

# Childhood Memories: Yuan Hsiao

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*Non-fiction writing by Zhengqing Li (incoming exchange student, BA English)*

Affection between family members originates from blood ties and close relationships, but sometimes it is not related to bloodlines.

My grandparents told me that Miss Liu came to my home soon after I was born and became a babysitter. She was born in Anhui, but her Mandarin was extremely good. At that time, she was slim and worked very well. Perhaps because we were her first employer, she always did everything to the best of her ability.

At that time I was a crazy man and always acted up in front of others. I often stuck stickers on her clothes when she was doing laundry and chased her, to braid her long hair. Sometimes I pulled her hair hard. She was in pain but seldom lost her temper. All she did was to solemnly tell me not to treat others like that.

One Lantern Festival, my grandma asked her to make yuan hsiao (a sticky, sweet rice-flour dumpling made for Chinese lantern festival, symbolizing family unity and happiness) for dinner. I happened to see her making those glutinous balls in the kitchen. Nowadays I can still remember her proficient skill: mixed the butter with sesame powder, sugar and wine together first, then heated the mixture for a few second and rolled it into small sesame balls; later on, she took half a cup of sticky rice flour and added water into it, stirred them with her hand until a dough took shape; after boiling the dough in hot water, she removed it to another bowl of sticky rice flour, added water and kneaded until the dough became bigger and smooth. Her next step was to divide the dough into small chunks about 10g each, kneaded each one into a small ball and made a hole in it like a snail. And in the end, she put the sesame ball into the hole and closed it up. Thanks to that moment, I'm capable of making sweet dumplings with various flavours nowadays. A few months ago, shortly after I first came to the UK to be an exchange

student, one day when I cooked yuan hsiao in the kitchen, my French roommates could not resist the aroma and were eager to taste them. I only remember that we had a very happy meal due to the appearance of yuan hsiao. Later, they sent me a bottle of champagne in return. We soon became soulmates.

However, what happened later that evening has lodged in my mind until this day. When yuan hsiao became ripe, Miss Liu left the pot to take bowls and ladles to pick them up. Right during that few seconds when the pot was left alone, I tried to throw an unfinished tangerine into a box next to the stove, because the kitchen was so hot that I did not want to step in. Unexpectedly, the tangerine fell into the pot, smashing two-thirds of the soft rice balls inside. Black sesame filling flowed out immediately and the soup turned black.

Later, when grandma saw the fragmented balls, she scolded Miss Liu severely and deducted money from her salary, but Miss Liu never revealed that it was my fault. For a long time after that day, she would cry secretly. My grandma was wise enough to know that Liu could not destroy them by herself. However, since Miss Liu did not tell the truth, I was not to blame. Since then I decided to treat her wholeheartedly well.

The last time I met Miss Liu was on my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. She gave me a gift-wrapped packet with 10,000 yuan inside. She said, “You helped me a lot and I’m unable to pay you back.” She is always like that—she owns not much, and gives a lot. I’m destined to be kind to her in the future.



*Drawing by BA  
English student,  
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