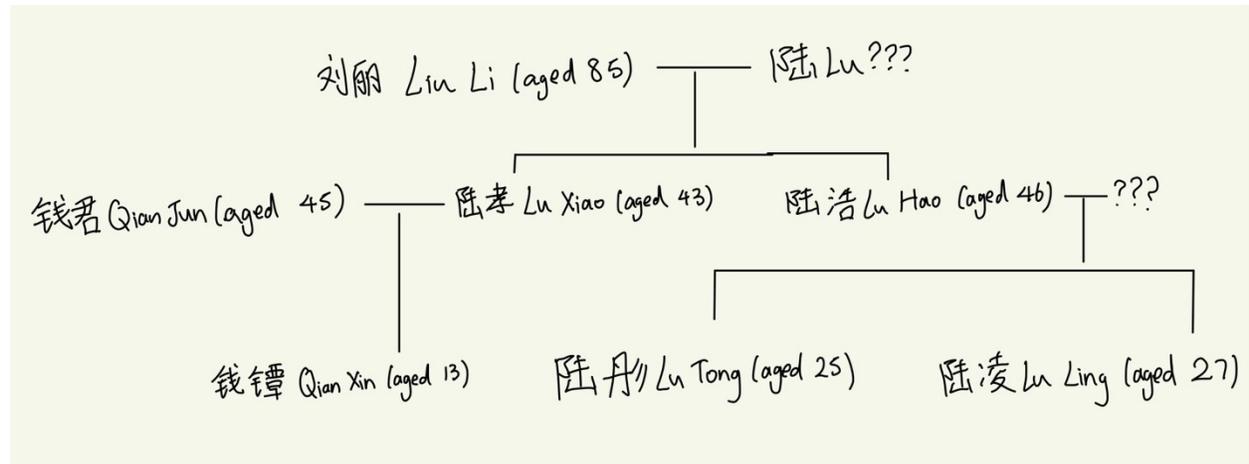


**Observations made at the Lu Family Dinner Table, New Year's Eve, 2019**



**Lu Xiao (aged 43)** sits at the center of the table, with her son and mother on either side of her. They are the triumvirate, the representatives of the Lu family's three generations. She beckons the waitress and swiftly orders a 1350-yuan braised whole abalone and a plethora of pork rib plates—her son's favorites. Occasionally, she releases small shrill laughs and asks her niece Lu Tong about her 3-year-old daughter, despite scrunching her nose disdainfully whenever the toddler begins to wail. She absentmindedly stirs the lonely marinated chicken feet on her plate and nods mechanically when her brother asks her to "fatten up." "Try the pork dumplings." "I'm allergic." She's not allergic to the intricately molded piece of dough and meat in front of her. "This is good." "I'm on a diet." The plush flesh on her stomach stretches and folds under her blue Burberry sweater.

**Qian Jun (aged 45)** occasionally glances at his wife, Lu Xiao. He immediately envelops his calloused hand over hers whenever her nose scrunches. She relaxes under his familiar touch, only to slap his hand away. Creased eyebrows and bubbly laughs are constant companions in their 25-year marriage. Occasionally, he checks his phone for texts as the Lu family gossips

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about some distant relative's wedding. After all, he has a small company to manage. "To health, wealth, and the boss himself." They clink their brimming champagne glasses and pour him another cup of Maotai liquor. He rubs the back of his neck and hums shyly. They call him Qian *laoban* – Boss Qian or literally, Money Boss.

**Qian Xin** (*aged 13*) is bored by this gathering. His parents, Lu Xiao and Qian Jun, are too engrossed by his cousin Lu Tong's newborn to pay him any attention. Worst of all, his grandma Liu Li cannot stop expressing her endless adoration of him. "Qian Xin, I still remember when you fell into a pile of cow dung when you were three. How big you have grown since then!" The whole table laughs, and Qian Xin smiles weakly. "Xin Xin," Grandma leans in until he can feel the wispy whiskers above her soiled lips, "You know that you are my favorite grandchild, right?" Her whispers indiscreetly float across the table. Qian Xin closes his eyes briefly and avoids his cousins' glances. He swallows and mutters, "Yes, I know." He wishes for the holidays to end so he can fly back to his Australian school.

**Liu Li** (*aged 85*) can't believe how much her grandson Qian Xin has grown over a year. Qian Xin is a paragon: smart, talented, polite. What else could you wish for in a grandchild? When she tries to stuff a bursting red packet into his hands, he stubbornly refuses. But they all know that at the end of the gathering, he will be gleefully counting the crisp, clean bills in the backseat of his father's Mercedes.

**Lu Hao** (*aged 46*) casts repeated glances at his sister Lu Xiao's blue Burberry sweater. He would need to save up for at least three months for the purchase, even working as a sales assistant. He considers asking for a raise but quickly balks at the idea when he imagines himself walking up to Qian Jun, his boss and brother-in-law. He subtly admires Lu Xiao's outfit

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again. It's a good thing *Taobao*, the cheap online retailer, exists. His new Air Jordans, bought for only 15 yuan, make him look semi-presentable for the occasion. The shoes are scrubbed squeaky clean. He hopes they notice. When Lu Xiao orders another abalone for their mother, he opens his mouth but quickly shuts it. He resents Lu Xiao's profligate habits, yet guilt quickly swallows him when he remembers that Lu Xiao pays for everything: the meals, the rents, and the job salary. If only he were born a few years after the Cultural Revolution and the eradication of education, he would have a college degree and his sister's lifestyle. When their mother beams at his sister, he can't help wondering if Lu Xiao compensates for the absence in their mother's life with money. He only hopes his children, Lu Tong and Lu Ling, will be at least half as successful as his nephew Qian Xin.

**Lu Tong** (aged 25) comments upon her cousin Qian Xin's composure. "You're like a Westerner already. You don't spit out the bones. You eat it piece by piece and cut it up." Qian Xin laughs and teases her back. In the periphery of Lu Tong's vision, she witnesses her three-year-old daughter smash rice into the plate. "Don't do that. I'll let you eat something other than rice if you sing the alphabet for the nice aunties and uncles." The Lu family eagerly awaits the performance, but the baby stubbornly refuses. The baby fixates on smashing the rice and flicking the grains off the plate. Sighing, Lu Tong hands her phone to the baby and opens up TikTok. The baby immediately stills, engrossed in the dancing figures on the screen. Lu Tong feels the gaze of her brother, Lu Ling, on her and smiles back.

**Lu Ling** (aged 27) tries to control himself as he stares at a plate of steaming sticky sweet rice next to his sister Lu Tong. The thin layer of golden oil that coats the broiled sweet pork ribs taunts him. He briefly squeezes his eyes shut, placing the chopsticks back on the table. If he wants to find a wife or even just a girlfriend, he needs to control his weight and acne. When his

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aunt Lu Xiao comments on his fit physique, he feels a rush of euphoria. The mood is immediately soured when Lu Xiao jokes about him living in his parents' apartment.

The waitress (*aged 27*) keeps an eye on the Lu table while inspecting her manicured fingernails flippantly. She's thinking of the Oscar-winning movie she watched yesterday. It is called *Parasite*.