

Platform Memories: The Literary Representation of Twin-City Space

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Abstract: Narrated from the perspective of Chen Zhixia, a writer documenting the intercity migration history of the Yangtze River Delta, this story unfolds through a vintage 1987 “Shanghai-Suzhou” train ticket, unveiling the poignant emotional legacy of her grandparents within a specific historical era. Utilizing a “time-traveling” narrative technique, the novella reconstructs the literary contrast between the cramped, bustling “green-train” platforms of 1987 and the modern, standardized Suzhou Industrial Park Station. It explores how “non-places” within industrial civilization serve as repositories for personal memory and nostalgia. Centered on the “magnolia flower” as its core imagery, the work symbolizes the grandparents’ unwavering and sincere devotion amidst life’s trials and historical upheavals. Through her quest for family secrets, the protagonist undergoes a psychological transformation in her perception of twin-city spaces, from “sterile transit hubs” to “emotional vessels,” profoundly reflecting the hardships and tenderness of intercity migrants during China’s urbanization process.

Keywords: Intercity migration; Platform memories; Spatial representation; Twin-city life in the Yangtze River Delta; Family history narrative

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The evening at Suzhou Industrial Park Station was always shrouded in a regulated silence. The electronic screens ceaselessly repeated the same train information, and the cold white light made the already empty platform appear even more orderly. The surrounding metal chairs, all of equal height, stood with their backs against the wall, their smooth surfaces devoid of any warmth. The mechanical female voice of the arrival announcement came from the broadcast, devoid of any emotional color; after spreading through this empty space, it was soon annihilated by the sound of passing footsteps. At this moment, Chen Zhixia was sitting in the waiting hall, holding a yellowed old train ticket in her hand, the pads of her fingers seemingly able to clearly feel the rough texture left by the passage of time^[1].

This train ticket was discovered by chance when her father was sorting through the belongings of her grandfather, Chen Jingming. As a writer specializing in the history of intercity migration in the Yangtze River Delta, she had a natural interest in such old objects bearing the imprint of their era. Printed on the ticket were the words “December 15, 1987, Shanghai—Suzhou”; the ink had faded somewhat, and there was no signature or date note on the back, only a drawing of a blurry magnolia flower, the edges of the petals worn white from being touched.

Grandfather Chen Jingming and Grandmother Zhou Hui were the epitome of the Shanghai-Suzhou commuter couples of the 1990s^[2]. Both were from Suzhou; Grandfather worked at a machinery manufacturing plant in Shanghai,

while Grandmother was a female worker at a garment factory on Pingjiang Road in Suzhou. Due to work reasons, the two maintained a dual-city life even after marriage, sustaining the warmth of their family with a green-skin train ticket every month. After getting off work on the last Friday of every month, Grandfather would take his newly issued wages and squeeze onto a green-skin train back to Suzhou. On Sunday evening, carrying the fragrant cakes and clean clothes prepared by Grandmother, he would rush back to the factory in Shanghai^[3]. When encountering overtime, the two could only meet hurriedly on the platform. According to her father, in order to earn more overtime pay, Grandfather often volunteered for extra shifts. In the thick diary kept in the old house, Grandfather had recorded the dates of the tickets, the carriage numbers, and the new grey hairs at Grandmother's temples every time he saw her. Only the page for December 15, 1987, remained a blank, except for this ticket with the magnolia flower drawing clipped inside, which had sporadic bloodstains on the back.

To explore the secret behind this ticket stub, Chen Zhixia decided to return to her grandparents' old home in Suzhou to take a look. She had lived in Shanghai since childhood, and later went abroad to study, so she had never been back, yet she always held a longing for Suzhou in her heart. This time, she decided to go to Suzhou Industrial Park Station first, attempting to find a trace of a clue at this platform where her grandfather had stopped countless times back then^[4].

The station broadcast announced that ticket checking was about to begin for train G7086 to Shanghai. Chen Zhixia moved two steps forward with the crowd, her gaze inadvertently sweeping over old photos on the platform wall. It was a series of black-and-white photos recording the changes of the Park Station^[5]; one was taken in the summer of 1987. The platform in the photo was simple and crowded, with no electronic screens or metal seats, only a few wooden poles hanging with kerosene lamps, and a group of travelers carrying luggage lining up to check tickets. In the corner of the photo, a man wearing blue work clothes was standing on tiptoe looking into the crowd, the ticket clutched in his hand faintly visible—that was clearly her grandfather in his youth.

Chen Zhixia leaned closer to the photograph, her fingertips almost touching the cold glass. Just then, a wave of intense dizziness suddenly struck, and the scene before her began to distort and rotate. The station lights instantly turned dim yellow, the blue light of the electronic screens vanished, and the sounds of the broadcast and footsteps gradually faded away, replaced by noisy human voices, the clashing of luggage, and the heavy “clank-clank” roar of a train.

After the dizziness subsided, Chen Zhixia found she was still at Suzhou Industrial Park Station, yet it was no longer the familiar appearance. The platform was uneven and potholed, dirt mixed with gravel, and the air was filled with the smell of coal smoke and the fragrance of magnolias. Several wooden poles stood on both sides, the hanging kerosene lamps flickering in the wind, their dim yellow light illuminating the crowded mass of people. People carried bulging luggage and wore patched clothes; their faces bore the fatigue of travel, yet could not hide the smiles of seeing their loved ones.

Chen Zhixia subconsciously looked down at herself; her off-white shirt and jeans were completely out of place with the surrounding environment. She tried to walk two steps forward and found that the people around her could not see her at all; some even walked straight through her body. Only then did she realize that she had traveled back to 1987.

“Jingming! Over here!” A crisp female voice rang out in the crowd.

Chen Zhixia looked in the direction of the voice and saw a young woman with braids standing on tiptoe and waving. The woman was wearing a light blue floral shirt and black trousers, holding a cloth bundle in her arms, with faint dimples on her face—that was Grandmother Zhou Hui in her youth.

Immediately after, a young man wearing blue work clothes squeezed out of the crowd and walked quickly toward the woman. His forehead was covered in beads of sweat, and his hand tightly clutched a train ticket, exactly the same as the one in Chen Zhixia's pocket. The man's build and brow were exactly the same as the grandfather in the photo, full of high spirits, his eyes filled with light.

“Ah Hui, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. The factory had overtime today; I just barely caught this train.” Seeing that Ah Hui had already been waiting for a long time, Chen Jingming spoke while wiping the sweat from his forehead with his hand.

Zhou Hui shook her head, smiling softly, and handed him the bundle in her arms. “It's alright, I just arrived too. Here

are new cloth shoes for you to wear, and your favorite sugar cakes. They are warm, eat two.”

Chen Jingming took the cloth bundle and carefully opened it. Inside were warm sugar cakes. He broke off a small piece and put it in his mouth, his eyebrows and eyes curving into crescents. “Yours are still the most fragrant.”

He looked at Zhou Hui, only feeling a heat in his eyes, and his throat felt as if it were stuffed with a ball of cotton. Zhou Hui treated him so well, which made it no wonder his heart felt so sad; it turned out his sadness had a reason. “Okay,” he said to Zhou Hui, “I won’t be in Shanghai in the future.”

“I know.” Chen Jingming nodded, fished that ticket out of his pocket, and flipped to the back. On it was a magnolia flower he had drawn for Lin Xici on the train today, exactly the same as the pot Lin Xici raised at home.

Zhou Hui reached out and gently stroked the magnolia flower. “It’s so beautiful,” she said softly. “Will you draw one every time you come back in the future? When we save up enough for one hundred flowers, we won’t be separated anymore.”

Chen Jingming nodded heavily and carefully placed the ticket and his wages into Zhou Hui’s hands: “Okay! I will definitely work hard so that I have the chance to apply for a transfer back to the branch factory in Suzhou. Then I can be with you every day and won’t have to squeeze onto the green-skin train anymore.”

Zhou Hui put the ticket away close to her body, then took out a neatly folded handkerchief from the cloth bundle and handed it to Chen Jingming: “I embroidered this for you; it also has a magnolia flower on it. Keep it with you to wipe your sweat.”

Chen Jingming took the handkerchief and unfolded it; on the white cotton cloth was embroidered a lifelike magnolia flower, the stitches fine and dense, the colors elegant. He gripped the handkerchief tightly: “Ah Hui, your embroidery is still the best looking.”

The whistle of a train came from the distance. Chen Jingming looked at the old watch on his wrist, a look of reluctance appearing on his face: “The train is about to leave, I have to go back.”

Zhou Hui nodded, forcing a smile through her held-back tears: “Go on, remember to write to me when you get to Shanghai. Be safe on the road.”

“Okay, certainly.” Chen Jingming took a deep look at her, then turned and walked quickly toward the train. After walking a few steps, he couldn’t help but look back and wave; Zhou Hui also stood on tiptoe and waved at him until his figure disappeared into the crowd.

Chen Zhixia stood still on the spot, tears having already blurred her vision. She finally understood that this train ticket was not a secret, but a testament to the love between her grandfather and grandmother. But she didn’t understand why Grandfather had left the record for this day blank in his diary^[6].

Another wave of earth-shattering dizziness enveloped her; the scenery began to tumble in disorder. The dim yellow lights slowly faded, and the cold white electronic screens gradually lit up again. The noisy human voices in her ears drifted away, while the familiar broadcast sounds and footsteps approached. Chen Zhixia woke with a start; she was still standing at the modern Suzhou Industrial Park Station, and the ticket tightly clenched in her palm had become sticky with sweat.

She smoothed the broken hair on her forehead and walked quickly down the platform. But after returning to Shanghai, Chen Zhixia searched through all of her grandfather’s relics, including that thick diary. This time, she read it all from beginning to end, carefully and earnestly.

The diary recorded her grandfather’s life leaving Suzhou to work in Shanghai, recorded the situation at work in the factory, recorded the feelings of every round trip between Shanghai and Suzhou, and also recorded his longing for her grandmother at home.

It wasn’t until she flipped to the last few pages of the diary that she discovered the anomaly—the paper suddenly became rough, and the handwriting became scrawled and hasty, forming a sharp contrast with the neat handwriting from before.

One of the pages scrawled: “December 15, 1987, Snow. There was an accident at the factory, the workshop collapsed, and I was buried underneath. My leg is broken. The doctor said I might never be able to do heavy work again. I can’t

transfer back home to work."

Further on, the content in the diary returned to being neat, but what it recorded was how Grandmother took him everywhere to seek medical treatment, how she resigned from her job in Suzhou and moved to Shanghai to take care of him, and how she smiled and said, "It doesn't matter, I will accompany you from now on."

To confirm her guess, Chen Zhixia went to the Shanghai Library and looked up news reports from the winter of 1987. Sure enough, she found an article about the collapse of a machinery manufacturing plant workshop in the "Shanghai Daily" dated December 16, 1987. The report mentioned that the accident caused three deaths and five injuries, and one of the injured workers was from Suzhou.

Chen Zhixia's eyes reddened again. She finally understood that the page Grandfather left blank was not because he forgot, but because he didn't dare to record it. On December 14, 1987, Grandfather had received the notice of his transfer back to Suzhou. He held the ticket with the drawn magnolia, his heart full of joy planning their future, but he never thought that an accident would disrupt all plans.

She thought of Grandmother Zhou Hui again. Grandmother had a gentle personality during her lifetime, always silently managing the household and being exceptionally considerate of Grandfather. When she was a child, she had asked Grandmother why she was willing to give up everything in Suzhou to come to Shanghai to take care of Grandfather with his leg injury. Grandmother always smiled and said nothing.

Chen Zhixia decided to go to Suzhou again, wanting to visit the places where her grandfather and grandmother had lived back then, to find more stories about them. Following the address mentioned in her grandfather's diary, she found an old alley on Pingjiang Road. The alley was lined with old houses with white walls and black tiles, the corners of the walls covered in moss, and the air filled with the faint scent of magnolias.

In the alley, an elderly woman with white hair was sitting at a doorway picking vegetables. Chen Zhixia stepped forward and asked the old lady in a low voice: "Grandma, hello! May I ask if you know Ms. Zhou Hui? It seems she used to live nearby."

The old lady looked up at her, a look of surprise on her face: "You know Ah Hui? We were neighbors when we were young. Later she moved away; I heard she went to Shanghai."

"I am her granddaughter," Chen Zhixia said.

"So you are Ah Hui's granddaughter." The old lady nodded, a nostalgic expression appearing on her face. "Ah Hui was a sensible child back then. Your eldest uncle was working in Shanghai, and she was working in Suzhou, while also having to take care of the elderly and children at home. Later, I heard your grandfather had an accident, and the factory in Shanghai arranged a lighter job position for him, and your whole family moved away at that time."

Bidding farewell to the old lady, Chen Zhixia came to Suzhou to visit her grandparents' place and walked into what was their old house in Suzhou back then. Although the house had been renovated, the magnolia tree in the corner was still as lush as ever. Inside a cabinet in the living room sat an old wooden box, locked with a small lock. Chen Zhixia remembered that she had a key among her grandfather's belongings that could open this lock.

She took the key out of her pocket and opened the wooden box. Inside, arranged very neatly, were yellowing ticket stubs. On the back of each was a magnolia flower, identical to the one she was holding in her hand. Beside them lay several letters written by her grandfather to her grandmother, as well as a handkerchief embroidered with a magnolia flower.

Chen Zhixia held them in her hands and read them carefully, one by one. The letters recorded matters during her grandfather's work in Shanghai, full of his longing for her grandmother, and saturated with the efforts he made to be transferred back to Suzhou. Just seeing these final letters and tickets, Chen Zhixia's tears could not stop falling. She could feel that the love between her grandparents was engraved in their hearts and bones; at the same time, she could feel the sorrow and grief of being manipulated by fate, and even more, she could feel their perseverance to never give up.

Leaving the old house, Chen Zhixia came once again to Suzhou Industrial Park Station. It was already late at night; there were very few travelers on the platform, and the surroundings were very quiet. Chen Zhixia leaned against the metal chair on the platform, tightly clutching the ticket in her hand, gently stroking the magnolia flower on the back of the ticket

with her fingertip. How she wished she could cross time and space to see her deceased grandfather and grandmother, but it was impossible. In a trance, she fell into a deep sleep.

At this moment, a familiar sensation of the world spinning hit her again. Her vision began to distort and rotate in waves. She made no struggle; in her heart, she only silently prayed, hoping that she could see them again, just like last time.

After the dizziness dissipated, Chen Zhixia looked around. Looking closely, it seemed to be the figures she often saw—her grandfather, with a stooped body, leaning on a cane, standing in a corner of the platform. Her grandmother was holding his arm. They walked past Chen Zhixia, looked at each other with smiles, their eyes full of doting affection. But Chen Zhixia did not chase after them; instead, she stopped two steps away. She knew clearly that she could not disturb their happiness at this moment. She simply watched them leave, supporting each other, as many thoughts surged in her mind. Although they couldn't save up the "100 magnolia flowers" as wished, nor return to the Suzhou he thought of day and night, seeing with her own eyes that they were well was enough to prove what love is.

Just then, the familiar arrival announcement broadcast came through, and the whistle of the high-speed train woke Chen Zhixia from her dream. It was time to return to Shanghai. It was already dawn outside. The first ray of sunlight penetrated through the platform window, dyeing the originally cold platform with a layer of warm gold. The number of pedestrians coming and going began to increase, each hurrying towards their own destination.

Seeing everything before her, Chen Zhixia suddenly realized: This is not a cold space, not a modernized standardized platform, nor a vacuum of time and space, but a three-dimensional folded space-time container. It holds the waiting and expectations of her grandfather and grandmother, as well as their perseverance like crossing mountains and seas. Cross-city couples, nostalgic for the night scenery of big cities, boarded the ship of the times with their day-after-day rushing. They entrust their yearning for a better life to their feet, writing life with their daily and nightly toil, and writing love with their repeated mutual support. They will not be known by others, but they are the true silhouette of this era and the representatives of contemporary cross-city migrants^[7].

Her gaze stopped on the raised magnolia flower on the small train ticket in her hand, shining blindingly in the sunlight. In that instant, she became clear-headed: Missing Suzhou is not only because her grandfather missed his native land, but even more because of this love that transcends time and space; because of the nostalgia and concern for the native land in her blood. She carefully put away the ticket and turned to walk down the platform. The sunlight was just right, warm and bright. And this story of cross-city migration in the Yangtze River Delta is just the story of her grandparents. There are still many ordinary people like them, reproducing generation after generation on this land. Their stories deserve even more to be recorded and remembered.

As a writer, she wants to record her grandparents' story, and record the stories of those cross-city migrants who crossed mountains and left their hometowns, so that more people will know their past hard work and perseverance, and know the experience and growth of this city.

This time, Chen Zhixia, who had been away from her native land since childhood, finally understood that those platforms, trains, and waiting halls standardized by the waves of modernity actually carried heavy history and emotion. They witnessed the partings and reunions of countless people, recorded the dreams and perseverance of countless people, and quietly shaped the appearance of "home" and "self" in everyone's heart.

Chen Zhixia looked up into the distance; the urban silhouette of Suzhou became increasingly clear in the sunlight. She knew that no matter how the times changed, no matter how the city developed, those memories hidden in the tickets, those echoes across time and space, would remain in her heart forever.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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