



Kanas Lake near Burqin has become one of the most well-known scenic spots in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. — Ti Gong

Hit drama revives memories of Altay

Wan Lixin

A mini-drama series, adapted from articles by writer Li Juan, has been getting rave reviews from domestic and overseas audiences, fueling enthusiasm for Altay in the northernmost tip of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region as a tourist destination, or an escape for those fed up with the grind in big cities.

Quite a few of my acquaintances commended the series to me.

I began to notice Li Juan fairly early, more than two decades ago, after she started publishing articles about Altay in the Wenhui Daily and Southern Weekend around 2000.

Later, a colleague of mine sent me two collections of essays by Li, including “The Corners of Altay,” upon learning that I was born and brought up in Altay, and had lived there for 17 years.

But to be honest, such is the vastness of the Altay prefecture and the difficulty of travel at that time, my footprint during those years had been chiefly restricted to a Han Chinese settlement in Jeminay, bordering former Soviet Union, or Kazakhstan today.

Reading the collections, I had been equally held spellbound by Li’s description of the exotic landscape and nomadic life in her essays, in Fuyun, on the east of Altay and about 400 kilometers from Jeminay.

Curious to know why the drama/

book so enthused my friends, I did a bit of survey. All were appreciative.

A friend observed that Li’s words are “healing,” and her intimate descriptions of the hardships of the nomads are mesmerizing.

Commenting on the drama “To the Wonder,” she said that one of the strengths about the mini-series is the depiction of the breathtaking scenic beauty of Altay, the traditional customs of the Kazakhs, and the sanctity of love between the hero and heroine. The only regret is that the series could have been longer.

As a matter of fact, while “hardship” is often used to characterize life in remote Xinjiang, mostly by those inured to modern urban amenities, the nomads’ way life has been shaped by the exigency of seasonal nomadic migrations, so that they could pack up and go at short notice, to the next pasture.

By comparison, we from the Production and Construction Corps would stay put in fixed settlement, in a typically Han Chinese style, usually far removed from the settlements of the ethnic Kazakhs (they also have fixed settlements).

We had been brought up on very basic food, and a selection of fruits and vegetables cultivated by our parents on the farm. It was far from being a life of affluence, but I enjoyed them immensely, and have never tasted apples, or watermelons, as delicious again.



A poster of the Chinese online series “To the Wonder,” which has entered the Official Selection for the Long Form Competition at this year’s CANNESERIES, or the Cannes International Series Festival.

Thanks to those years of “privations” I could still maintain a healthy appetite for simple food, such as steamed buns, noodles and meat, at my age, while some children today are complaining about theirs.

I was so sturdy that from junior high school I was capable of hoisting a shoulder pole and carrying two buckets of

water from a well a few hundred meters from our home.

But the beauty conjured up in Li’s work is probably unique to nomads in their search of water and pasture. In the production and construction corps, given its low altitude, it was chiefly about agriculture sustained by irrigation.

At a time when tourism was unheard of, the occasional vehicles on the rough roads would traverse a terrain that largely presented a dreary aspect of Gobi, occasionally relieved by the sight of a Mongolian gazelle, who took flight at the sight of vehicles. The truck might travel for a whole day without meeting anyone.

Jeminay is only 80 kilometers from Burqin, the town next to Kanas Lake, but the lake has been accessible only in recent years, and has since become one of the most famous tourist attractions in Xinjiang.

I did have ample experience of the hospitality of the Kazakhs, when we would occasionally visit their homes as guests, even though we were strangers. A hostess sitting by a stove would serve us salty milk tea. My father used to whisper to me: The more you drink, the more happier the host would feel.

I never let them down, downing one bowl at a gulp, then handing the empty bowl to the hostess for a refill, without saying anything.