the railway bureau, and helped him get three "back-door" tickets. The night before their departure, I sat outside the pipe, in the drizzle, wrapped under a big towel, sobbing all the way till dawn. The route must pass Tianjin, right beside Tang-shan the epicentre! What if another earthquake hit the train mid-way, and nobody could reach them? Oh, I dared not think!



Ming-liang took the kids to the train station. I didn't go to see them off. The train was scheduled to depart at noon. A couple of hours after, no earthquake, I knew they were through.



“Here, Ya-ping,” *gu-ma* (Yuan and I always call father’s cousin “gu-ma” – auntie) hands my cousin a stack of old newspaper, “It’s gonna be crowded. If the small ones want bathroom, use these; then wrap up and throw it out of the window.” It’s way more crowded than *gu-ma* thought! Ya-ping has to squeeze her way into the car first, then with the help of a few big men outside, Yuan and I are pushed in through the window. Stuffy air, smelly of stinky sweat, the inside is more jam-packed than rush-hour Beijing tram, there’s even people sitting on the baggage rack. It’s so hot and humid, after over 27 hours of stopping and going, we finally arrived in Shanghai, fully covered with heat rashes.

For the next six weeks, we stay with our third aunt – mother’s younger sister. Yuan and I soon forget about the horror trek. Shanghai is so different, so full of excitement; there’s even pink trams (we only have blue), and even their popsicles taste better than Beijing. We are having the hell of a good time when mom comes to Shanghai to pick us up! What? Already?!

The train back to Beijing is a sleeper. Yet mom can only afford one bunk, and the conductor doesn't allow mom to lie down on an extra seat without ticket, though the car is quite empty. Mom puts me and Yuan down on the bunk, with our heads facing opposite directions, while herself sitting at the tiny folding tea-table by the window across from us. The rhythmic noise of train wheels hitting the tracks makes me feel an army of iron monsters chasing us from behind. Unable to fall asleep, I creep over to mother, "Mom, you can lie down; I can sit here a little bit." Surprised and touched, mom says, "If you are scared, come back, alright?" I promise I won't. Looking out of the window, under gloomy moonlight, trees, hills and houses all turn into strange looking dark monsters, stampeding towards me silently in the noise of train tracks. I can't move away my eyes. I tell myself, "Nothing is happening", but I'm thinking, "Something is happening." I creep back, "Mom, ... I'm scared." ...



Day finally breaks, it's sunny. We are suddenly stopped in the middle of nowhere. The entire car is quiet. The PA system broadcasts a man's serious voice, with funeral music in the background. "Mom, what's happening?" I ask. Mom shushes me, "Chairman Mao is dead..."