

First Place, High School Category

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The Return of Huang Xiqi

It felt good to be home. The moment I pushed open the heavy, oak doors, I realized all I had missed during my absence. The changes swirled around me in a light breeze, but I had expected that feeling to arise. In the nine years since my departure from the Yin Yu Tang house, it was impossible that time would stand still, and that everything and everyone would be the same as when I had left. However, I was still anxious to rekindle the bonds with my mother and other family members who had not yet died or moved away, and with my new wife by my side, I was ready to settle down in my family's house.

As I walked across the floor, instantly remembering where to step so as to not catch my foot on the edges of the uneven tiles, I carried my wife's and my belongings. We had only a few satchels of clothing, and a case with heirlooms for my wife to contribute to the house, and I quickly placed them on the four-poster bed inside our room. Although the courtyard was glowing in the sunshine, light barely seeped into the bedroom through the lattice window and wasn't enough to illuminate the room. In the dimness, I used my memory of the room to maneuver around the ancient furniture; I would have to light a lamp later this evening. Now, however, was the time to meet with my mother.

My wife and I walked over to the main hall on the opposite side of the open courtyard. My mother was waiting there, her wrinkled, tired face resembling the old, worn wooden walls next to where she sat. Her life had not been easy, as my father – Huang Zhenzhi – had died only two weeks after my birth, leaving my mother in charge of the entire household. She was in her thirties at the time, and although I had no recollection of my father's death or my early infant years, I was often reminded of the difficulties my family went through. My father, in his passing, left my mother with no source of income, and she endured many financial hardships. However, other family members in the house assisted her, relieving some burdens by marrying off their daughters or saving money to give to my mother. It helped that the Huang family all lived in this one home; the bedrooms separated each wife and husband from the others, but the courtyard, from where light shone into every room, connected us all and held us together.

"Mother, how are you?" I asked the frail woman sitting next to a table, an heirloom that had been in our house since it was built.

"I am fine, Huang Xiqi. How good it is to have you back home with us," she responded.

"I am glad to be home. This is my wife, Tong Xihao. You have not met her before, but she will be living here with me," I slowly explained. But it had been unnecessary to say those few words, for my mother, having moved into this house as a wife herself, knew that the woman standing beside me, her eyes darting every which way in anxious fear of my mother, could only be my wife. Although I hadn't noticed the authoritative presence of my mother before now, the look on my wife's face openly revealed she had the utmost respect for her, sensing in every angle, every wrinkle of my mother that her life had been full of tribulations and as a result, was an unwavering source of strength for my family. My mother would have no trouble asking for help with household duties – my wife was completely enveloped in the aura of her mother-in-

law. And just as the other wives beckoned to my mother's every call, my wife would also be eager to please her.

"Yes," my mother thoughtfully, slowly replied. "And what will you be doing for work?"

"Because of the Cultural Revolution, I've been instructed to teach in our town at the Huang Village School," I said. "Tong Xihao will work as a farmer in the village, so we'll travel to town together in the mornings and return here every evening. I know this is something new, Mother, but the times have changed."

"I understand, Son," my mother nodded as she glanced out into the bright, warm courtyard.

Of course she understood. She had known, as I learned from moving away, that nothing would ever remain the same; time would not stand still. And Yin Yu Tang itself had failed to escape change. A house that once had no vacancy now cried for occupants, and in every room, its tears left their marks on the washed-out wood paneling. With a sigh, I turned to give my wife a tour of the house and search for something, anything, that had refused to change.

"Tong, those four rooms across from ours once belonged to the neighbor, Huang Zhengang. When the Land Reform Team – from the Communist party – noticed the available space in 1951, two of those rooms were confiscated and given to poor peasant families. I was only ten years old when those families moved into our home," I said, glancing into the bedrooms and noticing the lonely, cold beds. After these families departed, few Huang members had moved into those rooms; for the most part, they had remained unoccupied. There was a slight dust covering the dressing armoire, and although light from the courtyard filtered in through the open lattice window, much of the room was still enveloped in darkness. An eerie feeling drifted over me as I realized how few inhabitants our home now had, but I pushed those gloomy thoughts aside as I continued to show my wife the house.

On the second floor, we peeked in several of the bedrooms on our way to the reception hall. As we approached, I noticed the child warmers still tucked away in the corner, waiting for the cold breaths of winter to freeze our village again. And as I had hoped, there were still the ornate tables arranged neatly in the room, waiting to be used for the next holiday. As for now, however, they simply sat there, the chairs hugged around the edges as if committed to remain close by.

"Before the Communist Revolution," I explained to my wife, "we honored a Buddhist shrine and several Chinese deities in this room." She nodded her head, familiar with the outdated decorations that had once adorned her house as well. We gingerly stepped onward, and I paused as I looked in the next doorway.

"In this room, as you can see, the wall is covered with floral wallpaper. It still looks very pretty, even nowadays. The wallpaper was pasted when my parents were getting married – it's already forty years old, and it has passed the test of time." My wife admired the bedroom, dazed by the history soaked into each flower on the wall, and I continued to reminisce about my earlier years in this house. After a while, we went on – meeting three wives in the historic kitchens – and finally ending back in the main room on the first floor. My mother was still sitting in her chair, watching two of the younger children play a traditional game of mahjong on the stone floor.

"Mother," I said as I approached her, "I will begin work tomorrow, as will my wife. But unlike the fathers and grandfathers before me, I will spend as much time as possible at home. I will not be away, searching in city after city for work, but will instead come home to you, to my family."

“I am proud of you, Huang Xiqi,” my mother said as her eyes gripped mine. “Not only for becoming a valuable teacher, but also for being such an honor to your ancestors. You are a fine young gentleman, and you have brought a wonderful young lady into this house to join the Huang dynasty,” she said as her bold black eyes shifted over to my wife. A smile crept in around the well-defined wrinkles of her face.

“Thank you Mother,” I said with a slight bow of my head, my wife gesturing in the same fashion. “Thank you.”

My return home was even better than I had expected. Although my peasant friends had long vacated their rooms, and although there were fewer relatives residing here, the rich family history still sprang up around every wall deterring evil spirits from their straight paths and among every heirloom that had barely moved since being added to the home. Much had changed, but alterations were inevitable; more would certainly be disrupted in the future. And on this day, my first day home, I did not know what was to come. I was unaware that shortly after my arrival, sixteen women would be placed in one of the bedrooms on the second floor, sent to our village for military training. And I had no idea that eight years from now, all three kitchens abutting the house would collapse and have to be torn down. And little did I know that I – a member of the 35th generation of the Huang family – would be the last one to live in Yin Yu Tang and would have to close the doors on my ancestors’ dwelling, my family’s fortress. On this day, I could not have projected the future. However, I knew that I had returned home, and it was an exquisite feeling.

Bibliography

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