

## Chapter Two Killing Chickens 平静生活的乐趣 (1960-)

That day I did not go home after morning classes, but to the flat of Granny Wang, our downstairs neighbour. As Mother was working, she had arranged for me to have lunch with Granny Wang's family. Our two families lived in half of a low-rise, two-storey building in a comfortable compound built in the early 1930s. Each flat had a large balcony-cum-veranda, and there were flowerbeds with evergreen bushes and trees surrounding each block.

Granny Wang was from Suzhou 苏州, a city to the north of Shanghai famous for its traditional gardens. Like most women from Suzhou, she was tidy-looking and elegantly dressed, and always kept her rooms very clean and attractive. People say that every home has its own distinctive look and smell: I will never forget the waft of furniture polish that greeted me whenever I passed her front door.



Her husband, Grandpa Wang, had retired from a local estate management unit the year before, and since then had volunteered for the neighbourhood

committee, as did most retired people and housewives in that era. Through large bushes and trees at the base of the block he could be seen sitting at his ease by his bedroom window, watching the world pass by, with the one-man show Suzhou Ping Tan 苏州评弹 playing loudly on his radio. It was a perfect spot for spying on people, because the bedroom window faced directly onto the main entrance of the compound. Not long after his retirement Mother asked him how he had been spending his free time. He told her that he had taken up shadow boxing.

“This is the greatest work-out I’ve ever done,” he said, with memorable conviction. “After doing the exercises every morning, I have a really good fart, so all the bad air in my body is pushed out. I feel refreshed and ready to face the new day.” According to Grandpa Wang, breathing was crucial for human wellbeing, but farting was equally important. I laughed secretly and thought he should be a full time comedian. Luckily he did his shadowboxing in the open air rather than in his flat, or the combination of furniture polish and fart odours would have been difficult to endure.

A most embarrassing thing had occurred the previous year, when I was cleaning chicken mess from our first floor veranda. I thought that by blocking the overflow pipe with a piece of old cloth, the dirty water would not descend to the ground floor veranda below, but it seeped through anyway and dripped onto Granny Wang’s clean washing.



In those days nobody had washing machines; everything was washed by hand. Although Granny Wang did not do her family laundry personally, it must have taken her washerwoman hours to work her way through the mound of clothes. When Granny Wang discovered the mess that I had caused, she was furious. She looked up from her veranda, swearing and cursing loudly in her Suzhou dialect. Although I did not understand a word, I could tell from her irate tone that the vocabulary was as dirty as the chicken excrement water that had dripped onto her washing. Mother was very apologetic and offered to re-wash the dirty clothes, but to no avail. From that time onwards I was slightly afraid of Granny Wang, although she was still very protective of me when I had any confrontation with other children in the street.

It was common knowledge in the neighbourhood that Granny Wang's cooking was nowhere near as good as Mother's, but she was at least able to give me a good dumpling filling recipe. She would go to the nearby butchers, buy a piece of pork that had exactly the right proportion of fat and meat, cut it into very fine pieces, and then chop these pieces slightly more. After that she would mix the

meat with spring onions, sesame oil, light soy sauce, and Chinese rice wine. She told me that the secret of her recipe was in her cutting and chopping skills – 细切粗斩. All her cooking involved large quantities of spring onion and ginger, and when she cooked meat dishes such as pork and chicken, she would make sure that the whole building could smell them. Her food tasted sweeter than Mother's, but that did not necessarily mean that it was better. I was never served large portions when I ate at Granny Wang's, unlike at home, where every serving could have lasted me for a week. I also had to behave myself in front of Granny Wang and her family, especially after the chicken dirt incident.

To celebrate my admittance to the Young Pioneer corps, there was even chicken for lunch. During the early sixties all staples such as rice, sugar, and cooking oil were rationed in the cities, and less basic foodstuffs like meat, eggs and bean products were also included. Live chickens were brought to free city markets' 自由市场 from the countryside, but were extremely expensive, meaning that many urban families kept chickens for eggs or meat. Some very poor families kept rabbits, or would eat meat spurned by others, such as pigs' heads, trotters and tails. Although chicken was regarded as an extravagant dish, for serving to special guests, it was never my favourite. In fact I thought Granny Wang was serving me chicken for lunch to remind me of the chicken dirt incident.

My strong dislike of chicken as a food was the result of another incident. Just before the previous Chinese New Year, my parents had decided to keep two hens in the corner of our balcony for a few weeks. The idea was to fatten them up for our Spring Festival celebration meals. As my sister Linlin was frightened of chickens, it became my job to look after the hens every day. I always prepared their meals very carefully, chopping up green cabbage leaves and mixing them with leftover rice. Occasionally, when the hens laid some eggs, I was allowed to feed them some uncooked rice as a reward. Feeding chickens with uncooked rice was a luxury, as rice was rationed. In addition, I would often go to a 'free

market' to buy a few caterpillar cocoons with my pocket money. Once back home, I would open the cocoons with a pair of scissors and pull the insects out to feed the hens, as even more special treats for them. The hens were always very pleased to see me at feeding time: they twisted their heads in my direction and clucked very excitedly, hoping for more surprises. I grew increasingly fond of them.

When the time came to eat them, it was my duty, as the oldest son, and the only boy in the family, to carry out the 'execution', which also included other 'dirty' work such as cutting the hen's throats, collecting their blood in a bowl, plucking the feathers after soaking them in boiling water, and finally gutting them ready for Mother to cook. When those tasks were done, I had to clean up the balcony, which gave rise to the Granny Wang washing incident. Forever afterwards, I simply could not bear to eat chicken.

Granny Wang had a granddaughter called Xiaming 霞明, or Bright Dusk Cloud. She was certainly bright. Xiaming was only a year older than me, but she could nearly always get 100 per cent in everything at school, and, more impressively, was a Young Pioneer who had three stripes on her arm-badge. Mother always compared me with her, especially when I got poor results in school tests.

"How come Xiaming does so well at school all the time! Can't you learn something from her?"

It was strange to me that Xiaming's parents lived with her other siblings in Hankou 汉口, a city on the upper part of Yangtze River, but Xiaming always lived with her grandparents. I wondered whether I could have been as good as her or possibly even better than her at school if I had lived with my grandparents, who were by then in Hong Kong. Fortunately, Xiaming was not there for lunch that day, so I did not have to follow her example all the time.

As usual, Granny Wang served my portions of food in small separate dishes: fine red beans braised in dark soy-sauce; fried chicken pieces cooked with potatoes in light soy-sauce; and a bowl of egg soup with a few spring onion rings on the top. The dishes were beautifully laid out on a small table and looked unusual and appetising. The chicken pieces did not resemble any parts of a chicken that I could remember, which made me relax a little. In order to show my appreciation, I finished all the food that I was given. After lunch I helped to clear up the small table and got ready to do my homework in the afternoon.



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<sup>1</sup> My siblings visited our old home in March 2018. The third person from the left is Xiaming.