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The World of Chinese

It is a childhood memory shared by the post-80s generation — when the popcorn vendor arrived in the neighborhood and fired up his machine in the street. Everyone rushed home to fetch a bowl of rice or corn. Meanwhile, the vendor started slow-rolling his popcorn machine over the fire — a black, dangerous-looking metal vessel. A few minutes later, as a crowd watched nervously, a “ka-boom!” announced the arrival of sweet-smelling popcorn.

Popcorn-making used to be a thrilling spectacle, not like today’s fast-food version involving microwaves and commercial breaks. With street vendors fast becoming a thing of the past and a new generation developing more diverse snacking habits, is there still a place for popcorn made the old way?

In 2013, Discovery Channel’s *Mythbusters* set out to find the quickest way to make popcorn and tried out a Chinese machine, which they referred to as “mysterious Oriental ordnance”.

Video footage of the show’s host wearing a bombproof suit, letting the popcorn explode all over the room instead of into a bag, was widely mocked in China. “Their methods are all wrong,” tutted one viewer on Youku.com. Another commented: “Is there seriously the need to wear a bomb suit? It is an insult to the memories of the Chinese people.”

Still, other commentators were

When popcorn was thrilling

Explosive sounds and captivating aromas show that some street vendors refuse to fade quietly into memory

爆米花



bàomǐhuā
popcorn



Word box

- 爆米花 bàomǐhuā popcorn
- 童年记忆 tóngnián jìyì childhood memory
- 八零后 bālíng hòu post-80s
- 小摊 xiǎotān vendor
- 怀旧 huáijiù reminiscence
- 传统的 chuántǒngde traditional

glad to be reminded of one of their favorite childhood activities.

The “ordnance” is essentially a pressure vessel with a barometer. The device is rotated over high heat until the pressure reaches one megapascal, then lifted to open, with the container mouth attached to a bag or basket. The moment the pressure is released, the grain pops and bursts out of the cooker.

In the Wuchang district of Hangzhou, in East China’s Zhejiang province, photographer Zhang Demeng came upon the popcorn vendor pictured, who has stuck to the traditional method. He said he does not have a fixed location in the city but drifts from spot to spot. The office buildings and construction sites that now populate his beat do not provide him with many customers.

Perhaps in the near future, for him, too, the memory of his trade may be all that is left.

Courtesy of *The World of Chinese*, www.theworldofchinese.com



A popcorn vendor rolls the cooker over a fire to build up the pressure inside. ZHANG DEMENG / THE WORLD OF CHINESE