Our family consists of the following formal members: Grandpa, Grandma, Father, Mother, Uncle, Aunt, me, my wife, my cousin, her husband, and that tall and skinny darling son of mine.

They are, respectively, 88, 84, 63, 64, 61, 57, 40, 40, ... and 16 years old — an ideal ladder structure. In addition, we have an informal member who is more formally a member than the formal members, and who is inseparable from us — Elder Sister Xu. She is 59 and has been managing our household for forty years. She cannot do without us, we cannot do without her.

Furthermore, she is the “elder sister” of us all — from Grandpa down to my son, everyone is equal before her. By natural right, everyone calls her Elder Sister.

We have always lived in stability and unity. On such questions as whether we think the summer is too hot, whether we should drink Longjing tea at eight dollars a tael or green tea at 40 cents a tael, whether we should use White Orchid or Violet or Golden Shield soap, everyone listens to Grandpa.

Never have there been differing opinions, never has there been confrontation or negotiation, never has there been open hostility or hidden rivalry.

We even have the same hair-do — different, of course, for men and women.

For decades, we have been getting up at ten past six in the morning. By 6:35 Elder Sister Xu will have prepared our breakfast: sliced toasted buns, rice congee, and pickled mustard greens. Ten past seven, everyone sets out for work or school. Since retiring,
Grandpa reports for duty at the street committee office — at the same time. At noon, everyone returns, eats noodles with fried bean sauce prepared by Elder Sister Xu, and has a brief rest. One-thirty, everyone sets out for work or school again. Grandpa has a nap, and at 3:30 gets up to wash his face and brush his teeth, and then sits on the couch to drink his tea and read his paper.

At around five, Grandpa and Grandma discuss with Elder Sister Xu the evening meal. It is a daily discussion.

Be it Grandpa, Grandma, or Elder Sister Xu, every one of them is excited by the subject. Yet they always arrive at the same conclusion: tonight, we’ll have rice. Dishes? One meat, one meat with veg, and two veg dishes.

Soup? Let’s do without; or, let’s have some.

After the discussion, Elder Sister Xu will go into the kitchen and, after banging and clattering for thirty minutes, will emerge again to ask Grandpa and Grandma,

“Oh! How muddle-headed I am! I forgot to ask you about the meat-with-veg dish: should the meat be shredded or sliced?” Should it be this or that? — it is indeed an important question. Grandpa and Grandma will exchange glances, and say,

“Let’s have sliced meat” or, “Let’s have shredded meat.” The intention will then be fully realized.

Everyone is contented, and Grandpa is the most easily contented. Grandpa suffered a lot when he was young. He always says, “To have enough food for every meal, to wear clothes that are not in rags, to have a properly-furnished home, to have your children around you, and to be in good health was something beyond the imagination of even the rich and mighty. Don’t be presumptuous. You have never known how it feels to starve.” Father and Mother, Uncle and Aunt will then declare: they have not forgotten how it feels to starve — when you are hungry, you have spasms in the chest and stomach, dull aches in the brain, and heavy pains in your calves. According to what they say, the feeling of extreme hunger is like that of overeating — you want to throw up. The whole of our family, headed by Grandpa and Grandma, are disciples of the philosophy of contentment, loyal supporters of the Establishment.

Things, however, have inexplicably changed in the past few years. New trends keep rolling in. Within a few years, our home has suddenly got a colour television, a refrigerator, and a washing-machine. And my son’s speech is often sprinkled with English words. Grandpa keeps his mind and eyes open, absorbing new vocabulary from newspapers every afternoon after his nap, and picking up new ideas from the television and radio after dinner. He keeps consulting us, “Do we need any reform or improvement in our lives?”

Everyone says no. Elder Sister Xu even says she hopes our way of life will be handed down through time, day after day, year after year, generation after generation, forever. Eventually my son makes a suggestion. Before making it, he screws up his eyes
for what seems like half a day, as if a caterpillar had crawled into them. He suggests we buy a cassette recorder.

Grandpa lends a receptive ear and approves. So our home now also has a Red Lantern stereo-cassette recorder. Everyone is delighted when it first arrives. You talk, he sings, you meow, she reads, all to be recorded and played back, for everyone’s enjoyment and applause. Everyone thinks the cassette recorder is wonderful. How much Grandpa’s forefathers missed by not having seen a cassette recorder!

Two days later, the fever subsides. The singing on the cassette tapes is not as good as that on the radio and television. So the cassette recorder is put aside and gathers dust.

Everyone then understands: new technologies and devices have very limited purposes. They are far less important than the harmony and order of the family, far less durable than the old tradition — nothing beats the radio, after all.

That year a decree was issued: the siesta was to be scrapped, there would only be a rest of forty minutes to one hour. This caused a big commotion in our family. It was at first said that all work units would provide free lunches. That aroused mixed feelings in us. While we were delighted that meals would be free, we were worried that we might not adapt to them. It turned out that after two days everyone felt the effects. Everyone was constipated. Before long it was announced that free lunches were suspended.

Puzzling. So what were we to do? Grandpa had always taught us to take the lead in following the government, so we bought meal boxes and took our own lunches. With all this upheaval, Elder Sister Xu had insomnia, toothache, a sty on her eyelid, and an irregular heartbeat. Soon different government departments extended their lunch breaks of their own accord.

Some did not announce the extension but put back the starting hour of the afternoon session without putting back the knocking-off time. Our family resumed noodles with fried bean sauce for lunch. Elder Sister Xu no longer has a sty on her eyelid or “fire” in her teeth. She sleeps regular hours, and her heart beats rhythmically, seventy to eighty times a minute.

Fresh winds are howling, new waves are breaking. Revaluation-rejection is stirring. Revivification-reformation is simmering, so much so that our friends and relatives who championed us as models are urging us to change.

It seems that a new model has emerged in Guangzhou if not in Hongkong or even the United States. It is Grandpa who first suggests we change our autocracy to a cabinet system. He will nominate; the full family congress (including Elder Sister Xu, who is a non-voting delegate with the right to speak) will approve the nomination; and formal members will take turns to rule. Apart from Elder Sister Xu, everyone agrees.

Father is the first one delegated to take charge. It is also resolved that he will carry out a reform of our meals.

For his whole life Father has fed on ready-made meals and worked on ready-made
jobs (meaning jobs assigned to him). Now he is responsible for the task of meal-planning. He is out of his depth. Faced with major decisions like which type of tea to buy, whether to make soup or not, whether to have the meat sliced or shredded, he invariably turns to Grandpa. Whatever he says or does, it is always under Grandpa’s banner: “The old boy said, ‘For mosquito coils buy the Lion brand’, the old boy said, ‘No soup tonight’, the old boy said, ‘Don’t use detergent for washing dishes. That stuff may be poisonous. Better use soda with warm water. It’s cheaper and cleaner.’”

Trouble arises. Elder Sister Xu turns to Father for everything. Instead of making the decision, Father turns to Grandpa and then passes on the old man’s words to Elder Sister Xu. It is more troublesome than asking Grandpa directly. And should one ask Grandpa directly, one fears Father may feel slighted and Grandpa annoyed.

In fact, Grandpa does consider all this tedious. He tells Father several times, “You should decide these things yourself. Don’t come asking me.” So Father tells Elder Sister Xu,

“The old boy said he would let me decide. The old boy said he would not let me ask him.”

Uncle and Aunt begin to whisper between themselves. What is said is unknown. But they may well be unhappy about Father’s incompetence and suspect that he falsifies orders in Grandpa’s name, or unhappy about Grandpa’s control over things, or about Elder Sister Xu’s babbling. They may also be unhappy about everyone’s agreeing on the cabinet system and approving Father as the person-in-charge.

Grandpa senses this. He straightens Father out: delegation of power is the trend. Father has no choice but to promise he will no longer be so quick to act in Grandpa’s name.

Father also delegates his power.

He announces that the choice between having soup or not and eating sliced or shredded meat will be made completely by Elder Sister Xu.

Elder Sister Xu disagrees.

“How can I take charge?” She declines the honour in tears, and is so apprehensive that she misses a meal.

But everyone encourages her:

“You have worked for our family for so many years, you should have power to go with your responsibility. You take charge, we support you! Buy whatever you want and cook whatever you want. We shall eat whatever you give us to eat. We trust you!”

Finally Elder Sister Xu turns her tears into smiles and thanks everyone for the honour. Everything goes as before, but in reality people gradually start getting fussy. They know the meals are managed by Elder Sister Xu alone, without the seal of approval from above. Subconscious disrespect evolves into conscious dissatisfaction. First it is my son, then my cousin and her husband, and then my wife and I, who start casting
aspersions.

“Our meals have followed the same system for forty years. They are turning into antiques!”

“Routine, regimented, fossilized, complacent!”

“Life in our family is a paradigm of living behind the times!”

“Elder Sister Xu is too limited, her educational level too low!”

“She is nice, but her standards are too low! Fancy our family living according to Elder Sister Xu’s standards in the 1980s!”

Elder Sister Xu doesn’t catch on; instead she shows signs of complacency. She starts implementing her ideas of reform. The two plates of pickled vegetables at breakfast are cut down to one, divided, and put on two plates. Salted vegetables with sesame oil are served without the oil. Fried bean sauce for lunch is replaced by a boiled sauce. Soup every two days is reduced to every seven days. Egg drop soup is replaced by clear broth with soya sauce and spring onion. With the money she saves on meals, she buys ginseng royal jelly, which she takes to Grandpa’s room. The way she tightens our belts to show loyalty to Grandpa infuriates us, but no one dares to say so. Worse still: my son reports that when she makes the clear broth she always ladles out for herself the most delicious bowlful with the most spring onion before the rest of us can get a look-in. And once while cutting vegetables in the kitchen, she was cracking melon seeds to eat. My son said she must have embezzled some meal money.

“Power corrupts. A little power corrupts a little. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.” My son propagates his new idea persuasively.

Father and those below him withhold their views. Encouraged by the silence, my son launches a fierce attack on Elder Sister Xu when she is again caught eating soup before the others.

“Enough of your sub-standard meals! How dare you scoop the spring onions first! I shall be in charge from tomorrow. I’ll let everyone live a modern life!”

Elder Sister Xu wails and whines, but no one says much. Everyone thinks it may be wise to put my son in charge: he is young, energetic, outstanding, and full of ideas — measures up to the standards required of achievers. Of course, everyone, including me, comforts Elder Sister Xu:

“You have been preparing our meals for forty years. You have made a substantial contribution, which can never be erased!”

Fervently my son announces a theory: “The meals of our family have been taken according to the same system for forty years. There have been no new ideas and one fundamental handicap — too many carbohydrates and too little protein. The lack of protein delays growth and hinders the regeneration and vitality of antibodies in the white blood cells. As a result, our nationals are physically weak and qualitatively challenged. In developed countries, the average daily protein intake is seven times that of ours; their
intake of animal protein fourteen times ours. If this continues, we shall be shorter, thinner, weaker, and duller than others. People from developed countries sleep for four, five or at the most six hours a day, and it is enough to keep them vigorous from morning to night. We have an additional afternoon nap, but we are always sluggish.

"Perhaps you will say we should not compare ourselves with developed countries. Yet I must point out that the diet of us Han people cannot be compared even with that of our brother peoples in the north of our country — and you can’t say the level of economic development of our brother peoples is higher than ours! Compared to the Mongols, Uighurs, Kazakhs, Koreans, and in the south-west, the Tibetans, doesn’t our protein intake lag far behind? Can we not change such a diet? Take breakfast, for example, eating sliced buns, congee, and salted vegetables ... my God! Is this the breakfast of modern people earning an above-average income in a Chinese metropolis in the 1980s? How terrible! How stupid!

"Congee with salted vegetables is itself the symbol of the Sick Man of the Far East, is synonymous with incremental suicide and ignorance! It is a disgrace to the descendants of the emperors Yan and Huang, the cause of the decline of Chinese culture, the sign of the withering of the civilization of the Yellow River basin! If we had been eating bread with butter rather than congee with salted vegetables, could Britain have won the Opium War in 1840? Would the Western Empress Dowager have needed to escape to Chengde during the invasion of the Western Allied Forces in 1900? Would the Japanese Kanto Army have dared instigate the September 18th Incident of 1931? Would those foreign dwarfs have dared instigate the Lugou Bridge Incident of 1937? If the Japanese soldiers had seen that every Chinese mouth was crammed with butter, wouldn’t they have been scared out of their minds in every regiment and division? If, after 1949, our leaders had made an immediate decision to eradicate congee with salted vegetables and decree that the whole nation must eat bread and butter, ham and sausages, eggs, yoghurt, and cheese, jam, honey, and chocolate, wouldn’t our national power, technology, arts, sports, housing, education, and car ownership long have reached the forefront of the world?

"Back to basics! Congee and salted vegetables is the source of our people’s misfortune, the root of our super-stable progress-less feudal society! Eradicate congee and salted vegetables! There’ll be no hope for China if congee and salted vegetable are not eradicated."

The speaker is emotive, the audience moved. I have mixed feelings of surprise, delight, and apprehension. Surprised and delighted because without my knowing it my son is no longer wearing open-seat pants, no longer needs me to wipe his bum, but has acquired so much knowledge, revitalized so grand a concept, formed so incisive a view, and grasped so crucial a point! If Heaven could feel, it would feel old. My son knows the Way of the world! His blood is full of congee and salted vegetables, but his eyes are on butter and ham. He breathes the heady atmosphere of modernization and embraces
the four corners of the universe. Indeed, young people should be watched with respect. The world will eventually belong to them. What worries me is that sharp attacks on the ills of society flow so eloquently out of the kid’s mouth. All bark and no bite, all gestures and no action. Gross exaggeration is worthless. Academic theorization is fruitless. Almost half a century’s experience tells me: whoever describes serious issues as if they were as simple as green on white, like spring onions on bean curd, or claims that capturing the enemy’s commander is as easy as fishing in one’s own pocket, is doomed to impotence after the initial erection! But this is my only son. He must continue the family line! He can’t become impotent!

Sure enough, my cousin humphs, and grumbles, “Easier said than done! If there were so much bread and butter, I think modernization would already have been achieved!”

“Oh?” My son is high on his emotion. He yells, “Good god! In the ’60s Nikita Khrushchev advocated goulash communism. In the ’80s, Aunt is into modernization by bread and butter! How similar they are! Modernization implies automation of industry, intensification of agriculture, advancement of science, integration of national defence, randomness of thought, obscurity of nouns, metamorphosis of the arts, illimitability of arguments, theorization of academics, impenetrability of concepts, and paranormalization, which is the supernaturalization of human beings. The sea of salvation is boundless, butter is the boat. The land of happiness is inaccessible, bread is the bridge! Of course, bread and butter won’t rain down on us like bombs from our imagined enemies. This I know, I’m not slow. But we must ask questions and set goals. A nation without goals is like a person without a head, whoever heard of something like that!”

“OK, OK, the general direction of the two of you is the same, don’t quarrel any more,” says Grandpa. The quarrel stops.

My son launches his reform programme. The next day, bread and butter begets eggs, milk, and coffee. Elder Sister Xu and Grandma do not drink milk or coffee, so Uncle suggests that they roast spring onions with Chinese pepper, cinnamon, anise, ginger peel, pepper, laver, and cayenne pepper in a pan until they are dry, and sprinkle the mix with Guangdong soya sauce — mock shrimp-roe soya sauce — and then add the mix to milky coffee in order to disguise its foreign smell and rank taste. I try a mouthful and find it much more acceptable. I want to add the mix, too, but my son’s murderous look forces me to sacrifice my preference. Where will these little Chinese emperors, who are born with the “four-two-one complex”, lead our nation?

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As a result of the Chinese government’s One Child Policy, an extended family consists of three generations: “four” grandparents, “two” parents, and “one” child. The only child in the family gets easily spoiled. It is a contemporary idiom widely used in Peking.
Three days later, the whole family is rocked. Elder Sister Xu has got acute gastroenteritis. She is hospitalized and doctors suspect intestinal cancer complications. Grandma has got non-A non-B type nervous cirrhosis. Grandpa is constipated since embarking on his Western diet, and requires his two filial sons, Father and Uncle, to take turns to stick bamboo chopsticks up his bum — with little effect. My cousin has got intestinal blockage, which causes a severe bellyache and leads to an emergency operation. My cousin’s husband has got toothache and a cold sore. My wife vomits after every meal. After throwing up all the Western food, she steals back to my mother-in-law’s for her congee and salted vegetables, not daring to let my son know. What is more terrible: the meal budget for one whole month has been used up in three days. My son announces: nothing, not even congee and salted vegetables, will be supplied if no further resources are available. It develops to the stage where I must step in. I turn to Father and Uncle and suggest my son’s powers be taken away so that family life can return to normal!

Father and Uncle turn to Grandpa. Grandpa turns to Elder Sister Xu. But Elder Sister Xu is in hospital, so Grandpa visits her there. She declares that she will not prepare any meals after she leaves the hospital and that if we think she is useless, she will go. Grandpa has to assure and reassure her that we have no such intention. He reiterates his principles: that relationships and commitment are the most precious things in life — that Elder Sister Xu’s relationship with our family is perfect, and her commitment total, that she is closer to him than his own mother and dearer to him than his blood relations. That we shall share the rough and smooth with Elder Sister Xu for as long as she is with us. That even when there is only one bun left in the house, Elder Sister Xu will have her slice. That even when there is only one bowl of water left, Elder Sister Xu will have her spoonful. That she will benefit if we get rich, and she will be cared for if we are poor. That it is unacceptable that one should be sent packing when one is no longer useful. Grandpa speaks with passion and conviction, crying; Elder Sister Xu listens attentively and gratefully, bawling. Eventually the medical staff decide that their contact is inimical to the patient’s recovery and succeed in persuading a tearful Grandpa to leave.

Back home, Grandpa calls a plenary family meeting. He states that he is old and weak and does not mind what or how he eats. Nor has he any intention of wielding all power.

“If you insist on turning to me, I will have to turn to Elder Sister Xu. However, Elder Sister Xu has been depressed by your complaints and distressed by Grandson’s Western meals. I can no longer take charge. Eat whatever you like. If there is nothing for me, I’ll just have to starve,” says Grandpa.

We look at each other and declare our positions. Everyone says Grandpa is the best person to take charge: for half a century, the whole family has been healthy and harmonious. My cousin says she is prepared to cook for Grandpa every day, which means
that she and her husband, Grandpa, Grandma, and Elder Sister Xu will form one group to eat. Father announces that he and Mother can form one group, but they will not bother with me and my wife because my wife and I have a modern son and will be impossible to eat with. I also announce that I will only go with my wife. Then Uncle and Aunt form their group, leaving my son on his own. My cousin seems satisfied. She says:

"Now each group will eat separately. This is modern! Four generations eating together is too reminiscent of the times of A Dream of Red Mansions. Furthermore, it is too crowded to have so many people eating around the same table, and hepatitis spreads easily!" She asks, "Are there such big families in the United States? Are they so capable of bridging their generation gaps that they eat together?"

Grandpa has loneliness written all over his face.

The arrangements for separate eating do not work for more than two days. At eleven, my cousin’s group, blessed with Grandpa’s authority, cooks while others can only sigh and wait for the stove. Then it is Father’s turn, then Uncle’s turn. My turn will not come until two o’clock in the afternoon; by then I am forced to give up the cooking for work. It is the same waiting to cook dinner. We discuss, deliberate, and debate the question of each group’s buying their own stove. But it is impossible to get bottled gas. Before we managed to get the bottled gas our family is using, we had to ask for fourteen favours, host seven banquets, and give away two paintings, five cartons of cigarettes, and eight bottles of wine. It took us thirteen months and thirteen days and exhausted our physical and mental energies. There is a separate procedure for buying a coal briquet stove, and certification is required for buying briquets. Even if we manage to get a certificate and buy briquets, there is no place to put them. If we build four stoves according to modern concepts, we shall first need to expand the kitchen by thirty square metres. The best, of course, would be to build four separate kitchens. Better than the best would be to build five flats. The human propensity to consume is like a wild horse. No wonder that, the more newspapers report that consumption is overheated, the more heated consumption becomes. It suddenly dawns on everyone that without building more flats, our talk of modern concepts and protection of privacy is all a pipe-dream.

The soft science of stove separation cannot work against the laws of the sexagenary cycle. A bottle of gas is finished in nine days. This year the supply of liquefied petroleum gas has been rationed, and we have been allocated a dozen coupons or so for the year. Each bottle must last for at least twenty-five days if the whole family is to be guaranteed cooked food and boiled drinking-water. A bottle every nine days means that the year’s

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\(^2\)The ancient Chinese method of day-counting which combines a series of twelve characters (the so-called "earthly branches") with a series of ten characters (the so-called "heavenly stems") to form sixty combinations (Joseph Needham, Science and Civilization in China, vol. 1. Cambridge University Press, 1945).
allocation will be finished in four months. Who should we turn to in the remaining eight months? Such an arrangement would disrupt not only our own routines but also national planning!

Everyone is apprehensive. They sigh, complain, and whisper among themselves. Some say they will eat flour batter when the gas is used up. Some say the cooking time of each group should be restricted to seventeen minutes. Some say cooking separately at this stage is a matter of the relations of production surpassing the level of development of the productive forces. Some say the reforms have turned things from bad to worse, and would rather have Grandpa dictate and Elder Sister Xu manage our meals. Some attack the United States, comparing the Americans to beasts who have no sense of filial piety, no brotherly love, no loyalty, and no trustworthiness, and therefore necessarily do not have extended families.

"Why should we imitate the United States when we have a sound tradition of familial relations and morality?" No one dares to bother Grandpa, so they all turn to my cousin's husband.

My cousin's husband is the only one in our family who has been abroad. In recent years he has had two suits tailor-made, bought three ties, studied in the United States for six months, visited Japan for ten days, and seen seven cities of the Federal Republic of Germany. He has seen the world, has good manners, is capable of saying "thank you" and "pardon me" in nine different languages — is indeed, the scholar in our family.

He never argues, is never arrogant, is always easy-going, and is resigned to his place because he understands he has a different surname from us. For these qualities he has won our deep respect.

Now, seeing that we are deep in trouble and keen to find a solution, he speaks from his heart.

"I think the fundamental problem of our family is in the system," he says. "The question of whether to eat sliced toasted buns is, in fact, a small issue. The real issue is, who is to decide, and according to what process is the decision on what to eat to be made?

"Feudal patriarchy? Seniority? Anarchy? Arbitrarily eating whatever whoever wants to cook, cooks? Eating according to cookery books? According to a priori necessity?

"The crucial issue is democracy: without democracy you can't appreciate anything you eat. Without democracy, even if your eating is in a mess, no one will stand up to shoulder the responsibility of reform. Without democracy you can only eat in a muddle: not tasting the sweetness of white sugar or the bitterness of bitter squash because they have nothing to do with your choice be they sweet or bitter! Without democracy your heart is hardened, the subjectivity of eating is lost, and the eating subject is alienated as
an excrement-producing machine.

"Without democracy you are in chaos, each of you going your way, impulsively, for short-term goals, at the expense of your neighbour: the eating subject will expand into a monster with a stomach but no head! Without democracy you have no choice. Without choice the self is lost!"

All of us feel as if we have been showered with wisdom, and nod incessantly. Encouraged by the approval, my cousin's husband continues.

"An order based on seniority is acceptable in a stagnant agrarian society. It suits the illiterate and the retarded in particular because such a humdrum and muted — such an ossified — order can be understood and accepted by people of that mentality. But such an order suffocates competition, suffocates the initiative, creativity, and evolution of human beings. Without evolution there would not have been human beings; without evolution we would still be monkeys. Ranking by seniority also suppresses vitality. People usually pursue happiness the most actively and energetically before the age of forty, but they are relegated to the lowest stratum of the order...."

My son sighs, "Too right!" Tears stream out of his eyes.

I subtly signal to him. Since the failure of his Manifesto on the Westernization of Breakfast, his image has been in decline. Others are taking him as a bit of an adventurer, an idle talker, or even a rebel, someone who destroys rather than constructs. No one — not even my cousin and her husband — can see anything in him any more. If he stands up to support my cousin's husband, he will only ruin things.

"You are correct. But what should we do?" I ask.

My cousin's husband says, "Hold a democratic election! Democratic elections are the crux, the acupoint, the bull's eye, the central target! Everyone should run in the election!

"Everyone should say — like in a tender for a contract — how much you are to charge, what obligations you expect others to fulfil, what food you will prepare, and what reward you expect.

"Everything should be open, transparent, orderly, ruly, lawful, procedural, scientific, and systematic. The result will depend on the ballot. The minority will obey the majority, which in itself is a new concept, a new spirit, a new order, and will forestall both anarchistic impulsiveness and the stifling of creativity."

For a long while, Father thinks seriously, the lines carved on his face turning deeper. At long last, he says, "OK, I agree. But there are two hurdles: one is the old boy, the other is Elder Sister Xu...."

My cousin says, "Grandpa should be OK. His thinking is modern. And he has long been tired of overseeing the meals. But Elder Sister Xu may be a problem...."

My son gets impatient, and shouts, "Who is Elder Sister Xu anyway? She doesn't belong to our family! She should not have the right to elect or be elected!"
Mother is unhappy: “My grandson, do you have to put your two cents’ worth in? Don’t say Elder Sister Xu has a different surname from us! Don’t say she is not one of our family! You’re saying she has no right to elect or be elected? We can’t do anything without getting her agreement! I have been with this family my whole life: don’t I know more than you?”

My cousin and her husband are also divided and are debating between themselves. My cousin’s husband thinks that recognizing Elder Sister Xu’s special status would be to undermine democracy and that it is a matter of non-negotiable principle: if we uphold democracy, we cannot recognize Elder Sister Xu’s special status. On the other hand, my cousin thinks that unrealistic talk is useless: disrespect for Elder Sister Xu is disrespect for tradition; disrespect for tradition will knock the support from under your feet, and without support under your feet, any reform plan will become a dream in the clouds, and reforms in the clouds only mean a refusal to reform. My cousin rudely points out to her husband:

“Don’t think you are somebody because you have been abroad a few times and can utter a few words in foreign languages. In fact, you are less important than Elder Sister Xu in our family!”

Her husband’s face darkens. He stands around sneering for a couple of minutes, and then storms off.

Some days later, Uncle speaks up. He points out that the two obstacles are, in fact, one, because Elder Sister Xu, although stubborn, always follows Grandpa, that she will agree if Grandpa agrees, so there is no need to fabricate a conflict between democratic progress and Elder Sister Xu, much less to exacerbate such a made-up conflict.

Uncle’s reasoning wins everyone’s approval. It dawns on us that it is we who have created our worries, that we can either blow up or play down the conflict as we like, and that we can even decide whether there is to be a conflict at all. We suddenly realize that the challenge lies in our finding the point of agreement among different views, in creating an accommodating and harmonious relationship. Everyone is reassured. Even my cousin and my son have broad smiles on their faces.

We decide that Father and Uncle should speak on our behalf. It works as expected. Elder Sister Xu is very negative about holding an election.

“What is the point of all that rigmarole?” she asks.

However, she adds that she will not intervene or oppose anything after she leaves the hospital, saying,

“If you eat flies, I’ll eat flies. If you eat mosquitoes, I’ll eat mosquitoes. Don’t ask for my opinion.”

She is neither concerned about, nor does she have any opinion on whether she has the right to vote. She makes it clear that she will not take part in any discussion of our family affairs. It seems Elder Sister Xu has chosen to retreat from the stage of history.
We decide that my cousin’s husband should conduct the election. As election day approaches, our family is in a festive mood. Everyone is busy cleaning the house, shining the windows, hanging pictures, and arranging the latest silk flowers in vases.

Democracy has brought new life — believe it or not.

The day finally comes. My cousin’s husband puts on the tile-grey suit which he wore when he visited Europe and America and wears a black bow-tie, looking like the conductor of a symphony orchestra, to conduct the event. Firstly, he asks the candidates to make a speech on “How I Shall Manage the Household Chores”.

No one responds. Everyone is silent. You can even hear the flies in the kitchen.

My cousin’s husband is surprised: “What is this? Isn’t anyone running? Don’t you have your ideas, opinions, and attitudes?”

I said, “Cousin-in-law, why don’t you speak first? Show us an example! We are not used to democracy. We feel embarrassed.”

My cousin cuts in: “Don’t let him speak. It is none of his business.”

Her husband remains calm, and explains in a gentlemanly way,

“I am not running in the election. I’m not suggesting we try democracy so that I can gain power. You will only tarnish democracy if you elect me. Furthermore, I am making financial arrangements to study overseas. I have contacted several universities in North America and Oceania, and shall be bidding farewell to you once I have bought enough US dollars on the black market. I shall very much appreciate it if anyone of you is prepared to lend me some money. I guarantee to pay back your Renminbi in hard currency! So....”

We look at each other, completely deflated. The same thought arises in everyone’s mind:

“Why are we holding an election to manage the household chores? Isn’t this simply looking for trouble?

“A quack blowing his own trumpet, saying things disrespectful to his seniors and hurtful to his neighbours — it’s a trap! We are not falling for it! Are we really letting you conduct the election? Can you satisfy everyone?

“Food’s on the table waiting for us, and we’re holding an election — if this is not taking the wrong medicine, what is?”

And then everyone thinks, “What’s the point of a democratic election? We have been eating congee, salted vegetables, and noodles with fried bean sauce for decades without a democratic election! We haven’t died of starvation or overeating, haven’t eaten bricks or drunk dog’s piss, haven’t stuffed noodles into our noses or up our asses these decades without a democratic election! Sod democracy! What’s it good for? Diarrhoea and starvation! That’s how Chinese people are — fume and fret, fret and fume, over and over and over: that’s our peace of mind.”

But since we said we would have democracy, we have to have a bit of it. Since we
said we would hold an election, we have to hold one. Since we, including Grandpa, have gathered around, we have to go through with it. Anyway, who can say democratic elections are necessarily not good? We may be able to elect someone who is capable of providing us with meals which are both nutritious and tasty, which strengthen both our yin and yang, which help both our circulation and respiration, which build our bodies without ruining our figures or style, which not only look but also smell and taste good, which save not only money but also cooking fuel, which are not only hygienic but also simple to prepare.

That person may be able to cook without filling the place with oil fumes or clatter.

Every one of us may be able to have a say without wasting our time.

We may be able to have someone in charge of our meals without being autocratic. We may not need to eat left-overs nor waste any food.

We may be able to eat clams without contracting hepatitis, to eat fish and prawns without the fishy odour ... and so on and so on.

If democratic elections can bring all these wonders, I swear, no one will oppose democratic elections.

The election starts. We fill in the ballot-papers, cast our votes, and monitor the counting. All eleven ballot-papers issued have been cast.

Four of them are blank. On another is written, “anyone will do”, which makes it equivalent to a blank vote, making a total of five blank votes. Two votes are cast for Elder Sister Xu, three for Grandpa, and one for my son.

Who should be declared the winner? Grandpa has the most votes, but they make up fewer than half or even one third of all votes.

Should we consider him elected?

That was not specified beforehand. We ask my cousin’s husband. He says that there are two kinds of “laws”, written and unwritten, and that strictly speaking, unwritten laws are not laws: the term of office of the American president, for example, is not specified in the American constitution, but in reality it is law because everyone acts according to it; that the fundamental concept of democracy is the minority obeying the majority, but whether that means a relative majority, a simple majority (that is, more than half), or an absolute majority (that is, more than two thirds)\(^3\) depends on tradition and points of view; that since it is the first time we have had an election, and since all participants are kith and kin, we can decide among ourselves.

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\(^3\)The definitions are inaccurate. When more than two choices are put to the vote, the choice which gets the most votes, has a simple majority which may be less than half of all the votes. An “absolute majority” consists of fifty percent of voters plus one.
My cousin says that since Grandpa obtained the most votes, he should be considered elected, that this should be seen, that it could only be seen, as deriving from modern democratic concepts and not from feudal patriarchal thought. She says that our family has had no problem with feudal patriarchal ideas because they do not pose a threat or cause any fundamental contradiction in our family. What we need to guard against are, in fact, things that come under the banner of anti-feudalism — namely anarchism, liberalism, egocentrism, buy-now-pay-later-ism, hedonism, the-moon-in-America-isrounder-than-that-in-China-ism, and foreign dogmatism, she says.

My son suddenly gets all worked up. He solemnly announces that he has not voted for himself. At this point, I feel eyes converging on me from all directions, as if I had voted for my son, as if I had acted unfairly by favouring my own kin. My face blushes, while I think,

"Who could possibly be thinking like that? Why are they thinking like that? Don't they know that I did not vote for my son? Don't they know that even if I had, there is nothing unfair in that because otherwise I could only have voted for Father, Uncle, Mother, my wife, or my cousin, and according to Freud, who is in vogue, my cousin is no more distant from me than my son, who may even have an Oedipus Complex? Don't they know that?"

"Why do they begin to suspect me?"

My son starts shouting. He says the fact that he obtained one vote shows that the fire of hope in our family is not dead, and will eventually blaze up. He says his concern about the reform of our meals is entirely rooted in his selfless passion, in his treasuring of traditional humanism, and in his universal love. When he comes to the word "love", tears the size of soya beans flow from his eyes. He says that now there is only order, but not love, in our family, that an order without love is as immoral as a marriage without love. He says he could have long since shaken off the shackles of our family's system of meals and changed to eating snails, cheese, asparagus, tuna fish, lobster, veal, Kentucky Fried Chicken, sandwiches, Big Macs, apple pie with cinnamon, ice-cream, and pudding. He says he loves his aunt very much but cannot accept her views, although they are easy to agree with.

At this point Uncle interposes. (Note that he interposes rather than interrupts; interrupting is impolite, but interposing is friendly, wise, democratic, or simply a token of high regard.) He says that my cousin's identifying the fundamental contradiction and the major threat, is improper. That it would be better not to stress certain problems because half a century of medical experience has taught us that when you say constipation is the major problem, there will be widespread diarrhoea, resulting in a short supply of anti-diarrhoea medicine and an antipathy towards doctors.

On the other hand, if you say diarrhoea is the major problem, there will be widespread dryness in the rectum, which induces piles, or even quarrels and fights, as a
result of the "fire". Fire can only be conquered by water. The Five Elements have to be in fine balance before one is healthy.\footnote{The Five Elements is one of the two fundamental principles underlying the scientific ideas of the Chinese people. Zou Yan (350-270 BC), who is considered the real founder of all Chinese scientific thought, systematized and stabilized the concept of the Five Elements which had been in circulation for more than a century before him. The elements are Water, Fire, Wood, Metal and Earth but the conception was not so much of five sorts of fundamental matter as of five fundamental processes. (Colin Ronan, The Shorter Science and Civilization in China: An Abridgement of Joseph Needham's Original Text. Cambridge University Press, 1978).}

Therefore, it is as necessary to prevent constipation as to prevent diarrhoea.

Whichever we have, should be cured. The ideal is to have neither constipation nor diarrhoea.

He speaks so convincingly that I seem to hear some applause.

After the applause, everyone discovers that the problem has not been solved. The heated discussion seems to have speeded up the processes of the mutual production and mutual conquest of the Five Elements of our metabolism: everyone is hungry. So everyone says that since Grandpa got the most votes, Grandpa should be in charge.

But Grandpa disagrees. He says that the preparation of meals is an issue of skill rather than thought, concepts, seniority, duty, power, status, or reward: that we should not be electing a leader, but rather deciding who is the best cook. That is, selection should be based on cooking skill.

My son cheers. Everyone feels that a new path has been opened up. Some people, however, say that little time is left of today because everyone is hungry: that although the issue of who should be in charge of meals is still being discussed and debated, everybody still has to eat when the usual hour comes. If any result comes of the discussion, everybody will have to eat; if no result comes of the discussion, everybody will still have to eat. Those who support the discussion's result will have to eat; those who do not support the discussion’s result will also have to eat.

Everybody needs to eat, whether allowed or not. So... everybody eats, regardless.

To judge everyone's cooking skills, many procedures are devised: everyone is required to steam one basket of buns, simmer one pot of rice, fry two eggs, shred one plate of salted vegetables, cook one bowl of congee, braise one basin of pig's knuckle, and so on.

In order to work out the procedures, the whole of our family goes through thirty days and nights of discussion, involving arguments, temper fits, quarrels, tears, and reconciliations. In the end, everybody is so exhausted they can hardly breathe, pee, or walk. The discussion has destroyed harmony, but built up solidarity, fostered feelings,
and produced an exchange of views; has exhausted our energy, but aroused tremendous interest in everyone. When it is suggested that the candidate should fry two eggs, everyone laughs deliriously, as if encouraged by some mysterious cue. When it is suggested that salted vegetables should be shredded, everyone is disconsolate, as if they had suddenly aged many years.

Then the cooking-skills competition is finally over, and the results out. No one has any objection to the results.

The results are, first class division one: Grandpa, Grandma; first class division two: Father, Mother, Uncle, Aunt; second class division one: me, my wife, my cousin, and her husband; third class division one: my tall and skinny son. Everyone is worried that my son may be discouraged, so we unanimously agree that, although he is third class, we should present him with a "Star of Hope Special Award".

But despite the special award and despite his being a star of hope, he is still third class. Theories, terminology and methodology come and go, but order is permanent.

A long time passes. Everyone has somehow understood that order is permanent. Discussions and experiments with theories, terminology, and methodology have cooled down. The issue of meals no longer sparks divergent views or heated emotions. Whether the issue of meals is one of skill, of system, of cultural concepts, or of something we have not even thought of, no longer troubles us. It is apparent that we can continue to eat our meals even if we do not discuss the issue.

Elder Sister Xu has passed away peacefully: she had a nap in the afternoon, had not woken up by four, and was found to have stopped breathing.

Every one of us mourns her passing.

My son is working for a joint venture and may have realized his ideal of eating bread and butter and a great deal of animal protein every day. When he returns home on holidays, we ask him what he would like to eat. He says that he has tried every kind of cuisine and that what he really likes is congee with salted vegetables, plus plain soup and noodles with fried bean sauce. Having said that, he mocks himself, "It is easier to change your ideas than your tastes!"

Uncle and Aunt have moved to a newly-built flat allocated to them. Now they have a kitchen with a central gas supply and extractor fan, where they have braised pig's knuckle and fried eggs. But they say that more often they still eat congee, sliced toasted buns, salted vegetables, plain soup, and noodles with fried bean sauce.

My cousin's husband has gone abroad "for further studies", studying and working at the same time. My cousin has since joined him. They write back:

"What we eat most often is congee and salted vegetables. They arouse in us fond memories which dispel the sadness of being in a foreign land. They make us feel as if we've returned to our warm and simple home. We can't explain the feeling. Maybe we
have inherited congee-and-salted-vegetable genes in our cells?"

Father, Grandpa and I live together happily. We have been eating more chicken, duck, fish, pork, eggs, milk, sugar, and oil, and are gaining weight. The dishes on our dining table have become more varied and high-class. We have had stir-fried sliced pork, braised sea cucumber with spring onions, deep-fried peanuts, fried cakes, pasta salad, crab-meat salad, and on one occasion even abalone and scallops. Abalone, sea cucumber, and salad have come and gone, but congee and salted vegetables have stayed. Even if we come back from a banquet of exotic delicacies, we have to eat some congee and salted vegetables before our digestive systems can function properly. If we forgot our congee and salted vegetables, we would immediately have a stomach-ache. Or maybe we would even develop cancer.

The fact that we have not had any cancer of the intestine or the stomach must be thanks to our eating congee and salted vegetables!

Congee and salted vegetables are our irreplaceable staple, other foods are only supplementary.

Since Elder Sister Xu died, the task of cooking has fallen on Mother. Before every meal, she routinely asks Grandpa and Grandma:

"Should I make a soup or not? Should I slice or shred the meat?"

These ancient questions are both faithful and saddening. These apparently plain questions, empty questions, are a formality but also represent a moral sentiment: they are impregnated with our memories of Elder Sister Xu, making us feel that she lives on with us.

Grandpa has said many times that so long as there is congee, salted vegetables, sliced toasted buns and noodles with fried bean sauce, he is not prepared to get involved in whether we should have soup or not, whether the meat should be sliced or shredded, or which exotic delicacies we should eat; that he hopes Mother will not trouble him with these increasingly difficult questions. Mother humours him, but she would have no peace of mind if she did not ask. When the meal is ready and everyone has sat down around the table, she looks anxiously around, as if she were sitting on a bed of needles, to check for any disapproving expression, particularly Grandpa's. If Grandpa coughs, Mother mutters quietly: "Perhaps there is grit in the congee? Are the vegetables not salty enough, or are they too salty?" But she will not directly ask for opinions. Of course, even if she had consulted Grandpa before the meal, it was no guarantee that there would be no grit in the congee.

Therefore, as another evening approaches, Mother still faithfully and — due to her awareness of herself as a bother — tentatively asks Grandpa,

"Should we have the meat sliced or shredded?"

She asks in a soft tone and Grandpa replies in a kind and strong voice. Even if the reply is: "Don't ask me", it is enough to settle Mother into doing her cooking.
An old friend of Father’s back in the ’40s, who is British, has been travelling in China and is staying with us for a week. At first, we arranged for a Shanghai chef who specializes in Western cooking to prepare bread, cakes, custard, and steak for him.

The friend says candidly,

“I haven’t come to the East to eat Western food or its bad imitations. Why don’t you prepare your traditional, charming meals for me, please?”

Embarrassed, we treat him to congee and salted vegetables.

“How simple! How tender! How soothing! How elegant.... Only the ancient East has such mystical meals!” exclaims the British scholar.

I record his praise of congee and salted vegetables in Oxford English on a cassette tape for my tall and skinny son.