

Cantonese Mask

When a person asks me where I came from, I always say “Guangzhou.” If he or she frowns and at me, gives me a confused look, and tells me that he or she does not know the city because of the lack of Chinese geographic knowledge, I will add, “it’s pretty close to Hong Kong” (just like the phrase I recently heard when people in Pennsylvania introduce themselves, “someplace close to Philly”). Then the responses will always be “so you speak Cantonese,” and I will slightly yet proudly nod my head and grin at that person. Human beings seem to like relating ourselves to the highly developed places and hide the fact that the towns we hail from are relatively unknown to others, yet the masks we wear to hide our humble origin filter the true colors of our human nature. Its almost as if there is not one United States or one China but a country fragmented by the arrogance because of the regions.

Although I told everyone that I came from Guangzhou, my native place, or the old home, is located in Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province. In my memory, the city was a typical Chinese second or third tier city, in which the tallest building had only five floors, dilapidated windows and grey cement painted walls; the widest road had only four lanes; and the largest park had only an old banyan tree. Every morning, I woke up by the singing of the mobile service people, who went door by door to sharpen residents’ knives, to do hair cuts for the residents, etc. Although there was no sense of prosperity or flourishing, or big concern about material gain, people lived happily: they knew each other in the communities, no matter whether they were the merchants, officers, or the workers who sold dumplings and fritters-and-soymilk, pork, and vegetables at the sides of roads on trolleys. In the morning, I always went down to the street with my grandfather and bought breakfast for my family. I remember the smile of the mid-aged lady who sold us meat dumplings. When she saw us walking towards her, she always smiled at my grandfather with her eyes narrowed and said, “Master Zhong, nice to see you again! How were the dumplings yesterday? Good?” Then she would look down at me: “No way! Is this your grandson? No wonder people always say Zhong’s family always owns good fortune!” And then my grand father would smile back to her, and order some dozens of my favorite meat dumplings. When we left, the lady would

always add, “Wish you good fortune and good luck, Master Zhong!” According to my grandmother, because my grand father was the best truck driver and technician in the city before he retired and he likes to help people in doing anything, the older generation in our community gave my grand father the title of “Master Zhong.” In Ganzhou, when people met, they could not help greeting each other, praising each other and talking about everything around us. When people gathered around, we felt like we were a huge family, in which everybody was generous and willing to help each other out. Even as a child, I could sense the human touch around us. I love the city.

However, I moved to Guangzhou for my elementary school. Now, I still remember, even though twelve years have already passed, the shock that started from when I took my first step in the gigantic Guangzhou Railway Station. That was night with a full moon; the light reflected by the moon lit up the whole train station. I stood at the railway platform and tried my best to see the other side of the station, but I failed—the station looked like a giant maze made of marble material and glass. When the taxi we took entered the downtown, the new city surprised again: the dazzling neon lights lit up the entire urban area; the skyscrapers almost touched the sky; the viaducts connecting roads and roads intertwined together like staggered giant sacred dragons floating on the ground. However, while I appreciated the metropolis and dreamed about how awesome my life would be in the future, the supercilious individuals “settling” in the city left me negative impression. On the sidewalks, which were completely separated from the roadways, the city residents walked at “breakneck” speeds, striding to their destinations. When they quickly passed by each other on the streets, they inspected each other’s fancy outer appearances, comparing those to their own gorgeous and precious protections. I tried so hard to find the similar faces that I saw in Ganzhou—not that rigid, but more smiling and friendly. Unfortunately, their faces were stiff, like the masks of jokers and crowns that people wear in masquerades.

Later, I got into the elementary school. Just to clarify, in my former home of Jiangxi Province, people speak Hakka, another dialect in Chinese language other than Cantonese, Mandarin, etc. Therefore, the Mandarin required in schools is always accompanied with a

Hakka accent. When I went to the elementary school in Guangzhou, the origin of Cantonese, the students and teachers treated me differently, because I did not speak Cantonese or Mandarin with a Cantonese inflection, especially when I tried to get along with the kids. When I spent time with the “friends,” they always spoke Cantonese with each other, and reluctantly spoke a mixed language of half-Mandarin and half-Cantonese to me. I felt that they somehow alienated or even bullied me only because I came from a small city.

Imagine how much the kids bullied me if the teacher mistreated me too. In a Chinese Language class, the teacher asked the whole class to make up words by using the new characters we learned. Although the new characters were characters like “big,” “small,” “eat,” “walk,” and so on, the task was a little bit challenging for the first graders who had just joined the elementary school a few weeks ago. The teacher picked up a three-square-inch white card with a character written in regular script with red ink, and waited a few seconds: “Can each of you create a word?” Everyone remained silent in the classroom; no one raised a hand, except me. The teacher stared at me a few times, and continued finding other hands in the room. I waved my hand, acting like I was making sure that she saw me, but I knew she did not want to call on me (according to her explanation after class, she wanted to leave some opportunities for others). Left with no alternative, the teacher called my name: “Shuai, tell us your word.” I answered the question perfectly, in the most undiluted Mandarin among all the versions of Mandarin that my classmates spoke, and waited for the teacher’s compliment. However, the teacher did not give me any compliment, not even any comment on my answer. Instead, she gave me a scornful and despising look and said, “Oh I understand that’s so easy for you. You’re not native people right? You’re from the northern China? That is why you speak Mandarin so well! It doesn’t mean YOU did well on my question.” Many Cantonese people, had, and still have, a very stereotypical concept: they see everyone who comes from outside of the province, including people from Hainan Province located on the very South of China, as Northern. According to their stereotypical concept, the ones who come from the North are equivalent to the ones who speak perfect Mandarin.

Fortunately, no one can underestimate a first grader’s language ability. Within a semester,

by “soaking” in the Cantonese culture, I learned some basic Cantonese and mastered their dialect of speaking the broken, mixed Mandarin. At school, I spoke the broken, mixed Mandarin with friends, and the standard undiluted Mandarin with the teachers. At home, I spoke the Hakka dialect of Mandarin with my parents and grand parents. As I gradually altered my methods of speaking Mandarin, the kids and the Chinese language teacher successively changed their attitudes towards me. The kids started to speak Cantonese with me, and stopped saying bad things about me in Cantonese (although I did not know how things went behind my back), and the teacher started to encourage me in schoolwork. Speaking the Cantonese-Mandarin was not one of my traits, but one of my disguises, the mask I wore to protect myself in another region.

After the twelve-year “baptism” of Cantonese language, the mask I wore has already integrated with my face: the Cantonese accent has become my accent, and I cannot switch it back to the original Hakka one. This situation also happened to Zadie Smith, who lost her voice and shifted her accent, from working class London district of Willesden to Cambridge. In her essay, *Speaking in Tongues*, Zadie Smith expressed the same idea of losing one’s voice: “This voice I picked up along the way is no longer an exotic garment I put on like a college gown when ever I choose—not it is my only voice, whether I want it or not” (2). She “regret[s] it; [She thinks she] should have kept both voices alive in [her] mouth” because she believes that “they were both a part of [her]” (2). Smith sees the voice she speaks since college as the clothes she wears, which might make her brilliant and shiny, and part of the educated crowd, but the mask I wore in elementary school in order to find acceptance among Cantonese speakers made me fake. I regret it too, but the reason is a little bit different from Smith’s. I want to keep the Hakka style of Mandarin exclusively, because that is the way for me to stay real. I love the Ganzhou City, I love the people in that city, and I love the sense of human touch in the city and the language, if I had preserved it, could evoke my true home.

Work Cited

Smith, Zadie, “Speaking in Tongues.” *The New York Review of Books*. February 26, 2009.

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