

**LONELINESS, DEATH
AND DESOLATION:
WHY I RETURN TO
ANTARCTICA TIME
AND AGAIN**

Translation by Peishan Yann

Kou Aizhe: The short happy Antarctic summer ends too soon and is followed by a long winter.

Many scientific researchers return home to China at the end of summer as most Antarctic research can only be done in the summer months. Only a small number of staff are left at the research station for what is known as ‘winter-over’ 越冬.¹ Cao Jianxi used to be one of the team members wintering over at the research station, responsible for ensuring that the research station operated normally during the winter months.

‘Wintering over’: A gruelling experience

Once we are wintering over, everyone’s workload is much lighter. Someone like me, who is in charge of the kitchen, only has to make sure meat and vegetables are brought in from the storeroom and ready for cooking the next day.

We rise much later in winter as the sun only rises after ten o’clock in the morning, when it is almost time for lunch. Between lunch and dinner, we have plenty of time to ourselves.

I’d often sit by my bed, wrapped up in a warm blanket to play online games or watch movies. There was a particular actress, I can’t remember whether I saw her on TV or in a movie, but I was very fond of her at that time, and thought her very beautiful.

She has very oriental features, with a delicate ‘melon-seed’ oval face. She appeared wearing a crimson veil and appeared against a red background.

I took a photo with my mobile phone and would often stare at it, my heart heavy with loneliness and the yearning for a companion.

Although there were other people at the station, our interactions were minimal. In this sort of closed environment, the longer we stayed together the more silent and withdrawn we became, with no desire to connect with anyone, just amusing ourselves alone in our rooms.



Exploring the Frozen Frontier in Antarctica

Source: Cassie Matias, Unsplash

Those who are more extroverted, especially the older ones, seemed less affected by the isolation. The younger team members tended to be more quick tempered, and would ignore the others if they were in a bad mood.

At times an older team member would walk into the dining hall and, sensing the negative vibe, would attempt to lighten the mood by telling jokes or asking people how they were going.

But the strange thing is, they would get no response from the others. As you can imagine, under such circumstances, that made most team members feel even more depressed.

It was also common to see conflict among team members. I personally experienced this: as the period of isolation grew longer, the more my relationship with my direct superior deteriorated. At the start, we got along well because we were polar research centre co-workers.

But later, because of the nature of our working relationship, he made more demands on me than others. Sometimes it was over small things like cigarettes or alcohol. I would get annoyed and feel like he was mistreating me or that he wasn't looking after me. As time went by, our relationship worsened with every such incident.

As a result, my relationship with the station master deteriorated as well. Even when winter was over, we could not repair our relationship. In normal life, if we run into problems at work, we can always go home or go for a drink or a meal with friends after work to relieve our stress. But in the extreme conditions of the Antarctic, that isn't an option. We are always together. If something goes badly today, tomorrow we still have to continue working together. Frustrations build up and never go away.

Food

Kou Aizhe: In Antarctica, growing crops is strictly prohibited.² All crops are considered 'exotic species' that risk damaging its unique environment. Of course, the harsh conditions in Antarctica are not conducive to growing crops either, so supplies of food and other necessities are completely dependent on infrequent transport links to the station.

The popular Chinese saying goes, 'Food is the people's heaven'. Even when they are at the 'end of the world', those stationed in Antarctica are determined not to compromise on their enjoyment of food. It is at times like this when culinary creativity is at its most prolific.

My job as a manager at the research station means I am like the 'housekeeper'. I manage all the storerooms, especially the kitchen store. Every day, I would go to the kitchen to prepare supplies, like alcohol, other drinks, rice and flour. Our dishes mostly consisted of dried goods from the north-east of China because they could be kept for a long period of time. It was rare to have green leafy vegetables. Usually we'd eat bean curd strips, seaweed and other dried goods that had to be soaked in water first.

Among the twelve of us who stayed behind in the winter months, there was a chef by the name of Old Zhu. He used to be the main chef on board the [icebreaker and resupply ship] *Xue Long*.

Before each meal, one of us rang the bell outside the dining hall. Sometimes it was me, sometimes the chef himself or one of the kitchen hands, and then everyone would come to eat.

At the station, big steel trays were used for serving meals, which usually consisted of three dishes, such as chicken or black fungus stir fried with sliced pork belly, and a soup, typically egg-based with seaweed, which was vacuum packed; all we had to do was to steep it in hot water first.

We also had desiccated vegetables, but no matter what we did with them, they were flavourless.

Sometimes we would have barbeques outdoors using large steel plates and long iron skewers. Barbeques were fun, especially after the tide receded and lots of abalones were left stranded on the rocks. We would barbeque abalones on a large metal plate as if they were lamb on skewers. Those abalones were the best I have ever eaten—extremely tender.

When celebrating festivals or birthdays, we would prepare more dishes, sometimes a dozen or so, in smaller portions and served on white porcelain plates. We would lay them out on a table covered with a white tablecloth, plus flowers for decoration. The flowers were plastic, but it looked pretty.

To celebrate the birthdays of our teammates, Chef Zhu would also bake a cake. The station manager would pass a birthday card around for everyone to sign. On each card would be twelve signatures, making it something worth keeping.

On special occasions like the Mid-Autumn Festival, I would also make banners that read ‘China’s 22nd Antarctic Scientific Expedition Team at the Great Wall Station Celebrating Mid-Autumn Festival’. I would print out the Chinese characters individually on A4-size sheets and pin them together on a scroll of red cloth to make a long banner.

End of winter

Kou Aizhe: The first time Cao Jianxi spent the winter at the polar research station, he had a calendar pinned up in his room and he would stare at it for ages every day, studying it minutely, counting down the days until his return home.

But as the end of wintering over drew nearer, Cao had mixed feelings. On the one hand, he was dying to see his family and friends. Over and over, he'd imagine the scenes of meeting them all again in detail.

On the other hand, human society became like a beautiful dreamscape. The long separation from society instilled a sense of anxiety in Cao, who worried whether returning to a normal life would ever be possible.

After more than a year's wait, the day finally came for Cao to finish wintering over.

When I was in the Antarctic, I never thought I'd go back again. But back in China, I found myself having difficulties adapting to society. Like a prisoner who has been released after a long jail term of more than a decade or so, I found it hard to get used to a life of freedom and was nostalgic for the prison environment.

After many months of trying to adapt, I decided to return to the South Pole. Society was a little hard to fit into.

Life and death

Kou Aizhe: In 2007, Cao Jianxi boarded the icebreaker *Xue Long*, to join China's 24th Antarctic Scientific Expedition to the South Pole. The first destination was Zhongshan Station. If Cao's first 'wintering over' at the Great Wall Station had only subjected him to mental anguish, venturing into the interior of Antarctica was a severe ordeal that tested both his body and spirit.

Zhongshan Station was the second scientific research station that China built in the Antarctic. It is located in East Antarctica and is 4,986 kilometres away from Great Wall Station, making the distance between the two research stations even greater than that from Shanghai to Urumqi. What's more, the climate in Zhongshan Station is much harsher.

It was during the 24th Expedition that Cao had the most dangerous experience of his life.

In Antarctica, you never know where the danger lies until you come face to face with it. The further you travel into the interior, the more dangerous it becomes. Accidents are common, especially for those venturing onto the endless plateau of snow, ice and glaciers for the first time.

When the icebreaker *Xue Long* arrived at Zhongshan Station with our research team, we had to start unloading 10 to 20 nautical miles from the station. This is because the *Xue Long* could only drive through ice up to 1.1 metres thick. We had to use snowmobiles and sledges to transport our cargo from the vessel to the station.

This zone is notorious for its haphazard formation of ice sheets, resulting from huge blocks of old ice bonding together and refreezing. This makes the structure of the ice non-uniformly thick, with some places thick and others thin.

As a precaution, having two drivers (a pilot and a co-pilot) operate an oversnow vehicle is the norm. This boosts safety because in an emergency, one person can radio in a report.

At the time, a very experienced chief mechanic, Mr Xu Xiaxing, decided to drive an oversnow vehicle on his own, so as to allow the other members of the team to rest. He didn't take a sledge, which signified it was an empty vehicle. We'd put caterpillar treads on it while it was still in the hold, and it was the best equipped of all the vehicles. The crane moved it from the hold onto the ice.

Mr Xu wanted to move the vehicle to another spot and began driving.

Our assistant expedition guide Wang Hailang was on duty in the control room of the *Xuelong*. He witnessed the whole episode. The vehicle began moving forward when it suddenly stalled and began spinning. Then, suddenly, it started sinking.

When Mr Xu discovered his oversnow vehicle had stalled, he thought all he had to do was pump the accelerator to get the vehicle to lurch forward, as he had done before. But this was a totally different situation: the area's ice layer was too thin. Underneath, it was already broken into ice debris. The vehicle started sinking rapidly, as if the wheels were shovelling up ice from below.

When the oversnow vehicle first started sinking, Mr Xu didn't panic. He still thought that hitting the accelerator would solve the problem by propelling it forward and freeing it from the ice. But before he realised it, the vehicle had sunk to a considerable depth and a stream of bubbles began to burst forth from its interior. Only then did terror enter his heart, and he thought of his family. He realised the peril he was in and feared this would be the end of him.

Water gradually flooded the car. He prepared to escape but couldn't open any of the windows or its sunroof owing to the pressure of the water. Pushing open the door would be futile for the same reason.

However, the window on the driver's side could slide back and forth. By chance, Mr Xu managed to push that window open. Water rushed into the car and completely flooded the interior.

He then tried to escape through the sunroof.

The sunroof was like that of a family car, except it was not able to open fully. It could only be cracked open to a 5- or 10-degree angle at most.

Mr Xu decided to stand on the vehicle's middle console and push up as hard as he could to force the sunroof open. The connecting rod of the sunroof gave way completely, opening the only possible escape route for him.

He tried to float to the surface, but he continued to sink. His boots were caught.

Those boots were specially designed to withstand a temperature of around minus 30 degrees Celsius so they were extremely bulky and heavy. But he eventually managed to free himself from them. He'd used up almost all his energy and swallowed another mouthful of ice-cold sea water.

After he had made his escape from the sunroof, he swam upward with all his might, until he heard his head bump against the ice debris, and knew he'd reached the top. He raised his hand and ascertained he'd found the ice hole.

The rescue team still hadn't reached him, but he climbed his way out onto the dry ice all by himself. He managed to make two steps before collapsing.

As a result of this, all the work of the research team came to a temporary stop. Everyone was at a complete loss. The whole team's spirit sank to an all-time low.

Return to Antarctica

Kou Aizhe: After his fourth expedition to Antarctica, Cao Jianxi resigned from the Polar Research Centre. Not long after, he moved to Australia and began a new phase of his life.

After leaving China, I didn't think about returning to Antarctica. I threw myself into an entirely new life. I got married and devoted my time and energy to raising a family.

At first, I wasn't nostalgic or keen to think about those days. Nor did I want to dig out old photos and videos. However, with the passing of time, I began thinking more and more of the memories of those events.

In Antarctica, under such harsh conditions, a small group of us still managed to work together using our own skills to complete our mission. There is a sense of camaraderie in having been through thick and thin together, akin to that of having been comrades-in-arms on a battlefield.

I feel like this deep connection is too precious to be discarded or forgotten. It is so rare in one's life to have relationships built on shared experiences of life and death.

By chance, a friend asked if I was interested in working on board a cruise ship specialising in tours to Antarctica. The steep increase in the number of Chinese tourists in recent years has raised the demand for people like me, who know Antarctica and speak English and Chinese.

At first, I didn't take this opportunity seriously, but when night came, I thought more deeply and got very excited. Things big and small that happened when I was living and working in Antarctica, the friendship and connection with teammates, started to play out in my mind. If I returned, I would be return to my old circles.

I felt an urgent desire to go back, a bit like how I felt the first time I was bound for Antarctica after college. But before I ventured back, the cruise company decided that I should travel to the Arctic a few times first. As a result, I visited Iceland and Greenland several times. Some six months later, I was finally on my way back to Antarctica.

When the cruise ship arrived at Antarctica, the sight of the snow-capped mountains and glaciers in the far distance made me extremely emotional, and tears welled in my eyes.



Penguins in Antarctica

Source: Martin Wettstein, Unsplash

When I went ashore, I felt that every rock and stone was familiar. I also ran into a teammate who once wintered over in the same year with me at the research station. He was very happy to see me and cooked some noodles for us. I felt extremely happy and excited. I really hadn't expected that.

In that distant place, I returned to where I first started, as if some mystical power was at work, or perhaps this is just what is meant to be. When Heaven opens a door for me, I linger hesitantly at the doorway, but when I finally decide to cross the threshold, I keep going.

This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook: China's New Era*, edited by
Annie Luman Ren and Ben Hillman, published 2024 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2024.05A