

Story 1: A Family Story



Story shared by: *Huiyan*

Representing: *Chinese in Groningen*

The Story:

So, my family's story is like one of those real-life folk tales, you know? I mean, I'm 30 years old now, but if you look at my grandfather's generation, they went through so much. They lived through this incredibly chaotic period in China. They experienced the Japanese invasion, the Civil War, the founding of the People's Republic, the Cultural Revolution, the land reforms—everything. And then on top of all that, the economic reforms, and now into the 21st century. It's crazy when you think about how much change they saw in their lifetimes.

My grandpa's story is like a good example. He grew up in this little village in Tianjin, and his family were these small-time landowners. Not huge, but enough that they had some property. But when the new government came, all that got swept away. The land was redistributed, and overnight, they went from being, well, comfortable, to having basically nothing. His family became really poor, and my grandpa had to figure something out. So, he went to the city and became an apprentice at this tailor shop.

Now, when he told me this, I couldn't believe how tough it was back then. He said they'd make him wake up at like 4 in the morning just to cook for his master and mistress, clean the house, do all the chores. They worked him like crazy, and that was before he even got to touch a needle. And the worst part? His master refused to teach him the actual craft because there was this saying: "Teach a student, starve a master." So, my grandpa had to sneak around and spy on him while he worked. He'd hide and watch through the cracks in the door to learn how to sew.

It took him years, but eventually, he figured it out. And right around then, private businesses were being merged into the state. So, my grandpa got a job in a state-owned garment factory, working as a



tailor. He was good at it, too. They promoted him to a team leader because his work was so precise, and he was super dedicated.

But there was always this tension between the city and the countryside. My grandma didn't have a city residency permit, so she had to stay back in the village. Plus, my grandpa was an incredibly honest and upright guy, and some of his coworkers didn't like that. Between the pressure at work and the struggles my grandma was facing in the village, he eventually made the decision to go back. He returned to the countryside and kept working as a tailor, but secretly.

You see, during the Great Leap Forward and later with the People's Commune system, people weren't allowed to do any private business. It was all collective farm work. But my grandpa—he was crafty. People would sneak over to our house late at night, creeping along the walls to avoid being seen, and my grandpa would let them in to measure them for clothes. He'd work by the light of a little oil lamp, sewing clothes with this old hand-cranked sewing machine. He did that for years, earning just enough on the side to give his kids a slightly better life than the rest of the village.

Thanks to that extra income, my dad's generation—my dad, his brothers, and sisters—they didn't grow up as poor as they could have. They were still farmers, but my grandpa's tailoring made things a bit easier. And eventually, three of his kids managed to go to university, which was a huge deal back then. They were able to get jobs in the city after graduation, and life slowly improved for the family.

By the time we hit the 2000s, things had changed so much. My dad was able to buy my grandparents an apartment in the city, and they spent the last 20 or so years of their lives living there. Can you imagine? My grandpa went from being a young boy on a small farm, to secretly sewing clothes at night to survive, to living in a modern apartment with a refrigerator, a TV, and air conditioning. It's hard to believe sometimes how much changed in one lifetime.

That's the story I wanted to share. It's not some big mythical tale, but for me, it feels just as important.

Story Moral: *Sometimes real life is a greater Folktale than anything you can imagine*