

Walking *Dongshankou*: A Return to Innocence

The shutters always groaned before sunrise. Metal slats rattled upward as shopkeepers rolled them open, spilling the alleys with the smell of soy milk and Char Siu Bao. Laundry swayed overhead, catching the first light. Below it, my small figure threaded through the alley with a backpack heavier than I was, shoes slapping stone in uneven rhythm. By the time I walked to school, Dongshankou was alive—red-brick houses leaning into one another, banyan roots buckling the pavement, the morning farmer market swelling with voices: sharp calls, soft bargains, sudden bursts of laughter.

I grew up here. Nine years is long enough for every corner to take root inside you, long enough for a place to become less geography than rhythm. We left our marks on Dongshankou—chalk grids stretching across the stones until rain dissolved them, marble pits denting the dust, scuff marks worn into the steps of courtyards where we raced. The air carried our voices, radios crackling, gossip tossed from balcony to balcony until the alleys themselves seemed louder than their narrowness allowed. Afternoons were ours, and the neighborhood became something more than brick and banyan: it was a playground, a theater, a world rearranged daily by our hands and muddy pants.

Dongshankou has always carried a certain legend. There is an old saying, “Dongshan Shaoye, Xiguan Miss”—the young masters of Dongshan and the young ladies of Xiguan—reminders of the district’s reputation for villas, wealth, and long-settled families. Walking its streets, you could almost believe the saying was carved into the bricks. Villas stood in rows, each one different, red stone beside pale yellow beside white, four or five stories high with courtyards pressed close to the street. For a child, the scale of it all was generous: the roads seemed wide enough for ten bicycles to ride abreast, the buildings tall enough to lean into the sky. The neighborhood looked planned, orderly, a patchwork of color that felt less like city than like a fairytale backdrop, waiting for us to run through.

Yet for all its villas and wide roads, Dongshankou felt small, slow, almost self-contained. The world fit inside its alleys. A mailbox could hold an entire day’s hope; a corner shop selling pencil

cases and candy could feel like a secret vault; a vine creeping across a window could seem alive enough to play hide-and-seek with me. I slipped boba tea into my backpack as if smuggling treasure, convinced no one else knew. The innocence was not only mine—it belonged to the neighborhood itself, in how it seemed to expand to fit our games, our secrets, our small rebellions. To walk down a single street was to walk through an entire childhood, as if Dongshankou needed nothing beyond itself to be complete.

I came back to Dongshankou one afternoon, mostly to visit a coffee shop that had been there for years. It was the place where I used to sit after school with my notebooks spread out, pretending to do homework but mostly doodling in the margins, half-listening to the whirl of the ceiling fan. The tables were small and unpolished, the kind that collected ring marks from countless cups, and the air always smelled faintly of espresso mixed with dust from the street. It was never fashionable—just steady, familiar, a pocket of quiet. Returning now, I slipped into the same seat and thought, for a moment, that little had changed.

But stepping back outside, the quiet unraveled. Where the steady hum of bicycles and radios once drifted, the street now beat with a different rhythm—louder, glossier, restless. Scooters zigzagged like performers in a circus, neon signs clashed for attention, and a line of influencers angled their cameras against the old brick walls as if the villas had been designed as backdrops all along. The banyans still leaned over the pavement, but their shade was broken by LED lights. I had come back for coffee, but Dongshankou offered me a spectacle instead, its innocence drowned out by a chorus of commerce and curated images.

I lingered outside the coffee shop as the street folded into evening. Delivery scooters wove around parked cars where our hopscotch grids used to be, their headlights cutting sharp lines across the brick walls. An influencer crouched beneath a banyan tree, holding her smile until the camera clicked, while just above her, a window stood open with laundry drifting in the dusk. For a moment, the villa behind them caught the last gold of the sun—half in shadow, half in light.