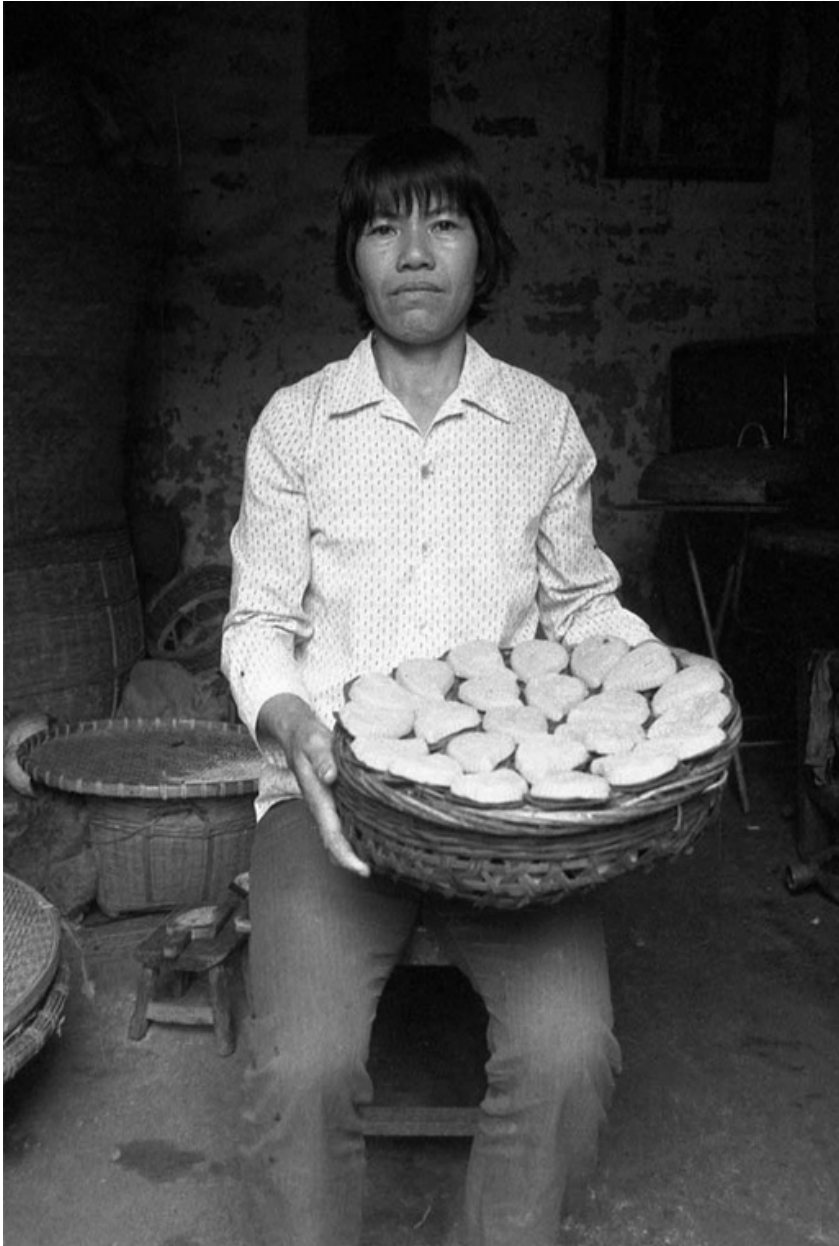


XVIII



Year of the Sheep

It's Chinese New Year (Spring Festival), 1991 - the year of the sheep. The New Year begins on February 14 and runs for 15 days. The date of Spring Festival is determined by the lunar calendar, so the date changes every year.

The steady beating of a drum sounds across the village fields. A man with a lion's head draped over his head dances away the bad spirits of the old year. The sporadic crackle of firecrackers drifts across the fields and through the village lanes.

At the village store men play mah jong, a Chinese gambling game in which players match marked tiles to score points.

A festive air pervades the village today. Children crowd into the tiny room near the village store to watch their fathers and older brothers play dominos; others slip into the cavernous village store to watch TV.

The villagers are dressed in their finest clothes today. Family visitors arrive from elsewhere. Children fly down the lanes and excitedly wave sparklers.

An old man walks down the village road dressed in a clean suit and Mao cap. Although his suit is old and mended, he still seems dressed for a special occasion. He smiles broadly for the camera as other families, also dressed in their best clothes, gather round him.

Some of the people walking the lanes today are city people who have come to Long Wan to visit their family.

In a house along the side of the road, an elderly woman makes special rice flour cakes, a New Year's tradition, while her granddaughter stands beside her, dressed in bright red clothes and a wide brimmed straw hat. A portrait of Mao Zedong stares down from the wall behind her.

A young girl stands in the rain at the edge of the rice fields, holding three cows by their tethers as they feed on brush along the side of the road.

The rain keeps falling but she pays no attention to it. She says she doesn't enjoy taking the animals out to feed but it's one of her duties. She's the second oldest in the family and has a lot of responsibilities.

It's Chinese New Year but she doesn't feel happy. She is 15 years old and recently dropped out of middle school. She wanted to stay in school but her family is poor and needed her to help out with the farm work. She has an older brother, two young sisters, and a younger brother.

She says her mother recently gave birth to another child and her parents were fined 1,000 yuan for violating the birth-control policy. She says the fine makes it more difficult for her family to make ends meet.

If she could, she says, she would leave this village right now. She would go to the city to look for work. She would accept any kind of work. Can you help me find work in the city? Can you help me?

She says her mother wants her to leave the village. If she could leave the village her life would be happier than it is now. She says she wants to have a happy life, with a good family, a rich family, a family that always has enough money.

A young woman carries freshly cooked rice cakes on a reed platter. The semi-transparent cakes - a special food prepared for Chinese New Year - are filled with coconut, peanut, and sugar.

The woman says she baked them for her younger sister who lives in a nearby village.

The woman lives in her husband's village near Zhanjiang and has returned home to spend the New Year with her parents.

She says she regularly returns to Long Wan to live with her family because her husband often leaves home to work in Zhanjiang.

If her husband is away, she doesn't like to stay with his family. It's better to live with her own family, she says. Her husband's parents try to control her too much but here in Long Wan, with her own family, she can do as she pleases.

Her own family always has enough food, clothing, and money, she says. She feels freer and happier when she is at home with her family.

She says her brother works on the side as a car mechanic and is able to earn extra money for the family.

She says she would rather not talk about why she doesn't have children.

Fong Xie Ying and her granddaughter sit by the fire roasting sweet potatoes on Chinese New Year morning. The kitchen is dark, lit only by the faint morning light streaming through the door. The villagers prepare food in their kitchens but they usually don't sit and eat in them.

Dressed in a black cap and a scarf, Fong Xie Ying smiles often as she talks. She says she came to Long Wan more than 40 years ago at a time when the village was very poor. She says life in the village today is better than it was back then, but not much better.

She says her son and daughter have better lives than she had because they earn extra money working outside the village now. She says her son recently built a new house with his earnings.

If people have the opportunity to go outside to try their hand at business they are always much happier, she says. They don't feel so miserable. The young people now are happier than before because at least they have the possibility of earning extra money doing something other than farming.

But it's too late for her to try anything new, she says. She's 73 and time is running out for her. I'm about to die now, she laughs. I can't fly away from the village.

If it had been possible, she would have preferred to live and work in the city, she says. Who wants to work in the village? In the city there's much more to do with your time and many things to buy in the stores.

I lived in Zhanjiang for three years, she says. I looked after my brother's sons there, but his children have grown up now, so I came back to the village.

Her life is quiet now, she says. She looks after the house and feeds the cows. Now and then she goes out to the fields to do some farm work. Every day she wakes up at about 6 a.m. to cook breakfast for her husband.

She says her family arranged her marriage. It happened such a long time ago, she says. Someone brought her husband to meet her in a house in Zhanjiang.

The marriage was arranged, but it has held up well over time. She liked her

husband and has spent many good years with him, she says.

Her life is simple now. At night she sits and watches TV at her son or neighbor's house. The days pass by as they always have in Long Wan. Life doesn't change much from moment to moment, day to day, she says. The work is still hard, the work has always been hard, she says.















