

Orange Dream

Orange trees have roots in the earth

We migrants have roots in our souls

When the autumn wind blows across the Three Gorges, the hills along the Yangtze River light up with ripening oranges. They have been hiding behind leaves like shy girls all summer, but now they burst out shamelessly, filling the valley with their sharp citrus fragrance and flaming color.

And the peasants get busy. First, they repair the road from the orchards to the villages, from the villages to the highway and the river. All the roads are narrow dirt roads. All zigzag along the river cliffs. They get muddy after a few rains, and are often washed away by landslides. But no matter, it's the only way to carry the golden harvest off the mountain slopes in bamboo baskets, out of the villages and Sichuan Basin in boats, ships, trucks, planes.

Next they clear the yards to make baskets. Oranges are fragile, easy to bruise and get moldy. Bamboo baskets are the best and cheapest containers. Since each family has about ten to twenty thousand jin of harvest, they'll need hundreds of baskets. The villagers buy the raw materials, and hire bamboo smiths to make the baskets. Bamboo smiths come as a family, husband and wife, children, cousins. They work from six o'clock in the morning till midnight, taking breaks only when they eat. For each basket, they make two yuan, and a good smith can make about thirty-five baskets a day. And the peasants pick oranges, pack them in baskets, carry them down the steep hills, sell them to buyers from Chongqing, Chendu, Shanghai, Beijing... Orange price fluctuates according to the market demand, traffic, weather, and the whims of the wholesalers. There are times when they can't sell at all. When late fall comes rolling with rain, the fruit rots in the mud. Even pigs won't touch it.

This has been the way of life for the peasants along the river for two millennium.

The oranges from the Three Gorges have been known since the time of the Confucius (551-479 BC), Warring States (475-221 BC), Qin (221-207), Han (206 BC-220 AD), Tang (618-907) dynasties, during which orange production was just as important as the salt industry, if not more. There were salt officials as well as orange officials managing the trade and farming. At 15, Du Fu (712-770) got his first government job to take care of 40 mu of orange groves and 100 mu of grain fields in Fengjie, where he wrote many of his great poems and made the place known as Poetry City.

The orange harvest was used as a symbol for the rise and fall of China. When an emperor chose the right way to run the country, there would be a good harvest and oranges would ripen with the right taste, color and texture. That was because the Three Gorges orange was the best of

all fruit, and would serve only the true heavenly son. If the throne was usurped, oranges would turn sour, or refuse to grow at all. Peasants regard oranges as lucky symbols because of its shape, color and sound. Ju (orange) is close to the sound of good luck—ji. A peasant bride would hide an orange cake, rock sugar and a mirror in her bra on her wedding day, hoping they would give her a good, sweet and bright life.

Dried orange skin is called chen pi. It cures gastric pain, clears phlegm, and revives the faint of heart. Oranges soaked in 65 degree liquor are served with hot fondues. It's fire upon fire, burning the toxin out of the body. And the sweetest oranges grow on ancient graves.

Beginning from the Three Gorges and down the Yangtze River, oranges form China's citrus belt—Chongqing, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi, Zhejiang. Away from the belt, they change flavor, color and taste. The farther away from the river, the worse they fare.

Most migrants no longer grow oranges. Those who moved 100 meters above the hills have lost the land and climate suitable for the citrus bush. Those who crossed the river sit in high-rise apartments with a big mortgage and little hope for a job. Those who moved to Shanghai, Fujian, Guangdong, and Shandong are struggling with different dialects and cultures, with dire opportunities for jobs or schools. They've been farmers for many generations, and growing oranges and fishing are the only skills they have. Many old and middle-aged migrants can't stand the homesickness. They steal back to their old homes and live with their relatives or friends illegally. Many men have joined bangbangjun—the army of porters on streets, and girls become “goddesses” in hair salons, hotels, dance halls.

The orange—soul of the Three Gorges. It haunts the dream of every migrant. Even those who have made it in their new places aren't exempt. Almost every migrant said they missed the orange fragrance, its color and taste, missed climbing the steep hills along the river to the orchards, missed the backbreaking season of the golden harvest.

They sing “Orange Tree” to the tune of the popular song “Olive Tree.”

Don't ask me where I came from

My old home is far far away

Don't ask why I keep roaming

Roaming in this strange land

For the birds wheeling in the sky

For the gibbons calling from the riverbanks

For the fish that swim upstream to spawn

I'm roaming, roaming

For the orange tree in my heart

For the orange soul in my dream