

The previous chapter gives a comprehensive examination of *Matsu Online*, and demonstrates the influence that the internet has had on local society. This chapter focuses on individuals and the ways in which they have undergone transformations in the online world. Beginning on September 14, 2005, a husband-and-wife team began to publish a series of posts on *Matsu Online*. The images were drawn by Chen Tianshun, a Matsu islander who had emigrated to Taiwan, and the text was written by his Taiwanese wife Xia Shuhua, who had never been a resident of Matsu. Given the enthusiastic response of netizens, the duo continued their collaboration for three years, culminating in the book *The Wartime Childhood of Leimengdi* (Fig. 6.1, hereafter *Leimengdi*), published in 2009. “*Leimeng*” means “hooligan” in the Matsu dialect, and the expression “*leimengdi*” is often used as a general term for boys. The book, narrated in the first-person by *Leimengdi*, thus represents both Chen Tianshun’s experiences as well as those of most Matsu children. It describes in great detail the ecology of the Matsu Islands and people’s lives during the period of military rule. The unique products of the island, the eastern Fujian culture, and the difficulties of living while governed by the military state all come alive in Chen’s vivid illustrations and Xia’s nostalgic storytelling which together constitute his memories of Matsu under military rule. Much beloved, it was selected as a “Book of Matsu” (*Matsu zhi shu*) in 2010.

This chapter will first examine the writing of *Leimengdi*, analyzing how Chen Tianshun’s experiences growing up in Matsu contain two kinds of self-consciousness, namely an island sociocultural self and a militarily oppressed self. Then I will discuss how online writing became for him a



Fig. 6.1 The cover of *The Wartime Childhood of Leimengdi*

process of subjectification (Moore 2011:80), allowing Chen to transcend these two kinds of self and become a new imagining subject brimming with morals, emotions, and hopes for the future. New media technology played a vital role in this process (Dijck 2007), since its inherent connectivity and immediacy can evoke, respond, and animate intersubjectively, linking netizens in different spatio-temporal locations. In this process, the borderlines between the inner and the outer, the individual and the social are transgressed; new subjects, social relations, and, importantly, a collective wartime memory thus take shape.

Leimengdi in Matsu Online

On the old main page of *Matsu Online*, one could find a link to “Xia Shuhua-Leimengdi Stories” on the right side under “Recommendations” (Fig. 6.2). Clicking it gave access to posts beginning in 2005 and continuing up to the present day. Each of the posts received a large number of hits when it first appeared, and they continued to be frequently visited. When the web page was redone in 2016, this section was merged with the “Star Writers” (*dakuai*) section, under the name of Xia Shuhua. Nevertheless, it has remained one of the most popular series on the website. What prompted this couple to write the posts? How did they work together, and what did they want to express?



Fig. 6.2 Xia Shuhua-Leimengdi stories on Matsu Online

The Denial of Matsu

Let me begin with the creation of *Leimengdi*. I first met Chen Tianshun at the invitation of a Matsu commissioner, Yang Suisheng. Chen was already quite famous in Matsu because of the success of *Leimengdi*. The commissioner was interested in promoting a recent archeological discovery on Liang Island, and hoped he would put out a series of books about the lives of the people on Liang Island in the style of *Leimengdi*.¹ Later, as I was writing about the online Matsu “land reclamation” movement (Lin and Wang 2012), I found him very keen on writing blog posts and drawing pictures criticizing the government’s occupation of the Matsu people’s land during the military period. When I contacted him to express my interest in researching *Leimengdi*, with the hope that I would be able to interview him and his wife, he invited me to his home.

In my interview with Chen, I asked why his family had come to Taiwan. He told me that the Matsu fishing economy had declined, and his father could no longer support their family by fishing in their village of Qiaozhi, Beigan. His elder brother and sister were sent to Taiwan as child laborers, and were followed there by their father, who made a living selling Fuzhou noodles. When Chen graduated from middle school, he moved with his mother to Taiwan, and with that, the whole family had left Matsu behind. Chen then studied fine arts, and after graduation worked as a cartoonist for several animation companies. He lived in

Taiwan for twenty-seven years without returning once to Matsu. I asked him if he hadn't missed it, and he frowned and said:

CHEN : As far as I was concerned, it wasn't such a great place. Shuhua had been telling me for a long time that she wanted to go back with me to see it, but I just told her that it's a barren and dying place. I only went back in 2005 because of the land dispute with the government. Here in Taiwan, we've tried so hard to get our land back, and when we actually got a chance to reclaim it, would it have been right if we hadn't gone back?

AUTHOR : When you came here, did you contact other people from Matsu in Taiwan?

CHEN : I didn't get to know any others from Matsu, aside from occasional contact with some high school classmates.

This snippet of conversation shows that when he moved to Taiwan, Chen Tianshun's memories of Matsu under military rule were very negative. He did not return for nearly three decades and only rarely had contact with others from Matsu. He married a Taiwanese wife and lived with his family in Taipei, unwilling to face that part of Matsu's past.

Nevertheless, during this time, he would occasionally post a few cartoons on *Matsu Online*, criticizing the state for fooling the people, occupying their land, and coming up with all manner of excuses to justify not handing the land back to its rightful owners. The longstanding anger he holds against the government is still evident (Fig. 6.3) (T. Chen 2008).

I asked Chen why he started drawing the *Leimengdi* series. His wife Shuhua, sitting beside him, answered by saying that when she joined her husband as he went home to negotiate the land dispute with the government, she was very moved to see his hometown for the first time. She wrote about her feelings in an essay entitled "Total Lunar Eclipse" (*yue quan shi*) (Xia 2005a), and posted it in the "Life & Culture" section of *Matsu Online*. In the piece, she describes how after she visited Matsu, her husband's childhood memories turned into her own longing. The first couple of pieces were all text, with a few photos she had taken appended to the end. To her surprise, the click rate was extremely high. She then wrote three or four more essays, and each essay broke the Matsu Online record for number of views. Encouraged, she continued to write.

The enthusiastic response of netizens not only gave Xia Shuhua the impetus to continue the series, it also inspired her cartoonist husband to begin illustrating her work. On October 27, 2005, he published the first



Fig. 6.4 Qiaozi, Beigan (circa 1960)

drawing in the *Leimengdi* series called “Faraway Childhood” (*yuangfang de tongnian*) (Xia 2005d). When I asked him why he decided to do it, he told me:

When I went back to Matsu for the lawsuit, I saw how desolate my hometown had become, and it made me very sad. I wanted to leave something behind, since this was the place where my mother and father once lived and struggled.

This husband-and-wife web creation continued for three years.

Since *Leimengdi* is built around Chen Tianshun’s recollections of growing up in Matsu, I will begin with his descriptions of local customs and his warzone experiences to analyze the implicit dual self in the text.

The Island Sociocultural Self

Leimengdi offers a rich portrait of Matsu’s sociocultural context during Chen Tianshu’s childhood. Below, I discuss how the author imagines himself from the perspectives of land, family, social lives, and individual fantasy.

Land

Opening the book, what immediately leaps to the eye is the carefully drawn Qiaozi, where the main character *Leimengdi* grows up (Fig. 6.4). The village is on the Matsu island of Beigan, and many of the villagers there rely on fishing for their livelihood. Some of their catch is sold to



Fig. 6.5 Leimengdi's siblings

Tangqi, the largest hamlet in Beigan. Chen Tianshun meticulously depicts the two inlets of Qiaozi, and as Leimengdi's father says: "They were like two precious pockets given to us by God, from which an inexhaustible supply could be drawn" (Xia and Chen 2009: 96). In this drawing of Qiaozi, Chen recreates the houses of the 1960s with incredibly accuracy (today, more than half of them have disappeared or fallen into disrepair). This precision undoubtedly shows that his youth was the most important period in his life.

Family and Social Life

Below the drawing, Xia provides a wonderful description of how Leimengdi's family managed to support eight people, two pigs, twenty to thirty ducks, and a dozen chickens. The father left each morning at 5 am to fish in the ocean, while the mother was constantly on the move, farming the slopes of the mountain, collecting seafood at low tide, and hawking goods to soldiers. Every child in the household had a job to do: the older children did the heaviest work with Leimengdi as a helper,



Fig. 6.6 Processing shrimp required the participation of the whole family

while his younger sister watched the youngest girl. Every member of the household took part in its maintenance (Fig. 6.5).

During Leimengdi's childhood, the ocean around the Matsu Islands still teemed with small shrimp. Processing shrimp was a complex process that required the participation of the whole family. When the fishing boats returned, the shrimp was first sorted on the beach, then taken back to each family's fishing hut to be boiled, dried, and laid out on bamboo mats to continue to dry in the sun (Fig. 6.6), all before it could be sold.

Chen also made extremely detailed depictions of village ceremonies and events such as weddings. In the small communities on Matsu, when a wedding was to be held, the family would borrow tables and chairs from anyone they could. A few days before the wedding banquet, all the able-bodied men in the family would carry a long bamboo pole through the village, tying chairs onto it as they walked the lanes, which became a fascinating part of the backdrop of the village (Fig. 6.7). The islands carried on the customs of eastern Fujian, where the tradition was that wedding celebrations lasted three days and three nights, with a separate "men's party," "women's party," and "children's party." The "children's party" would be held three days before the wedding, and before the



Fig. 6.7 Chairs needed for a wedding banquet



Fig. 6.8 A children's party

banquet began children would beat a gong and shout as loudly as possible, “The gong’s ringing, come and drink!” When they heard the sound of the gong, the other children would happily run over to join the fun (Fig. 6.8).

The annual Lantern Festival celebration (*pe mang*) was an even happier occasion for everyone, young and old (Fig. 6.9). Adults would carry sedan chairs and the children would beat gongs as they circled the village. Children liked to hear the adults tell the story of Deity Yang fighting demons on the high seas (Fig. 6.10).



Fig. 6.9 Lantern Festival night in Matsu



Fig. 6.10 Deity Yang taming demons on the sea

Personal Fantasy

As he grew up, Leimengdi often played by the seaside and enjoyed the beauty of the ocean (Fig. 6.11). The section of beach that led to his grandfather's house left a particularly indelible memory. As he walked along the sand, the village seemed to rise like a mirage of a castle, while



Fig. 6.11 Leimengdi's personal world

behind him was fine white sand and the ever-changing ocean. In his mind, the scene resembled a girl curled up on the beach, and that image has remained etched deeply in Chen Tianshun's memory.

The exquisite scenery of Matsu was imprinted on his mind through his childhood games, as was the food that the women of Matsu made: noodle soup with fresh seafood and fish balls, jellyfish strips, and golden crab. These flavors became an unforgettable part of Leimengdi's memories. However, all of these wonderful memories came to be overshadowed by the military rule.

The Militarily Oppressed Self

Leimengdi is the first book to describe the physical and psychological harm that military rule wreaked on the islanders. The narratives and illustrations portray violent scenes with great vividness. The terror, oppression, and trauma of the time are evoked through the visceral content, paralleling the sociocultural context of Matsu described earlier.



Fig. 6.12 Newly arrived soldiers

Terror

Given the haste with which Chiang Kai-shek's army came to Matsu, many soldiers were billeted in the homes of islanders. The second floor of Leimengdi's house was turned into the military "Gaodeng [Island] Bureau." When young soldiers sailed in from Taiwan, they would frequently stay in Leimengdi's house (Fig. 6.12). When the weather and tides permitted it, they would then sail across from Beigan to the facing island of Gaodeng. Despite his youth, Leimengdi observed the fear of these unseasoned soldiers:

[They] shrank back from the piercing cold wind, feeling for the first time the vibrations from cannon-fire at the frontline. Leimengdi heard the young soldiers' low sobs, mixed with their helpless terror. At night, it seemed they were orphans forsaken by the world...Even young Leimengdi could sense their feeling of near-despair (Xia and Chen 2009: 22).

Like the soldiers, Matsu islanders also faced terror, that of losing a loved one at any moment. Once, Leimengdi's father and a few other men from the village disappeared for several days after accidentally crossing a boundary while fishing (Fig. 6.13). At that time, the whole village was anxious, and wives and children who feared losing their husbands and fathers would



Fig. 6.13 Dad has disappeared

burst into tears unexpectedly. Every so often, mainland fishermen who had drifted off course in the mist would appear in the village, and Leimengdi would watch them be blindfolded and dragged off by the soldiers.

Trauma

The trauma of military rule was most keenly felt when loved ones met with violent abuse. The women of Qiaozi often went to the seaside to gather shellfish and seaweed in order to supplement their families' incomes. To get there, they had to walk near a slope where the garrison barracks were located, and great care was necessary to avoid the notice of the soldiers (Fig. 6.14). One day, Leimengdi's mother and aunts went to gather wild vegetables. They were caught and held by soldiers from the garrison, and only when village leaders came to negotiate, were they released. That night his mother kept crying in pain, and as Leimengdi salved her back, he saw that she was bruised as though she'd been beaten. Although she never told him what she had experienced, he had a sense of what must have happened. From then on, when he knew she had gone to the seaside, he would wait until dusk and gaze anxiously at the mountain



Fig. 6.14 Hiding from soldiers while gathering wild vegetables by the seaside

ridge until he glimpsed her and could relax. When Chen mentioned this memory, he said half-jokingly, “When you read that passage, you probably thought I was being filial, right? But it wasn’t filial piety, it was a child’s fear of losing his mother.”

Oppression

Living under military rule, the fear and psychological trauma of oppression were omnipresent for Matsu islanders. The story entitled “The Disappearing Yellow Croaker” in the book best demonstrates the sense of maltreatment that they experienced during this period (Fig. 6.15). A soldier living on the second floor of Leimengdi’s house received orders to leave Matsu, and he asked Leimengdi’s mother to buy some yellow croaker and dry them in the sun to make “croaker jerky,” a local Matsu specialty, for him to take back to Taiwan. At that time, the yellow croaker catch was minimal, and it rarely appeared in the markets. When they heard that a fisherman had caught some croaker, Leimengdi’s aunt who lived in Tangqi bought a few. She put them in a basket, covered it with a gunny-sack, and told Leimengdi to take it on the bus back to Qiaozi.

Unexpectedly, there were two military policemen and the owner of a seafood restaurant on the bus. Seeing Leimengdi carrying a fish basket,



Fig. 6.15 Where are these yellow croakers from?

they demanded that he uncover it, and they examined its contents. They saw the fish and asked, “Where are these croakers from? Why aren’t they for sale in the market?” They concluded, “These are illegally hoarded goods,” and confiscated the fish. Tears welled up in Leimengdi’s helpless eyes. He didn’t understand why the fish had been taken from him. When he got off the bus, he was crying and felt confused and helpless as he walked home. When he told his mother what had happened, she immediately hurried off to Tangqi. When she reached the seafood restaurant, she saw that the owner had already gutted and cleaned the confiscated fish.

With this simple story, Chen demonstrated how soldiers were able to join forces with influential locals to wield power, invent excuses for their behavior, and run roughshod over the islanders. Tianshun mentioned this story in my interview with him. The oppression he experienced as a child still lingers in his mind and his anger has not faded.

Indeed, children experienced a special kind of oppression and terror under military rule. Another story in the book, *Nighttime Trilogy*, describes a separate incident. One night, Leimengdi’s mother told him to take some fish to his uncle in Tangqi. Between Qiaozi and Tangqi was a



Fig. 6.16 Going to Tangqi at night

forest, a forbidden military zone, and a military blockhouse. These areas were viewed with complacency during the day, but at night they became terrifying; it is difficult to measure just how much courage it took for a child to go through them. Chen describes the journey in detail. After Leimengdi left the village, he first had to walk through the deep, dark forest. Concealed among the trees were graves, and the ghosts of the dead flashed here and there; Leimengdi dashed madly and made it to Juguang Fortress where the sentry pointed his rifle at him and shouted: “Halt! What’s the password?” “I’m...I’m just a villager,” Leimengdi answered softly. It wasn’t easy to keep going, but he made it to a lookout post, where a group of cadres were training. Their dogs were famous for their ferocity; one had viciously bitten Leimengdi’s younger brother. Leimengdi started to run through the dark as he heard his own frantic heartbeat and ragged breath, not knowing when his ordeal would be over (Fig. 6.16).

Bodily Injury

Aside from terror and oppression, ordinary people were also physically injured in the military zone that Matsu had become. Maimed or crippled



Fig. 6.17 Landmines everywhere

characters frequently appear in the *Leimengdi* series. One example is a man who often passed by Leimengdi's home. He had been hit with machine gun fire while fishing, and walked with a limp, perspiring heavily from the effort. His sadness makes a deep impression on Leimengdi, who also goes with his mother to visit a distant aunt who has lost an arm to a landmine. He sees her sitting in a dark room with sunken eyes, burdened by her struggle to support three young children with only one arm.

Children were not exempt from adult fates. Chen tells the story of a group of children playing by the seaside who discover a rusty metal case and decide to use it as a target. They take turns throwing rocks at it to see who can hit it, but just as they are getting excited, there is an enormous bang and the box explodes. Four of the children are blinded, including Leimengdi's older cousin.

Leimengdi's mother's story is perhaps the most tragic. As a young newlywed, her new husband was conscripted into a work gang and mortally wounded by a landmine (Fig. 6.17). Unfortunately, at that time marriage was a matter of agreement between two families, and the remote islands did not issue marriage licenses. These marriages were not recognized by the government, so not only was Leimengdi's mother ineligible for compensation, the young widow had to bear the burden of losing her husband all on her own.

Matsu Locked in Mist

These intractable problems seemed the inexorable fate of the islands. Leimengdi can only stand behind the barbed wire and stare out hopelessly at his own island of Beigan (Fig. 6.18). Xia writes:



Fig. 6.18 *Leimengdi* standing by barbed wire staring out hopelessly

The confinement of the islands coalesced into a song of the islanders' fate...In those years, the opposite bank surrounded us, as though we were surrounded by our own military. My mother couldn't go to seaside to gather shellfish, my father couldn't go out to fish, children couldn't swim in the ocean...What my mother lost couldn't be retrieved, what was taken couldn't be demanded back, and all of it just seemed to be a matter of course...Was this just part of the hopelessness of the larger situation, or was it a historical tragedy? (Xia and Chen 2009:53)

In *Leimengdi*, the word “mist” is frequently a metaphor for Matsu caught in a warzone atmosphere:

There had been mist for days. The whole village seemed glued to the ground—there was no sun and no breeze, only gray lumps congealed there...The earth and sky were moist and dark, and the tree trunks all looked darkened and wet with rain.

Waves of mist would come in on the breeze. The mist would cover everything and suddenly the sea would disappear, enshrouded. Then in an instant, the mist would lift and dissipate. It was like a demon, a blurry sea monster that came in with the wind and dreamily drifted there.

It was a special feeling to run through thick mist. It was as though you knew how long the road was but could never know how deep the mist was. (ibid.: 45)

The Matsu Islands frequently experienced fog, and all communication with the outside world would be cut off. Chen builds a metaphor of the warzone atmosphere as a mist that locks Matsu down so that the people are

lost in a miasma, unable to orient themselves or tell which direction they're heading. For this reason, distant Taiwan became a "treasured island" (*baodao*) for them. Leimengdi was eager to grow up because his mother often said to him, "When you're older, you can go to the 'treasured island of Taiwan.'" When he was fifteen, his mother packed up household possessions, the family's ancestor tablet, a jar of sand from the coast near their home, and, with him and his younger siblings, left for Taiwan.

Healing through a Wife's Pen

These rich accounts of the warzone were written by a Taiwanese woman who has never lived in Matsu herself—Chen's wife Xia Shuhua. The duo's creative process generally involved Chen telling a story to Xia, who would then write it down. They would discuss it so that Tianshun's intended meaning would not be lost. Xia's writing was honed over many years of working in advertising and communications, and her posts have been admiringly received by Matsu islanders. Not only have all of her essays obtained a very high number of views, they have also been reprinted in *Matsu Daily*. Here is how Chen explains it:

She manages to capture the experiences of the Matsu people. It would be hard for a local Matsu person to write that way. Her [relatively distant] relationship with Matsu allows her a certain objectivity.

There seems to be a special understanding between husband and wife that engenders a collaboration that is far from simple or one-dimensional. At times, Chen will simply draw a scene, and his wife will freely narrate, allowing her to express her own emotions and imagination. For example, in "New Years Performances," Chen told her a simple story about an unforgettable snowy New Years Day when he snuggled in his mother's arms to watch the snowfall (Fig. 6.19).

Xia meticulously wrote out the scene, describing Leimengdi's warm memories of his mother:

As firecrackers and fireworks swirled through the sky, Leimengdi seemed to spot the first snow of the year. Just as on the first day of the lunar year, he and his mother joined the crowd in the big public square in Tangqi to watch the folk dances and performances. And that day, fine snow suddenly fell from the sky, the white snowflakes fluttering about like soft, delicate flakes of oatmeal, sparse and elegant. It fell gently and evenly, neither too fast nor too slow, coming to rest on his mother's black hair and the fur collar of her blue coat. It came down like

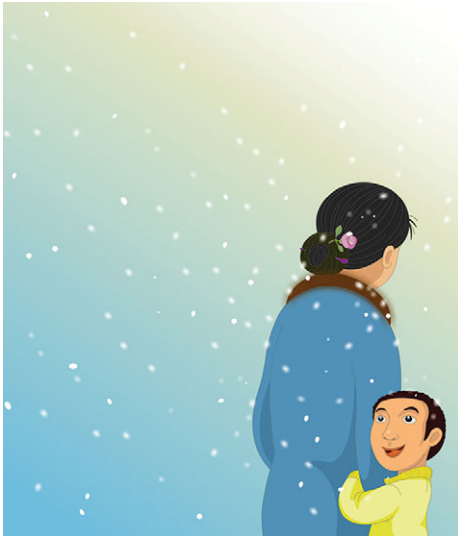


Fig. 6.19 Leimengdi's memory of his mother

eiderdown, silently floating through the air. Leimengdi lifted his young round face, and saw that his mother was spellbound, smiling happily. That day, that instant, was the calmest moment of his mother's life, just as it was the most tranquil moment during the hubbub of the midwinter scene. The beauty of the silent snow mingled with this lovely memory of his mother, and even when he was older, its beauty could still overwhelm him. (*ibid.*: 136)

Of course, Xia's texts do not merely transmit Chen's memories; she often adds a twist to Chen's mournful stories of military rule. For instance, in the example above, Leimengdi stares out hopelessly at the confined island of Beigan, not knowing where the islanders could turn. In the following narration, Xia turns this idea into a yearning for change:

Young Leimengdi stood on the rocks staring out at the ocean, the wind roaring past his ears and the sea roiling beneath his feet. Facing the freedom of the wind and the unfettered sea, when would the inhabitants of these isolated islands open their wings like seabirds and have a free and open spirit? (*ibid.*: 53)

Next, she provides some hope for the future of the islands:

The mist silently enshrouded the islands, and the sun diffused through the scattered clouds, shining on the wet treetops with dazzling sunbeams. Although that year layers of thick mist locked the islands down like the military rule, the sun that had disappeared behind the mountains would rise again the next morning, and the mist would finally be dispelled. (*ibid.*)

This hopeful future transfigured from past sorrows has helped Chen gradually face his painful childhood and reach a sense of self-transcendence and salvation through the creative process. As Chen told me in our interview, “Once it’s written down, I can let it go.” He hopes that his old painful memories will finally be exorcised by the writing.

Xia Shuhua plays an essential role throughout their creative process. For example, in the interview, Chen mentioned that the book was originally called *Leimengdi*, a transliteration of the name “Raymond” (雷蒙) which would have had fashionable foreign associations. But Xia changed one of the Chinese characters in the name to mean “alliance” (盟) implying that Chen and his homeland of Matsu were reconnected through his writing, and that he had taken an oath of allegiance to it. Undoubtedly, Xia recognized that the experiences of Leimengdi under military rule express Chen’s deepest memories, even in spite of his immigration to Taiwan at a young age. This is also true for many other Matsu islanders who immigrated to Taiwan. As Leimengdi’s senile old father drifts between waking and sleep, he still mumbles about getting on the boat in Keelung to go home.

Relay of Memories

The Leimengdi stories have received tremendous support and participation from Matsu islanders. Whenever a story is published online, netizens often enthusiastically share similar experiences of their own and exchange their intimate feelings publicly. For example, the day after “The Dark Night Trilogy” was published, a netizen responded:

Many thanks to Shuhua and Leimengdi for helping us remember how we used to go to the seashore when we were young to dig for clams to make a little money. Foggy mornings were even scarier than nighttime—you couldn’t see the village in front of you or the shops behind you, and it was terrifying. So it turns out I wasn’t the only coward...Because of your wonderful posts, when I get off work, I often go on *Matsu Online* and look for more solitary pleasures. (Maimian Xishi 2005)

Similarly, when the webmaster of *Matsu Online* saw that Leimengdi’s father had been captured by the Communist Party, he immediately shared the following post:

Lots of similar things happened in Dongyin during the Cold War. Dongyin fishermen were captured by the mainland fishing authorities, but there were

also mainland fishermen who drifted off-course and were imprisoned by our side. At one point in the fifty-some years of the Republic of China, a mainland fisherman was captured, and was able to meet up with his son who had been forced into the military by the Kuomintang many years before. Afterward, the two were once again separate. The famous author Sang Pinzai wrote the story up in the moving tale “A Meeting of Father and Son,” which is included in the official Dongyin Gazetteer. (J. Liu 2006a)

Xia’s evocative writing seemed to bring the faded, blurry past back to vivid life for many Matsu emigrants. For example, Huang Jinhua, who had emigrated to Canada, also responded:

Reading Shuhua’s work is like looking at an old photograph...suddenly I see how I made it through, and I know all about how things used to be, things that at the time were muddled and confusing. Now I use those memories to finally see my own childhood clearly, to see my old life in my hometown. (J. Huang 2005)

Netizens not only use *Leimengdi* to understand their own histories, they also help Chen to draw more accurate pictures by supplementing gaps in his memory owing to his long absence from Matsu. Their support has provided crucial emotional ballast for the couple to persist with the project. For instance, Tianshun wrote on *Matsu Online*: “This afternoon I exhausted myself revising a drawing of a kitchen. But when I saw the response of my fellow villager Mu’er, I felt revived...” (Leimengdi 2006). For Xia, the internet expanded her world, and the responses of netizens were the strongest impetus behind her writing. She once wrote on *Matsu Online*:

I’m so grateful for *Matsu Online*—it’s opened another window for me onto Matsu! (Xia 2005b)

I would like to thank the webmaster and netizens of *Matsu Online* for all their encouragement. Your enthusiasm has been a source of constant motivation for us, and this beautiful, welcoming site has become a paradisaal castle in my mind. (Xia 2008)

Indeed, one could say that this work of more than three years could not have been completed without netizens: throughout the process there was a collaboration between the writing and illustrations, the creators and readers, and the locals and non-locals, all of which brought the series to life. As one netizen commented:

Each time, I’m not [just] moved by your stories. There are also all of those readers who are moved by you, and their responses really touch me. (Leayang 2005)

The associate webmaster of *Matsu Online* even asked, “Without *Matsu Online*, would there even be a book about Leimengdi’s childhood under military rule?” (vice admin 2010). Another netizen’s response speaks to the spirit of online creation: “[One is] like a dazzling dancer, and [the other is] like a beautiful stage, and when they come together...they create a moving performance.” (Qiahogou 2010).

Unsurprisingly, when the *Leimengdi* series was collected and published as a book in 2009, it was celebrated by netizens, who felt that Leimengdi’s childhood echoed a wider experience:

Leimengdi’s childhood under military rule is also our childhood. (H. Wang 2009)

It’s a period we all went through, and these are memories we all have. (Yuan 2009)

In sum, it was not Xia Shuhua and Chen Tianshun alone, but also their online readers, who completed this memory of wartime Matsu.

New Subject, New Matsu

The narrative practices of life stories usually exert an important influence on self-formation (Peacock and Holland 1993: 374; Lambek and Antze 1996: xxi). The writing of *Leimengdi* certainly changed Chen and his wife. Online media not only provided new forms of sociality to Tianshun, who had been displaced and had long refused to confront his past and his homeland, but also brought a new understanding of this place. He told me:

Only through the *Leimengdi* series could I build a new connection to Matsu. I needed to understand Matsu better in order to draw it. When the book was published, we had open meetings about it, and the readers who came offered different opinions, which gave me a deeper understanding of Matsu. It helped me see a different Matsu.

Clearly, composing *Leimengdi* not only offered Chen a new connection to Matsu, it also constituted a process of discovering different aspects of Matsu. “Over the past few years, I’ve spent a lot of time in Matsu, so it’s like I’ve made up for the previous twenty-seven years of absence! (*Laughs*).” He explained:

These past few years as I've tried to get my land back from the government, I've returned to Matsu to do land surveys. Only now do I appreciate how my parents had to work in this terribly remote and difficult place. But now we have new technologies, and we can have a different kind of lifestyle on Matsu from the one we had before.

That is to say, Tianshun has not only discovered a new Matsu, but also fresh possibilities for the future. In a new era, equipped with new technology, he imagines that he could remake his hometown into a new world to re-inhabit, and to transcend his painful past. As he said:

I'm not asking for all of the land back from the government, only for places that have "stories." Like the spot on the beach where my mother used to collect shellfish. The soldiers didn't just prevent her from collecting there, they chased her and beat her until she was black and blue. And then there's what used to be the Chen ancestral fields where my grandfather is buried. When the army wanted to expand their barracks, they made my father dig up my grandfather's casket. By the time my father was notified, he didn't even have enough time to buy an urn. All he could do was put my grandfather's bones in a cardboard box and place it in a nearby mountainside cavern. Matsu has a lot of big black ants, and they came and nested in the box.

As he recounted this story to me, I could sense his deep anger at the military's injustice towards his family. He wants his lands back because they hold bodily traces of injustice and trauma; he is now prepared to confront the past oppressions and abuses by winning back his lands. When I interviewed him in early 2016, Taiwan was in the middle of a presidential election, and the leader of the opposition party had a real chance of winning. He told me: "When the new president takes power, I'm going to write to her personally." Not only is he demanding the return of his land, he also seeks to redress the issue of his mother's first husband.

My mother hadn't been married to her first husband for more than six months before he was forced to work for the army. When his arm was blown off by a bomb, he was taken to the hospital, where he died the next morning. You know how he died? The hospital facilities were so bad that he bled to death.

At that time, if you married on the outer islands, you weren't issued a marriage certificate. And without a marriage certificate or children, the government wouldn't recognize the marriage and wouldn't pay out benefits. It was such a horrible, cruel death, but as far as the government was concerned, it was as though he'd never existed at all.

Chen Tianshun's narration shows that what he is fighting for is not compensation, but rather the right to attach a sense of purpose to his life, a meaning for his existence. Having been reawakened in the process of creating *Leimengdi*, the afflictions of military rule, which previously caused him so much suffering, have now filled him with new power. He has started to confront his traumatic past by fighting for the ethical value of the unmourned and unremembered many who died because of military rule (see also Kwon 2010: 412). By grappling directly with the humiliation and oppression his family suffered, he is attempting to rediscover his morals, emotions, and affects, as well as to restore ethical value to the people who were abandoned by the state.

As for Xia, she said:

I've been writing advertising copy my whole life, but it wasn't until I started working on *Leimengdi* that I truly found joy in writing. Every day I still write something and put it up on Facebook.

Indeed, in the online series, Xia Shuhua not only puts Chen Tianshu's memories into words, she also frequently writes about her own feelings as a mother and expresses her apprehensions and her gradual coming to terms with aging in posts such as "My Invincible Little Warrior" (2005c), "A 33-Year-Old Mother's Disneyland," (2005e), and "Anxieties of Middle Age" (2006a). She says that she "wrote these pieces for myself," and that she enjoys sharing her youthful dreams and travel stories with fellow netizens. In the piece "The Slow Life" (2006b), she also writes of her love for music, fiction, and soap operas, and describes how a grown woman in the midst of her busy life can still find space for small acts of self-indulgence and ways to enjoy her life (Fig. 6.20). Although the *Leimengdi* series has ended, Xia has not stopped writing, but continues to produce work and post it on Facebook. Tianshun says: "She's got a lot of fans on Facebook now." Of course, after these interviews, I became one of them.

Conclusion: Internet Writing as Subjectification

Leimengdi is based on Chen Tianshun's personal memories of living in Matsu under military rule. It includes his longing for the land there, his family's common struggles, the oppression and trauma inflicted by the



Fig. 6.20 The slow life

WZA, his anger, and his uncertainty about the fate of the islands. For years after moving with his family to Taiwan, Chen Tianshun chose not to face this painful part of his past. It was only with the advent of the internet that he began to reconstruct his memories and imagine new possibilities for Matsu. He and his wife were in constant dialogue throughout the process of creating their online work. His wife retold the history of the area from her position as a Taiwanese, describing her hopes for the island's future. With the enthusiastic support of the online community, Chen was gradually able to face his own wounds and past misfortune, and to begin to heal. Through his *Leimengdi* stories, he was able to reconnect to the land and the people of Matsu. He not only repositioned himself, but also developed a fresh understanding of Matsu. He imagined different possibilities for the islands and himself – it is an island of hope for him now. For Chen Tianshu, writing is a process of subjectification. By drawing, writing, and sharing his work, he was gradually healed, turning himself into a subject. Bringing morals, emotions and affects together, he was able to transcend his old selves, and rediscovered a capacity to act.

However, *Leimengdi* was more than just Chen's personal reminiscence; it gave the people of Matsu an account of a shared history. It was chosen

as a “Book of Matsu” precisely because it offered a “collectivity-in-the-person” (White 2000, 2001: 504), or a “memory of memories” (Cappelletto 2005a: 23), representing the painful and violent experiences of a people under military rule in the form of a single child’s story. That this web-based series of wartime memories could be woven so quickly reminds us of a key effect of internet technology in contemporary society. Over recent years, scholars have probed the interface between individual and collective memory.² Many works have pointed out how focusing on narrative practices (White 2000, 2004) or new mediational means (Miklavcic 2008, Lambek and Antze 1996) can transcend the dichotomy of the individual and the collective, the psychological and the socio-structural. The ability to read and write provided by Web 2.0 meant that netizens could immediately receive and respond, and this made online collective creation possible. These choral effects are particularly clear in the *Leimengdi* series: the individual is no longer a sole writer, but in a relay of emotion. Whether living in Matsu, Taiwan, or elsewhere in the world, Matsu people can come together and interact in the virtual world, composing their war memories communally. Through the course of this process, netizens participate in a “social curation” (Macek 2013), mingling the individual and the social, thereby producing a new collective identity.

These memories, furthermore, carrying as they do the load of shared traumatic experiences, are imbued with a power and agency that can erupt at any moment. *Leimengdi* thus is an important foundation for Part III in which I will discuss how this history of common struggle has become an internal motivating force for the people of Matsu to pursue better futures for the islands after the suspension of military rule. In the face of an uncertain future, the people of Matsu not only use internet technology, but also apply all kinds of ways to connect themselves with the broader world.