Currents & Tides

by

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Thesis

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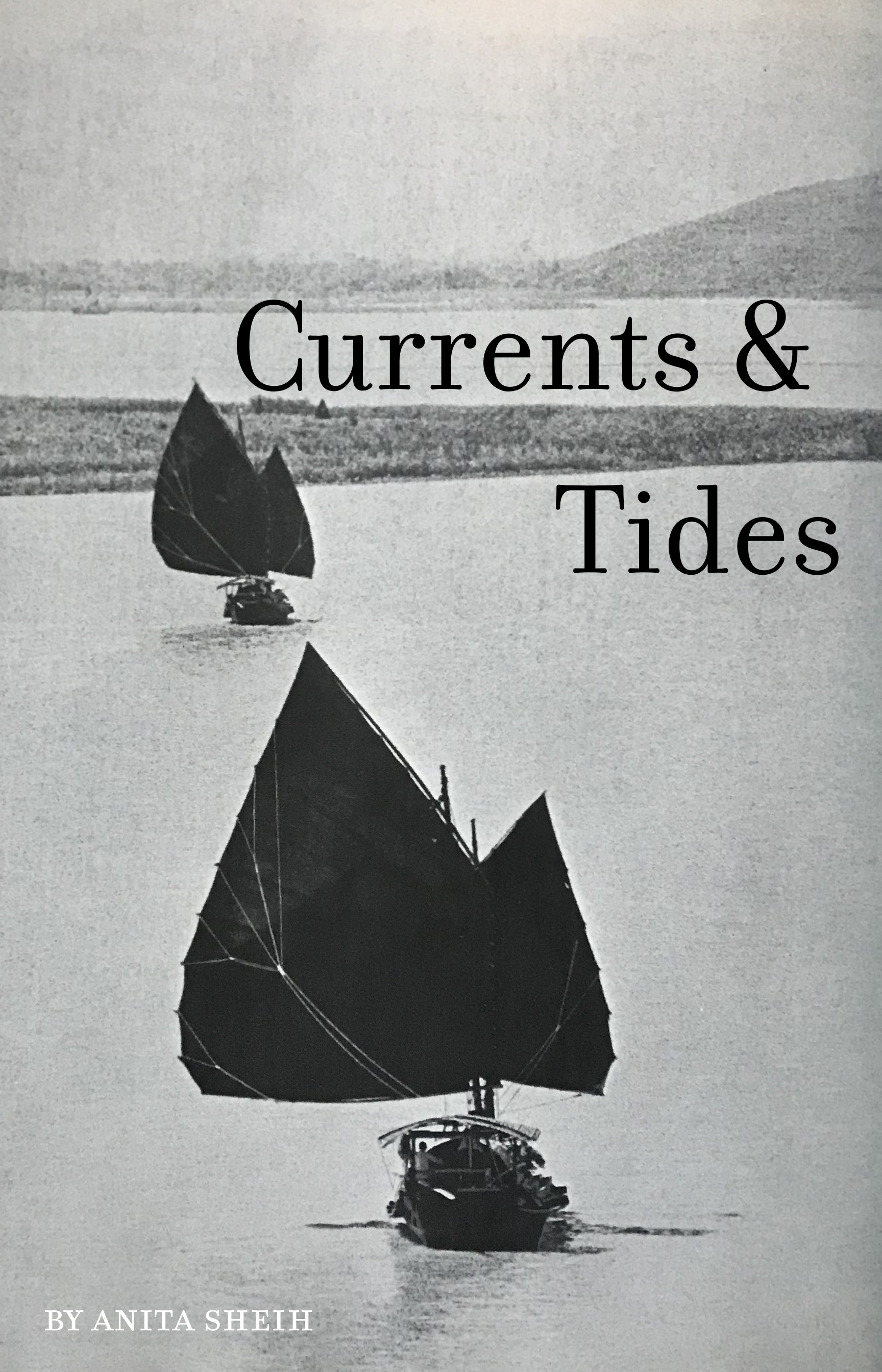
Currents & Tides



BY ANITA SHEIH

Introduction

My grandmother remembers the number of siblings she had growing up, but not how many brothers or sisters. She remembers the floorplan of her home and the layout of the neighborhood, but not the age or year that she moved away. She remembers the long days on the run from the Japanese, but not her favorite subject in school. She remembers her favorite comic books that she read in order to learn Mandarin, but not when she met her husband-to-be. She remembers how to identify a quality cloth by eye, thanks to her forty years at the textile factory, but not the details of her wedding ceremony. She remembers coming to America, but not how, when, or where each of her siblings passed away. She remembers feeling content, bored, and useless, but never scared.

What scared me most was her laughter. She would chuckle after recalling some of the most horrifying details of her life.

> "Everyone was so scared *(laughing)*. There was no choice but to laugh because we couldn't be afraid of dying."

Interviewing her was a rare experience that I truly believe would not have happened had my father not first explained to her, "It's for school." He tells me that she then nodded solemnly and took a deep breath, like she was inhaling all of her memories and stories that she'd let escape over her years of silence, preparing herself to breathe them out to me over a 2,611-mile phone call. As the phone rang, I took a deep breath too, preparing myself to catch them.

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This interactive project aims to break the mold of historical nonfiction writing and share a part of the twentieth-century Chinese immigrant experience by investigating the journeys of six individuals. The structure of this immersive choose-your-own-adventure narrative mimics the experience of living these stories, exhibiting how the various, versatile forms of creative nonfiction create new spaces necessary for storytelling and the inclusion of all voices.

As the daughter of two Chinese immigrants, I have felt my relationship with my Chinese American identity evolve throughout my life. I used to believe that the two sides of my hyphenated Asian-Americanness were in constant conflict—each side struggling with the other, bending the hyphen under the weight of my internal tension. Only after learning about multiplicity of identity through works of other Chinese American authors did I begin to realize that the hyphen wasn't bending but connecting. Literature holds the power to communicate identity and understanding, and this power lies heavily in the hands of writers, who decide what, when, and how stories are presented to the public. Through this project, I intend to hold this gatekeeping role responsibly.

I've been obsessed with words ever since I was a child. I would take my mom's pens and notepads, scribble nonsense, and pretend to read it, telling stories like, "Once upon a time, a fish walked up a mountain…" The English language is beautiful, with its countless synonyms and endless possibilities of rhyme and rhythm that allow for interaction, cooperation, and communication. Through this language,

I examine the lives of my ancestors and their contemporaries, taking the comfort, solace, and home I have found in creative nonfiction writing and applying it to a project that has the power to question, challenge, and reflect. In this way, I hope to preserve and present a comprehensive, nuanced view of the Chinese American history that has informed my own experience to a larger audience through personal narratives, historical context, and cross-cultural dialogue.

Weaving these elements into a single work, I share the stories of these individuals that are captured only by fallible human memory, forgotten photographs, and oral histories—people whose stories have been left out of the institutional archives and overlooked by history books. I aim to combat the one-dimensional representation of these individuals whose lives have been flattened into statistics within a migration report or demographic survey. I hope to give light to their stories, collected through in-person, phone, and email interviews with the individuals themselves or their family members. While all six people whose stories built this project were born in southern China the 1920s and 1930s, their paths have differed widely. Only by exploring this text multiple times may the reader discover all of their stories.

In researching and constructing this interwoven narrative, I learned about the invisible personal challenges and social cultural obstacles many potential Chinese immigrants faced and how they overcame them. I soon found that their experiences differed from my own impressions, ideas, and imagination of them. The other details—to fill in gaps, historical dates, and political movements—I gathered from

encyclopedias and dusty books in the depths of the libraries.

The power of this story's structure lies in the opportunity to explore choice, chance, quasi-autonomy, forms of agency, dead ends, and circuitous routes, which are often hidden forces that shape immigrant narratives. Through the reader's journey, I hope to convey an overall impression of the Chinese American immigrant experience in the twentieth century, one that is greater than the sum of its parts and that communicates the complexity of this global experience better than any single story could on its own.

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In this choose-your-own-adventure story, you will move through a tale that takes place primarily in twentieth-century China. Your adventure will take you near and far, and at every step of the way, you will choose what happens next. You will often choose between staying and moving. You may not always know what will come from your decision. You may reach a dead end. You may discover, as I did, the powerful role of gender along the way. Sometimes you may find that you do not really have a choice. You will perhaps experience a new form of agency that is limited, small, deceiving. Luck, fate, chance, circumstance, destiny, whatever you want to call it, may intervene; but rest assured, it's all part of the adventure—an adventure "collected from the ones who know, who remember, and who have heard."[1] When you reach the end of the adventure, I encourage you to play again, because at least in this story, you can choose your ending.

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[1] Quote from a personal interview with Bryan Lin, whose name has been changed upon request for anonymity.

IMAGE 1

7

You always hear the adults talking about the Red Army and the Nationalist Party, Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong, the invasion, the Japs. The civil war is well underway, as tensions have been rising for the past 12 years. The newspapers say that the Japanese Army has finally reached as far south as Guangdong Province, your home—the soldiers have begun flooding your streets, men in uniforms, men with guns, grabbing people's money, people's food, grabbing women.

You hear about the neighbors' boy, whose soul felt tense and whose feet felt restless, who left the safety of home to join a cause, who went to fight, who never came home. You hear about so many of these boys that you can't keep straight who left to fight for whom, but you see the young men of the neighborhood disappearing, chests puffed. And you see their parents left behind, backs hunched and bleary-eyed.

You miss the days when you could play with your neighborhood friends, running about for hours, without your parents dragging you back indoors with rough hands and furrowed brows and stern words. *It'll be better soon*, they say. *Once either side wins this area, they'll stop fighting, and we can continue with our lives, either under Chinese or Japanese rule. It'll be better soon either way.* You see the fog fill the streets, the Japanese Army's latest military tactic, which stings your eyes and stuffs up your lungs if you don't listen to your mom and keep the windows closed—*always*.

Every so often, if you are sure no one is around to catch you, you push the heavy curtains aside to make a small gap where you can peer through the window that faces the street. You sometimes see nothing, and you can almost pretend it

isn't wartime. Other times, you see people, and you duck to hide out of view, to avoid the gaze of Japanese soldiers stalking the streets or to avoid seeing the faces of the bodies that would allow you to identify which neighbors' sons they belonged to.

You and your friends invent a game to pass the time, as the adults murmur and debate. Communist vs. Nationalist: You rock, paper, scissors to pick your team, and you wage war through the same method—rock, paper, scissors, small fists shaking into infinity, best of three, best of seven, best of fifteen. If you win the first round, you always pick the same team:

Communist.
Go to page 9.

Nationalist.
Turn to page 44.

You always pick Communist, if not for luck then for ritual's sake. It isn't until years later that you realize which team you picked had nothing to do with whether or not you won the game; it was really up to chance, but that is a revelation for another time.

You are about to begin Grade 7 of your schooling, but your family is not too well-off, so…

You rely on your older brother, who will work extra hours selling newspapers to pay for you to go to school.
Turn to page 10.

You drop out to work and earn money for the family too. After all, you still have a few younger siblings to worry about.
Turn to page 11.

You decide that you must study hard and do your best in school so that your brother will not be working tirelessly for nothing. You go to a good high school and do fairly well. Your favorite subject is history. You even qualify to attend Guangzhou Culture University in the big city. All of your hard work has paid off, but you have another important decision to make, one of loyalty, or perhaps priorities.

You join the army to fight for the Communist Party of China, the current ruling party. Turn to page 12.

You don't join the army and choose to attend university. Turn to page 13.

You get a job as a newspaper boy, biking along the same route through the city every day on your forest-green bicycle to distribute the papers. The work is tedious, and the pay is meager, but something is better than nothing. Soon, you have another important decision to make, one of loyalty, or perhaps priorities.

You join the army to fight for the Communist Party of China, the current ruling party. Turn to page 12.

You don't join the army and continue to work. Turn to page 14.

You work in the army for nearly a decade, during which you never see battle—never even shoot a gun. You have been positioned as a reporter because of your education and spend your time writing news articles and updates for the army officials on your massive, 30-pound typewriter, making sure everyone is caught up on the latest happenings within the complex organization. Five years after the official end of the civil war, in 1955, you return to Guangzhou, unsure of where your career should go next. You are offered the opportunity to become a high-ranking officer in the local government for your good work in the army serving the Communist Party of China.

You take the position. Turn to page 15.

You choose to explore other career paths, perhaps poetry. Turn to page 19.

You attend Guangzhou Culture University, excited to start your higher education. You take up an interest in literature and poetry. After a year, your parents give you some exciting news. Your family has been applying for immigrant visas for years now, and you have finally been approved.

In a whirlwind of excitement and frenzy, you shoot off some college applications to American universities and eagerly await the responses. You receive your first decision letter from Pratt Institute in New York. You hold the flimsy envelope with both hands, trembling slightly. *It's so thin,* you think. *If it were an acceptance, wouldn't there be more to it than this? Instructions about class registration and dorm procedures…*

But it is an acceptance after all! Your whole family packs up to leave with you—before the government changes their mind and takes back their immigration approval.

You decide that, at Pratt Institute, you will continue to pursure your passion for poetry. Turn to page 20.

You decide that, at Pratt Institute, you will explore new fields, such as engineering. Turn to page 21.

You continue delivering papers throughout Guangzhou, but the familiar silhouettes on your daily route begin to deteriorate. Buildings and people alike begin to crumble, broken from battle with the Japanese soldiers, which continues to escalate to the point where you can't do your job without fearing for your life.

You decide to flee the area with your family and risk a long and arduous journey to escape the Japanese invasion.
Turn to page 16.

You decide to stay because you cannot imagine your life anywhere else. *Turn to page 18.*

You become the director of the education department for the local Guangzhou government. After two years of meaningless, menial administrative work full of forms, petitions, and school board meetings, you realize this is not the life for you. Too many people, all demanding different things, none of which you are feasibly able to provide for them.

Tired of the cycle of relentless demand and inevitable disappointment, you decide to act on the idea that has been stewing in the back of your mind for a while now—becoming a poet.
Turn to page 19.

16

Your family flees on foot because you don't have any other means of transportation. You walk to Wuzhou, a city in Guangxi Province—a 170-mile journey that takes your family about a month to complete with all of your worldly possessions on your backs, trudging through the winding hills and twisted streets. Along the way, the wooden chairs and wicker baskets your mother so carefully tied to your bodies are abandoned. Only the essentials survive this mass migration, which begins in such morbid festivity, with hundreds of people packing the main streets, bodies pressing and elbows shoving and chair legs poking.

Reaching only about hip-height of the adults around you, you can't see where you're going, only the broken bits of forsaken and forgotten belongings now being trampled underfoot. The group gradually thins out, leaving few to accompany your family on the road to Wuzhou, as others with different destinations or less able bodies drop off and part ways. You dream of a life without war in Wuzhou, of simple days lounging by the Xi River that the city is built around or working at the chemical plants the area is known for. You aren't in search of luxury, just safety, comfort.

You start to make a life for yourselves there, but the next year in 1944, the Japanese reach Wuzhou too. The chemical and pharmaceutical plants are blown to bits in the conflict. This time, you doubt you will be able to flee because you are struck ill by a severe fever. Lacking the money to see a doctor for a diagnosis and proper medical care, you just remember it as "the big hot sickness."

IMAGE 2

You risk death on the road due to your weak body and endurance by choosing to flee again. Turn to page 22.

You stay in Wuzhou, thinking it is your best chance of survival. Turn to page 26.

Guangzhou is your city, your home. You decide to stay and tough it out, hoping the Japanese will give up before you do. But one day, as you and some other school kids are playing in the streets, collecting pretty stones and chasing after the wild rabbits hopping by, a Japanese plane flies overhead and drops a handful of bombs. One lands only a little over 10 meters away from you, and the impact knocks you off your feet—but not before you watch it hit one of your friends.

After your parents hear of this incident, they realize you cannot stay in Guangzhou after all. You decide to flee. Turn to page 16.

You dive into the art of poetry with fervor and become immersed in the power of language, the power of a single character to transform a story, create a feeling, discover an idea. You write.

"Layers of snow cover the Mountain of the Crouching Wolf
As the waves of the river rise high."

The only thing that is able to distract you from this new passion is another new source of energy in your life—a woman. You meet Xiufen Deng in 1961; and for this, you will forever be grateful to the Jins, the mutual friends who introduced you two. You and Xiufen Deng really hit it off, and you decide to register to get married right away. It will be a small occasion because you can't afford much more, nor do you need it. Romance is simple.

You decide to have a modest dinner party at your house after the wedding. Turn to page 27.

Just as everything is coming together, and the material possessions of your childhood home have been packed into cardboard boxes, sealing your past life with silver duct tape, devastating news arrives in the mail. Your immigration visa has been rescinded.

You have no backup plan, and your family has invested a lot of money in the move. Now, with no university acceptance in Guangzhou or means of getting a job, you realize your only option left is to join the army to fight for the Communist Party of China.

This way, at least you will be guaranteed three meals a day. *Turn to page 12.*

You thrive at university in America. Your English language skills are improving quickly, but you just hate some of those arbitrary grammar rules. You join an intramural soccer team, and you make a lot of friends in your classes too, some of whom introduce you to Lily Zhong.

Lily is from Philadelphia, but she recently moved to Queens. Her family, like yours, also moved to America from Guangzhou, and her Cantonese is even better than yours. She challenges you, in more ways than one, in all the best ways.

You decide to meet her at a Chinese restaurant for your first official date.

You take her to Nom Wah Tea Parlor because you both love dim sum, and you want to impress her with the authentic food. Plus, the shrimp siu mai reminds you of home. *Turn to page 28.*

You take her to Wo Hop, the traditional eatery that comes to life at night. It's open until 4:30 am and usually gets bustling around midnight. You're a New Yorker now; you've got to act like it. *Turn to page 28.*

22

You plan to run from the Japanese again, but your family has a hard time finding relatives or other connections anywhere else where they could make a fresh start again. Meanwhile, the Japanese occupy the city and regularly launch air raids. The Americans try to help, but you don't see much difference between the damage done by a crashing ally warplane and an enemy bomb striking your city.

You spend your days miraculously dodging these collisions and watching friends and strangers alike fail to do so.
Go to page 24.

You realize you cannot wait for a miracle connection to form any longer. You must take action, pick a direction, and hope for the best. *Turn to page 25.*

IMAGE 3

One day, your luck runs out. You walk down the street on your way back from the produce market with a modest sack of rice and a couple eggs in your shoulder bag. Your mother is planning to make eggs scrambled with tomato tonight for dinner, one of your favorite dishes. But you hear the giveaway whistling sound just a bit too late, you look up—and then—

THE END.

By the time your family works out a plan of action to go north, there are rumors of the impending Japanese surrender. Just a couple weeks later, on September 9, 1945, the Second Sino-Japanese War is officially over.

Your life on the run is finally over.

You stay in Wuzhou to look for work. Turn to page 29.

You move back to Guangzhou to look for work. Turn to page 30.

You realize you would not be able to move quickly enough to escape the Japanese soldiers, and you would be even more of a burden to your family on the run. Without another option, you stay in Wuzhou as the Japanese occupy the city and begin to launch air raids. The Americans try to help, but you don't see much difference between the damage done by a crashing ally warplane and an enemy bomb striking your city. You spend your days miraculously dodging these bombs and watching friends and strangers alike fail to do so.

Finally, on September 9, 1945, the Japanese surrender, and the Second Sino-Japanese War is officially over. Your life on the run is finally over.

You stay in Wuzhou to look for work. Turn to page 29.

You move back to Guangzhou to look for work. Turn to page 30.

You and Xiufen Deng are happy, happier than you've dared to feel your whole life thus far. Everything seems to be happening so fast, and the next year, your first daughter is born. She has silky, smooth hair and piercing, black eyes. The Jins, now your neighbors, are the first to meet her and tell you what a beautiful child she is. But you already know. For her first birthday, you want to give her a special gift, even though you know she will not remember it.

You decide to write her a poem in calligraphy on bamboo paper, a memento to remind her of her father's love for her in the future, and for the rest of her life. Turn to page 31.

Lily seems to have a wonderful time on the date, and you continue seeing each other.

One spring break, you two go to San Francisco to get away from the university for a while. While sitting at the dock, you see a military ship in the distance, possible from Indonesia. The army band aboard is blasting "Jingle Bells" into the relentless waves of the summer sea, and you think this is the funniest scene you have ever seen and the happiest moment you have ever felt. And you think it is because you saw and felt it with her.

Right at that moment, you get on one knee and propose to her—you can sort out the ring later. Turn to page 32.

Your uncle has recently opened a small shop in Wuzhou that sells mattress covers. You help him at this shop, learning to advertise the different benefits of the grass or bamboo models. A few years later, in 1949, it seems no one needs mattress covers anymore. The business begins to fail, and you cannot find work anywhere else.

The rest of your family struggles with employment too, so you decide to move back to Guangzhou. Turn to page 30.

In Guangzhou, the government has a lot of work to do and is hiring workers to perform strenuous manual labor for cheap wages. One of the main projects you work on with dozens of other men is digging a soccer field out of the side of a mountain.

Soon, you grow tired of this work. You hear rumors of some job openings at the Lian De Cheng ("Together Can Successful") Factory and soon enough, the government offers you and three other workers positions there.

You're wary because you have heard the conditions and work in textile factories can be extremely grueling and not very rewarding. You decide to stick with the manual labor, which seems to be working for you so far. Turn to page 33.

You want a change of pace, and the idea of a stable job with consistent pay appeals to you. You take the position. Turn to page 35.

As the years pass, poetry and the arts become a central form of expression in your family, a way to show each other affection. One family dinner, your granddaughter draws a sketch of you on her restaurant napkin and says, "Gong gong! Shi ni!" *Grandpa, it's you!*

For years, you keep this napkin in your faded brown wallet that you always carry in the chest pocket of your shirt, until your next book of poetry is published, and you decide to display your granddaughter's drawing on the inside cover of the book next to your author's bio.

Turn to page 106.

Lily Zhong says yes, and soon she becomes Lily Lee—an even lovelier name, in your opinion.

The years pass, you graduate from Pratt Institute with a degree in mechanical engineering, and you start a family. You watch your children grow up and start their own.

Now, the days are much quieter. You try to find ways to pass the time.

You decide to try your hand at writing. Turn to page 39.

You spend your time watching, recording, and re-watching China Central Television (CCTV) and learning the craft of woodcarving.

Turn to page 110.

A few years later, the major repairs and renovations to the city have been completed. There isn't much manual labor left to be done, and when there is, the competition for it is too high for you to land a job.

You reconsider that factory job offered to you so many years ago and ask around to see if that is still a possibility. You've made a friend in the local government, so he pulls some strings and gets you into the factory. Turn to page 35.

IMAGE 4

35

You are placed in a relatively good position in the factory, working as an apprentice to a "master" (*shifu*) technician. Your master is vicious and strict in his teaching, with little patience for delays or mistakes. You also have to cook for him, drink tea with him, and buy cigarettes for him, as if you are his lapdog and personal assistant. One day, right after you come back from a trip to the store for his favorite pork noodle soup lunch, your master asks you to get him another pack of cigarettes.

You go out again to get him his cigarettes.
Turn to page 36.

You tell him you will get them in half an hour.
Turn to page 36.

Your days are filled with grueling labor and menial tasks, but you bite your tongue and grit your teeth and get those cigarettes day after day. You work hard and learn diligently, quickly rising through the ranks of the factory to become an independent technician as you gain more skills and knowledge. Things seem to break faster than you can repair them, but it only takes a couple more months for you to learn your way around the place and even predict which machines will need oiling before the order for it comes in. You do this work for a few years and successfully send your younger sister to school too.

After many years of struggle,
it seems like things are finally looking up.
Go to page 37.

A few years later, in 1954, you meet a new worker by the name of Man Liang who is employed at another small factory nearby. Your lunch breaks often overlap, and you think she is funny.

In 1956, the Guangzhou government decides to conglomerate all of these smaller factories into a large national one, called the Guangzhou No. 1 Textile Factory. They also transport all the workers from the smaller factories to the new one, where you work closer with Man Liang and get to know her better. She seems really sweet, and you're starting to fall for her.

In 1958, because of the war and subsequent serious lack of education in the general public, the government implements a system where factories must hire teachers to offer classes for the workers to attend after their shifts. These classes teach everything from singing to drawing to reading and writing, and workers can attend whichever they want. Through these classes, you learn to read well enough to understand the newspaper, but you never quite learn to write beyond an elementary level. You also attend some singing classes and become very interested in Chinese opera, which has a big culture and fan base in the factory.

There are so many reasons why you love Chinese opera—the rich history of the traditional practice since the Tang Dynasty, the colorful costumes, eye-catching makeup, sweeping stories, calculated elegance, technical vocal challenges, and the power to transform into someone else entirely, whoever you want to be, for the duration of a show. Soon, it becomes your primary passion and favorite hobby, which you use to serenade Man Liang.

You've also reached a point in your life where you're starting to think about building a family, but you're worried she doesn't feel the same way about you, so you wait for her to make the first move.

She does. She asks you to be her boyfriend, and you happily accept.

Four years fly by, and things are becoming more serious.

IMAGE 5

You don't have a romantic bone in your body, so you just ask her one day, "Hey, what do you think of getting married?"
Turn to page 40.

You want to show her you really care about her in the best way you can, so you sing her a love song and propose at the end.
Turn to page 41.

You write a book about the history of China. But you know that people's attention spans are short, so you limit your writing about every topic that has been important to the development of your country and culture (tea, porcelain, etc.) to one paragraph each. Then, you think, people may actually read it.

You need help with the grammar, so you send your book to your granddaughter over the Google Drive because she has always been good with words.
Turn to page 110.

She says, “I think we could do it.”

So, in 1960, you do it. You register for the legal paperwork and get married.

You both agree to do something simple, so you invite some friends over for a small celebratory dinner afterwards.
Turn to page 42.

She is moved to tears by your song and accepts your marriage proposal. You register for the legal paperwork and get married in 1960.

You both agree to do something simple, so you invite some friends over for a small celebratory dinner afterwards.
Turn to page 42.

A few years later, you have risen up the ranks of the textile factory and now work in upper management. Then, in 1966, Chairman Mao launches the Cultural Revolution.

Everything is turned around. Schools are closed, little red books flash in angry fists, public conversations turn into back-alley whispers, and youngsters join Red Guard gangs. Most of the local government officials are fired, and you are somehow elected to become a representative of the workers, to attend civil meetings and participate in policy votes. You work to never abuse your power and just do your part to get through these turbulent political times unscathed.

Ten years and about 1.5 million deaths later, the revolution comes to an end, and you return to the factory, to the production line, because you knew the machines were what you were really good at. You have had a taste of power, and a taste was enough. At age 60, you retire.

In retirement, you continue to visit the factory often, just to check up on things and visit people.
Go to page 43.

You dive into retirement, never looking back, thankful for being able to look forward.
Go to page 43.

You become more and more serious about your hobby of singing Chinese opera, which you learned in those government-mandated factory classes so many years ago.

You watch your three sons, now fully grown, start families of their own.

In 1994, your first granddaughter is born.

Turn to page 108.

You always pick Nationalist, if not for luck then for ritual's sake. It isn't until years later that you realize which team you picked had nothing to do with whether or not you won the game; it was really up to chance, but that is a revelation for another time.

The Japanese have reached and invaded southern China, including Guangdong. Your family must make a decision—to flee further south, which meant settling down someplace new or living on the run, or to stay, which meant risking death by gunshot, bomb blast, or assault every trip to the grocery store or bus ride to work.

Your family decides to flee. Go to page 45.

Your family decides to stay in Guangdong. Turn to page 87.

You are only a few years old when it starts; you barely understand what's happening. But you will remember the hushed tones of conversations, the late nights of hasty packing, and seemingly endless hours of moving, *on your feet, hurry up, don't dilly-dally!*

You are headed to Hong Kong—a mystical place you have only every heard of before, where they also speak Cantonese, and where there will be friendly faces. Maybe an auntie or an old family friend. Surely someone will be able help, anyone.

There are stories of the people who have made it across the water to Hong Kong, the city whose name means "Fragrant Harbor." You hope the fragrance comes from delicious food, steaming cha siu bao or sweet dan tat. Or maybe it comes from beautiful flowers, celebratory bouquets whose petals line the streets of safety, of British rule, which the adults remark has never before seemed as appealing as it does now.

With the smells of buns and roses still in your nostrils, you run, clutching tight to your mother's ever-warm, comforting hand the whole way to Fragrant Harbor.

You and your mom decide to really try to make this place your new home. Turn to page 46.

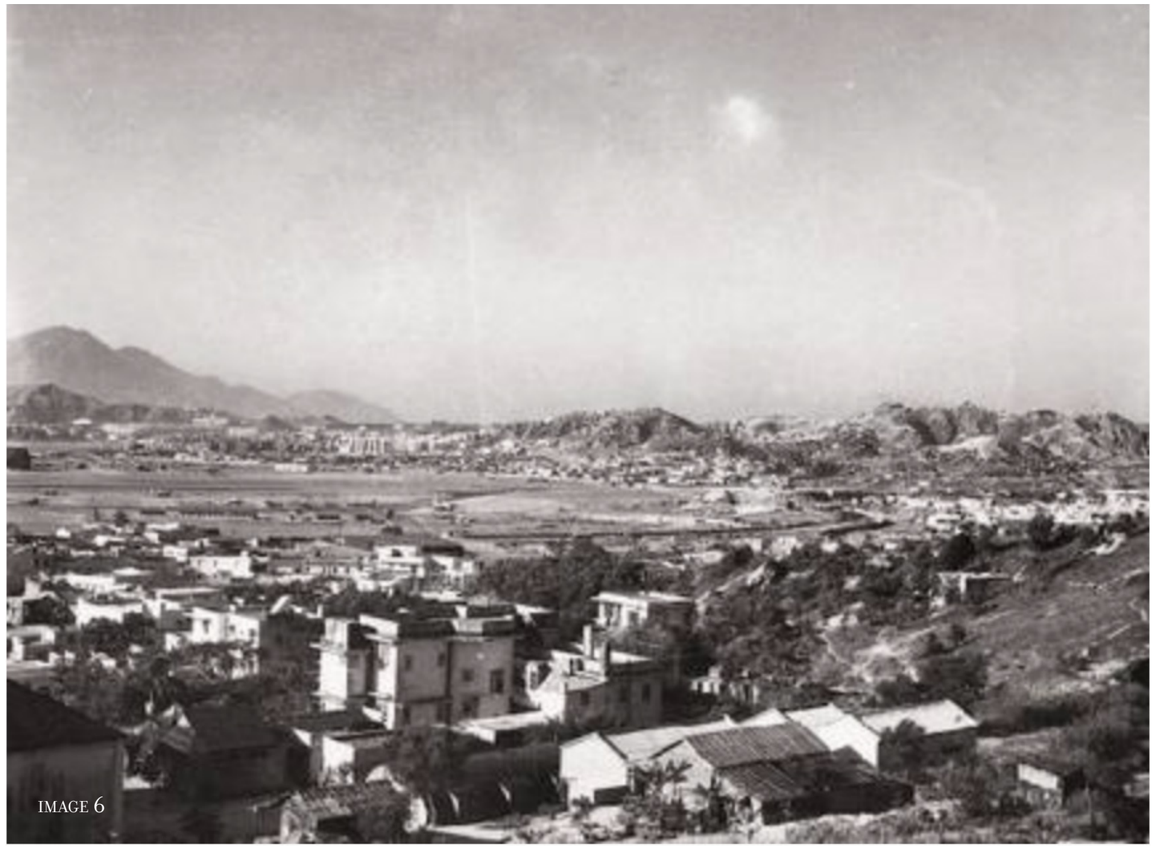


IMAGE 6

You settle into your new, even smaller apartment in Hong Kong. *Real estate options are so limited these days,* your parents whispered before the move, giggling over their last bottle of rice wine that they couldn't fit into their bags, *demand is high in the market, but we'll still get a good deal.*

A couple days later, your mom strides out the door with purpose, your small hand firmly gripped in hers. Today's mission? *Make our home feel more like home.* She had turned off the radio and scrambled together what remained of your family's meager savings to create a fund for this mission, which she now needs your help with! What's the right call? Cream lace curtains for the kitchen windows, or floral plum tablecloth for the dining room table?

You soon realize it doesn't matter. The Japanese are back, with even more force than before.

Hong Kong is no longer safe—you must leave, fast. You walk for days on end until your feet are blistered and your toes are numb. All the while, you clutch your mother's hand. You see patrolling Japanese soldiers in the street, but you don't know to be scared. Your mom tells you to keep your head down and walk fast, so you do. You count your steps to pass the time and play games with yourself depending on the type of ground you're walking on.

Sidewalk:
Don't step on the cracks. Take an even number of steps within each square of sidewalk, so you can take two steps or four, but not three.
Turn to page 48.

Brick:
Hop on same-colored bricks until you stumble. Then choose a different color and continue.
Turn to page 48.

Dirt:
Step lightly. You only have the one pair of shoes, so don't get them dirty, or your mom will scold you.
Turn to page 48.

You will still remember this walking game every time you look down, even as you walk into adulthood. Many other children your age are left behind because they can't keep up or because they are too scared, making too much of a fuss when furtiveness is of utmost importance. The scared ones are most often left behind, often in mountainous regions, where they can be left to be raised by locals in the mountain villages.

Sometimes, you imagine what life would have been like had you been left behind, left to run freely on the winding dirt trails under the thick canopy of lush trees, to discover hidden pools of fresh water to play in and invent poems by, to breathe the mountain mist instead of the Japanese gas in the city.

Instead, you soldier on, sleeping in the doorways of public bathrooms, on park benches, anywhere you can lay your head as the others take turns keeping watch.

And then you reach the water.

You crowd onto a tiny, over-packed boat with dozens of other Chinese refugees on the run. You pray it won't sink under the weight of so many lost souls hoping to live.
Go to page 49.

You fear the boat will flood and sink in the ocean, so you ask to wait for the next one. *Turn to page 51.*

You board the boat, sticking close to your mom. There are so many bodies that you can barely see a few inches in front of you, and you desperately clutch your mom's hand to keep from getting separated in the confined struggle for space. With every breath, your ribcage meets resistance—someone's knee, another's elbow—and you try to focus on taking even, shallow breaths, so you can stay out of the way but not pass out. *Although, it might not be a bad option to pass out,* you consider. Your body would still be held up by the support of the others packed around you, so you would not hit your head or anything else important on the way down. And then you could escape from this sardine-can reality into your dreams.

You start to feel numb to the ocean's spray and the water rising up to your ankles, shins, knees… You aren't scared anymore, because you can't afford to be. You start to laugh.

After some length of time, you can't tell if it had been a couple of hours or a dozen, you make it to land. Everyone scrambles off, chilled to the bone from the sea breeze and the harrowing journey. Then the passengers, who had just shared these moments of mortal peril and warming relief together, part ways. Your mom pats you down in a vain attempt to dry you a bit before grabbing your hand once again.

You begin walking towards home.
Turn to page 50.

You begin walking towards the city, towards Guangzhou.
Turn to page 54.

50

You make it back to your childhood house and scramble up those familiar wooden stairs to your room, flopping onto your bed, so comforting and warm, exactly how you had left it. You go back downstairs to see your parents unpacking the few items that had survived their travels. They are not grinning nearly as widely as you are. You've made it home—what could still be wrong? Your parents say, *We can't stay.* As soon as they empty their bags, they begin to fill them again—*only the essentials,* they say. *There are no jobs left here in the countryside. We can't stay. We're moving to the city center in Guangzhou, for good. We can't stay.*

You nod and slink back up the stairs with your siblings to pack your bags and say goodbye to the house you grew up in, again.

Turn to page 54.

51

You mother squeezes your hand—tight—and scolds you for being *Ridiculous! How can we take that chance? The Japanese are right behind us. We have to go now, or not go at all. Do you want to live?*

No, *you insist.* It looks wobbly, like it will sink any second!

Turn to page 52.

Yes, *you nod.*

Turn to page 49.

You refuse to get on the dilapidated boat. You make such a fuss, pulling your mother out of the crowd of people as she tries to reason with you. The others all board, and the boat pulls away. Your mother realizes too late—the boat already a small dot on the horizon. It's getting late now, and as the blazing orange sun sets over the glistening water, the scene almost looks beautiful.

Just as the boat disappears into the distance, another appears. A second boat with the same purpose. Breathing a gasp of relief, your mother stares you down with an iron gaze and uses a tone that you know means no nonsense. *Come,* she says. Her calloused hand grabs you by the arm, and she marches you back down to the rickety wooden dock. As the boat nears, she pushes her way through the new crowd of people that has already formed, her knuckles now white around your wrist, nails nearly breaking skin.

IMAGE 7

Onboard, there are so many bodies in the small vessel that you can barely see a few inches in front of you, and you desperately clutch your mom's hand to keep from getting separated in the confined struggle for space. With every breath, your ribcage meets resistance—someone's knee, another's elbow—and you try to focus on taking even, shallow breaths, so you can stay out of the way but not pass out. You start to feel numb to the ocean's spray and the water rising up to your ankles, shins, knees…

As the water continues to rise, the panic in the boat rises too. It starts with some shuffling, then pushing, shoving, screaming. The overloaded boat is sinking, and the dark water is suffocating. Your mother shouts your name and flails for your hand, and you could've sworn your fingers briefly touched, but you lose her in the waves that swallow bodies whole.

Your grandmother once told you that drowning is the most peaceful death because you feel elation before losing consciousness. One last sleepy thought bubbles up as the light fades from above you. She was right, *you think to yourself, as you are rocked by the undulating waves of nature's crib into darkness.*

THE END

You learned on the boat that there is "no choice but to laugh because [you can't] be afraid of dying." This lesson will haunt and protect you for the rest of your life.

They say there are more opportunities in Guangzhou City, and maybe you can even get some more schooling in.

Soon, a couple of jobs open up.

You take a job at a textile factory, working in the sewing division because your small, nimble fingers would be perfect for threading needles and operating the delicate machinery. Go to page 55.

You take a job at South China Normal University's print shop, where you help with printing, pressing, and binding books. Turn to page 68.

You begin work at the textile factory and attend a night school after work hours to finish out your elementary-school-level education. Then you continue your education on your own, teaching yourself how to read and write Mandarin through popular comic books. Of the four most famous series of the time, your favorite is Monkey King—the tales of a legendary monkey born from a stone who possesses supernatural powers such as super strength and the ability to fly. You collect, read, re-read, and treasure these books, which teach you not only Chinese characters but also life lessons of patience, justice, and hope.

Down the road, you will no longer be able to recall each of the Monkey King's adventures during his travels from China to India. But you will always remember so vividly the sound of his twinkling laughter that you imagine as you read his stories, the mischievous gleam in his eye as he stirs up trouble and taunts his enemies, his ability to conjure doppelgangers out of strands of his fur, his jaw-dropping and jaw-breaking strength, which he uses to split stones at a single tap of his magical staff.

You will remember his friends, his fellow adventurers. The mild and wise Buddhist monk Tang Sanzang shows you how to be selfless and peaceful. The perpetually hungry and brash half-man-half-pig Zhu Bajie teaches you how *not* to be; he always gulps down delicious food so quickly that he will finish a meal and ask the others what it tasted like. You make a mental note-to-self that you will always eat slowly, so you can taste your meals and have the patience to enjoy the flavors of your life. Finally, the obedient and logical sand priest Sha

Wujing, who was rescued from his eternal punishment for a past crime to join the group's journey, teaches you about forgiveness and second chances.

Decades later, your granddaughter will grow up with the Monkey King's stories and lessons too. She will watch the popular Chinese-Canadian animated series *Journey to the West: Legends of the Monkey King* in Mandarin with English subtitles.

Once you grow tall enough, you are transferred to the weaving section of the textile factory to operate the large looms. Although you struggle at first to keep the countless threads straight, to learn when to flick what stick and when to press the foot pedal; soon, the rhythms of weaving and the sounds of the twirling spindles and creaking wooden frames and flying shuttles become meditative and second-nature to you.

At your new station, you meet a young technician, who performs basic repairs on the various textile machinery. He's new to the factory, and you decide to help him, show him around. You become close friends, and you think he's pretty great.

You begin to see him as more than a friend. You enjoy his company, but you are both still so young. You don't want to rush into anything or mess anything up. But as you continue spending time together during lunch breaks at the factory and after work, something warm inside your chest continues to grow, slowly, centimeter by centimeter, until it takes over your body and mind.

One day after work, you walk together toward your bus stops. Before you split ways, you reach out and catch his wrist.

He turns around, and you say, *I think I love you.*

He laughs his charming full-belly laugh, eyes wrinkled and teeth flashing, and he says, *I know,* followed by, *Will you marry me?*

Before you have a chance to process, you hear yourself saying, *Yes!*

In 1960, you have a small wedding, nothing elaborate. You feel nervous, even though the ceremony is just a meal with close family because you can't afford decorations, nice outfits, or even wine.

You have three sons together. You had hoped the third would be a daughter, because it would've been easier to talk to her, but you love your sons regardless.

You and your husband both continue working at the factory, which has now merged with various other local factories to form the national conglomerate known as Guangzhou No. 1 Textile Factory. It's hard, honest work to support your family, and you're lucky enough to have the help of your mom who watches the children while you are at work. Even now, your mom is still holding your hand.

At 50, you retire from the factory to a much calmer life at home with your husband. In fact, you start to get bored without work or your kids, who are now fully grown, to keep you busy. To pass the time…

You look for another job you can do now. Turn to page 58.

You help take care of your mom at home. Turn to page 59.

Your whole life, you've loved to sing and dance. You're pretty good, too—at least your friends and husband tell you so. In your old age, you're beginning to lose your voice and your strength and agility. Instead, you've taken up watching Chinese opera shows to pass the time.

You hatch an idea. If you work at a theater as a docent, showing customers to their seats, you can watch the shows for free and earn some extra cash for your grandchildren's birthdays and New Year's red envelopes. You imagine slipping a hefty stack into the cherry-red, three-by-four-inch rectangular pouches, decorated with gold-embossed calligraphy, koi fish, and dragons. You imagine feeling the weight of your earnings, your gift, your love through the thin, waxy paper of the envelopes, loosely concealed and readily tangible.

Unfortunately, the theater refuses to hire you.
Even more unfortunately, your mother's health deteriorates,
and you decide to end your quest for a new job
to care for her in your free time.
Go to page 59.

Your mom, who has guided you your whole life, needs your help now. Her knees are weak, and you live on the second floor of a building without elevators. You carry her up and down the stairs, and the arm-around-shoulder method becomes the piggy-back method, as her frail body continues to shrink smaller. It's a slow process, which gives it weight, like a ritual. Up, and down, and up again.

One night, her small body breathes its final breath,
and you weep, clutching her wrinkled, bony hand.
Turn to page 60.

After your mother passes away, you continue to make and remake her bed even though no body sleeps in it anymore. You continue to cook for two in the small second-floor apartment until the fridge is empty of produce and full of leftovers. You spend your days in a daze of grief and purposelessness.

In 1989, your oldest son successfully immigrates to the United States with his young wife on a student visa. He is pursuing a Ph.D. at Arizona State University. You have never heard of Arizona—only New York City and California. He tells you that it's closer to California.

He petitions for you to come to the US too.

You decide to accept his offer for a new chapter of adventure in your life. Go to page 61.

You decide to stay with your husband in Guangzhou to live out the rest of your days. Turn to page 63.

America feels a lot smaller than you expected because your version of it is limited to your family and your house. You don't speak English, and you can't drive. Public transportation in Mesa is rather lacking—nothing like the efficient buses and endless trains in Guangzhou.

You help raise your grandchildren, two delightful baby girls whose giggles become your new world. You cook meals for them and play with them while their parents are away at work, spending hours scribbling outside of the lines on their Disney coloring books with them. You discover the older one's love of puzzles (one good horse puzzle can entertain her for a few hours) and the younger one's fish allergy (she becomes such an alarming shade of rashy red every time you feed her your famous fish soup, so you create a new recipe using chicken broth). You change their smelly diapers and witnessed their many firsts.

By the time both of them are in school, your son finds you a job at a paper company. You take comfort in knowing that someone has hired you—someone still believes you are useful.

The initial dazzle of the American dream begins to fade, and you realize it's increasingly inconvenient to not speak English. After all these years in America, you spend every day on repeat, with only *Hello, good morning, yes, no* to keep you company. You managed to resist the colonialism of the English language within your body and mind, but now your tongue feels lacking. Your coworkers at the paper company sometimes ramble off English phrases at you and wait, watching with wide eyes to see how you'll respond. You can't help but feel like an animal at the zoo. You feel like they are

poking and prodding you in your cage of linguistic ignorance, throwing their English at you to see what reaction they will elicit. Every time, you can only reply, *I don't know English.* You can't decide if you hope they find that response satisfactory.

You stop working at the paper company because it's getting harder and harder to move the thick stacks of paper, perhaps for other reasons too. Your son gently offers to help you move into an old folks' home. *It's the Hong Lok Senior Apartments. I'm sure you'll make friends there in no time.*

You take up his offer because you're ready for a change.
Turn to page 64.

You prefer to stay at home, in a setting you're used to and comfortable with. You just don't have the energy to make new friends these days. *Turn to page 66.*

In your growing restlessness and your husband's growing complacency, you grow distant. You feel he no longer understands you and your desire to do something, to matter. Without the factory or the children to unite you, it seems you just don't have that much in common.

You realize there's nothing left for you here in Guangzhou. It's time to move again.
Turn to page 61.

You move into the senior center and quickly grow accustomed to the musty smell of old. Your apartment is moderately spacious and rather gray, but you throw a hand-knit blanket on the couch and a bright red calendar onto the wall and stock the fridge with ripe radishes, fresh bok choy, and your favorite fish soup. It soon feels like home.

You do, indeed, make fast friends with the other residents, who invite you over to pan sear dumplings and bake radish cakes and stir fry rice (all your favorite foods seem to be golden-brown) at their apartments that look very similar to your own. Huddled in each other's kitchens, you recount your days and the latest center drama, barely conscious of the way your wrinkled, clumsy fingers suddenly glide with ease when wrapping meat filling in dumpling skins, or the way your creaky wrist forgets their pains and cricks when flicking the familiar weight of the pan at just the right angle for a clean flip. Around mealtimes, the hallways here are filled with the sounds of sizzling oil on woks and the rich aromas of home cooking.

You don't know yet how hard it will be teach your granddaughter how to make these very same radish cakes, how eagerly she will listen to your instructions, and how tragically she will never quite master the exact proportions of each ingredient that you measure by muscle memory.

It's nice to be able to speak with people again. You meet in the lounge every mid-morning for your daily game of mahjong with ten-cent buy-ins. It's more about the fun than the money, but of course, winning a couple of bucks a day feels pretty good too.

Life is good—nothing to complain about.
You don't do much these days, but more of the same.
Turn to page 67.

You are comfortable, but you begin to feel like a burden. As you sit around watching Chinese period dramas every day on your son's TV, everyone else is moving on with their lives. The girls are in school now, learning more English every day, forgetting more Mandarin every day… You reinforce to your son that he must continue to speak to them in Cantonese, lest they lose that part of their heritage too. Or else, when they're older, they won't even be able to hold a conversation with you.

Your son and his wife get exciting news jobs, and they want to go on a fancy vacation to Hawaii, but they worry about your comfort during the plane ride. You're not sure about the quality of authentic Chinese food in Hawaii, which raises more questions—what will you eat when you get there, and will the restaurants serve hot water instead of iced, will the hotel beds be stiff enough for your aching back, or will they be marshmallow-soft like how the white people like them?

You feel you have so many problems and so few solutions here. You decide you're ready for a change.
Turn to page 64.

"Now, there's nothing. I'm like a dead rat (laughs)."

You still play mahjong, but less so, because you keep losing. You feel your mind power slipping. It's not fun anymore when you lose more often than you win.

More of the same has grown boring, and the sense of purposelessness and uselessness that has plagued you since retirement has come creeping back in.

You exchange WeChat messages with your husband every few days, and he tells you about his very comfortable life. He has a new live-in servant who is very capable and takes very good care of him. He seems to be hinting that she would take very good care of you too, should you decide to move back… *She cleans very well. I have lots of visitors, our friends in China, who come and cook with me. I go on trips, too, to other Chinese villages nearby. You could come with me.*

You are unsure. You feel you are a useless person no matter where you go, bothering others wherever you are.

You can't even decide how to spend the rest of your life. So you stay, for now.

Turn to page 112.

You enjoy your job at the print shop. You start your days there with manual labor, running pages through the printing press and hand-binding books of all kinds, from textbooks to encyclopedias to short fiction novels. You count the weeks by the number of papercuts on your hand, and as you grow used to them, you lose count. You slowly work your way up the chain to management, proving time and again that you are hardworking and trustworthy.

One afternoon, during your lunch break, you're enjoying a steaming bowl of noodles in soup, when a handsome gentleman sits down at the table right next to you. He reads a book of poetry as he eats, and he has the posture of someone grand. You remember thinking that you've never seen someone slurping noodle soup look so sophisticated.

Through furtive glances, you decide to say hello, hoping to start a conversation. Go to page 69.

After openly staring for a few moments too long, you regain your senses and decide to mind your own business. You focus on your meal and keep your head down like your mom taught you all those years ago. Turn to page 70.

Hello, you say, hoping your breath doesn't shake as it leaves you. The handsome gentleman looks up from the book he's reading with his lunch.

Hello, his voice is resonant and clear.

You don't know it yet, but this gentleman is a high-up editor a major publisher. And he will become your husband.

You get married. Turn to page 71.

You keep your gaze directed steadily toward your lunch in front of you. The boiled cabbage has never looked so unappealing.

Hello, he says, his voice resonant and clear, the pages of book gently rustling as he sets it down.

Hello, you reply, hoping your shaky voice doesn't betray your nerves.

You don't know it yet, but this gentleman is a high-up editor at a major publisher. And he will become your husband.

You get married.
Go to page 71.

You have a small wedding, nothing elaborate, just a meal with close family because you couldn't afford decorations, nice outfits, or even wine. You have two daughters together, both raised on the campus of South China Normal University.

The older one is better at school and tests, and the younger one's passionate about softball, joining one of the country's first female league for the sport. You and your husband work together to raise them, each earning an honest salary and making an effort to serve as models of patience, respect, and open communication in the household.

Eventually, you even have the opportunity to transfer out of the print shop department to do administrative work in one of the academic departments of the university.

You take the new job, ready to close this chapter of your life to open another. *Turn to page 73.*

You turn down the job, content with the work you are doing now at the print shop. *Turn to page 72.*

You are doing fairly well for yourself, but your mom becomes frustrated that there's nowhere left for you to go. You've reached the top of the print shop management, so the pay raises have stopped. Her nagging grows from intermittent to incessant, and you do want to make her proud.

You go back to the university administration and ask around—can they still get you into an admin job elsewhere, anywhere in the academic departments?

You're in luck. They can squeeze you in in the Department of Psychology, a nine-to-five desk job.

You take it!
Go to page 73.

It's a bittersweet goodbye. Your printing coworkers throw you a modest farewell party—nothing much, but it's what they can manage, and it brings tears to your eyes. You will never forget your years here.

In the psychology department, you continue to make connections and develop friendships. You've always been a people person, and now your daughters tease you about your popularity. *Every night, we starve before dinner,* they joke. *You finish with your work at 5 pm, but it takes you two hours to walk the quarter of a mile from your office to our on-campus house because you stop and chat with the fifty people you know on the way back!*

You laugh. It feels good to be a part of a community. To feel safe and stable, loving and loved. It's been so long.

The days and years pass like this, and before you know it, both of your daughters are off the college.

Cont. Next Page

The younger one gets married early, and her husband takes her with him to the United States, where he will be pursuing a Ph.D. with a full-ride scholarship from an American university. You could not be prouder. Your daughter is going to start fresh and start a family in the land of opportunity, and you just wish you could be there to root her on as she does it.

But you know your life is in China. All of your family and friends and your husband's career are based in Guangzhou. This campus is all you've known, or at least all you remember of your adult life. The most you can do is offer to visit your daughter in America once she's settled down, in case she needs any help around the house.
Turn to page 76.

You decide to offer your services permanently. You're not sure if your daughter will want you to live with her, or if you will simply be an inconvenience on her new lifestyle, but why not offer? You just want to help her the way your mother helped you through so much.
Go to page 75.

Your daughter considers for a moment before laughing. She says, *Don't be silly, Mom.*

You try not to take that personally.

You decide to propose a compromise—a six-month stay with her in the US to help her settle in, and to help you let go.
Turn to page 76.

Your daughter accepts your offer; after all, she has a daughter of her own she could use some help with. For six months, you and your husband will take an extended vacation in the States to help raise your grandchild and to help your daughter save money on the babysitter.

You go. You and your husband are restricted to the house during work hours because both your daughter and your son-in-law and their cars are gone—not that you would know how to drive anyways. But you don't mind; there's plenty to do in the house. The days fly by as you sweep the floors, make the beds, play with your granddaughter, fold the laundry, cook for the family, wash the dishes, and continually move around that giant plastic vase of artificial pale pink roses that you can't quite find the right spot for.

Days like this are punctuated by family trips. Your daughter wants to show you around the States because who knows when you'll be back. You don't know yet that you will never be back.

Your daughter, your son-in-law, your husband, you, and the young girl pile into the small, silver Toyota Camry with your suitcases and a rice cooker packed neatly in the trunk. Together, you venture out into the vast unknown. Destinations? First it was Las Vegas—the dazzling neon signs take your breath away, and perhaps your eyesight too, for you see dots in your vision for a couple of days after. Then the Niagara Falls—your daughter tells you this is where she and her husband had their honeymoon, watching the roaring waters pour forward, both unable to resist and unhindered in following the path they were meant to follow. Then Chicago—

there is a big metal bean and a severe wind chill. Finally, on the last trip, you go to New York—the promised land for American dreamers, the city where, as long as you work hard, anyone can make it big. You feel the magic of the place fill your body and your brittle bones as you gaze up at the Statue of Liberty, this beautiful woman standing tall at the gates of heaven on earth, and you silently wish that one day, your daughter or *her* daughter could make it here. Could really make it.

The trips are great fun, but you are really here to help. And when the six months are up, and your visa expires, you feel you aren't quite ready to leave. There's still so much to be done, and your daughter and her husband could finance a babysitter, but why should they do that when you could just stay a bit longer and save them a couple more paychecks? So that they can take their daughter on even more exciting trips when she is a bit older, old enough to remember.

You apply to renew your visa and settle in for another six months. Turn to page 78.

You know it's time for teary goodbyes and to head to the airport. Turn to page 79.

You continue on as you had, waiting to hear back from the immigration office. A few weeks pass by, and still nothing. You begin to grow uneasy. You are here illegally.

You decide it's too dangerous to risk getting caught without paperwork and decide to head home.
Go to page 79.

You figure the chances of anyone stopping and asking for your paperwork are so slim that you probably wouldn't encounter any issues. *Turn to page 80.*

It's hard, but you know it's time to go. You pack your things, your suitcase the exact same size as it was when you'd arrived. It feels almost like you were never here, and like all the memories are an old, hazy, but familiar dream.

You hug your son-in-law and then your daughter, harder and tighter. You slip one final red envelope to each girl, to your daughter's protests, *Mom! Where did you even get that money? There's no holiday right now. You don't need to do that! Please keep it.* But you sternly push the envelopes into their soft hands with a wink and a finger to your pursed lips, *shhhh,* you say. *Our secret,* you say. At least you learned this much English while you were here. The girls giggle and clutch their envelopes with delicate fingers and big eyes full of wonder, clumsily failing to wink back.

On the plane, you ask your husband to trade so you can have the window seat. During takeoff, you watch the world you have come to know and love over the past months recede, falling away beneath you, soon to be replaced by the incoming world you had left behind.

Seeing all the cars shrink to the size of ants brings a small smile to your face, before you close your eyes and sit back for the ride, your homecoming.
Turn to page 81.

You decide to stay, and after the first couple of months pass without incident, you are fairly certain nothing bad will happen. You end up staying another six months, doubling your initial intended stay, before you finally feel comfortable leaving your daughter in her new life and returning to your own, waiting for you back in Guangzhou.

You're ready.
Turn to page 79.

You didn't even realize how much you missed it until you were back. From the moment you step off the plane, through customs and baggage claim, all the way back to your doorstep, you are flooded with familiar scents, sounds, and signs. You can actually read the street signs again!

The comfort of home envelops you, and you are glad to have gone, but also glad to be back.

You and your husband settle back into a routine. You make your daily visits around the campus, greeting everyone, notifying them of your return and catching up on all the local gossip you've missed while you were away this past year. Your husband jumps back into his writing, sure that these new adventures will provide some healthy fodder for his next book of poems. Things feel right.

Until things start to feel wrong. It started with a lump. You found it one day in the bath, a small one the size of a marble on your left breast.

Everything after that happens so fast, things escalate, the lump grows, your husband constantly furrows his brow; suddenly you are in the hospital, losing hair and hooked up to beeping machines, wondering how the girls are, if your daughter is eating well, and how is her older sister, your other daughter, whom you haven't spoken to in so long?

The operation goes smoothly. The lump is gone, and you hope things can return to normal quickly. You didn't tell either of your daughters about this—you saw no point in worrying them unnecessarily about something they had no control over. You just hoped to recover, and now you have.

You tell your younger daughter in America, offhandedly, during one of your regular phone calls, *Sorry I haven't been available much in the past couple of months. I had a bit of a cancer scare, but everything is fine now, and we should be able to do our biweekly calls with no problem moving forward!*

She says you are brave, strong, for handling that burden alone. Secretly, you wonder if you were simply in denial. But regardless, you were never alone.

Your husband had finally learned all of the household chores you had managed for so long while you were at the hospital. He learned to pay the bills, call the plumber, actually remember to check the mail box. The hardest thing he had to learn, he says, was how to cook half as well as you. You laugh and place your hand on his arm, *Well, if you think you're half as good as I am now, I guess I'll just have to come home and prove you wrong.*

You come home and prove him wrong.

You're relieved to be home. Try as he might, your husband simply couldn't keep the apartment as tidy as you do. Now he can focus on his writing again, and life can resume.

So it does, until it comes to a screeching halt once again. The cancer is back, and worse this time. You feel your body weakening. The disease has returned with a vengeance, with a bone to pick, a chip in its shoulder, something to prove.

You have something to prove too—that you can be as brave as your daughter believes you are and keep this hidden from her too, so she doesn't have to worry. *Turn to page 84.*

You have something to prove too—that true bravery is confronting the truth, the truth that you may soon have to bid your daughter goodbye for the final time. *Turn to page 85.*

You resolve to keep your condition a secret. You can recover from this too, right? Your daughter has enough on her plate, making a life for herself and your grandchildren in America.

But in moments of quiet, you find yourself imagining dozens of different goodbyes with her—none of which you would get to have if you don't tell her. Would she cry on the phone? Would she have something important to say to you? Would she wish she could hug you? Would she fly across the world to hold your hand?

Only one way to find out, so you reach for the phone.
Go to page 85.

You call your daughter, remembering the +1 for the American number. She picks up, *Hello, Mom!*

Hello, sweetie.

By the end of the phone call, your daughter has booked a plane ticket to Guangzhou this coming February to spend the Lunar New Year and her birthday with you. She assures you she can take the time off from work, she has been collecting vacation days, and her husband can watch the kids just fine on his own. They're in school now, so he just has to drop them off before work and pick them up afterwards. He's even better at cooking than she is, so no worries there. She is coming, for you, and she will be here soon, for you. To watch the lion dances and firecrackers with you, to exchange red envelopes and good wishes for the new year with you.

You hang up the phone, plump tears openly tumbling down your weathered cheeks.

You wait patiently for your daughter's arrival in just a couple of weeks. Turn to page 86.

You wish you could be there to greet your daughter at the airport as she flies in, but instead, you greet her with a gentle squeeze of the hand when she walks into your room. For the week she stays, she makes you home-cooked meals and pats your forehead with a warm cloth, telling you stories of her life in America. You reminisce about the past, her childhood antics, like when she would try so hard to catch the dragonflies that hovered above the pond near your old house that she would fall in, trudging the last half-mile home from school in a wet, sullied uniform and a look of mixed shame and bemusement. You dream about the future, what your granddaughters will do when they grow up—the older one has taken an interest in animals and veterinary work, and the younger one still spends her days doodling and making up nonsensical stories. You see much of your husband in the younger one; you suspect she will do something with words.

Too soon, it's time for her to go. But oddly enough, a sense of calm and peace has washed over you. You know it's her time to leave, and it will soon be yours too.

Turn to page 114.

Guangdong is your home. Your parents decide to stay and tough it out, hoping the Japanese will give up before you do. But one day, as you and some other kids are playing in the streets, collecting pretty stones and chasing after the wild rabbits hopping by, a Japanese plane flies overhead and drops a handful of bombs. One lands only a little over 10 meters away from you, and the impact knocks you back off your feet—but not before you watch it hit one of your friends.

Stunned, you stumble home to tell your parents what happened. Their stony expressions give nothing away as they turn their backs to you in hushed conversation. You hope they will tell you to pack your things, that you'll be safe where you're headed.

No such luck. Your father tries to explain that, in his line of work as a merchant, his business would not survive if he were to uproot his whole life and family. He would lose all his regular suppliers and clients, so you had to stay.

You know he will live to regret that decision.
Turn to page 88.

Amidst all the chaos, your youngest baby brother is born. He is absolute perfection. You sit by his small bundled body every night, studying the exact curve of his smooth cheeks and the length of his thick dark lashes in the moonlight. During the day, you play with him endlessly, tickling and teasing in hopes of hearing his wind chime laughter, so bright and so sweet, just one more time.

In these moments, you could never have imagined that, one day, you would forget his face, his smile, his sweet, bright voice.

But you will. You just don't know it yet.
And that's not all you will lose. That's not all that the fallible human memory, the injustices of institutional archives, the passing of time, and the erasure of history will cost you. You will also forget…
Go to page 89.

With one more sibling, your family has one more mouth to feed, and money is getting tighter every day. You are about to begin Grade 7 of your schooling, but your family is not too well-off, so…

You rely on your parents who will work extra hours to pay for you to go to school.
Turn to page 90.

You drop out to work and earn money for the family too.
After all, you have your younger siblings to worry about.
Turn to page 91.

Your parents tell you not to worry; they will take care of everything. This works for a while, and you begin to grow accustomed to the everyday routines of fixing breakfast for your siblings before walking the younger ones with you to school. You do begin to miss your parents, who always leave the house before dawn for their extra shifts. You can just make out their steadily receding figures as they stride out into the foggy (or is it smoggy?) distance every morning from your bedroom window.

This works for a while, that is, until your father falls ill. He's been pushing himself too hard, sleeping four to six hours a night, and he's caught something nasty. No longer able to leave his bed, much less go to work, you realize you'll have to get a job after all to help feed your family.

You drop out of school to look for a job to support your family. Turn to page 91.

IMAGE 8

Shortly after your father's death, no longer tied by his profession to the area, which is now fraught with the Cultural Revolution, your family decides to move again. Everything here is too turned around. Schools are closed, little red books flash in angry fists, public conversations turn into back-alley whispers, and youngsters join Red Guard gangs.

You soon settle into a new routine in Hong Kong and get a job working at a toy factory. One day on your way to work, you are running a bit later than usual, just about five minutes—so you take a different bus from usual. This bus, the 27B, is rather packed, so you can't weave toward the middle where you normally stand, closer to the back door of the bus. Instead, you take up a post by the front door, right hand firmly gripping a metal pole for balance, as the bus jostles its way down the uneven roads toward the toy factory. On these bus rides, you usually like to read the newspaper, but today, it is too packed to extend a paper out in front of you. So you look out the window and around at the others riding this bus. That's when you meet the eyes of the bus conductor, who happens to be glancing up at the rearview mirror. You don't know it yet, but he will be your future husband.

You don't know it yet, but whenever anyone asks you in the future, you will joke that you married him "out of pity."

You don't know it yet, but he will finish his shift as a bus conductor before you get off work at the toy factory, and he will wait for you after work every day to walk you home. You will tell him not to, but he will persist.

You marry him.

You run the household, handle the finances, and raise three young boys. Your middle son, Bryan, will remember you as "a force of nature," and your husband as "a goof." He will remember "street vendor food, [his] preschool uniform, mango ice cream, blackouts during monsoon season, an amusement park named Lai Yuen *(beautiful garden)*."

Your goof of a husband is also a gambler, and not a very good one. Bryan will grow up watching your husband's behavior and believing, even forty years later that "gambling is the worst vice for Chinese people." So even though you work at the toy factory relentlessly day in and day out, you sometimes still find yourself strapped for cash for things like this year's birthday presents for your boys.

You get creative with your gift shopping.
Go to page 93.

You ask you father-in-law, a jeweler, for help.
Turn to page 95.

You begin to bring home toys from work—factory rejects deemed unworthy of store shelves. You collect these discarded toys and toy parts to create your own charming Frankenstein toys for your sons, custom-designed creations for their birthdays.

Bryan is turning seven this year. You gather your materials from the factory and decide you can either utilize the stuffed bear with a wonky eye and the shiny sequins of a fish plushie to create a sparkly bear with sequin-patterned eyes, or you can make use of the few fighter toys with warped plastic and dissect them limb by limb to puzzle together a mammoth super-figurine.

You don't remember which route you ended up going with,
but you remember how much
Bryan loves the toy you give him.
Turn to page 94.

Bryan loves your gift. Almost as much as he loves the baby chicks you bring home one day, gifted to you by a friend at the factory whose chickens somehow secretly hatched their eggs. You store the chicks in a large cardboard box in the living room, and your boys spend hours cooing at them, taking turns holding and petting and feeding them.

One day, you go to pick up your oldest and middle sons from their local school, leaving your youngest son, Danny, napping at home. When you return, the door is chained shut, and you yield no results from repeatedly knocking—well, banging—on the door to be let in. You begin to panic.

You go over to the window and yell Danny's name to get a response. Turn to page 96.

You go over to a neighboring apartment for help. Turn to page 97.

He's not the warmest man, but he's proven to be loyal in a pinch. He is aware of his own son's shortcomings and agrees to give not just a loan but a gift of several thousand yen. You thank him and assure him you will spend it wisely.

Bryan is turning seven this year. You buy him the latest Monkey King comic book with an accompanying stuffed monkey. Its fuzzy brown fur and black beady eyes remind you of the countless toys like it you have stuffed at the factory. Turn to page 94.

You yell nonstop at the top of your lungs for a few minutes. Your voice is starting to feel scratchy, and there is still no movement within. Not even a rustle of the cream, lace curtain by the windowsill.

Your other two sons close behind you,
you storm over to a neighboring apartment for help.
Go to page 97.

You curtly explain the situation to your baffled neighbor before pushing past her to reach her balcony. Your dazed sons watch you clamber over the railing and leap onto the balcony of your apartment unit, open the door, and discover Danny hiding under a bed with chicks running amok around him.

A quivering Danny asks if he's in trouble. You scoop him up and, as tenderly as you can manage, demand an explanation. He had awoken from his nap and decided to check on the chicks. But then he tipped the box over, and the chicks spilled out, chirping to proclaim their newfound freedom and terrifying Danny so much that he went to hide. "Never saw those chicks again," Bryan remembers.

Soon, the whole apartment would be
another thing you never saw again.
Turn to page 98.

Seeking a better life for your sons, you and your husband apply to emigrate to the US. Luckily, some distant relatives agree to sponsor you, and your application is finally approved in December 1971.

You clear customs in Seattle with a few large suitcases, a husband, and three sons in tow before immediately boarding a Northwest Airlines flight to New York City to start your new life.

In New York, you move into a drug-infested, lower east side walk-up tenement building with crooked floors and a curious bathtub in the living room—but it's all yours. You don't know it yet, but this building will become a multi-million-dollar brownstone in a few decades.

Danny comes home crying one day, explaining that the boys at school have taken to calling him Ping Pong. *I don't even like ping pong,* he wails. *Max stretched his eyes with his fingers as he slid down the slide on the playground and sang "Ching chong, Ping Pong!" at me.* His small fingers stretch his eyelids in a desperate demonstration. *I don't want to bring your food to school for lunch anymore,* he throws his half-eaten fried rice lunch onto the kitchen table and storms to his room.

You think about the other challenges he will face: worse teasing in high school, racism in the workplace, an eternity of coffee shop baristas spelling his name wrong, or going through public spaces under a pseudonym just because *it's easier that way.* But you know, in the end, he'll see. It'll be worth it to have kept his family name, to pronounce it the *right* way rather than with the Westernized tangy vowels and drawn-out consonants that hurt your ears. He'll see.

You sigh and clean up the spilled rice on the table, rinsing the Tupperware for him to bring another lunch to school tomorrow because you can't afford to do otherwise.

He'll see soon enough.
Turn to page 100.

The first few months in New York are hard, but you're in it for the long game, and you're determined to stick it out. Your husband, who has never cooked before in his life, gets a job as a restaurant chef. Everyone gets a kick at this news around the dinner table when he announces his new career path. You find work as a seamstress in a sweatshop in Chinatown, where you are determined to excel.

You do it all: You drop your kids off at school before work, pick them up after school, wash them, prepare dinner, clean the house, do the laundry, handle the grocery-shopping and cooking (when your husband reports that he won't be able to bring back leftovers from the restaurant, that is). All you ask from your sons in return is that they work hard and do well in school—no excuses.

During parent-teacher conferences, your sons always translate for you what the teachers are saying. One semester, Danny receives a bad mark in one class, and you are eager to hear an explanation. Bryan, translating, explains that the markdown is due to Danny's lack of participation. You turn to Danny, your face a mixture of disappointment and anger, but Bryan rushes to his defense, saying he mistranslated—rather than lack of participation, the teacher simply wants to encourage him to raise his hand and participate more in the future. You're not sure what to believe now. Regardless, you expect only good marks on every report card, so you explain to your son that shyness is no reason to receive a bad grade. You hold him by his shoulders and look him in the eye, hoping a direct gaze will overcome the language barrier, *You must raise your hand, son. You must be bold, brave.*

You don't know it yet, but Bryan will describe you decades later as "brave," "your stereotypical, self-denying, sacrificing Asian parent." He will continue, "I remember we had just arrived in New York City, and my mom had purchased three chicken wings for dinner. She cooked them and served them with rice. We were young—four, six, and seven. My mom served each of us one wing, while she just ate the three wing tips. She told us she wasn't hungry, even though I knew that it was her first meal of the day."

Things are going well for you. Things are looking up, and you're starting to make a life for yourself and your family here. Turn to page 102.

Things are going well for you. Things are looking up, and you're starting to make a life for yourself and your family here. You decide to pay it forward. Turn to page 103.

You apply for citizenship, pass the test to become naturalized, and continue to live in Chinatown for the next five decades. Oddly enough, you never learn more than a lick of English all this time.

You have a circle of friends and neighbors in the community, and you and your husband walk to a senior center near City Hall every morning. There, you play mahjong, and he plays Chinese chess or cards. You refuse your son's repeated offers to employ a home attendant because you are still alive and kicking, and still very able to cook supper every night for your husband.

You will never move again.
You suppose you've lived the American dream.

Turn to page 116.

You and your husband are able to comfortably support your family now, so you decide to help your relatives, no matter how distant, just as you were once helped.

You sponsor around 30 of your relatives on both sides of the family to emigrate, even paying for legal fees, plane tickets, and rent deposits.
Go to page 102.

IMAGE 9

106

SHA LUO (罗沙) was born on December 1, 1927, in a Chinese village called Gannan in Jiangxi Province, two provinces north of Guangzhou. He completed school up to the university level, attending Guangzhou Culture University for one year. However, he soon had to drop out for financial reasons and instead joined the Chinese People's Liberation Army for the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1948, two years before the end of the Chinese Civil War.

Having received some higher education, which was more than many others serving at the time, he was designated as an "arts soldier," writing about and reporting on the army's current events. After seven years of service, he returned to Guangzhou, where he was offered a position as a high-ranking officer in the local government. But he turned it down, choosing to pursue poetry over politics.

Now, at the age of 90, he has published 27 books of poetry and is currently working on two more. Having served in the army for the CPC at a crucial time in China's history, he now receives special retirement benefits, including free medical care, a good retirement salary, and annual invitations to many official galas and holiday events in Beijing, which he says really aren't as much fun as they sound—the best part is the free food!

THE END

IMAGE SPREAD 10

108

ZHONGXUAN XIE (谢仲煊) was born on August 1, 1934, in Guangzhou, China. He came from a low-income family with five other siblings and began working in a textile factory at a young age to help support his family. He never completed his middle-school education.

He started as a machine technician, doing basic repairs on monstrous sewing machines. In his 48 years at the factory, he became an old hand and was promoted to an engineer, managing the other technicians until retired at the age of 60. He was never able to pursue another career but was content with his work.

After retirement, he spent his free time helping to raise his grandson, Chengxi Xie (谢承希), who recently graduated from South China Normal University. Now, at the age of 85, he sings Chinese opera at local theaters and smokes a pack of cigarettes a day, which he always says is better than drinking a bottle of liquor a day.

THE END

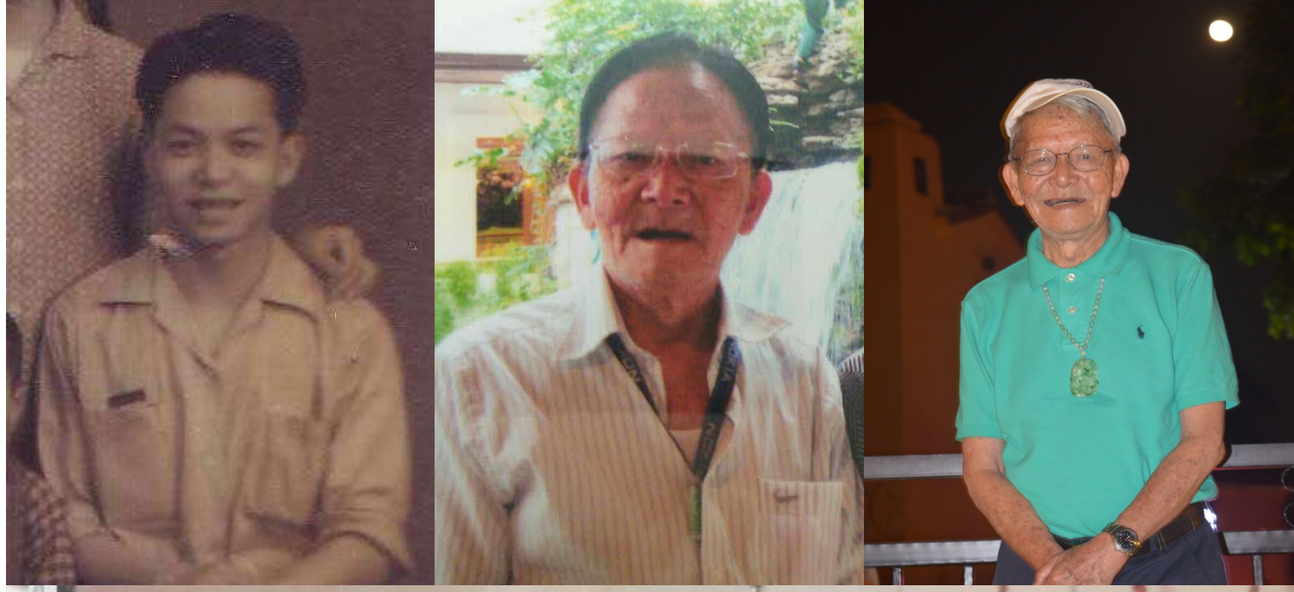


IMAGE SPREAD 11

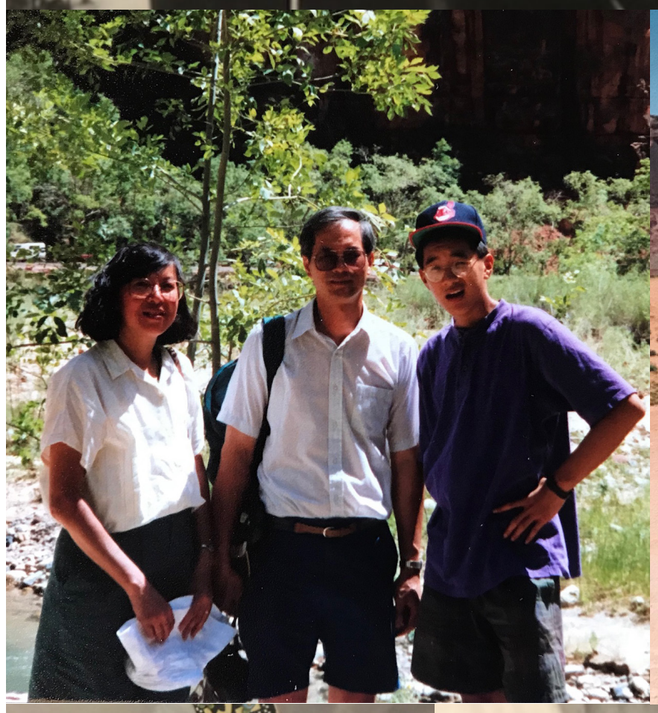
110

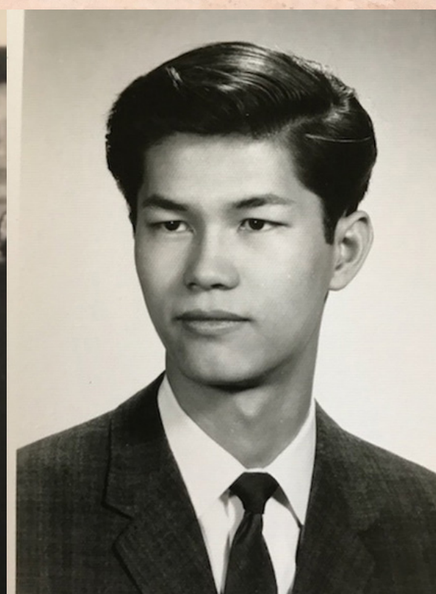
WEICHENG LI (李伟成) (Vincent Lee) was born on September 9, 1939, in a village in Guangdong Province by the Xijiang River, about an hour's drive from Guangzhou. He is one of seven children, and his father was a doctor who had previously worked for Sun Yat-sen.

His family was able to obtain an immigration visa when he was a teenager, at which point they moved to the United States. In America, he continued his education, and his father became a factory worker. He graduated from Pratt Institute in 1963 with a Bachelor of Science and Master of Science in mechanical engineering.

After college, he worked at Northrop Grumman Corporation as an aerospace engineer, specializing in fighter jet design. Now, he spends his time watching CCTV and working on his woodcarvings, and he continues to tell the story of the time he and Lily saw the band on the military ship playing "Jingle Bells" in the middle of the San Francisco summer.

THE END





112

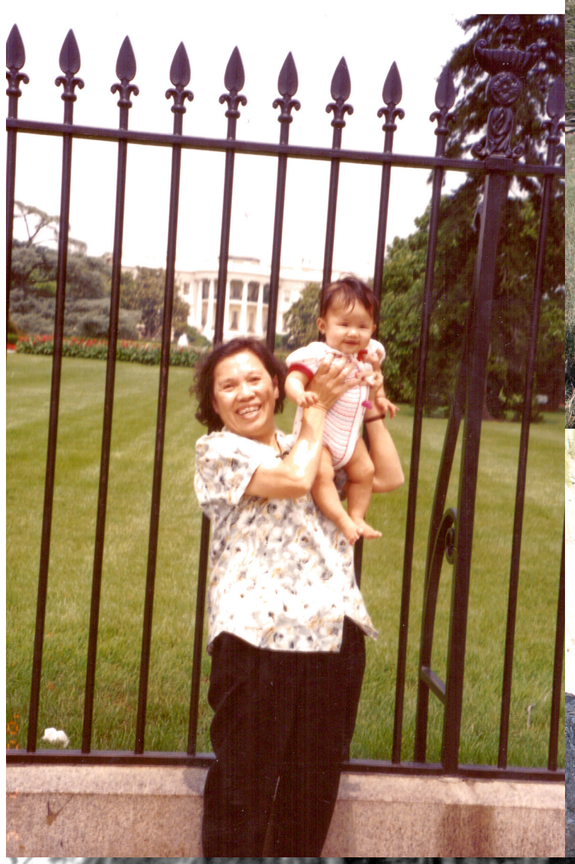
MAN LIANG (梁满) was born on May 6, 1935, in the countryside outside Guangzhou, China. She was one of 12 children, and her father was a doctor. She remembers that he was cold to her and her siblings growing up. At a young age, she moved to Hong Kong with her mom, but they had to flee the city as the Japanese invasion caught up with them. They traveled back to the countryside via foot and boat and soon moved again to Guangzhou to find work.

In 1945, she started working at a textile factory, where she continued to work until her retirement at age 50. She was content—with a place to sleep and food in her belly and a reason to wake up every day, she felt she had nothing to complain about.

She received her elementary-school-level education through night school after work hours and then taught herself to read and write Mandarin through her love of comic books after that. She still hasn't forgiven her husband for giving away her comic book collection after she moved to the US. She met her husband at the textile factory, where he also worked as a machine technician. They married in 1960 and had a small wedding followed by three sons.

In 2004, at age 68, she moved to the US to live with her oldest son and help raise his children. She also worked at a paper company and never learned English. These days, she enjoys playing mahjong and chatting with friends at the Hong Lok Senior Apartments. She used to visit China more often, but now she finds less reason to and more hassle in doing so. She is currently deciding between staying in the US for the rest of her days or moving back to China to reunite with her husband.

THE END



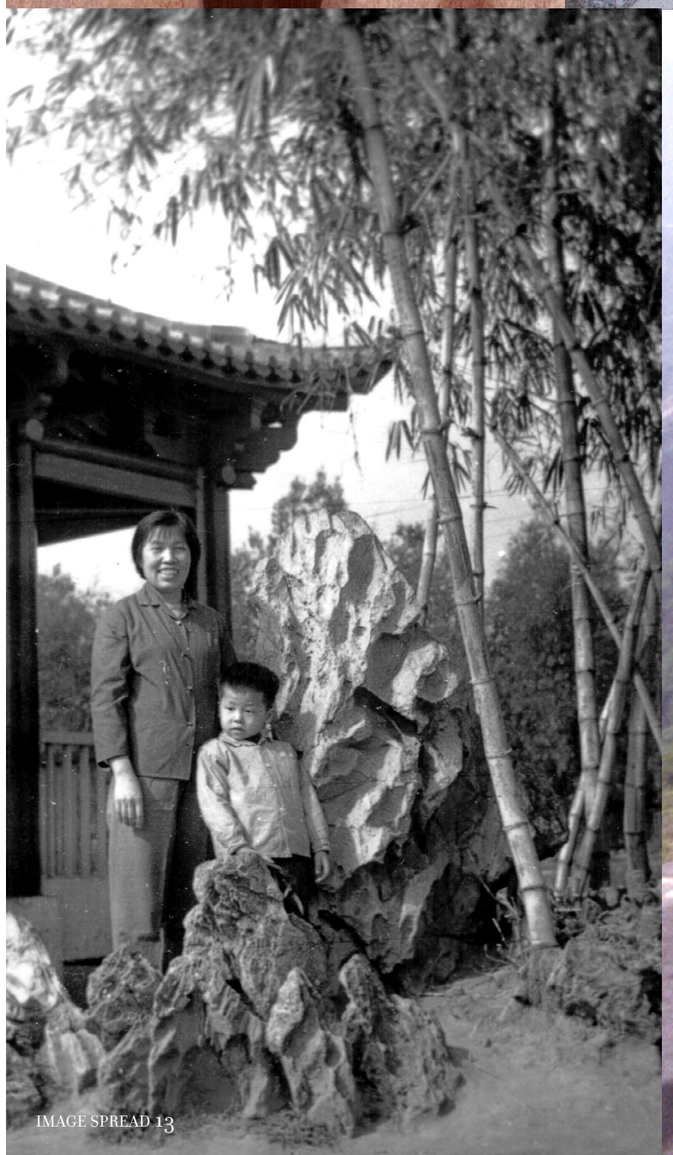


IMAGE SPREAD 13

114

XIUFEN DENG (邓秀芬) was born on March 5, 1935, in the city of Guangzhou in southern China. When she was five years old, her family fled to Hong Kong during the Japanese invasion of China. After the Japanese made it to Hong Kong, the whole family boarded boats to Shanghai, where she attended a Catholic school. Her father died when she was young, so after her high school graduation, she began working at South China Normal University to help support her mother and younger sister.

She loved singing, dancing, and all of the arts. She had a beautiful voice and was once recruited to be a professional singer, but she never pursued that career path. She met her husband through a mutual friend, and they got married in 1961. They raised two daughters and had a good marriage of communication, compromise, and compassion.

Both of her daughters attended university and immigrated to North America—the younger first to the United States, and then the older to Canada. After she retired from the university at age 55, she continued to earn wages and pass the time through odd jobs.

When she was first diagnosed with breast cancer, she didn't tell her daughters, underwent surgery, and recovered. In 1995, she and her husband went to visit their younger daughter in America, where Xiufen Deng reconnected with her religion, helped out around the house, and looked after her first granddaughter for one year. After her cancer returned, her younger daughter was able to visit her one last time during the Lunar New Year in 2001, when she was mostly on bedrest and no longer able to sing and dance. She passed away on May 5 that same year, but her daughter believes that in the end, she lived a life with "no complaints and no regrets."

IMAGE SPREAD 14

THE END

116

XIAOLING LIN (林小玲)[2] was born in May 1938, but is unsure of which day because she once falsified her records during immigration and forgot the truth. She was born in the Panyu District of Guangdong Province as the oldest of eight children. She began work at a young age to help support her younger siblings. Her family did not flee Guangzhou during the Cultural Revolution, and she only moved to Hong Kong later in life.

In Hong Kong, she worked at various factories, including a toy factory. She married a bus conductor and raised three sons while running the household and handling the family's finances. Even as her husband gambled, she continued to work day in and day out.

The family moved to the US in December 1971. They settled in New York City, where she worked as a seamstress in a Chinatown sweatshop, and her husband got a job as a restaurant cook. Her son feels she was heartbroken after learning that he and his brother both entered the police force, which she sees as a waste of their educations. To this very day, she and her husband live in the same lower east side walk-up they first moved into. She supported other relatives to emigrate to the US, financing their moving expenses too. She never learned English and says she will never move from Chinatown.

Now, she spends her days playing mahjong at the senior center in City Hall and prepares dinner for her husband every evening without fail.

THE END

[2] Name has been changed upon request for anonymity.

Images

Cover Image. Schafer, Edward H. *Ancient China (Great Ages of Man)*. 1967. Page 160.

Image 1. Schafer, Edward H. *Ancient China (Great Ages of Man)*. 1967. Page 156.

Image 2. Spence, Jonathan D., and Annping Chin. *The Chinese Century: A Photographic History of the Last Hundred Years*. 1996. Page 124.

Image 3. Abrams, James, et al. *China: From the Long March to Tiananmen Square*. 1990. Page 34.

Image 4. Abrams, James, et al. *China: From the Long March to Tiananmen Square*. 1990. Page 211.

Image 5. Spence, Jonathan D., and Annping Chin. *The Chinese Century: A Photographic History of the Last Hundred Years*. 1996. Page 223.

Image 6. "Our Collection." *The Hong Kong Heritage Project.* "Kowloon City and Wong Tai Sin as viewed from Ngau Chi Wan, 1951."

Image 7. "Our Collection." *The Hong Kong Heritage Project.* "Tai Po (Yuen Chau Chai/ Sam Mun Chai)."

Image 8. Abrams, James, et al. *China: From the Long March to Tiananmen Square*. 1990. Page 104.

Image 9. Schafer, Edward H. *Ancient China (Great Ages of Man)*. 1967. Page 157.

Image Spread 10. Sheih, Wilson. *Personal Photographic Collection.* 1957-2020. Digital Images.

Image Spread 11. Sheih, Wilson. *Personal Photographic Collection.* 1957-2020. Digital Images.

Image Spread 12. Lee, Vincent. *Personal Photographic Collection*. 1945-1998. Digital Images.

Image Spread 13. Sheih, Wilson. *Personal Photographic Collection.* 1957-2020. Digital Images.

Image Spread 14. Sheih, Wilson. *Personal Photographic Collection.* 1957-2020. Digital Images.

Back Cover Image. Schafer, Edward H. *Ancient China (Great Ages of Man)*. 1967. Page 161.

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