

The Rusty Cage and the Sacred Thread

by Zhiying Yao

Suzhou, my hometown, is a romantic city full of poetry to outsiders. The golden sunshine and mild breeze have been blessing the ancient and mysterious city of Suzhou for thousands of years. The land is a piece of green cloth, and the shining silvery moat gently embraces the antiquated town with its gurgling. The moat, like a mother, has thus selflessly raised generations of people and witnessed Suzhou's soft dialect, meek Kunqu Opera, and distant history. When I was a child, I loved to sit on the wooden boats in the old town with my family. I watched the boatman with his light yellow woven straw hat swinging the oars left and right. The dark brown oars made ripples in the greenish river water, startling a few lively little fish to flee in all directions.

Sometimes my grandmother would sing the Chinese song “Jasmine Flower” at a leisurely pace beside me. Grandmother's gentle singing voice is an unmistakable display of the softness of the Suzhou woman. As Suzhou woman gently singing to a jasmine flower: “Budding and blooming here and there, Pure and fragrant all declare. Let me take you with tender care, Your sweetness for all to share. Jasmine fair, oh jasmine fair” (Fang He, lines 3-8). In the end, because of the girl's conflicted passion but also empathy, she ends up not plucking the jasmine flower, the jasmine flowers were not plucked. Like the city of Suzhou, jasmine exudes a charming fragrance to the outside world, while the girl in the song reflects the indecisive and subtle nature of the Jiangnan women that was restricted by obsolete rules.

I, rather than the outsiders' superficial view of Suzhou as a beautiful and romantic city, see Suzhou as a city whose euphemistic language and culture are elusive, constantly weaving

dizzying labyrinths within the city. Every time I tried to explore the city and thought that I will find a way out, I find myself was led back to the start by the after-images of Tongli, an old neighborhood in Suzhou that I'm familiar most with its good-natured people and atmosphere. Every time I think about a real place that makes me feel relaxed, I think of Suzhou, with its "rich commercial city with many bridges and waterways" (Wang, *City profile: Suzhou, China—The interaction of water and city*, page 1). Standing by Tongli's moss-covered bridge, I looked down by the shore of the algae-filled moat and imagined that I saw a timid, introverted bird looking back at me.

I went Tongli for school and became more solitary under the influence of traditional education system and people who always express their thoughts in some indirect ways that I felt lost. At that time, I was in junior high school, and at that age I did not understand the meaning of the sophisticated language. I only remember once I was distracted in class, and when I was called into the office, the teacher only said to me, "Just pay attention in the future." What should I pay attention to? Should I be careful that I don't daydream? Should I be careful not to let the teacher find out that I am deserting? Why didn't the teacher make it clear? Furthermore, the teacher always made us obey her instructions for the sake of better development (no one would ask questions even if we didn't understand enough). Silence and obedience seemed to be my best disguise. The long dark and silky hair of my classmates blocked their soulful eyes. The teacher's old-fashioned and oppressive teaching turned her into a chain around the rusty cage of the school building, blocking my footsteps. Therefore, I gradually turned out to be cowering, vacillating, and submissive to others. I wonder, is that still me?

Just as my friend Youcheng Huang said, "Suzhou people don't express themselves in a straightforward way; they express themselves in a roundabout way. People from other northern

cities in China are more outgoing and direct in their communication.” As far back as I can remember, no one around me as an adult would speak their mind directly. It seems to have become an essential part of Suzhou citizens’ life to go around in circles and do a long build-up before reaching their point. For example, people would say, "That's a lively and cheerful child," what they really meant was: "You're too noisy." When people are saying, “You are a popular student, ” the truth is that they think I should not waste too much time on socializing, but to spend more time on learning. Their behaviors and speeches made me feel exhausted. Why do people go to such lengths to say things that can obviously be said in one sentence? Euphemisms don't make it easier to socialize. What my teacher from Tongli neighborhood in Suzhou exhibited to me further. On the contrary, it only consumes your energy and time in organizing unnecessary language. And I, taking this to an extreme, became more passive and fearful of expressing my true thoughts.

Inevitably, I also found myself turning into a bird that only knows to hide from others in the cage. It reminds me of the Tuisi Garden, which is the symbol of Tongli in Suzhou. Tuisi Garden has a stunning garden design structure, plants that are always in top condition, and a collection of fine artworks. What really appeals to me is that Tuisi Garden hardly advertises itself, it just quietly waits for the visitors to come, without arguing or quarreling, away from the sophisticated world. There are times when it resonates with me: it may be best to quietly wait for others to find my sparkle and pace.

Unlike other prevailing tourist attractions that employs public-relation (PR) techniques to construct positive public image, Tuisi Garden have the magical ability to attract enough visitors and leave a good reputation national-wide through its rich historical heritage and exquisite architecture. As for me, I'm just a little girl with cowardice. I have been influenced by such

cultural and linguistic expressions unique to Suzhou in my life. Once upon a time, I missed many opportunities that I lost because I was afraid and not able to speak directly. I was deeply troubled by verbal expression, whether in academic, interpersonal or all aspects. There were times when I felt like a trapped beast in a cage, bound by a leather cord to my mouth and only able to whimper and sob. When I was young, my grandparents always told me to behave, so I thought not talking and obeying others was good. Nevertheless, as I grew up, I realized the importance of expressing myself. When I realized that, it seems a little too late to be myself.

Since coming to the United States, I have often been troubled by making friends: my introversion and caution in speaking exhausted me. It seems that following the guidance of authority figures and elders is what I should do. However, as an independent individual, do I really need to follow the rules in a foreign country where nobody knows me? My classmate Xiyan Chen, on the other hand shows me another way; she met many people with her enthusiasm and her personality to say whatever she wanted to say. I'm affected by Xiyan's spontaneity and the way she speaks, but I just can't do it. Sometimes I tried to change, it was as if something was growing unchecked in my mind, and it was desire: the urge to break free from the cage and the chains that keeping me from breathing.

A month ago, I picked up the confidence to be myself, rather than the understanding and subtle other me that people think I am. Who said that girls in Suzhou must speak politely and in a roundabout way? My hometown is certainly a large part of my character, but I should live as I am comfortable. I am not the real me in other people's eyes: I was born to be vivid, cheerful, straightforward and generous. In the book called *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, American journalist Isabel Wilkerson used the symbolism of the Sacred Thread to describe the obsolete concepts of Indian caste system. In Brahminism, the wearing of the sacred thread

indicates that the person is in a high position in the hierarchical structure of civil society. It is also, however, a confinement of stereotypical thinking. As long as the Brahmin wear the sacred thread, they remain enveloped by the unscientific and human chain of contempt that is caste. Further, in the caste system of Suzhou culture, as long as I'm suppressing myself there is a sacred thread that fetters my body. Stereotypic thoughts about Suzhou girls and women should be eliminated from outside expectations.

In my case, it makes more sense to have my own mind than to simply accept the voices of the outside world. Nothing is absolute. Suzhou culture is not totally beneficial to my development. My sacred thread is the elusive Suzhou traditional language expression and the suppression of elders. Elders always thought that preaching and oppression would help me integrate better into the society. However, sometimes their oppression makes the tasteless and distorted love a sacred thread that binds me. I need to break free from the sacred thread in order to embrace my true self. In fact, I have let my own personality develop and emanate at will, diffusing out of the city of Suzhou that once troubled me, the neighborhood of Tongli that once caused me confusion, and sailing all the way to America.