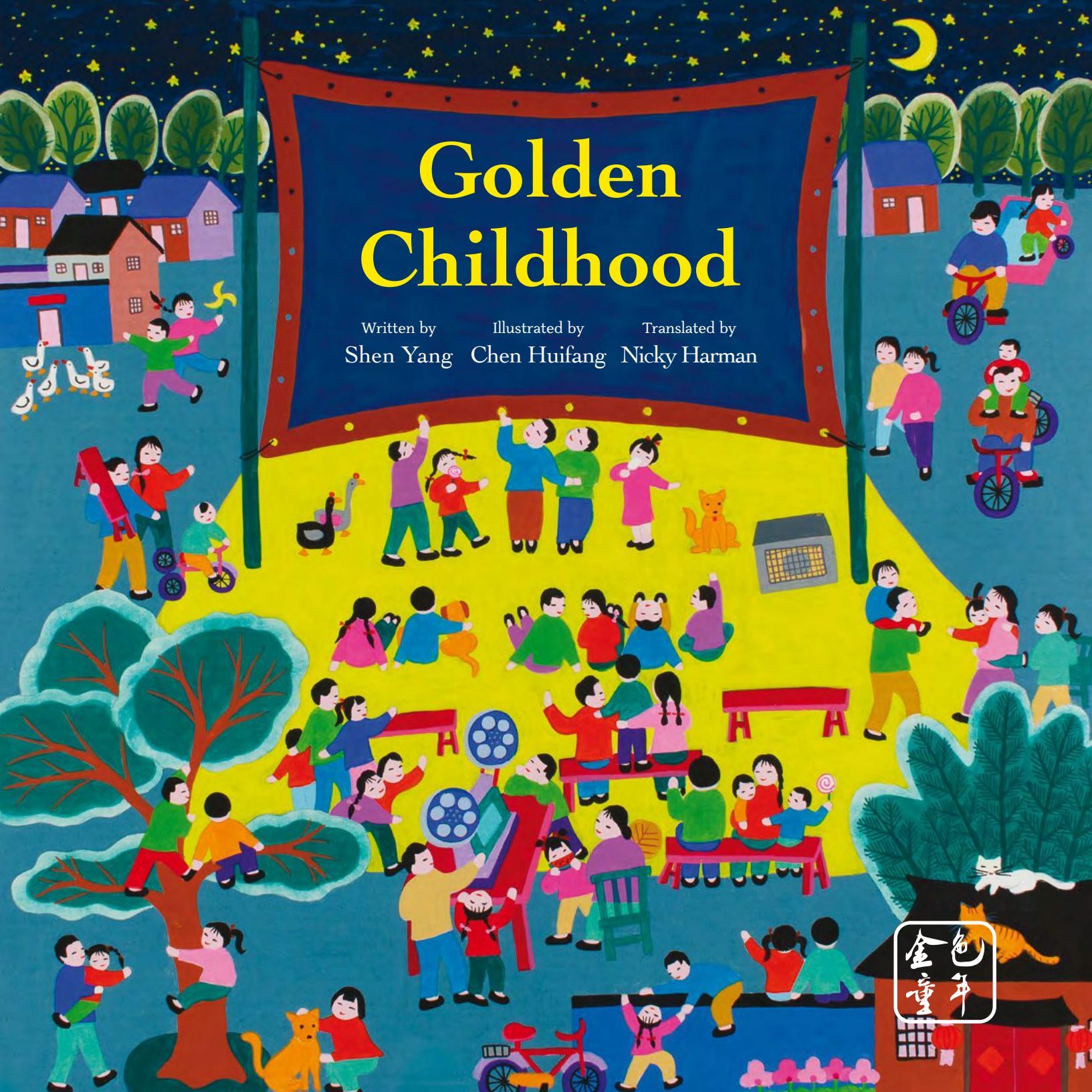


Golden Childhood

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金色童年

Granny's Little Garden

When we were children, my younger sister and I lived with our grandparents in a North China village. Granny's house had a little garden where she grew fruit and vegetables all through the year, and kept hens and ducks and cats and dogs. They and the swallows in spring were our playmates, and the garden itself was a wonderful playground for us.

Our grandparents loved and cared for us, and my sister and I grew up healthy and happy. But that cozy little garden was just the beginning of our childhood adventures.



Riding Straw Horses

When it was harvest time, the breeze blew over the fields making golden waves of the wheat, and we could hear the swish-swish as the wheat was cut. It was laid out on the ground and our donkey pulled a stone roller in circles over it to separate the straw from the grain. Granddad sang as he followed the donkey round, while our hens fought greedily over any grains that escaped.

Granny turned over the straw with a big fork. Then the straw was tied in bundles, and the grains of wheat were put in bags. We children pretended the bundles of straw were warhorses and we scooted around on them with loud yells. The air was filled with the good smell of wheat and everyone was happy.



Lotus Leaf Umbrellas

During the hottest summer afternoons, we used to play in the village pond, while the grownups did the washing and chatted.

The sun was scorching but we didn't need umbrellas or sun lotion: we picked huge lotus leaves to wear on our heads, and pulled apart fat lotus heads to nibble the seeds inside. The water was clear and cool and we jumped and dived, splashed and paddled in it happily all summer long, as the cicadas chirred loudly around us.



Haystack Slides

In autumn, the fields were golden with stacks of wheat straw. They looked like giant mushrooms. We went crazy on them. We used to skip from one to the next, from the east end of the field to the west end, then swoop down from the very top of a stack to the ground. We never seemed to run out of energy. No matter how tired we were, how much we puffed and panted and sweated, we still chased each other madly around the field. It was so much fun that we could never get enough of these games.

Then we all flopped on our backs on top of the stacks and laughed at the sun over our heads. Finally, tired of messing around, we let our eyes close and, before we knew it, we were asleep.



Ten Minutes of Joy

When the bell rang at break-time, boys and girls rushed out of the classroom, and the playground came alive. We had swings, bars, basketball hoops and balls, but most of our games required barely any equipment. Like blind-man's buff and drop the handkerchief, leapfrog and cat's cradle, or one-legged "sumo", a classic Chinese game. Another traditional game was shuttlecock kicking, where you had to keep the shuttlecock in the air for as long as possible, kicking it with one ankle, while standing on the other leg.

It was only ten minutes, but every day we made the most of that short time between classes, and had loads of fun.



Corner Shop Wonders

In the middle of the village was a place that both grownups and children loved: the little corner shop. The shop-keeper who lived there was a lovely lady who was full of life and so was her place: a pomegranate tree, its branches laden with ripe fruit, stood against the wall, pots planted with colorful flowers, and a small patch of vegetables stood outside the gate.

Her shop was a friendly, welcoming place. The adults often went there to buy sesame oil, soy sauce, or vinegar and then stopped for a chat with the neighbours. Sometimes, they would send us there to buy what they needed. To us that was a ticket to a wonderland: Hot'n Spicy chews, lollipops, sour plum sherbet, dried fruit peel, bubble gum, shrimp crackers, Huazhan biscuits, "Raccoon" brand instant noodles, "Commander Black Cat" chocolate... that shop was bursting with good things, and we only needed a few cents of spare change to buy a big bag of happiness.



Starry Night Games

The alley felt very homely. When it was time to eat, there were calls of: 'Dinner time!' through every open gate. We children were often outside playing Chinese jump rope and hoop rolling in the alley, and the grown-ups had to chase after us if we ignored their calls for too long. Inside, the houses were brightly lit and there was a cheerful clattering of pots and pans and bowls as the whole family sat around the table and tucked into their dinners.

When we children had had enough to eat, we ran back into the alley to play with our friends until our laughter rose into the dark night sky and turned into a myriad twinkling stars.



Shopping at the Open Market

When it was almost New Year, Granny and Granddad used to take my sister and me to the market. It was a very busy place. There were piles of bright patterned fabric, wonton dumplings, fruit, candied jujubes on skewers, and special banners with writing on to hang outside the gate and welcome in the new year and bring good luck. The barbers sat outside too, cutting people's hair ready for the holiday. Granny led the way, carrying a big bamboo basket, with me following behind with the little bag she had sewn for me from bits of coloured fabric. Granddad pushed the pushchair with my younger sister.

By the end of the morning, Granny's basket was full of all kinds of delicious things to eat, and so was my bag. I kept dipping my hands in, to try this and that, until my tummy was bursting.



Jujube Cakes

Jujube date cakes were a speciality at New Year in Shandong province where we lived, and we children loved them. They were made by coiling thin strips of dough around dried jujubes. These were arranged in circles and layered up into a big mound. The cakes were not just good to eat, they also symbolized people's hopes for prosperity and a better life in the coming year.

Every family had their own special shapes. Granny's jujube cakes were colourful and tasty, and came in all shapes and sizes. She would take a piece of dough, pop in the jujubes in just the right places, and in a few seconds, she had made a duck or a rabbit or a fish. After her animal cakes had been steamed, she quickly rolled jujube paste between her thumb and forefinger into tiny balls. Then she stuck them to the hot cakes to make cute little eyes that smiled up at you.



Happy Chinese New Year!

Between late January and February we celebrated Chinese New Year, also called Spring Festival because it marks the end of winter. Of all our holidays, it was the one we most looked forward to. Every family let off firecrackers, pasted new banners outside their gate, and hung up red paper lanterns. We children, in bright new clothes and shiny shoes, went from house to house holding little animal-shaped lanterns.

The grown-ups wished the neighbours 'Happy New Year!' and we were given special red envelopes with money in to bring us good luck in the coming year. Meanwhile, firecrackers crackled and popped all through the village, and the air was filled with the burning smell. I've always loved that smell, because it reminds me of the New Year holiday and family get-togethers.



Lantern Festival

Shortly after Spring Festival, we welcomed the first full moon of the lunar new year by celebrating the Lantern Festival. The whole village was decorated with animal-shaped lanterns and streamers, and giant dragons and lions, animated by nimble dancers inside them, roamed the streets at the rhythm of drums. At every corner you could find stalls selling “tangyuan”, sweet and perfectly round rice balls symbolizing unity and the wish for a joyful start of the year.

The streets were always jam-packed so my friends and I used to climb up onto the branch of a big tree. From there, we could get a good view of all the lanterns and the shows. More kids joined us, and soon every tree had rows of kids in colourful clothes on its branches shining under the bright moonlight, just like little lanterns.

