

## Interview of Grandma's steamed Bun Shop

**Xinyu Ren**

*YewWah International Education School of Shanghai, 201306, China*

**ABSTRACT.** *When people think of Shanghai's traditional food, they probably think of steamed bread. On JuMen Road in Shanghai, the front door of an unremarkable steamed bread shop is often crowded with customers. The shop's owner, Ms Hu, is over 80 years old. She sells steamed buns every day and never takes a rest. The reason why she started a business in her old age is that it's frustrating. However, she is persistent and hopeful about her career and has a positive attitude towards life.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Interview, Shanghai Special local product, Steamed Bun*

Two o'clock in the afternoon, the hottest moment of a summer day, there is a crowd gathering in front of a small shop on JuMen Road, Shanghai.

The glare of the sun and the sweltering heat do not repel the enthusiasm of those visitors. Instead, they are waiting energetically with their long awaited smiles on faces, staring intently at the shop door. Even for the people who happened to pass by couldn't help but wonder what attracted such many consumers, thus they stopped and looked closer.

In front of the store, where is less than ten square meters, a huge sign reading "Grandma's Steamed Bread shop" is hung high on one side of the wall. Below the sign, there is a price list for the foods it sold. The narrow store has no enough place for a table or chair, pots and pans which are arranged in a dense but not disorganized way, take up most of the spaces of the room. The only worker in the shop is an old woman who looked to be over eighty. Each day, starting at two p.m., she donning a clean white apron and a chef's hat, starts making and selling her steamed buns in this tiny shop.

"Oily steamed bun is a historic thing, it has been the old specialty of Shanghai people since ancient times." For Ms Hu, the founder of "Grandma's Steamed Bread", a little steamed bun means a lot to her. "The amount of seasoning in the flour should be controlled, the temperature of the pot should be controlled, and the cooking time also should be controlled."

She repeated as she made each bun, "If you cook it with all your patience and attention, the person who tastes it will feel its essence." Every time she made a bun, she washes the white radish and strips it into silk, whisks together the flour and shredded radish, and finally puts the mixture into the pan. The customers swarm

when they saw that the food was nearly cooked. Then Ms Hu passes it through the window to the customers outside. Some of them will leave after they get the food, while others will stop in front of the store to finish eating and have a chat with her. "She is a old lady with a young heart." Said one of the regular customers, "She would come here every day to make and sell steamed buns, and every time I came she would be here."

It takes no skill to make this kind of steamed bread. However, this is an old taste, Shanghai people do not get tired of eating. At first, people in the neighborhood would buy when they passed by. Later, countless food lovers came all the way to taste the bun. As time went on, even some of the festival's interviewers came to visit this 82-year-old woman, whose dishes were so delicious and attractive. It may sound implausible, but Ms Hu, who can make such authentic Shanghai snacks, is not a native of Shanghai. In fact, she is from Jiangsu province and came to Work in Shanghai when she was 18. She has devoted all her life to Shanghai, eager to make a breakthrough in this bustling city. When she was young, no one appreciated how much effort she put into her dream. Now, at the age of 80, Ms Hu, nevertheless, takes those adulation in stride. "You write down what I say. I don't want to exaggerate. I don't want to be famous. I just want to keep my business like everybody else."

Sadly, this old lady is not as tough as others seem. Whenever she talked about her past, tears came out of her eyes. "People said that I shouldn't live like this on my monthly pension, but there's nothing I can do." She retired in 1988 at the age of fifty. Soon after, the son and daughter-in-law lost their jobs. Her son was forced to make a living, and had to find temporary workers everywhere to keep food, clothing and shelter, while her daughter-in-law abandoned her son at the most critical moment, decided to leave home. In 1990, Ms Hu's first husband was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and died less than 40 days later. In 1998, In 1998, she met her current partner by chance. In the same year, Ms Hu's son was encouraged and decided to raise money for the factory in Luoyang. At that time, he not only sold the house where Ms Hu lived, but also borrowed nearly 900,000 yuan. In 2011, while the family was looking forward to a better life, her son declared bankruptcy. The stress of bankruptcy had also crippled him and made him incapacitated. When the creditors saw that he was unable to pay back the money, they turned their attention to his 72-year-old mother. Since there was no room to live in, with the care and help of the street community, a 10-square-meter guardhouse on Mengzi Road was lent to Ms. Hu and her husband for free. There was only a small bed, an old TELEVISION, a table and a wardrobe. During that time, the people who collect the debt went to Ms Hu's residence every week and asked her to pay back the money. At that time, she almost every day to tears, and even wanted to commit suicide. "I kept asking myself, if I left, who would return the money I owed them?" In 2011, at the age of 72, in order to pay her son's debts, she plucked up the courage to set up a stall with her then 80-year-old partner and sold steamed buns. "I am poor but not greedy, once I help my son to repay the debts, I will be clean."

Time flies, nine years have passed, Ms. Hu insisted on selling steamed buns with rich fillings and stable prices every day. "My steamed bread is only cost for 3 yuan, I didn't expect to make more money, as long as I make money I will be satisfied." In all these years, Ms Hu has not bought herself a new pair of socks. Her summer and winter clothes were donated to her by well-meaning volunteers. Even though, whether it's a hot summer of 40 degrees Celsius or a cold winter of minus 5 degrees Celsius, Ms Hu stays open to make money. Her partner, the 87-year-old "grandpa" doesn't like to talk too much, but silently assisted Ms Hu. Every time there are ingredients that needed supplementing, he will fill them in time.

Although business was booming, it was illegal to set up a roadside stall, and sometimes neighbors would even complain about this. In 2018, when the government learned of her plight, it decided to help her find a new environment for business and promote "Grandma's Steamed Bread shop" on the Internet. In the past year, more and more people have learned of Ms Hu's story, and many enthusiastic citizens came here to buy steamed buns. There were also plenty of customers deliberately overpaid a lot of money, but they were both rejected by Ms Hu. "It is not easy to earn money for anyone, now I am in a good health. Only by paying off my debts with the money earned by my own work can I feel at ease."

"We don't have as many guests in summer as in winter." Shanghai recently had a continuous high temperature of more than 35 degrees. There was no air conditioner or fan in her small kitchen. Facing a pot of hot oil and a road without a shadow, Ms. Hu was still happily busy.

When I ask her how much she still owes, Ms Hu said, with extraordinary seriousness and pride, "Only 150,000 yuan left." Through two small stainless-steel Windows, I could see her smiling as she made steamed buns for customers. If Ms Hu and her husband continue to sell steamed buns every day, they will probably have three years to pay off all their debts. "Then I will not sell steamed bread any more. I should have a good rest after working so hard for so long." She said optimistically.

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