

University of Alberta

Learned Chinese

by

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Dedication

In memory of Erwin Wong, 1961-2012.

Abstract

Modern Standard Mandarin (MSM) is increasingly taught in a multitude of international contexts. This creative non-fiction thesis examines the pedagogical methods used to teach MSM in China and Canada, by contrasting my alternating experiences as an international student in China and a domestic student studying Chinese in Canada. While my curriculum in China emphasizes the practical application of MSM and issues of cultural nuance, my curriculum in Canada stresses matters of technical accuracy and theoretical knowledge. Issues of gender, racial identity and language acquisition are examined through my experiences in and outside of the classroom, and through the lens of Chinese literature.

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Learned Chinese

Introduction

In 2006, I travelled to Beijing, China, to spend a summer abroad studying Mandarin at Renmin University. The trip was my first to China, and I had never studied or spoken Mandarin before. After completing my semester there, I returned to Canada and continued my studies, alternating between China and Canada as I completed my undergraduate degree in Chinese language and literature and English literature. After graduating in 2011, I returned again to China as student in Advanced Chinese, studying at Yunnan Normal University in Kunming.

As I pursued my studies, an interesting dichotomy emerged between the curriculum espoused at home and abroad. In Canada, a mixture of Western and Eastern teachers stressed theoretical knowledge and prioritized technical accuracy. While in China though, my native Mandarin speaking teachers focused on practical application and understanding cultural nuances and gestures. “Learned Chinese,” my creative non-fiction thesis, explores this difference, as I travelled between the two frontiers and cultivated a cultural fluency that was capable of traversing both territories.

“Learned Chinese” is organized chronologically; it begins with my initial trip to Beijing, in 2006, and follows my return to Canada, where I enrolled in the introductory Chinese courses at the University of Alberta. At this juncture, I trace my development as a “non-heritage” Chinese language student, recounting the experience of learning Chinese in Canada and being taught by both native and non-native Mandarin speakers in Classical Chinese poetry and Classical Chinese, as well as intermediate Chinese language. These passages highlight both the different approaches and emphases that emerged in my Canadian experience, as well as some of the technical details involved in learning Chinese: character stroke orders; Chinese grammar; and tone conversions.

From my early Canadian experience, I then recount my second time studying in China, as part of a university exchange group at Nanjing University. In this section, I explore my developing fluency in both speaking Mandarin and in navigating Chinese cultural expectations. I also demonstrate the complications of having a partial Chinese and Western identity in both China and Canada, and how this difference manifests in myriad forms within multiple students that I encounter. I continue exploring these dual identities when I return to Canada, reflecting in my final Chinese course, on what I've come to understand.

The third and final section of "Learned Chinese" describes my time after graduating from the University of Alberta, and continuing as an advanced student in Kunming. This chapter dramatizes my internalization of Chinese cultural values and norms in and outside of my classroom, and how I negotiate these differences while in the presence of Western roommates and Eastern classmates. My chapter in Kunming is also, more broadly, a reflection on the language acquisition process, and as such it explores my earliest experiences of studying a language. While it embraces the successes and opportunities that studying another language offers, it also reflects on the feelings of self-erasure and loss that develop concurrently, and the relative levels of *chiku*, eating bitterness, that learning another language demands.

Beijing, 2006

The Colonel smiled down at me benevolently. I had found him. 肯德基.
KFC.

Among the throng of people I saw his cartoonish face one feature at a time. Thick black framed glasses, a goatee, and a neat black bow tie. Unflinching, the Colonel stared out into the crowd, his frozen, immobile face *Sehnsucht*, yearning.

...

“Yo man, where you from?” A young Chinese man who had been standing by himself smoking a cigarette in the foreign dormitory lobby was looking at Kennedy. We were all waiting for our tour of the campus. Kennedy and I had met one another earlier at the airport, when our university contact had instructed us both to wait next to Beijing Airport’s KFC. So far we were the closest each other had to a friend in China.

Kennedy laughed.

“Yo, Texas man. You?”

“Jeff, I’m from Hong Kong. Texas, eh? That’s cool, that’s cool.” He took another drag off his cigarette, and then looked at me. “You American too?”

His voice was a little hoarse and wheezed slightly.

“No, I’m Canadian.” This was going to be a pattern.

“Canadian!” Jeff’s voice rose. “Hey, me too! Did my B.A at York University in Toronto!”

Before I had a chance to ask, a small, wiry man in the requisite black trousers and button-up short sleeve business shirt came darting up to our group.

“你好学生，你好！”

I looked blankly at Kennedy.

“昨天晚上睡觉好吗？” the man chirped at us. He had bright eyes and a perfectly even smile, and was thus far, the most expressive Chinese person I had met. He was deceptively middle aged, the only giveaway being small strands of grey hair that flecked his part. He was burning with energy.

“This is Zhang Laoshi,” Jeff gestured laconically, since the rest of us

seemed paralyzed by being addressed in Chinese.

Zhang Laoshi's smile dropped theatrically as he looked sternly at Jeff.

"Ah, Jeff. You should practice your Chinese."

Jeff tipped his head in mock deference.

"Okay. 你好! You know 你好? Soon you will know 你好. My name is Zhang Laoshi, I welcome you students to Renmin 大学 Summer Chinese language program. *Daxue* is university." He looked at all of us to ensure we understood, before continuing. "I am this school's administrator, my office is on 五楼五零六号. *Wu lou wu ling liu hao*. *Wu lou*, means fifth floor, *wu ling liu* is number 506. In this building. You understand? Okay, good. You can come to me to register or change your classes. I am here to help you with anything. Today we show you around campus, two student volunteers will show you, but I come along too, just to see. Okay, good!" He clapped his hands and spun on his heel quickly, striding out the front door and leaving the rest of us in a daze staring after him.

"That guy," Jeff shook his head and stubbed out his cigarette, "he's crazy, Zhang Laoshi."

Outside waiting were two Chinese students, our tour guides, dressed casually in jeans and t-shirts and talking to Zhang Laoshi, their faces shy and amused. They led us on a slow, rambling tour of the Renmin University's campus: the gym, the University restaurant, the running track and our main classroom buildings.

Our tour finished, we began to walk back towards the main hotel. Jeff, the Hong Kong-Canadian was walking next to Kennedy, asking him about his music preferences when out of nowhere Zhang Laoshi materialized at my side.

"加拿大人! 你好, 你自己来对吗?" he looked at me, smiling.

I didn't understand a word he'd said, so I smiled back apologetically.

"*Jia - na - da - ren*," repeated Zhang Laoshi, slowly. "*Jianada* is Canada. *Jianadaren*, you are Canadian, yes?"

"I am, yeah," I was embarrassed. "How did you know?" And then I remembered that I'd sent in a photo with my application form.

"Only one Canadian here," Zhang replied. He looked over at Kennedy and

Jeff, who had stopped talking when Zhang Laoshi joined us. “堵学生，漂亮加拿大人自己来，所以你最好看她，好吧？” He was looking at Jeff.

“*Hou-la, hou-la,*” Jeff replied in Cantonese, waving off Zhang Laoshi. It was the first thing I’d been able to understand: *okay, okay*. Kennedy looked back and forth at the two, unable to comprehend.

“哪，你听不懂，这是为什么你微笑？你很漂亮！” Zhang Laoshi was smiling and looking at me, as if I understood at all what he was saying. I didn’t know what else to do so I just smiled back.

“*Piaoliang* means pretty, he said you’re pretty.” A Chinese-American girl had stopped to listen to our exchange and was now standing off to the side of us.

“What?” I was taken aback.

“*Dui,*” Zhang Laoshi was now smiling appreciatively at her. “*Piaoliang*, pretty. Very good, 又慈. 现在午饭. Okay, I leave you now!” As if on cue, a group of men in suits walking perpendicular to our group waved excitedly at Zhang Laoshi, and he hopped off to join them, disappearing into another crowd.

“He knows I can’t understand him, right?” I said, turning to Jeff. “I really don’t know a word of Chinese.”

“Zhang?” Jeff shook his head in exasperation at the thought. “He doesn’t care. *Ha-ah*, you’ll learn before you leave anyway. You guys wanna get lunch?”

...

Jeff had already studied introductory Mandarin and was in the secondary level classes. Since the group of students who spoke English as a first language was relatively small at Renmin, we rapidly arranged ourselves into a surrogate family. Jeff, in his beat up Beer Lao tank top he had bought in Thailand, old surf shorts and a worn pair of Adidas flip-flops, took responsibility for me and Kennedy, becoming a sort of hungover, bachelor uncle to us. Through Jeff we were introduced to the higher-level students studying at Renmin; J.K, a South Korean student in his late twenties who was slowly finishing his bachelor’s degree in business, and Kat, the Chinese-American student who had translated Zhang Laoshi for me. Both of Kat’s parents were from Taiwan and she had grown up speaking Mandarin so that she was essentially fluent, certainly among our

group. When I asked Kat why she was even in China, she shrugged and said it was important to get international experience during college and anyway she didn't know to read in Chinese. Kat smoked menthols and frequently went braless in impractical summer dresses, appalling our teachers. We became fast friends.

Each day was divided into morning and afternoon classes, with an hour-long lunch break in between. Kennedy and I were the only two independent students from the program who were in the beginner level. Our classes were on the second floor of a peeling, decrepit concrete building that was so old and bare of any identifying features that it was simply known as the building next to the trackfield. Here and there, I noticed pockets of these old buildings, all of them tucked behind massive, gleaming new facilities. The older buildings were always made of shoddy concrete or crumbling bricks; hunched and square, it was startling coming across them, like wandering into a decaying village.

Our classroom was a dark, water-damaged room that had a faintly menacing medieval look. Our professor, Hu Laoshi, was a young, bespectacled man with square-cut hair. He greeted the two of us enthusiastically on our first day of class - with no other teaching materials beside the crumbling chalk left behind in the classroom.

"Nee-howww," he said slowly to us. I had learned in two days that *nihao* was the standard greeting in China. We obediently repeated his greeting back at him.

"Welcome to introductory Chinese," Hu Laoshi said quaintly, standing at the front of the classroom. "You have lots to learn in order to speak even a little Chinese, but if you practice all the time you get better and better. You have not studied any Chinese before?"

I shook my head but Kennedy gave a guilty nod.

"Okay," interjected Hu Laoshi. "So, you know a little bit, yes? So maybe you review. But first we must learn how to pronounce the sounds in Chinese. We call this pinyin system. Do you know pinyin system?"

"Yeah, a bit," said Kennedy.

“Okay. We will review a little then. But this is very important.” Then Hu Laoshi turned from us and drew four symbols across the chalkboard: —, /, V, \.

“In Chinese, we have tones. You know the tones? There are four tones. First tone, we call *yi sheng*. First tone. You listen. Mā.” It was an even, singing sound. “Next we have second tone. This tone rise up. This called *er sheng*. Má?” As if he were asking us. “Next we have third tone, *san sheng*. Ma.” I had no idea what happened in the third tone. We looked back at him, at a loss. “Okay, again. Maaa.” This time it was there, a falling then rising sound, but I still couldn’t identify it against anything I knew. “Now last tone, fourth tone, *si sheng*. Falling tone. Mà!” Fourth tone would definitely be my go-to tone, I decided. You just added an exclamation mark to whatever you said.

Hu Laoshi led Kennedy and me through the four tones three times, and satisfied that that aspect had been covered, he turned to the rows of letters.

“Now, we try some of the pinyin system.” He scribbled a ‘b’ above the letter A on the board. “You repeat. Bā.”

We bleated back at him.

“Good. Chinese we say, *hao*. Means good. *Feichang hao* means very good.” He erased the a and wrote o. “Bō,” he crooned at us, softly. I watched his mouth carefully, and we crooned back.

“*Feichang hao*, very good. Okay, next we just try these sounds. These can be very hard for beginners.” He pointed at a row: ji, qi, xi. “You listen, then try,” he pointed at the first combination: “gēe.” The next: “chēe.” And then: “shēe.” His lips drew completely back from his teeth, but the rest of his mouth stayed perfectly still, the consonants hissed out behind set teeth. “Now we try in turns.” He looked at Kennedy, “uh, you...”

“Kennedy,” said Kennedy.

“Ken-di, you go first since you know some Chinese.”

Kennedy, softly chewed out the three sounds, his mouth rounded and slightly off.

“That’s good, very good Ken-di. Now you...”

“Aly,” I supplied. I pulled my lips back the way I thought Hu Laoshi had,

and my tongue pressing up against my teeth I hissed: “gēe, chēe, shēe.”

“*Feichang hao!*” Hu Laoshi was excited. “That’s very good first try. Again.”

I repeated my success.

“Ai-li! I can’t believe you’ve never spoken Chinese before!” Hu Laoshi beamed at me, staring a little too long before saying, “we try these sounds then,” and pointed to another row of letters: zhi, chi, shi. He demonstrated the correct pronunciation: “zhuuh, chuuh, shuuh.”

“Now Ai-li. You try,” Hu Laoshi waited, eager. Kennedy had been left by the wayside.

“Zhuuh, chuuh, shuuh,” I sang.

“Ai-li, you’ve never spoken Chinese before?” Hu had an exaggerated air of disbelief on his face.

“No,” I replied smugly.

“You seem to understand the sound very quickly. You never try before?”

“Well,” I hesitated. Maybe I wasn’t all, raw unadulterated talent. “My mother’s Chinese. But I’ve never studied Mandarin.”

“Ahhhhh,” the young man’s face transformed, and I could see him taking stock of my face, cataloguing my features. “So, you are half-Chinese. Very beautiful! We have name for this, when you are half-Chinese.” He turned to the chalkboard and drew two characters: 混血, then wrote: hunxuè. “*Hunxuér. Hun,* means a mix. And *xuér.*” His *xuè* had a burr attached to it, so that it was more like ‘shuar.’ “*Xuér* means blood.”

I was a mixed blood. Next to me, Kennedy carefully copied the two characters into his notebook.

...

“I want to learn how to read,” I sighed, pushing my beginner’s textbook away in despair. J.K and I were studying in the lobby of Er lou, a few tables away from the security guards who were gathered around a table smoking and playing cards. It was hot outside and everyone else was either having an afternoon nap or watching back seasons of T.V shows on their laptops. In an effort to get better, I

was doing my best to emulate J.K, who I noticed seemed to be progressing the most rapidly of all our friends.

“You can,” J.K responded, pushing my textbook back at me without looking up. He was crouched over a text, concentrating on reading a solid block of characters without referring to any of his vocabulary words. J.K had to do twice the work that Jeff, Kennedy, Kat or I did; all of the textbooks we were assigned at Renmin were for English speakers learning Mandarin, which meant that J.K first had to review the English translations in Mandarin and back-translate it further into Korean before being able to understand it in Chinese. He put several hours into practicing his Chinese each day, and without having to say anything, checked me whenever I began to complain about how difficult learning Chinese was.

“Hey J.K, how did you get such fluent English?”

“Mm,” J.K reached for the can of beer he always bought in the afternoon, but it was empty. “I think I have so-so English. *Mama-huhu.*”

“Mama-what?”

“*Mama-huhu.*” J.K wrote the characters out for me in the margin of my notebook: 马马虎虎. “Horse-horse, tiger-tiger. It’s what you say in China when something is okay, not-so-great, not-so-bad.”

“Your English isn’t *mamahuhu*. It’s really fluent. When you’re speaking with me I forget that it’s not your first language.”

“Really?” J.K was trying not to grin. He was pleased. Just then a group of other South Korean students descended into the lobby. It was late afternoon and it looked like it was turning into *soju*-time. Two tall, youngish men in the group looked over politely at J.K, giving him a wave, which J.K acknowledged with a nod. One of the men, spotting J.K’s discarded beer can, walked up to Er lou’s shabby bar and ordered another can before delivering it to him with a discreet nod; J.K smiled politely.

“*Kam sa hae yo.*” The young man smiled and brushed it off, as if to say “no need.”

“J.K – why did he just buy you beer?”

“Mm?”

“Why did he just buy you beer?”

“Oh. He is just being polite.”

“By buying you beer? I’m feeling kind of thirsty.”

J.K gave me a wry smile. “I am the eldest in the group of students here, so they are just being polite to me.”

“Really, you get to pull rank?”

“Eh? I don’t think so. No, he is just the younger one, so he shows respect to me. That’s how it works in Korea.”

“Everyone shows respect to someone older than them?”

“Yes. Usually if we know the person we are talking to is older, we use the more respectful form of question. Or we address them sort of more...politely.”

“Is that what the *yo* is for?”

“What?”

“I noticed you end your sentences with *yo* depending on which person you’re talking to.”

J.K smiled. “Something like that. You know you pay good attention to stuff, I think you will learn Chinese quickly.”

“Should I have been buying you beer all this time, J.K? I feel kind of rude. We don’t treat you like an elder in our group.”

“Eh? Shut-up, of course I know this rule isn’t the same with you and Jeff and Kennedy.”

“Still, I can start treating you to beer.”

“Of course not,” J.K grimaced at the suggestion. “You’re a girl.”

...

Within the first week of classes, Kennedy and I had covered the entire pinyin alphabet and had moved on to a random mishmash of knowledge: basic numbers; conversational phrases; pronouns and simple nouns. Everything was being taught in pinyin.

“When will we study how to write in Chinese?” I asked Hu Laoshi.

“Ah, Chinese writing is very difficult,” he clasped his hands patiently, tilting his head in a fatherly gesture.

“But we can’t read,” I pressed. I hated being illiterate. There were only two places where I could order food from with the limited Chinese I had, otherwise I was completely reliant on Jeff, J.K or Kat for life’s necessities. I wanted to get started right away.

“We will learn to talk first,” said Hu Laoshi. “You can do more things if you can talk, and then you can begin writing. More useful, talking in Chinese. Most students they learn to speak in Chinese; not so many learn to read.”

“How do you get better if you can’t read?” I didn’t want to carry out a relentless stream of half-baked introductions. Kennedy and I could only ask each other so many times who was in our family and what our nationalities were.

Fortunately, Kennedy was on my side.

“Hey, yeah. I want to learn to read too,” he said. I knew I hadn’t been wrong about those glasses of his.

Hu Laoshi sighed. Western students could never just follow directions. We were being stupid and didn’t know it.

“I teach you to write numbers today, okay? But we still learn to speak more, and then you learn to write later.” By later, he meant: if we even bothered to keep studying Chinese after a month.

...

“How’s your class going?” Jeff had finished eating the *mapodofu* we had ordered for lunch and was enjoying his after-dinner cigarette.

“It’s fine. I’m pretty sure our teacher is going to ask Aly out,” Kennedy said matter-of-factly. He had picked at the oily tofu; Kennedy was none too fond of Beijing’s food.

“Oh yeah?” Jeff cocked an eyebrow and looked at me. “Looking to make your stay permanent, huh?”

“God, don’t get me started,” I said. The truth was I couldn’t tell if our teacher was trying to make moves or not; he asked us all whether we had a

nanpengyou, boyfriend, or a *nüpengyou*, girlfriend; he repeatedly told us all that we were either *shuai*, handsome, or *mei*, beautiful. “I think he’s just trying to make me feel better about my Chinese.”

“Nah man, it’s getting weird,” Kennedy chimed in, laughing but grimacing with his eyes for effect. “The other day he asked her repeatedly if she had a boyfriend -”

“ - and I said no,” I interrupted.

“Yeah, so then he taught us how to say, ‘How surprising! She doesn’t have a boyfriend!’” Kennedy finished, shaking his head.

“How do you say that in Chinese?” asked Jeff, interested.

“*Hen qiguai, ta meiyou nanpengyou!*” I supplied. At least I was learning.

“Oh yeah, *qiguai*, I know that one,” Jeff nodded. “Look, if he’s creeping you out, tell Zhang Laoshi. I can come with you if you want.”

“Zhang? I don’t know if I’m just being oversensitive...” After all, from what I had observed it was somewhat standard practice in China to make candid comments on other people while in their presence.

“Just tell Zhang, okay? Otherwise I could get in trouble.”

“How will you get in trouble over this?”

“He told me to look after you!”

“He - what?!”

“Yeah man, he told me on the very first day to look out for you, since we’re sort of the same nationality.”

“Is that why you panicked when I wandered off in Forbidden City?”

“Well, that and because it was friggin thirty-five degrees out and I didn’t want to be there any longer than necessary - ”

“That place was relentless man,” Kennedy said, shaking his head.

“Anyway,” Jeff took a drag to calm himself, “Zhang is like the goddamn eye of Sauron – he sees and knows everything – so if you’re having trouble just tell him. Or else he’ll find out anyway and get on my case.”

“You’re not my father, Jeff.” I glared at him. “I don’t need to be ‘looked after.’”

Jeff took a long drag and shook his head as he exhaled. “Calm down will you? That’s how things are here, you’re part of a group. Anyway, how the hell would you be eating right now if you weren’t relying on me in some way?”

“I would manage.”

“Jesus,” Jeff shook his head, muttering, “North Americans.” He put out his cigarette, an indication he was trying to be serious. “Look, you don’t have to get worked up about it like that. We all take care of one another here – we explain things to J.K. when he doesn’t understand, don’t we? You spot Kennedy money when he forgets his, don’t you? It’s not an insult, it’s just...looking after one another, you know? That’s what you do in China.”

...

Later, I told Kat what Jeff had said about Hu Laoshi and looking after one another.

“Oh yeah,” she nodded. “Doesn’t your family get upset if you...you know, make them look bad? It’s all about keeping up face, you know.”

Face. People were always attributing things to losing face in China. “I guess,” I nodded. “If I behaved badly then my Mom would probably break my ass.”

“Exactly,” shrugged Kat. “Cause what you do is basically a reflection of the entire family.”

“I wasn’t aware that we were all a family at Renmin,” I said.

“Well, we’re not. But most of us are North American, or Western at least, so we all kind of represent one another in one form.”

“Okay, well as my fellow Western sister, what do you think I should do about Hu Laoshi? Am I completely misinterpreting it?”

“He sounds pretty creepy, I wouldn’t let that slide. Although you know here it’s considered the ultimate compliment to tell a girl she’s not going to die alone.”

“What?”

Jeff, Kat and I each self-identified as “Chinese” to varying extents, and we each seemed to have wildly different ideas when it came to interpreting China’s culture.

“Like, the biggest fear you’re supposed to have as a woman in China is to end up alone – *shengnü* – they call it leftover women. So when someone tells you they’re surprised you don’t have a boyfriend, it’s a backhanded compliment.”

“Right, so, I’m kind of overreacting to it?”

“Maybe. But I wouldn’t put up with it. Why should you have someone badger you repeatedly and make the assumption you’re heterosexual?”

“Right.” It felt like we were getting a little off course.

“Yeah, why should Kennedy’s personal choices go unscrutinized and every class yours get examined?”

“I guess. Mostly it’s just an annoying way to teach a lesson and our tuition isn’t cheap.”

“Right, exactly. *Suan le* that, right?”

“Well not exactly *suan le*.”

“You know what I mean. Fuck it.”

Later that week I went up to Zhang Laoshi’s office on the fifth floor. I told Zhang Laoshi that some of Hu Laoshi’s questions seemed unnecessary, bordering on inappropriate, and that I wasn’t sure what to do.

“*Okaaay*,” said Zhang Laoshi, looking startled. Quickly, he recovered his composure. “Okay, maybe this teacher is not working out for you,” he continued gently, “that’s okay. Sometimes a teacher’s style is not suitable for your learning,” he nodded and smiled. He opened a drawer on the side of his desk and startled rifling around before turning back to me and placing 200 RMB neatly across the desk. “Here is what we do,” said Zhang Laoshi carefully. “You wait one week, and start the new round of classes with different teacher. In meantime, you can sign up for the trip to Datong. You’ve heard of it? No? It’s large caves, we take a train trip and then you see the famous caves and temple. And when you come back, a few days later start new classes with different teacher. *She* will be maybe more suitable for you.” Zhang Laoshi looked impressed with his quick thinking. “Much more suitable, yes?” he nodded, a slight smile on his face.

Yes.

Suan le, whatever.

So I went to Datong.

...

“Kat?” I was using the cellphone she had forced me to start using; everyone complained they could never find me once I left my dorm room.

“Yeah?”

“Want to come with me to buy an *erhu*?”

“Yeah! Wait, is that that violin thing?”

“The one we always see that man playing near the *dongmen* pedway.”

“Cool, yes, definitely. I think I even know a street that sells musical instruments.”

I had a feeling Kat would be able to help me with my *erhu* obsession. The first time I heard an *erhu* was on my Grandma Rose’s record player; she had a few *erhu* records, but her best one was Lui Man-Sing’s “Chinese Masterpieces from the Erh-Hu.” Less shrill than a violin, but with the same thin, delicate sound like that of a bird, the *erhu*’s notes swooped from one range to the next: melancholy and unpredictable. Since then, I had always wanted to play one, but regarded them as an extinct animal; too old, too exotic, and ultimately, something I would never have a chance to touch.

And then I saw them all over the place in Beijing. Primarily in the hands of beggars draped in raggedy coats, hunched on a grimy box or stool with an old tin can set out in front of them. The music of these street-side *erhu* players would slice through the air wherever I was; crushed in a solid mass of people on either side, disembarking from a bus, walking down a quiet side street: suddenly a few quiet notes would emerge, tilting everything sideways into its bittersweet song.

I had to get my hands on one.

...

It was late afternoon by the time we made it to *Xinjiekou*, a beautiful old street untouched by redevelopment, and only a few blocks from the centre of Beijing.

“Do you have any idea what you’re looking for?” asked Kat. She had come along to translate for me, but she didn’t know anything about playing an *erhu*. And neither did I. I had a vague idea of what the *erhu* I wanted should sound like, but I was unsure what to look for when buying one.

“Not really, but I know what I want it to sound like: not too dry,” I said, feeling assured.

“Dry?” Kat looked back at me, skeptical.

“Mmm,” I was sure about this. “If you can help me translate, I’ll think of the questions to ask.”

“Alrighty,” nodded Kat.

We traipsed through one store after the other. In some, the only *erhus* for sale were black, heavily lacquered, inlaid with fake mother of pearl and strung with cheap plastic strings and plastic tuning pegs. In other stores, I could see myself going bankrupt for *erhus*. In one store, their most expensive *erhu* sat high up on a shelf: a gorgeous ebony *erhu*, its neck intricately carved, the beautifully buffed wood giving off a dark, sinister, intoxicating gleam. A mere 2500 RMB. I looked at it lovingly and Kat reminded me that I had no idea how to play it. After milling through half a dozen stores, we found the right one. The owner, a small, careful man whose life had probably been spent maneuvering between the delicate spaces of his instruments, brought out a tiny wooden stool for me to sit on, then began showing us one *erhu* after the other, placing each one in my hands, turning to Kat to describe their qualities.

“He says this one is a good one to start with,” Kat translated, as I hesitantly sawed back and forth on a heavy, thick-necked *erhu*, its wood a heavy lacquered cinnamon.

“It’s nice,” I nodded, “could you tell him something a little lighter?”

“He wants to know what you’ve played before,” Kat relayed. The owner was watching me inexpertly hold the bow of the *erhu*, which I had tucked into my palm, my fingers resting flat along the top and supporting it underneath with my fingertips.

“Cello.” I looked, worried at how I was supporting the instrument. The bow of an *erhu* is strung in between the two strings to be played so that its constantly attached to the instrument, and it was a feature I had neither been expecting nor knew how to accommodate.

“He thinks you’ll need one with easier pegs,” responded Kat. The owner placed a delicate looking *erhu* made of rosewood in my lap, and pointed at the tuning pegs protruding from the neck’s front, which were made with bronze, and connected to wooden adjustors on the other side.

“Tuning with wooden pegs is harder,” Kat translated for him. “So usually beginners start with this; but he says this is a good-quality *erhu*, one of the best.”

I studied the *erhu* I was holding: its wood was a beautiful darkened brown with glimmers of red, buffed but not lacquered, the grain visible.

Kat listened to the owner as he pointed out the various highlights of the *erhu* I was holding. Her face looked dismayed. “Aly, that’s *python* skin!” I patted the grey scaly skin drawn across the resonator box, knowing I should feel guilt but also aware I felt none. Beginner or not, it was a beautiful place to start.

“I guess we need to bargain,” I said to Kat.

“Hang on, he’s asking whether you would like lessons,” Kat told me incredulously listening to the owner’s offer. “He says he’ll give you a discount if you also get lessons.”

“Is he teaching?” I looked at the owner. He was a small, wiry man in his late fifties, and he seemed near-sighted. But his hands had the warm, lined feeling of firmness that comes from decades of having to be careful.

“Yes, he says he’ll come meet you, and the lesson will be for an hour.”

“I don’t know how we’ll communicate. I don’t speak Mandarin,” I said glumly. Kat explained the predicament to the owner, and he nodded his head.

“He says that isn’t a problem, that he can teach and you don’t need to speak Mandarin.”

“Let’s do it then! Can you tell him I’d like lessons?” Kat paused and looked at me.

“Dude, you really want to go through with this?”

“Why not?”

“I can’t be there for your lessons you know.”

“Music’s a universal language,” I shrugged. “And I really, really want to learn how to play this.”

“Oh god. Okay, I’ll let him know.”

Kat gave him our address, and he tapped the details down into the small, grubby Nokia cellphone that hung from his neck on a lanyard. Then after a small amount of persuasive bickering over price, we left the shop, my new *erhu* carefully placed in the soft cloth case he had thrown in *gratis*.

“You better tell me how your lessons go,” Kat said.

“Don’t worry.” I felt upbeat, the way I always felt after getting my hands on a new instrument. “It will be great.”

...

My first lesson was later that week, on a Friday at five o’clock. But my new teacher, Du Laoshi, the owner of the *erhu* store, was running late and had missed his bus, so it wasn’t until quarter to six that I finally met him outside the university’s gate. Shyly, I waved at him and spoke a few broken words of Mandarin in greeting; he smiled but said nothing. Then, following me through the entrance to Renmin’s campus, the security guards stopped Du Laoshi, the first time I had ever seen anyone held back. Nodding humbly at the adolescent guards, Du Laoshi pulled out a small plastic card-holder that was stamped on the outside with gold ink: his official identification. The young guards took it from him gracelessly and scrutinized it, before handing it back without a second look. Du Laoshi tucked it back neatly in his jacket coat pocket. Then following me, we made our way to my dormitory.

Again though, as we crossed the lobby of the foreign student’s hotel, en route to my dorm room, a security guard called out and waved Du Laoshi over. Again, Du Laoshi had to produce his documents, in the process giving a lengthy explanation and showing the guard the *erhu* he had brought with him to teach me. They let him proceed after he had signed and registered into a grim looking ledger book I had never seen produced before.

...

My first task in learning how to play *erhu* was to learn the names of its components in Mandarin. Holding his own *erhu* up, Du Laoshi fixed me with a weary half-smile and then pointed to the small box at the base in the shape of a hexagon.

“*Pi*,” he murmured, pointing at the python skin. “*Pi*.”

“*Pi*,” I nodded. I scribbled the pinyin down in a notebook of mine, without realizing I needed to draw a diagram first.

“*Pi*.” Du Laoshi confirmed. Then he tapped the wooden box it was attached to. “*Tong*,” he said.

“*Tong*,” I agreed.

“*Mm*,” he shifted focus to the long delicate neck. “*Gan*.”

“*Gan*.”

“*Mm*,” his finger rested on the spiraling pegs fixed at the top. “*Zhou*.”

“*Zhou*,” I added it to the list.

“*Nggghhhh*,” Du Laoshi gave an impressive suck of his lungs, clearing his nasal cavities, and I looked apprehensively at the floor. But instead he shifted his body forward and then rested his *erhu* on his knees, supporting it with one hand cupping the neck, the other plucking at the two strings of the *erhu*.

“*Zhegewaixianr*,” he hummed. I looked at him blankly.

“*Waixianr*,” he tapped the outside string.

“*Ohh, zhe ge waixianr*,” I sighed in relief, simultaneously elated I had half-understood a sentence.

“*Dui, waixianr, nah zhegeneixianr*,” he was plucking at the inner string.

“*Zhe ge neixianr*,” I repeated wisely. This is *neixianr*. Probably meant string.

“*Mm*,” Du Laoshi nodded. He readjusted in his seat, and then suddenly began to draw out notes on his *erhu*: a quick, upbeat scale.

I looked back at him and wondered if I was supposed to imitate. Instead, Du Laoshi leant forward, and calmly directed my hand towards my *erhu* bow. I

obediently picked it up, holding it pigeon-fingered like I had learned when using a cello bow.

“*Bu dui!*” Du Laoshi barked. He twisted my hand around so that my inner wrist faced up, then none too gently rearranged my fingers so that the bow’s joint rested in the gully between my index finger and my thumb, and my index and middle finger were pushing down on the bow’s string.

“Mm,” Du Laoshi grunted and directed my attention to the inner string of my *erhu*, pointing back at my two fingers that were pushing down on the bow. He mimed a sawing motion, and I drew the bow out, producing a tinny, uneven note on the *erhu*’s inner string. “*Neixianr,*” Du Laoshi repeated.

Gesturing at me to stop, he then pulled my fingers away from the bowstring, leaving the string slacker, while also angling the bow further away from me. Again he mimed the sawing motion and I pulled the bow again, this time making a coarse cracked note on the outer string. “*Waixianr,*” said Du Laoshi.

...

The next phase in mastering the *erhu* was squeaking out a decent scale along the string. Du Laoshi demonstrated the finger placement for the first four notes of the scale, and at this I was thankfully more practiced, but only just. The *erhu*’s string responded to the lightest touch, unlike the mallet-like strength needed on cello strings, and it was difficult, resting my fingers lightly on the string while simultaneously supporting the neck in the crook of my thumb. Du Laoshi watched my progress with pursed lips, then he unhooked his bow from his *erhu* and using its tip, he jabbed at my left hand as it tried to cradle the *erhu*.

“*Buuuuuu dui,*” he crooned crossly. The tip of the bow jabbed painfully at my palm. I pulled my hand away sheepishly.

“*Ni kan!*” Du Laoshi commanded. He held his *erhu* sideways so that I could see how the neck rested just barely in the crook of his hand, without any pinching or clamping. He looked back sternly at me.

“Okay,” I said stupidly, and relaxed my hand, leaving the *erhu*’s neck to slide along my thumb joint.

“Mm,” Du Laoshi grunted.

...

On my second lesson, I attempted a scale. Nervously, I unhooked my *erhu*'s bow from the top of the tuning pegs, where it rested in between the strings when not being played, and angled it as best as I could remember how. Remembering the painful lesson in not holding the *erhu*'s neck too firmly, I let it rest freely in the joint of my thumb, and then, hesitantly, sawed back and forth, slipping on a few notes.

Du Laoshi looked unimpressed. I stared back at him, giving him a small, dumb smile. I was beginning to understand Kat's disbelief at my music-is-a-universal-language conviction. How in the hell was he going to tell me how to get better if I couldn't speak Mandarin?

Finally, Du Laoshi motioned with his hand to play it again. Apprehensively, I gripped the bow with my right hand, and drew out a long first note, hoping it would eventually stabilize.

Thwack! Du Laoshi brought his bow down hard across my right hand.

“Jesus!” I dropped the bow as my hand shook. The side of my right hand was pink and stinging.

“*Bu dui!*” Du Laoshi bellowed. I stared at him in shock. He motioned at his own hand, which was now holding his untethered bow out, the hand holding one end in proper position. I had been holding the bow wrong.

“Err.” I felt myself laughing in a strange mixture of embarrassment, unsure what else I was supposed to do. Was there a hidden camera in my room, recording this ridiculous lesson? Was I allowed to attack him since he had hit me first? My hand stung but it was otherwise unharmed.

I picked up my bow, determined to show that I was a good sport, and resumed my scale. On my second try there was another pronounced tap on my hand from Du Laoshi's bow – I was cramping my hand a bit, trying to support the bow's weight with my thumb joint rather than with my fingers. I corrected.

...

“So are you going to keep studying Chinese when you get back to Canada?” Kat asked me.

We were lounging on the balcony of Er Lou, enjoying some real sunshine and eating *xigua*, watermelon, which I had bought successfully on my own, though I had no idea how much a *jin* equated to.

“No, I hadn’t planned on it.”

“What are you studying then?” asked Jeff, who was also sipping a bottle of *Tsingdao* with his watermelon.

“Mm, French I guess. And Spanish. I’d like to learn Spanish.”

“What are you going to do, be a translator?” asked J.K.

“I don’t know...Get through university first.” In truth, I didn’t have much of a life plan worked out.

“God, my parents wouldn’t let me enroll in anything but business,” said Jeff.

“I was surprised my Dad didn’t get upset I wanted to go to Brown,” added Kat. “Maybe he thinks that I have artistic talent or something.”

“What about you, J.K? You’re in business, right?”

J.K gave a slight nod, “Yes of course. Attend a good university, learn English, get a job with a good company. Same life-cycle.”

“Your parents don’t care what you do, Aly?”

“Not really.”

“Really, isn’t your mom Chinese?” asked Kat, incredulous.

“Yep.”

“And you’re not worried about what you’ll do after?” Jeff stubbed out his cigarette.

I sighed. I knew what they were getting at. That in many Chinese families, the expectation was that in exchange for being given everything and anything you need you will owe your family for the rest of your life. The necessity of attending a good school and securing a good job was so that you could support your parents when it came time for them to retire.

But was that expected of me? While I had seen it all play out within my mother's immediate family, I couldn't really picture my father accepting a life of retirement funded by his own children. If anything, I could picture him spending his remaining years in happy self-exile, culminating in an elaborate, self-orchestrated Viking funeral. An air-conditioned condominium was not for him.

"I'll figure it out," I shrugged.

"Man, my parents would not be okay with that," Jeff shook his head. Jeff and Kat were only children, and J.K. was the only son in his family. The responsibility escaped none of them.

"Anyway, how are your *erhu* lessons going?" Kat asked.

"They're...going," I said. Now and again Du Laoshi would smack at my hand when it wasn't in proper position. Otherwise, I heeded the physical pain of his corrections quite effectively, and had managed to play "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" on my fourth lesson.

"How do you learn from him without speaking Chinese?" asked J.K.

"Well, you know, I do understand some basic Chinese," I said airily, waving my hand.

"Really?" asked Jeff. "Are you going to play for us sometime soon?"

"Yeah!" enthused Kat. "I brought my banjo with me, maybe we can busk on the street or something."

"Actually," I retreated a little. "I can only play nursery rhymes really," I admitted. "Also, Du Laoshi hits me whenever I make a mistake."

"WHAT?" shouted Jeff and Kat at once. I had everyone's attention.

"He's smacked my hand with his bow a couple of times," I explained, cautious. "Just when I hold the bow wrong and stuff. It caught me by surprise at first, but it's not really that painful or anything."

"God that's old school!" crowed Jeff.

J.K. was doubled up, laughing.

"Uh, Aly-dude, that's crazy," Kat said, both concerned and amused.

"It is," I agreed. "But really, considering neither of us speak the same language, what else are we supposed to do?"

“Not hit you?” exclaimed Kat.

“Well, that’s probably how he got taught,” added Jeff.

“You know,” J.K had managed to stop laughing, “It’s pretty normal in Korea, to get hit, now and then, especially in after-class study lessons. Maybe twice in my life, I get hit for doing something. But - ” J.K’s face crinkled up again, “only when I was a small child!”

“That’s what I figured,” I said shrugging. “Anyway, I think I can only manage two more lessons this month, since I’ll be going home at the end of August.”

“Seriously, you’re just going to let him hit you?” cried Kat.

“Well,” I sighed. “It’s not that I’m down with corporal punishment or anything. But I also don’t feel like I’m the only bad *erhu* player he’s ever had to work with in his life, and hey – I’ll never hold my *erhu* wrong again.”

“Jesus,” said Kat.

“I’ll figure it out,” I said. Eventually I had to.

...

“Hey J.K,” I waved over at him. “Each little lion is different!”

We were crossing the *Shiqikong Qiao*, the Seventeen Arch Bridge, in Summer Palace. Kat, Jeff and Kennedy had all left Beijing in the past week, and J.K and I had decided to go to Summer Palace since it was one of the last major Beijing landmarks we hadn’t seen. In a few days, I would head home too.

J.K, slathered in sunscreen and sporting a Nike visor, squinted at the lion guardians mounted along each of the bridge’s columns. He looked at the fold out map we had bought at the entrance. “This is Kunming Lake,” he said, gesturing at the wide expanse we had just crossed.

Summer Palace was truly beautiful. So far it was the first time I had visited a tourist attraction in Beijing and not been pressed in on all sides by crowds. Instead, the entire park unfolded in delicate detail: the undulating paths were walled in with enormous garden-rocks, shaded by huge willow and cedar trees, their trunks twisted and curved from centuries of weather. Even the numerous

temples that dotted Summer Palace were accessed by indirect, circuitous means that let you wander and admire its beauties indiscriminately. Unlike Forbidden City, which had felt like an exhausting, crowded march through one imposing courtyard after the other, Summer Palace invited dawdling.

“This is probably my favourite place in Beijing so far,” I told J.K. He smiled. We had already been to his favourite place in Beijing, East Shore Jazz café, and he appreciated what it meant to have a favourite place in foreign territory.

“You know, I’ve seen a lot more of China with you and Jeff and Kat, and even Kennedy,” J.K. was gazing off at the small boats that were circumnavigating Kunming Lake. “Usually, I just study all the time, but with our group I got to see a lot more, it made me appreciate China, I think.”

“You gotta get out,” I nodded wisely at J.K.

He laughed. “It’s not so-much what you think. But, in Korea we don’t really think much of what is in China, like, when I come here it was just to learn Mandarin, because it’s a good thing for business, especially now.”

“But now you love Beijing?”

“Not maybe love,” J.K. looked embarrassed. “Just see how much there is. It makes me glad I can speak Chinese and be able to do these things here.”

“Yeah, I wish I knew more Chinese.”

“Are you going to keep studying Chinese, Aly?”

“I hadn’t planned to, but it’s tempting after being here all summer.”

“I think you should. You seem like you pick up some things quickly.”

“Thanks, J.K.” We were resting in the shade of a willow tree, looking across the lake at the whole of *Wanshou Shan*, Longevity Hill. “I think I’ll be back.”

CHINA 102: Stroke Order

The chair of the Chinese department was looking over my enrollment questionnaire. I was hoping to skip ahead into the second semester introductory Chinese class, since I hadn't completed the prerequisite.

"Mm," she grunted, and flipped through the Renmin University textbook I had brought with me. "Too many characters, how can you be expected to learn them in one summer?" She frowned. "Can you write the characters there?"

I looked. They were four simple characters: 朋, 友, 可, 我。

"Sure," I nodded. She handed me a pen and I methodically wrote out each character, careful that I followed the stroke order mantra: *top to bottom, left to right*.

"Mm," she grunted. "You'll be in the non-heritage class."

...

It turned out that students studying Chinese at the University of Alberta were screened into one of two groups: heritage or non-heritage. Heritage students had a background in an Asian language, either because their parent(s) had an East Asian background, or because they had lived or studied abroad in East Asia. Newcomers without any experience speaking Chinese, and without an East Asian background, were placed in the non-heritage stream. The idea, similar to most language programs, was that heritage students held an unfair advantage over students with no previous background in the language, and skill-levels would be too uneven to teach them all in the same class. By the 400 level, all students studying Chinese, whether heritage or non-heritage, were merged into one classroom stream.

My non-heritage classmates quickly let me in on the reality of being in the non-heritage class: we moved much, much slower. Whereas at Renmin University, Hu Laoshi had been reluctant to teach us to write in Chinese, in CHINA 102 that was virtually all we did.

Each week, I wrote out three or four pages of characters in Chinese, demonstrating that I was in fact following the correct stroke order. The character worksheets were designed like a paint-by-numbers colouring book: each character was shown in its finished form, then broken down into its separate strokes, which we had to trace, carefully, step by step, before writing the complete character. Even though the homework was mind-numbingly easy, it wasn't the sort of thing left to the last minute; trying to write four pages of characters consecutively left your hand cramped and in pain, as I discovered.

Like a genie's wish gone wrong, CHINA 102 delivered my earlier demand to study writing, and then some. Every class our teacher wrote a *chengyu*, Chinese idiom on the chalkboard, which we then had to copy and work into our own sentences. We wrote mini-dialogues; short paragraphs about why we liked Chinese; descriptions of our classmates and family members; weekly vocabulary tests; short reports outlining the difference between Chinese and Canadian behaviours.

Though we practiced speaking aloud with each other every once in a while, speaking in Chinese took a visible backseat in CHINA 102. Few of us had anyone to practice speaking Mandarin with outside of our classroom, and practicing in class took up too much time. Writing however, was easily assigned as homework, and more importantly, easy to evaluate objectively. You either wrote the character wrong or you didn't. Your grammar was incorrect or it wasn't.

As the semester progressed, I felt my *yuedu*, reading comprehension, flourish while my *tingli* and *kouyu*, listening and speaking skills, atrophy.

...

"ALY!" began Kat's email. "If you miss China as much as you say then you should come out and join me." Kat had returned to Renmin University in Beijing for the winter, and was staying on over the summer to work as an intern at an English language expatriate magazine.

"You're welcome to share the apartment I sublet from Jeff. It's tiny, but we shared your dorm room for a month so I'm sure we can get along just fine. Think how fun it will be if we spend the summer together in Beijing! I'm doing the

nightlife reviews for City Weekend, and you know I can't really drink. You'll have all the free booze you can dream of. Just get here and I'll take care of the rest. I've missed having someone point out the different species of trees all over Beijing. I miss my *Ai-li*. And anyway, I need someone to help me dye my hair blue, and I know you're the person for the job."

"KAT!" I wrote back, "DELIGHTED TO ACCEPT INVITATION STOP AM LOSING MY CHINESE FROM LAST SUMMER STOP WILL START COUNTERCULTURE MOVEMENT WITH YOU STOP AND DYE HAIR."

So I spent another summer in Beijing.

CHINA 202: The Drawing Contest

Chen Laoshi teaches intermediate Chinese class. He does not hold a Ph.D. but works as a contract instructor for the university, and sometimes the Edmonton public school system.

He is somewhere in his late forties and pulls a beat-up backpack on wheels with him wherever he goes. He often re-wears the same shabby blazer: dark navy blue and starting to show fuzz at the edges; and he starts his classes by taking out a tin of flavoured drops that he calls “medicine,” and crunching on them absentmindedly before talking. He has a lot of patented, home-made teaching props: small pieces of coloured chalk that he stores carefully in a dented Altoids tin; flash cards written on the other side of his old utility bills; and an envelope filled with slips of paper bearing our names, which he ceremonially draws from to delegate turns in class.

He is a slow moving professor, undeterred and unfazed by other people’s feelings. When a student becomes flustered by a question in Chinese and freezes in their seat, turning a painful shade of crimson - their eyes begging Chen Laoshi to move on to the next student - Chen Laoshi waits impassive and patient for their answer, dumb to their agony. He has no classroom favourites, and he never asks us for self-introductions or our personal thoughts on Chinese culture. We never watch movies during class, or carry out ‘group discussions’; we never skip chapters in our textbook. Chen Laoshi calls us by our given names not our Chinese ones, and makes it socially impossible to discreetly apologize for not completing homework: everyone completes their homework in his class. He is thorough and unforgiving with everyone’s pronunciation, and will make students repeat themselves endlessly until they get it right. He is, in so many words, the best kind of teacher.

It is nearly impossible to derail Chen Laoshi’s focus. One time he asks me to read out a conversation in Chinese between a frantic mother and her lazy son at the Beijing airport. When I recite it all in character, Chen Laoshi is indifferent to my attempt at humour; he just corrects my tones and exclamations. He cares very

little about whether we've been to China or even want to go; all Chen Laoshi cares about is that we learn what we're supposed to learn, and learn it well.

There is only one thing that could be considered a distraction to Chen Laoshi: drawing. He will spend half a class drawing out elaborate explanations on the chalkboard, sometimes bringing out the Altoids tin chinks to give his pictures more nuance. When we begin our unit on giving directions in Chinese, Chen Laoshi sketches out a complicated map of a city and marks various points around it for us to navigate from, replete with twisting alleyways and bridges over a river bisecting the city. He draws a detailed, beautiful view of a streetscape in China, with fruit stands and kite shops and decorative store awnings, all so that we can look at it and pretend to be lost there; forcing us to describe its features in Chinese to a friend who must find us. When we are learning how to address mail in China, Chen Laoshi writes out his father's address in Shanghai, and then gives a meticulous visual explanation of each component of the address, down to the numbered door of the housing complex his father lives in.

One of Chen Laoshi's favourite idioms is 画蛇添足: to draw a snake and add feet to it. He tells us that the origin of this idiom stems from the story of two soldiers competing for a pot of wine by having a drawing contest. Whoever finished drawing a snake first would win the wine. However, the soldier who finished drawing first became so self-satisfied with his work that he decided to add feet to his snake, ruining his drawing and losing the contest. Sometimes Chen Laoshi illustrates this on the chalkboard for us: a long, sinewy snake with scales, and six comically shod feet protruding from its belly. We are *hua she tian zu*-ing every time we clutter up our sentences with unnecessary pronouns or articles, he tells us. You don't need all the grammatical components of English when you speak Chinese - that's like adding feet, he explains.

When someone in the class opines that they're in business school to make money, Chen Laoshi illustrates on the chalkboard the story of King Zhou and his corrupt decadence. He tells us that during the Shang Dynasty, King Zhou is so lazy and gluttonous he orders a pool in his palace be filled with wine, and the trees above it have meat suspended from them, so that he can drift about drinking

wine and pulling off hunks of meat from the branches above. Chen Laoshi draws it all out; a stately, circular pool filled with wine and the forest of meat surrounding it: large, lightly barbecued hindquarters tied to branches, rotating softly in the wind. I tell Chen Laoshi that he's very good at drawing, and he tells our class that he has recently painted a mural of West Lake on the wall panels of his basement. He promises us that he will bring pictures of it next class, so that we can see.

Someone else, realizing that we have at last touched upon Chen Laoshi's classroom diversion weakness, asks him how he got so good at drawing. Chen Laoshi clears his throat and tells us, actually, that he did lots and lots of drawing during the Cultural Revolution. Our class falls silent: even Chinese novices like us know the *wenhua da geming* 文化大革命 is a sensitive topic; we may have inadvertently brought up a terrible memory.

It's true, explains Chen Laoshi. His father worked for a newspaper in Shanghai that had not supported the Communist takeover in China: a disastrous past to have during the tumult of the Cultural Revolution; he and his father were sent down to the countryside. He had to look after pigs and work in a farm, away from his father who worked in a different place. Chen Laoshi smiled, lighthearted at the thought of pigs. He was not so good at the work, he chuckled, so instead he drew propaganda posters for the Communist Party of China. Someone gave him the job when they saw he could draw. Drawing propaganda was much easier work, he said laughing, like he had hoodwinked his way working in propaganda. So many things he drew, you wouldn't believe how much, he told us.

Everyone was listening; worried we were pushing too far. Did he and his father eventually get to return from the countryside?

Oh yes, said Chen Laoshi dismissively. His father lives in Shanghai; don't we remember the lesson about his address? Suddenly Chen Laoshi's lonely father - widowed with only a son in Canada - took on a whole new significance.

Was he okay after the Cultural Revolution, we asked him, concerned.

Yes, of course he's okay, he said. He'll tell us another story. One time, during the Cultural Revolution, when he was a middle school student, he was

living in the school dormitory sharing a room with seven other boys. Bunk beds. He drew a rigid picture of a bunk bed on the chalkboard. At the time there was no control anywhere, Chen Laoshi said simply. A boy who shared the room with him, he was part of a group of kids that broke into a supply of army weapons. They stole guns from the soldiers, rifles. Chen Laoshi quickly drew the basic outline of a rifle next to the bunk beds. This boy, says Chen Laoshi, he comes back to the room with the rifle he stole, and sits on his bed, the bottom bunk. He is playing around with the rifle, inspecting it and it accidentally goes off. Goes straight up into the top bunk. Chen Laoshi draws the straight path of the bullet into the upper bunk. Another boy was sleeping there, he explains, and the boy playing with the gun below him kills him, accidentally. Chen Laoshi draws an X on the upper bunk, as if it were a target, and laughs. It's true, he promises us. He saw it because his bunk bed was right across from the boy who got shot.

We all stare at Chen Laoshi, appalled.

You know what, says Chen Laoshi, that's not the only time he was almost killed. He'll tell us another story: he was visiting New York in 2001. He visited the World Trade Centre the day before the planes hit. It's true, he assures us, again. He even bought a few souvenirs, and has the receipt to prove he was there. He'll bring it and show us next time.

Next class, true to his word, Chen Laoshi brings his proof. First, a snapshot of his basement mural: pale, fluid water colours of West Lake's famous pagoda; and another picture of him, bespectacled, fanny-packed and grinning cheesily in front of the World Trade Centre. He also passes around a Ziploc bag, with a receipt inside it. It is for the World Trade Centre gift shop, and dated September 10, 2001.

...

CHINA 405: Huang Enhui

Kuo and Cheung Yan were complete opposites, and they were my only friends in our Tang Dynasty poetry class. Kuo, nimbly beautiful and sweetly eccentric, wore enormous faux glasses that overwhelmed her delicate face and paid earnest attention in class; studiously taking notes while peering at the translated poems under discussion.

While Kuo was sweet and elfin, Cheung Yan was anything but. She wore loud, colourful clothes, and her hair was dyed in that particular eggplant-shade of dark purple popular with ladies who know and happen to be from Hong Kong. In this respect, Cheung Yan was very similar to my grandmother, because her hair was always perfectly coiffed and dyed; her bangs falling over her eyes just so; and her earlobes, neck, wrists and fingers glittered in an avalanche of jewelry: Swarovski crystals, diamonds, and 24 karat gold. While Kuo paid attention in class, Cheung Yan concentrated on her cellphone, tapping out intensely emotional messages to her on-and-off boyfriend, Calvin. Cheung Yan didn't speak Mandarin, and her English was halting and poor, so much so that she coloured visibly when called on in class, often staring at our instructor, Professor Green, as if he were an annoying salesman.

We sat in the far right corner of the classroom, at the very back: three in a row. I suspected that I was more of a pity-friend to Kuo and Cheung Yan, that they adopted me out of politeness, since everyone else in the class arrived with a group. After all, I was the only one who couldn't speak either fluent Mandarin or Cantonese and was also one of the only visible minorities in class. Sort of.

To compensate for being cultural concrete around their ankles, I did my best to cover for the two of them during class discussions. Professor Green was teaching us Tang poetry in English translation; a tall task for ninety-nine percent of the class, most of whom had no background in literature and spoke English as a non-native language. Even though Kuo paid close attention and took a multitude of notes, she struggled to figure out just what we were expected to do with our readings each class.

“It’s not fair,” she sighed, glaring at a long essay by Stephen Owen that Professor Green had just assigned, “because we know these things in Chinese but we have to talk about them like they’re English.”

She was right. It wasn’t fair.

Professor Green encouraged the international students to speak in Chinese if it made them more comfortable, but it wasn’t just an issue of translation difficulties. The entire purpose of the course was lost in translation; few, if any of the students, seemed to understand the point of discussing a poem by Liu Ye in terms of its rhythm, metaphors, or symbolism. Without a catalogue of synonyms in your head; without understanding the distinct association between words; with no familiarity in archaic sentence structures, how would you go about discussing a poem over a thousand years old in English translation? And even more, would you even talk about it in the same way if you were studying it in your native language?

Having taken English literature classes, I enjoyed talking about Tang poetry, even though I knew next to nothing about Chinese poetic tropes or symbols. We were doing textual analysis, and the skills required were fairly transferable. But I felt a tug of guilt every time I raised my hand to offer an interpretation, since the rest of the class inevitably sat mute and stiff; listening to me, the only monolingual one, talk about poetry whose history I barely knew the surface of. And afterward Kuo and sometimes Cheung Yan would smile and whisper enviously: “You’re so smart, how did you think of that?” And I didn’t know how to tell them that there wasn’t even a right answer they were supposed to be looking for: that it was all interpretation. After all, how were they supposed to think of that?

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One day, when our course was in its final weeks, I asked Kuo and Cheung Yan to give me a new Chinese name.

“My first one is horrible,” I explained, writing out the two characters for them to see. “It doesn’t have any meaning and I don’t like who gave it to me.”

“*Ai Li*,” muttered Kuo, looking over what I had clownishly written out. “I think this is just maybe your name made to sound Chinese.”

“It is,” I said, “but I want one with meaning. And maybe old fashioned.”

“Old fashion?” asked Cheung Yan.

“Yeah. I’ve noticed that when a lot of Chinese people choose their English names, they go for something really old-fashioned, like Dorothy, Martha, Arnold. Why do they do that?” I had pondered this for a long time.

“Oh,” Kuo laughed, “yes, I know what you mean. Maybe we choose a name like this because it sounds really established? Or it is in a book our parents read, and they think it is a proper name, so they give it to us.” Cheung Yan looked confused still, so Kuo quickly translated my request in Cantonese.

“You want an old name?” asked Cheung Yan in disbelief.

“Just one that is a more common one,” I persisted. “Not one that sounds like a made-up translation of an English name. More like a Chinese name someone older could have.”

“Hmmm...” Kuo and Cheung Yan both furrowed their brows, turning to each other to confer. They wrote out a number of character combinations along a sheet of paper, whispering and crossing out one or the other as they argued amiably. Finally, after a great deal of discussion, they turned to me.

“How about this name?” Kuo tapped at two characters they had written out: 恩慧. “We think this name suits you. The second character, *hui*, it means smart, very intelligent.”

“And first one is good too,” assured Cheung Yan. She slid her cellphone over to me, where she had looked up the English translation for 恩: grace, kindness, mercy.

“This is kind of older name too,” assured Kuo, “it’s something my Auntie or maybe older woman might have.”

“I like it,” I nodded. “It’s perfect. And I have a family name already: *Huang*.”

“Oh that’s good!” Kuo clapped her hands, “*Huang Enhui*, that sounds so nice together.” Cheung Yan grinned in agreement. So I became Huang Enhui.

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Several years later, while sitting in Sterk Laoshi's late night translation class, bored from tediously going over the previous assignment's translation errors, I saw my name written out in pinyin on the attendance sheet. It was partially covered by an overlapping piece of paper, and the upper half of the 'h' in my name was obscured, so that it read: *Ennui*. I grinned.

CHINA 341: 酣

The translation is the story of Master Yan, rhetorician extraordinaire, and his skillful reversal of the King of Chu's insult, back at the Kingdom of Chu. Each translation is a well-known parable in Chinese literature: the humble, plain speaking Confucian sage remonstrating with a king, a prince, or even a greedy merchant on what is just and proper action. By the time I painstakingly look up each and every character, a half centimeter at a time across the page, I neither care nor grasp the overarching theme of the story. My classical Chinese textbook makes me feel like I am a knee-socked, uniformed, Postbellum grammar student - stuttering over single syllable words and circuitous grammar constructions. *He who flees the obligations of the Kingdom, this is that which makes the petty man, 也.*

The translation exercise is only seven lines long but will probably amount to five hours of work. At the start of the fourth line, I come across 酣. The textbook tells me that in this passage it means to be “pleasantly drunk, tipsy, at the height of the party,” and that from this use it now also connotes “an event or process at its moment of greatest power or extent.”

I feel as though I knew this 酣 drunkenness; the raucous, evenly soaked mirth that suddenly swells up at a party, when light and sound seem to rise and fall in tides. A roomful of tight dresses and loosened, wrinkling shirts on New Year's Eve, or in the summer, worn-in denim and disintegrating t-shirts. Hair that arrived neat now collapsed in skeins. Someone remembers a song with a simple chorus and voices hurl it forth, overtaking the room in an atonal roar, obliterating conversations. 酣 was reached the night the Malian students held a farewell party on the terrace of Ren-Da; their hips and shoulders thrusting and swaying to dancehall hits from their home, voices chanting a chorus in French that we all took up, Francophone or not.

I imagine the banquet being held in Chu, with its Southern courtesies and nature-imbued art. A vast, stone-flagged hall with row upon row of men seated on the ground, leaning over one another: shouting, laughing and cursing. Ale, earthy

with hops and pungently distilled, sloshes in and out of the shallow bowls they lift and slurp from. Fires and incense burn; the whole banquet seems to pitch forth on a separate ocean as it nears 酣, and Master Yan, the chronically serious statesman for whom the whole party is for, is sitting dour and sober amidst it all.

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Year of the Ox

“*Ta hen gao, danshi bu tai gao, ta meiyou ni gao.*” The audience erupted into laughter. Kris, my classmate, and for the moment, costar, winked at me from across the fake-restaurant table we were sitting at. Our five-minute comedy sketch in Chinese was a hit.

A new professor, Jiang Laoshi, had organized a rather elaborate Chinese New Year celebration variety show that year in order to entertain a group of visiting Chinese dignitaries. None of us knew who or what exactly they were dignitaries for. The variety show itself consisted of a mishmash of acts by students either deeply or very loosely affiliated with the Chinese program at the University of Alberta. One student had performed a five-minute Kung-Fu routine by himself that looked improvised, exhausting and lonely. Another student had played an impressive piece on the *guqin*. The more advanced students in Chinese, all of them Chinese Canadian, had perfectly sung and recited a series of classical Chinese poems. Kris and I had been none too subtly pressured by Chen Laoshi to represent our entire class’ talents in our grammatically over-the-top comedy sketch, the product of a homework assignment.

“*Deng yi xiaaaa!!!*” Kris cried out dramatically, as I froze mid-chew, mime-eating a *la si le*, deathly spicy, bowl of noodles. The audience roared in laughter. The dignitaries slapped their knees and turned to one another, laughing. *I better see an A+, Chen Laoshi*, I thought.

We took our bows and returned to our seats. Chen Laoshi looked vindicated. Next the CHINA 102 students took the stage. They stood nervously in a line, arranged underneath an enormous screen that was projecting a YouTube video of the opening ceremonies from the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics. Timidly, one by one, each student sang out a line from “*Beijing Huanying Ni*,” the official Beijing Olympic song, doing their best to pronounce the consonants and tones properly.

By the fifth verse, Ryan, a fourth year student hosting the variety show, decided that their performance lacked the necessary spark, and took unilateral action, taking the microphone from the startled student whose verse it was.

“*Bu guan yuan jin dou shi keren, qing bu yong keqi,*” he crooned smoothly into the microphone. *Qing bu yong keqi* - make yourself at home - indeed. Ryan was replacing the beginner Chinese students with something much more watchable: himself. It was like watching Lin Miaoke, the six year old substitute for the “less cute” six year old Yang Peiyi, at the Beijing Olympic ceremony – *sorry kids, you’re not quite cute enough!*

Kris and I looked at one another. Behind us, the 400 level Chinese students looked equally unimpressed. The previous year, Ryan had won as one of the runner-ups in the Chinese Bridge Contest, an international competition between students studying Chinese. Since then, he had become something of a darling to Jiang Laoshi and the East Asian Studies Department. Among his *tongxue* though, he was far less admired.

“What the hell is he doing?” asked Jason, one of our classmates.

“Showing everyone how to *really* be Chinese,” chortled Kris.

“Did you know he wants to call himself Xiaoshan, after Dashan?” said Jason.

“Please tell me you’re joking?” I said, grimacing at Jason. Dashan, also known as Mark Rowswell, was still the most famous non-Chinese person able to speak Mandarin fluently. He often hosted the Chinese New Year CCTV specials and was recognized throughout Mainland China. Even though there were plenty of other people at much earlier points in history who had become fluent in Mandarin, perhaps even surpassing Dashan, Mark Rowswell was Caucasian, Western and an Anglophone, and somehow this made him the first and only. To me, Dashan reeked of a certain colonial aftertaste and I despised having him held up as a role model for all of us “non-heritage” speakers to aspire to.

Now Ryan had joined the CHINA 102 students in their line, waving one hand in rhythm to the song as he coaxed the audience to sing along. The rest of the CHINA 102 students were looking at one another, peeved.

“Oh *buddy*,” Kris hissed through her teeth.

“How lucky we are he didn’t feel the need to intervene during our performance,” I said dryly to Kris.

“If he even tried I would have thrown him on his ass,” growled Kris.

“Only if you beat me to it first,” I laughed.

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Later in the semester, Jiang Laoshi ramped up her efforts to get us to compete in the Chinese Bridge competition. For almost a week she screened Internet video clips of past competitions for us, showing us that we too could become Chinese-speaking stars. The videos showed various Caucasian students dressed up in Imperial robes, reciting proverbs and Classical Chinese poems. In others, they donned what was ostensibly their national dress: Lederhosed German students; a female Belgian student dressed up like French aristocracy in the 18th century; Russian students decked out in fur. Jiang Laoshi showed us one particularly elaborate set that had Ryan, our role-model, dressed up in faux-Confucian silks and a cap, replete with a fake braid, suspended on high wires carrying out a choreographed *gongfu* showdown with a French female contestant, similarly made up to look like an imperial princess. The Chinese Bridge competition seemed to be a mash-up of a drag contest and a minstrel show.

“That competition seems kind of insulting, don’t you think?” I asked Kris after class. “And where are the *huayiren*, the overseas Chinese? What do they put you in if you’re a heritage speaker?”

“I don’t know bud,” shrugged Kris. “I think if I had the chance though, I’d do it.”

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Nanjing, 2009

The dumplings arrive in five minutes, soft, pale and translucent with steam. The ground pork and leek, once tucked so tightly into wrappers, loosened in the heat as though untucking the corners of a well-made bed. Unceremoniously scattered onto a tin platter, they lay in a pearly heap, giving off a cloud of heat: the broth inside them broiling hot.

Kris and I sit across from one another on doll-sized stools at a rickety folding table, which rests on a steeply slanted slab of concrete outside the dingy, simple *jiaozi* restaurant in Bird Flu alley. As the dumplings arrive, we fall about preparing our sauce dishes. Each table comes equipped with a caddy filled with greasy wooden chopsticks, soup spoons, small stacks of round sauce dishes, two cheap, stained plastic containers of soy sauce and rice vinegar; and a miniature pot of chili-oil, a delicate little metal spoon resting on a bespoke groove notched along the lip of the jar. We each have our own method: I am less than fond of chili-flakes, and usually pour a half and half combination of soy sauce and vinegar, depending on how watered down either condiment at a given restaurant is. Kris, I've begun to notice, will start with a generous pool of the dark soy, splash a light amount of vinegar in, and then mix in a small dollop of the oil in as well, giving the finished liquid a glassy orange sheen on top, with small chili flakes floating in between. The cheap foods available in Nanjing are all very customizable, but the process of getting them to suit your taste takes time. 人心如面 - a person's tastes are as individual as appearances.

Our chopsticks lower over the platter, and one by one each dumpling is pinched and lifted into their salty bath – a mini-braising- before the initial bite. The meat is soft and perfectly cooked inside, small bits of water chestnut yielding an intermittent crunch. The dumpling skins are soft and swollen with salt. After the first bite, the remainder of the dumpling is transferred into the soup spoon in my left hand, which takes in the second act of the dumpling: the delicious mingled juices, the sensation of its constituent parts: the meat and the skin.

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I had a message from Hongxian.

“早！帶你的雨傘吧！今天下雨！Morning! Bring your umbrella!

Today's going to rain!”

“哈哈，謝謝朋友，Ha ha, thanks friend.” I wrote. I had learned that 哈哈 meant laughing from his last text message.

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“He's a toll booth operator.” Yi Fei, calm and concentrated, listened to the voice coming from my cellphone. “He takes tickets? He's at work and can only meet evenings. This weekend?” For a second, Yi-Fei looked taken aback at the prospect of a weekend date, looking up at me in embarrassment and concern, even though the invitation was extended to me, and me only, and I felt far from embarrassed. I was exultant.

“Aly we have to go to Hangzhou this weekend.” Yi-Fei's sugar-sweet voice reminded me, her hand over the cellphone's speaker. She waited politely as I tilted my head back in exasperation, before letting him know I couldn't make it that weekend. “He says don't worry. He will give you a message. Okay. *Zai jian.*”

See you again. Not likely. I took back my cellphone. “He works at a toll booth?”

“Mm – like a ticket operator I think? Like he said he takes tickets, and it starts early in the morning and he's not done work until six. I don't know, he said his title and I kinda know what he's saying? But I can't describe it?”

“That's okay. Thanks Yi-Fei. I cannot understand him when he's speaking on the phone and my Mandarin is so lousy he can't understand a thing I'm saying. At least I can text message in Chinese.”

“That's okay, I don't mind. Anytime.” Yi-Fei sat primly on her twin bed, looking morosely serious, her expression at odds with the t-shirt she was wearing, which decreed: Treat Me Like a Princess. Or maybe it wasn't.

Yi-Fei was the only Chinese-Canadian student on our trip who I asked to translate for me. Something about her otherworldly patience made me trust her.

“So are you actually going to meet him?” Yi-Fei was skeptical about my summer romance, not because my Mandarin was bad, or because the object of my affection was a Chinese tollbooth operator and there might be an un-navigable cultural gap between us. Yi-Fei was skeptical because I had only met him in person once. In other words, he was a stranger. And generally, strangers want to murder you.

“God, I don’t know about Hangzhou,” I said, ignoring her question.

“Yeah. Well we paid for it I guess.”

“Mm. But I hate being in a tour group. If it’s anything like Suzhou, that will suck.” Our trip to Suzhou had been a carefully managed nightmare, as we were marched around an abbreviated version of Suzhou’s cultural landmarks, culminating in a fifteen minute picture opportunity with one of Suzhou’s most famous bridges, before being hustled back onto a lopsided, grubby sightseeing van and packed back off to Nanjing.

“What are you doing for dinner?” Yi-Fei was staring off into her wall, and I tensed. I had made loose dinner plans with Kris to go down to one of the Western restaurants and get a chicken sandwich. We had made it close to a month before caving for some Western food and we were planning on topping it off with a lot of beer. Yi-Fei, on her own, would be welcome to join us, but therein lay the problem. Yi-Fei never went anywhere alone - none of the Chinese Canadian girls in our group ever did – and the three of them together were a different matter entirely. Kris would not be pleased.

“Just going to go down to the soup place,” I offered this generously, knowing the response.

“Why do you always choose places on the street? I don’t think their food is clean. I guess I’ll just go to *Lao Difang* with Christine and Grace. You can come with us instead.”

I exhaled. “Nah. I’m going to go see if Kris is back and maybe she’ll come with me instead.”

“Okay. Let me know if need help with your Chinese.”

“Thanks Yi-Fei, you sweet little panda. *Zai jian mei nu.*”

“Ha ha. See you.”

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I had never been sent to a summer camp as a child, but I imagined living in the Nanjing Foreigner's *sushe* was not a far off experience. Each of us had a roommate, with whom our compatibility fluctuated with on a routine basis. Certain rooms, and roommates, were noticeably more popular than others and we would often drift out of one another's rooms out of boredom or to swap useful items we had brought with us from home. We were living in a hotel, in beige rooms with hospital-white bedspreads and most of us were in our early to mid-twenties. At times it felt like we were in a sanatorium.

Kris and I, not only *laoxiang* but *tongxue*, classmates, were good roommates, a lucky thing. This was especially important given how small our shared room was. Nanjing University's foreigner dorms consisted of two twin beds, snugly fitted with less than a metre of space between them. Approximately two feet from the foot of our beds were very practical but uncomfortable desks with a clunky, older box television on a stand tightly wedged between. Our bathroom reminded me of being on a cruise ship or train; a plastic coated beige cube, every surface waterproofed and easily scrubbed. The sink, toilet and shower efficiently wrapped into one meant that the whole floor got wet whenever we showered. Every morning, when we left for class, housekeepers went from room to room, making our beds and cleaning our bathrooms. The majority of these cleaners were middle-aged women, and after establishing what level of Mandarin we were able to keep up with, they would greet us as 美女 *meinu* whenever we shared an elevator ride with them, and jibe us about our rooms – *were we up too late last night? Studying, huh?* I liked these women and felt embarrassed whenever they made my bed, feeling as though my mother were coming in to tidy up my room.

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Before the end of our first week in Nanjing, Jiang Laoshi, the professor assigned as our chaperone for the trip, absconded. Or, according to the email she

sent us a few days later, she fulfilled what was legally required of her in the contract she signed before she left. In the aftermath, Grace, the most fluent student in our group, was given the thankless responsibility of acting as surrogate chaperone for the remaining two months of our trip. Becoming the contact point for the shambolic management at Nanjing's foreign language program, our university administrators, and the rest of us was a taxing job and we felt bad for Grace. We all promised her we would do our best to stay out of trouble.

"How could she just leave?" Yi-Fei said, shaking her head. She was fairly angry with Jiang Laoshi. "What if one of us had a medical emergency?"

"She said her husband is in Beijing," volunteered Jason.

"That's nice, but what about the rest of us?" Kris guffawed. Kris wasn't particularly upset that Jiang Laoshi was gone – "More freedom for the rest of us!" she had declared wildly in our dorm room when we found out – but she disliked that it was unprofessional.

"Poor Grace," I said. "I guess no midnight disappearing acts while we're here."

"Speak for yourself," laughed Kris.

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Our second week in Nanjing, Kris and I convinced the rest of the group to go out to a bar. Yi-Fei and Christine had never been to one, despite being well over the legal age, and everyone else had been holed up in their rooms for much of the trip so far, limited by their language level. While Kris and I were fairly friendly with the rest of the students in the group, all of them non-heritage students a level below us, we had spent less time with Yi-Fei, Grace and Christine, because they were from the heritage stream.

"It'll be good for them, you know?" Kris said, trying to sound sensible as she debated which hot-pink top to wear out.

"I think Grace deserves a break," I nodded, equally willing to play the part of the wise chaperone.

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Castle Bar was a bomb shelter converted into underground drinking hole - hazy with smoke and booming electronica music. Kris and I made a beeline for the bar while the rest of the group shuffled off in search of a place to sit.

The night slid into blurred focus. A thrumming repetitive synth number began to glide out under the bass from the previous mix and Kris, as if hypnotized, shambled away from the bar and away from me, dancing. Kris' dancing prompted a group of Chinese youths to take part, and suddenly the bar was throbbing with energy, full of thin young bodies in cartoon t-shirts and rainbow bright dresses dancing away. Electro-bass thumped away under an impressive kaleidoscope of coloured lights. Between the mix of people, a tall, skinny young man danced frenetically. His body was expertly straight and still for a second before swaying smoothly into a hunched resting pose and then silkily spinning around and moonwalking.

"He's so good!" Kris paused and the two of us watched in admiration as he danced. Our foreign faces caught the attention of his group of friends, and an incredibly pretty girl from the group motioned for us to join them. As we moved towards them, the bespectacled dance dynamo spun around and launched into a perfect recreation of Michael Jackson's "Beat It" dance. We watched as he did a mid-air kick while pulling at his crotch.

"*Ni de tiaowu feichang hao*, your dancing is really good," I told him, when he was finished and momentarily at rest.

"*Zhen de?* Really?" his face was good natured and shy, but he grinned at my compliment, and shook his Korean-style bangs away from his eyes. "*Ni shuo zhongwen shuo de hen hao*, you speak Chinese very well."

"*Zhen de?*" Now it was my turn to shake my bangs away coyly.

Brokenly, we carried on our nervous exchange of compliments.

"*Qing gei wo ni de shouji haoma*, please give me your number?" He smiled nervously, unsure whether I would feign incomprehension as so many Westerners do.

“Uh,” I paused. Would we even be able to carry out a conversation? “*Ai, wo ji bu liao. Gei wo ni de, yihou song ni wo de*, I can never remember. Give me yours, I’ll message you mine after.”

“*Hao*, okay.”

He smiled at the compromise, and wrote his number down on a stained napkin at the bar. I tucked it into the sleeve of my dress.

“*Aly-pengerz*, Yi-Fei looks like she’s going to collapse,” Kris said, waving over at me. Following Kris’ gaze I saw that Yi-Fei and Christine were both tucked protectively into a banquette, next to a group of older Chinese men. Christine had a look of disdain on her face, and Yi-Fei looked sleepy but was smiling.

“I think it’s time we called it,” I nodded at Kris. Waving goodbye to our dance-floor friends, we collected Yi-Fei and Christine.

“I’m hungry,” moaned Yi-Fei.

“Me too,” Christine echoed.

“Okay, okay.” The only thing still open at this hour was a *shao kao* stand or fast food. “There’s a McDonald’s up the street here. I saw it on our way in.”

“Ohh, yeah that would be good,” purred Kris.

All together, we stumbled out of Castle Bar, climbing up the stairs back onto street level to a nauseating amount of neon light. The brightness seemed to bring Christine back to life.

“God, those guys were trying to convince us they were bigshot millionaires,” she drawled.

“The ones next to you in that booth?”

“Yeah,” laughed Yi-Fei, “they said they would hire us at their business if we decided to stay in China.”

“He was such a creep!”

“He was not!”

“Alright,” I said. We were inside McDonald’s. “You guys stay here, I’ll order for you both.”

“Hey Aly, where are Melissa and Ilana?”

“And Allison?”

“Oh god.” I had forgotten about the others.

“She was with Jason and David, I think those three left an hour ago.”

“So, it’s just Melissa and Ilana that are still down there?”

“Mm,” Kris was looking impatiently at the McDonald’s menu.

“Right, I’ll go get Melissa and Ilana, you three get something to eat and we’ll all head home after,” I said. The wise chaperone was being called into action.

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When I finally emerged above ground with Ilana and Melissa in tow, Kris was waiting for us.

“Heyyy! *Pengyoumen!*” Kris shouted happily. “Which way is it back to the *sushe*?”

“This street,” Ilana pointed confidently across the road.

“*Zou ba!*” Kris commanded. Together we all started the walk home.

Halfway back to the dormitory, Kris and I realized we had left Christine and Yi-Fei at McDonald’s.

“Oh man,” I needed to sit down. The rest of the group stood in drunken mortification, only half-aware of what had happened.

I called Yi-Fei on her cellphone.

“Aly?” Yi-Fei sounded groggy.

“Oh Yi-Fei, I’m so sorry,” I said, relieved at her answer. “I completely forgot you two were with Kris and Kris just walked out.”

“Yeah, we both went to the bathroom and she disappeared,” said Yi-Fei, remembering her indignation.

“Are you still there?” I asked, wincing.

“No, we called a taxi and are back at the *sushe* now.”

I exhaled. “Okay, we’re so sorry but glad you’re back safe.”

“Yeah,” Yi-Fei’s voice trailed off. In the background I could here Christine’s voice, taunting: “What if someone had kidnapped us?”

Here we go, I thought.

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“I feel so bad about leaving Yi-Fei and Christine behind,” I said guiltily to Kris, as we crawled into our beds later that night.

“I don’t,” Kris replied defiantly. “They’re both your age or older. Why shouldn’t they be able to get home on their own? You could, and you know less Chinese than both of them.”

“I guess,” I said, reluctant to accept the absolution. “It’s just, you know you’re supposed to look after one another here.” I thought about Beijing and Jeff’s explanation of the group mentality from so many years ago. “You’re just not supposed to leave anyone on their own out here...It’s like a bad reflection on you.”

“Says who?” Kris demanded. Then in a drunken half-mutter into her pillow she proclaimed, “*ziji, ziyou.*”

自己, 自由。Oneself, freedom.

...

Two days later, when I found the crumpled napkin the sleeve of my dress, I decided to send the Dance Spectacle a text message.

“你好。这是 Aly. 加拿大人在 Castle 酒吧。” I wondered if the message would make any sense, if I had even told him I was Canadian. Seconds later my cellphone buzzed with an incoming call. It was the Dance Spectacle himself.

“*Ni hao?*” I answered shakily. *Dammit*, I thought, *I’m supposed to answer with “wei?”*

“*Ah, ni hao? Zhe shi Zhang Hongxian, ni shi waiguoren gei wo de hao ma? Wo bu zhidao ni shi Jianadaren, na, wo bu -*”

He continued to talk. *Oh jesus*. Panic washed over as I was unable to follow a word he was saying. I think he said his name was Zhang Hong.

“*Duibuqi, qing ni zai shuo yidianr man?* Sorry, could you please say that again slower?” I interjected politely, realizing as I said it that slower wouldn’t compensate for my vocabulary.

“*Wo shuo de tai kuai?* I’m speaking too fast?” he faltered.

“*Dui, ni shuo yingyu ma?* Yes, do you speak English?” I asked hopefully.

“*Ai, bu hui, wo de yingyu bu hao* – Um, no I can’t, my English is bad.”

“*Wo bu haoyisi, tingli bu hao.* I’m sorry, my listening comprehension is bad.” Talk about poorly matched skills.

“*Ai*” he inhaled and hissed in that way particular to the Mainland, a harsh inhale between closed teeth that said it all – what was to be done? *Zenme ban?*

“*Ei, wo kandong Zhongwen.* Hey, I can read Chinese,” I offered helpfully, “*keneng, xie wo?* Maybe you could write me?”

“*Ah*” this time the exhale was relieved. “*Ni xie zi ma? Hao, duibuqi, wo xue yingwen xue tai duan, dan... wo song ni yi ge xin. Hao. Zai jian.* You write characters? Okay, sorry, I studied English too briefly, but... I’ll send you a message. Okay. Bye!”

I still didn’t know his name. “*Ni de mingzi ma?* Your name?” I pressed anxiously.

“*Ha ha, wo yijing shuo. Zhang Hongxian.* Haha, I’ve already said, Zhang Hongxian.”

“*Hao, Zhang. Hong. Xian.*” I repeated earnestly.

“*Dui – Hongxian. Zai jian meinü.*” I waited for him to hang up, and then lay down on my bed, washed out from the adrenaline of carrying on a barely functioning conversation. Why had I even bothered to message him? He was probably laughing at my strangled Chinese as soon as he hung up. Now I would have the headache of dodging his calls, too scared to answer in my piece meal Mandarin. Why did I always do this?

Just then my cellphone trilled a little tune announcing a new message. I looked at the screen.

“你好漂亮加拿大人.Sorry my english is bad.”

...

“So then you choose which bits you want in your soup,” Kris said, holding her plastic basket and pointing at the baskets of produce lined up on shelves inside

the open freezer with her tongs. She was showing Yi-Fei, Christine and Grace how to buy soup from the soup stall we frequented.

“Um, do they wash the vegetables first?” Grace asked, looking skeptically at the baskets of lettuce, mushrooms, yam, and potatoes. Yi-Fei and Christine looked equally queasy at the food on display.

“It’s fine,” I said, impatient. “Everything gets boiled in that enormous vat of broth anyway.” They started picking out skewers of food for their soup, still looking nervous.

The soup stall was admittedly a dingy-looking affair. Kris and I had learned how it worked by simply standing on the street and watching others buy theirs. First, you picked up a small, cheap plastic basket from the stack sitting on the ground next to the open freezer, and a pair of metal tongs. Then, using the tongs, you selected whatever caught your fancy from the produce being displayed. There was usually a row of leafy cabbage bundles in baskets: *xiaobaicai*, *gailan*, *wengcai*. Below these were skewers of mushrooms, some thick and tubular, others delicately ruced in irregular nuggets. Along with the mushrooms were various types of tofu; thin flat pieces tied together like spaghetti noodles, small perfectly round spheres; and thick, rough cut squares. There was also a selection of rice noodles, of every width to suit your taste; seaweed; chunks of ginger; and in the basin of the open freezer, heavily spiced skewers of pork, beef, chicken and fish, orange and red from their seasoning.

Once you filled your basket with whatever you liked, you brought it over to the cook, who stood over an enormous boiling cauldron of broth. She then dumped the contents of your basket into a small, fine-meshed individual strainer, secured to the rim of the cauldron by a binder clip. Your food then boiled *en masse* with everyone else’s, stewing in the collective broth. Once it was done you told them whether you wanted it *la*, spicy, and then the cook would deposit the contents of your strainer into a thin plastic bag placed over a disposable cardboard bowl, ladling in the broth last. The process was highly individualized and not very efficient, but the results were delicious and cheap. Kris and I would tolerate no insults directed at the soup stall.

Once everyone's basket-contents were boiling away nicely in the broth cauldron, we sat down at one of the tiny, cramped tables set up inside. Thirsty, I ordered a can of *xuebi*, Sprite.

"It's funny," I mused to no one in particular, "I never drink Sprite ever when I'm in Canada, but in China it's always the first thing I want to drink."

"Is it because that's the only thing you know how to say?" asked Christine unkindly. Kris' faced dropped; Grace and Yi-Fei looked between themselves, embarrassed.

"It's too bad you found your way home from McDonald's, Christine," I said, staring at her. Christine's mouth clamped shut in sour anger.

...

"不好意思，下个周末没有空。I'm so sorry, next weekend I don't have any free time."

I wasn't all that sorry, and I doubted that Hongxian was either. We had both made up a series of flimsy excuses any time either of us suggested we meet. Privately, I was sure that Hongxian was as scared of having to speak with me in person as I was with him. Still, to keep up appearances, every few days one of us would make a lame attempt at wanting to hang out so the other could nix it. Neither of us wanted to lose face.

"你喜欢音乐？ Do you like music?" I asked him.

...

"God, this is so boring," I said dispirited, tossing my textbook down the length of my bed. Kris and I were holed up in our room, attempting to study for our class. Kris was sitting at her cramped desk at the foot of her bed, in between a miniature tabletop fridge and the boxy old television.

"I know man," Kris muttered, her head bent over the sheet of paper she was practicing her characters on. "This goddamn furniture is killing my neck and my back. I'm going to have to get an *anmo*, massage, soon."

"Our desks in class are the worst," I agreed. "It's like sitting on a church pew with a desk rammed over your knees to keep you from moving." Our classroom was a very discouraging place, painted a stark, expressionless white in

paint so cheap it came off if you touched it. Innumerable scuffs, marks and stains covered the walls, and we sat, uncomfortably, at boxy two-person desks arranged unevenly in rows. Our seats were so painful that one of the Japanese students had brought a doughnut-shaped pillow with him to sit on, a coping strategy our instructor didn't fail to notice – she held the pillow up gleefully in front of the rest of the class and asked him whether his mother had knitted it.

“I hate our class,” Kris said flatly.

“Me too. It's a waste of time – no one's at the same level so we just spin in circles every day, hashing out the same stuff.” It was true; our classes were very poorly run. The program the University of Alberta had enrolled us in was not actually administered by Nanjing University, as it had been advertised, but instead was controlled by a secondary business that had simply rented out Nanjing University's name. The building where we studied was removed entirely from Nanjing University's campus – it was attached to the foreign student's hotel, so that we simply walked back and forth between two buildings. To say that we were studying at Nanjing University was an insane stretch of the truth.

“Want to go out soon?” I asked Kris hopefully. “We could go back to that underground mall we saw the other day.”

“I think we should study, *pengerz*,” Kris' normally buoyant voice sounded strained. I knew the cause of her anxiety. Even though we both vowed we would have beaten Christine's ass to the ground for her insult the other day, her slap to my Chinese had stung us both. Kris and I were both acutely aware that the non-heritage students moved at a much slower pace than the heritage classes, and it was made clear to us on multiple occasions by our own professors that they didn't think much of our chances.

“Okay, we'll keep studying. *Jiayou, pengyou.*”

Kris turned around solemnly from her desk. “And more oil to you, my lady.” We burst into laughter.

“Aly? Kris?” Grace was at our door.

“Hey Grace!” I said, enthusiastic for another distraction. “What brings you here today?”

“Yes, *meinü*, what can we *zou* for *ni, jintian*?” Kris sang out grandly.

“Haha, you guys,” Grace laughed and took a seat at the edge of my bed.

“The way you two speak with each other is really funny.”

“Why, because we don’t *mama-huhu* it?” I asked, pitching my textbook across the room so that it sailed over Grace’s head and landed on my desk.

“*Mama-huhu* it?” Grace laughed again. “See, that stuff, I’ve never heard anyone use Chinese that way.”

“Oh, you mean our Pinyinese?” asked Kris. She had got up from her desk and was stretched out on her bed.

“What’s Pinyinese?”

“Oh, we just say stuff in pinyin,” I shrugged. “It helps us remember new words.”

“Yeah, just the way you two mix it is funny. Like *mama-huhuing* it. I guess because I learned Chinese in elementary school, I can’t translate its meaning into an English context like that as quickly. But when I think about it, it’s funny.”

“Kris’ favourite is ‘more oil, *baichi*!’”

Grace dissolved into laughter. “When do you say that? Is it supposed to be an insult?”

“Yeah, sort of like when you’re super exasperated with someone but you don’t want to sound mean. I guess it’s our version of ‘good one, dumb-ass.’”

“*Jiayou baichi*,” Grace laughed some more. “I’m going to use that one.”

“Okay, but it’s ‘more oil, *baichi*,’” Kris stressed, looking serious. “You gotta keep the *jiayou* in English, it’s funnier that way.”

Grace started laughing again. “Okay,” she nodded, wiping at the corner of her eyes. “I’ll say ‘more oil’.”

“Good,” I lay back on my bed. “Anyways, what’s up?”

“Oh,” the smile that was on Grace’s face disappeared. “I’m just...frustrated at this whole program. Jiang Laoshi leaving, us staying here in this hotel, the lessons...they’re so -”

“- So crap, you can’t believe we’re getting university credit for them?” I finished.

“Yeah,” Grace agreed, glum. “And you won’t believe what a teacher said to me today!”

“What?” Kris and I asked in unison.

“She was asking us where we were all from, and when I told her Canada, she got all...mean and said ‘No, where are you *really* from?’ And I said ‘Canada’ and she got annoyed and asked me where my *parents* were from!”

Kris and I looked at one another.

“Uh, dude, how long you been in China?” Kris asked, trying not to laugh.

“Seriously,” I added, “that’s the first time you’ve been asked that?”

“Yes,” Grace sounded horrified. “You’ve been asked that before?”

“Oh sister!” My head fell back thinking of all the times in my life I had been dogged with that question. “Every week of my life, I’m pretty sure.”

“You mean in Canada?” asked Grace, looking amazed.

“Canada, China, you name it.” The only people who never wondered where I came from were my parents and the doctor who delivered me. “Haven’t you been asked where you’re ‘really’ from before?”

“No,” said Grace, shaking her head, “I mean, people assume my parents are from China, but no one’s insinuated that I’m *not* from Canada.”

“Really? Never?” Now it was my turn to look incredulous.

“Never.”

“Hmm, well, anyways, that’s pretty standard fare in China. If it’s any comfort, Kris gets pointed at and whispered about almost non-stop here, since she’s so tall and blonde.”

“It’s true,” Kris nodded thoughtfully. “I really feel like a freak here sometimes.”

“But if you say you’re from Canada, that should be enough.”

“It should,” I agreed, “and yet, it never is. Why are you a ‘heritage’ speaker, and I get classed as ‘non-heritage,’ when I studied in China and you and

I both grew up around Cantonese-speaking family members? Why did we all have to fill out that stupid questionnaire to study Chinese in Canada?”

“Well,” said Grace carefully, “I did go to a Chinese immersion school. So I did get to skip ahead of the basic level classes in Chinese.”

“Right,” Kris nodded. “But what about all the other kids that are attending those schools now? A lot of them aren’t “heritage” speakers in the same way you are.”

“I guess it’s the term that’s so inappropriate,” I shrugged. “If you’ve got a background speaking Chinese, that’s one thing, but if you’ve got a Chinese background, that’s another and no one gets to dictate that. Anyways, telling someone you’re Canadian just seems to be a cue to other people that their assumptions won’t hold up.”

Grace was silent for a while. “Do people always think you’re white?” she asked.

“Yeah, more often than not.” I thought about it. “It’s kind of weird because in Canada the default is definitely that I’m white, but in China it’s been really different because the first thing they ask is if I’m a *hunxuer*. I feel a little more at home here because of it.”

“Because they ask that?”

“Because it’s an option, I suppose.”

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Yi-Fei and Christine were standing out in the hall, just outside our open threshold.

“You can come in,” Kris nodded curtly to Christine.

“Hey everyone...” Yi-Fei waved lamely at all of us, looking nervous.

“Take a seat,” I waved grandly at our twin beds. “We’re just discussing intersections between race and culture, you know, the usual.”

“I was telling Kris and Aly what our teacher asked us all today,” Grace explained.

“Oh, whether we’re actually Chinese or not?” said Christine, looking unimpressed.

“Yeah, basically.”

“She seemed so hostile,” said Yi-Fei, “like we were lying by being in her class.”

“Do people think you should be more fluent than you are?” I asked, curious.

“Yes,” said Yi-Fei simply. “And the minute we don’t understand something in Chinese, they pounce on us.”

“Like we’ve forgotten it or something.”

“Hmm,” I considered what it must be like on the opposite side. “For me and Kris the expectation is always that we know nothing, and when we do something right it’s like a miracle.”

“Well of course,” Christine said, frustrated. “If you’re not Chinese, or you know what I mean,” she amended, nodding to me, “it’s impressive, but if you are Chinese-Canadian it’s expected.”

“That is crummy,” Kris agreed, “but on the other hand, people just believe you the first time if you say you understand Chinese. We have to prove ourselves every single goddamn time, because no one trusts us.”

“Even if we never grew up speaking Chinese though and had to learn it from scratch, no one cares because we look Chinese – they just think, *duh*, of course you should know,” countered Christine, bitterly.

“You mean you don’t get to win the Chinese Bridge contest?” I asked her sarcastically.

She gave me a wry smile. “None of us get to act like we’re Dashan.”

...

“我喜欢爵士. I like jazz,” read Hongxian’s message.

“What’s up? Got plans?” Kris asked, noticing my deep concentration as I attempted to tap out a message on my cellphone.

“Just keeping up my camp-letters to Hongxian,” I explained. Everyone in the group knew about my purely textual relations with the tollbooth operator from Nanjing, and even though I got teased for it, I stayed in touch with him. There was

something nice about our friendship, bound as it was on the unspoken promise that we would never make each other meet in person.

“Hahaha, oh man, you two,” Kris was greatly entertained by my messaging. “I gotta say though, *pengerz*, I’m impressed that you’ve even bothered to contact him.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, warily. Hongxian may not have been more than a texting-partner to me, but still, I stood up for my texting-partners.

“I guess, just, you know it’s hard speaking to locals,” shrugged Kris.

And I knew what she meant. That it wasn’t necessarily a feat to interact with ‘locals,’ but it was most definitely a gendered affair, one dominated almost entirely in China by Western men. Chinese women with foreign men was a fairly common sight in the expatriate areas of Chinese cities, so much so it was a stereotype, but the number of times I had seen a foreign woman out on the town in the company of Chinese men was nonexistent.

Many of my Chinese teachers had recommended getting a Chinese girlfriend as an antidote to poor Chinese. She would improve your speaking ability, and hey, maybe cook your meals too, *haha!* But no teacher had ever recommended a female student ‘get’ a Chinese boyfriend, perhaps because he wouldn’t be able to teach us to cook or arrange social activities to partake in.

Was Hongxian my ticket to better Chinese? Someone to chide me for using the wrong tone – in other words - someone to love? I didn’t care. I liked our correspondence.

“这个周末我去上海. This weekend I’m going to Shanghai,” I told Hongxian.

“慢走！你最好买一个口罩，哈哈！ Take care! You’d better buy a face mask, haha!” he replied.

...

Midway through our program in Nanjing, I was sitting on the main steps to the hotel drinking beer with Kris and a mixture of Americans. We had

attempted to go to karaoke that night, but our plans were derailed when the other students from our group failed to come back from their shopping trip.

“*Zhe ping nide?* Is this bottle yours?” I asked Kris, unsteadily gesturing at the bottle of beer next to me. My question caught the attention of one of the Americans standing in a group.

“Did you take a vow or something?” he asked me.

“A what?” I looked at him puzzled, wondering if he was part of a Mormon mission. They were making a serious effort in China.

“A vow, like a vow to only speak Chinese,” he was looking at Kris right now, who was bemusedly looking back at him.

“No buddy,” said Kris, chuckling. “No promise rings either.”

The American sat down on the steps below me. “*Ni shi na guoren?*” he asked. He was drunker than he looked: as he sat back he had to place a hand behind him to keep from falling over.

“Canadian,” I answered, in English. I always disliked it when obviously Anglophone foreigners insisted on speaking Chinese with each other.

“Canadian,” he repeated. For the first time I looked at him – he reminded me of the boy-heroes from American action movies in the eighties. His face was a soft square; with a long side-swept fringe half covering his eyes.

“Have you gone to the café at the end of the street? Alphabet café?”

I said that we hadn’t, that it was our first month in Nanjing.

“I’ll show you,” he staggered up, determined, and began to walk somewhat unevenly down the street. I hadn’t followed, but when he stopped and looked back, waiting for me, I rose and joined him.

“Why are you here?” he asked as we walked. The question sounded sad and hollow and meant for him more than me.

“Studying. You?”

“I’m doing my Master’s at Johns Hopkins here.” He motioned sloppily in the general direction of his school. It was a square, solid building next to Nanjing University’s foreigner hotel, and Kris and I saw their rooftop garden from our thirteenth floor room whenever we looked out the window.

“And how’s that?” I asked politely. He had stopped walking.

“The café’s right there.” We had reached the final intersection of the road, and he was pointing at a small, nondescript, gated property, shadowed by one of the enormous trees with deep dark leaves that defined Nanjing. A sign on the gate spelt out ‘Café’ in cute letters.

He stood, uncertainly, looking at it.

“Okay,” I said gently, “thanks for showing me.”

“It’s alright,” he turned to me, suddenly elated. “Want to get more to drink?”

...

The apartment was in a dark, crowded housing complex just off of *Shanghai lu*, a sinister half burnt neon sign hanging over the gated entry. Inside, the apartments faced out into a central courtyard, dirty and cluttered with bicycles, small carts and scooters. The illuminated windows of apartments gave off a sour yellow light, silhouetting the tiers of laundry that hung from every balcony. The courtyard was so dark that I walked into the corner of a food vendor’s cart, bruising part of my leg.

“I live on the third floor,” the American confided to me in a half-drunk whisper.

“You live on your own?” I asked as I followed closely behind up the pitch-black stairwell littered with discarded snack wrappers and cigarette butts.

“Me and my brother,” he drawled, suddenly loud. “Yep, me and David. He got laid off when the market crashed last fall.” He stopped and pulled out his cellphone, using its light to look for his keys.

“This is me,” he announced, fiddling with a rusted, clanking metal door, covered in gold and red remnants of *duilian*, now torn and peeling.

I looked in curiously at the apartment. Stepping over a pile of shoes I could make out a sagging brown leather couch, with a clunky television directly across from it. A blistered mirror rose above the couch, covering half the wall and perhaps attempting to soften the shallow space.

“*Ni yao he shenme?*” What do you want to drink?

“Anything.” He came back with a Tsingdao. I peered into his kitchen. It was similarly small and crowded, with a mixture of Western snacks – a box of cereal, a Snickers bar - sitting among a collection of cheap Chinese convenience foods.

“Is your brother studying Chinese too?” I asked.

“No, he’s looking for a job teaching English. He’s done a few, he likes it here. He doesn’t know a single word of Chinese though.” The American leaned against the windowed wall leading to the kitchen. “How long have you been studying?”

“Only two years,” I answered, “what made you study Chinese?”

He took a long draw from the Tsingdao. He hadn’t turned on the lights after entering, and the front of his apartment was bathed in the backwash from outside, a brackish afterglow that filtered through the green glass of his beer bottle. “My Grandpa. When I applied to college he said I should study Chinese, that everything to do with business would need Chinese. I didn’t know anything about China or Chinese. Never studied any languages.”

“Your Chinese seems really good.”

“Does it now?” he drawled, exasperated, and then seeing I had meant it only as a compliment, he softened. “Sorry, I’ve worked really hard for it.”

“Yo!” A voice suddenly called out from the stairwell.

“That’s Dave,” the American slurred. His older brother came into the apartment. He seemed less drunk than his younger brother, but was still visibly inebriated.

“Didn’t mean to interrupt,” David hiccupped. “Don’t mind me, just gonna pass out on the couch.”

“Hey, she actually understands Chinese,” the American swung his Tsingdao accusingly at his older brother. “How’s yours coming along?”

“Oh, has he charmed you with his Chinese?” A goofy grin crept up on David’s face. “He is quite the prodigy isn’t he? Parents couldn’t be prouder, I tell ya!” David pulled himself up from the couch and loped up to their television set. “Has he shown you his television debut in Hong Kong?”

“Shut up, Dave,” the American shook his head, face beginning to flush. “I swear I’m going to burn that thing.”

“Here we go,” David had inserted a DVD into their player.

“Should I leave?” I started to make my way out of their cluttered living room.

“No, no,” David pleaded gently, “stay and see this. It’s great.”

I looked at the American. He was slumped against one of the walls, his Tsingdao bottle hovering near his mouth. “Whatever,” he looked at me, his face suffused with the same drunken elation I had seen earlier.

The DVD was a recorded television episode. A group of foreign students were clownishly styled for the camera as different stereotypes: the lady-killer; the jock; the spoiled valley-girl. One of them was the American, dressed as a geek in too-high pants, suspenders, a calculator in his pocket and large-framed glasses. In fluent Chinese they all explained their personal passions in life, while hamming it up for the camera in various Hong Kong locales. I watched as the American’s nerd character was rejected by the valley girl, bullied by the jock and then teased by the lady-killer, all the while speaking flawless Chinese

“Can you believe we’re in the same room as him!?” said Dave sardonically.

“What was that for?” I asked the American, trying to sound light-hearted.

“Part of an internship,” the American said. He had a sickly smile on his face. “Actually, a lot of those students studied in Taiwan. We had to come up with our own characters. The guy who pretended to be a jock can’t throw a ball for his life.”

“Yeah, that’s obvious,” sneered Dave from the couch, where he had lay down, preparing to fall asleep.

“Well,” I said, aiming for diplomacy, “your Chinese is really amazing. It’s impressive you learned in university only. It makes my effort seem pretty weak.”

“Play to win, that’s the only way to do it,” said the American mournfully from against the wall.

“I suppose.”

“It’s true,” he said, looking at me sharply. “Why else would you try?”

...

Later, as I navigated my way out of the housing unit and through the sloping alleyways that led back to the dormitory, I thought about winners and losers in life and whether I fell into the losing column when it came to Chinese.

Tall, white washed walls bordered either side of the narrow street I made my way up, while lush, deep green leaves murmured over the sides, flickering the light. Now and then I passed a street vendor or general labourer, slowly shuffling their way to work before dawn, a quiet parade of people drifting along in darkness.

At the top of the road, I made to turn left, back to the *sushe*, but noticing a small glow of light from the opposite direction, I changed tack and wandered toward it.

A small, perfectly square workshop radiated light, a soft smudge against shadow. Just outside the doorway to the shop was a semi-circle of mismatched chairs, arranged to face the entrance. As I drew closer I saw the source of the otherworldly brilliance: stacks of metal pipe stood in vertical clusters against the walls, heaps of them leaning against one another in wave after wave. They were a bundle of different lengths, a silver forest of bamboo, and they gave the workshop a celestial lustre that only intensified inwards. From where I stood, the light from the workshop overflowed out into the street, silhouetting the empty chairs at the entrance. Arranged as they were, the chairs looked like unoccupied seats in a theatre; reserved seating for a vacant jury.

...

“再见，周六我要离南京赴台北。Goodbye, on Saturday I’m leaving Nanjing and going to Taipei,” I told Hongxian.

“真的吗？我想你的信！⊕ Really? I’ll miss your messages,” replied Hongxian. He sent a second message: “你很有意思的朋友，我真是三生有幸。You’re a very interesting friend, I’m really *san sheng you xing*.”

I didn’t recognize the *chengyu*, idiom, and had to look it up: *san sheng you xing*: “the blessing of three lifetimes,” or, “I feel lucky to have met you.”

...

“Who wants *shaokao*?”

We were near the end of the program, and Yi-Fei, Christine and I were sitting on the steps outside the hotel, the perennial hangout for foreign students. At night the same *shaokao*, street barbeque, vendor set up outside the steps, and the more skeptical street-food critics within our group had eventually come round to enjoying it.

It was still early that night, not quite nine o'clock, but *shaokao* business was in full swing. Metal trays stacked with prepared kebabs of meat and vegetables rested on a spindly folding table. The vendor, a friendly, self-assured father in his early forties, patiently waited for the foreign students to make their selection of kebabs before placing them on the crude charcoal burner he set up, periodically brushing the kebabs with a spicy sauce, or else just spritzing them with water if the student managed to advise “*bu yao la*” - I don't want spice.

Assisting with operations was the man's young son, who looked to be in his early teens. He was equally friendly and spoke some English, acting as a translator for his father when someone asked what type of meat was on the kebabs.

“I'll have some *shaokao*,” said Yi-Fei gingerly. “Christine, how about you?” And to mark how much progress we had made since our first arrival, Christine nodded and got up from the steps to join us at the kebab table, where we were waiting in line.

“Hey did you ever meet that guy?” asked Yi-Fei, trying to pass the time, “the ticket collector?”

“No, I still haven't.” And I wasn't sure if I ever would, because in three days time I was off to Hong Kong, to see the long-estranged Jeff, and then to Taiwan, where Kris had invited me to keep the party going. “Some how we were always busy when the other wasn't. But that's okay, I'll keep him freeze-framed in my memory this way.”

“I saw that American you're friends with while you and Kris were in Shanghai,” said Christine, adding delicately, “he was getting drunk on the stairs with some American girls.”

“I think he’s lonely,” I said sympathetically. And I meant it, because he was.

“What are you getting?” asked Yi-Fei as our turn came up in line.

Fatty, pink chunks of pork were speared in piles on the table, making the raw chicken lying next to it look thin and measly. Next to all the meat were the more symmetrical spears of vegetables: frilly, exotic funghi, round zucchini slices, thick chunks of potato and yam. Following the vegetables were the vegetarian options of tofu and fish balls, and because we were in Nanjing and somewhat close to the sea, there was also seafood: miniature fish stabbed three in a row, large white chunks of unidentifiable flesh, grey veined prawns, and in last place, filleted halves of squid, the flesh pristine white and purple-flecked. I paused and looked at it.

“*Youyu*,” said the teenage son helpfully.

“It’s so beautiful as it is,” I picked up a kebab admiringly, “it’s a shame to barbeque this.”

“Ew, Aly, don’t eat the squid,” Yi-Fei was eyeing it prissily.

“That’s gonna give you food poisoning,” chimed in Christine, looking distastefully at all the raw seafood, her nose squinching. “It’s not even on ice.”

I chose two vegetable kebabs and asked for some *la*, then held up the squid kebab. “*Keyi chi sheng?*” I asked the father. *Sheng* 生, newborn, to grow, uncooked.

“*Keyi*,” he smiled as flakes of ash floated up from the grill and rested on his clothes and the kebabs cooking.

Then, to Yi-Fei’s horror and Christine’s disgust, I bit into the perfect orchid body of the squid, savouring it raw.

CHINA 438: Tones

The world outside was soft: water dripped off evergreens and walkways were crowded with slush. The East Asian studies library, on the second floor of Pembina Hall, was a narrow room lined with metal shelves of Chinese and Japanese texts and dominated by an enormous conference table. From the casement windows all semester long, I had watched day darken into night - students retreating in thinner and thinner groups, done for the day. Winter was finally going home too, and for the first time in a while, the sky was setting after seven o' clock.

Our translation class took place at night. Initially, it had been an uphill battle: a three-hour seminar at the end of the day spent fussing over grammar and semantics in Chinese. But in our final spring months we had proven to be a cozy, murmuring group. We gathered around the conference table like foreign journalists in a warzone: caffeinated, greasy from the day's work; each of us bringing our heavily marked translations with us which we crouched over protectively, listening keenly to each other's translations, debating and arguing over a preposition's nuance, or whether the character was acting as a verb or a noun.

Professor Sterk, excessively lean and always wearing a three piece suit, led the class through its paces: first the week's exercise sheet of practice translations, then the Chinese to English translation, and then the English to Chinese translation. He was a careful man, and would often debate and question a word ragged, sometimes even arguing himself out of his original position. He was also a stickler for tones. Whenever any one of the non-native Chinese speaking students had to read out their translation, he would painstakingly cock his head to the side, his eyes half-closed in concentration, listening and checking for the right fall, rise, vocal break of tones. My friend Dan and I would joke that he was like a tone mystic, a shaman listening to the sound of winds and looking at us harshly when the incantation failed. When we failed to loop and connect our tones - when the *jiu* wasn't sufficiently *j-i-u* for him, he would turn us around, force us back

down the hill and through the third tone valley - “there’s a slight vocal break in the third, *gee-yeoooh*, you can’t hear it but it cracks a little, so your first tone falls: *gèee*, and your second tone rises: *yeeeóhhhh*, and you connect the two with a little vocal crack: *geeeeyeohhh!* I *shouldn’t* hear it. Again!”

Sterk Laoshi also scrutinized our tone conversions, something our native speaking classmates did effortlessly, and couldn’t fathom the mechanical way in which we, godforsaken English speakers, tried to track. A third tone plus a third tone became a second tone and a third tone. *Bù* in fourth tone changes to *bú* second tone when following a fourth tone. A third tone before a first, second, fourth or neutral tone, never makes it out of the valley – that is, you only use the falling half of the third tone, letting it come to a stop at the vocal break. Rearranging tones was a process of counterbalancing their effects: mellowing the harshness of the fourth tone with the more hopeful rise of the second tone; breaking up the monotony of consecutive first tones to create distinguishable variation between words; elongating the second tone just a *little* so that your third tone’s descent delivered enough dramatic flourish.

When I was young I had played the cello, and the process of adjusting and compensating tones in Chinese reminded me of the way my fingertips eventually learned to cluster and shift for sharp or flat notes. My index finger, inching up the neck and away from the cello’s centre by a mere centimeter in order to make the pitch go dull: flat. And then, just as quickly, the third finger taking the second finger’s place instead, hammering down hard on the string to bring the note back up to its regular pitch. Renegotiating space and placement, changing the character of the tone, and by creating variation, creating meaning.

...

“Again!” urged Professor Sterk, “you’re not paying attention to your tones, Aly.”

I was getting irritated with Sterk Laoshi’s tone agenda, and starting to feel tone deaf. It seemed to me I was never going to produce something that would ever sound natural and having my Chinese hauled out in class like a misbehaving servant in front of the native speakers was beginning to get old. *There’s nothing*

wrong with an accent, I should tell Sterk Laoshi. Some of the native-Chinese speakers were twittering between themselves at me, the *wairen*, and my goblin Chinese. *Goddamnit*, I thought, *they'll never know when to use 'a' or 'the.'*

I dragged my way through the sentence a third, fourth, fifth time, crawling down to the slowest speed: one laboured tone at a time. Finally Sterk Laoshi was satisfied. “Good, Aly, remember your tones; no tones: no meaning.”

“Professor Sterk, do you think in the future, tones will even be relevant in Chinese?” Now it was his turn to deal with someone obnoxious.

“I think tones are an essential part of Chinese, and I think if you don't bother with them you won't be understood. So yes.” Sterk Laoshi wasn't going to budge on his tones.

“Yes, but can I tell you my theory?” I continued, “I was thinking about Nigerian Pidgin, and how that developed, and – well, considering the influx of non-native speakers of Chinese that are studying Chinese and maybe migrating to China, isn't it possible that some of the tones will eventually erode away? That eventually, the speakers of non-tonal languages will screw up their tones or omit them enough that they won't be necessary in Mandarin anymore? Basically, they'll be such a pain that they'll get discarded for efficiency? Especially considering Putonghua, as it is, is considered a watered down version of Chinese.”

Professor Sterk sighed. He had large expressive brown eyes, and they were half-closed in pain, filtering out what I'd said. “I hope, Aly,” he said sighing, “that your theory doesn't prove true.” He brought his hands up to support his head, bowing it. “Because tones are what I find beautiful and it took me decades to even get them close.”

...

When I'd had time for remorse, I reconsidered my theory. Putonghua, as a nationally recognized dialect, didn't officially exist until 1956. It was only after Mao Zedong had come to power that major language reforms took place to try and provide a unified language for all of China to use. Mandarin, a dialect primarily used in the north existed long before then of course, but its journey to becoming synonymous with “Chinese” following its designation as the official

language was fairly recent. A lot of people still believed it was incorrect to call any dialect within China “Chinese.”

For some reason, the rather problematic nature of ‘Chinese’ and China’s multiple dialects never came up for discussion in any of my classes until well into my final year of university. But it was apparent to me, from my earliest stages of studying Mandarin, that calling Putonghua ‘Chinese’ was up for argument. My grandmother Rose didn’t hold back when I first declared my intention to study Mandarin in school:

“Why you not learn Cantonese?” she demanded.

She had grown up in Guangdong and similar to many southern attitudes, she held Mandarin in contempt: unrefined; simple; the peasant’s dialect. For her, there was no question that Cantonese was not only a rightful signifier of speaking “Chinese,” but that it was also more culturally relevant to know. Old Chinese? That was Cantonese. Mandarin? A made-up language. And for myself, my whole life, Cantonese was a familiar sound: harsh, nasal, full of sudden stops. Taishanese, the predominant dialect spoken by the early wave of Chinese immigrants to Canada in the twentieth century, was a phlegmy, unattractive language that sounded much more comforting to me than Mandarin.

Perhaps it wasn’t entirely without cause that some of our Chinese instructors regarded Chinese Canadian students with a bit of wariness. As one adjunct Korean professor explained to me once: “They feel they’re faced with a bunch of Cantonese speakers who they need to re-train in Mandarin; that they have to overcome this default Cantonese-ness.”

...

Kunming, 2011

The man had an exquisite flower arrangement secured precariously above the rear wheel of his dusty, rust-covered scooter: pink and yellow tiger lilies, fluffy white peonies and delicate stalks of dragon snaps were surrounded by a thin wisp of fern. As the scooter looped in and out of traffic the flowers swayed uncertainly from their perch, like a bouquet tossed into the sea.

...

“*Puguaijuan, beizi, zhentou.*” The dormitory *guanliyuan* tossed the last item, my pillow, unceremoniously on top of the thick, dusty stack of bedding I was struggling to hold. Unable to see past the bedroll, the quilt and the pillow, I tried to rebalance the load to no avail.

“*Suoyou de.* That’s all,” she nodded at me, then turned and sat down on the lower bunk where she and her colleague had been watching a historical drama on a laptop before I’d interrupted them.

Cautiously, I turned around and made my way to the stairwell, walking sideways up the stairs so that I didn’t trip and fall. My dormitory room was on the fifth floor. I had arrived in Kunming three hours prior, and was already sweaty and tired, having first hauled my two suitcases up the five flights of stairs, and now an enormous stack of bedding.

Since I was a *zhengfu xuejin xuesheng*, Chinese government scholarship student, I had free, shared accommodation with one other foreign student in the foreign student dormitories, a relative luxury since the other non-scholarship and domestic students were expected to share their rooms with up to five other people. Even so, my dormitory room was going to be a tight squeeze. Four grim, loft-style bunks had been crammed into the room, creating a narrow corridor of space between beds. A separate, tiled washing area with a shallow, trough sink was at the end of the room, separated by a windowed partition. Connected to the washing room was our bathroom, an extremely narrow tiled closet that was simultaneously a toilet and a shower: underneath the rough metal pipe that served as our shower was a no-nonsense porcelain squat toilet. I had already mentally prepared myself

not to move at all while I showered, lest my foot go down the toilet's sewage hole.

Reaching the fifth floor, I pushed open the door to my room exhausted. My bed still had to be made. I took in the totality of my bedding: one thin bedroll made of matted cotton, to serve as a mattress; one thin duvet; some brightly coloured sheets; and a thin, limp looking pillow. The bedroll would go on top of the plywood board of my bunk bed. And what was this? I noticed a small duffle bag pushed to the far corner of the loft. Clumsily crawling across the bed, I grabbed it and looked inside. A mosquito net. That would have to shroud the bed once I'd made it. I allowed the thought I'd been suppressing since I'd arrived at the dormitory to finally surface: I am in prison.

...

"*Ni hao,*" the girl sitting behind me tittered. "*Wei shenme ni jiu baoming? Ni shi naguoren-ah?* Why did you just enroll? Where are you from?"

It was my first day of classes at Yunnan Normal University, and I had been placed in what seemed to be the heritage speaker's class. Everyone else was visibly East Asian, apart from one student. I was enrolling one month late into the semester, and my arrival had piqued the interest of everyone.

"*Wo shi jianadaren,* I'm Canadian," I said, turning to face her. She was a small, thin girl with enormous dark eyes and long, shiny black hair. "*Ni ne? And you?*"

"*Cai yi cai!* Take a guess!" she shrieked, giggling. Taken aback, I looked at her. She looked Chinese.

"Umm," I stalled. This was probably going to go horribly wrong.

"*Cai yi cai!*" she repeated.

"*Ni shi hanguoren?* Are you South Korean?" I ventured.

"*Haha, keneng ta shi chaoxianren!* Haha, maybe she is North Korean!" laughed a nearby girl. Like my inquisitor she looked puzzlingly Chinese to me, with neat, short hair, perfect skin and delicate features. This was a game I was set up to lose.

“*Ni jue de wo xiang hangguo meinü?* You think I look like a South Korean beauty?” the girl asked me, feigning a coquettish pose.

“*Geng youkeneng ta jue de nide bizi shi jia!* More likely she thinks your nose looks fake!” cackled the other girl, making the first girl frown and adopt an exaggerated sulk.

“*Wo shi yuenanren*, I’m Vietnamese,” she volunteered, still pouting. Vietnamese. Yunnan province bordered Vietnam. I smacked my head in a show of embarrassment.

“*Ni ye shi yuenanren?* You’re also Vietnamese?” I asked the other girl, hesitant. She burst into a gale of laughter.

“*Bu, bu, bu! Wo shi taiguoren!* No, no, no! I’m Thai.” She gestured towards the back half of the classroom, where four or five students were watching me, amused. “*Women doushi taiguoren.* We’re all Thai.”

“Ah, okay,” I said, slipping into English and feeling bewildered.

“*Wo xing Du, Du Peipei.* My name is Du, Du Peipei,” my exuberant Thai classmate informed me, winking.

“*Women shi hanguoren*, we’re South Korean,” an older woman volunteered kindly, gesturing at the woman sitting next to her. “*Tamen ye shi*, they are as well,” she continued, motioning towards a young female and male student sitting across the aisle from me. They were stylishly dressed in oversized t-shirts and cardigans and wore large black glasses. They waved politely back.

“*Wo shi yinduren*, I’m Indian,” the girl sitting in front of me grinned, joining in on the game. “*Ta jiao Akira, ta shi ribenren*, his name is Akira, he’s Japanese,” she said, tilting her head towards an older man in a Hawaiian shirt and flip flops. Akira gave me a polite nod.

“*Hao jianada, women dou jieshao le, suoyi ni gaosu women weishenme ni bu shi baoming gen biede xifangren?* Well Canada, we’re all introduced, so you’ll tell us why you’re not enrolled with the other Westerners?” Peipei looked at me, an impish grin on her face. Everyone else in the class turned, interested in my answer.

“Umm?” I hesitated. No one looked truly hostile, but I was clearly an unanticipated addition to their class.

“*Nide hanyu zhen bang ah?* Your Chinese is awesome, huh?” she prodded me, smiling. “*Keneng ni shi hunxue?* Maybe you’re half-Chinese?” she said, raising her eyebrows. I realized Peipei was Kris, as Kris had been Kat. I had a friend.

“Mm,” I assented. I changed tack. “*Wo shi yige shentong*, I’m a child prodigy.” Peipei and the rest of the class broke into a peal of laughter.

...

We had four different classes each week at Yunnan Normal University: *Yuedu*, reading comprehension, *Kouyu*, speaking, *Tingli*, listening comprehension and *Boya*, or “Learned Chinese,” a sort of literature class. I was familiar with *Yuedu*, *Kouyu* and *Tingli* classes and knew what to do in them, but I had never taken a *Boya*, class before. It was an odd mixture of spoken colloquialisms, literary Chinese and textual analysis.

Every chapter in our textbook began with an excerpt of literature, followed by an extensive vocabulary list. Unlike the usual vocabulary definitions I was used to however, these were long, complex explanations of just what type of feeling certain words evoked, of how they could be mixed into other contexts. Like a step-by-step how-to guide to reading literature, *Boya* attempted to define a particular word’s nuance to outsiders.

沧桑 (名) : 沧海桑田. 比喻世事变化很大。

cangsang (n.) : The blue sea turned into mulberry fields. A metaphor for a life’s affairs undergoing enormous change.

Every week, we started a new chapter of our *Boya*, reading the text aloud and then, using our vocabulary quick guide, we would attempt to interpret them.

“*Danshi, ai, huozhe youyi, bu shi yi zhong shushi, mai hui lai qieqie jiu neng xia jiu le; ai he youyi, yao ni qu jianli, yao ni qinshen touru jinqu, zai ni fuchu de tongshi ni dedao, erqie ni biding yijing gaihuan le yi zhong xinqing, you le yi zhong xin de shenghuo taidu.* But love or friendship isn’t a kind of processed food that you purchase, bring home and then hastily wash down with a drink; love

and friendship need a foundation from you, need you to throw yourself into them, and at the same time that you're investing in one, you're simultaneously receiving. Moreover it's certain that you've already changed in the process, and possess a new perspective on life." Mingzhaung finished reading.

"Mm," Du Laoshi nodded. "*Shei juede youyi shi zuan niu jiao jian?* Who thinks friendship is *zuan niao jiao jian?*"

Zuan niu jiaojian. That was one of our new expressions. To drill into a bull's horn: to waste time on something small and insignificant.

No one took the bait.

"*Hao, xiexie xuesheng,* Alright, thank you student," Du Laoshi said, giving Mingzhaung an approving look. "*Suoyi, zhege zuozhe fahui shenme? Ta fahui youyi, jia, ai, dou shi haode touzi!* So what is this author expressing? He's expressing that friendship, family, love - all are good investments!" The class laughed.

It was a simple passage from Shi Tiesheng, but it appeared to be striking a chord. Around the classroom, heads imperceptibly nodded in agreement. No one disagreed with Shie Tiesheng.

...

"*Est-ce que ni, I mean, tu, as faim?*" I asked my roommate Clémence. She was from Marseille and in the beginner Chinese class.

"*Ah, non, je bao le, merci xie xie,*" Clémence smiled, shyly. It felt like I was torturing Clémence every time I initiated conversation, which I probably was.

"*D'accord, je qu canting!*" I said waving at her. I left our dorm room and met Peipei and the other Thai students on the floor below.

"*Mingzhuang ganmao le, Mingzhuang's sick,*" Peipei explained. "We'll have to bring her soup."

"*Hao.*"

"*Nide sheyou? Your roommate?*" asked Peipei.

"*Wo qing ta, I invited her,*" I assured Peipei. "She just likes to go on her own."

"*Weishenme? Why?*" Haoqiang, one of our classmates, was listening.

“*Xifangren*, Westerners,” began Peipei, “You’re very independent. You want your own rooms, live by yourself, eat alone - ”

“*Yinyi*, privacy,” I interjected. “Privacy is not a bad thing. I like having my own space to do things.” We had reached the cafeteria. “*Danshi*, but,” I continued, “We don’t do everything as a group like you tend to in Asia.”

“We think it’s *limao*, polite,” agreed Peipei. “And maybe it’s safer to do things with other people. You have to take care of each other this way.”

“I know.” I had finally become accustomed to group action in China, but it didn’t happen easily. “I think it is nice, to look after your friends like you are looking after Mingzhuang. But it’s also, I don’t know, fun? To be off on your own and have an adventure.”

“*Wo mingbai*, I understand,” Peipei assured me, “it’s just, um, sometimes we think someone who wants to be alone all the time, by themselves, we think this person maybe is mentally ill.”

I laughed, because I loved being on my own and earlier I had confided in Peipei that I wanted to move out of the dormitories. “Maybe you’re right.”

...

Later, when we had brought Mingzhuang her soup and were sitting in her dorm room keeping her company while she ate, Peipei asked me curiously:

“*Ni zhaogu nide sheyou?* Do you look after your roommate?”

“*Shenme?* What?”

“Since you’re both...independent, does one of you care about the other?”

I laughed. “*Bu rongyi*, it’s not easy,” I explained. “She’s from France and doesn’t speak very much English, or very much Chinese, so we have to communicate *yi ban*, one half Chinese, the other half French.”

“Ohhh,” Peipei nodded, suddenly understanding. “You can’t speak that much with each other.”

“*Ni shuo fayu ma?* You speak French?” Mingzhuang asked admiringly from her bunk bed.

“Ooooh,” purred Peipei.

“*Wo hui shuo*, I can, but it’s not very good anymore,” I said. “I don’t understand why everyone’s always impressed with French in China?”

“Mm,” Peipei shrugged sheepishly, “we just think, in Thailand, maybe China too, that French is...very sophisticated, because it’s European? So we think if you speak French it means you are quite...*lao yu shi gu*, very worldly.”

“Oh,” I said. “*Jianadaren*, Canadians, it’s sort of everywhere in our country, so it doesn’t mean as much.”

“Comment-ah ça va?” asked Mingzhuang coyly. “*Wo shuo yi dian youyu yuenan he faguo de lishi*, I speak a little bit because of Vietnam’s history with France. When did you learn?”

“*Dang wo xiaohaizi*, when I was a little kid,” I replied. “Actually, my French teacher was Japanese, Japanese-Canadian.”

“*Zhende!* Really!” exclaimed Mingzhuang. “How come she could speak French? Was she even good?”

“*Jianada*,” said Peipei, shaking her head. “Everyone is everything there.”

“*Wo tongyi*,” I said. “I agree.”

...

Mademoiselle Kawahara was the first language teacher I ever had. She was the French teacher at Westbrook Elementary, and had been, for several decades and was regarded as something of an institution among the teachers at Westbrook, who taught us all at a very early age to be extra careful around ‘Miss K’ or else.

Miss K had a small, windowless office next to the computer lab that smelled like mothballs and was decorated carefully with posters in French, all laminated and arranged on her walls in perfect order. Sometimes she would invite a few choice students to come and help her organize her office, an invitation that was less of a question and more an imperative. The few times I was invited, I was tasked with sorting through her worksheets and ordering them by grade; it took up an entire lunch hour, and afterwards I was rewarded with two squares of stickers, a treat I was much too old for.

At Westbrook Elementary, Miss K taught French to grades four, five and six, three times a week. However, though your French education technically started in grade four, she often paid the grade three classes a visit near the end of the school year, laying out her rules in the classroom and giving them a summer to ‘smarten up’ before joining her world.

Because Miss K’s classroom world was very strict. She had an encyclopedia’s worth of rules, spanning our posture and question-answer etiquette, to the style in which we were expected to write and complete our homework assignments. Students in Miss K’s class always had their hands and elbows resting neatly on top of their desks at all times. They sat up straight and looked forward. If a student sitting in front one of us was absent, we automatically took their place; Miss K hated seeing empty seats in front of her. Our French binders always rested to our left, with our French-English dictionaries placed precisely on top of them, at the start of class. We were never to have our hands above our shoulders: no resting our chin in our hand; no yawning; no scratching; no playing with our hair. And we were never, ever, to turn around to look at the classroom clock behind us.

In the few minutes before the start of French class, it was standard practice for us all to rush around our classroom, hastily tidying up loose sheets of paper on the floor, misplaced erasers and pencils under desks; ensuring that everything was in its proper place and that Miss K would find no fault in the cleanliness of our classroom. This was especially tough if French class happened to fall after the lunch break, since those of us who stayed at school for lunch were obliged to eat our lunches in our classroom, under the supervision of a bored lunch monitor. Somehow, despite our best efforts, there would always be a scrap of cellophane - the discarded clear wrapper from a juice-box straw was a common culprit - which we would fail to pick up from the floor. If Miss K came across this type of trash, her reaction would be livid, bordering on vicious:

“What is this?” she would say, in a clear precise tone that conveyed she wasn’t looking for an answer, as she stooped to pick it up off the ground, pinched

distastefully between her two fingers. Everyone's buttocks would immediately clench in their seats.

"What is this trash?" She would repeat, as if she were in a Shakespearean tragedy. "Do you think I'm blind? Garbage scattered about the classroom? Do you just throw food on the ground after you're finished eating it, like pigs?" Her nose would wrinkle, and she would glare at us behind her rose-tinted glasses, menacing. She would then do a careful circuit between desks, holding the offending wrapper above our heads, continuing: "I hope you do not think that I am your maid, here to clean up after you. Because I am not your maid; I am your teacher; I expect to teach in a clean classroom, and if you do not understand this, you can leave -" her voice boomed, "RIGHT NOW!" She would throw the wrapper into the garbage can, and stare at us, daring us to get up or protest. But we would all sit silently, waiting for her to finish and begin our lesson.

Though these episodes caused uncomfortable shifting and a dark cloud of silence around the classroom, they were group wounds, inflicted on all of us indiscriminately, and so, easier to take. The absolute worst was when Miss K attacked you, and only you, in front of everybody. She had made every single one of us cry at some point.

My time came fairly early, not long after starting to learn French in grade four. Miss K demanded we handwrite our homework answers in a style that replicated her own handwriting as closely as possible: a requirement I found difficult. My handwriting had already taken the shape of a thin, scratchy scrawl, and I found Miss K's handwriting, with its squat letters and long links, extremely ugly. The homework I handed in that day was written in my own hand, and Miss K registered this defiance immediately when she collected it.

"What is this?" She held the sheet of homework up in front of the class. Everyone automatically strained to see the name, praying it wasn't theirs. She knew this, and held it up for an agonizingly long time to maximize everyone's fear. And then -

"Aly, is this your homework?" Everyone else gave a silent sigh of relief, while I slunk in my seat.

“This is your homework, yes?” Miss K continued. “That’s funny, because the writing is absolutely intolerable. Here I was, thinking I had given you all clear instructions on how I expect your homework to be completed, and then I get this -” she waved my offending homework in the air, “which is absolutely impossible to read. Are you always this messy?” She paused. I stared back mutely at her, unsure whether the question was rhetorical.

“I asked you a question Aly, and I expect an answer. Are you this messy all the time?”

“No,” I whispered, head down.

“Look at me. This is unacceptable. This handwriting is illegible. You must be a messy person if you write like this. Messy writing is a messy, careless person, who is sneering -” her lips were curled, and she was standing over me, her tiny five foot frame drawn to its maximum, “ - at me, my work, and the class. You will not hand this in, because it is garbage.” She returned to the front of the classroom, and then ceremonially began to tear my homework into long thin strips, which she then neatly bunched together and shredded further into squares, before letting it all fall to the floor.

“Come here!” she snapped. I got up painfully from my desk and walked to the front of the classroom, head bowed. The rest of the class was dead silent, eyes averted or else watching apprehensively from their seats.

“Pick up your garbage, and then go stand outside the classroom until I am done. You aren’t joining our class today.” I got down on my hands and knees and picked the remains of my work from the floor as quickly as possible, concentrating on the carpet, the garbage can, and the door to our classroom. Somehow, I made it all the way outside and to the dunce’s spot just outside the door before breaking into tears. I stood, quiet and miserable, while Miss K taught the remainder of the class. Her mercurial temper had careened into a mirthful one, and she joked with the class as she taught them the seasons in French.

When class was finally over, I waited, still outside, until Miss K had collected her things and left the classroom. She had calmed down throughout teaching the lesson, and was now in a compassionate, forgiving mood.

“Aly, I hope you have learned something today.”

“Yes, Miss K.”

“Good. I want you to know that I am not attacking you, but you need to do better on your homework.”

“Yes, Miss K.”

“Alright. You may redo your homework tonight and hand it in at my office tomorrow; come with me now and I’ll give you another copy.”

“Yes, Miss K.”

And when I returned to class, with my second chance at the assignment in hand, no one said anything to me about Miss K; everyone went about their business, politely silent about my ordeal. The protocol amongst us was to leave a student humiliated by Miss K alone, until they revived of their own accord and were ready to talk again.

...

Though she had a volcanic temper, Miss K was a phenomenally good French teacher. We had all mastered the *avoir* and *être* verb conjugations within our first year of French, and had moved onto *passé composé* and the *futur proche* by our second. For a non-immersion school, Westbrook was renowned for turning out well-prepared students in French, and Miss K’s reputation had preceded her so much so that a nearby junior high school allowed students from Westbrook to skip ahead into advanced French.

Perhaps because of this efficacy, Miss K was never the object of complaints from parents. No teacher dared interfere with any of her lessons, and if they happened to pass one of us standing outside our classroom and silently crying while Miss K taught, they would leave us there, and continue on without a word. They knew what had happened. Though she was known as a bully and had even thrown binders and books at students when something had truly enraged her, she had *carte blanche* when it came to her teaching. As students, we privately speculated that someone had rejected her when she was young and she was forever angry at being alone; after all, she was in her late sixties and unmarried. No one knew anything about her personal life; her family; where she lived, or

what she did on the weekends; only now and then would you hear hushed conversations between parents helping their children into coats - “but you know, she was interned in one of the camps during World War Two,” they would whisper, never explaining. Miss K was respected among parents, because what she taught, she taught. My own parents, neither of whom spoke any French, were enthralled with her results; each of their children could converse intelligibly in a second language by the time they were twelve.

Though she was unyielding in her guidelines on filling out homework (“always underline titles with a ruler in a different colour, red or blue”), my early experience with her did prove useful in the subsequent language classes I would take in my life. To prepare for her *dictées*, my older sister taught me to record myself speaking French, and then to play it back and write it out, checking for problematic spelling or misgendered nouns. We all rose to meet her standards, although there were a few who couldn’t; these students ceased to exist for an hour or so every other day, during Miss K’s class. They sat, silent and miserable in the far back corners of the classroom, ignored and left out of her lessons, sometimes for years.

...

“*Keshi wo yi tian bu neng kefu zhe zhong yaonie sheng de xiao fannao, shengming shi yi xi huamei de pao, pa man le zaozi.* But I can’t overcome the gnawing worry, life is like a magnificent robe, one that’s crawling with fleas.” Ke-Na, the Indian student sitting in front of me finished reading the passage.

“*Hao*, good,” nodded our teacher, Du Laoshi. “What do we think her state of mind is?” She was asking our whole class.

“*Youmen*, depressed,” volunteered one of the Thai students.

“*Fakuang*, crazy,” chimed in Peipei. Everyone laughed.

“*Hen jimo*, lonely,” suggested Akira.

“*Hao, hao*,” Du Laoshi nodded, “and ‘the magnificent robe, crawling with fleas,’ what do we think this means?”

“*Tade shenghuo aosang*, her life was depressing,” Meiyu, the older South Korean student answered. The rest of the class nodded, satisfied. We were discussing Zhang Ai-ling.

“*Enhui*,” Du Laoshi said, turning to me, “*you biede da’an ma?* Do you have any other answer?” Lately Du Laoshi had been giving me the last word on every lesson, possibly because I was the only *Xifangren*, Westerner in class, and she felt sorry for me. I was getting inundated with Eastern *sixiang*, ideologies.

“Nng,” I thought about all the Chinese classical poetry I had read. Everyone was always looking back, reflecting on their lives, even if they weren’t even close to death. “Maybe it’s also important that she is looking back at this time, and writing about it with an adult’s reflection, so that her despair weighs even more heavily on her?”

The class fell silent. I wondered if I was going to be corrected, like I had been when we read Lu Xun.

“Mm,” Du Laoshi nodded. “*Keneng*, maybe.”

In other words: probably not.

...

“What the hell is this?” I was standing in front of an enormous chalkboard installed next to the dormitory *guanliyuan*’s office, which read, “*Xueya yuan weisheng jiancha biao*.” The Xueyayuan (Dormitory) Sanitary Inspection Table.

Peipei stifled a laugh at hearing me speak English. “This has been here for a while. You just noticed it?”

“It has?” I realized that I had ignored its presence because it was large, confusing and written in hard-to-read Chinese handwriting.

“Mm, see our scores,” said Peipei, pointing at the subdivided rows, which were arranged by each floor of our dormitory. The chart gave each room in the dormitory building a score out of 100. I looked for my room. I had been given an 85.

“Eighty-five!” I shouted. “What is this even graded on?” I wondered if it was because Clémence had an electric kettle, which was technically contraband.

“I only have ninety-four,” Peipei said, trying to comfort me.

“When do they come in and grade our rooms?” I asked Peipei, still in disbelief.

“When we’re in class during the day,” she shrugged, like it was obvious.

“Why do they even have to score us?” I asked. “What’s the point?”

“Mm, I dunno, to shame us?” Peipei pointed at the upper rows of the table, where the first and second floor rooms were listed. The first and second floor of our building housed the male students, while the upper floors were assigned to the female students. “Doesn’t really work though, see how low the scores are for the boys?” The rooms were all given scores below sixty.

“That’s it, I’m finding a new place to live,” I declared.

Peipei gave me a knowing nod, saying, “See, I told you when you came that none of the Western students ever stay for long in our building.”

...

“You can choose which room you want,” Matt said, gesturing between two doors in the hallway. Matt had told me he was only in Kunming because he had run out of money after going through Nepal, and a fellow traveller had told him that he could earn good money teaching English in China, and so, since Kunming was the closest city he could afford a plane ticket to, he had arrived here. He was the third person I had met as a potential roommate, and so far the most promising, not the least because the apartment he was trying to fill was the best I’d seen.

From the hallway, I peeked my head into each doorway. The first bedroom, narrow and rectangular, looked more like a small office with a low double bed pushed up against the wall. The second bedroom was significantly bigger. A double bed resting on a cheap metal frame was positioned neatly in the centre of the room, still leaving a large corner of space to fit a desk. But the bedroom’s main feature was a massive boxed window with a thick granite ledge, which jutted out of the actual building, giving a suspended view of the apartment courtyard below.

“This bedroom’s a little bit bigger, so I’m going to charge an extra 150 kuai,” Matt said. I could see myself growing plants on the window’s ledge.

I sighed. My dormitory room was free.

“I’ll rent this room.”

...

Matt had already found our third roommate by the time that I had moved in, but I didn’t officially meet him until I’d been living with Matt for a week. Peter, a young Dutch student, was trying to cut his living costs by moving into a shared apartment. Prior to becoming our roommate, he had lived on his own in an apartment in Kunming, one that was by his account: “very spacious, modern, and so so bright.” But this apartment was leased and paid for by the flower-importing company he was employed by, and when circumstances led to his being let-go, Peter was ordered to vacate. Subsequently, he went searching for cheaper accommodation, shared accommodation, which led him straight to Matt.

Matt and I had barely gotten to know one another after I moved in, but we became sudden allies in the face of Peter’s arrival.

We learned quickly. First, Peter had fallen in love with a beautiful girl (whom he referred to as “Beautiful Girl”) but he was unfaithful to her and now “she does not see me ever, even when I take the bus to where she works.” The second was that he had an extensive knowledge of horticulture. He had worked for numerous greenhouses across Holland during his teenage years, and had made it a life aspiration of his to run his own flower business. He knew the exact temperature that roses must be stored at; the lifespan of gerberas; the intricate forces involved in coaxing orchids into life. His second language to Dutch was plant taxonomy, and he was substantially better at speaking this than he was at speaking either Mandarin or English.

Peter was also enrolled at Yunnan Normal University as a Chinese language student, not because he cared to learn Chinese, but because he believed it made a better impression on Chinese employers that he was a student, rather than an unemployed foreigner, which he was.

...

“Peter, this is Tumi, our neighbour downstairs,” I said. Tumi had come up to use our washing machine. He was a friend of Matt’s, and worked as an English

language teacher as well as a D.J in different clubs around Kunming. Tumi was from Botswana, but attended college in the United States, and worked as an English teacher in a U.S based partnership with Yunnan University.

“Hey man,” Tumi said warmly, “I think maybe I’ve seen you around Kundu before, I D.J sometimes.”

“Oh, yes maybe,” nodded Peter, his mouth twisting into an embarrassed grin. “Yes, likely, I am there quite often.”

In fact, Peter was in the process of preparing to go out as we spoke. His routine consisted of pulling on a sweater on top of the sweater he was already wearing, carefully enticing the fringe of his hair straight up with liberal doses of hair gel, and dousing himself with an acrid, peppery body spray. Occasionally Peter would add a shiny blue corduroy blazer to this ensemble, when he didn’t feel like his fake nightclubbing age of twenty-seven. Peter was actually twenty-three, and looked somewhere around fifteen, but to put anxious girls at ease, he gave the age of twenty-seven. When I asked him once why twenty-seven, he said:

“Because the point is - Matt is twenty-seven.”

And Matt, who was twenty-seven, but looked somewhere around eighteen, seemed momentarily flattered at this response.

“Alright! I see you!” Peter called out to Tumi and me.

“He seems like he’s fun,” said Tumi, an amused smile on his face.

...

Somewhere, between Dante’s second and third circle, Kundu can be found: a wasteland of garish light and concussive music, a town hall for sexpats. A city square consisting entirely of nightclubs, they face out into a large open plaza that is perpetually lit with the glow of neon signs. The plaza is littered with shards of broken glass, puddles of vomit, and discarded bamboo kebab sticks. Small children, clutching single wrapped roses, run haphazardly back and forth across this plaza, up to foreign men with barely conscious dates, pleading with them to buy a rose. In their persistence they cling to every loose end - to hands, to arms, to legs of strange men, entreating them to buy a rose for their pretty girlfriend; from a distance their parents stand and watch. Meanwhile, behind the

square, at the back entrances of the nightclubs, middle-aged women garbed in canvas aprons and blue sleeve covers smash mountains of beer bottles into cardboard boxes. Securing the boxes to the backs of their bicycles, they slowly pedal the carefully packed broken glass away into the night.

It was from Kundu that Peter lurched home every night. With the support of a girl he managed a taxi, and stumbled back up the steps to our apartment. Loudly, they would enter. The large living room windows always drew an appreciative “wahh!” from the girl, before Peter rehearsed his lines:

“Why you smell so beautiful!”

“How much is this apartment per month?”

“You smell, it’s very beautiful,”

“You live here alone?”

“I want I think to look at you... night”

“What?”

“I say, I want, I think to look at you. Night.”

Silence.

Peter. Pater. In Mandarin, verbs do not conjugate; you have to put a time at the beginning of your sentence to change tense. Which night do you mean Peter? Tonight? Place today in front of night at the start of the sentence. And which verb are you trying to get at? Want? Wish? Pine? Desire?

In my dreams Peter’s sentences became desolate characters unable to return home. Branded thieves. Their confused arrangement hanging in the air, a suspended chord.

...

“*Ei! Ni kan!* Look!” The demon flapped his arms trying to capture my attention. “*Ni kan!* Look!” Behind him was a small crowd of misshapen creatures. “*Deng yi xia!* Wait a sec!”

...

When I was small, our next-door neighbour was a professor in French, who taught at a nearby university. I often played with her daughter, and was in awe of the fact that her mother had learned a language so well that she was fluent.

“How did she do it?” I asked her daughter one time, as we played on their back patio.

“She says she had to go live in France,” shrugged the daughter, Anna. “She spoke French all the time there. She even had dreams in French. She says when you dream in another language it’s there for good.”

Ever since then, my benchmark for success in Chinese was being able to dream in it.

...

“*Ni renshi wo?* Do you know me?” The little demon demanded. He was scarlet red, with a thin, fragile face that bobbed up and down. “*Ni wang le ma?* Did you forget?” he demanded. Behind him stood his small legion of fellow demons, plaintively waiting. One had a man’s face mounted onto the body of a bird. Another was a small, shrunken man with a double row of eyes. And one was headless with a wide expressive face growing out of their chest.

“*Ni de mingzi shenme?* What’s your name?” I asked it. At once the demons smiled, their faces pulled in grotesque grins, lips curled and sharp pearly teeth bared.

“*Eh? Wo jiao Honghe!* My name’s Honghe.” His head was shaking.

“*Honghe?*”

“*Ni renshi wo?* Do you know me?”

“*Bu!* No!” I shook my head. “*Wo bu haoyisi, wo wang le ni.* I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten you.”

“*Mei shi,* no problem. All you had to do was speak Chinese with me and we’ll stop following you.” Honghe turned around and waved at his gang to follow him. They began to toddle away.

“*Hao, hao,* okay.” I nodded, and turned to walk the other way.

...

When I awoke in the morning, I realized my dream with Honghe had been in Chinese, and that I was now dreaming in Chinese and living in China.

Later, in class I told Peipei about my dream.

“*Ni meng de yaoguai*, the monster in your dream, what did you say his name was?” asked Peipei.

“Honghe, I think.”

Peipei giggled. “*Zuotian zai ke*, yesterday in class, Du Laoshi told us about the Honghe. It’s the major river in Yunnan and it flows into Vietnam.”

...

“Hey, Aly, thanks for coming with,” said Tumi. Matt, Tumi and I were ambling through *Cuihu* park, cutting through it to get to *Dongfeng* road. I was helping Tumi pay the internet bill for his apartment, since neither he nor his two roommates, Arleigh and Dan, spoke enough Chinese.

“*Mei shi*,” I said, waving my hand. I had become the go-to person for errands in Chinese among our small group; I helped buy medicine, register at the local police station, set up bank accounts, haggle for secondhand furniture, and order water refills over the phone. Among the six of us, I was the only one able to speak, read and write in Chinese. “It actually feels...really weird to me that I’m able to do this now.”

“Well, you’re pretty fluent, right?” asked Matt.

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head reflexively.

“You’re not?” asked Tumi.

“No, I mean, I know how to speak, but I’ve got a long way to go.”

“But you have a degree in Chinese, don’t you?” persisted Tumi.

“Mm, but I don’t know all that much.”

“I’ve noticed you have a hard time accepting compliments,” remarked Matt, cocking his head and looking at me, smiling.

“Compliments?” I asked. I hadn’t considered it as a compliment.

“Yeah, you really do,” chuckled Tumi.

I thought about it, as we walked along *Cuihu*’s crowded paths. Families out for the weekend were milling back and forth, and the air was soaked with the small, confined shouts of children, the tinny echo of recorded dance music being practiced somewhere deep in the park, and the occasional warbling voice of a singer, out practicing in the sunshine.

“It’s just that you never want to seem *deyi*, when you’re learning Chinese,” I said finally.

“What’s *deyi*?” asked Matt.

“*Dedao de de* and *yisi de yi*,” I explained. “It means self-satisfied, or proud of one’s self. Like smug, or complacent.”

“You don’t seem smug or complacent,” Tumi assured me.

“No, it’s not that I worry I’m getting smug. You just never want to seem *deyi*, especially in Chinese class.”

“Or else what?” asked Matt.

“Or else you’ll get humiliated one way or another by your teacher.”

“Why?”

“Because,” I said, unsure what else I could say. “You don’t want to be *deyi*. If you act too *deyi*, then someone will take it upon themselves to bring you down a notch, even if you actually weren’t trying to be *deyi* at all. It’s just about showing humility for your limitations, or something.”

“Hmm.” Tumi seemed to be absorbing my *deyi* warning. “I want to learn more Chinese. I’ve been picking up some phrases here and there.”

“Most of the time you just kind of grunt nasally and go ‘naaah’ though, Tumi,” laughed Matt. “I swear you speak your own language.”

“Hey man, it works a lot of the time,” chuckled Tumi. “A lot of the time all I need to say is ‘uhh, naage, zhege nuuuuh.’” The three of us laughed. Tumi had a peculiar way of speaking Mandarin that somehow, despite being nothing but uttered syllables, seemed to translate to *Kunmingren*, the people in Kunming. He would saunter up to a counter, gesture and use a few demonstratives: *na ge*, that, *zhe ge*, this, and somehow find a way to successfully obtain what he wanted. It was only for the more complicated transactions - like their internet bill - that Tumi would ever ask for my help. He was excellent at absorbing vocabulary he had heard once, and at paying close attention to interactions, so that he could mimic it later with whatever words he remembered. Though we teased him for it, Matt and I both admired Tumi’s adaptability.

“Hey,” said Tumi, “I meant to ask, how’s Peter working out as a roommate?”

“Oh my god,” Matt shook his head. “I swear I’m going to throw him out soon.”

Peter’s irregular hours were beginning to wear thin in our apartment. Twice in the past week he had woken Matt up in the middle of night while he was loudly and unintelligibly trying to persuade a girl into bed.

“He’s awful,” I agreed, “and I can’t believe you didn’t see any warning signs before you took him in,” I continued, looking at Matt accusingly.

“I swear, he didn’t seem like he’d be this bad when I met with him.” Matt held up his hands in surrender.

...

One morning, close to the end of the term, I slouched out of my bedroom to find a Chinese woman craned over our bathroom sink, applying her mascara. She was presumably still dressed from the night before: black nylon stockings, black leather short-shorts, and an oxblood cropped leather jacket. Seeing me in the mirror, she gave me a friendly smile and waved her mascara wand at my reflection.

“Ah Aly. Good morning. You want ride to school?” Peter was fully dressed and daintily nursing a cappuccino.

“What?”

“She has a Mercedes. She will drive us, but the point is - don’t take so much time, like always, aha!” Peter gave my shoulder an affectionate swat with his hand then strode away to smoke his morning cigarette. The woman at the mirror turned to me. She was at least thirty years old.

I did want to be driven in a Mercedes to school, so I did not take so much time that morning, like always.

...

Peter soon dubbed this woman “Car Girl,” or sometimes “Mercedes Girl,” if he were really looking forward to seeing her. Car Girl was in fact, an exceptionally nice person. She worked a regular job as an assistant for a mid-level

politician, and she was always gone in the morning by the time either Matt or I awoke. Rarely, ever, did we hear Car Girl and Peter come home in the night, for Car Girl seemed aware of Peter's serial inconsideration as a roommate, and did her best to manage him. She would often drive Peter to far flung locations across the city, picking him up from train stations and airports after weekend trips. I became quite fond of Car Girl, and I think Peter did too.

One weekend, Peter decided to go on a trip to see a greenhouse that he had heard of. He invited Car Girl along, deciding that he was ready to spend a weekend with her. Together they went to buy tickets.

I did not see Peter come home that night, but the next day, after returning to the apartment from school, I found him slumped on the couch, listening to his Lady Gaga album. He was drinking Dali, the cheap local beer, and listlessly watching a Dutch news show. He waited until I had made a bowl of noodles and sat down on the opposite seat, before saying:

“You know Car Girl?”

“Hmmm Peter?”

“How old you think she is?”

“I don't know Peter. Thirty at least. Maybe thirty one?”

“What! Thirty!?”

“She's not thirty? Why are you asking me?”

“She is thirty two!”

“And?”

Peter looked incredulous. His large blue eyes were those of a baby, and they contrasted eerily with his unshaven face.

“She told me she was twenty-six!”

“Yes, but you told her you were twenty-seven, didn't you?”

“Yes, but the point is - I am only twenty three, and they know I look young.”

“You lied about your age. She lied about her age. What's the problem?”

Peter was thoughtful. “I saw her passport, yesterday at the ticket office, that was when I realized. I think she thought I would not be looking, but the point

is - when they opened the passport, I saw her birthdate, and I figured it out.” His blue eyes grew even larger.

“Peter. You lied. She lied. What’s the problem?”

“But you see the point is - I am only twenty-three!”

The point, the point. What was the point Peter? The point was his pragmatic filler. Every one has their point, their phrase; the one you utter in a second language with familiarity as you fumble for more time. Lexical chicanery. Peter’s was an authoritative “but the point is...” And I had one too. In Mandarin, mine was *jiushi shuo*, “that is to say” or “in other words.” And in moments of duress this phrase revealed itself like a holy incantation, refining the edge of my panic as I desperately sought a meaning.

...

“*You ren zhi kan jian he shang chi mantou, mei kan jian he shang shou jie, sui sheng xianmu bier en zhi xin.* Some only see a monk eating their bread, without seeing the oaths a monk takes, thereby giving life to envying others within their heart.”

I stared blankly at Du Laoshi, at a complete loss.

“*Mm, ni you meiyou jianyi, Enhui?* Hm, do you have any suggestions?” she asked me.

I didn’t. I had no idea what monks eating bread and having to take oaths signified. Material comfort? Envy of those with security? Spiritual poverty? Was spiritual poverty even a thing you could say in Chinese?

“*Women zhineng kan,* we can only see the limited beneficial things in a situation and tend to ignore the larger hardships involved,” volunteered Meiyu.

“*Mm,*” Du Laoshi nodded, “*feichang hao.* Very good.”

I started reading my *Boya* more carefully.

...

“*Ni biye, you shenme zhuanye?* What major did you graduate with?” Peipei asked me, near the end of the term. We were waiting in the Muslim cafeteria line, where the meat was purportedly better. The Muslim cafeteria food was a little bit more expensive, but everyone in the *sushe* was sure that the price

was worth it. “The meat is more tender,” Mingzhuang had whispered seriously to me, in Chinese. A significant portion of Yunnan’s population was Muslim, and because all of their meat was halal, everyone around Kunming believed it was safer to buy and eat meat from Muslim vendors.

“*You shuang ge*, I have two,” I told Peipei. “I studied Chinese language and literature and English literature.”

“*Yingwen wenxue*? English literature?” Peipei looked at me. “What is studying English literature mean? We hear about it all the time, but I don’t understand what you do.”

“*Hao de wenti*, good question,” I agreed, “I don’t really know either.”

“*Xue yingwen shi xuexi yingyu*, studying English means studying English language,” continued Peipei, “in Thailand, I mean. But if you already know English then what do you study in an English literature course? Just read books all the time? Is it the same as studying Chinese literature?”

I thought about it. I still had no words to describe the value of studying literature, other than the regular clichés – that it opened your mind; that it fosters empathy; that you have a shaper sense of your historicity; that it enriched your knowledge of the language.

“*Keneng*, maybe,” I began, “what’s difficult about talking about literature is it’s never...” I paused to look up the word vacuum. “*Zhenkong*, in a vacuum.”

“*Zhenkong*?” Peipei and Mingzhuang looked bewildered.

“*Haoxiang taikong*? Like outerspace?” I tried. “In outer space there’s no oxygen, so there’s no sound, there’s no smell. We say it’s a vacuum, *zhenkong*.”

“Oh,” Peipei nodded, “*zhenkong*, that’s an interesting way to describe it.”

“Mm,” I nodded. “So since it’s not in a vacuum, you have to consider and think about all the things that shape a writer’s impression: history, politics, geography, religion, social class, gender, and...*bie de shi*, other things.”

“*Suoyi*, so you study all that too?” asked Mingzhuang. She looked bored with the topic.

“*Keneng*, maybe, or even if you don’t study it, you know what you don’t know and you take that into account too.”

“*Ni zhidao shenme ni bu zhidao de*, you know what you don’t know,”

Peipei laughed at my wording.

“Mm,” I said, shrugging and giving up, “you just think about everything that will influence an impression, and maybe if it tells you something about that kind of literature.” I felt defeated.

“*Qian yi mo hua*,” consoled Peipei. She was using one of our new *Boya* vocabulary words. *Qian yi mo hua* – an imperceptible influence.

...

Between the farce of attending school and going to Kundu, Peter searched for work, but in this pursuit he despaired. Despite being a capital for flower production, no companies in Kunming required Peter’s expertise.

One day, when I was visiting with Dan, one of Tumi’s roommates, I found out why Peter was having so much difficulty finding work.

“What’s Peter been up to?” asked Dan. By now, Peter had become something of a myth among my foreign friends; they often plied me and Matt for stories about his latest romantic entanglement or drunken escapade, vicariously enjoying our apartment’s dysfunctional relationship with Peter.

“Not much,” I replied. “Still roaming Kunming looking for work and occasionally asking me to translate incoherent text messages.”

“Really? Well, Tumi and I were at a wedding banquet, and we happened to run into someone who knew Peter.”

“Who?”

“This guy who owns a greenhouse outside of Kunming. He’s Dutch, and when I heard he was Dutch I asked if he had heard of Peter,” explained Dan.

“And he had the best reaction to Peter’s name!”

“What happened?”

“He flinched, and said ‘Ahh Dirty Pate, yes we all know of him.’”

The Dutch were a small, tight-knit expatriate community in Kunming, and they ran a virtual monopoly in the flower-exporting business. Every lily, tulip, and iris that was bought or sold in the Kunming area at some point passed through the hands of a Dutch flower-boss. They frequented each other’s greenhouses; met in

the backrooms of the Dutch-owned bars of Kunming, flexing their control over blossoms.

According to Dan, all of them had heard of Peter, because he had disgraced himself in his former job: hung-over, late, and promiscuous. Word had spread among the Dutch about Broer Pater's partying. To them, he was Dirty Pete. So they blacklisted him.

"Basically, no one wants him, but no one's going to tell him," Dan said.

"Really? That's kind of...sad." I suddenly felt awful for Peter.

"It is," Dan agreed quickly. "But at the same time, he sounds like a jerk."

"Oh no, he is," I nodded. "He is absolutely the worst roommate you could think up."

Still, I couldn't help it. Reframed as an exile, Peter took on a new quality. I was wrong, I thought, to be so irritated with his bohemian ways. Who was I to look down on him, to see him as a failure when he was just doing what I would have done at twenty-three, if given a large amount of money and a liver that didn't produce hangovers the day after. He was Kong Yiji, Lu Xun's failed imperial scholar, doomed to spend his time in and out of bars, outcast by the town folk, unable to practice what he loved.

...

Our time together was drawing to a close; Peter could not find any work in Kunming, and was preparing to return to Holland.

"What are you going to do back in Holland?" I asked Peter. We were walking to school together, about to write our final exams before the Spring Festival break.

"Well, the point is – Aly, before I go, first I will see if Beautiful Girl loves me, and if she does then I will stay," Peter said heroically. He pulled a cigarette out from its pack with his lips, and lit it for emphasis.

He had not mentioned Beautiful Girl in quite some time. Later the next day, he put on his best t-shirt and his blue corduroy blazer, and then gelled his hair into a romantic peak. He walked down to the crowded open-air market next to the Wal-Mart, and bought Beautiful Girl a silver ring mounted with a cluster of

blue stones. Then he walked to the crowded bus stop above *Dongfeng lu*, and got on the number 86 bus, which he knew went by the clothing store where Beautiful Girl worked. Incidentally, this bus also went by a bakery that made fantastic Western bread, so he disembarked here first, and bought himself a half-dozen rolls. With his bread in hand, he continued on to see Beautiful Girl. It was sunny, and the weather that day was warm, causing his hair to droop a little. Finally, he reached the store. Beautiful Girl saw him before he entered, and scandalized, ran to the door to shoo him away. He begged her for a moment. Beautiful Girl told him to leave. He pleaded with her to listen to him. Beautiful Girl ignored him and went back into the shop. Crestfallen, he left the ring in its box on the side of the road, and still holding his rolls, walked home.

...

“But you see Aly, the point is – I will go to Thailand first, and have some fun. I am only twenty three!”

So he went. And I wondered where the point had gone.

...

The bus stop was in the northern outskirts of Kunming, a dusty, dirty little island surrounded hazardously by four lanes of traffic. Four other people were waiting there when Tumi and I disembarked from our bus; otherwise the area around us was woefully remote. We were connecting to the smaller regional bus service that would take us up into Yu’an Mountain, to Bamboo Temple, and this was the last stop within Kunming’s city limits. I was leaving soon, and was the only one among my friends who had not seen Bamboo Temple, so as a parting gift Tumi volunteered to be my guide.

“This place looks ravaged,” I remarked tetchily. The shop-fronts looked heavily weathered and covered in dust, many of them empty and abandoned. Every other lot was vacant, since the area was being rezoned for development; mountains of broken bricks and rubble surrounded half demolished shells of old apartment buildings, as if they had been bombed. Yet there were no construction workers, no heavy equipment, to indicate any signs of growth. “How long do we need to wait for the bus?” I ventured, trying not to sound impatient.

“Hey man, when it comes it comes,” shrugged Tumi. “We’re not going anywhere out here,” he chuckled, “this bus stop is our home now.”

Faced with an indeterminate amount of waiting, I broached the question everyone in our group was slowly panicking over and which lay heavily at heart:

“So, what’s next for you when you go home?”

“Oh my god, Aly! What have I told you about relaxing?”

“Sorry,” I rocked nervously back and forth on my heels, waiting silently for some time before Tumi spoke.

“Hey, you’ve studied other places in China, right? What do you think of Kunming?”

“Kunming? Why?”

“Nothing, man, just thinking of studying in China some more. And I’ve only really been around Yunnan since I got here.”

“Mm, well, I’ve really liked it here.” I considered it. “It’s been...really different from studying on the east coast, in Beijing and Nanjing.”

“Accent-wise?”

“No, *Kunminghua* is pretty close to standard Putonghua. More in terms of people, environment, the climate. I know that’s true of any place you visit, but I feel like my time here has been kind of a complete turnaround from when I first went to Beijing.”

“Why?”

“Well,” I tilted my head back. Where should I start? “I feel like out here, resources are limited.”

“Especially water man,” chuckled Tumi. I smiled. There was a drought across Yunnan, and water was being rationed. Our building’s water supply had been cut off for four days last week. We had all moaned the first day about not being able to shower, cook, or use our toilets, and then agreed as a group to stop complaining about it since none of us were farmers.

“Yeah, literally resources here are limited. And that’s cool, because people make the most of them here. Like, we go out and buy our furniture secondhand,

and all of us have part-time jobs here, and no one's a jerk about their currency being worth more."

"Oh man," Tumi shook his head. "I hate that. There is nothing more annoying than an expat dropping hundreds of *kuai* like it's nothing."

"I guess I feel like opportunities are pretty limited out here, so everyone's careful with opportunity."

"This conversation is getting balls-deep, man."

"Yep, it is." We laughed.

"There was this analogy in my class the other day, that completely baffled me, I guess because it felt culturally foreign."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, it was basically how people will see that a monk eats bread, but fail to see them take their vows."

"What?"

"Exactly," I laughed. "I had no idea what it meant. I guess it's an analogy for the way people tend to gloss over hardship and focus only on the reward or the end product."

"That's the most Chinese thing I've heard man," laughed Tumi. "I think my favourite expression in Chinese so far is *chiku*."

"Oh, *chiku*." I hadn't used that word in a while. 吃苦, to eat bitterness; to endure hardship. I felt like I hadn't tasted *ku* that sharply since I'd been able to converse in Chinese, but I still, I remembered how it felt.

Just then a small decrepit bus pulled up to the stop. It was more of a van than a bus: there were four threadbare seats at the back and three single seats on either side, with a narrow aisle between. We climbed aboard.

"Better sit back and wait," Tumi teased, "Cause this baby just crawls."

...

The bus wound its way up through the foothills, into the lush forest that covered Yu'an mountain. There were small ramshackle homes out here, hidden from view, built into the hills. The road was well paved, but narrow and hemmed on either side by a thick wall of trees and bamboo. Now and then we passed a

newly constructed building made out of solid, ungainly concrete blocks, erected as a tourist destination, but not yet finished, seemingly abandoned out in the forest. Tumi had settled himself comfortably into the corner of the bus-van, and we left each other to our own thoughts as we made our slow journey up the mountain.

The bus had stopped, and a young couple were attempting to board the bus with a new refrigerator, enormous and still in its cardboard box. The bus driver got down from his seat and helped the two of them manhandle it through the bus' door, and then squeeze it into the middle of the aisle.

"You gotta be kidding me," laughed Tumi softly, as we watched them. "See, this is the kind of stuff I'm going to miss about China."

The young couple, their faces flushed from the effort, collapsed into the seats next to their refrigerator, laughing and looking happy.

"Let's see how long before someone has to get past that," Tumi said gleefully.

"Maybe it will be us."

"God, can you see me getting over that?" exclaimed Tumi. "Everyone on this bus would probably be watching me wondering if my ass will break the refrigerator."

In the end we weren't the first passengers to have to get past the refrigerator; it ended up being the first young couple that had boarded the bus. The young man helped his girlfriend up over the box first, before squeezing his own body in between the box and the bus ceiling. Then, luckily for the rest of us, the refrigerator was offloaded at the next stop; Tumi and I both got up to help ease it out the door. As we lowered it off the bus and out onto the road, the blush faded from the couples' faces. It was a desolate stretch of pavement, deep in the forest, and it was not immediately apparent where they were going to take their refrigerator.

"Maybe someone's picking them up," I said hopefully, as the bus pulled away, leaving them.

“Or maybe they’ve gotta push a refrigerator through a forest,” Tumi responded. “That lady does not look happy.”

We soon arrived at Bamboo Temple. The day had faded into late afternoon, and between the trees the sky was a moody grey.

“So this place is famous for a couple of things,” said Tumi grandly.

“Oh really?” I looked at him.

“Okay, I may have only been here once before, but I know one thing about it,” Tumi admitted.

“What’s that?”

“I’ll show you when we get inside.”

The entrance to Bamboo Temple was a curving, dramatic path that rose slightly as it led into the first courtyard. Passing through the gate, two large spirit figures, their faces twisted into grotesque expressions, stood at guard on either side. There were three courtyards in all, each one grander and more impressive than the last, and linked by elaborate temple entrances. The first courtyard was small and contained, shaded by enormous century-old cedar trees planted precisely next to the stone steps that led to the second entrance. The second courtyard was much wider and austere looking: enormous copper dings, elaborately decorated with gold leaf were filled with incense and sat morosely in a line, leading to the third temple entrance.

“Hey, what I wanted to show you is in this courtyard,” said Tumi, tapping my arm and leading me over to the side of courtyard, where glass display cases were cut into the walls.

“So this temple is famous,” Tumi resumed his lecture, “for having hundreds of statues of monks that are all super detailed.”

“*Luohans*,” I interjected, reading the information placard we were standing next to.

“What?”

“It says they’re *luohans*, sculptures of Arhats.”

“Okay, cool. So, when I came here with my Chinese friends the first time, they said that if you go into these rooms filled with all those monk statues,

starting from the right you start counting out your age, and when you stop you'll see the monk that represents your true self."

We went into the room filled with *luohans*. They were each two or three feet high, beautifully painted and singular: not one wore the same clothes and their faces were each composed in a different expression. Some carried objects with them: a walking staff, a small bag of belongings, an engraved tablet. One held up a stalk of roses. Some were seated cross-legged, others stood, and many more were in elaborate postures, one leg drawn up and arms raised as if warding off evil. They were arranged around the room one after the other, stacked on a succession of shelves, and I noticed the upper shelf statues were all seated looking down, as if peering at us.

"Where do you start counting from?" I asked Tumi.

"I think from the entrance."

"From the top shelf or from the bottom?"

"Uh, the bottom."

"But there are two rooms, Tumi."

"I think you just start counting from anywhere man. I already know which one I land on. Here, I'll count them for you." Tumi began silently counting off the Arhats, working up one of the levels. Suddenly twenty-five didn't seem that old an age.

"Here, this one." Tumi pointed out my Arhat. I looked at him.

"Are you sure?"

"Uh-huh, that's your true self staring back at you right now."

I looked at the Arhat closely. His lips were bared in an aggressive smile, the mouth outlined by a thin white goatee.

"I like his robes," remarked Tumi.

"But what sort of expression is that? Deranged or happy?"

"Maybe that's for you to find out, *haa-haah*."

I stared at my Arhat a little longer, studying his eyes, his hands, the way he sat: straight-backed. When I was done I followed Tumi out into the courtyard.

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