Puo-Puo

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[Editor's Note: To me, this piece has a totally different feeling from the rest of what I've chosen. Clearly less anxious. I've included it because, first, I like it a lot, and second, I feel like it strikes a dissonant note, which will perhaps allow the rest of the issue to be heard better. The author of the essay is a quite famous Chinese novelist nearing the end of her life. She was literally born into the massive wave of Chinese fleeing the brutal, meth-addicted Japanese army; she then faced reeducation during the Cultural Revolution due to her family's intellectual status. The upheaval that she has lived through is considerably greater than anything Americans have had to face: invasion, civil war, famine. And as though this was not enough, she has chosen to focus her essay on a woman who, in that deadly chaotic situation, had to flee with bound feet! This should be the most anxious text in the issue — but it's clearly the opposite. I'm not sure what that says, but it says something.]

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Puo-Puo was rather tall, taller than most women. If it was as convenient to measure height during the 1940s as it is today, she would have measured to at least 1.7 meters, maybe even taller — Puo-Puo could measure up against any modern-day supermodel, height-wise. Unfortunately, Puo-Puo possessed a pair of bound feet, a true pair of "three-inch golden lotus." When she walked, her arms swayed in a dramatic arch, while the tips of her feet pointed outward in opposite directions until her heels hit the ground, rocking her hip with the movement of each foot and propelling her forward. It was as if she walked not with her feet, but with the weight of her torso performing a strange dance in midair.

She was not my maternal grandmother, nor my paternal grandmother. Her surname was Li, which was completely unrelated to mine. She was there, however, when I was born, and she took care of me even in my infancy. She was the one who ate my leftover food, as a mother did for her child back in the day. She called out to me in the most doting voice, a nickname from her rural Hubei dialect, which to this day I cannot pronounce. It sounded something like "Ao-Er?" Not really. Maybe there was a consonant

in front? — No, that's not right either. Though I could not describe the syllables, I knew that the nickname meant "baby." Even after 80 years, her soft voice calling me by this name still lingers in my ear, an unforgettable dream. In my earliest memories, she was the first person I saw each morning when I awoke, telling me to wash my face and brush my hair. At night, she was the last one to say good night, making sure I was warm and snuggly in my blanket. She did all of this not only for me, but for my siblings as well.

Though she was not related to us by blood, she was family. When father graduated from university and moved from Beijing to Hubei for work, she was maid and cook for him and a few of his bachelor friends. In today's vocabulary, she would be called a "domestic worker." In the old days, she was a "maidservant." But Puo-Puo was no ordinary "maidservant" to our family. She was ten years older than my mother, she was there when my parents got married, and she was there for the births of all of their children. After the Manchurian Incident, she helped the whole family escape to safety, eventually settling down with us in Sichuan province. Sharing in our family's time of adversity, and being there with us day and night, of course she would become as close to us as any family member! My parents called her Li-Puo, and so all the children called her Puo-Puo. As a child I believed that she was the most needed person in the family. It was no big deal if my mother left my sight, but I panicked whenever I could not find Puo-Puo. Puo-Puo cooked such delicious meals. Hubei people are known for their fish dishes, and Puo-Puo cooked extraordinary fish. This was not just my opinion — all of our dinner guests agreed. When I started cooking, it was inevitable that I stole her recipes: stewed ribs with lotus root, catfish soup with shredded radish, fried lotus fritters . . . too bad they never tasted quite like Puo-Puo's.

From dawn to dusk she floated about the house doing this and that, never taking a moment of leisure for herself. In the morning, after cleaning up after our breakfast, she would take a large bowl of water and place it on our square dining table. She would bring over the tea tray, wash the china one by one, polishing each cup with a cloth until it shined. She would then place the squeaky-clean teacups back onto the tray upside down, to keep dust from settling inside them. After that, hips swaying, she would carry a full basket of laundry into the yard, sit down on a stool next to our large wooden basin, shove a washboard against her stomach, and scrub the clothes until the basin swelled with bubbles. Whenever

my father's delicate white silk tunic needed a washing, she'd have to scrub with her hands instead of using a washboard. I remember my mother saying, "Your father's silk tunic is such a pain to wash!" But Puo-Puo never complained about it. Why is it that after more than 70 years, these small details still appear so vividly in my mind? It must be because I followed her around all day long, like her little shadow.

It must have been toward the end of the Anti-Japanese war, when I was around 8 years old, that our family was evacuated to rural Chong Qing, in Sichuan province. We no longer had to listen to the sound of Japanese bombers in the sky, and our daily life became relatively peaceful and stable. What the villagers referred to as the "Catch Up" was a vast outdoor market. A great variety of foods were sold there. I remember that whenever there was a holiday, the fragrant smell of Puo-Puo's cooking emanated from the stovetop. Though these delicious dishes would soon be on the dinner table, we children still gathered impatiently near the burning wood stove with our faces lifted up, standing on tiptoes in order to gawk at what's inside the big wok. Whenever Puo-Puo saw us like this, she very helpfully picked out pieces of chicken or pork from the wok with her greasy fingers, and stuffed them into each tiny open mouth, as though feeding little sparrows. Blissfully we children chewed on the meat while scattering about the yard, though soon enough we would return for another round, making a game out of it. Puo-Puo always answered to our wants and needs, and never once rejected us. I'm certain that we must have been annoying, but I don't recall *her* ever being annoyed. Those small moments of love were mere drops of water sprinkled onto my childhood, but they have trickled all the way into my old age, nourishing the whole landscape of my life, allowing it to live and gently etching it into the depth of my memory.

I once heard my mother say to a friend: "Li-Puo is extremely fond of cleanliness." Thinking of it now, it did not sound like a compliment, exactly. Maybe she was implying that Puo-Puo was somewhat, in today's term, OCD? Perhaps that was true, but under the constant care of Puo-Puo, whether we lived in the city or in the village, our house was eternally tidy and clean, the windows clear and bright without a speck of dust. Also, if Puo-Puo was OCD, she must have infected me with it. To this day, I like to clean the house and organize my desk before sitting down to write. After a meal, I must make sure that the dishes are washed and the kitchen is

restored before I go on with my day. If this is an illness, then it must be a good kind of illness, for her habitual cleanliness has led me to live my whole life in a tidy, pleasant environment.

Puo-Puo not only made sure that everyone in the family dressed sharply, she also cared a great deal about her own appearance. Her hair was always pulled back into a smooth bun and, on special days, she even pinned a small red velvet flower to the bun, which I thought was so pretty. She pressed all of her clothes with rice water so that even the old clothes looked brand new. I also loved watching her do her hair and wash her feet. When doing her hair she would hold one end of a red hair ribbon in her mouth, and affix the other end to the back of her head, holding her long hair in place. Then, she would raise her elbows and quickly loop the ribbon round and round until the hair magically formed into a bun. Finally she would let go of the other end of the ribbon, which she swiftly tucked back into the bun. When all this was done, her hair appeared shiny and smooth without a single stray strand, topped with a flawless bun! Only, the ribbon left a slight red indentation on her cheek — did it hurt? I reached out my hand to touch it. Even now my fingertips remember the soft pale skin of her face, and the wrinkles that were beginning to show. She was probably almost fifty years old at that time.

In order to watch Puo-Puo wash her feet one had to pretend to be asleep, for she did not like anyone seeing her bound feet. She'd wait until we were all tucked in bed before sitting down on the stool with a basin of hot water. Placing one foot on the opposite knee, she'd begin to slowly unwind the long wrapping cloth from her foot. If we were still awake when she started, we'd all jump off the bed to investigate. It was an unbearably gruesome sight to see. Aside from her big toe, the other toes were bent into the sole of her foot as though broken, causing her entire foot to curl into itself like a fist. We understood then why she only walked on her heels! Aside from pain and humiliation, her mutilated feet served very little purpose, but if she wanted to continue living, she would have to continue to walk on them.

In the superstitious old society, one could say that Puo-Puo was born ill fated. She was an illiterate village woman whose husband died early, leaving her with two sons to raise by herself. Desperate, she moved to the city to work as a servant, selling her labor in exchange for her and her children's survival. This was how she came into our family. Eventually, she was not only a part of our

family, she was the expert on all of its stories. Even stories we forgot, she treasured and never grew tired of recounting. Such as when my infant sister nearly starved to death on the evacuation boat out of Beijing; how my little brother had his leg trapped in a chair so badly she had to saw off the chair back to rescue him; or the time us kids snuck out in the early morning to go see a pig butchering, kicking over a full latrine on the way out . . . Out of all her stories, the one that scared me the most was the one about how I almost died! Apparently, I contracted pneumonia when I was only a year old. In today's world this would be an easy cure with antibiotics, but we did not have such a thing back then. I can still hear Puo-Puo telling the story in a dramatic, tragic voice: "I'll be damned! Your little face turned blue; there were no more breaths. Your little nostrils flared in and out as your mommy said to me, 'Li Puo, don't bother anymore, just put her on the ground.'"

Though I knew well the outcome of this story, her words still sent a shudder into my heart. The little girl in her story would surely die! But then into the story came the doctor, bringing with him a dose of herbal medicine, rescuing me from the verge of death. Because of this, I still believe in the healing power of Chinese medicine, and I'd be glad to debate with anyone who doesn't. If not for that dose of Chinese medicine, I would have been laid to rest in a little coffin long ago — yet here I am, writing this essay today at age 84! In any case, in that era full of warfare, lives were as insignificant as the common weed. A sudden unforeseen catastrophe could arise anytime, anywhere. While living in Chengdu, my parents set up a square table beneath the awning of our house and lined the floor underneath with thick blankets. Should there be a sudden airstrike leaving little time to run to the bomb shelter, the children would be able to take cover under the table. It occurs to me now that this set up was clearly to ease the anxiety of the adults; how, after all, could a square wooden table shield us from bombs!

One day, though, it really happened. Out of nowhere the air raid alarm blasted out. With no time to get to the shelter, Puo-Puo stuffed all three of us under the table, shoving us into the corner, all the way up against the wall. She then lay down on her side, awkwardly curling her body around to block us in. She looked ridiculous, like a giant dried shrimp. Looking back, I'm struck by the absurdity of this strange and uncomfortable strategy. This was how Puo-Puo was going to shelter us from the bombs.

And alas! Who would have thought — it worked!

A bomb fell right beside our home, scattering shrapnel everywhere. One piece flew straight at our square table shelter, lodging in the back of Puo-Puo's head. Fresh blood instantly poured out of her wound, pooling around her head. Fortunately the piece of shrapnel that hit her was relatively small, and her injury was superficial. She stopped the bleeding and cleaned up the mess. Neither of our parents was home that day — but even if they were, things probably would have played out the same way.

Puo-Puo spoiled the three of us equally, never playing favorites. Of her own two sons, she had a particular fondness for the younger one. She arranged a marriage for her older son and gave him the family plot to farm. As for her younger son, who was both smart and filial, she was determined to invest in his education so he could make something of himself. With support from my parents, her younger son did become a university student by the time our family moved to rural Sichuan. He looked much like his mother, tall and with a square jaw. My mother said that he was a very becoming young man.

During summer and winter breaks he would stay over at our house, and us children welcomed him wholeheartedly. We never cared about how "becoming" he looked; we only wanted to hear the stories he had to tell. Thanks to him, I had my first exposure to literary classics such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Journey to the West*. The characters in his name contained many strokes and were quite complicated to write, but I remember them to this day. His name was Li Hong Ding. Whenever Hong Ding was around, we were a bunch of little sycophants who worshiped the ground he walked on. He despised us and couldn't wait to get rid of us. But how could anyone blame a young man in his early twenties for not wanting to babysit a bunch of obnoxious little kids?

Whenever he attempted to shun our company, we would employ our secret weapon — telling his mother. Because of us, he endured much scolding from her. Then one day, at the brink of losing his patience, he came up with a plan for revenge. Instead of the usual fun stories he would tell, he started telling us the ghost tales of *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*. I recall a female ghost with a stark white face, a bloody open mouth, and long hair that reached her ankles. During the day she composed herself as a beautiful lady, but in the dead of night she took off her head, placed it on her vanity, and slowly combed her long hair . . . Hearing this tale in the broad daylight, we children shriveled in fear, making ourselves

smaller and smaller, crowding around Hong Ding's knees, afraid to listen but too curious to run away. At night, recalling his stories, we were unable to stay in our own bed, so we piled into Puo-Puo's bed for protection. Even so, perhaps I should thank Hong Ding for being my first literature teacher.

After the war, everyone who had been evacuated to Sichuan was in a hurry to rush home. Puo-Puo was getting old, and it was time for her to return to her hometown in rural Hu Bei. When my parents finally secured ship tickets, we first traveled together to Wuchang so that we could see Puo-Puo home. Then we continued on our way.

That was how Puo-Puo left us. I never saw her again. Later on, when I got married in Beijing, I sent out two wedding photos: one to my parents, who had once again relocated to Sichuan, and another one to Puo-Puo, who was still living in Wuchang. I imagined that she was glad to receive the photo, that she must have stared at it for quite a while, muttering under her breath: "Ao-er, I'll be damned — what will they eat? She doesn't know how to cook a thing!" Too bad she could not write. She could only watch Hong Ding's pen glide across the paper under the desk lamp, while she went on and on with what she wanted to say to me. In Hong Ding's letter, however, all of that became one line: "Mother urges you to please eat well." And I understood.