

## ***Dut Zie***

*Jian Liang*

**I**t is late night right now. The drizzle continues to fall. The world looks asleep except for us. The moon takes a nap and hides inside the heavy clouds. Dogs forget their duties but stay in the warm, dry houses. We walk on the wet road. The puddles seep into our shoes. But we do not care about it, because the rain has already soaked us. The only light in this environment is the lights from our phones. We will return home, depending on this shining light. After six hours of walking, our bodies are tired, but our spirits are still excited about our experience. We've just participated in a fantastic party, the Torch Festival.

I have been here for five months as a volunteer Mandarin teacher to fourth year students at primary school. From winter to summer and now it is July in the mountains. This is one of the poorest areas in China, the LiangShan Prefecture, and this is a prefecture surrounded by mountains. I came from Shan Dong province, flying more than three hours to Xi Chang city. Then I took the car about five hours to the village. At first, I was excited because I had never seen so many mountains. But after, the mountains became boring for me because they were the only scenery around. When I stood atop a peak and looked around, I could only see mountains. The layers and layers of mountains prevented me from seeing the outside and feeling hope.

Some of the mountains are tall, some mountains are short. Each one has its own character. These mountains isolate communication with the outside world and make it hard to build roads. People who live here keep a primitive lifestyle like in the last century. Every year, many youths of the Yi people must leave their homeland to go outside to make money. They can earn 6000 Chinese Yuan in one month in Canton's factories, but here, one family can only earn 1000 Chinese Yuan in one year by farming the land.

While the beginning was uncomfortable, then comfortable, I am now familiar with this place. There is no grocery store near the village, so we walk forty minutes one way to the town to buy food every weekend. I didn't cook very much before coming here, because I could go to the restaurant if I wanted. But now, everyone cooks for each other, following a schedule. There are no restaurants. I have changed my old routine and find I am suited to this new lifestyle.

From the beginning, my students looked at me with strange eyes. After class, they didn't want to talk to me. But now, we are becoming friends. After class, they like to stay around and listen to my stories. Sometimes, they also teach me some of their Yi language.

On the day of the Torch Festival, I notice the students are having a hard time sitting on their chairs during class time. Though I know the reason, I choose to ask. I like that they share their lives with me.

"Can we leave early today Mr. Liang?" one asks.

"Yes, today is Torch Festival. My family killed a whole pig today to celebrate," another student says.

As students talk over each other, the whole classroom becomes noisy. I laugh as the students talk to me about the Torch Festival.

"Mr. Liang, will you come to the Torch Festival?" one student asks shyly.

"Of course, other teachers and I will come and celebrate with all of you tonight," I tell them. "But now, let's focus on our textbook."

The classroom is filled with sighs.

In the afternoon, the sky is drizzling. The drizzle does not stop the children. After school, they rush out of the classroom with impatience. The playground is filled with laughter. Some students start to play basketball while others play tennis. Our students come from several different villages in the area. The students living in other

villages begin to leave, but students from XiaDaLuo village stay and wait for us. We are going to XiaDaLuo to celebrate today.

The local villages have a different time to celebrate the Torch Festival. ErMaLuoXi village usually celebrates a week later. I think the mountains cause the difference. There were no roads between the mountains in the past and it was hard to communicate between villages.

After preparing, the teachers and I are ready to go. Students stop playing and follow us. They form small groups and speak in whispers to their best friends. Some students stay with the teachers. The formation is not unchanging, but where students are in the formation always changes. Some students are like the birds that fly here and there. Some students keep playing basketball even though the road does not have enough space for a basketball hoop. They chase the basketball down the road. Luckily, there are no cars. This is the best time and place for the children to enjoy their free time. When they come back home, these primary school students have to take care of their little brothers and sisters and do housework.

I heard from a shop's owner that this road was built in 2018. It is a solid cement road inserted into this natural world. I can't imagine how these students went to school by the muddy path in the past. The children are familiar with climbing because they walk between these mountains every day. I think these children do not need to worry about the tough environment and mud path.

The scent of summer has surfaced. Everything is green and lush. Sometimes, I can see some pink and red colors; these are cherry trees. Close to the road, some farmlands are located here. The corn planted in the spring has grown very tall.

I don't know when the rain stopped. The sky has become clear once again. After almost 45 minutes, we arrive at XiaDaLuo village. It is a little darker, but there is day light still. I think we must have arrived at our destination, but my student tells me the celebration is in a different place. I feel anxious because I don't want to walk at night. But when I see the expectation in my students' eyes, I can't do anything but go with them.

We eat dinner in a student's home. This is Shi Niang's house. Shi Niang is a tall, fifteen-year-old girl in my class. In Yi's tradition, the kitchen is located inside the main house. There is a small pit for a fire. On top of the fire, a large iron pot cooks the large

pieces of pork. In Yi's tradition, the larger the piece of meat the host gives to the guest, the more it shows the host's generosity and hospitality.

We sit surrounding the fire. The warmth drives the cold and exhaustion away from my body. My student's family cheers with us. Though I cannot understand their language, I can still feel the emotion they convey to me. They are relaxed and happy. This is the first time I have shared a meal at the home of one of my students.

My student becomes my teacher. She shows me how to bake the potatoes. The tips are simple. First, throw the potato into the fire. Second, get the potato out with tongs. Everything is natural here. When my student gives me the potato, I don't know how to eat it. The whole exterior skin becomes carbon-like ash. But the fragrance of potato emanates from it. Shi Niang shows me how to scrape the ash off using a beer cover. It's a novel experience for me. The potato in my hands is still hot and stains my skin black. I scrape the peel carefully. Gradually, the burnt yellow flesh is exposed. Biting into it, the pure flavor of potato reverberates in my mouth, a taste that can hit the heart. I don't need any seasoning. The fire is the best seasoning.

In my hometown, in the ShanDong province, people's staple is usually steamed buns and Jian Bing, a kind of thin pastry. But these foods are processed several times. The baked potato gives me a special feeling which I have never tasted before. It is a natural, raw flavor, without any modern flavor added. A thousand years ago, when our ancestors discovered the fire, they threw raw potatoes into the fire and savored the same taste. Watching the flames dance and hearing the sounds others make, my heart is peaceful and restful.

After dinner, the sky is dark. Children start to make their own torches. The most common things they use are beer boxes. These boxes are made of thick paper, so they are easy to light. The children fold these thick paper shells into the shape of a torch. The torches are unique.

One student uses a shoe to make the torch. The child ties the broken shoe to a tree branch. He must have found the shoe in the garbage pile. Some students use rubber to make the torches. They pierce the rubber with wooden sticks. I guess the source of the rubber is the tires of a car. Some children gather in front of the fire and start lighting their torches. Others fling their torches around to increase contact with the air to make their torches look brighter. As they throw the torches, there are flashes of light in the air. Then they slowly fall, like an artificial meteor.

"Mr. Liang, this is yours." My student gives me a paper torch.

"Thank you. I can't take it," I am so surprised and cheerful, but I think the student only has one torch. If I take it, he will be left without.

"I have another one. Here." He shows me another torch.

I am touched. "Thank you, little ErYi," I say, taking the torch from him.

We light the torch together. Watching the fire, I feel strange. I can't remember the last time I played with fire. When I was nine?

I liked to play with fire when I was a child. Fire is mysterious and powerful to me. I had an intense curiosity about everything. I liked to build with clay with my friends. I also liked to squat on the ground and watch ants the whole afternoon. But my favorite was to make a fire in the small hole and then quietly watch the fire jump. When I remember this, I can still feel the heat. My family thought it was too dangerous to play with fire. My mother told me a lie that all mothers spoke to their children. She told me "the child who likes to play with fire wets the bed at night." I was afraid of this and stopped playing with fire. Eventually, I could not resist the charm of the flame and I started to make fires again.

I raise the torch in my hand. I am happy like a child after getting a toy. It is a familiar strangeness that I have not wanted to indulge in a long time.

The air is filled with the smell of smoke, along with some chemical smell. The chemical smell is from burned shoes and tires. Walking on the dirt path, we need to go over the mountain to compete with another village. There is no cement road between these two villages. The children hold the torches like a long red dragon and dance through the mountain. I am a little worried about if the fire catches the mountain. But I don't need to worry about it for long. The sky rains again. Fortunately, the rain is light. The wet ground becomes muddier. Now we must walk carefully. The light from the torches go out, so we have to use our phones to light the road. We walk through the woods. A leaf touches my forehead with some rain. The dew drops cross my cheeks. I do not wipe the dew because I like the feeling.

"How long do we need to walk?" I gasp.

"Soon, soon. We will arrive soon," a student tells me.

I don't know how long I have been walking, but I am a little regretful that I've come. I can't feel my legs anymore. But at least the rain stops again. After rounding a bend, I see a bright light in front of me. It is light from a fire.

“Here, Mr. Liang. We’ve arrived,” the student says excitedly.

I am excited too. Finally, I can take some rest. As we get closer, we reach a flat meadow between two mountains. The source of the brightness is a large fire. I don’t know where they found the dry firewood. Some kids relight their torches. The lights of fire fill the air again. The people of the two villages speak eagerly and celebrate the festival. With everyone arriving, we make a big circle. Now it is time for the wrestling match.

Wrestling is a local tradition. Adults and children in primary school already know how to wrestle. After class, many kids will get together and start wrestling two by two. Wrestling is not a just tradition of the Yi people— it is also a myth.

In ancient times, the god Enti Guzi did not want the Yi people to have a good life. He sent ten Hercules to destroy the Yi people’s crops. The Yi people, not to be outdone, sent a young man named Ati Laba to wrestle. The young man won the wrestling matches with ten Hercules. The god became angrier. The god scattered the incense, which became countless pests. When the Yi people saw this, they lit the torches and burned up all vermin. This is the origin of the Torch Festival.

The atmosphere becomes more and more heated. The wrestling will be done by adults first. Children begin to wrestle each other. When the winner appears, people cheer for him. A student from my class doesn’t talk much, but here on this field, he beat several children in succession. He wins the cheers and applause from everyone. I am surprised by his difference between class and the wrestling match. Everyone has something they are good at. As a teacher, it is important to explore students’ potential and encourage them to build on their own strengths. I should understand them more outside of class.

After a teacher joins the wrestling match, I also want to try. I stand up and intend to experience a wrestling match that I have never experienced before. My students cheer for me.

“Mr. Liang! Mr. Liang!” They shout together. I am inspired by their cheer.

A large man steps forward. We put our hands around each other’s waists in a semi-crouching position. As the match starts, I power up, trying to hold him and trip him. But he is strong. I use all my strength but can’t move him even a step. Then his hands tighten and his feet push. I can’t resist but fall to the ground. But I don’t feel the force of the earth in the end. The man holds me at the last second. We hug together.

"Thank you," I say

"My pleasure," he replies in Mandarin.

It is close to ten o'clock and the festival is nearly over.

We return along the same route, and it is hard. The road back is uphill, and we must focus more on the slippery path. I nearly fall several times. My students show their experience and ability now. They climb the mountains like they walk across the flat ground. They even run on the slippery path.

"Take care," I say.

"Don't worry, Mr. Liang," they laugh.

At last, we return to the village. We send the students home and return to the school.

This Torch Festival is not only a new experience but also a chance to discover my students' "shining" attributes. What should I do as a teacher?

I am reminded of a poem.

"Spring silkworms never exhaust their thread until death. Candles' tears don't dry up before they become ashes."

The hours I spent with my students, attending the festival and learning from them, inspire me to become a torch for them, to light their lives like the ancestor of Yi. Thousands of teachers come to this land and become torches to lead children over these endless mountains. We bring knowledge, but we also bring hope.