

20210319 Reminiscence, In Spain

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### Reminiscence, In Spain

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On an early morning in late autumn, with sleepy eyes, I opened my email box while yawning. Suddenly my eyes lit up. An email from a Spanish friend, Laureano Ramirez Bellerín, appeared on the screen. Who was looking for us?

Laureano Ramirez didn't know the sender.

The stranger inquired about email address of Professor Laureano Ramirez from the Autonomous University of Barcelona and wrote the letter in Spanish.

*“I am writing to you, because I have information on the Chinese brigadista Chen Agen and I do not know how to get this information to the authors of the book ‘Chinese Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War’...”*

It seems that the book read by the stranger would be in Spanish, and the translator was Laureano Ramirez, so the stranger asked him to forward the letter to us.

#### A letter from a Stranger

Perhaps many people do not know who the Chinese brigadista Chen Agen (aka: Aking Chan) is. More than eighty years ago, he was one of the 12 Chinese volunteers who participated in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). But he was the only one directly from China. His experience was full of legends. What does the stranger know about Aking Chan? I read the letter with curiosity.

The stranger is a woman, who signed her name as Begoña Ariznabarreta, or Bego for short. I never thought that her information was related to the 2020 Covid-19 virus. The spread of the epidemic in Spain was severe, and the graph showed that the number of infections was rising sharply. Bego, residing in the Basque autonomous region of northern Spain, was also forced to stay at home because of the pandemic. Unexpectedly, she found a manuscript left by her late father.

Bego estimated that this manuscript was probably written by her father in 1979, recalling his participation in the Spanish Civil War. She found that two articles were peculiar. The content was about "a Chinese in the Basque army."

During the Spanish Civil War, the world's transportation was extremely inconvenient. In the minds of the Basques, the Chinese seemed to be people from another planet. Why was there a Chinese participating in the Basque army! Bego was taken aback, and immediately searched the Internet. She was pleasantly surprised to find that Laureano Ramirez translated the book "Chinese Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War," which she bought and studied right away.

*"When I read the name of Chen Agen in the first pages [table of Contents], I immediately turned to his chapter and read his story. I clearly realized that he was the same Chinese brigadista who appeared in my father's writings," Bego wrote.*

So did Bego's father fight the Spanish Civil War with Aking Chan?

Bego seemed to anticipate my question. She went on to write, *"He participated in the Civil War with my father in Asturias, in the same squad as the Basque Brigade."*

This news made me very excited, since Aking Chan indeed participated in the war in Asturias! Bego's letter also revealed that her father and Chan not only fought in the same squad, but also encountered similar experiences. She wrote, *"Aking Chan was captured together with my father and also locked up in a concentration camp."*

### **Remembering a Chinese Comrade**

More than 80 years have passed since the Spanish Civil War broke out. Yet a Spanish fighter's descendant is looking for me to provide information about a Chinese comrade in her father's manuscript. This warmed my heart, and I immediately replied to her letter.

*"From your letter, we know that your father and Aking Chan, who was two years older than him, were not only on the same squad, but also held together as prisoners of war. To our comfort, your father finally came out of prison alive. However, Aking Chan's fate remains unknown." I told Bego that we continue our research on Chinese and Asian volunteers who participated in the Spanish Civil War. "I hope you can share with us your father's manuscript about Aking Chan, so that we can add fragments of Aking Chan's life in Spain, through the eyes of his comrade – your father."*

I received Bego's reply the next day. She was very happy to contact us. She said that this was a topic that moved her because her father had kept talking about the Spanish Civil War during his lifetime. And now she found that her father had missed his comrade Aking Chan. This remembrance touched her, *"It would be very exciting for my brothers and me to meet Chen's descendants, and give them a copy of my father's manuscripts."* Bego wrote affectionately, *"I know this is very difficult to do, but we will make some attempts to find them."*

Bego's father was named Luis Ariznabarreta. He endured suffering and torment in Franco's prisons. In 1940 he was released from prison, but was sent to do military service as forced labor in a prisoner-of-war camp for at least a year. Three years later, he got married, and eventually had eight children. He was fortunate to live a life with dignity for more than 60 years. He passed away in 2003 at the age of 87. Bego has been putting her father's manuscript in digital format, making it easier for us to read. This is where our continuous communication began.

### **The mysterious Vietnamese cook**

What kind of person was Aking Chan? How could he go to Spain to fight? In fact, when he left China and went to Europe by ship, he didn't know that the civil war had broken out in Spain. But meeting a Vietnamese cook on the ship changed the course of his life.

The Spanish Civil War entered its second year in 1937. Aking Chan, who grew up in Shanghai, China, was 24. He was being hunted down by the Chinese National Government for helping the Communists organize a trade union. In desperation, he jumped on a British steamship, Gerta Moora, working as a cook's assistant.

On the ocean sailing to Europe, Aking Chan slowly got to know the cook. He found that the cook spoke not only French, but also several Chinese dialects. What surprised him most was the knowledge of the cook who seemed to know everything about the world. He felt that the cook was the most knowledgeable and intelligent person he had ever met. He admired the cook very much. After working every day, Aking Chan listened to the cook talk about politics and Vietnam's search for independence and learned French from him.

When the steamship approached Europe, the cook knew Aking Chan well and told him some serious news. He said: Spain is in a civil war. German and Italian fascists are fully supporting Franco's rebels and want to overthrow the democratically elected Spanish Republic. Western countries are not only failing to save the Spanish Republic, but also prohibit her from buying arms to save herself. If fascism succeeds in Spain, a world war will be in sight. Now is a crucial moment. He hoped Aking Chan could go to Spain and fight fascism.

The cook's impassioned words touched Aking Chan's young heart. Aking Chan said excitedly, so let's go to the war together. The cook said that he had already enlisted in the military and was now being ordered to go to a Moscow school for further studies, therefore unable to accompany Chan. In August, when the steamship docked at Gijon, the port of Asturias in northern Spain, Aking Chan jumped ashore and went to join the local militia until he was arrested by Franco's army in late October. What experience did Aking Chan have during these two months? The manuscript of Bego's father, Luis, helps fill the gap in this period.

### **Shanghainese appeared in the line of fire**

Luis was born and grew up in Soraluze in Basque. He received professional training in the armory school and worked in a factory operating a lathe. When the gunfire of the Spanish Civil War erupted in July 1936, Luis, almost 21 years old, immediately organized a militia with local young people to resist Franco's rebels. Because Soraluze was an important town for the manufacture of cannons and various weapons, Franco had already coveted it and eagerly launched an offensive. At the end of September, the rebels were about to enter the town and occupy it. At this critical moment, Luis rushed to one end of the narrow town, and beat the drum in his hand desperately, announcing that the train had arrived at the station, waiting for women and children to get on the train and evacuate immediately. Later, some girls were exiled to France and some boys to Belgium.

Due to insufficient military power, Luis's militia retreated westward in April, 1937. On their way, they looked to the east toward Guernica, 10 km away, and witnessed combustion flames from the brutal German aircraft bombing. Four months later, they retreated to Cedeira in Asturias, where they formed the Basque Brigade which was composed of four companies. At this time, *"a Chinese man from Shang[h]ai arrived there with two Basques to join our Brigade. He was assigned to my squad,"* Luis wrote.

Aking Chan was courageous. After getting off the ship in Gijon, he set foot on a completely unfamiliar land, not knowing how to speak the local language. Where could he join the army to fight? What's more, how could the army just accept a strange Chinese man to join? Apparently the Vietnamese cook who convinced him to come ashore had made some arrangements on the ground, allowing Aking Chan to go south 40 kilometers to Cedeira to join the Basque Brigade.

In the Basque Brigade, they spoke in Basque. But what about Aking Chan? Luis wrote, *"For Chan, the languages of Basque and Spanish are the same thing, so whenever we talked to him, we used Basque."* He couldn't understand it anyway. Facing the language barrier, Luis speculated the meaning of Aking Chan's expression and guessed that he was a sailor on the ship. Luis supposed that Aking Chan, after getting off the ship in Gijon, got drunk, missed boarding and was left on shore.

Although Aking Chan did not understand Basque and had to "talk" using body language and hand gestures, he insisted on participating in the war. Luis wrote in his manuscript, *"This Chinese was involved in all our battles... He fought among the Basques, we called him 'Shang[h]ai' because he came from there. He was a Basque among us, in the fight as well as later in prison."*

Aking Chan arrived at the right time, when Asturias was fully embroiled in the war. On September 6, 1937, he followed the Basque Brigade to El Mazuco near the coast. A fierce battle began and the rebels, with seven times more troops than the Republican force, surged westward in waves. Although their weapons were sophisticated, they still couldn't conquer Mazuco. So Hitler's German Condor Legion bombers appeared in groups and carried out carpet bombings, and Mazuco fell in the middle of the month. Aking Chan and the others walked west to Peñas Blancas, where there were three peaks. The terrain was rugged and difficult to navigate, forming a natural barrier. Aking Chan and the others guarded the top of the mountain where the freezing rain turned into snow. Again, the rebels used the same combat mode: airplane bombings followed by artillery and infantry attacks. Then the rebels occupied Peñas Blancas on September 22. Aking Chan and his squad retreated north to Fito to continue the fight. The outstanding performance of the Basque Brigade on the battlefields earned them a special commendation from the Basque government. The entire Brigade was awarded the Republican Medal of Freedom.

Finally, they went north to La Berruga, where they received the message that the warship *"Jose Luis Diaz"* sent by the Basque government, was waiting in Gijon harbor, to send them the next morning to the Catalonia region to continue the fight. At three o'clock in the morning of the day of their intended departure, it was Luis' turn to stand guard on the front line. He could clearly hear the voices of the rebels. The enemy was approaching so close. Luis said he had never felt so scared. He was worried that he would be left there. But by six in the morning, sure enough someone came to pick them up. Everyone jumped from the trenches heading north to Trubia. Over there, they saw the commander, and learnt that Franco's troops had occupied the entire coast of Asturias and they had been surrounded. Facing the siege they refused to surrender, but rather escaped to the southeast. Arriving in Mieres, Aking Chan, Luis and their comrades of the Basque Brigade were arrested by the rebels. Northern Spain fell completely under the control of Franco. It was October 21, 1937, the most unforgettable day of their lives.

### **Falling into hell on earth**

In the last two months of their fight in the war, Luis was always together with Aking Chan who did not understand the Basque language. After they were captured in Mieres, Luis was transferred to a prison in León, and separated from Aking Chan. After that, the two comrades lost contact with each other. Like Aking Chan, who volunteered to come to Spain to participate in the war, more than 40,000 people from 53 countries came to Spain to form the International Brigades to fight fascism. In February 1938, Aking Chan and a group of prisoners of the International Brigades were sent to the northern coast of Santander prison. On April 5 he was escorted southward to San Pedro de Cardeña concentration camp, and locked up with six hundred prisoners of the International Brigades in the slate building of a former monastery. All the windows were broken. They endured icy cold and starvation and were forced to give the fascist salutes to the national flag every day. Franco made a propaganda documentary "Prisioneros de Guerra" there to promote his kindness to prisoners of war. Aking Chan became one of the prisoners shown in close-up. In the film, he dipped a pen in ink and wrote his name in Chinese and English: "*Aking Chan Shanghai*" and "*CHAN A KING CHA GE CHINA*".

Aking Chan was imprisoned in San Pedro de Cardeña concentration camp for nearly 20 months. On November 29, 1939, he was taken to Belchite as a coolie along with prisoners of the International Brigades. The old city was completely destroyed because of the battle. Franco, to warn future generations, prohibited the ruins of the old city from being removed. Aking Chan and others were ordered to build a new city west of the ruins. During the day they worked like cattle until the evening when they dragged their tired, hungry bodies back to their shabby and cold seminary residence. However, this was not their most tragic enslavement. After 17 months of hard labor in Belchite, they moved again in early May 1941. This time they were escorted to a disciplinary battalion in Palencia, where they lived in caverns 75 feet underground to build a gunpowder depot, unable to see the sun. The fine airborne dust in the long underground tunnels entered their lungs; the damp moisture penetrated their muscles and bones, and the food was worse than before. To drink water, they had to walk several kilometers to search for water. Of course, they couldn't take a bath. Soon typhus broke out and quickly took 19 lives. It was a hell on earth.

After enduring seven months of inhuman life in Palencia, Aking Chan and prisoners of the International Brigades were escorted to Miranda de Ebro concentration camp on December 10, 1941. All the windows in the camp were broken. The north wind was blowing and cutting like a knife. There were no mattresses or blankets in the camp. They had to huddle close together to keep warm. The lousy food made them all malnourished. In November 1942, a Polish prisoner of war smuggled a list of prisoners of war from the concentration camp. The name of Aking Chan appeared on it, indicating that he was released in Madrid. However, Aking Chan was not so lucky. In June 1943, Miranda de Ebro concentration camp had a report on Aking Chan. It was written to the battalion commander by a lieutenant, accusing Aking Chan of gambling and seizing 369 pesetas from Chan to warn other prisoners.

Many years later, a Basque comrade told Luis that while he was in the Miranda de Ebro concentration camp, there was a Chinese who had fought in a Basque Brigade in the mountains of Asturias. When Luis heard this, he said, "*Undoubtedly, this is my friend, our friend 'Shang[h]ai'.*" He was extremely disappointed not to see Aking Chan there. When Aking Chan was taken to Miranda de Ebro concentration camp on December 10, 1941, Luis had already left the concentration camp in mid-November of the previous year. The two never met again.

## Healing notes and words

It is difficult to accept that in this anti-fascist war, the righteous side was defeated. Four years of prisons and hard labor left an unhealable scar in Luis's heart. Bego said that her father Luis loved music and played in the village band before the war. In early December 1941, when he returned home from military service in the prisoner-of-war camp, he wrote a song "To Our Dead" in Basque. He sang this lament of prayer together with his family. The preface of the song reads: *"Today I have come home in restricted freedom, but my heart and soul are in pain."* Bego sent me her cappella recording with her English translation of the lyrics. I listened to it again and again trying to feel the pain that Luis conveyed. One paragraph was sung like this:

*"A mother cries hugging her children. At this very moment, her husband, the father of these poor children is being shot. Mother! The children are sobbing. Mother! The children repeatedly ask: Where is our father? This is what our land looks like, full of widows and orphans."*

The lament that Luis prayed for the dead reminded me of the white terror in Taiwan during the 1950s. Before being escorted to execution, political prisoners sang a song "Rest in Peace" to bid farewell to their comrades in prison. I clearly remember two sentences of the song: *"Although winter has bleak wind, it is the cradle of spring."* Justice will eventually prevail. The roar of the Spanish Civil War's artillery ceased in April 1939, but the sound of gunshots of the Franco regime's killing of dissidents continued to ring out. The bodies of the victims were randomly thrown to roadsides and into sewers, woods and wells. In the 36 years of the dictator's rule, Luis never voted in its false "democratic" elections. This was his insistence and protest, waiting for the day when justice would arrive.

In 1940 after leaving the concentration camp of Miranda de Ebro, Luis was still not free. He was sent to Recruit Depot in San Sebastian to perform military service, working as a prisoner of war, at least to 1941. Although the hard labor finally ceased, he was not allowed to change his address for the next 13 years, and had to report to the civil guard barracks every week. It was not until 1954, however, that his political shackles were lifted.

Civil war and forced servitude to the body and mind made it difficult for Luis's wounds to heal, Bego wrote, *"I believe that our father used writing about his war experiences as therapy. He would write on any paper, without caring about its appearance. When the whole family went to the countryside in the summer, I would see him sometimes write on the back of wrappers for chocolate bars that the children had eaten."*

In this way he left numerous manuscripts, jotting down his and his comrades' deeds in the Spanish Civil War. Among them, he wrote a chapter "A Chinese in the Basque Army", that ended with: *"Friend 'Shang[h]ai', at the corner of Gasteiz in Basque Country, I give you warm greetings and hugs, from the bottom of my heart."*

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Captions of photos:

1. Aking Chan (right) and Ben Raadi, a Moroccan prisoner of war, in San Pedro de Cardeña concentration camp (1938). Photo courtesy of Carl Geiser.
2. In 1935, Luis Ariznabarreta in his hometown of Soraluze (Basque). Photo courtesy of Begoña Ariznabarreta.