

Jiatang

by Xiaomeng Yan

Since coming to college, I've realized that I have to add the place I come from whenever I introduce myself to a new group of people. My hometown is such a minor city that I would usually omit it and only give the name of my province. When the word "Shandong" comes out of my mouth, something noticeable always happens in the room. Most of the time, some other students smile at me to show that they also identify as Shangdong *ren* (people). A few people raise their heads, look at me thoughtfully. But sometimes the reaction can be quite sharp. Once a girl from Shanghai cried out, "You are from Shangdong? I've heard that women there cannot eat with men at the same table. Is that true?" In that moment, I felt surprised, confused, awkward, and tried to explain to her how old that tradition is, and that nobody obeys it now except for few really backward villages in the countryside. I started clumsily putting my words together, but she had already turned her head to another curious classmate to tell her about the prevalence of sexism in this northern province, Shangdong.

It is actually no wonder that stereotypes and negative attitudes towards Shandong as a province prevail. The latest trending item about it on social media is a news report about a huge ritual that took place in Shangdong during Spring Festival in which thousands of people kowtowed to a statue of Confucius. Comments under the article are mostly taunts and disparagements towards poor Shandong people who still stick to the traditional and conservative Confucian values because Shandong is the hometown of Confucius and therefore the home of Confucianism. When my friends, who are almost all Suzhounese, told

me about this piece of news, I said yes, back in my hometown, we do kowtow in the Spring Festival—not to Confucius, but to *jiatang*.

How to describe what *jiatang* is? It's like a Chinese painting that can be rolled up like a scroll. It's rectangular, about three meters long and two meters wide, with a blue margin. Part of it is a painting of a family celebrating Spring Festival in their Chinese ancient-style villa. It's a big family, because Chinese culture sees a big family and populous household as a blessing. The elderly grandparents sit in the middle of the villa, with friendly smiles on their faces. Their grandchildren play around, chasing each other and setting off firecrackers. Adults are cooking, making festival preparations, giving each other New Year's greetings. The scene is harmonious and festive; it's a classic Chinese Spring festival painting. But what makes it different from those traditional paintings is that there are grids in the upper part of *jiatang*, in which names are written vertically. These are the names of people who have passed away in the family. Horizontal lines indicate the generations. The timeline proceeds from top to bottom. There are two blocks of names arranged horizontally. On the right are the names of men, and on the left the names of women form a symmetrical pattern, each corresponding to their spouse. I used to stand on tiptoe to read these names, which are simple and traditional Chinese names. But I sensed stories behind them that I could not decode.

Jiatang is in my grandparents' house, where I spend all of my Spring Festivals. There is a small altar placed in front of *jiatang*, with foods and fruits served on plates. When *jiatang* is put up and hung on the wall, we renew the offerings with the best of our dishes before every meal. There are two candlesticks that tower above the food, which will burn all night on New Year's Eve. The orange flame dancing on the top of bright red candle is always

fascinating. I tried to touch that lively light at one night alone in front of *jiatang*, but it bit me so hard that I pulled back my hand immediately and looked around to make sure no one saw a college student had just burnt her finger on a candle flame.

The day before New Year's Eve my grandpa always pulled out the cardboard box under his bed in which *jiatang* is stored like a scroll. Then my father and uncles climbed up onto the table to hang it up on the southern wall of living room, while I ran around with my cousins, handing over ropes, nails, and the hammer. Most of the time we were more of a hindrance than a help, but it was always a lot of fun for us. This was not yet the best part, although the atmosphere was already filled with excitement for the upcoming festival. On the first day of Spring Festival, I always woke up early (which is very rare for me) and jumped out of bed immediately to ask my mum to give me my new clothes. Once dressed up, I rushed to the living room so quickly that it was like someone was chasing me. Grandpa had already placed a big pile of thatch in front of *jiatang* to protect our knees when we kneel down on the ground. I knelt down on the soft thatch, put my hands together, and kowtowed three times, making a secret wish every time I bowed my head. After this ritual I jumped up from the thatch, patted straws off my new clothes, and ran to my grandparents for red packet money. This is my childhood memory of *jiatang* and Spring Festival. It was a time of pure happiness and joy, which I always recall when hearing the sound of firecrackers.

My grandma calls *jiatang* "*laoyeye*," old grandpa. She's very serious about the ritual. Even in that year when she was hospitalized for breaking her leg, she insisted on coming back home to take charge of the rituals and chores. On those nights during Spring Festival, I sometimes saw her stand quietly in front of *Jiatang*, supporting herself on her crutch. Her

gaze fixed on the scroll for a long time, oblivious to my presence. Grandma has been kind and friendly to me, but she's a bit grumpy to my grandpa, who is already slightly deaf. She has to yell when she orders him to change the offerings and light new incense on the altar. Every time people talk to him, he just smiles apologetically and looks away, waving his hand and mumbling, "I can't hear. My ears are not working anymore." He has become more and more deaf every time I return home. What hasn't change is that he always comes up to me and gives me fruits, and snacks, the things he saved for me while I'm not at home. I always reply, "Thank you, Grandpa!" in a very loud voice, but I never know if he really catches my words. He nods and smiles, then walks away.

I dreamt about going to my grandparents' house for Spring Festival for the whole year when I was a kid. As I grew up, I realized that things had changed, and so had Spring Festival. My cousins and I all have all gotten very busy with our schoolwork. We visit our grandparents less, see each other less. When we gather for Spring Festival the atmosphere is more embarrassing than heart-warming. The family reunion has become the reunion of smartphones. We all smile at the screens in front of us but wear cold faces when looking at each other. It's silence that fills the gaps of our conversations; it's only the sound of the firecrackers that goes all night nonstop.

Sometimes I feel that it's not that things have changed, it's just that I've started to see things that had never occurred to me before. All my cousins grew up in the village while I was born and raised in city. The family discord has always been there, but I used to ignore it and look away. I started to pick up on these hidden meanings when Grandma sighed at me and said, "If only you were a boy." I understand now why that's important: my father is my

grandma's only son, and I'm my father's only child, who happens to be a girl. I've come to wonder why my father has four elder sisters; why I always spend Spring Festival with my grandparents and relatives from my father's side, never my mother's; why my mother avoids coming to my grandparents' house days before Spring Festival; why she avoids having conversations with my grandma. I looked at *jiatang* once again and saw those women only have their family names on it, because they don't even have a given name. Their names are on *jiatang* of *my* family, not on theirs. Because once they become these men's wives they are no longer considered part of their own families. They've become wives of their husbands, mothers of their children, and are no longer daughters of their parents or individuals of their own. Their names on *jiatang* say too little, and this is all I can read.

Last year, because of Covid I didn't go to my grandparents' for Spring Festival. It was the first time I spent Spring Festival at home with my parents. This year, the pandemic is largely controlled in China, and I arrived at the village on the very last day before Spring Festival. When I walked into the living room, *jiatang* was already there, in the same color with the same names on it. The incense was burning quietly along with offerings set on the small altar. For all those years we've all changed so much, but it's like it stays the same. It's a vestige of the past that we keep although we don't understand its implications and we have already decided to abandon part of its meaning. The thatch in front of *jiatang* had been changed for a small rug. My grandpa was standing there arranging the offerings. He saw me and said, "No need to do that. No need." I nodded at him. I looked at *jiatang* for some time, then kneeled on the rug and kowtowed three times. *Why can't I help doing this?* I asked myself. Is it a superstition that I cannot give up? Is it some traditional thinking that I've never

gotten rid of? Or is it just a habit that I feel comfortable repeating? I don't know the answer. In that moment, I just wanted to hold on to what was disappearing, what has disappeared. I wanted to wish for good health and long life for my grandparents, wish for my family to be reunited again at this time next year. And I somehow believed that I could do everything out of my own choices, which included bowing my head down in front of *jiatang*, and at the same time believed that the fate of those women only sticks to the past. For all these reasons, I knelt down and kowtowed three times, with my hands together, eyes closed, to *jiatang*, on which my ancestors have their names inscribed.