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This is an extract from the autobiography of Hong Ying, where she writes about her life as a child in China during the 1960s.
She lived with her family on the banks of the River Yangtze.

Daughter of the River

My house was on the southern bank of the Yangtze. By standing on the ridge in front of my house, I could see where the Yangtze and Jialong rivers meet. An assortment of buildings on the surrounding hills looks like a jumble of children's building blocks. Quays dot the riverbanks, steamships tie up between the quays. Cable cars, dripping rust, crawl slowly up and down the slopes. Dark clouds blanket the river at dawn, and at dusk, when the sun's rays slant down on the water before settling behind the hills to the north, a few bursts of sunlight emerge from the dark mist.

For us, water was precious. Several hundred families shared a single tap. Queuing up was only part of the problem, for once water came, it was usually a dirty yellow. If we went down to the river to fetch water, a hard sweaty job at best, we had to treat it with bleach to make it fit for drinking or cooking, and it left a metallic taste. Except for times when the running water was turned off, we fetched water from the river only for laundry or to mop the floors.

Anyone who has never suffered the heat of this place cannot possibly understand how it burns its way from your heart and clogs up every pore on your body, to lie there baking your skin. Normally there is no wind, but when there is, it's like adding coal to a fire. That was in the summer. Then when the Yangtze began to rise the water flowed from the higher reaches and hundreds of metres of riverbank would be swallowed up overnight when the flood season arrived.



Once the weather cooled off, the inconvenience of bathing increased. Hot water was particularly scarce, but since we couldn't afford to go to the public baths, we simply took fewer baths or no baths at all. The winter cold was as oppressive as the summer heat. Our houses weren't heated and heating materials were virtually non- existent. Sometimes we simply cocooned ourselves in quilts and lay in bed. At night we bundled up in as many clothes as we could wear and climbed into bed, shivering until morning with freezing hands and feet. I don't think there was a winter in my childhood when my hands weren't covered with chilblains that made my fingers look like carrots.

For my brother, the river was a source of food. Water from the snowy peaks kept the river temperature icy cold most of the year. Nevertheless, whenever he saw something that even looked like food, he dived in after it: vegetable skins, leafy greens, even melon rinds. Once he had whatever it was in his grasp, he'd swim back to shore and take it home, where mother would wash it, cut out the rotten parts, and throw it in the wok. But he wasn't always lucky. Most of the time all the river offered up was muddy water and he'd return home empty-handed.