



Memories of Old Macau: The Story of My Childhood

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The Chinese edition was a #1 Best Seller



4. On a Pedicab

Dad came to meet us and hired a pedicab to pick us all up from the port.

Pedicabs or cycle rickshaws were a major means of transport in Macau in the early fifties. Because of their relatively low fares, pedicabs prevailed as the most common type of vehicles hired by the general public back in the old days. They charged passengers based on the distance travelled and a pedicab ride usually cost merely several tens of cents. A pedicab could accommodate two adults along with one more child on its passenger seat. After bargaining and confirming the price with the driver, passengers would hop on the pedicab, pedaled by the driver towards their destination. Carrying passengers under their green roof, pedicabs rolled across local streets and lanes.

Near the port, the pedicab finally halted at the entrance of an inn where we would stay in the early days after our arrival in Macau.



7. Nam Van Seashore

During the hot days of summer, Dad loved taking me to Nam Van for a stroll in the breeze after dinner.

On those days, Dad held my hand and together we walked from Rua de S. Domingos, past the Senado Square and up along San Ma Lo, until we reached Nam Van.

San Ma Lo was an avenue brimming with lights. However, once we turned our way into Nam Van and reached the shore, we became surrounded by darkness. Only a few street lamps stood there, shedding dim light upon the shore. Dad lifted me up onto the stone embankment lining the seashore. I sat on the embankment, staring into the stark blackness of the seawater, cheerfully toying with the paper fan Dad bought me on the way. Several huge banyan trees overlooked the bay from the shoreline. We sat there and let the time pass, refreshed by the sea breeze as we gazed at the stars scattered across the moonlit sky. Afraid that I might catch a cold from the chill in the night air, Dad held my hand and in no hurry, we meandered from Nam Van back to Rua de S. Domingos, passing through Rua do Campo midway.

Heading home, we passed by Calçada das Verdades, the steep alley next to Na Tcha Temple. Dad took the chance to visit a friend of his from Canton, who worked at a small, leather shoe factory located at the front end of the alley. The man chatted with Dad while making shoes but I had no idea what they were talking about. I watched Dad helping along during their chat, cutting leather into one piece of shoe insole after another. On our way home, I wondered why Dad knew how to make shoes. Hearing my curious query, Dad smiled and answered with a tap on my head,

“Didn’t I learn it just by observation?”

An ice-cream shop called Chiu Kei was there at the crossing of the alley. Dad got me an ice-cream and I finished the last drop of it before we arrived home. It drove away the heat I felt before from head to toe!



9. Rua dos Mercadores and the Local Market

To go from our home to the local market¹, we had to first pass through Rua das Estalagens and Rua dos Mercadores.

Rua dos Mercadores was a commercial street bustling with life. Various kinds of shops were operated along both sides of the street including a tea house, bakery, porcelain shop, ice-cream shop, dyeing and laundry store, barbecue shop, silk and satin fabric store, gold jewelry shop, bookstore, fruit shop, grocery store as well as a Chinese herbal medicine store, among others.

On the way to buy fresh food at the market for the first time, Mom bought some bowls and plates at a chinaware shop, as well as some rice at a grocery store, both located on Rua dos Mercadores. Carrying things with both of her hands, she was unable to hold mine. I could only clutch her dress, tagging along with a quick step. Soon we arrived at the market.

In those days, the market was housed in a grey two-storey building. Fresh fish stalls were operated on the upper floor whereas the lower floor was occupied by stalls selling fresh fruits and vegetables. Among them, tofu and bean sprouts were sold at a stall run by a chubby woman with a bad temper. She always carried a stern look on her face and snapped at others in a harsh tone. To this day I can still vividly remember the way she looked - why?

It so happened one day, that Mom gave me some money and ordered me to buy a block of tofu at the market to bring home. When I arrived at the tofu stall of the chubby woman, she was holding a bowl and having her meal. I told her I wanted to buy some tofu and without hesitation, gave her all my money. Upon receiving the money, the woman looked at me and tore off a corner of newspaper in an unhurried

1 The official name of the local market in Portuguese is Mercado de S. Domingos.

manner, picking up the fish bones one by one from her bowl with her chopsticks and placing them on the piece of newspaper. Afterwards, she folded it up and bundled it tightly with a piece of salt water grass², then handed it to me in a slow motion. I looked up to see her face, catching sight of her snigger.

I had no idea why she would have done such a thing, nor could I summon up my courage to ask. I took the bundle and ran back home to give it to Mom. Upon opening it, Mom was at a loss: why was it all fish bones? I thought Mom would go there right away and hurl a question at the woman. Yet Mom only shook her head with a long sigh, without saying anything more. Mom was always so kind and forgiving.

Still, Rua dos Mercadores is a place that carries a part of my happy memories. When I was a third-grade student in primary school, I got good marks in exams and ranked third in my class. As a reward, Mom took me to an ice-cream shop there and treated me to an ice-cream with four flavors. It was a taste of heaven!



² Salt water grass is a grass-like plant. It was commonly used as string to tie up packages in local markets in Southern China until the late 1980s.

20. Pacapio Store

Along Rua de Camilo Pessanha, the store which made the strongest impression on me was the Pacapio¹ store adjacent to the hot water shop near Travessa dos Alfaiates.

Back in that decade, it was popular to buy lottery tickets in Macau to play a game called Pacapio. Pacapio was a type of old-fashioned Chinese lottery that came with the first eighty Chinese characters of the Thousand Character Classic printed on each ticket. People would select characters and bet on their luck. The results would be picked by pigeons. Each player had to choose ten characters on one lottery ticket.

The liquor store Dad operated his stall in front of was two to three stores away from the Pacapio store. I often scampered into the shop just to watch people placing their bets.

Entering the shop, one could find a high counter on the left with two to three shopkeepers sitting. On the right was a long table by the wall, upon which stacks of lottery tickets were available for use. Those who brought a lottery ticket home would burn holes through characters they chose with a burnt cigarette or incense stick and then bring it to the store. The alternative was to come to the store, circle the characters of your choice on the ticket and hand it to the storekeeper. The storekeeper would use a Chinese writing brush to dot the chosen characters with red cinnabar on a receipt before stamping a big, square red seal upon it. Players could check the lottery results with their receipts and claim lottery prizes if they had won the game. Lottery results were posted on the central wall in the shop.

Every day, crowds would flock to the store for purchase of lottery tickets. In the old days when it was a common struggle just to make ends meet, it was an alluring dream for the populace to wake up a millionaire!



1 As a game of chance, Pacapio is a form of gambling that emerged in the late Ching Dynasty to become prevalent among populace in China. Sprouted in Macau since the early 20th century, lottery businesses would sell tickets printed with Chinese characters of the Thousand Character Classic for people to bet on.

37. Bronze Horse Statue and Café

Today, the bronze horse statue¹ at Praia Grande² is no longer there, but back in the old days, it remained a landmark of the district. What evokes my nostalgic feelings the most, however, is my recollection of the Bronze Horse Café, an outdoor café beneath the bronze statue.

In my childhood days, Praia Grande was a place of serenity to visit. In summer, it was a perfect place to escape the summer heat, enjoy a leisurely stroll and feel the caress of the breeze on your cheeks. Back then, Praia Grande was just a piece of undeveloped land where the Lisboa Hotel had not yet been built. Nearby, there were schools, a football field, shops, tenements and pedicabs ferrying passengers around.

After dinner, hearing Dad say, “Let’s go for a walk to Praia Grande!” threw me into a burst of delight. From Senado Square, Avenida de Almeida Ribeiro until Rua da Praia Grande³, I scampered to reach the Bronze Horse Café as soon as possible. From afar, I caught sight of the café’s colorful light bulbs dangling under banyan trees. Next to the café, there was a sculpture of a Coca Cola bottle taller than me, and I excitedly made a beeline towards the bottle to wrap my arms around it. After a stroll, Mom and Dad decided to sit down, get a drink and relax at the café, which meant I could run in circles around the Coca Cola bottle again and again. I was on cloud nine.

Happiness was so simple when I was a child!

- 1 Dubbed the “Bronze Horse” among locals, this was the bronze statue of João Maria Ferreira do Amaral, the 79th Portuguese Governor of Macau, mounted on horseback. In 1940, the government of Macau under Portuguese administration erected this monument in commemoration of Amaral.
- 2 Also known as Nam Van District.
- 3 Renamed Avenida da Praia Grande in 1995.



41. Avenida de Almeida Ribeiro and Mid-Autumn Festival

Avenida de Almeida Ribeiro¹ was a prosperous thoroughfare lined with businesses of all kinds on both sides, from department stores, banks, pharmacies, restaurants, tea houses, cinemas, bakeries to hotels. The bakeries, among other businesses on the street, remain part of my most cherished memories. Back then, I would visit bakeries there at least three times a year, my heart pulsing with joy on the way.

As the Mid-Autumn Festival neared, my sister and I would head to one bakery after the other for the so-called “mooncake leaflets” which referred to the beautifully-printed copies of mooncake pricelists distributed by bakeries to patrons for promotional purpose. A pricelist of mooncakes of different types was usually printed on one side of the leaflets, while colorful drawings themed around the Mid-Autumn Festival were printed on the other side. My sister and I wanted to collect those drawings which came on the leaflets of different bakeries. Thrilled with delight, we brought those leaflets back home to compare, appreciate and treasure in our collections.

In the days approaching the Mid-Autumn Festival, I would jubilantly follow Mom to obtain mooncakes at one of those bakeries on Avenida de Almeida Ribeiro. Mom had joined a “mooncake club” to purchase boxes of mooncakes in monthly installments. With the Mid-Autumn Festival approaching, she would visit the respective bakery to obtain mooncakes with a fully-stamped installment card. It was rather common for families and friends to shower gifts of mooncakes on each other at this festive occasion, but not every family could afford paying for some ten boxes of mooncakes all at once. People would buy mooncakes by monthly installment instead. A customer would pay two or three dollars per month and after completing one year

¹ Also commonly known as San Ma Lo.

of installment payments, could obtain ten boxes of mooncakes in return. When it was about time to obtain the mooncakes, the bakeries would be swarmed with customers.

I followed Mom to get mooncakes and the bakery gave me a “caged piglet pastry” as a free gift. Kneaded into the shape of a young pig, the pastry was caged in a delicate bamboo basket that could be carried. Mom would carry ten boxes of mooncakes and other free pastries from the bakery with both hands, while I scampered after her with the caged piglet pastry held in my hand on our way home.

For sales promotion prior to the Mid-Autumn Festival, bakeries would raise Mid-Autumn-themed decorative archways high above their entrances, which became their huge advertisement boards. Each year, every decorative archway would be crafted to deliver a special theme, from “Chang’e Flies to the Moon”, “the Eight Immortals Cross the Sea” to “Wu Gang² Chops the Osmanthus Tree” and other folklores. The archways were three-dimensional art creations lit up with dazzling illuminations or even animated installations. They were like beautiful pictures that came to life.

On the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival, people would flock to Avenida de Almeida Ribeiro after dinner to enjoy the splendor of glittering archways, a family fun activity for young and old. The street was bustling with people meandering back and forth for a gaze at the glamorous archways festooning both sides of the street. It was a big feast for the eyes.



2 Chang’e and Wu Gang are both legendary characters in Chinese folklores.

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The author lived in the Portuguese colony of Macau when she was little. Through her childhood memories, it is possible to get a glimpse of the social and cultural facets of Macau in the 50s and 60s.

The Macau of today has evolved from a plain, quiet and peaceful small town to an internationally renowned destination for entertainment, shopping and gourmet food. Luxury casinos and hotel resorts abound, with numerous popular tourist sites, recreational attractions and fine dining opportunities, welcoming tourists from all parts of the world.

While witnessing the prosperous, bustling, shining “Las Vegas of the Orient” today, you may be more interested to follow in the author’s footsteps and stroll along the bygone pebble paths. As you hear the author’s stories and experience life in Macau from over half a century ago, you will come to appreciate its small-town charm and distinctive local culture.

