

Extreme Experiences

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Duan Chengshi (AD803-863) in his book *Various Stories of Youyang* wrote: In the Tang Dynasty there was a scholar endowed with profound literary talents who has studied for five years and because of his admiration of Li Taibai¹ gave himself the name Li Chi. Though I've never met him, I can already imagine his appearance: an elegant handsome gentleman. On one warm spring day, Li Chi and several of his friends out of the city to have some fun. When they arrived at a countryside inn, they decided to stop there to have lunch. After everyone took a seat, Li Chi got up to relieve himself. He left and never came back but no one paid any attention. Suddenly, they hear a loud yell outside and everyone rushes to the bathroom to find Li Chi with his head down feet up stuck right in the bucket of feces. This scene startled everyone. Thankfully, there was someone who was going to use the bathroom, discovered Li Chi, and then shouted. If someone had come later, the consequence is hard to imagine.....

Everyone rushed and pulled him out with a few buckets of cold water splashed on him right away. Luckily, Li Chi was still breathing and quickly recovered with a few splashes. Someone thought there might be a trickster hiding in the bathroom who purposely did this by throwing Li Chi into the bucket head first. But Li Chi said that he fell into it himself. Thus, everyone there laughed and said that he ought to be more careful. They let him join the rest of them at the table but they ignored one thing: Li Chi is not a trained diver and doesn't have the natural instinct to place his head at the bottom so how did he end up in that position when he lost his footing? Hence, I believe that he jumped in himself. Duan Chengshi never explained why Li Chi was in the shit bucket but I feel that I can explain this matter.

Some people are by nature special and can't be satisfied by a normal life. They want to have certain extreme experiences, e.g. they may like to be tied up by others and get beaten up or verbally abused. Each has one's own liking and this really doesn't factor into the matter. Among them, there are also people that want a golden shower, which is to spray urine and feces over one's head. This is really an astounding hobby. I hear that in some clubs in New York and California, there are people with yellow handkerchiefs in their pockets with half showing to indicate that they have this hobby. I believe Li Chi had this hobby but he didn't want it to be poured over his head but rather he wanted to jump into it. To describe this matter in any greater detail will be hard-pressed not to become disgusting so we only need to understand what I mean by extreme experiences here.

These days are peaceful times but about thirty years ago², China was in a chaotic uproar with some people living in the midst of extreme experiences. I knew a few of these people which included a teacher from school and some aunties and uncles³ from the courtyard. None of them liked these extreme experiences that they didn't ask for and so they committed suicide. They ended their suffering through various devices with some jumping off buildings and others hanging themselves. Perhaps those who caused all this havoc thought doing these things were rather interesting but I implore them to think from the perspective of those who died. The dead are gone but they leave their friends only an endless night....

Then I went into the countryside⁴ and from traveling everywhere saw many similar such things. For instance, at the village meetings, the party secretary always cried out "those rich in land go to the front". After some discussion, they'll be called to stand up. There were many who were younger than I but the village rules stated that even the children of the land rich were still called that. In such a small village everyone knew each other. In front of everyone with their head down and butt up and forced to be shamed in front of everyone, this has to be called an extreme experience. Of course, now no one calls them the land rich anymore since we're now all societal members. Those who made the distinctions are no longer alive but everyone still remembers those days of extreme experience. Though they were dangerous times and quite exhilarating, I don't like them at all.

Nowadays, there are some young intellectuals who lives abroad and with their PhDs and green cards will bring up the good things about those days. They'll use some story from some village but their point remains the same: they want everyone to once again to go for acquiring daily morning instructions, sending off nightly reports, and studying the three essays⁵. They further make an extravagant show of summarizing experiences of how Mao Zedong's thoughts have given birth to a new people. When I hear these words, I shiver with goose bumps and my whole spine tingles.

I have the thinking of the layman: to be full is better than to be starving, to be healthy is better than to be sick, and to stand outside of shit is better than to jump into them. But some people don't agree with this view, for instance, scholar Li Chi. After everyone has finished eating and was on their way to the city they discovered that Li Chi was gone again. After hurrying back to search, they found that he was once again planted head down into the shit bucket. This time was different from last time though since when they pulled him out he wasn't breathing. Gentleman Li Chi's extreme experience thus ended here; he played until he killed himself which is really too extreme and has no significant meaning whatsoever. I believe that people shouldn't drown in urine but you know that's just what a layman believes which is clearly different from Li Chi's point of view for when he died he had a happy smile on his face. The only thing was that he just really stunk.

I as this layman have another belief which is that peaceful times are better than chaotic ones. The difference between these two periods of time is greater than that of the difference between fresh air and stinky urine. In these last some two decades we have lived in peace which is like breathing a bit of fresh air. There's no reason for us to go back to the stinky urine. Since I am a Chinese citizen my wish for my country is this: I wish peace will last here forever. Regardless of how the overseas scholars say that I am but a mediocre failure and have lost the leftist's drive, I will not give up my view. Nowadays in peace, I can read some books and write some articles which satisfy me. I definitely don't want to get daily morning instructions and give nightly reports like those torturing days of the Cultural Revolution.

As far as those scholars overseas, I doubt that they want another Cultural Revolution; what they want is the tense atmosphere of the extreme times. They definitely don't want America to have this atmosphere since that's where they have their possessions and feel safe. They only want to create a mess in China so that they can come and experience this atmosphere when they go there for summer vacations. Then after a short trip they can go back to America and continue teaching there earning their American money. This idea isn't bad but we don't agree. We don't have this desire for extreme

experiences and we don't want to be tortured like this. Those who *really* desire such experiences should just follow Li Chi's example and stick their heads in the shit.

Notes:

¹Tang dynasty poet of great renown

² Referring to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)

³Chinese society addresses people of your immediate upper generation unrelated to you as aunties and uncles, an established form of respect from a younger generation

⁴ Many young people from the cities left the cities to join the life and work of a rural community during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)

⁵ Three essays refer to three short essays written by Mao Zedong before the founding of the People's Republic of China. They are respectively "Service for the People" (1944.09.08), "Remembering Bai Qiuen" (1939.12.21), and "The Old Man Moves the Mountain" (1945.06.11).

Original text (原文) :

极端体验

著：王小波

段成式在《酉阳杂俎》写道：唐朝有位秀才先生，才高八斗，学富五年，因慕李太白为人，自起名为李赤。我虽没见过他，但能想出他的样子：一位翩翩佳公子。有一天，春日融融，李赤先生和几个朋友出城郊游。走到一处野外的饭馆，朋友们决定在此吃午饭。大家入席以后，李赤起身去方便。去了就不回来，大家也没理会。忽听外面一声暴喊，大家寻声赶去，找到了厕所里。只见李赤先生头在下，脚在上，倒插在粪桶里。这景象够吓人的。幸亏有位上厕所的先生撞见了，惊叫了一声，迟了不堪设想……大伙赶紧把他拔出来，打来清水猛冲了几桶。还好，李赤先生还有气，冷水一激又缓了过来。别人觉得有个恶棍躲在厕所里搞鬼，把李赤拦腰抱起，栽进了粪桶里，急着要把他逮住。但李赤先生说，是自己掉进去的。于是众人大笑，说李先生太不小心了，让他更衣重新入席——但却忽略了一件事：李先生不是跳水队员，向前跳水的动作也不是非常熟练，怎么能一失足就倒插在粪桶里？所以，他是自己跳下去的。段成式没解释李秀才为什么会往粪桶里挑，但我觉得，这件事我能解释。

有些人秉性特殊，寻常生活不能让他们满足。他们需要某种极端体验：喜欢被人捆绑起来，加以羞辱和拷打——人各有所好，这不碍我们的事。其中还有些人想要 golden shower，也就是把屎尿往头上浇。这才是真正惊世骇俗的嗜好。据说在纽约和加州某些俱乐部里，有人在口袋里放块黄手绢，露出半截来，就表明自己有这种嗜好。我觉得李赤先生就有这种嗜好，只是他不是让别人往头上浇，而是自己要往里跳。这种事解释得太详细了难免恶心，我们只要明白极端体验是个什么意思就够了。

现在是太平年月，大约在三十年前吧，整个中国乱哄哄的，有些人生活在极端体验里。这些人里有几位我认识，有些是学校里的老师，还有一些是大院里的叔叔、阿姨。他们都不喜欢这种横加在头上的极端体验，就自杀了：跳楼的跳楼，上吊的上吊，用这种方法来解脱苦难。也许有些当年闹事的人觉得这些事还蛮有意思的，但我劝他们替死者家属想想。死者已矣，留给亲友的却是无边的黑夜……

然后我就去插队，去南闯北，这种事情见得很多。比方说，在村里开会，支书总要吆喝“地富到前排”，讲几句话，就叫他们起来“撅”着。那些地富有不少比我岁数还小。原来农村的规矩是地富的子女还叫地富，就那么小一个村子，大家抬头不见低头见，撅在大伙面前，头在下腩在上，把脸都丢光，这也是种极端体验吧。当然，现在不叫地富，大家都是社员了。作出这项决定的人虽已不在人世了，但大家都会怀念他的——总而言之，那是一个极端体验的年代；虽然很惊险、很刺激、但我一点都不喜欢。现在有些青年学人，人已经到了海外，拿到了博士学位和绿卡，又提起那个年代的种种好处来，借某个村庄的经验说事儿，老调重弹：想要大家再去早请示、晚汇报、学老三篇，还煞有介事地总结了毛泽东思想育新人的经验。听了这些话，我满脊梁乱起鸡皮疙瘩。

我有些庸人的想法：吃饱了比饿着好，健康比有病好，站在粪桶外比跳进去好。但有人不同意这种想法，比方说，李赤先生。大家宴饮已毕，回城里去，走到半路，发现他不在了。赶紧回去找，发现他又倒栽进了粪桶里。这回和上回不同，拖出来一看，他已经没气了。李赤先生的极端体验就到此结束——玩就把自己玩死，这可是太极端了，没什么普遍意义。我觉得人该淹死在屎里，但如你所知，这是庸人之见，和李赤先生的见解不同——李赤先生死后面带幸福的微笑，只是身上臭哄哄的。

我这个庸人又有种见解：太平年月比乱世要好。这两种时代的区别，比新鲜空气和臭屎的区别还要大。近二十年来，我们过着太平日子，好比呼吸到了一点新鲜空气，没理由再把我们栽进臭屎里。我是中国的国民，我对这个国家的希望就是：希望这里永远是太平年月。不管海外的学人怎么说我们庸俗，丧失了“左派”的锐气，我这个见解不肯放。现在能太太平平，看几本书，写点小文章，我就很满意了。我可不想早请示，晚汇报，像“文化革命”里那样穷折腾。至于海外那几位学人，我猜他们也不是真喜欢“文化革命”——他们喜欢的只是那时极端体验的气氛。他们可不想在美国弄出这种气氛，那边是他们的安身立命之所。他们只想把中国搞得七颠八倒，已便放暑假时可以过来体验一番，然后再回美国去，教美国书，挣美国钱。这主意不坏，但我们不答应：我们没有极端体验的瘾，别来折腾我们。真正有这种瘾的人，何妨像李赤先生那样，自己一头扎向屎坑。