

What is called Home

Su Liu

I have no personal memory of my grandfather. I suppose he passed away quite a long time ago, but looking at his photo at the tomb I feel he was the kind of person I would love to meet. Around fifty years ago, he and my mother lived downtown in a small neighbourhood in Guangzhou, just next to the Pearl River, across from the Shamian Island. She used to ride on grandfather's bicycle to cross the river to the place he worked, the school she attended, and the book stand where he would buy her a story book for 1 RMB – you won't be able to buy a bottle of water for that now. The double-floored stone building they lived in was covered with simple wooden sheds when I visited three years ago. It was a sunny autumn day, but I could barely see any sunlight shining through. Apparently someone still lives there, as evidenced by the toy windmill on the windowsill.

Before even arriving at that neighbourhood, you would quickly realise that it is no longer considered 'downtown' by present standards. From my perspective, Guangzhou remains the best city for residence as all neighbourhoods remain lively despite the rise of the new 'downtown.' Regions such as the one my grandfather lived in are now called 'the old districts,' usually with a nostalgic sentiment. These neighbourhoods are usually marked by wandering verandas along the road, and stone lanes in the residential area that are so worn out that they have become increasingly grinded down. People still walk and ride bicycles on these streets, and nothing seems to have changed in their living atmosphere. Meanwhile, the other bustling side of the city continues to grow.

The Current

I was born and raised in Guangzhou. The district where I spent my childhood used to be a vast farmland before it was officially made 'Tianhe' district in the 1970s. It has been rising at a furious speed, with possibly all the modern elements a local citizen can think of. This being said, we had moved several times within the district, mainly due to my studies. To be frank, the elementary school and middle school I went to are merely 700 metres from each other, and the longest time it would take me to walk was 15 minutes. Yet my mother insisted on moving every time I studied at a new school. During my last year in secondary school, she even rented an apartment next to my school so that she could cook me proper lunch, and I wouldn't have to take the ten-minute metro trips – for a good reason, as I will elaborate in a moment. I am still surprised at her determination in carrying out the 'mother of Mencius'¹ way, though I have to say I am grateful for her efforts.

We eventually settled down in the centre of Tianhe, which was then proven to be a superb choice. The area is filled with shopping malls and a diverse cluster of schools – part of the belief in dwellings for the Chinese is that the more schools in proximity, the more valuable the property would be. It is a five-minute walk to the CBD (central business district) of the city, where world-class architecture such as the Canton Tower and Guangzhou Opera House have been built. It is almost the perfect place to live if you enjoy urban life.

Why 'almost' perfect, you might ask?

Because it can get extremely populous in rush hours. It may be hard to imagine what it is like to be in a place as busy as the Guangzhou city centre, but here's the idea I had: on a usual school day I overslept, went in the streets at 8am, only to see a massive crowd of black-and-white suits all heading in the same direction – into the CBD. I felt like a fish wriggling against the tidal currents. If I wanted to get home in time for dinner after school, I would have to wait in a queue to simply get into the metro station. My destination

¹ Legend has it that Mencius' mother moved their house three times for better education for her son, Mencius, a philosopher in ancient China.

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was 'Tiyu Xilu', which is still joked to be 'Diyu', meaning 'hell', due to the monstrous flow of passengers. Despite being a failure in predicting population flow, Guangzhou Metro is not essentially bad because it is part of an enormous transportation network, which has been improved since 2010.

What was special about the year 2010 was that the Asian Games were held in Guangzhou. I was still an elementary student when we lived on the 'central axis', an extension of the new Huacheng Square where you can see all the skyscrapers of the CBD. It is the most futuristic region that covers Tianhe District and Haizhu District (one of the old districts) where the Canton Tower has been open to public since 2010. The Haixinsha Island, which was not redesigned into a stadium until 2009, was also open for the Asian Games in 2010.

To me, the most dramatic change would be the scaffolding that blindfolded our windows. There were workers outside my bedroom window, in the streets and on the playgrounds. By the time the Games began and all scaffolding was at last dismantled, it felt like a dream to walk outdoors. The buildings were repainted in rouge red, with western style roofs to cover the open rooftop. For the following few years I had missed the way it looked before. Because this, a flat, empty street with large stone panels, would eventually be stained by the street food dealers wandering with their spiced carts. The exterior design, street lamps and plastic 'tile' roofs looked so deliberately foreign. No doubt, the international event had brought great positive change to the city. Yet the 'central axis' felt less like a home to me. Nowadays I just say that it is a cute tourist attraction.

What was genuinely impressive about the constructions, though, was how the bus system had been improved. The BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) was built especially for the commercial areas in central Guangzhou. While the bus system in Guangzhou is relatively cheap and dense with more than 1,400 routes across the city, the BRT stations are like islands in the middle of the road, slim and longer than roadside bus stops to serve more buses and passengers. The dedicated BRT routes on these roads have greatly reduced bus stop congestion and made our lives easier.

My mother favours the bus system more than the metro. 'They're everywhere,' she said, 'and cheap and cosy to sit in.' But this wasn't always the case. When we first settled in the flat we bought, it soon occurred to my infant brain that our new home was next to one of the busiest roads in the city, with eight to ten lanes! It is the road that separates our side of the district from the CBD. The main issue was the two bus stops right downstairs. There were no such things as electric cars back in the early 2000s; all buses ran on petrol, and the disturbing noise of bus engines soared to the 10th floor² where we were living. It was only when clean energy buses appeared that my mother attempted to take more buses – and she has been enjoying it.

The Flat

The Chinese people have always been looking for a place that they financially and physically own. I know it sounds materialistic, because real estate is considered a financially stable property. So I admit that we Chinese are obsessed with buying real estate; this is a result of our culture.

² Equivalent to the 9th floor by UK standards.

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The first important element of this culture is family. There is an enormous number of people that travel to large cities like Guangzhou to work, and that travel home for festivals despite having gained settlement in the city. For 'convenience', they might take their family and elders to their new settlement. When I say 'settlement', it usually means a bought property. It appears that Chinese people cannot live without familial connection; most older generations like to call it 'belongingness.' I believe that is what 'home' means in traditional Chinese culture, even if it can feel like shackles to the younger generations – settlement, namely owning a flat or house, remains a common priority in marriage, sometimes even a prerequisite. The younger generations would nevertheless enjoy managing their own home and not having to deal with landlords. The elders tend to believe the same: you need to own a place to live instead of renting somewhere that does not belong to you. Belongingness, but also a sense of boundaries and territory. Secondly, China has long been a major agricultural country. A large part of my knowledge from Chinese history class was about agriculture – land policies that manage the people, poker games that depict the villain player as 'landlord', and even contemporary revolutions that were started by farmers. I would say that the Chinese people are quite connected to the concept of territory. Yet buying a house to settle down in a city has never been an easy task. Even the great poet Bai Juyi, who was a well-paid government secretary, could not afford any house in the capital city until twenty years later, in the year 821 AD.³ We wanted a farm, then a house. Now we want a large flat. Perhaps part of all this is driven by desire. Desire for a sense of wealth, if not wealth itself. Desire to feel at home.

So after some years of dealing with room rents and landlords, my mother finally decided to get us a settlement.

We settled in a flat with three bedrooms at the heart of the city. The building has 31 floors and looks ordinary, with stained white bricks on the outside and old lifts that ring a bell when they stop at each floor. In Chinese cities, the vast majority (if not all) of the population lives in apartment buildings; in flats that usually have a living room, kitchen, bathroom and one to four bedrooms. So the type of flat we lived in was a typical choice for families of more than three people. This is quite different from other parts of the world, and I suppose the relatively high population in China is the main reason for this. To deal with the 'heavy metal music' traffic going non-stop, my mother took the most generous measure I could think of – she replaced all the windows with noise-proof ones. She also dug out a small tunnel in the wall to install a ventilator so that we could breathe with all the windows closed, as well as an air filter to reduce the traffic pollution brought up from downstairs.

You see, my mother has some experience in interior design. Perhaps she had waited for our own home for so long that she spilled her ideas all at the same time. When we first bought the place, she immediately decided to change the structures before we even moved in. To reduce the influence of loud traffic, she turned what used to be the living room into a small bedroom, and built a wall to separate it from the entrance of the flat. A hallway was therefore divided from the original living room to help ventilate the entire flat, leading from the entrance straight to the farthest bedroom. The bedroom closer to the road was then turned into a living room, with some other walls removed and rebuilt. But she is never satisfied. Someday at lunch she would talk about her new dream flat and how to achieve it, and ask us for feedback. The next month she would start recruiting workers and plumbers. Then would be all the drilling and cranky noises. It has been over ten years and I have long forgotten what the flat looked like in the first place. Never have I heard that she studied or worked in architecture, or anything related. Yet it is incredible how she moves things around – the kitchen, walls, doors, bedrooms; she even expanded our balcony.

³ This was depicted by Sima Qian in *Records of the Grand Historian*.

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At the same time, she knows well what not to change: bathroom plumbing and supportive structures. She would supervise the workers she hired, although they have worked for her for so long that they watched me grow up.

As a child I used to follow my mother wherever she went, and that was how I learned what she learned. It would typically be half the price and easier to supervise the work being done if you hired individuals instead of a construction team. It is also cheaper to pick construction materials at the local factory dealers in the streets rather than at a branded warehouse store. Over the years, my mother has developed her way of dealing with people and money – her workers get a little more payment day by day, so that she could ask them to teach her more in arrangements and construction materials. Nobody gets less if they make mistakes, as long as they manage to deal with it. She also cooks them lunch to make them feel at home. She is such a perfectionist, and is so impressive at her ‘hobby’ that I would have believed it if she had said she was a civil engineer. It felt like magic... but what if it was?

The Superstition

Is there magic for dwelling?

There is a term for that which has been a topic since ancient times – Feng Shui. When we talk about Feng Shui in recent days, the most common reaction may be that it is a superstition, but we would also admit that it has infiltrated Chinese culture and minds when we talk about housing and fortune. We still see traditional ‘signs’ written on physical calendars that tell us whether it would be a good day to move house, travel, or have a wedding. In housing, Feng Shui usually means the geomancy or positions of a house and of the fittings inside it. A traditional standard for excellent Feng Shui would be: a house by the mountains, decorated with dragons and white tigers, sunlight shining through its main entrance and a river flowing through its garden. These are difficult standards to meet now that most people in China prefer to or have to live in buildings. A common example would be when my mother tells me: ‘You should put your desk in front of your window. It’s a Wenchang⁴ position, very good for your studies.’ I believe it was a made-up theory, but if you think about it, being in a bright and open environment will indeed benefit your productivity. Or you could think the other way and disagree, because sitting in front of a window draws away attention. Other examples of Feng Shui include: avoid living next to the cemetery or hospital as they are associated with evil spirits; the main entrance should avoid facing the balcony, windows and the kitchen door, otherwise the home will not be able to ‘contain’ wealth. They do sound like superstitions from the way people address them, as they have mainly developed from word of mouth.

I am a firm atheist and am lucky enough not having to debate with my mother about the credibility of Feng Shui. The results of her arrangements are positive and seem reasonable to anyone who is not an expert in Feng Shui, such as I. Her understanding of Feng Shui is that you should always isolate the bathroom. The bathroom door should not be right across any other door, nor the kitchen, because it introduces negative ventilation – you would never want the germs near the toilet to swap places with the kitchen air. Even though we have little room for the shower, sink and toilet altogether, the toilet should not be opposite the bathroom door, so as to benefit privacy. My mother rarely makes changes to the bathroom structure to avoid damaging the plumbing, which is part of a larger sanitation system of the building. So I understand how frustrated she was when our ceiling got soaked, because the upstairs neighbour built a second bathroom in what is usually the balcony. There could have been germs in that ceiling.

⁴ Wenchang is initially the name of a star. In ancient Chinese symbolism, the Wenchang star represents intelligence and luck for examination.

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I have many good and bad memories in this flat in its different forms. It is as though I have lived in many different flats already, but my location remains the same. It never occurred to me how my sense of security towards the place has changed. It has always been my 'home', in the sense that I feel content just by sitting on the floor, no matter what the entire place looks like. I guess part of that is because our furniture and personal possessions remain the same. This is a mindset I have had since my first arrival in the United Kingdom. I have been trying to make my new room feel as similar to home as possible, by placing things I brought from home and making things messy, especially in bed. However, I cannot change the lighting to make the atmosphere match. My room is too tiny to move things around, and unlike at home, I don't meet up with my good friends for school, not to mention going home with them, and it is not as clean as my mother would normally request 'for the sake of Feng Shui.'

Solitude

It has been almost deceptively sunny in Sheffield. Looking again at the spring onions, mint and blooming kalanchoe on my small windowsill, I realise they make this room feel more like home, even if the lighting doesn't feel right, nor is my kitchen big enough. I enjoy gardening despite my clumsiness at it. Plants move subtly. They make no noise and calm me down just by the fact that they exist and grow taller day by day. I have enjoyed my alone time in this tiny room. It can be kept at the same temperature no matter if it is raining or snowing, and I don't hear any of the traffic noise once the window is closed. Then the hidden ventilator starts working. If I am expected to buy a place just like my parents did, I might choose a twenty square-metre apartment with full privacy like this one. I don't expect everyone else to understand.

My friends in China agree with me. Who knows, maybe we are all simply lazy. I feel exhausted just by mopping the floor of our entire flat.

It may be the case that I expect to live alone in the future, and I suppose that is the same for many others in China. In recent years, there has been a new trend called the bachelor economy, typically in East Asian countries. Couples are no longer the major customers for certain industries such as leisure and catering. Hence, some restaurants have introduced products such as single-portion hot pot and sauerkraut fish. Anything that is normally in large portions may be served single now for 'bachelors.' The same changes have been taking place on the level of dwelling as well. Capsule hotels and youth hostels made up of tiny bedrooms have become increasingly popular, especially for those on a tight budget or looking for trendy services.

I have never had the need to live in one of those, and I can be picky – my life standards require a kitchen to cook homemade food, a washing machine, and a private bathroom that I can access anytime I want. As I mentioned earlier, we rented a small apartment for the sole purpose of not having to commute through horrific traffic. It was a cosy place with one bedroom, big enough for two beds and a wardrobe, and a living room about the same size, with kitchen counters, a private bathroom and a washing machine. If someone looking for a career wants to settle here, they might as well prioritize renting a place like that.

I cannot imagine settling down in a house instead of a flat. The only time I stayed in a house was at my cousin's hometown in Dongguan, a city next to Guangzhou. Their family house lies in a small village named after their own surname 'Lu.' This sounds interesting but I never asked why or how it is related to my cousin. The house was built by my cousin's family, with an old lychee tree in their yard; I bet the house is older than the tree. It is three levels tall, and I slept on the second floor, which connects to the lower half

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of the rooftop. Sleeping there was a peaceful experience – you only share the building with your family, in the suburbs. You could taste it in the air, smell it, hear it. You hear it in the morning too, but that would be something else, probably a neighbour's rooster, or a guard dog barking.

Me and my niece (technically another cousin's daughter – funnily enough, she is a year older than me) would buy ice cream and sit outside the Lu Family Temple to gaze at a shimmering small glass building. It seemed a bit out of place in this quiet village. I heard it was built by a rich businessman from Hong Kong. We peeked through the front gates to see the marble interior, tall ceilings and fountains in the hall. The lights were never on but the fountain never stopped running. I still don't know why its owner built it there, alone, in somebody's village. Perhaps to show off? Who cleaned it up to make everything so glamorous? I could never see myself tidying up my entire house, which could take me all day. As a local idiom says, 'a house too big is a house intimidating.' If you have decided to live alone, a house would probably make you feel hollow and lonely, and being alone is not equivalent to being lonely. That's just my perspective.

Speaking of Hong Kong, it has always been a relative to Guangzhou, I suppose mainly due to the Cantonese language. I often noticed in old photos how fashionable my mother was compared to her peers, because of the clothes her cousins gifted her from Hong Kong. I well remember an azure sailor collar dress that would look lovely even for girls in current standards – Chinese girls these days love those collars. There was a time when some Cantonese people were so longing for a life in Hong Kong that they were willing to slip across the borders. I heard it was basically a triathlon of 130 kilometres, including hiking alone to avoid being caught in groups. It was striking that my mother's cousin was one of those people. However, I cannot say that I would prefer their lives to ours. Most people live in the same apartment buildings as we do, probably smaller, because Hong Kong is quite tiny in comparison. The subdivided units of flats in Hong Kong have also been a prolonged social problem, with issues concerning privacy and hygiene.

I am honestly confused with the fact that there is still an increasing number of new immigrants in Hong Kong, especially from non-Cantonese regions. How can they feel at home living in a place that rarely speaks mandarin? Or perhaps they merely treat it as a workplace? It is partly why I like the atmosphere in the old districts compared to in the CBD, where I can appreciate the fun ways people speak to one another in Cantonese. I guess I love the language so much that feeling estranged from my native language is like not having a nationality.

*As Circular as a Chinese Full Stop*⁵

You might have noticed that I yearn for the nostalgic side of the city more than the modern. I do like the modern architecture especially since I have spent intense weekends studying there as a secondary student, which also led me to eat at the fancy restaurants nearby. But that's just about it: there is nothing much about *life* that I can relate there. Living, as an essential activity, feels more solid and approachable when I am simply at home, or at my friend's home. I can sense more interesting details in people when I stay at their homes, because it is where they feel most relaxed and authentic (that is, when they don't realise there is a guest nearby). The way they talk to their family members is a combination of unique tone, mixed feelings, love and hate, and all-inclusive tolerance. This is something you can only see in someone's home, or in films like Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman*.

⁵ The full stop symbol in Chinese is written as '。', a hollow circle.

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The film portrays the complex sensibilities in a typical Chinese family using the symbolic scene where the Chu family gathered at the round dinner table, whose circular layout implies reunion in Chinese culture. This was where the film began and ended, but with different atmospheres: at the beginning, the daughters were absent-minded with Chu's food and Chu 'lost' his sense of taste, and in the end Chu retrieved his taste eating his daughter's homemade soup. As the elder host of their last reunion, Chu said: 'As a family living under the same roof, we can still live separate lives. This worry that we have for each other is what makes us a family.'

And my mother always says, if you don't listen to your elders at home, you will regret it soon. I cannot tell for sure if that's always true, but I never regretted listening to her, because she is local. Because she knows Guangzhou more than I do, and I believe every mother has her own life philosophy. She is just too lazy to write a book about it.

'Why would you?' she said. 'The knowledge that belongs to just you is the most valuable. So don't write a memoir. Now hush, I want to watch telly.'

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