

Back to My Port

by Kangying Zi

On Women's Day when I was seven years old, my parents forgot to pick me up at the school gate because there was a promotion of Vitality 28 washing powder in the supermarket. After hesitating around the campus with no money, I finally decided to walk the three miles home on my own, along the familiar bus route by that river. That was the first time I saw the Yangtze River up close as long as I could remember, as a person from Shashi district. The road from school to home is along the Yangtze River, one of the two greatest rivers in China, running quietly by my side. It was not yet summer here in March, but the clear river water seemed to be gathering vitality: a woman squatting on a low step was washing clothes by the river; the wave hit her feet suddenly and soaked the lower half of her body. Two old men playing Go by the riverside wall narrowed their eyes, sighing that the current was stronger than last year. I leaned against the stone wall, a little lower than I was, with my heavy schoolbag on my back, staring at the sparkling water beneath my feet and listening to the sound of cargo ships—heading to the port.

Shashi, now actually a district of Jingzhou city, used to be an individual port city. You may wonder why I call myself from Shashi district rather than from Jingzhou city. Jingzhou and Shashi, these two appellations have been combining and dividing for many years. However, introducing myself as a person from Shashi is like a badge for me that probably only our local people know. It is a sense of identity.

In the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, one of China's four great classics, “Jingzhou was the center of the Three Kingdoms (220-280 AD) culture” (Li). Modern Jingzhou (Shashi) is only a small part of ancient Jingzhou on the map, and the whole place was said to be a place contested

by all strategists because of its advantageous and central geographical location in China. Time goes on to the last few centuries; becoming a port city was the fate of such a well-connected place with waterways. No port, no Shashi--the port then built attracted people all over the world to do business, and it was a vivifying pearl full of all kinds of opportunities. This place also attracted the attention of imperialists at the time of China's greatest humiliation. The Treaty of Shimonoseki between China and Japan in 1895 opened Shashi as a treaty port for Japan, and later set up westernized consulates subject to Japanese regulations (Peattie, 191). At the beginning of the 20th century, there were almost eight consulates in Shashi. After the establishment of the foreign wharf in Shashi, it became a port for the imperialists to plunder the resources of Jiangnan Plain and a market for dumping foreign goods (Peattie, 168). "Vile imperialism!" Every time I read this history, I cannot help feeling a sense of mission to share the destiny with this small city. But when I stand here today, looking back at those indelible scars, I have to admit that these wounds also cast the future of the Shashi. In such state of forced openness, Shashi presented the embryonic form of modern commercial port culture and industry.

"In the '80s, taking advantage of convenient port transportation, Vitality 28 washing powder, hot water bottles, bed sheets were selling all over the country and even the whole world!" (Wang). Those old brands once marked the glamour and prosperity of great Shashi city as a light industrial city. But unfortunately, it did not escape the fate of the decline of the old industrial base in the background at that age. All the glories and shames of this city had disappeared into the dust of 20-year history before I was born in 2000. Countless times of standing up and countless times of falling down, only Shashi herself will remember these details.

As a millennial, I hardly ever met that great Shashi. Although I was born here, my parents were just outsiders who were transferred here for work. It is said that language is the

bridge of communication. Then well, I never thought of myself belonging here at all when I was a little kid, for my parents themselves even did not know the local dialect. I sometimes enjoyed being an outlier who only speaks standard Mandarin, weird thoughts often swirling in this seven-year-old child's head. Gloomily, I grabbed a pebble and threw it into the river, wondering why my parents forgot about me because of the washing powder. I struggled to rest my chin on the stone wall, and the shade of the small trees nearby barely gave shade on my back. I walked slowly along the riverside, watching some people sitting on the riverside fishing, drowsy. It took me more than two hours to get home and meet my parents in front of the door who had just bought a pile of washing powder.

I have never been involved in Shashi's past, and for me it was merely a small town where I lived. I did not belong here. I was different from the people here at least in terms of the dialect. But the Zaotang noodles that I always bought in the alley where my school sits were really delicious. There is something I have to be honest about, but at that time, it was much harder for me to acknowledge my identity than my taste.

As an interviewer, all I have left is the chance to learn the past from someone else. The shimmering warmth hidden under the shell of this golden city whispers in my ear from time to time. Hou is one of my best friends, and it is not unusual for me and him to come out for breakfast. I asked Hou, a local person, out to tell me something about this city. "Generations of people are alive," Hou said, standing with me at the breakfast stand near the port. "I mean they have passed all those things on, those worldly things with a human touch." We order two bowls of Zaotang Noodles filled with stock as always, sit down at a small table set up nearby and wait. At this point, the dockers will start to work. The steam from the cauldron makes the cook sweat and turn red. "Good morning!" One by one, the dockers come, and the cook says hello loudly

with an enormous grin. It is said that she had been a worker at the Vitality 28 washing powder factory. After being laid off in the 1990s when the factory went into decline, she set up a breakfast stand on the dockside to earn a living. The breakfast stand was laid out quite casually, but for the sake of aesthetics, the wooden boards that separated the boiler from the dining area were draped in what looked like decades-old Vitality 28 washing powder plastic advertising sheets, with eye-popping slogans printed on them.

At the breakfast stand in the workplace, you can see a scene full of human life like Ukiyo-e. We slurped our noodles and looked around. “It was the same in the old days, but much busier,” Hou said. I looked at the swollen river, and the old scene came to my eyes. The dockers walked along the high and low slab stone roads to the breakfast stands along the river. Those who are pressed for time chose cheap and portable food to eat as they went, while those who were not busy could start their workday with a bowl of noodles. Then the day's work began. The whistle echoed on the river, the river flowed back and forth under the push of the steamer... We quickly finished our noodles and I tried to say goodbye to the cook in the half-baked accent I have learned over the years, wondering if she heard me while being busy cooking noodles. The meal at the breakfast stand is a symbol for the workers leaving the port to begin their sailing work. Just like the cook has seen off countless workers over the years, this time she is sending Hou and me away with a full meal. Both of us are going to study abroad far away from home soon. As I am about to leave, I realize that the city seemed to have left a lot for me. No matter how awkward my accent is, my stomach is never out of whack—the cuisine of this dockside city has shaped my stomach thoroughly. After breakfast, I was even more certain of it.

Everything was the same as it was a decade or more ago. It was like going back to the day I walked home alone. I noticed it all: two old men playing Go nervously by the river, and the

passers-by at the game table chattering about it; children clamoring with their parents that they wanted to fly kites here; industrious women pushing snacks cart in the river beach shouted hawking. I stood next to the little tree that now had grown big enough to give me shade, wrapped in the warmth of the sun and the familiarity of the hometown sound. I look at this worldly city, and the city also looks at me with its undetectable tenderness. People come and people go, just like the Yangtze River brought everything to us and took everything away from us decades ago. But now, even someone like me who has never witnessed the ups and downs of Shashi, I have begun to trace the precious precipitation washed by the river and left behind. Standing in the cold river in my sandals, I have never felt more awake and aware of the fact that I am from this place, that Shashi's identity becomes a part of my identity. Even when I mean to speak standard Mandarin, my accent and vocabulary are "Shashiful." The food I am most familiar with is irrigated by the Yangtze River and made by the industrious people in Shashi. The water I drink is purified from the Yangtze River. My personality, like all the people who have been nurtured by the river for generations in this city, is an open-minded personality capable of creating brilliance and surviving the valleys because we once saw the whole world and heard the different voices, through this little port.

I counted the days on the calendar, fell into fear of having to leave home in the near future. At the beginning it was my own determination to transfer from a domestic university to another university abroad, and now I began to miss everything in my hometown. Most of my life so far, is in her eyes. Not performing well on the most important exam of my life led me to go to a university I was not satisfied with; getting the opportunity to be an exchange student in another country made me study hard there and get good grades...But the pain that only I know, and the

glory that only I secretly celebrate in my heart, have made me a person who has decided to go out into the wider world.

I have traveled so many places and have many homes in my entire life. But there is always a genuinely worldly place I would like to affectionately call home, and regard it as a badge on my chest, a dock in my heart. Along the track of history, Shashi has been promoting us, from the land to the river, and from the dock to the world. She tells me what the sense of belonging means to me. She also tells me to dare to make my way and hear different voices in the outside world, but whether I come home triumphant or not, I just remind myself to have the magnanimity to face everything. This is the true me, getting every piece of flesh built by equally important success and failure. Feel free to come back to your port for a little rest, this is the worldly world.

I absolutely have to admit that Shashi city, now is indeed a district of Jingzhou city. The struggle of the name that only we care about, the extraordinary generosity that only we recognize, rest sedately in this small city submerged in the hinterland of China, sleeping on the banks of the Yangtze River. My dear past, even if you are already deep in sleep, I will still appreciate you and cherish you for making me who I am today.

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