

Bathing in Clean Water

By Chi Zijian

In Tianzhao's view, bathing before the New Year was not so different from shaving bristles off a dead pig. When thick, hard bristles were shaved, a pig would reveal its white, tender skin. Similarly, when a person washed dirt off his or her body, the skin would also look fair and tender. The difference was that the pig would be sliced into pieces and become delicious food for human beings.

People of the Lizheng Township set the 27th day of the 12th month of the lunar calendar as a date of "water discharging." The so-called "water discharging" meant taking a bath. In the Zheng family, Tianzhao was responsible for boiling water and throwing it away after use on that day. When he was as young as eight, he began this duty. Already, it had been five years since his appointment.

People in that township took only one bath in a whole year, which occurred on the 27th day of the 12th month. Although women and girls who were fond of cleanliness washed themselves occasionally, that practice was nothing compared with a real bath. In summer, for instance, a woman would wash her feet and legs in a pond on her way home from farming in the fields. A girl would wash her neck and armpits after washing her hair. But the napes and bellies of those bare-backed boys in the height of summer were black, as though covered with bats.

Tianzhao's room served temporarily as a "bathroom" during that time. The fire-heated wall of his room was very warm, the curtain long since having been drawn. The order in which they took baths in his family was chronological -- from the elderly to the young: Grandma first, then his parents and, finally, the children.

Before Grandpa died, he had been the first. He had been very quick. Fifteen minutes would do. And his bath water was not dirty at all. To save water, Tianzhao would quickly dip into that water. When someone took a bath, the door would be tightly shut and the door curtain would be lowered. When Tianzhao was bathing, his mother would ask, while knocking at the door, "Sonny, shall I help clean your back?"

"No need," Tianzhao would reply, curling up in the bathtub like a fish.

"You won't be able to wash yourself clean on your own," Mother would say.

"Why not?" the child would argue. He would splash with his fingers stirring the water, as though to tell his mother that he was working very hard at cleaning himself.

"Don't be shy!" Mother would say, smiling. "You're born of me. Are you afraid of being seen by your own mother?"

Tianzhao would close his legs subconsciously in the tub. Red-faced, he would shout, "What are you talking about? I don't need your help. Don't you hear me!?"

Tianzhao had never had a tub of really clean water for a bath. He had to boil water at the oven, throw away the dirty bath water, bucket by bucket, for each family member. So he had to adjust his time to take a quick bath with another's bath water. It was not agreeable at all. To him, it was only a ritual. No matter how clean the bath water was after being used by someone else, he found it murky. So he would sit in the bathtub for some ten minutes, scrubbing off dirt here and there, until he finished the whole business. He hated using his room as a "bathroom," which made the air damp, covering the bulb with dewy beads. At night as he slept, he felt as though he were in a pigsty. So, shortly before the New Year, he stated to Mother, "We should use Tianyun's room as the 'bathroom' this year."

Upon hearing this, Tianyun, who was making a paper flower, craned her neck and said angrily, "Why in my room?"

"Why should mine be used as a 'bathroom' every year?" Tianzhao retorted in the same manner.

"You are a boy. A girl's room should not be dirtied," she said indignantly. "Besides, you're a few years older than me. You are my elder brother and you should give way!"

Tianzhao stopped arguing. However, he murmured, "I hate the New Year! What's so good about the New Year?"

This made everyone laugh. Since Grandpa had left this world, Grandma rarely smiled. Sometimes, when everyone was doubled up with laughter, she showed no expression, so people assumed that she was hard of hearing. Presently, she broke into laughter, too, on hearing Tianzhao's complaint. As she was laughing, some phlegm blocked her windpipe. She coughed so violently that she spat out her false teeth.

It was true that Tianzhao did not like the New Year. In the first place, he was not keen on all those rituals, such as burning imitation paper money for the dead, kowtowing to each other and visiting one another to offer blessings. At the junction, the pristine snow on the ground had become filthy because of burning imitation paper money. They looked like scattered dog droppings. A gloom seemed to dominate the New Year. Second, he found the preparations for the New Year tedious. It simply exhausted one, adding aches

and pains all over, and brought about grievances. To remove sewn covers from quilts, to whitewash walls, to make paper lanterns, to tailor new clothes, to steam kneaded dough for the New Year cakes, and so on. Everybody, old and young, was involved. Not only did the house need a thorough cleaning, but people, too, had to clean themselves. The 27th day of the 12th month of the lunar calendar was a day for bathing. In the bath, all family members had to scrub off all the dirt from their bodies that had accumulated for a whole year. As a result, everyone appeared to suffer from dropsy. This invariably reminded him of a butcher scraping bristles off a dead pig with an iron brush. He was sick of it. Third, he did not like to see all the people in their new clothes. The new clothes made them look stiff and ridiculous. If they stood in a line, Tianzhao thought, they would look like rigidly packed bolts of cloth on fabric store shelves. What he could not tolerate was that the New Year arrived at midnight, when he was at his most sleepy and tired state. He had no appetite, yet he had to boost himself up and eat the New Year dumplings. He was bored to death by all of this. He had often imagined that if he had had all the power, the first thing he would do was change the date of the New Year.

Grandma was the first to finish her bath. Helped by Tianzhao's mother, she tottered out of the "bathroom." He spotted the wet, gray hair dangling over her shoulders; the bags under her eyes made her high cheekbones look as though they were ready to drop any minute. The dark age spots on her face appeared darker because of the warm steam, reminiscent of dark clouds before a thunderstorm. Tianzhao found his grandma more obese and clumsy, just like a rotten mushroom. He was not sure if all people would be like her when they became old. Grandma, panting, passed through the kitchen and returned to her own room. On seeing Tianzhao, she said, "The water you've boiled was very hot. I've had a good bath. My fatigue of the whole year is all gone. You may have a bath using the bath water I've left."

"Grandma has not left this house even once in a whole year," said Mother, "she was not dirty at all. The water is quite clean indeed."

Tianzhao said nothing. He threw more firewood into the oven. Then he lifted a bucket and entered his own room. The sultry and steamy air lingered like a mangy dog running about in the room. The bulb was surely covered with roe-like beads of water. With an effort, he lifted the large bathtub and poured its water into the bucket. Wiping perspiration off his forehead, he lifted the bucket and went out. As he passed the kitchen, he met Grandma, who had not returned to her own room yet. She gaped at seeing Tianzhao carrying a bucketful of her bath water, her eyes filled with disappointment.

"So you think the water I've used is..." she faltered.

Tianzhao was silent. He pulled the door open and went outside. It was dark and cold. With unsteady steps, he carried the water to a drainage ditch outside the entrance gate. In winter, a large, dirty ice mound used to form by the ditch. Many boys were fond of "whipping" tops in the ditch beside the ice mound. They whipped tops hard. Some were so fascinated that they ignored their runny noses. During the day, they enjoyed this activity, and they could not resist playing in the moonlight, too. So they came out of their houses, wearing heavy, cotton-padded coats, and whipped tops. At night in deep winter, one could hear the clear sound of "thud, thud..."

Tianzhao spotted a short figure standing on the snowy ground near the ice mound. The figure was bent over a little, as if searching for something, a flickering cigarette held between fingers.

"Tianzhao," the figure spoke, standing straight, "out to throw away bath water?"

From the voice, Tianzhao recognized one of his classmates, Xiao Dawei, who lived in the next alley. He made an effort to lift the bucket onto the ice mound. "What are you doing here?"

"I whipped a top at dusk and I hit it so hard that I lost sight of it. I just can't find it."

"How can you find it without a flashlight?" As he was asking, he poured the dirty bath water onto the ice mound.

"The bath water smells awful," Dawei said loudly. "Your grandma must have used the water."

"So what?" said Tianzhao. "I bet the water used by your grandpa smells even worse."

Dawei's grandpa was bedridden, paralyzed. He needed someone to look after him, even when he relieved himself. Dawei's mother had waited on him from the time when all her hair had been black until it had all turned gray. She complained that she would not want to continue being a filial daughter-in-law and threatened to leave for good. For that remark, her husband had used Dawei's whip, which was normally used for whipping a top, to lacerate her body all over. That became a township scandal.

"Whose dirty bath water did you use for a bath this year?" asked Dawei, obviously annoyed. "I'm always the first to take the bath every year and I always have a whole tub of clean water for myself." He challenged Tianzhao.

"I have a tub of clean water of my own, too," protested Tianzhao righteously.

"You're boasting!" said Dawei. "You're the one who boils all the water for the family's bath every year. And you always use dirty water to bathe yourself. Is there anyone who doesn't know this?"

"I'll tell your father you're smoking!" Tianzhao did not know how to counterattack.

"I only use the light from the cigarette to find my top. I'm not doing anything bad. Go tell him. Let's see if it works."

The irritated boy held the bucket and went home. After a long distance, he turned and shouted towards Dawei, "I will have clean water for a bath this year!"

He looked up and found that the galaxy seemed brighter and was cascading clear water onto him, washing away all his frustration.

Grandma's weeping came from the house. It sounded remote and hollow, reminding one of dripping water in a deep cave.

Tianzhao pulled the vat lid open and ladled hot water into the large bathtub. Father stepped over. "What have you done? You've made Grandma sad."

Instead of answering, Tianzhao poured cold water into the bathtub. Then he tested it with his hand to see if it was all right. Slightly cold, but just right for his father, Tianzhao thought, because he did not like hot water for a bath. If it had been for Tianyun or Mother, he would have had to add more hot water.

"Whose turn next?" Tianzhao asked.

"I'll be next," replied Father. "Your mother has to keep your grandma company for a while."

Tianyun dashed out of her room suddenly, wearing only a blue floral vest, revealing her plump arms. Her hair was loose and her eyes were shining. "Let me take a bath first!"

"I'll be very brief," said Father.

"I've already freed my pigtailed." With that, she shook her head left and right, her hair billowing up and down. Then she remarked to Father matter-of-factly, "From now on, I must wash before you. What if I use the bathtub you've just used and get pregnant? Who would be responsible for the consequence?"

This made Father double up with laughter and spit out phlegm. Tianzhao laughed, too, throwing down the ladle. Tianyun pursed her little, full lips, her face glowing like the fire in the oven.

"Who on earth has told you that you'll get pregnant just because you use the bathtub Dad has used for a bath?" Father asked, chortling.

"I was just told. Don't press me for that."

Tianyun soon gave her instructions to Tianzhao, "I'll wash my hair first. Give me a basin of lukewarm water. I want that blue fragrant shampoo of Mother's, too!"

Tianyun's careless words chased away all of Tianzhao's gloominess. He was glad to serve his younger sister. When he was about to scoop water into the basin, Tianyun stamped her foot and cried, "Oh no! That basin is too dirty. Clean it up or I won't wash my hair."

"It's quite clean, isn't it?" said Father jokingly.

"Just have a good look at it! There's a ring of slime on the edge, just as obvious as the dark circles around Widow Snake's eyes. How can you say it's clean?" the girl argued, her face outlined with contempt.