



Nostalgia

Wang Ying*

Guangdong University of Finance, Guangzhou, P. R. China

***Corresponding Author: Wang Ying, Guangdong University of Finance, Guangzhou, P. R. China**

EDITOR'S NOTE

The following is an essay written by a middle-aged teacher working in a University of China. It is the description of her childhood in 1980s living in the town and county in China, which reflects the real life of the generations of herself and her parents, and grandparents. And the article also reveals the living conditions of ordinary intellectuals of China at the time.

Nostalgia is an affectionate feeling of missing home and loved ones people have in the past, especially for a particularly happy time. Most of what had happened are indelible and can be regarded as valuable treasures. In the essay, the hometown rivers, banks, streets, shops, photos, popsicles mentioned are all marked with the brand of the times, which directly touches the real-life side of the ordinary Chinese people in the 1980s. Even a piece of "Dacron Cloth" can evoke the collective memory of the people in those days. It is true that with the continuous progress and development of society, today is no longer that of the 1980s, and everything has drastically changed. While people still memorize the trueness and simpleness of that time, and never ever forget the most precious, and honest spirit! This profound impression of the times has laid the solid foundation for people's initial values and even determined their lifetime choices.

The author uses her concise and simple language to describe her own childhood life and a life of her big family. It reflects the plain living and the working of ordinary Chinese people in that era, which is the epitome and authentic depiction of Chinese society in the 1980s.

FOREWORD

After my parents' passing away, my hometown has become a place that I miss most, but at the same time the one I have hesitated about going back to. It often appears in my memory and has turned into my thick nostalgia.

PART I

I was born and raised up in Xiang Xiang, a county in Hunan Province, China. It is the place where the outstanding and talented people come forth in large numbers^[1]. Before the age of nine, my elder brother and I lived with my parents in towns of Qiziqiao and Tanshi since they worked there. At that time, my parents often took us to my grandma's home in the county at weekends. Grandma and grandpa lived in Nanzheng Street. In the 1970s, the old green-train^[2] was terribly slow. Making the sound of puff and blow, it would take us one and a half hours to get to the county. Right now, it spends only a half hour by car through the highway. However, on the journey we were happy, for we liked to go back to my grandma's home on one hand. And on the other hand, we could have a sweet and delicious mung bean soup on the train. We often looked at the soup with greedy eyes. Mom

occasionally bought two bowls for us, and we surely cleaned the bowls. Sometimes, we had to have hitchhiking as there were very few stops of the green-train. Dad, who was cheerful and optimistic, became a good friend of the drivers who often picked us up.

The small county in my eyes, a little girl's eyes, was a very lively place. In the early morning, the radio in the street began to play the song of "The East is Red."^[3] Then came the jingling jingling of bicycles and the sounds of the neighbor's pots and pans while cooking breakfast. And people started their busy day. For us, the only thing to do while coming back to my grandma's home is to play. There was a small entrance hall in the house which was once the place for learning of the Group Four of the Neighborhood Committee in Nanzheng Street^[4]. On the left side of the entrance hall lived a teacher named Hu. Her little niece often came to live with her. The adults liked to make us singing and dancing together. Mom was skillful in making clothes. She often bought a few feet of "Dacron cloth"^[5] to make dresses embroidered with simple flowers or small animals on them for me. Wearing the beautiful small skirts, I skipped around livelily, which attracted a lot of envious eyes from my little neighbor friends.

Through the entrance hall, there were the main rooms. My grandparents lived on the right. When we were back, we lived there, too. On the left, there were six members of the Xu's family. Their eldest son, brother Sheng was my brother's good playmate. Further into the entrance hall lived my eldest uncle's family. My cousin Lixin was a few months older than my elder brother, but he was shorter, so my grandma often mistook him for the younger one and asked him to call my brother as elder brother Hong (My brother's nickname is Wei Hong, my name is Xiao Hong).^[6] They three often played together. Boys had their own ways of playing. They did not let me, a girl, to join them. In the middle of the room there was a patio where stood a large tank of water. Grandpa loved to be clean for everything. We were not allowed to throw anything into the courtyard. Otherwise, we would be criticized.

Behind my grandmother's house, there was a vegetable processing factory. In summer, the smell of hot pepper sauce from the factory would diffuse around. While smelling the flavor, we were so gluttonous that we often secretly climbed up the big jar and dug spicy sauce to eat. In those days when there were limited things in market, everything tasted good. On sweltering days, the vendors on the street sold popsicles with loud hawking. Popsicle made of white sugar and mung beans! The sound was so seductive that it still lingers in my ears even now. On the main street, there was an ice factory, in which the popsicles were made. We could pay three cents to buy the popsicle of white sugar and four cents for the one of mung bean. But at that time, we could not afford them because mom and dad had low salaries as teachers. They did not have enough money to support our big family including my grandparents, my brother and me. Every month we lived beyond their income.

Very occasionally, before returning to our town, mom would quietly buy a few small oranges for my brother and me. She would not let my dad know that. If my dad knew, mom would explain "I just buy some for their miserable mouths." The only thing my parents would like to spend money on was taking photos for my brother and me. Every year they would bring us to the Galaxy Photo Studio in Nanzheng Street to have pictures taken. Mom carefully kept those photos and developed the films into two copies, one for me and the other for my brother. These precious photos recorded the growth and happiness of our childhood.

Out of Nanzheng Street there was Grand Centre Avenue. It was the busiest part of the county with shops, restaurants, and cinemas. The Workers and Peasants Shop^[7] was the place I liked to visit. From the shop window I could see the dolls with blonde and blue eyes. They were dressed beautiful princess skirts and extremely cute. Every time I went there, I was reluctant to leave. And my mom

always coaxed me, “The dolls here are not for sell.” So, my dream of having a beautiful doll had never come true.

On the opposite of the cinema there was a small bookstand. The owner was a humpback, named LiTuozi. After learning to read, I often went there to rent comic books and picture-story books. Seating on a long bench I often read for several hours. My elder brother often read books there, too. That small bookstall was the common memory of our generation when we were young because in the era of scarce information resources, it was one source of our extracurricular knowledge and the pleasure of reading.

PART II

In 1982, my parents were transferred from the town to the county. We lived on the opposite side of Lianshui River, the mother river of the county. Every time we went back to my grandma’s house, we had to cross the river by boat or took my father’s bike by passing through the only bridge in the county at that time -Dongshan Bridge. Dad was particularly good at riding bicycle. No matter how narrow and bumpy the riverbank was, he could ride his bicycle very well and we were firmly seated on his bike with me on the front and mom on the back.

Two years later, we moved across the Lianshui River. My parents worked in Xiang Xiang No.3 Middle School. My elder brother and I studied there. I was in junior middle school and my brother in senior. My grandma’s house, which had been so far away from us, then it was nearby. We often went to my grandma’s house through the vegetable field behind No.3 Middle School and it only took us about ten minutes. On the way we would pass a square well, which was called Xiangquan well. The water in the well was noticeably clear. Mom told me that the water brought up several generations in the neighborhood.

In 1990, I went to college. Every time I went home, I still took this road to my grandmother’s home with mom. As we grew older, our task had changed from play to visiting grandma. Only then did I know that grandma also liked to eat popsicles. Grandma was short and thin, but she was in decent shape. She could finish a popsicle at 90. Seeing grandma mumbled popsicles joyfully, I recalled that when I was very young, I told grandma I wanted to grow as tall as her. And grandma had the same joyful smile at me. Several years later, the neighbors moved out one after another. The lively house turned to be cold with only my old grandma and my eldest uncle’s family living there. Every day my grandma would sit on the edge of the street, watching passing vehicles and passersby. Sometimes she would mind neighbors’ business. After I graduated from college, I went to work in Changsha^[8]. My grandma died in the winter of the first year on my job. She did not wait to the day I could afford to show my filiality to her.

PART III

In 2000, I went to work in Guangzhou^[9]. My parents spent most of their time helping me to take care of my little child in Guangzhou, too. Then I had even less time to go back to Xiang Xiang. In those days that I did not often go back, a fabulous changes had taken place in the county. The old houses were demolished. The old streets had been extended. The small stores had been replaced by supermarkets. The small bookstall did not exist. The muddy embankment became a broad greenway. The farmland across the river became a new district ... I really didn’t know how to find my way in the county. But even though, my hometown in my mind is always a landscape that cannot be erased. There is always warmth in my heart that cannot be reduced.

In the last few years, dad and mom left us in succession. I lost the courage to go back to Xiang Xiang.

I am afraid to see the familiar streets, the empty house... But I know, I must overcome this mentality because Nangzheng Street is my dream, and the beautiful Lian Shui River will always be my home....

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Xiang Xiang county mentioned in the article is a place in Hunan province of China. It is also called a cradle where the outstanding and talented people come forth in large numbers. The following is a list of a few of them.

[1]I: *Chen Geng* (1903-1961),born in Xiang Xiang County, Hunan Province. A senior general and strategist in the People's Liberation Army of China (PLA). He participated in the seventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China held in Yangjialing, Yanan in 1945, and was elected alternate members of the Central Committee.

II:*Tan Zheng* (1906-1988), born in Xiang Xiang, Hunan Province. He was a proletarian revolutionist, militarist, communist soldier, the general of the PLA of China, an outstanding leader of the state and the PLA of China. And he was one of the top ten generals of the People's Republic of China.

III: *Li Zhuoran*(1899-1989),born in a peasant family in Xiang Xiang, Hunan Province. An outstanding member of the Communist Party of China, a long-tested and loyal communist fighter, a proletarian revolutionist, and an outstanding political worker of the Communist Party of China.

VI:*Ding Qiusheng* (1913-1995),born in a peasant family in Xiang Xiang County, Hunan Province. He was a lieutenant general of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, a political commissar of Nanjing Senior Infantry School.

V:*Mao Zedong* (1893-1976),born in Shaoshanchong, Xiangtan, Hunan Province. He was a great Marxist, a proletarian revolutionist, a strategist, and theorist. He was the founding father of the Communist Party of China and the People's Liberation Army. He was the Chairman of the People's Republic of China.

VI:*Liu Shaoqi* (1898-1969),born in Shangningxiang County, Hunan Province. A great Marxist, a great proletarian revolutionist, a theorist. He was one of the main leaders of the Party and the state, the one of the founding fathers of the People's Republic of China, and an important member of the party's first generation of central leadership with Comrade Mao Zedong as the core.

[2]"The old green-train"refers to the very old train in China, and the color of the train is green.

[3]"The East is Red." It is the name of the song, which is also called a red song to praise Chairman Mao Zedong.

[4]"The Group Four of the Neighborhood Committee in Nanzheng Street" is the study group for the native people at the time.

[5]"Dacron cloth" is a very ordinary cloth in China in 1980th. All most all the people were wearing the clothes made by this cloth.

[6]"Hong" Chinese, meaning "Red," as the Chinese people love the *red* color which is full of age characteristics of 1980th.

[7] "The Workers and Peasants Shop" was a very popular name with the workers and peasants, e.g., "the Workers and Peasants Barba Shop" and "the Workers and Peasants Street."

[8] "Changsha" is the capital of Hunan Province.

[9] “Guangzhou” is the capital of Guangdong Province, which is the advanced province in the development of economics and science and technology as the open-door policy conducted in China. And it is also a province nearby Hong Kong and Macao.

AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Wang Ying, an associate professor of English at Guangdong University of Finance, Guangzhou, P.R.China. The main research area is English teaching and English literature. Email:1228986226@qq.com

Citation: Wang Ying " Nostalgia " *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, vol 9, no. 2, 2022, pp. 88-92. doi: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.0902010>.

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