

Picnic at the Stadium

Kerry Chan is an intern at the artist residency program I am enrolled in. She is especially excited about this year's election, and insisted on taking me to the campaign rally with her and her friends. Later on, I found out she just turned 21 years old this year, the legal age to vote. At this age, she's maintained a high level of excitement and passion about many things, although she has to fill out a bunch of forms everyday. The thought of filling out forms gives me unimaginable headache. As much as I admit the effectiveness and necessity of these forms, in the back of my mind, I think there is an alternative, and this can't be the only way of improving efficiency. The process of filling out forms would make the entire work seem dry and boring. The very thought of it, this must be a habit, and not a bad one. Around noon, Kerry Chan has already planned our itinerary before we'd arrive at the rally. First, we will go to the bus station, take the bus for two stops, then get on the purple line of the subway, three stops later, we'll be downtown, of course, her boyfriend Gary would be waiting for us there. Taking us in his car, and we will pick up her art teacher, Ellen on our way.

Ellen is a charming teacher. On our way there, she started talking about the founding of the nation in 1968, quickly recapping us on general historical knowledge, even though I had read about the same content earlier. Meanwhile she sneaks in her political opinions as she skips through these historical events. Speaking of the same kind of campaign rally from four years ago, she told me to be mentally prepared, because this is nevertheless a rally attended by hundreds of thousands of people.

We've indeed arrived too early. Ellen's husband and her ten years old son had arrived even earlier to meet Ellen. Ellen pointed at my dark blue t-shirts and said, "You've worn the correct color today, blue, blue, and it's also blue here." As if everyone was looking for the color blue on him or herself.

"Sit down, sit down", Gary spread out the camping mat, and took out the drinks he had prepared, in another large plastic

bag, there were all kinds items from McDonald's, hamburgers, chicken drumsticks, nuggets and Coca Cola.

"Zzzz, hi hi hi", someone wearing a light top in his middle ages was testing the microphone, looking up, I could see people living in the residential buildings at a distance, poking their heads out.

"Kerry told me about your work, you make videos?" I turned around, Gary was smiling at me while chewing the food in his mouth, "Well, yes, also some performances."

"Oh, I also make videos." He passed me a paper cup, "Coke or yogurt?"

"Yogurt." I can't get used sweet drinks in Southeast Asia. To not add any sugar may be a strange thing to do. Pure coconut juice may be a pretty good choice. A local friend told me that you can't take the coconuts that had fallen to the ground. I asked him why, he said, that's the law. I suddenly remember, in a rainstorm, through the crack of my studio door, I saw a few Malays picking up the fallen coconuts and rushed onto a construction truck, their faces had the smirks of children.

"You live in Beijing?" Ellen asked me.

"Right, but I am not a Beijinger, I only live there."

"Where were you born?"

"In Hubei." I don't think she would know what kind of place that is.

"I am Chinese-Malay, my husband is Malay, I am sorry that my Chinese is not proficient. I moved here with my parents from Malaysia when I was a child." Ellen is an easy going teacher, half way into her sentence, she raised her arm and screamed, making the same smirk of a child.

"Are you a Chinese diaspora?" I turned around to ask Gary who was sitting next to me. Gary is a large framed guy, about a head taller than me, who also has a baby face. He kept on

passing me potato chips and tissue, "I am. My parents are from Fujian." Gary's Chinese is not great, just the pronunciation of 'Fujian' took him a while to get it right.

"I've also lived Fujian, but I was born in Hubei." We heard a loud buzz, something was happening on stage, and people started to crowd around us. The stadium is half-enclosed, furnished with professional running track and artificial lawn, people can come in from various directions.

"Who are you going to vote for? Are you going to vote for them?" Kerry sitting next to me looked bored. She hasn't been saying anything.

"I don't know yet, I will have a look first, I haven't received the voting package from the government yet, I don't know why, but I turned 21 this year." Kerry flips through her phone while she was talking, showing us photographs of food she's taken.

"Hey, Gary, are you going to vote for them?"

"Yes, I think so, although I am not sure, my parents are definitely voting for them, in fact it's impossible to be elected. You heard them speak earlier, only five members were sent to the parliament. Well, it's also a performance, but this is a good start."

"Ha, I am definitely voting for them." Ellen opened up a simple folding chair and sat down, "Sorry, I can't sit on the ground like you, I just had knee surgery last year, I still can't do too much sports, but I am definitely voting for them. Our whole family is their supporters. We voted for them last time, you know, this is a bizarre country." She passed on a flag to each one of us, "See, I even bought their umbrella." Ellen passed it to Kerry, as if she's already been their supporter.

"Quick, look over there." Gary points to a giant hammer-like neonlight, carried on the back of a Malay or Indian man. I couldn't see it clearly, about two to three meters tall, three old men each held drumsticks, carrying a large red

Chinese drum, riveted with the rhythm of the loud slogan sang.

"I've never been to China." Kerry smiles.

"You should find an opportunity to go."

"I like Taobao, so cheap." Kerry's smile reminds me of the Malay coconut thieves.

"Are you also a Chinese diaspora?" I asked Kerry. Then, I realized I was being redundant.

"Of course," Kerry rolled her eyes, in order to make up for this kind non-sense questions, I said, "Are you sure you don't have Malaysian blood?" "Ah?" Kerry looked at me funny, I can't use language to imitate the sound of "Ah?" she made, or perhaps it sounded like "huh?" "Do I look Malay? My ancestors are from Guangzhou." That said, the place became quiet, a middle-aged Indian man uses English to announce his future direction and ideas on healthcare and education. I could only understand a little, but the place was very quiet, "Sit down, sit down", the people in the back rows asking the audience in the middle to look sitting down, but obviously, those standing in the front couldn't sit down, because the space occupied sitting down would be twice as much as those two rows standing up. Then, a viewer moved to the side of the crowd, directing those viewers in the back rows to move backwards.

"I think I would visit China." Kerry went on discussing the Chinese film stars and Taobao items she's interested in.

I turned around and whispered to Gary, "Do you think they are left wing or right wing?"

Gary frowns, "We don't distinguish right from left. It's hard to make such distinction." Listening attentively, Gary stopped putting the chips in his hands to his mouth.

"Sit here." Ellen asks her son to sit next to her, this ten-year old boy had the best of his parents' facial features,

when he realized I was looking at him, he made a face, and grabbed a handful of chips from the camping mat, and returned to his seat.

"Look over there." A viewer next to me points at the top of a residential building, another yellow neon light in the shape of a hammer, hanging on the balcony, that seemed had been prepared. Now, the rest of the viewers seem to have noticed the hammer at a distance, sighing in awe, the three old men in the back suddenly restarted the drumming. In fact, no matter how you beat the Chinese round drum, I'd recognize its low sound. Its sound is unique, like the sound of *guzheng* or flute, without any mix-up. At this moment, Ellen's son picked up a competition trumpet hanging on his neck and blowing along, with all his energy, what a healthy child.

"Kites, look!" We looked up, hmmm, there were kites, blue kites, in the shape of a centipede, one side attached on the artificial lawn in the stadium, the other end flying high. When I gasped in awe, Gary smiled at me proudly, "It was like this the last time too." He raised his eyebrows as he passed a cup of juice to me.

"There is a representative for every race." I looked out at the uncle who just stepped onto the stage with a Southern Fujian accent, who refers to himself as the "little brother", "Ha, Fujianese." I smiled at Gary. He nodded, and poured a cup of juice for Ellen's husband. This is time for the Malays who can't speak Chinese to relax, Ellen introduced everyone, "This is my husband, and this is Li Ran, who just arrived from Beijing." We nodded at each other, then Ellen's husband picked up a bag of chips and passed it on to me, "Please."

"Little brother" is a passionate speaker, the momentary quietness was broken again, as there were many Southern Fujianese in the audience.

"Can you speak the Southern Fujian dialect?" I asked Gary who kept on pouring juice, "Uh..., my parents can, I can only speak a little bit, but I can understand."

"I can't understand, but I know some Cantonese." Kerry seemed a bit tired. Afterall, she's worked all day filling out forms at the organization.

"Tired?" I thought I must tell her my doubts about filling out those forms.

"Why do you fill out forms everyday?"

"Ah? Well, I have to, otherwise?"

"You can also choose not to do it."

"No, it's necessary, if you look at the itinerary I sent to your email, there are a lot of information there, they had to be filled into forms."

"But those that can't be done are still impossible."

"It's better than not making any, otherwise, it'd be a mess."

"Oh, I've actually never really looked at those forms, neither do I have the habit to. Your forms are very long, it's easy to get cross-eyed and confused."

"What is cross-eyed?"

"Seeing discontinuously."

"Right, but they still need to be filled out, at least on our part."

"Well, I understand, we also made forms, only that we don't write everything in there."

"If you don't fill them out, how do you plan things?"

"We rely on guessing." I said. "Pzzzz" Kerry laughed out loud, she knew I was teasing her, I was still thinking whether there is a more effective way than filling out forms. Wouldn't writing poetry be better? I remember, for a while, I used to write short poems to a friend via SMS in the middle of the night, I could only guess what my friend was thinking,

I know this kind of fun and cheeky thing has got nothing to do with filling out forms.

"Look over there, look at that guy..." I twisted my neck to look for what everyone was pointing at, but I couldn't see what was happening, are they pointing at the man holding up the hammer neon light? Haven't we seen that already? The crowd has already filled the entire stadium. Ellen and Gary saw me looking out to the back, they turned around, "Yeah, lots of people, just like four years ago, maybe there will be more coming." Ellen must remember really well of that rally from four years ago, I turned around and said to her, "This is my first time."

"Oh, in fact, it's only our second." That said, Ellen twitched one side of her mouth, and passed on an empty cup to Gary. "Just half a cup, not too much." I picked up my phone and took a few panoramic photos of Ellen's family and Gary. Kerry passed me her phone, "I just took this one."

"Nice, send it to me later." Kerry always smiled, she never complained about the tedious works at the organization, maybe it's only superficial.

"How much longer is your internship?"

"What's internship period?" Kerry looked at me with shock, my Chinese expression is perhaps unfamiliar to her, so I repeated, "How long will be interning at the institute?" I tried my best to enunciate every character, despite I think her Chinese is excellent.

"A few more months."

"Do you plan on working there afterwards?"

"I don't know yet, I haven't thought through about it." Kerry flipped through her phone, "Look at this one." A photograph of four people's backs, one of them was me, she must have just taken it, before I had time to look closely she took her phone back, and muddled, "This one is not bad, I am going to post it on Facebook, may I?"

"Of course, remember to send it to me too."

"I will send it to you now." Kerry opened the apps on her phone. She seemed to have recovered from her fatigue.

"My phone is almost out of battery, you will have to tell me how to get back to the residence." I wasn't really worried, like Gary said, no one gets lost here.

The one speaking on stage was not the "little brother" with the Southern Fujian dialect. Of the speakers taking turns on stage, other than crisscrossing of the various racial groups, of course they were also gender differentiations, which fully demonstrated respect to the right of discourse in an equalitarian system. The speaker's calling is loud and clear, I picked up a potato chip and looking at the back. I took out my cellphone, it'd be a misfortune to not have captured this scene, while I am embarrassed to stand up and block the view of those sitting behind me, so I raised my hand high to take the photo blindly. Gary and Kerry saw me discretely taking snapshots and looking behind me. Right, that guy carrying the neon light on his shoulders was still there, and he's walked a few full circles around the stadium, so was the hammer at the distance. Ellen kept on cheering, "Yes" to whatever was said on stage, and I was waving the small blue flag like everyone else. My phone went out of battery, and it turned itself off.

"What do you buy on Taobao?" I turned around to ask Kerry who was playing with her phone.

"Huh?" A question belted out of her throat, but I was sure she understood my Chinese. Maybe she didn't know how to react, "Oh, on Taobao? Yes, I buy a lot of stuff each time, and they send them over all together, this way I save on postage."

"Is postage expensive?" I asked, her focus shifted from the screen of her phone, as she picked up a thin potato chip, looking at me with droopy eyes, "Not bad, but I forgot how much, cheap enough, I've bought a lot of hide material."

"What's hide material?" I guess I couldn't understand this time, she added, "It's leather, materials made with leather."

"Oh, is it a lot cheaper?"

"Yes, a lot. But!" she paused, "The Chinese *jin* weighs half of our *jin*, I thought I was cheated when I received the package."

"Oh, right, our *jin* is half a kilogram." I thought later, why do we still use the unit of *jin*? Other than the unit of *inches*, once I had to use mathematical conversions to explain to the installers of an exhibition, it doesn't seem like there is anything else that hinders my description of length and weight.

The speakers went one after another to the stage, I stared at those residents poking their heads out at a distance, that must be a good viewing point, looking down from above, where the entire stadium can be seen at once, but those office workers who wished to go to sleep early must be kept up, especially those who support other political parties.

"When can I see you work?" Gary must felt my boredom, but it was ok actually.

"There is a small screening session at the organization, you should come." I looked at the small flag in my hand, while leaning towards Gary and telling him about my research plans. Gary offered me various advise on traveling and visiting these places, while my eyes glanced over Gary's shoulders at people's concentrated expressions sitting in the back row, in fact, our age group was not the majority here, but the middle aged and retirees. I guess this must be relevant to the social welfare discussed at this rally.

"Please pass this to me. Thanks."

I passed the bag of potato chips that Ellen's husband gave me to Ellen, when I opened a bottle of juice and poured into my own cup. Compare to yogurt, juice seems sweeter, luckily the evenings are not too hot and humid, as long as the sun is not blazing overhead, for a country located near the equator, it

is not as hot as I imagined, while sweets seem to be a favorite eat. This must be related to the eating habits of the Cantonese. Also, Indian sweets are also high in sugar.

Now, Kerry leaned her head on Gary's bulky arm, I thought, for Kerry, these social issues couldn't ease the complex feelings of filling out forms everyday. Of course on the other side, the 10 years old boy was energetic, even though he stood up from time to time to blow on the cheering horn, he did not block the view of the back rows. Ellen certainly didn't want her child to be annoying, as she waved at him to sit down.

As a new father, the way I look at children is indeed different, as if my love and appreciation for them were turned on suddenly. The boy wearing a blue AC Milan jersey reminded me of my childhood, when I was fully equipped to play, leg protection, long socks, spike shoes. Then, a middle-aged Malay man began reading the speech he had prepared on stage. Ellen's family listened attentively. I am not sure whether Ellen's son would understand anything. At least I couldn't understand a word of it.

"Are you alright?" Gary figured I couldn't understand, I guess he must have been more bored than I was, at least I could imagine myself making an appealing yet sleazy work through political perspective, so I said, "Not bad, I am not tired."

Then, I suddenly thought of a term to describe the smirk on the Malay workers when they stole coconuts, in fact a child's laugh can be more wanton, a laugh that's like a chuckle, a unexpected happiness, or a gratification transcends any rule or system, what allowed me to feeling fine in these few long hours is perhaps this kind of happiness, a few unexpected coconuts, a few insignificant and humble actions.

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