

## Chapter Twenty

### Together 高压下的凝聚力 (1977- )

After coming back to Ma'anshan, I did not expect any positive news from the places where I had my auditions. I understood the nature of the competitiveness in the music world and realised that my skills of violin playing was not up to the national standard. There were too many good young violinists at the time. Most of them would try their best to stay in a big city like Beijing. Anyway, who would be willing to work in the countryside without a clear aim or a firm political belief? Everyone knew that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was the only authority in China that had the power to recruit people nationwide. As a result, the PLA performance groups in Beijing became the main targets of the Chinese young musicians. I appreciated Zheng Binghui's advice before I left for Beijing: "...It's a very competitive world, but it'll be a good experience for your career development." I did not feel terribly upset about the idea of staying in Ma'anshan for an indefinite time and I did not regret the fact that after making a great effort I did not get what I wanted.

"My trip to Beijing taught me a lesson. I know what I can and cannot do for the moment. The most important thing is that I know how to improve my situation," I wrote to Dingding to thank her for looking after me in Beijing. She agreed with me and said in her reply, "...when dealing with difficult situations in life, one should always try one's best to concentrate on the target. That includes that we should never take things for granted and should never be dragged down by any negative feeling of temporary setback. We should never blame others for any of the unfortunate outcome... Only then, we can free ourselves to move forward." I agreed. Only with this kind of positive attitude, I would be successful.

A month later Dingding sent me a letter saying that the director of the Chinese navy symphony orchestra came to see her. The first word he said was 马到功成 which implied that my audition was a swift success and, they were doing the paper work for me to move to Beijing. That was a piece of unexpected good news. Nevertheless, I did not want to tell my boss about this until it became more definite. I did not even tell my close friends, Zheng Binghui and Chen Jian'an. However, because of the encouraging news, I was in a much better mood and was more enthusiastic about working and practising. With my energetic practice, it only took me two weeks to learn Mendelsohn violin concerto. Everything became easier and nicer.

“Xiao Gan, why are you practising so hard? Do you have an audition coming up?” Zhao Yixuan asked.

“No, not at all, I am just practising,” I smiled and asked her, “By the way, could I please hear you playing Paganini D major concerto again? I really like the way that you play the semiquaver passages of double-stops in thirds.”

“Of course, come at any time. Just knock at my door.”

I was surprised to hear her answer, as she was usually too shy to play the violin in front of people. I was wondering if she knew that I went to Beijing for auditions, as I met the son of her violin teacher in the navy symphony orchestra and he helped me to fix my rattling E string before my audition.

Not long after receiving the letter of good news, Ma'anshan PAG did another big tour. That time we went to Anhui, Jiangsu provinces and finally the tour ended in Shanghai. It was another good opportunity for us to try out more local foods. However, I was imagining myself working for the Chinese navy: touring the seaports and navy bases along the eastern coast of China. The strange thing was that I would be wearing the uniform of Chinese navy officer. That might confuse some friends of mine in Shanghai. Uniforms always gave me a sense of belonging: from joining the Young Communist Pioneers at the primary school to obtaining an armband of the Red Guards at the early stage of the Cultural Revolution. I was sure that I would feel equally proud, if I had been wearing the officer uniform of Chinese navy.

Comparing with China's general military symphony orchestra, the scale of both navy and air force's orchestras was smaller. When discussing the military symphony orchestras in Beijing with my colleagues in Ma'anshan, I was subconsciously on the navy orchestra side. My expectation of working in Beijing was getting too high, which was a mistake. It was certainly against the sensible idea that Dingding said before: when dealing with difficult situations in life, higher expectations often brought disappointments.

A few days later, I received a letter from Dingding saying that she had moved out of her parents' home and was living with Aunt Zhu Zhongli 朱仲丽. Aunt Zhu was Chairman Mao's ex-girlfriend and later married another Chinese communist leader, Wang Jiaxiang 王稼祥. Dingding told me that she could be reached at Aunt Zhu's telephone number. As soon

as I came back from the tour, I went to the Ma'anshan Telecommunication Office to phone her.

When I was on the tour, a dark drama was unfolded.

Everything was going smoothly for my prospective job in Beijing, but one day when Dingding was at work and her father was in a meeting, Dingding's mother went into Dingding's father's office at home and made a call with her husband's "Red Telephone". (Many of very high rank Chinese communist leaders had the "Red Telephones" which were used for the direct communication within the leadership circles without going through the public telephone system. I assumed that the system was built for the state security.) Somehow, her conversation was overheard by a house worker who was loyal to Dingding. Apparently, Dingding's mother phoned the Chinese navy chief offices, saying that she was advised to deliver an urgent message. The message was to tell the Chinese navy symphony orchestra in Beijing that they should not employ me and should not transfer me from Ma'anshan to Beijing. When Dingding came home from work and heard what her mother did, she lost her temper completely and shouted at her mother with great anger. Her father was trying to protect her mother by asking her to get out the house. She left home and went to live with Aunt Zhu just like that. She was not prepared to move back home again.

I could understand that Dingding's mother was trying hard to mend Dingding's relation with her boyfriend. The obvious thing for her to do was to stop me seeing Dingding. After that explosive event, her mother wrote to my mother and expressed her views on our relationship saying that it was the most unsuitable relationship and should be stopped immediately, otherwise it would be impossible to mend Dingding's relation with her boyfriend. Strangely enough, she left out the issue of Dingding and I were from different generations within the Jing family-tree. Although Mother was also against our relationship, she was offended by her aunt's tone in her letter and took it as an issue of we were from a lower social class backgrounds and she replied to Dingding's mother in an aggressive manner too. It looked like the worst outcome that one could ever imagine and it ended up with everyone became a loser. Only then, I realised that Dingding's genuine intention was to help me to establish what I wanted to do in life. This time I did not try to escape from the difficult situation. I resolutely gave Dingding my full support. As soon as our relationship became public, I was no longer afraid of the pressure from the families or our social circles. I felt that Dingding and I should speak within one voice and we had the right to be a couple. Suddenly we, the targeted losers

became the winners. That event cleared up all the doubts of our relationship and we were very much together. I wrote to her more frequently. I sent the letters to Beijing Chongwenmen Hospital where she worked. The word “Aunt” was immediately dropped out and I suddenly felt free to express my feeling.

Luckily, I did not tell anyone in Ma’anshan about the possible job in Beijing, otherwise I would have had more explanations to do. I could imagine people like Sima Jing who would have more gossiping topics. At one stage, I phoned Dingding nearly every day. She seemed to be in a good spirit. Aunt Zhu looked after her well. As Aunt Zhu did not have any children of her own, she treated Dingding just like her own daughter. Sometimes she would host parties by inviting celebrity singers and dancers to cheer Dingding up. In the evenings, Aunt Zhu wrote her book about Jiang Qing, Mao’s widow. Aunt Zhu hated Jiang Qing, but I did not know the real reason behind that. Meanwhile Dingding’s mother missed Dingding very much and she sometime phoned Dingding to have a chat and to ask her to come back, but Dudu, Dingding’s sister wanted to keep her rivalry out of the house. Sometime Dudu would try to stop her mother to talk to Dingding on the phone. Because of that, Dingding would sometimes phone at gatehouse where the guards would come into the main house to ask Dingding’s mother to answer the call. Later Dudu told the guards not to pass on Dingding’s calls to her mother. The family power struggle went on for a while.

The following six months Dingding and I did not meet. We only communicated by making long distance calls and writing letters, but we appeared very much together. Despite of the unfortunate situation, we were positive and did not blame anyone for this. Finally, the relation between Dingding and her mother improved and at the end, Dingding agreed to move back home. Her family “officially” accepted our relationship. Dingding’s father asked Dingding’s sister-in-law, Xiao Zhao to go to Shanghai to persuade Mother to accept the situation. At beginning, Mother would not even talk to Xiao Zhao, but with Xiao Zhao’s diplomatic and very persuasive skills, Mother finally accepted too. As a result, the two families were back on the talking terms again. The sun started shining on us. It was wonderful that I did not have to hide our relation anymore. Of course, I could not claim for the victory, as I was in Ma’anshan all that time. I knew that Dingding was a strong fighter and without her efforts, our relationship would be impossible. She had many qualities that I did not have, such as her bravery and determination. The strange thing was that she never blamed me for not writing to her at the early stage of our relationship. Dingding put the episode of me working in the navy symphony orchestra completely behind her and never said

a word about it to her parents. Instead, she started talking to them about me going to Beijing Central Conservatory of Music to study. This time she made sure that her parents were completely behind her. She pulled all the strings and asked round her friends to help me to study in Beijing. Dingding found out that the stringed instruments department of the Conservatory was already oversubscribed, yet the conducting department was undersubscribed. As a result, she suggested that I should take the conducting course there. At that time, the higher education institutions in China only took the “students of workers, peasants and soldiers” 工农兵学员. In other words, those who were accepted as students in higher education institutions must come from the working-class background. Luckily, the Beijing Central Conservatory of Music was also running training courses for provincial orchestra conductors and musicians. They offered places for those who were recommended by the local provincial orchestras. It would be impossible for me to persuade the Ma’anshan PAG to send me to Beijing Central Conservatory to study the conducting course. Firstly, I was not one of the PAG orchestra conductors, and secondly, they need me there as an orchestra violinist. As I never had proper music education, Dingding asked me to take a few days off from work and to go to Beijing again to meet some of the relevant people who were connected to or taught the courses at the Conservatory. She also arranged for me to meet some conductor friends of hers. She was determined to prepare the ground properly for me to study the conducting course in Beijing.

I went to Beijing to see her for the second time. Her family had moved back to their courtyard house in Dongsì after the earthquake. It was said that the compound of houses used to be the Cuban embassy in Beijing which was formed with a set of single-floor Chinese courtyard houses with a two-floor semi-European style building in the middle. I stayed with Dingding and her parents in the two-floor building and some of her siblings and the guards occupied the Chinese style houses all around the compound. Everyone in her family was cordial, as if the drama had never happened. Dingding took me to meet Zheng Dan 郑丹, a family friend, who was a conductor for the Chinese army choir. Zheng Dan studied conducting at the Conservatory before the Cultural Revolution. He was very friendly and gave me a crash course on conducting choirs. I also went to meet Mao Yuan, a Chinese composer. Mao Yuan was the husband of Li Keyu, who was the costume designer for the Chinese Central Ballet Company where Xiao Zhao, Dingding’s sister-in-law worked. Mao Yuan talked to me through many of his published compositions. Through Xiao Zhao, I also met Li Esun, one of the pianists who played the piano for the conducting course at the

Conservatory. My second Beijing trip was more fruitful. It opened the door of the China's musical world at the highest-level for me. Dingding asked a friend to introduce me to Li Delun, the principle conductor of the Chinese Central Philharmonic, but he was on tour abroad at the time.

Dingding and I were making a plan for the next stage of our life together. I thought that first step for me to do was to leave Ma'anshan, at least temporarily. So that I could move to Beijing to pursue my music studies, but before I could do that I had to persuade the authority of the Ma'anshan PAG to allow me to study in Beijing on a non-pay leave for two or three years. I decided to ask my work place for the permission to marry Dingding. At that time, the work place had to authorise people's marriage. Only with the permission, one could obtain a marriage certificate. If I put everything clearly on the table, it would look obvious that I was going to leave Ma'anshan permanently. I did not expect the Ma'anshan PAG to keep the job for me, but to my surprise, they said yes to all my requests. Maybe they realised who I was going to marry and they found it difficult to refuse.

When we finally planned for the wedding, the members of both families were happy for us. Dingding's mother wanted to host the wedding banquet in Shanghai where most of her relatives in her maiden family lived. We set a time in the summer for the wedding banquet to be held at Shanghai Jinjian Hotel 锦江饭店, a posh hotel in the west side of Shanghai. It was difficult for ordinary people in Shanghai to book an event there. As Dingding's mother booked for the banquet in one of the halls, the hotel authorities were very cooperative and helpful.

As Dingding's mother organised everything, both Dingding and I could not invite any of our usual friends for the wedding banquet. The most attendees were family relations in Shanghai. We had about forty guests with four tables. Even my great uncle (my grandmother's brother), who my mother had a grudge with at the beginning of Cultural Revolution came to our wedding too, as he was a cousin of Dingding's mother. Great Uncle Zhang came as well. GUZ used to be Dingding's mother's brother-in-law. The wedding banquet was a good opportunity to reunite the families and relatives. It seemed to wash away all the bad feelings between the relations. Our Japanese neighbour came too. The only friend who Dingding invited was Zheng Ni, Zheng Binghui's sister from Beijing.

“Let’s drink to your health and hope you both grow old together 白头偕老,” Aqiao, Dingding’s cousin, the grandson of Jing Hengyi came to our table to give a good wish. Dingding raised her glass and finished her Maotai<sup>1</sup> in one go.

“Wow, I thought you didn’t drink. How come you finished it just like that?” I was very surprised.

“Of course, I would drink to a good wish for us to grow old together,” she smiled. I had never seen her so happy.

The presentation of the wedding banquet itself was a work of art. Each dish was presented like a piece of sculpture. At the beginning of the meal, each table was presented with a cold dish, which was in the shape of peacock with beautifully sliced meats and vegetable imitating feathers of peacocks. Towards the end of the meal, each table had some deliciously cooked Chinese ham soup in a container that was made of a Chinese Winter Melon (ash gourd). It was in a shape of green-jade vase, which was carved with a pattern of dancing phoenixes and dragons. I did not know the cost of the banquet, as my mother-in-law took care of the entire arrangement.

A few days after the wedding celebration, I went Beijing with Dingding, my newly wedded wife and my mother-in-law by plane to pursue my music studies. It was also my first time travelling by air and it was a very strange experience. The strangeness was not only being sitting in a Boeing 707 aircraft, but also facing our unknown future together. Everything seemed to be rosy and positive so far. I was remembering the history of our relationship of good and bad patches. Somehow, I felt that the past became a bit hazy and far away. Maybe it was a class thing. I did not really know Dingding’s social circle at all and I certainly never lived in her environment. I realised that our life ahead would be challenging for both of us. I am sure that she must be worrying about how I was going to fit into her life in Beijing. Maybe she did not worry at all. Anyway, there was one thing for certain: we were going to have plenty of time to talk through all the issues... I was very happy to be with her, which was the most important thing.

Although I had been to Dingding’s home, when I arrived there, it seemed very different. Dingding’s parents and the dog, Moguo, lived on the ground floor of the western style building. The unoccupied first floor had the bedrooms of Dingding’s two younger brothers

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<sup>1</sup> A Chinese strong spirit

who were in the army most time of the year. Dingding and I used her original bedroom, which had a large north-facing window. The room was simply furnished: a double bed with two bedside-cupboards, a desk, a cupboard and two chairs. The most noticeable thing was a big pot of asparagus setaceous on her windowsill next to the green-net-screened-windows. There was a vine frame outside the window. Strangely enough, it produced a few bunches of good-looking large green grapes every year, although they tasted rather sour. Our bedroom had two doors, and one of them led to the ground floor sitting room, which was blocked and the other one opened into the ground floor bathroom, which was shared by her parents and us. Therefore, we had to pass through the shared bathroom in order to get into our room. The other side of the sitting room was Dingding's father's bedroom/office. He often worked until late in the night.

We all had to walk cross the courtyard to the south-facing dining room in the Chinese style building for meals. As my father-in-law's was originally from Huizhou Guangdong (Canton), he was allocated a chef, who was specialised in Cantonese cuisines. His name was Xu Fu. Mr Xu spoke Mandarin with a strong Cantonese accent. As he did not live with us in the same house compound, Xu Fu would take his bike to a special food supply station 供应站 for the top officials in Beijing to do the daily food shopping for the family in the morning. We just had to tell Xu Fu how many people would be eating on the following day. Dudu, Dingding's older sister and her daughter, Maomao lived in the set of rooms next to the dining room. Dingding's older brother, Liao Hui, his wife Xiao Zhao and their two sons lived in a set of the west-facing rooms. The north-facing rooms on the both sides of the large double-front red steel doors were occupied by a few army guards, Dingdin's father's personal bodyguard and the secretary Mr Zheng. Dingding father's chauffer, Xiao Lu lived nearby, so he always went home after his last duty of the day. Old Uncle Yang was a gardener, who also looked after the coal burning boiler in the winter when there was not much to do in the garden. The garden had many types of trees including a couple of toona sinensisa and a few persimmon trees, which gave us a large crop of fruit in the autumns.

If Dingding was in a cooking mood, she would tell Xu Fu and would ask Xiao Lu, the chauffer to take her to the food supply station to do the food shopping. Dinding's father had two official cars, as he was in charge of a few government departments. One of them was a stretched Red Flag limousine, which was used for his important official meetings and engagements. It sometimes was also used for taking the family out for official social events.



Those days the traffic lights were operated manually. When a traffic police saw a stretched Red Flag limousine approaching, he would give the priority and would try his best to switch on the green light for the vehicle to go through the traffic first. The other car in the house was a Mercedes-Benz 280, which was often used for less official events, such as occasional food shopping. I went to the food supply station with Dingding a few times after I had arrived in Beijing. It had a good selection of all kind of foods, which were not rationed.

The life in the Chinese Communist leadership circle was privileged, but it was also isolated too. It was insulated from the common people. One day he was on his way home after a meeting, when Dingding's father saw a restaurant which was specialised in the steamed beef 牛肉泡馍, he asked Xiao Lu, his chauffer to stop there, as he would like to have his lunch there. However, his bodyguard did not allow him to get out of the car. As my father-in-law insisted on eating at that restaurant, his bodyguard told him to stay in the car while he was going to sort it out. The bodyguard went into the restaurant and cleared all the customers of the restaurant, made a few phone calls and checked through the restaurant. Only then, he allowed Dingding's father to go into the restaurant. Dingding's father was not very pleased with the crude actions that his bodyguard had taken, and he felt very bad for the people who were eating there. His original intention was to join the people for lunch. The following day, my father-in-law was summoned by the Central Committee Offices for breaching the security code. My father-in-law was one of the most approachable high rank officials in China. He always smiled and liked talking to people on the equal terms. It became very apparent that any of the 'normal and friendly' official social activities such as having meals with foreign visitor's families in restaurants required detailed security planning.

The only time that I could leave the environment was when I went to the Conservatory for music lessons. The Central Conservatory situated in south-west of central Beijing. I went there by bike. Although I was not officially accepted as a formal student there, I was allowed to attend all the classes for the conducting course. The teacher, Mr Xu was a fragile looking man in his early 50s. He was the principle music director for the PLA General Political Department Song and Dance Troup. He was the one who rejected me as a violin player in his symphony orchestra when I came to Beijing for auditions a few months before. I was very sure that he would not even remember who I was, as he simply had met too many people like me. The teaching style of the conducting course was very much influenced by the Russian music training methods. The teacher would analyze a score and music phrases with a student.

After that, the student would stand in the classroom to conduct the symphony piece, which would be played by two pianists. Comments would be made by the teacher. I attended the class with an official student who came from Wuhan City Symphony Orchestra. The list of the repertoires on the syllabus was based on the western classical music. The first work that we tackled with was Schubert's Unfinished Symphony and it was followed by Grieg's Peer Gynt Suite One and Beethoven's Egmont Overture... Only those who were outstanding would be allowed to conduct the conservatory symphony orchestra. I also had regular piano lessons and attended the harmony and counterpoint class there. When I came home, apart from practising the piano and doing music theory exercises, I had to learn the scores of the symphonies by heart. I would listen to the recordings and read the scores. At home, there was a piano in the meeting room. I was the only one in family, who used the instrument. The meeting room had sofas around the edges of the room with coffee tables in front. On the other side of the room, there was a large framed Chinese painting of plum blossoms, which was painted by He Xiangning, Dingding's grandmother. Sometimes my practice had to give way to my father-in-law's official engagements, if he brought back some people for meetings.

One day Dingding and I had lunch with her parents in the dining room. During the meal, everyone was quite. Dingding's father looked preoccupied with his work. After the lunch, Dingding had a go at her parents for not talking to me at lunch.

"Why didn't you talk to Yungyung?" Dingding was slightly angry. "It was very rude of you."

"I had nothing to talk about, so I didn't talk. That doesn't mean we were rude." Dingding's mother replied.

Dingding's mother often sat in the sitting room smoking cigarettes and staring into the space in silence with no expression on her face. I could not tell if she was thinking or she did not want to engage in conversation with anyone in the room. In the evening, she could not sleep without taking sleeping pills. My mother once told me that when Dingding's mother was a young woman; she was a lively, happy, active and sociable person, and one could hear her laughter from far away. In her old age, she had obtained much higher social status, but she became less happy. Maybe her life experiences made her how she was. During the early stage of the Cultural Revolution when Dingding's father was locked away for interrogation, Dingding's mother had to work under the supervision of the Red Guards. When coming

home, she had to keep what was going on around her secret from He Xiangning 何香凝, her mother-in-law.

Like Song Qingling (Madame Sun Yat-sen), He Xiangning (Madam Liao Zhongkai) was one of the left wing KMT<sup>2</sup> politicians in the early stage of Republic China. He Xiangning was invited back to the Communist China by Mao after the defeat of the KMT governments in 1949. He Xiangning was given a job as the Director of the Department for Overseas Chinese Affairs in the State Council of the Communist China, and was the Vice-Chairperson of Chinese National People's Congress (NPC), the Chinese Parliament. She was also the Vice-Chairperson of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee. He Xiangning was given a big house, which was specially built for her under Mao's instruction to welcome her back to China. The house was built next to her office. She was the Chairperson of the KMT in the Communist China. In her old age, the Communist governments wanted to keep her out of the Communist Party internal power struggle. Over the early stage of the Cultural Revolution, Dingding's mother had to live under the same roof with her mother-in-law, as if nothing had happened outside of the house. When He Xiangning asked whereabouts of her son, Dingding's mother could only tell her that her son was too busy with his work and having governmental meetings all the time, so that he could not come into her room to see her in the morning or night every day. Her relationship with her mother-in-law was not very easy. Anyway, it must be terrifying to live with that powerful old lady. He Xiangning died in 1972. As my father-in-law's official rank was lower than his mother's in the early 70s, the family had to move out the big house to the place where we lived then. After Mao's death in 1976, my father-in-law was promoted and became the Vice-chairman of the NPC. He was responsible for Sino-Japan relation; overseas Chinese affairs; Hong Kong and Macao affairs and the China's Tourist Board. As a result, the number of the meetings had increased significantly. As the nature of his work, the involvement with the family members had also increased. If an important visitor came to China with his or her family, as a host, my father-in-law would involve us for his official social engagements such as having meals with visitor's families. Those who lived with him at home would be asked to take part in these official engagements.

One day when we were having a meal with some overseas visitors in Quanjide Peking Duck Restaurant 全聚德烤鸭店 outside the City Front Gate 前门, Nanan, Dingding's seven-year-

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<sup>2</sup> Chinese Nationalist Party

old nephew told me in a serious tone “Don’t eat too much the first few courses, otherwise your tummy won’t have any room left for the Roast Peking Duck at the end.” I could tell that he was already a very experienced customer of the restaurant. Indeed, the meal started with eight dishes that were made from different body parts of ducks, from duck tongues to duck webs. It was amazing to see the skills of the chef who could make any undesirable parts of the animal into appetising dishes.

One of the beautiful early autumn evenings, my father-in-law was entertaining an important visitor and his family from Macau. It was decided that we should have the Imperial Court cuisine. The venue was arranged in the Summer Palace. After five pm, the park was closed to the public. It was very strange to walk round the ground of Summer Palace just two families. I assumed that it must be a similar experience for the imperial family in Qing Dynasty. Dingding inherited her father’s charming social and diplomatic skills and was extremely good at entertaining visitors’ family members. As a result, she was always very popular among all the visitors and they liked her and remembered her well.

In Wednesday or Thursday evenings there would be foreign film shows for the leadership circle. Many of the films were imported from the west. There were a few venues for such activities in Beijing. There were always two films for each show, which would be shared by two or three leaders’ families, but in many occasions, we were the only family there. These foreign films would be spontaneously translated by interpreters who sat at back of the cinemas. These cinemas were small and furnished with comfortable leather sofas. I remember watching *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, *Deer Hunter* and many Japanese horror films too. My mother-in-law always preferred classical Hollywood films.

When Dingding’s parents came back from their visit in Japan, they brought back a Panasonic microwave oven. It was first time that I saw such high-tech cooking equipment and it was said that it would reduce the cooking time significantly. Xu Fu, decided that he would prepare a Cantonese style roast duck for supper that evening.

“As we didn’t have a proper oven, I couldn’t do any of the roasting dishes. This machine should improve our diets,” Xu Fu said with a smile on his face. However, no one could understand the instruction of the microwave properly, as it was written in both Japanese and English, Of course, we dared not to bother Dingding’s father with this type of things. Xu Fu, Dingding and I started experimenting with the new cooking equipment together.

“It says that it would reduce the cooking time by at least by 70-80%,” I was guessing by reading at the Chinese characters in the Japanese instructions.

“So in this case, it would only take 20-25 minutes to cook a roast duck.” Xu Fu was very excited about the claim. He trustfully put his carefully prepared duck into the microwave oven. We set the timer, switched on the oven and watched the duck turning round on the oven plate.

“It’s nice to have a light too, so that you can watch it cooking ...It’s a clever machine... Look, the plate goes round, so the heat can be distributed evenly,” Xu Fu was pleased with his new toy and was happily making his running commentary.

Fifteen minutes later, we were still sitting there watching the performance of the new oven.

“It’s very strange. Look, the duck still stays in the same colour. It doesn’t look like a roast duck” Dingding raised her doubts first.

“Be patient. You should trust the new technology. I can smell it is cooking,” Xu Fu said with hope.

When the microwave pinged to indicated the end of cooking time, but the duck still looked uncooked.

“Maybe it needs another five minutes,” Xu Fu said. We added five more minutes and did it again and again. An hour later, the common sense told us that the duck could not be cooked any longer. Not until we took it out of the microwave, we realised that Xu Fu’s carefully prepared duck had turned into to a hard wooden duck, but it still looked uncooked.

As Dingding’s father was born in Japan and had many Japanese friends who would often send him some Japanese food that he liked. Occasionally, we had a large piece of sashimi tuna or salmon in the freezer, as Dingding’s father was on a diet and was not allowed to eat in large quantity. As there was no one else in the family, who liked eating raw fish, I ended up eating a lot of fish and put on weight of a few kilos as a result.