Two sorts of errors are absolutely commonplace. The first of these is the idiotic belief that seismic events are somehow “timed” to express the will of God. People will seriously attempt to guess what sin or which profanity led to the verdict of the tectonic plates.

— Christopher Hitchens

The road to Huimei’s school was red.

I blinked, wondering if my mind had conjured this mirage after three hectic days on the road. But there it was: not a comforting earthen red, but a scarlet gash made up of thousands of shredded fireworks, lit to honour the recent dead.

Huimei’s mother tottered up the path. Four days before, Tang Shuxiu was working at a Beijing construction site when the building began to sway. Eight hundred miles away, a powerful earthquake was ripping through her hometown, tearing up major cities along the western Sichuan basin and unleashing as much force as the Fat
Man bomb in Nagasaki. Tremors were felt as far away as Bangkok and Bangladesh.

As news of the quake unfolded, Tang dialled home frantically, trying to reach her teenage daughter. There was no answer.

The next day, Tang and her husband, Liu, set off for home. I tagged along, a random reporter they’d met. My presence barely registered except as an extra set of hands to help with their luggage. All those weary miles home, the couple doggedly hauled bags crammed with instant noodles, charcoal cakes, gardening gloves, sanitary napkins, and floral quilts. There were shiny thermos flasks the colour of Mao’s *Little Red Book*, reams of tissue-thin toilet paper, disposable chopsticks, and a giant pack of cigarettes. Tang even packed a gallon of cooking oil over her husband’s objections. Of course, the bottle leaked over everything—our clothes, bags, hands. Toward the end, we were covered with a film of grease, our faces glowing incongruously, like film stars at a photo shoot.

Now Tang was unceremoniously dumping this precious cargo to race up that red path. Tin mugs and exercise books lay in the rubble of the school grounds, and a basketball hoop swayed at an impossible angle. A notice, written on torn-off exercise paper, said:

The government has done a lot to save the children of this school.

The government hopes parents coordinate with them to claim the bodies.

Tang and Liu made their way to the edge of the field, to a man with a plastic folder.

I remember her screams when they told her. The sound was a wound tearing open, a sound humans shy away from as instinctively as dogs from the scent of rotting meat. That sound meant, *Game over.*
In the beginning, the Sichuan earthquake, China’s deadliest in years, was viewed as a simple tragedy. The earth moved, buildings crumbled, and about seventy thousand people died.

In time, I would see it as a devastating illustration of the tragedies of the one-child policy, writ large.

Many people had no idea Shifang, the area near the epicenter, was a test case for the one-child policy. Before the 1980 nationwide launch of the one-child policy, population planners had experimented in Sichuan, in particular Shifang County, using coercive methods to drastically lower birthrates. Scholars believed Sichuan was chosen first because it is the heartland of rural China, home to a tenth of China’s people. It was also Deng Xiaoping’s birthplace.

Whatever the reasons, the methods worked astoundingly well. By 1979 Shifang County’s population growth had drastically plunged, and 95 percent of couples there had pledged to have only one child. Sichuan gave China’s birth planners “a sense of tremendous possibility” that Beijing could “achieve demographic miracles,” wrote population scholar Susan Greenhalgh.

When the quake struck almost thirty years later, some eight thousand families lost their only child in the disaster, according to state-run news agency Xinhua. In Shifang, where over two-thirds of families are single-child families, the quake was said to have wiped out a generation in some villages, local media reported.

This lent a bizarre dimension to the tragedy. Mere weeks after the quake, parents were rushing to reverse sterilizations they had been forced to accept long ago under family-planning rules. They were desperate to conceive a replacement.

Soon after, they were pressured into signing documents pledging to make no trouble. Chinese media were expressly forbidden to write
stories about grieving parents and the shoddy school construction that had caused many of these children’s deaths. Locals who tried to probe were jailed. Lives were lost, families ruined, and protests steamrolled as Beijing prepared to host the Olympics, just months away.

Although Communist China is theoretically secular, many still believe in omens and portents. People interpret natural disasters as a sign of withdrawal of the mandate of heaven from China’s rulers. After all, Mao had died six weeks after the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, ushering in a new era, which eventually led to socioeconomic reforms—such as the one-child policy—that shape today’s China.

Some wondered if the 2008 earthquake was a judgment on the one-child policy and other practices that tampered with nature. There was speculation, for example, that the building of massive dams in highly seismic areas might have triggered the quake.

These were precisely the sorts of inferences Beijing did not want. The Communist Party had worked long and hard to ensure that the year 2008 would be associated with another set of omens, ones designed to suggest a glorious future for the Republic.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics was to be a multibillion-dollar event that would mark China’s phoenix-like ascent from the ashes of the Opium Wars and the Cultural Revolution. It was no accident the leadership picked the year 2008 to host the Games, nor that they set the opening ceremony date for the eighth day of the eighth month, when the capital city would be at its hottest and most polluted, not at all conducive to peak athletic performance. The number 8 is auspicious, for in Chinese the word sounds the same as the word for fortune. When turned on its side, 8 represents eternity, certainly something any regime would aspire to. Eight is so popular that places with Chinese communities charge a premium for it, from phone numbers to licence plates and house numbers. That year, a licence plate with the number 18 fetched over $2 million in a Hong Kong auction.
I myself was born on August 8, and Chinese friends never fail to comment on the symbolism of my birthday when they find out. “Wah, you must be so lucky.”

All across China, clocks were set on a countdown to the day of the opening ceremony: August 8, 2008, at, of course, 8:08 p.m. May’s earthquake, and its attendant baggage, was not going to be allowed to upset this auspicious apple cart.

It was ironic because until the earthquake, the one-child policy had been receding from the news and national discussion.

As the descendant of southern Chinese who’d migrated to Malaysia, I was always grateful I hadn’t been born in China. I am the youngest of five daughters, all conceived in hopes of a son that never was. Malaysia was by then too modern for practices such as abandoning unwanted girls, and in any case my parents were educated urbanites, not farmers. Still, my accountant father never ceased regretting his lack of a son, nor reminding his daughters they were liabilities, not assets.

They say huaqiao—overseas Chinese families—are more traditional than mainland Chinese, who were forced to abandon or hide the old ways during the Cultural Revolution. It was certainly true of my father’s family. “Be glad we’re not in the old country,” my relatives would say. “You’d never have been born.” That was my introduction to China’s son-loving culture and the one-child policy. As a bookish child, I would come to see the one-child policy as one of the most fascinating and bizarre things about the land of my ancestors, equal parts Aldous Huxley and King Herod.

I certainly didn’t anticipate that I would be living and working in China one day. By the time the Wall Street Journal posted me to greater China in 2003, the policy was well over two decades old and was by no means as monolithic as outsiders envisioned. Over time, exceptions were made. You could likely have more than one child if
you were a farmer, or if you were Tibetan; if you were a fisherman or a coal miner. Or if you were handicapped, or were willing to pay the fines, which ranged from nugatory to wildly exorbitant and depended on whom you knew and where you lived. Given all these exceptions, the one-child policy should more accurately be called the “1.5-child policy,” but nobody used such a clunky-sounding term. In China, the term of reference most used is the more anodyne jihua shengyu, which means “planned birth programme,” instead of a more straightforward translation — yitai zhengce — of “one-child policy.”

Negotiations and rule bending are a way of life — some say art form — in China. To xiang banfa — find a solution — is second nature in a place where people are many, resources scarce, and regulations strict but erratically applied. That’s why when you live in China you must quickly accustom yourself to full-contact bargaining, line jumping, and creative driving, all part of the xiang banfa ethos. Many Chinese xiang banfa-ed and came up with all sorts of creative ways to get around the policy — fertility treatments for twins or triplets, birth tourism, fake marriages, bribes. I had Chinese friends who had several children, though usually no more than two. I met a woman in a second-tier city who’d had six, all born during the years of the policy. (According to grisly family lore, she’d killed her first by plunging it in boiling water.)

By the time the one-child policy entered its third decade, experts estimated that only about a third of the population faced strict one-child limitations, and it had become increasingly easy for people to afford the fines for a second or third child. By 2013, China’s one-child policy was “slipping into irrelevance,” wrote my colleague Leslie Chang, a well-respected China watcher.

It would take an earthquake, a miscarriage, and a journey of a thousand births for me to fully realize that curbing China’s masses had serious implications beyond its borders.
Far from courting irrelevance, the one-child policy had irrevocably shaped the face of modern China and set in motion a host of social and economic problems that will endure for decades.

In fifteen years’ time, if you throw a stone anywhere outside of Beijing or Shanghai, statistically speaking, you will probably hit someone over sixty. Chances are high that person will be male, to boot. China’s one-child policy so tilted gender and age imbalances that in a little under a decade there will be more Chinese bachelors than Saudi Arabians, more Chinese retirees than Europeans.

Everything in China is about scale and speed. China doesn’t just face the prospect of being home to the world’s largest number of old people; proportionally, too, its population is ageing faster than anywhere else, meaning there will be far fewer working adults to support a retiree population. The speed of this transition will strain China’s rudimentary pension and health-care systems. By 2050, pension funding shortfalls could be as much as $7.5 trillion, or equivalent to 83 percent of China’s gross domestic product in 2011, according to one estimate by Deutsche Bank.

This is a pretty bleak outlook, and yet the policy’s future repercussions may be difficult to reverse. Over the past decade, most people in urban China have accepted the reality of smaller families and, indeed, prefer it. After all, China had leapfrogged from socialism to full-blown capitalism, so costs of services like schooling and health care are relatively high. Throw in things like melamine-tainted milk powder, lead in toys, and lung-searing pollution, and child rearing in urban China becomes quite a daunting proposition.

Besides, authorities had done a good job with messaging: the one-child policy, they insisted, had played an integral part in China’s economic resurgence. It seemed churlish not to rejoice in better
living standards for a country that had, not too long ago, seen great famine and tremendous political turmoil. This is, after all, my ancestral homeland.

Anyone over the age of sixty in China will have a hardship tale to tell, but one that still sticks in my mind is an anecdote by Chinese journalist Xinran Xue. She once visited a family so poor, they rotated one set of clothing among four children. The rest would lie naked under a blanket, happily dreaming of their turn to “wear the clothes.”

China was like a terrier puppy that had been brutally mistreated by history’s vicissitudes. It was hard not to cheer a little to see it lick its wounds and limp along gamely. Starting in the late 1990s, there was much to cheer. Children of peasants became the first in their families to enter college. Infant mortality rates fell. Starbucks outlets bubbled up like so many foamy lattes. A veritable fleet of Bentleys, Beemers, Hondas, and Hyundais took to the roads, and local Xinhua bookstores were crammed with travel guides for China’s first generation of group tourists.

When my Mandarin teacher excitedly recounted her first trip to Europe, I asked her to name her favourite European country. “Germany,” she said promptly. I was surprised. Why not France, Italy? She paused a beat, then said, “It’s so orderly.”

In 2005, I spoke to a contractor who built dormitories for factory workers. He complained of having to put in more electrical outlets, as workers now had so many gadgets to charge. In 2007, I witnessed the opening of Beijing’s first Hooters, or “American Owl” in Chinese. As I eyed waitresses with jacked-up décolletage dishing out overpriced chicken wings, it seemed, strangely, like another milestone had been reached.

People used to joke that a year in China was like a dog year: so much changed that it would be as if seven years somewhere else had passed. In the four years I lived in Beijing, the city’s subway lines expanded fivefold. IKEA opened its largest-ever store outside
of Stockholm in Beijing, with extra-wide aisles to accommodate the multitude of first-generation homeowners. The car population quadrupled. Despite the growing pollution and the corruption, it was hard not to feel the quickening excitement, echo the prevailing sentiment: Jiayou, Zhongguo, Jiayou! “Go, China, Go!”

It took me a while to realize that, contrary to popular thinking, the one-child policy had very little to do with China’s double-digit economic growth of the past thirty years, and will actually be a drag for the next thirty. That the Chinese government’s claim that the one-child policy had averted 400 million births was an exaggeration based on faulty maths and wishful thinking. Or that the one-child policy was, in the final sum of things, a painfully unnecessary measure, since birthrates had already fallen sharply under earlier, more humane measures.

More intriguing are the future effects of the one-child policy on the economy: Could it prove detrimental, stalling future progress? The answer here is: most likely, though how much remains to be seen. Predicting long-term economic growth is a chancy business, and few economists, if any, anticipated that the country’s economic rise would be so swift, so spectacular, or so prolonged. Equally, these experts’ basis for predicting a future economic slump is the premise that what goes up must, at some point, come down, a prognosis that would perhaps be more useful if we knew when, and by how much.

Clearly, though, a large greying population in China will likely mean a less productive China. It will also mean the China that global companies currently see—world’s largest cell phone market, world’s largest car market, soon-to-be world’s largest luxury sales, home of KFC’s biggest customer base even—will change. With the manufacturing boom in its last days, the country is now trying to move to a consumption-driven model of growth, with increased domestic spending and growth in the service sector. A large population of retirees will likely prove as helpful in this transition as the Great Wall was in repelling northern invaders.
There is also a growing body of evidence suggesting that China’s population would have fallen significantly—exactly how much is in dispute—even without the one-child policy. A family-planning policy that predated the one-child policy, called wanxishao, or “Later, Longer, Fewer,” had already halved family sizes successfully using less coercive tactics.

In 2009, demographers Wang Feng, Cai Yong, and Gu Baochang challenged the Communist Party’s assertion that the one-child policy averted the births of more people than the entire US population. Until then, the 300 to 400 million number had been pretty much taken as gospel truth. It was, and continues to be, a key part of the central government’s claim of the global good wrought by the one-child policy. Without the one-child policy, Chinese officials argue, the world would have reached the 7 billion population mark in 2006, instead of five years after. Wang et al. contend that the real number of births averted was probably no more than half of what the Communist Party claims.

How did this huge gap occur? They argue that the original calculations used a simplistic extrapolation method that projected what China’s future birthrate would be in 1998, based on birth trends between 1950 and 1970. The number arrived at was 338 million, which was subsequently rounded up to 400 million. But this method was flawed. First of all, it was based on the assumption that people’s reproductive habits would roughly trend the same from the 1950s to the 1990s, a period when changes such as urbanization, feminism, and advances in infant mortality dramatically altered social behaviour. This is patently as absurd as modern-day tour companies drawing up itineraries on the assumption people still travel by steamship. Second, the Communist Party’s method counted birth reductions from the 1970s. The one-child policy didn’t start until 1980. In Chinese parlance, this kind of misrepresentation is called zhiluweima—pointing at a deer and calling it a horse.
Even as the policy loosened up, many were still adversely affected. Yang Zhizhu, a law lecturer in Beijing, lost his job because he had a second child. In 2010, the peppery Yang advertised himself as a slave for anyone who could help him pay the $36,000 fine. “Whoever decides to buy me, I will become their slave and serve them until I die. I reject donations as I don’t want to become a parasite for the sake of my child,” wrote Yang in his tongue-in-cheek ad. Yang was eventually reinstated at his university, but at a lower position. His wages were garnished, and university administrators took away his spacious university-assigned housing and made him live in a smaller flat. “The policy is just an ingenious way to tax people without giving any kind of service in return. What could be more natural than having children? Might as well tax for breathing and eating,” Yang told me.

I met a girl, Li Xue, or “Snow,” who spends her days fruitlessly lobbying for the all-important hukou, or household registration, that authorities will not allow her because she is an out-of-plan second child. Her parents were labourers who couldn’t afford the birth fine. Without a hukou, she hasn’t been able to attend school, get proper medical treatment, or so much as apply for a library card. Without a hukou, Snow is a nonentity, without the ability to legally hold a job or get married. Any future children she might have might also be locked in this limbo. An estimated 13 million people share her predicament as an undocumented bei haizi, literally, “black child.”

During the summer of 2008, as the country geared up for the Olympics, the fifteen-year-old Snow bravely showed up at Tiananmen Square every morning, holding a sign that said, “I want to Go to School.”

She was never there for more than five minutes before being seized by authorities. Tiananmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace, is one of the most tightly policed places in the world. In 2008’s Olympic year, security was tighter than usual. Still, she managed to dog-
One child

gedly show up there all summer long. Sometimes, public security officials would try to grab her just outside her house. There’d be frantic chases as Snow and her motorbike-mounted mother weaved through Beijing’s narrow warrens, all in a mad attempt to get to Tiananmen for those brief few minutes.

Her actions filled me with both admiration and exasperation. So much risk, so little yield. It all seemed so valiant, so futile; whatever did she hope to accomplish?

“I just wanted someone to notice me,” said Snow.

Years later, I met a man who’d had an affair with his teenage co-worker in the factory where they worked. She became pregnant, so he brought her to his village to have the baby. They couldn’t legally marry because she was underage, and their baby was born without a birth permit. Later, family-planning officials used this as a pretext to seize the child, who was sold into adoption. This man has now spent the last five years in search of the child, whom he believes is living in an Illinois suburb.

Such were the costs of the one-child policy.

IV

I was on a flight returning from Kunming, the nearest major Chinese city bordering Myanmar. A sour taste of failure was in my mouth, for I’d failed to get a visa into the country. Myanmar was in a news blackout after a cyclone, and they weren’t letting in foreign aid workers, let alone journalists of any stripe or colour. I flew back to Beijing unaware that the earth was ripping apart thousands of miles under me.

The Sichuan quake measured a cool 8.0 on the Richter scale. This was China’s most serious quake since Tangshan, which happened thirty-two years before, measured 7.6, and is accounted one of the world’s deadliest disasters. For years, the Communist Party covered up the severity of the Tangshan quake, which happened at the
tail end of the Cultural Revolution. State-run news agency Xinhua eventually put the number of fatalities at 250,000.

Nearly every family in Tangshan had a casualty. Every year, on the quake’s anniversary, “paper money burnt for the dead is like black butterflies flying low on the Tangshan streets and alleys,” wrote resident Zhang Qingzhou. “People are used to this kind of quiet and speechless way of mourning rather than speaking out their sorrows.”

Since Tangshan, building standards had improved somewhat, but it was a fair bet Sichuan would have huge casualties. With over 80 million inhabitants, Sichuan is one of China’s most populous provinces, with a mountainous terrain that would complicate rescue efforts.

At the Beijing airport, I turned on my BlackBerry and watched in disbelief as dozens of messages scrolled by. My colleagues were already in the air headed to Chengdu, Sichuan’s capital.

I stomped to the office, cursing. Why, oh why did I have to return so quickly? If only I’d lingered in Kunming. There’s roughly only 400 miles between Kunming and Chengdu. I could have driven to Chengdu and be reporting now, I fretted.

Meanwhile I banged out a couple of bread-and-butter stories, including one recounting how Chinese citizens were using a new-fangled, Twitter-like service called Weibo to report the disaster. It was one of the first instances of citizen journalism in China. Looking back, the piece seems as quaint as a story about ancient drumming techniques.

I cudgeled my brains thinking of other ways to cover the story.

There are a lot of Sichuan migrant workers in Beijing, and just about everywhere else in China. Most Westerners know the province as home of China’s cuddly mascot, the panda bear, but the region is poor and populous.

More than half of its natives labour as guest workers, powering factory assembly lines and cleaning crews, the kinds of menial tasks
most urban Chinese no longer want to do. Factory owners and construction crew bosses quickly learn to include spicy Sichuan dishes on cafeteria menus in order to retain these hardy workers, who are likened to the tiny peppercorns they so love: diminutive, fiery, and with boundless ability to *chi ku*—eat bitterness.

Since the earthquake, many were frantically trying to return. What would it be like, I wondered, to have to fight your way across the quake’s wreckage to your remote home? And what would you find there?

I headed to the railway station.

I spotted Tang first. Her face was a series of *Os*, a smooth oval face, dark circles under the eyes, her mouth a half circle of misery, lips chapped and bitten. She was in her best gear: jeans embroidered with glittery butterflies, a coral satin coat. Railway journeys were a rare thing for her, and she was observing the formalities by dressing up, even though she was dizzy with worry.

She hadn’t heard from her fifteen-year-old daughter, Huimei.

Tang’s husband, Liu Jishu, was a wiry five-footer. He looked a little like a Dutch doll: small, with glossy black hair and round apple cheeks. It was an immobile face but for his red-rimmed eyes, which glared with fierce intensity.

Tang and Liu worked on a construction crew in Beijing, roaming from work site to work site. They were now frantically trying to return home with a group from their village.

The quake had ripped through railways and highways, so it wasn’t clear how far they’d be able to travel, but there was no alternative. They couldn’t afford to fly. Liu sketched out a rough trip scenario that might include twenty-hour bus journeys, days of hiking and sleeping in the open, to get to their remote mountain village.

“Can’t we just hire a car and give them a ride home?” I asked tentatively, already knowing the answer. The journey was the story.

We boarded the train two days after the quake. The third-class compartments were packed. Most slept wedged standing up, or perched on tiny seat barriers. During the Spring Festival period, when the whole country is on the move, sales of adult diapers inevitably shoot up. I could see why, for there was no way of getting to the toilet in this crush. Take a train journey in China, and you will know absolutely, indubitably, that the Middle Kingdom is the most populous nation on Earth.

Liu grinned at me fleetingly as I mashed his toes. "Ren tai duo,” he muttered. “China has too many people.” I heard that all the time.

Despite the No Smoking sign, Liu puffed away furiously. Tang said little and ate less, sitting stoically as tears crept down her cheeks.

By the third day, she was so dehydrated no more tears flowed. Liu forced sips of tea down her throat, dampening her blouse in big Rorschach blotches. It looked pretty, like a design that was meant to be.

Their story was like that of many other migrant workers. They couldn’t make a living farming rice on a tiny patch of land, especially not with their daughter’s school fees to pay, so they left and became liudong renkou—literally, “flowing population.” It’s a poetic name for China’s migrant workers, who drift from the countryside to the city, going from menial job to menial job. Without the city hukou household registration, they cannot access urban social services like schooling and health care. That’s why Liu and Tang couldn’t bring Huimei with them to Beijing.

The hukou is a form of economic apartheid that creates a permanent underclass and prevents the population of China’s teeming cities from overflowing to unmanageable numbers. It is also a cleaver that cruelly separates families like the Lius for months on end. Liu and Tang hadn’t seen their teenage daughter for more than
a year. When I asked them for a description, Liu couldn’t remember if she had long or short hair. What did she like? What was she like? Tang said, vaguely, “She loves to watch TV, but she is a good girl.”

There are about eight hundred miles between Beijing and their home village, the formidably named Iron Gourd Village. The distance is in some sense helpful to note—it is roughly the length of Great Britain. But economically and culturally, it is like a trip to the moon.

There’s no running water in Iron Gourd. No villager has sat on a plane. Everybody under the age of forty eventually makes the trek to a city—any city—forced by poverty or boredom, returning to brag, or breed, or both. Everyone in Iron Gourd is named Liu, or married to someone named Liu. Infanticide and bride buying are things of yesterday and not the distant past, and the spring rains that tunnel through the earthen roads make the place impassable for parts of the year.

And yet the place has beauty, with craggy hills and velvety blue lakes that match the skies above. On days when she coughed black phlegm in Beijing’s sooty air, Tang would dream of those faraway blue skies and wonder why she ever left. Life on a work site was even more primitive than life in Iron Gourd. With no washing facilities, you wore the same clothes until you threw them away and bought new, a stunning piece of extravagance she marveled at. They cooked on a smuggled hot plate, drank water from buckets once used for paint. Tang had saved that rose-coloured coat in her bedroll—no mean feat as they trudged from work site to work site, everything they owned on their backs—so that she’d have something tangible to show the folks back home, some shiny emblem of their adventures.

Now, as the train chugged homeward, she cursed the curiosity that made her leave. “It wasn’t all money,” she said wistfully. “We just wanted to go out and have a look.”

Now she was mentally flogging herself for leaving Huimei be-
hind. She said, “We all avoided this tragedy. But my baby didn’t,”
again and again, like an incantation.

It was hard to hold a good conversation or build up any kind
of rapport. The carriage was crowded, they were worried and disin-
clined to talk, and their accents were difficult to understand.

I was also ducking in and out of the carriage in an effort to evade
railway officials, who found out I was a reporter and forbade inter-
views. This made Tang and Liu even more stiff and self-conscious.

I had always liked train journeys for the lulling sound of rails,
the flashing landscape, and the feeling of being inexorably borne to
a certain destination. But this was a prickly ride, sour with tension
and fear. Everyone kept their phones by their sides like expert gun-
slingers, cocked for any new information.

Bit by bit, the news seeped through.

Casualties estimated at twenty thousand. Then thirty thousand.
The earthquake’s epicentre had occurred in the city of Wenchuan,
where some 80 percent of the buildings were destroyed in the first
three minutes.

Tremors were still shaking the region. Whole towns were being
evacuated.

They were pulling more dead bodies from the rubble than live
ones.

Twenty-four hours into the journey, Liu and Tang heard that 183
bodies had been pulled from Huimei’s school.

“She’s dead,” sobbed Tang.

“You can’t say that yet,” insisted Liu. “You can’t say that yet.” His
eyes glared.

The uncertainty left hope alive. One man sat nearby with an ashen
face. He had just received a call telling him that his child was dead.

Somewhere between then and Xian the water ran out in the toi-
lets. The rank smell of urine drifted out, mingling with clouds of
cigarette smoke.
Liu and I fell into conversation with another villager, Ding Wan-long, who was considered an outsider because he was one of the rare few not born in Iron Gourd. He’d been relocated there after his first home was razed to make way for a dam. Ding was proud because he’d managed to build a second home from money squirreled away from construction jobs in far-flung cities.

“It’s a two-story building, very comfortable,” he said, puffing a Diamond brand cigarette.

He paused a beat. “I’m going to have to rebuild all over again.”

A few hours later, he got a call. The quake had in one stroke orphaned him and made him homeless. His mother was buried in the rubble of his ruined house.

We chugged past Xian, home of the terra-cotta warriors, and were told the rails had been repaired enough for the train to forge on. This was a welcome bit of news, saving the Iron Gourd group a ten-hour bus journey. After the last train stop, we would take a ferry and hike up some hills.

At this point, almost everyone in the group had bad news—some relative killed or maimed, some home wrecked, some both. Tang and Liu had heard nothing from Huimei though.

Liu unbent a little as the trip went on. As we chugged on, sipping beer, he told me about a relative who’d bought a wife. The bachelors of Iron Gourd were finding it hard to find brides. Few women, especially with ever-increasing prospects of factory jobs in cities, were willing to brave the hardships of life in the small village. Years of family-planning policy had also contributed to a staggering gender imbalance. If you had to choose to have a boy or a girl, you chose a boy and gave the girl away, or looked away tacitly while the midwife took care of your problem. So there were almost no young women of marriageable age in Iron Gourd, unless she was your sister or your cousin.

This relative, said Liu, was so lonely and so harangued by his family for his failure to add to the family line that he succumbed to
the blandishments of a town matchmaker, borrowing and scrimping for the bride price.

“So, what happened?”

“She ran off, that’s what!” he said, chuckling, using his teeth to rip off a beer bottle top.

We laughed, then stopped when a phone rang. Another death was announced.

The train tunneled its way south through Hebei, Shaanxi, and Shanxi, China’s heartland, a landscape that looked like it was steeped in tea. Coal dust pollution. For Americans, the car is the American way. Jay Gatsby roars through capitalism, individual freedom, and the good life. For China, the train is the metaphor. Everyone’s on board, there’s no chance to steer, and it’s clickety-clack to collectivism’s dream. Years later I was reminded of this reading Dickens: “The power that forced itself upon its iron way—its own—defiant of all paths and roads, piercing through the heart of every obstacle, and dragging living creatures of all classes, ages and degrees behind it, was a type of the triumphant monster, Death.”

Once we got off the train, things sped up like one of those montage sequences in the movies. It was a nightmarish dream sequence. Rows of suddenly homeless people sleeping on the streets. Us, hunkering down in line at the ferry terminal as the loudspeakers blared: We are here to help you. We are here to help you.

We were boarding the ferry when a woman shrieked. She’d just heard: someone she loved was killed. They carried her on board, stiff as a corpse.

And then we were on the water, chugging past dramatic craggy mountains, Alpine-style scenery.

Tang stared blindly, running through her mind countless scenarios that ranged between hope and despair. In the best scenario Huimei was untouched, though somehow inexplicably unable to reach a telephone or a relative. Then there were the possibilities of injury,
memory loss, crushed limbs—painful to a parent, but still tolerable. Or perhaps Huimei was buried in the rubble somewhere, drinking her own urine, calling for her mother in weak croaks.

“There’s still hope,” counselled Liu. “We don’t know anything until we get home,” he said.

When we landed, we hiked miles up the mountain. It was there that I began to see the damage the quake had wrought. We clambered past landslides, crushed cars, and caved-in buildings. A group of People’s Liberation Army soldiers marched by, shovels on their shoulders.

After seeing Tang and Liu stagger to the hills in search of their daughter’s body, I left. In truth, I ran. I ran because I had a deadline. I ran because I thought there was nothing more I could do for them. I ran because I didn’t want to be there. I ran, and I will always feel guilty for the unseemly haste with which I abandoned them on that ruined road.

Weeks later, I would try to make reparations by journeying back. I met Liu on top of a windy cemetery. It wasn’t where Huimei was buried, for she had been hastily interred in a mass grave not far from the school. Rather, Liu had chosen that spot because its vantage point made it easier to detect the approach of informers and spies.

By this time, authorities were in full cover-up mode. Many children had died in crumbled schoolhouses—called “tofu schools” for the way they’d crumpled under the tectonic onslaught. Scores of parents were calling for a probe of corruption in school construction. They would show up at devastated school grounds, clutching pictures of their dead children—including some of their mangled corpses—calling on authorities to take notice, to investigate, to do something, anything. So the authorities did: they shut the protests down.

Liu didn’t look well. The wiry frame that I had seen carry enormously heavy bags with ease seemed shrunken, tentative. He smoked incessantly. Tang wasn’t there. She rarely left the house, didn’t see anyone, he said.
He asked, “Those pictures you took of us, can you destroy them?”
Reluctantly, I told him we had already run the story.
His face fell.
“Don’t worry, most readers aren’t even in China,” I said hastily.
I didn’t tell him the photo I took of him and his wife, looking resolute, had been on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*.
I remember taking that picture, carefully positioning my camera to capture Tang on the boat, gazing into the distance. She had looked so weary, so hopeful. It was before they reached journey’s end.
“We don’t want to talk anymore,” he said. “We have no words left.”

Suddenly, an explosion of sound. We jumped. Peering around the headstones, I saw mourners lighting firecrackers. No matter happy or sad, Chinese ceremonies have a certain similarity. Fireworks explosions precede the birth of babies, weddings, New Year celebrations, and funerals. We exchange money when people are born and when people die. Red packets at birth become white packets at funerals. The same observances give some kind of comforting sameness to the rituals of birth and death, a sense of circularity, of coming home.

Liu showed me a document he’d been forced to sign. It acknowledged he was accepting money for the death of his daughter and absolved officials of culpability.
It said: *I pledge to come back to normal life and normal production as soon as possible.*
A great wave of indignation washed over me.
“So, you see . . .” He shrugged.
He hesitated, turned, and began trudging down the hill, a figure that grew smaller and smaller until it was swallowed by the countryside.
I never saw him again, but his life and mine developed a strange symmetry.
For when I began my journey with them, I had been pregnant.