1. Quyizhen

My name is Qu Yizhen. I left Shenyang for Beijing in 1993, when I was nearly 30. I had no job when I first came here, barely able to support myself by doing home tutoring. I studied at Peking University to learn German when I was free, and I learnt to play violin.

I have learnt violin for nearly a decade, but I’m still far from being good. Still, good things have come of it—I became close friends with my violin teacher, who is a local and provided me with accommodation at his family’s old house.

I got the chance to know a Chinese-American artist when I was living at my friend’s courtyard, who led me to engage in art after that. I now have a small workshop that features some art activities from time to time. After 25 years, Beijing still amazes me and brings a fresh breeze into my life on a daily basis. And I’ve developed an understanding of the nature of art. I think that’s the biggest thing life’s given me.

Have I ever regretted any decisions? That needs some serious thought before answering.

Since leaving Shenyang, I’ve spent no more than two months a year with my parents for the past 25 years. My parents were not supportive. They wanted me to go back to Shenyang. They don’t understand what’s in Beijing that intrigues me enough to stay. I myself, of course, know what it is. The people I’ve met and the experiences I’ve had here have hugely enriched my life. But there’s no way for my parents to get that, even after I explain.

I don’t really have a home now both my parents are gone. My father passed away a few years ago, and my mother died last year. Not spending enough time with them will be a lump in my throat forever, but my eagerness to pursue what I value went against being stuck in Shenyang my whole life. So I had to make a painful choice.

The one time my determination wavered was years ago when my mom had an amputation. I accompanied her for half a year, the longest time I’ve spent at home since I left in the early 1990s. But I still decided to leave at the end. My father sent me off to the station. I cried my heart out when I said goodbye. My father told me that he returned home to find my mother weeping bitterly too.

I have an elder brother and a younger sister. I’m not close with my brother at all. We share no common values so there is a huge gap between us. My sister and I, however, share an affectionate bond. What saddens me is that life hasn’t been treating her very well. She is divorced, and her children are good for nothing. She is optimistic despite the sufferings and bitterness in life.

Shenyang has changed a lot, totally different from what it was like in my memory. I used to visit my primary school and high school when I returned, but now they’re all torn down, my family’s old house too. No trace to be found. So I now not only don’t have a home, I don’t even have a homeland.

I can’t really say if my life now lives up to my expectation or comes from the choices I made. Yes and no I think. You can never predict the future. Let’s say the decision to come to Beijing was my own choice, but what lay in store for me was not something I could have chosen.

Whenever I recall my childhood, the word “barren” is the first to pop into my head, both the land and my life. Every family was poverty-stricken in that time’s China, but poverty doesn’t necessarily mean unhappiness. I remember being super happy during Chinese New Year. My sister and I playing around as if we didn’t have any other care in the world. There’s only a three-year gap between us so we get along well.

My most treasured memory? I wouldn’t describe it as “treasured” though. There’re always several specific pictures ready in the corner of your brain; you don’t’ really always think of them, or you don’t even feel that they’re particularly precious or happy, but those pictures stay anyway and remain vivid even decades later.

We were short of rice at that time, so we sometimes needed to grind the corn into flour for food. I remembered that I once went to grill corn flour with my father and my brother. I still remember for sure it was a winter day. We walked across a cropland. I don’t know if you’ve been to Northern China or not. I mean the real North, not Beijing. The dusk feels so bleak, especially in the wild, with unmelted snow scattered over the field. It’s extremely freezing in Northeast China, and complete darkness curtained the sky early and quickly. We carried the bags of flour and headed for home, our warm and brightly-lit home, a place where I knew I would be fed.

The Analects of Confucius is the book that has the most far-reaching influence on me so far. Confucius is everywhere. When you look over your left side, he is at your left; when you look over your right side, he is at your right. I think, for many of the problems in life, you can always find an answer in the remarks of Confucius.

I think life is all about feeling. Feelings come along with life itself. Even when you’re chasing after fame and fortune, it’s also about feeling. Nothing can be free from feeling.

Photo by Uni You

**Note from Kuang:**

The housing add posted by Qu Yizhen captured my attention immediately—the picture showed a whole wall piled with books. We didn’t introduce ourselves when I arrived to check the flat, but we discussed a lot of Ana Karenina. I didn’t rent the flat nor did I get in touch until I came across him one night near Dongsi. That’s how the interview begins.

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