

Memoirs of a Kitten: DiàoDiào

Hyun Chen



1. DiàoDiào with KungFu Panda Nunchaku Toy

June 9th, 2018, Taken by Hyun Chen, living room at home in Bānán, Chóngqing, China

Content: Crouched on the ground near the tea table, my little cat DiàoDiào 雕雕 was sleeping beside my KungFu Panda Nunchaku 功夫熊猫双节棍 toy.

Context: After playing with me and the toy, the little kitten, only 4 months old, succumbed to a deep sleep. The KungFu Panda Nunchaku toy was sent by my teenage elder brother as a gift, because I have always slept with stuffed animals.

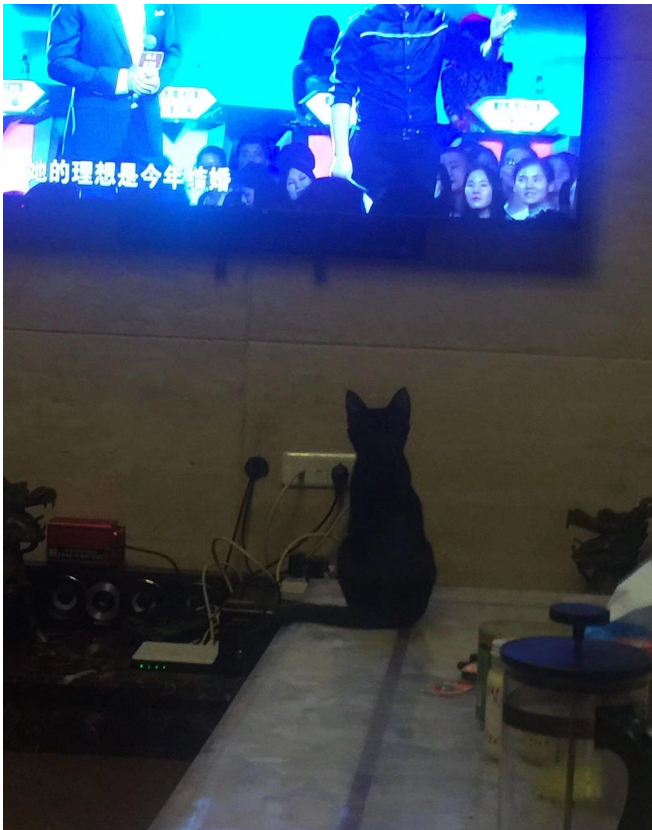


2. A Ginger Cat in the Neighborhood Park

June 17th, 2018, Taken by Hyun Chen, in the home neighborhood park in Bānán, Chóngqing, China

Content: Behind a rock, a ginger cat was staring at the cellphone camera in the shade of trees.

Context: I took this photo by accident on a hot summer day on my way home from school. The cat has almost the same appearance as the female cat protagonist in a famous Chinese children's novel, Smiling Cat Diary 笑猫日记, which records the daily life of several animals with a group of brave children who made a home in a stone cave for the speaking cat family. DiàoDiào 雕雕 always went out and hung out with his neighborhood cat friends, and I used to imagine that Smiling Cat Diary actually existed in my life.

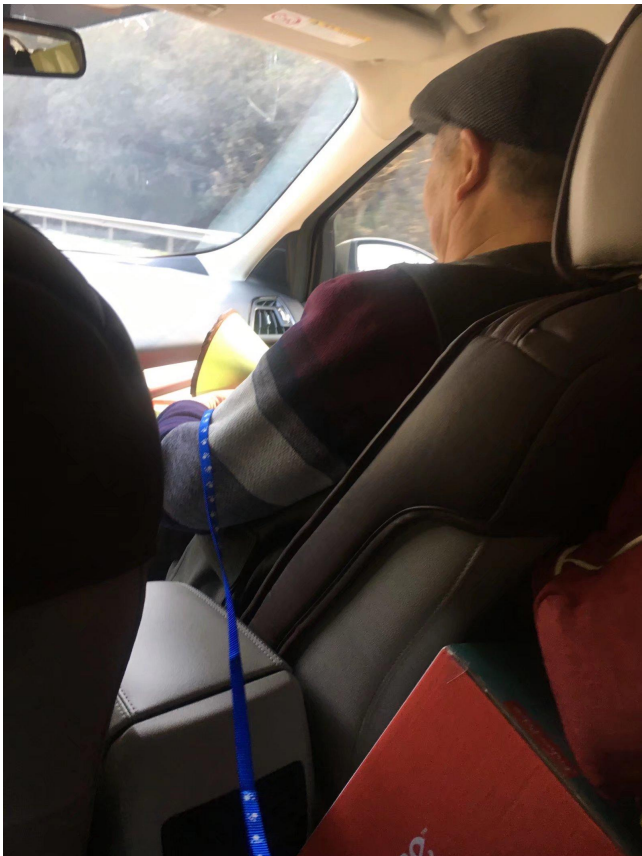


3. DiāoDiáo Watching TV

June 22nd, 2018, Taken by Hyun Chen, living room at home in Bānán, Chóngqing, China

Content: DiāoDiáo 雕雕 was sitting on my grandpa's favorite tea table and watching the replay of a popular Chinese dating show from the 2010s. The subtitle, 我的理想是今年结婚, is from a man in the dating show, translated as "My dream is to marry this year."

Context: My grandpa's biggest hobby was watching television when he was awake. Raised by grandpa, DiāoDiáo developed the habit of watching television with my family and was his most loyal companion in front of the screen.



4. DiāoDiáo with Grandpa

August 22nd, 2018, Taken by Hyun Chen, in the family car on the highway in Shízhù, Chóngqing, China

Content: My grandpa was holding DiāoDiáo 雕雕 with an Elizabethan collar in the passenger seat. (Permitted to share this photo by Hyun Chen's grandpa, Shuxun Deng)

Context: My grandpa initially said that he doesn't like Diāo Diáo or any type of pets at all. But after Diāo Diáo came to our home, he fed him and played with him every day. In this photo, he was looking at Diāo Diáo lovingly.



5. DiàoDiào on the Car Headrest

August 22nd, 2018, Taken by Hyun Chen, in the family car on the highway in Shízhù, Chóngqing, China

Content: Behind my mom, DiàoDiào was staring at me on the headrest, his claws tightly set into the fabric. The car was filled with packages. (Permitted to share this photo by Hyun Chen's mom, Qun Deng)

Context: My parents initially didn't allow DiàoDiào to come along with our regular family trip. But she relented upon my keen request. Diào Diào managed to break through the rules and somehow brought us all closer.



6. DiàoDiào, Happy Christmas

December 25th, 2018, Taken by Hyun Chen, in the home atrium in Bānán, Chóngqing, China

Content: DiàoDiào 雕雕 was wearing a Christmas snowman headband and sitting on the carpet.

Context: The snowman headband belonged to my nephew. DiàoDiào wanted to go out to play; his curiosity about the outer world and interest in meeting his cat friends at night was almost unstoppable by anyone in my family. To bribe him into staying home, my nephew offered him this headband.



7. *DiàoDiào, Happy Chinese New Year*

January 30th, 2019, Taken by Hyun Chen, at the family's old home in the countryside of Bānán, Chóngqing, China

Content: DiàoDiào yawned on the sofa with a yellow-dotted plane toy.

Context: The plane toy is also my nephew's. With DiàoDiào's company, I was performing a traditional Chinese custom, ShǒuSù 守岁, which requires you to stay up all night on Chinese New Year's Eve to stop Nián 年, a monster in Chinese folk mythology, from wreaking havoc in the fields. DiàoDiào's presence makes the long night pass by faster.



8. *Whimsy Sketches of DiàoDiào*

December 4th, 2023, Taken by Hyun Chen, at Printing Studio, School Museum of the Fine Arts, Boston, MA, U.S.

Content: I was drawing random sketches on yellow zine printing paper, including a black cat, a house, suns, moons, plants, words, and little figures with different facial expressions of sadness and happiness.

Context: Having grown up in China for the past 18 years, this is my first year studying in the United States. Due to his great love for the outdoors, DiàoDiào went missing in 2022. Maybe he left home to explore the world like me. By sketching him, I felt that he was still with me.

Project Essay: Memoirs of a Kitten: DiāoDiáo

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This project comprises eight photographs taken during my time with my family's cat DiāoDiáo, with the exception of the final photograph being drawings of DiāoDiáo. Captured with a cellphone and permitted by my family, these images are spontaneous snapshots of my daily life, showcasing how DiāoDiáo plays a role in bringing my family closer together in the context of broader Chinese culture. By comparing different aesthetic approaches to these photographs, I hope to demonstrate further how animals can deepen family ties and evoke cultural memories.

Firstly, pets help with facilitating a joyful familial atmosphere. In the fifth work, *DiāoDiáo on the Car Headrest*, I managed to persuade my parents to let him join our family trip. It is common for my family to have intense quarrels during trips, for it is hard to negotiate everyone's individual wishes. However, thanks to DiāoDiáo's naughtiness in venturing into different spots in the car, his presence added a layer of humor and distracted the family's attention away from negative emotions, giving us novel topics to break the ice.

This type of supportive and warm atmosphere promoted by cats aligns with scenes about cats in *Lissa: A Story about Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution*, written by Sherine Hamdy and Coleman Nye, and illustrated by Sarula Bao and Caroline Brewer. This ethnographic graphic novel explores the bond between Anna, a white American, and Layla, an Egyptian Arab amid the Egyptian Revolution. Layla's father's words, "I'm fine, my child. I have the best doctor in Egypt," are followed by the white cat appearing on page 103. (Nye, Hamdy, Bao, and Brewer 2017). Contrary to the heavy atmosphere due to Layla's father's illness, the interaction between Anna, Layla, and the cat is full of love and tenderness, revealing the intimacy and connection between pets, family, and friendship. Thus, it is apparent that the company of pets can indeed be a buffer zone after tense situations of family.

In parallel, in *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty 2014), a documentary shot nearly 100 years ago about indigenous Inuit life, domesticated animals are considered as significant as in today's media in promoting the interactive bond among family members. About 56 minutes into the

movie, in a scene where Allakariallak pulls the rope of the trap while hunting, dogs are sledding in the background with his family. Though dogs here mainly serve functional roles like setting up camps and hunting, they still play an essential role as the companions of Allakariallak's family. Similarly, in the third work *DiāoDiáo watching TV*, the kitten shared the same space with my grandpa and was included as one of the family members. Though my photographs are more about the lifestyle with family cats in a contemporary era, they still reflect a deep-rooted commitment and entanglement of humans to their domestic animals.

Secondly, incorporating animals in media works lowers the barrier to the audience's emotional engagement by evoking the viewers' memories and reflecting personal relationships with animals. For instance, in the first photograph, *DiāoDiáo with KungFu Panda Nunchaku Toy*, the cat plays with the popular icon of Chinese cultural imagery beloved by youths worldwide, indicating animal engagement in the cultural milieu. In the second work, *A Ginger Cat in the Neighborhood Park*, the neighborhood cat is similar to the feline hero in the book series *Smiling Cat Diary*, which is also a shared cultural vocabulary among younger generations across East Asia. Therefore, they are associated with both my individual childhood memories with family and some collective, communal, and playful recollections of Chinese children's media.

Moreover, in the eighth work, a photograph of sketches of *DiāoDiáo* with my home memories, the drawings anonymized my biographic details. Multimodal anthropology isn't intended to supplant visual anthropology. Rather, it integrates conventional visual anthropology techniques and broadens the scope to encompass various contemporary media forms. (Collins, Durning, Gill 2017, 142-152) With the context of *DiāoDiáo* already lost, the multimodal technique of drawing the memories allows me to bond my relationship with the pets and family objects in an alternative way, without the constraint of time and space.

In conclusion, these photographs exemplify the enduring impact of domestic animals like *DiāoDiáo* in enriching our familial and kinship bonds, and speak to a universal language of empathy and connection.

Bibliography

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