IMAGINING THE DECOLONIAL SPIRIT:
Ecowomanist Literature and Criticism in the Chinese Diaspora

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Xiumei Pu

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Dedication

To all those who have brought five flavors and meanings to my life.

To the plant I was in my past life.

Abstract

My work explores the interrelated themes of gender, nature, and spirituality in contemporary women's literature of the Chinese Diaspora. Drawing from three texts by diasporic Chinese women writers of "the wounded generation" and a piece of my own short fiction, my dissertation problematizes the alienating ideologies and practices in the process of China's modernization and urbanization. More importantly, my work examines the ways in which the bond of nature-woman-spirituality functions as a resistance to androcentric and anthropocentric beliefs and practices in the Mao and post-Mao eras in China, and as a catalyst for alternative ways of knowing and knowledge production. I argue that this bond can be better understood within the frameworks of the decolonial imaginary and ecowomanism. It is important to re-member this bond and to refocus it in order to move toward a more just world. My short fiction adds new threads to the fabric these three writers have woven, bringing rural women and folk knowledge to the forefront. Using womanist literary criticism and production, my work sheds light on the possibilities opened up by forgotten and subjugated ways of knowing and knowledge production to imagine a global healing praxis that helps bridge the gap between the East and the West. Thus it broadens our understanding of the links between interdisciplinary and diverse feminist theories such as the decolonial imaginary and ecowomanism by revealing an Asian dimension to these largely Western discourses.

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Part One

Chapter One

"Putting Fragments Together…in a New Way": Weaving Theoretical Threads

This is a true story.

A massive number of toads was crossing the road. Hundreds were trampled by passers-by and thousands were smashed by cars and trucks. Villagers had a hunch a *tian zai*,[1] natural disaster, was coming. Their gossip started a panic within minutes. An investigation group made up of experts was immediately sent out by the local Municipal Forestry Bureau to the toad-infested site. After careful investigation, the Head of the Bureau offered his scientific explanation. It was the mating season of toads. This site, full of ditches, was a haven for toads to reproduce. Two days of rain and high temperature created an ideal environment for them to spawn and hatch. He concluded that the migration of toads on a massive scale at this time of the year was normal. This phenomenon had nothing to do with what villagers believed to be a potential *tian zai*. The coming of toads in such a great number would not affect villagers' everyday lives; instead, toads could help

[1] *Tian zai* literally means act of Sky. In ancient Chinese cosmology, natural disasters were considered to be acts of *tian* (Sky). *Tian* was an essential component of *(da) zi ran* (the universe, or nature). The other essential component of *da zi ran* was *di* (Earth). Therefore, the term *tian di* was used to refer to the universe. Interestingly, *di* was engendered as female and *tian* male. As China's patriarchal social structure developed, sky worship and patriarchy mutually reinforced each other. *Tian*, once a component of the universe, was magnified to represent the whole universe. *Tian zai* came to mean *(da) zi ran zai hai* (natural disaster). The English equivalent of *tian zai* is act of God.

keep mosquitoes at bay. There was no need for villagers to worry about it. Some considered the phenomenon to be an indication that the ecosystem was getting better.[2]

This was a local news report circulated on the Internet on May 10, 2008 in Sichuan Province, China. Dismissed as a normal phenomenon, the ripple those toads made quickly disappeared. Two days later, an earthquake, known as Wenchuan Earthquake[3] (measured at 8.0 on the Richter scale) shook Wenchuan, a nearby county, to the ground. The earthquake claimed tens of thousands of lives. Shocked, people suddenly came to realize the evident abnormality and significance of the toad phenomenon which was diagnosed as normal.

In retrospect, the instance was a warning to us of the risk of turning blind eyes and deaf ears to other ways of knowing. It was shocking how readily experts invalidated villagers' intuitive speculation. Villagers' speculation about a potential *tian zai* was not unfounded. The abnormal behavior of animals has been read as an omen of natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes since antiquity. The sign-readings have found their expressions in proverbs, jingles, and folk tales. These expressions have become a folk knowledge repertoire which ordinary folks

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[2] This source comes from *Si Chuan Xin Wen Wang* (*Sichuan News*) [四川新闻网] whose website is http://scnews.newssc.org. The news was originally published in Chinese under the title of "Mian Zhu: Shu Shi Wan Zhi Chan Chu 'Ban Jia" Guo Ma Lu" [绵竹:数十万只蟾蜍'搬家'横穿马路], which means "Mianzhu: Tens of Thousands Toads 'Moving' across the Country Road." This paragraph is my own translation and summary of the report. See <http://scnews.newssc.org/system/2008/05/10/010825410.shtml>.

[3] The earthquake was also referred to as the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake or the Great Sichuan Earthquake in Wikipedia. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wenchuan_earthquake>.

draw upon to make sense of their surroundings when similar situations happen. Nonetheless, the experts' dismissal of the villagers' speculation reveals an apparent power disparity when it comes to the question of who will be considered to be the legitimate knowing subject and which body of knowledge is accepted as the truth.

Beneath the surface of a supposedly neutral and multi-angled representation of the event (coverage of both villagers and scientists in this case) lay a deep conflict between two ways of knowing—*mi xin* (superstition) and science. The very term *tian zai* (act of Sky) the villagers used is rooted in the tradition of animistic beliefs, which is often simplistically equated with *mi xin* (superstition) in China's contemporary mainstream political rhetoric. The countryside is particularly considered to be the incubator, hothouse, and fortress for *mi xin*. "Ideological construction and progress," the advocacy of science in opposition to *mi xin*, is especially targeted at the rural population. In this sense, the countryside is stigmatized as a "backward" location, and thus country folks' voices are not taken seriously. Folk beliefs such as animism, ancestor veneration, and shamanism are indiscriminately swept into the category of *mi xin* in a similar way that indigenous spiritual belief systems were labeled "superstitious" and "backward" by early colonizers in the Americas and Africa. Rather than correcting the term *mi xin* in my work, I use its ambiguity to indicate its limiting and liberating potential. I propose a more nuanced approach to understanding the so-called *mi xin*.

The seemingly bipartite contest between *mi xin* and science as mentioned above, however, involved a third party—the toads who were hyper-visible in the news yet invisible in knowledge validation. In other words, there were three competing ways of knowing by three groups—that by the villagers, that by the scientists, and that by the toads. There was an identifiable pyramid of power among those three groups. The scientists obviously had the power over the construction of what the toads (and by extension, nature) meant. The power relation revealed in this piece of news has been socially constructed; it mirrors a hierarchical knowledge structure presiding outside the news. This hierarchy has a tendency to invalidate ways of knowing that are different from science and to silence the voices from the countryside and Earth Mother. This structure has been firmly established in the process of China's modernization. On top of the knowledge pyramid is scientific knowledge, which holds the supreme authority and is accepted as the ultimate truth.

Picture the possessor of the top level knowledge: male, modern, and atheist. Does the image look familiar? Why is this image so pervasive? What is disquieting? What if the knowledge tower is deconstructed? What if the toads are seen as intelligent producers of knowledge? What if the villagers' intuitive responses are given equal credit? What if one of the authoritative speakers is a *pu sa*?[4] What if the so-called *mi xin* is seen as an equally invaluable way of knowing?

[4] In my hometown, *pu sa* (bodhisattvas) is a term used for bodhisattvas of the Buddhist pantheon as well as female healers.

In addition to scientists, what difference would it make to have toads, villagers, and *pu sa* at the summit conference of the future? These questions compel us to imagine alternatives. It is of great urgency to do so. The Wenchuan Earthquake is just one case among many examples to shake us awake. The terror of this seismic eruption, the heart-wrenching scene of the earthquake, the screams and cries of victims and survivors press us to question what is lurking in human-centric, masculinist and class-based notions of "progress," to wonder if nature is in our way or if we are in nature's way in the process of development.

To be sure, there were concerned professionals who made a connection between the toads and the earthquake, but no evacuation plans were made before the earthquake struck the area. We might wonder whether the villagers would have thought it the right course of action to leave the village even with the validation of their way of knowing, but that's another story. What I want to make visible here is the power disparity between scientists and villagers when it comes to knowledge validation. That experts gave scientific explanations to dispel villagers' worries compels me to ask the following questions. Whose voice is heard during a potential crisis? What institution supports the supreme authority of science which is one, but not the only way of knowing? What do we risk by not acknowledging the wisdom of folk knowledge—the wisdom produced by the people's relationship to nature? What interventions could ecowomanist literature and criticism in the Chinese Diaspora make in the crisis?

My dissertation explores these questions through the lenses of ecowomanist literature and criticism as an orientation in women's studies and literary studies to reflect upon contemporary social change and ecological challenge within both China and a global context. I locate my questioning of China's "progress" within feminist studies, interdisciplinarity, and the subfield of (eco)womanism. The object of my study is contemporary literature by women writers in the Chinese Diaspora,[5] specifically *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1991) by Jung Chang, *Daughter of the River* (1997) by Hong Ying, and "Maverick" (2007) by Wang Ping. Being outside China's political and cultural hegemony,[6] women's literature in the Chinese Diaspora offers a vantage point for critiquing the connections between development, women, spirituality, and nature in the process of China's economic development. By bringing diasporic Chinese women's literature into conversation with womanism, I wish to apply theory to read a text produced by women writers in the Chinese Diaspora and come to understand how one informs the other.

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[5] I use the concept of diaspora in its broad sense rather than expound on what Chinese Diaspora means. I situate these three writers in the Chinese Diaspora because each of them writes from a geographical and metaphorical location that is outside of China despite the fact that the content of their stories is about China. Jung Chang is London-based. In comparison, Hong Ying lived in London for a much shorter time and has a looser connection with London. Both *Wild Swans* and "Maverick" were written in English. Their primary target audience is English-speaking readers. While *Daughter of the River* was written in Chinese, it was initially published and disseminated in Taiwan and was then circulated in China. Its translation spread to various countries across the world.

[6] Here I am using Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony. In recent years, the significance of Gramsci's work within sustanablity debates has drawn the attention of numerous scholars. See *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics* edited by Michael Ekers, Gillian Hart, Stefan Kipfer, and Alex Loftus.

Ecowomanism and Spirituality

Womanist scholar Layli Phillips defines womanism as follows:

> Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. (xx)

Womanism explicitly acknowledges the significance of spirituality in dealing with oppressions and in working toward social, environmental, and spiritual health. Other frameworks that provide critiques of development, colonialism, and exploitation—such as human rights—do not consider the spiritual. The nature-spirituality-human connection with which womanism is concerned closely pertains to my research interest. I use the term *ecowomanism* to bring the ecological dimension in womanism to the forefront for analysis. Ecowomanism is not a subcategory of womanism, as Layli Maparyan argues, "ecowomanism is almost a redundant term" (278). The value of the term lies in that it allows us a language to "highlight the environmental 'leg of the stool' when it is the most prominent feature of an activist's work or concern" (278). Maparyan views ecowomanism as "a womanist approach to ecological and environmental issues, predicated upon the womanist triadic concern with human beings, nature, and the spiritual world simultaneously," in other words, the global earth healing praxis

(278).[7] In light of ecowomanism, my work examines how ecowomanist literature and criticism in the Chinese Diaspora contributes to this praxis.

These three women writers whose works I study have a shared memory of the Cultural Revolution. While the three texts respond to that memory from different perspectives, they have one thing in common: an emerging awareness of and respect for nature and spirituality. The emergence of an ecospiritual sensibility in these works signifies an alternative consciousness in opposition to China's masculine and despiritualized ideology since the 1960s. This new consciousness opens up space for imagining a new language and a different future.

All three texts are related to the Yangtze River region. The Yangtze River system is the central thread that connects different parts of my writing. By using the Yangtze River as a way to make connections, I wish to suggest a place-oriented sensibility to study literature. As Leslie Marmon Silko points out, "The stories cannot be separated from geographical locations, from actual physical places within the land" (69). My intention to place the Yangtze River foremost and central in my study is to reconnect with a way of knowing, that is, coming to know through knowing the place or through having a relationship with the land. This is a

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[7] Wan-Li Ho, "Environmental Protection as Religious Action: The Case of Taiwanese Buddhist Women," *Ecofeminism and Globalization: Exploring Culture, Context, and Religion*, eds. Heather Eaton and Lois Ann Lorentzen (NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003) 125. Stephanie Kaza also discusses the role of Buddhism to draw ecofeminists together in transnational praxis of healing the world. For a fuller view of her discussion, see "Acting with Compassion: Buddhism, Feminism, and the Environmental Crisis," *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams (NY: Continuum, 1993) 50-69.

fundamentally different way of perceiving than a way of knowing dependent on ownership or control of the land.

My consciousness of place has resulted from my effort to (re)orient myself in the process of handling the peculiarities of my own shifting geographical, social, and cultural locations. I was born in southern rural China. In my childhood, I was exposed to my paternal grandmother's spiritual beliefs, which were a mixture of folk Buddhism and shamanism. I received modernized elementary education first from a small school in the village and then a relatively bigger one in the town. After graduation, I was admitted to a boarding school in the county where I continued to receive modernized education. I moved to the capital city of the province where I was trained as an English teacher at a teacher's university. I went to a graduate program at a different university in the same metropolitan city. I came to the United States about eight years ago.

In all these locations where I have studied and lived, I have experienced disorientation and confusion. I have struggled to make intellectual connections between interrelated but conflicting knowledge systems I have been exposed to, and to make emotional connections between my identities which are constantly shifting as I travel within and across geographical, social, and cultural boundaries. My dissertation is a way to move through the disorientations by linking spirit, nature, ecowomanism, and women's literature in the Chinese Diaspora. I understand I am not alone in this struggle. Feminist studies has provided me with

an opportunity to think about the tensions between various ways of knowing and the role of place in shaping consciousness, imagination, and literature.

With its rich biological and cultural diversity, the Yangtze River bio-cultural system offers invaluable inspirations for my study. The region simultaneously encompasses different modes of socio-cultural paradigms: Tibetan culture, Ba Shu culture, Chu culture, and Jiang Ze culture. Stretching from the Qing Zang Plateau to the Zhu Jiang Delta, it connects the rural, the urban, and the cosmopolitan. The River's capacity to accommodate biologically and culturally diverse systems inspires a mode of knowing that rejects ostracism. This mode of Yangtze-River-thinking challenges China's nationalist politics which privileges cultural hegemony and the central government's ownership of the land and natural resources.

In China's nationalist discourse, the Yangtze is claimed to be the cradle of southern Chinese civilization and singled out, among a few other national natural landmarks such as the Yellow River, to represent China. With the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, the Yangtze River is now a contested site at national and international levels. The Dam also makes the region an international environmental observatory. It is at this juncture that I have started to think about the position and role of women's writing in the Chinese Diaspora in relation to knowledge claims about landscapes, the Yangtze River in particular. *Wild Swans*, *Daughter of the River*, and "Maverick" offer three examples to think about these

questions.

I situate these three writers' works within a larger transnational and cross-cultural frame. Their works can be read alongside a body of literature by U.S. women of color. Examples include Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* (1993), Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005), Helena Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007), Alice Walker's *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990) and *Tropic of Orange* (1997). The list can go on.

This body of literature reveals a salient ecological and spiritual awareness, a keen concern for social and environmental justice, and an urge to acknowledge alternative ways of knowing, imagining a hopeful, sustainable, and egalitarian future. This burgeoning orientation in literature by U.S. women of color challenges Euro-centric, androcentric, and anthropomorphic canons. This new literary orientation reflects a new social movement and, to some extent, shapes it. The three texts by diasporic Chinese women writers bring a transnational Chinese dimension to this literary trend.

In my critique of *Wild Swans*, *Daughter of the River*, and "Maverick," I center women, nature, and spirituality as three intersecting categories of analysis. I explore how centering these three categories can counterbalance master narratives of nature and spirituality within the Chinese context and how ecowomanist criticism can disrupt the mainstream reception of diasporic Chinese Women's

literature within a larger transnational frame. Alongside my critique of *Wild Swans*, *Daughter of the River*, and "Maverick", I include a piece of my own short fiction.[8] This section adds new threads to the fabric these three writers have woven, bringing rural women, who are on the periphery of these three texts, to the forefront.

Telling a rural story is a way of keeping track of disappearing knowledges of medicinal plants, healing recipes, and spiritual ways of knowing the self, the natural environment, and the social environment. These knowledges constitute an important part of the folk knowledge reservoir that is an asset to the global healing project. It is imperative to remember them and refocus them in order to work toward social, spiritual, and environmental well-being. Sources for my fiction are from my field research on Di Mu (Earth Mother) in Wushan, folk religions in Meishan, and Bön and Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet. I also rely heavily on my memory of my paternal grandmother's spiritual beliefs and practice.

My paternal grandmother was a *pu sa*. In the course of framing and writing my dissertation, I came to see she had a long-lasting influence on me which I had not realized before. To include rural women and their ecospiritual knowledge in fiction does not suggest that their knowledge is fictional or unreal. Instead, by weaving their knowledge into stories, I intend to situate my project within the

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[8] The term was used by Leslie Marmon Silko in her edited transcript of an oral presentation. See Leslie Marmon Silko, "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective," *English Literature: Opening Up the Canon*, eds. Leslie A. Fiedler and Houston A. Baker, Jr (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1979) 68.

genealogy of what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls “Grandma’s Story.” Minh-ha argues that “literature and history once were/still are stories: this does not necessarily mean that the space they form is undifferentiated, but that this space can articulate on a different set of principles, one which may be said to stand outside the hierarchical realm of facts” (121).

Grandma’s story is more than just a story; it represents what Paula Gunn Allen calls “the sacred hoop— a way of thinking and living that holds everything together. Grandma’s story does not just include old stories; it is the beginning of stories. More new stories come after the old stories. The old stories and the new stories, as Leslie Marmon Silko sees them, are all part of a whole which we should not differentiate or fragment. Grandma’s story is about a sense of story and the idea that “one story is only the beginning of many stories” and “stories never truly end” (56). This shows the resilience of stories and people who hold on to these stories.

China’s Modernization and the Decolonial Imaginary

Underlying my ecowomanist criticism is my deep reflection on and critique of China’s modernization since the 1970s as a female graduate student and educator who was born in rural China but caught in the net of various contesting knowledge systems. Similar to the process of colonization during which spiritual indigenous knowledge has been inferiorized and suppressed, the process of China’s modernization has privileged science over spiritualized folk knowledge. I am not

suggesting that science is entirely invalid, but rather it is problematic to make it the only legitimate way of knowing while devaluing other ways of knowing. The favoritism of science further marginalizes the rural population who are considered to cling to non-scientific knowledge. China's modernization process also resembles the period of industrialization in Britain and the United States. Thus it has parallels in terms of the political economy and the intersection of class and gender as women and men are trained into certain categories of production.

Despite its alleged benefits and contribution, China's modernization is a different version and a different side of colonization, industrialization and nationalist periods. It can be invasive, violent, and destructive. Nature and those who are associated with nature are easily feminized, marginalized, exploited and their well-being is neglected. On the other hand, the marginalized thrive in the cracks of modernization, regardless.

Modernization has been China's national goal since the turn of the twentieth century. It was initially embraced as a means to lift China out of immanent colonization by the Europeans and the Japanese. Patriotic youth and intellectuals at that time believed it was China's feudalism that caused its backwardness, poverty, and the shameful history of being beaten by westerners. During the New Culture Movement (1915-1923), "Save China with Science" was embraced as a primary principle to liberate China from its feudal past and western powers who coveted China's natural resources. Therefore, modernization, from the onset, was

in competition with colonial powers.

This legacy was carried on into Mao's Era and developed into the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) to compete with British and American imperialists. The Great Leap Forward turned out to be a tremendous natural and social catastrophe. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), also known as *shi nian hao jie* (tens years of calamity), halted the process of modernization, as much energy was wasted on anti-cultural political campaigns. Modernization was reassumed in the 1980s under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. This took place in the context of the Reagan-Thatcher era that opened the doors for unrestricted globalization. The last three decades have witnessed a rapid growth of the Chinese capitalist economy packaged as Chinese style socialism. "Being modern" now is celebrated as national pride. I offer this simplified bird's eye view of China's modernization as a person who has lived these experiences. I am aware that the meaning of modernization continues to change.

China's modern education reinforces China's political economy. The full impact of erasing other ways of knowing is particularly salient in the post-Mao educational system. Generations of youth since the1970s, including me, were taught to accept de-spiritualized ways of knowing as the only correct epistemology. We were indoctrinated to believe *si ge xian dai hua* (four modernizations) —modernization of industry, modernization of agriculture, modernization of

national defense, and modernization of science and technology— were progress.[9]

I would like to draw attention to the side effects of modernization. The process of becoming modern entails misuse of the land, environmental degradation, increased class disparity, forced displacement, and spiritual loss. I urge a radical rethinking of nature and spirituality—two of the most suppressed aspects in the process of China's modernization. Adjusting China's contemporary mainstream notions of nature and spirituality would help to construct a more sustainable healing praxis.

In the process of China's modernization, nature has been de-spiritualized and exploited as natural resources. Deprivation of nature's sacredness frees humans from their moral responsibility for nature and legitimates the domination of nature. This has led to destruction of land and the environment. Industrialization gained momentum in the 1990s. The industrial economy has pushed people off the land through technology, the scientific altering of seeds, and increased agribusiness production. Those who are thought to be closer to nature—the rural population—have been either lured or relocated to urban areas, usually the social periphery of the urban core, where they have to deal with a serious problem of the mind: *cheng shi you yue gan* (urban superiority).

Urban superiority functions as an invisible yet powerful controlling ideology

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[9] *Si ge xian dai hua* (four modernizations) was passed by the National People's Congress at its first meeting in 1954. It was adopted into the Party Constitution in 1956. The slogan was introduced into elementary school curriculum in the 1970s and 1980s.

to aid the process of industrialization and urbanization. When the rural population internalizes the aura of superiority associated with urban life, urbanization becomes appealing. The mechanism of urban superiority shifts the government's responsibility onto the urban population—the assumed producers and disseminators of a superior urban culture—and the rural population—the assumed consumers and conformists to this culture. The political economy is disguised as the cultural dichotomy between the urban and the rural and thus made invisible that it is part of the government's plan that the peasant class became the urban proletariat. However, those who are assimilated into the urban periphery may not be able to enjoy the same urban privilege. On the contrary, many *min gong* (laborers from the countryside) have to deal with class discrimination and their own sense of inferiority.

Education driven by a socialist capitalist agenda serves as yet another tool to program minds. As a person who has had first-hand experience of China's modern education, I am highly aware of a lack of ecological and spiritual concern in China's modern curricula, which supports its goal of economic *progress*. China's contemporary politics and rhetoric of *progress*, from a Chinese feminist point of view, is deeply rooted in China's thousands of years of patriarchal ideology. In spite of its limited room for women's voices and peripheral peoples' voices, the masculine structure remains relatively intact.

I have observed several parallels between the processes of colonization and

modernization such as: 1) the displacement of marginalized social groups from the land; 2) the colonization and control of the mind; 3) cultural appropriation and usurpation; 4) the exploitation of socially marginalized peoples and natural resources; 5) the inferiorization, subjugation, and extinction of knowledge produced by marginalized peoples including the suppression of nature- and woman- friendly spiritual knowledge systems; and 6) the discontinuity of folk and local knowledge systems.

In my intellectual struggle, I find kinship with decolonial thinkers and writers who refuse to succumb to fragmentation, who choose to live in contradictions but not in dismay, and who courageously dissect the colonizing and colonized mind in order to liberate it. I draw connections between the decolonizing work and the project of reassessing China's modernization. I posit my scrutiny of China's "progress" as both similar to and different from the transnational decolonial imaginary[10]and the global earth healing praxis.

Because one of the most tenacious and invisible consequences of colonization is the colonization of the mind through erasure of the colonized peoples' knowledge systems and indoctrination of "colonized texts," a crucial step toward decolonizing the mind is reclaiming belittled knowledge and spirituality, and putting fragments of this recovered knowledge together in a new way. An

[10] "The decolonial imaginary" is used by Irene Lara in her article "Goddess of the Americas: in the Decolonial Imaginary: Beyond the Virtuous Virgen/Pagan Puta Dichotomy." She uses this term to describe the process of decolonizing Christianized spiritual beliefs and practices that distort indigenous spirituality.

ecowomanist intervention in this process is to recover devalued perspectives about gender, nature, and spirituality which could be integrated into individual and collective work to rebalance the world.

Maparyan cautions us that spirituality is not to be confused with religion. While religions are socially organized institutions to "*deliver* [italics mine] people to spiritual knowledge and its application," womanist spirituality acknowledges *kwimenya*, self-knowledge (5). According to Maparyan, *kwimenya* is an indigenous Kenyan concept of spiritual self-authorship which has been adopted by Wangari Maathai, the founder of the Green Belt Movement, into her public work. *Kwimenya* references "both self-knowledge as an individual and communal self-knowledge based on one's culture and heritage" (268).

When *kwimenya* is considered in light of ecospirituality, it refers to ecospiritual self-authorship through connection with (nonhuman) nature. Alice Walker poetically tells a story of ecospiritual self-authorship in her 1983 four-part definition of *womanist*. I have analyzed this story in my essay "Nature, Sexuality and Spirituality: A Womanist Reading of Di Mu (Earth Mother) and Di Mu Jing (Songs of Earth Mother) in China":

> In the definition, the daughter asks: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" The mother answers: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." The diversity of colors in the flower garden helps the daughter to understand the diversity of races in the social garden. The fact that it is the diversity of colors that makes the flower garden beautiful teaches the daughter that it is racial diversity that makes the social garden

> lovely. The knowledge the flower garden reveals to the daughter protects her from suffering a sense of racial inferiority. More importantly, through learning from the flower garden, the daughter develops a womanist ethic of universalism, committing to "survival and wholeness of entire people." Here the flower garden, and by extension, (nonhuman) nature produces knowledge. Contemplation upon nature, speech, and writing bring that knowledge into light. The process of thinking nature and articulating its meaning is the process of transmitting knowledge from nature to the heart on a profound spiritual level. Knowledge transmission, in this case, is a deep ecospiritual communication. (65-66)

The color spectrum in the flower garden disrupts the racial dualism of black and white. This ecospiritual story illuminates that ecospirituality is spiritualized ways of knowing plus activism based on non-dualist and spiritualized notions of human and nonhuman nature.

Dualism is a powerful and yet harmful mechanism to fragment identities, divide social groups, and abuse nature. In problematizing dualist worldviews that place humanity in opposition to (nonhuman) nature, nature in opposition to culture, the physical in opposition to the spiritual, ecowomanist scholar Shamara Shantu Riley recommends a return to African cosmological concepts as a route away from dualism. She finds the concepts of *Nyam*, *Da*, *Nommo*, and *Ache* capable of liberating dualist mindsets:

> [*Nyam* is] a root word in many West African languages, *Nyam* connotes an enduring power and energy possessed by all life (Collins 1990, 220). Thus, all forms of life are deemed to posses certain rights, which cannot be violated at will.
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> [The *Da* concept] originates from the Fon people of Western Africa. *Da* is "the energy that carries creation, the force field in which creation takes place" (Teish 1985, 61). In the Fon view, all things are composed of energy by *Da*. For example, "the human is

> receptive to the energy emanating from the rock and the rock is responsive to human influence" (Teish 1985, 62).
>
> Because West Africans have traditionally viewed nonhuman nature as sacred and worthy of praise through such cultural media as song and dance, there is also a belief in *Nommo*. *Nommo* is "the physical-spiritual life force which awakends all 'sleeping' forces and gives physical and spiritual life" (Jahn 1961, 105).
>
> [*Ache* is] a Yoruba term for human power. *Ache* doesn't connote "power over" or domination, as it often does in mainstream Western thought, but rather power *with* other forms of creation. With *Ache*, Teish states that there is "a regulated kinship among human, animal, mineral, and vegetable life" (Teish 1985, 63). Humans recognize their *Ache* to eat and farm, "but it is also recognized that they must give back that which is given to them" (Teish 1985, 63). In doing so, we respect the overall balance and interdependence of human and nonhuman nature. (202)

Riley argues that non-dualist African concepts like this should be recovered and applied to heal the harms which alienating colonial religious forms have done to our minds. Only when we begin to view ourselves as a part of nature will the earth healing praxis be set in motion. She points out, "by viewing ourselves as a part of nature, we would be able to move beyond the Western disdain for the body and therefore not ravage the Earth's body as a result of this disdain and fear" (203). These invaluable concepts gathered from various sources and put together by Riley compel us to recognize the potential of non-Western ecospiritual views. These views can subvert knowledge systems that see human as superior to nonhuman nature and culture as superior to nature.

The human versus nonhuman nature dualist logic in industrialized Western social structures extends to the construction of gender, sexuality, and other forms of dualisms. Ecofeminists identify a close link between the domination of women

and the domination of nature. In particular, Carol J. Adams argues that patriarchal rhetoric simultaneously feminizes nature and naturalizes women. This domination logic is also applied to the "feminized" other—the Third World, queers, and the disabled. Domination is made sacred and reinforced through patriarchal spirituality. Adams asserts, "When patriarchal spirituality associates women, body, and nature, and then emphasizes transcending the body and transcending the rest of nature, it makes oppression sacred" (1).

Ynestra King argues that the transcending process can never be complete. In an *othering* culture where man is defined by *othering* woman, on whom he is dependent emotionally and materially, a peculiar love-hate fetishization of women's bodies develops. King points out that this fetishization "finds its manifestation in sadomasochistic pornographic displays of women as objects to be subdued, humiliated, and raped—the visual enactment of these fears and desires" (409). King contends that homosexuality and the gay liberation movement become even more threatening for men because they are reminded that "sexual orientation is not indelible, nor is it naturally heterosexual" and they may not be needed by women (410).

Just as the human and nonhuman nature split could be disrupted by the African cosmological concepts of *Nyam*, *Da*, *Nommo*, and *Ache*, the different variations of dualism deeply seated in the human and nonhuman nature dualism could also be challenged by non-Western spiritual traditions. In *Africa Wo/Man*

Palava (1996), Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, the foremother of African womanism, elaborates on how spiritual beliefs in Igbo and Yoruba cultures can subvert the dualistic view of gender and sexuality. I discussed her ideas in my master's thesis "Spirituality: A Womanist Reading of Amy Tan's The Bonesetter's Daughter" as follows:

> Ogunyemi suggests that spirituality in Igbo and Yoruba belief systems has two implications; it comes from without and springs from within. For individuals, the external spiritual resource is sought through worship of deities and the internal one is by means of Chi/Ori. Chi/Ori is imagined as "the *quidditas* inside the human body, that part that cannot be detected but that we know is there." According to Ogunyemi, Igbo and Yoruba cosmology affirms that each individual is born with a unique Chi/Ori and that individuals, regardless of sex, should follow their own Chi/Ori, namely, their own inner spiritual guiding force. Chi/Ori functions as an inner spiritual generator that receives external spiritual input from superhuman deities and converts it into internal spiritual strength within each individual. Moreover, Ogunyemi argues that Chi/Ori is the primary accessible spiritual power for individuals to achieve individuation or cope with stress. Most important of all, Ogunyemi contends that Chi/Ori as essence is both male and female. To assume that Chi and Ori are quintessentially male will result in masculinizing the internal and create psychological imbalance. (4-5)

Ogunyemi's gender-ambiguous concept of Chi/Ori resonates with Wekker's formulation of the cosmological complex in Afro-Surinamese Diaspora which Alexander analyzed in *Pedagogies of Crossing*. According to Alexander, Wekker's formulation says:

> Within this cosmological system human beings are understood to be partly biological and partly spiritual beings. […] The spiritual side is made up of three components, two of which are important

> here: all human beings have a kra or yeye (soul) and dyodyo (parents in the world of the gods). The Kra and dyodyo together define a person's mind…[they] both consist of a male and female being and both of these parts are conceived of as human beings, with their own personality characteristics. The female and male part of the soul are determined by the day of the week on which the person is born. […] a person like Renate, who has Aisa as a female godly parent, will, regardless of gender, display nurturing behavior. (302)

In Aztec mythology this concept is embodied in "ometeotl"—both male and female spirits, or characteristics are present. Depending on the date one is born, one's character and fate are set and known to the partera or curandera who assists in one's birth. The possible alignment of a female spirit with a male body and vice versa challenges the biological and social assignment of one's sex and gender.

These non-Western spiritual concepts have been relegated to the margin in the process of continuous colonization, although they are of great importance to the survival and flourishing of marginalized social groups and the environment where they live. The work of reclaiming and putting fragmented cultural legacy together is crucial to the decolonizing and global earth healing praxis. Feminists from the Chicana front have done significant work on re-imagining and theorizing the decolonial imaginary. Gloria Anzaldúa's revisionist writing of the Aztec myth of Coyolxauhqui provides an invaluable and powerful metaphor to think about colonization, fragmentation, marginalization, and the work of decolonization and healing.

Imagine Coyolxauhqui, goddess of the moon.[11] Visualize the moment she was dismembered by Huitzilopochtli, the sun god and god of war. Her head was chopped off. He flung her head to the moon and threw her body down to the temple. She broke into pieces against the stone steps. With one part of her body in the moon and the other part scattered around a temple on earth, her corporeal body was forever fragmented just as her psyche was forever split. She was to be tormented by a sense of alienation, fragmentation, and displacement. She was to be driven by a strong desire to become whole again.[12] Her life's work was to be, in AnaLouise Keating's words, "putting the fragments together…but in a new way" (297).

Coyolxauhqui's story is emblematic of a gendered war. The war between Coyolxauhqui and Huitzilopchtli is symbolic of an ongoing battle between the female gender and the male gender. The war of gender also has a colonial undertone. Huitzilopchtli was the child of an intruder—a ball of feathers. This intruder can be read as a metaphor of the colonizer who brought war to the native land and disturbed its peace.[13] Coyolxauhqui, the embodiment of the moon, the

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[11] Coyolxauhqui' s Chinese counterpart is *Chang'e*. Wenyin Xu proposes a womanist reading of *Chang'e* in Amy Tan. For Xu's discussion, see Wenyin Xu, "A Womanist Production of Truths: The Use of Myths in Amy Tan," *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (NY: Routledge, 2006) 165-72.

[12] This is my paraphrase of Gloria Anzaldúa's poem-essay "Llorona Coyolxauhqui." See Gloria Anzaldúa, "Llorona Coyolxauhqui," in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2009) 297.

[13] Irene Lara has a different interpretation of the myth around "a ball of feathers." She argues that the story of Coatlicue's being impregnated by a ball of feathers (rather than in sexual intercourse) transformed her from a mother Goddess into a more passive Mary-like mother of God. See Irene

native land, and the indigenous woman, lost the colonial war and the war of gender. She was dismembered, displaced, and subjugated.

It is now time to move into, what AnaLouise Keating calls, "the Coyolxauhqui imperative."[14] Coyolxauhqui's imperative was to put her dismembered pieces back together again, to heal, and to become whole again. A challenge for her was that the myth had already been tempered with the victory of Huitzilopchtli and accepted as truth. To re-member, she had to undo the male meta-narrative, to decolonize the text written about her, to reveal her true face, and to reconnect with her fragmented parts, each of which represented one of her multiple identities—the indigenous, woman, nature, and goddess.

Chicanas are beginning to critique the traditional telling of Coyolxauhqui's story and its meaning. Ana Castillo describes the conversion of Aztec/Totec traditional beliefs into a more patriarchal construction as the Aztec shift from a balanced dualism to a sexist patriarchal system. This process, she contends, predates Spanish colonialism and Catholicism and that it is an indigenous shift toward a more war-like culture. This shift, Castillo claims, sets the stage for the eclipsing of Tonantzin.

Irene Lara carefully analyzes the implications of erasure of Tonantzin, the Nahua indigenous goddess in the Mesoamerican context. In "Goddess of the

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Lara, "Goddess of the Americas: in the Decolonial Imaginary: Beyond the Virtuous Virgen/Pagan Puta Dichotomy," *Feminist Studies* 34. 1-2(2008):105.

[14] For a definition of Coyolxauhqui imperative, see AnaLouise Keating, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2009) 320.

Américas in the Decolonial Imaginary: Beyond the Virtuous Virgen/Pagan Puta Dichotomy," Lara debunks the Christian codification of La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche as the virgin/whore dichotomy. Lara argues this codification has a number of consequences. First, the virgin/whore dichotomy has ruptured an indigenous worldview that does not fragment spirituality and sexuality and left "negative effects in the development of female subjectivity" (99).

Second, the dichotomy erases Tonantzin, the Nahua indigenous goddess, from the Guadalupe-La Malinche configuration. Tonantzin is ostracized as Guadalupe's pagan Other. Tonantzin and her related goddesses such as Cihuacoatl (Serpent Woman), Coatlicue (Serpent Skirt), and Tlazolteotl (Filth Goddess) are demonized through Christian projections of "the Christian serpent, devil, Eve, evil, and sin" upon them. The Christian association of Tonantzin with the serpent, the evil, and the filthy contradicts the Nahua perspective of the serpent as an earth figure. The dualist projection is contradictory to Nahua cosmic views that privilege complementarity, balance, and fluidity.

Lara suggests reclaiming Tonantzin, the pagan side of Guadalupe, and her affiliated goddesses can dismantle the Christian male bias against women and thus further a decolonial imaginary. Lara points out that Tonantzin is a human mother as well as mother earth if viewed from a Mesoamerican indigenous lens. She represents the feminine energy of agriculture and human fertility. Moreover, she is believed to have both the energy of creation (the feminine energy) and that of

destruction (the masculine energy). The source of her spiritual power lies in the duality of her femininity and masculinity. Being self-sufficient in spiritual power, Tonantzin contrasts with the Christian Mary figure whose spiritual power is derived from association with a male God and the Son of God. Unlike Mary, Tonantzin herself has a God status and is the mother of God and a Goddess in her own right. Lara insists the critical work of re-membering Tonantzin can be personally and socially empowering for Chicanas to reject the double repressions of spirituality and sexuality imposed through patriarchal spirituality and trickle-down patriarchy.

However, as Lara states, it is especially challenging to discern pre-transculturated Nahua beliefs and practices, as most Nahua documents were destroyed and the knowledge passed on to the present is laden with Christian colonial and Nahua male bias. Colonized texts, texts that represent "information according to philosophies, cosmologies, and knowledge-keeping systems of the colonizers," are a mechanism of colonization (Geniusz 4). They are used to deploy patriarchal values and life ways and thus erase knowledge that the colonizers find threatening. Through forced indoctrination of patriarchal knowledge the colonization of one's mind begins.

Paula Gunn Allen discusses a similar ideological usurpation that happened to the American Indian goddess tradition. In "Kochinnenako in Academe: Three Approaches to Interpreting a Keres Indian Tale," Allen illustrates how the story of

Yellow Woman, a Keres story about the change of seasons, was altered into a story about war through an Anglophobic worldview and then resold to a people through oral tradition. Allen argues that the consequences are serious. She explains:

> When a people finds itself living within a racist, classist, and sexist reality, the oral tradition will reflect those values and will thus shape the people's consciousness to include and accept racism, classism and sexism, and they will incorporate that change, hardly noticing the shift. If the oral tradition is altered in certain subtle, fundamental ways, if elements alien to it are introduced so that its internal coherence is disturbed, it becomes the major instrument of colonization and oppression. (224-225)

It is especially important to unravel the multiple layers of oppressive worldviews imposed on nature-inspired and women-friendly traditions. As Allen observes, colonial folklorists, anthropologists, and ethnographers tend to retell or translate stories from patriarchal and anthropomorphist perspectives. Recoding changes the faces of those stories. Some distortions include the alteration of goddesses' gender to gods, demonization of indigenous goddesses, reduction of goddesses' creativity to fertility, reduction of goddesses' unified qualities of creation and destruction to the good-evil model, and erasure of indigenous goddesses. The distortions and the erasure of indigenous stories about women and nature are powerful mechanisms of cultural colonization. A crucial step of decolonization is decolonizing through storytelling.[15]

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[15] See "Decolonizing through Storytelling" by Chi'XapKaid and "Defying Colonization through Language Survival" by Waziyatawin in the anthology *For Indigenous Eyes: A Decolonization Handbook* edited by Waziyatawin and Micael Yellowbird.

I observe a similar process in Chinese indigenous spiritual traditions. One example is the case of Di Mu. As the concept of *tian*, sky, develops, she is gradually replaced by Tu Di Gong, Earth Father and rendered secondary to Sky Father. The Di Mu belief, however, has never completely disappeared. In my field research, I met a *yin chuan yi shen* (shaman, healer) who has creatively kept the Di Mu belief alive in her practice of Buddhism, which is an officially recognized religion in today's China. Through conscious "spirit work"—excavation of these indigenous goddesses in a diversity of cultures—we re-member the histories and act upon issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

Similarly, Daoism, a nature-based Chinese religion which is seen as the most gender-friendly religion for its recognition of yin yang duality, has been greatly influenced by Chinese patrilineal-heterosexual traditions. Wenshu Lee points out in her 2003 article "Kuaering Queer Theory: My Autocritography and a Race-conscious, Womanist, Transnational Turn" Daoism is not separated from the Chinese patrilineal-heterosexual tradition that valorizes male potency. In terms of sexual potency, there is an obvious male priority when "Taoist treaties were written to help older Chinese men practice sex without losing their 'precious fluid,' which they believed would help them prolong life" (334). In like fashion, the idea of men as superior to women has worked its way into folk Buddhism, despite the fact that Buddhism advocates equality of all sentient beings. For example, to be born a female is seen as one's bad karma.

Reclaiming the Sacred: Literary Criticism from Ecowomanist and Decolonial Perspectives

With a decolonizing awareness, I consider how an ecowomanist revisionist reading of Chinese mythology might inspire a corrective to the masculine orientation of China's modernization, which has a tendency to sacrifice the health of nature, the psychological wholeness of marginal social groups, and the intellectual integrity of generations of students.

I will start with the myth of Pangu Kai Tian Pi Di, which means Pangu separated the sky and the earth.[16] According to the story, the natural world was developed from Pangu's body. Before I proceed, I want to clarify a few words I use. I use *ta* and *ta de* to mean *he* and *his* respectively. The three modern Chinese characters that line up with the three English personal pronouns, *she*, *he*, and *it* are 她, 他, and 它, all pronounced as *ta*. A possessive personal pronoun in Chinese is constructed by adding 的 (of), pronounced as *de*, after the personal pronoun. The word *ta* as used in the contemporary version of Pangu's tale is 他 (he). However, I speculate *he* might be a distorted reference to Pangu, which I will explain later. Therefore, I use *ta*, phonetic representation of *she*, *he*, and *it*, to indicate the ambiguity of Pangu's gender and identity.

The story goes like this. Pangu was formed in an egg-shaped mass and

[16] Wu Xiaodong argues that Pangu does not separate the sky and the earth. The sky and earth are separated naturally. See Wu Xiaodong, "Pangu and the Origin of the Universe," *China's Creation and Origin Myths: Cross-cultural Exploration in Oral and WrittenTraditions*, eds. Mineke Schipper, Ye Shuxian and Yin Hubin. (Leiden: Brill, 2011) 162-176.

developed into a giant to support the four corners of heaven and earth with *ta de* arms and legs. Over time, *ta* grew tired and fell down. *Ta de* body became the earth. *Ta de* left eye turned into the resplendent sun, *ta de* right eye the clear and bright moon. *Ta de* hair and beard became the stars in the sky. The air exhaled from *ta de* mouth became wind and clouds, *ta de* voice the roll of thunder in the sky, *ta de* tears and sweat the endless rain and dew, *ta de* limbs and body the four poles of the earth and famous mountains. *Ta de* blood turned into rivers, *ta de* muscles farmlands, *ta de* tendons and veins great roads, *ta de* skin and fine hair flowers, grass, and trees. *Ta de* teeth, bones, and marrow transformed into bright metals, hard stones, beautiful pearls and shining jades hidden in the earth.

This tale needs three levels of decoding. First, the tale seems to be a male-centric creation story. However, I doubt the reliability of the reference pronoun 他(ta) as used in contemporary Chinese. It is debatable whether Pangu was he. According to *The Songs of Di Mu*,[17] the male gender and female gender were differentiated when Pangu separated the earth from the sky. That means, prior to this event, gender did not exist; therefore, Pangu was genderless. It is possible Pangu was made a male-bodied shen (spirit) in the processes of patriarchalization in imperial China, and over time the gender of Pangu has been consolidated and presented to us as we see it now. A gender lens makes visible how patriarchal perspective might change the gender of Pangu.

[17] I came across this scripture in my field research conducted in Dragon Bone Village. This scripture is also collected in National Library of China and Beijing Ditan Park.

Second, the tale invites us to think about a prehistoric conceptualization of genders. That Pangu's left eye turned into the resplendent sun and *ta de* right eye became the clear and bright moon contrasts strikingly with the popular present imagination of "*nan ren shi tai yang, nv ren shi yue liang*" (man is the sun and woman is the moon). Whereas the latter reflects the divide of gender and a gender gap that is as wide as the distance between the sun and the moon, the former closes the gap by placing the sun (representing the male quality) and the moon (representing the female quality) on the same face and in the same body. If Pangu has to be imagined as a gendered entity, I argue that Pangu contained all genders. This conceptualization is similar to the Aztec concept of *ometeotl* and *ometeotli*. *Ometeotl* and *ometeotli* existed in one entity that was both masculine and feminine at the same time. Having both masculine and feminine characteristics symbolized balance and wholeness.

Third, Pangu was not human.[18] This can be inferred from the tales of Nü Wa Bu Tian (Nü Wa mended the sky) and Nü Wa Zao Ren (Nü Wa created humans).[19] The sequence of the three events of Pangu Kai Tian Pi Di, Nü Wa Bu Tian, and Nü Wa Zao Ren might be like this: Pangu separated the earth from the sky. The sky was broken. Nü Wa fixed it with *wu cai shi* (five-colored stones). After Pangu

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[18] Wu Xiaodong suggests that Pangu is the prototype of *renhuang*, the king of human beings. See Wu Xiaodong, "Pangu and the Origin of the Universe," *China's Creation and Origin Myths: Cross-cultural Exploration in Oral and WrittenTraditions*, eds. Mineke Schipper, Ye Shuxian and Yin Hubin. (Leiden: Brill, 2011) 162.

[19] Some Hmong scholars insist Nü Wa is a Hmong goddess who was assimilated into Han mythology.

created the sky and the earth, Nü Wa created humans from dust, including the first man and the first woman and placed them on earth. The order of events implies Pangu existed in a time when humans were not yet in existence, in other words, Pangu was non-human. *Ta* was shen (spirit).

In sum, Pangu was an embodied genderless *shen* (spirit) or a *shen* of all genders, who transformed into nature—sun, moon, stars, trees, plants, minerals, rain, clouds, rivers, mountains, and other landscapes. Here, nature is perceived as an embodied spiritual entity. China's contemporary mainstream perception of nature, still driven by predominantly patriarchal politics, is disjointed from this way of seeing nature. To be sure, I am aware that it is important not to romanticize the past. However, a revisit to the creation story might shed light on a reductive notion of nature. Nature today is reduced to mere material, for example, the designation of land as national and/or private property. When nature's sacredness is stripped, abuse of nature follows. And when *shen* is made a male, patriarchal authority becomes sacred.[20] A crucial step toward a more sustainable model is to move away from anthropocentrism and androcentrism.

Now let me go back to Di Mu and Nü Wa. They signify what M.A. Jaimes

[20] Rosemary Radford Ruether discusses how God, the ultimate patriarchal Lord, is made a male to legitimize the human patriarchal lore ruling over women, children, slaves, and land. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature," *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams (NY: Continuum, 1993) 13-23.

Guerrero calls a "female principle"[21] in understanding the planet earth and the origin of history and culture. As I mentioned above, Nü Wa was the creator of humans in Chinese mythology. She was half woman and half snake. Whereas it is very tempting to read the snake as merely a symbol of sexuality and fertility, hence, the association of woman with snake, I would argue no matter how absurd Nü Wa's intraspecies hybridity seems to us today, Nü Wa's image as half woman and half snake invites us to think of a time when the evolution of humans was yet to be completed, and to ponder the mutual inseparableness of humans and animals in the evolution process. At the very least, her image compels us to not deny the animal side of this archetype. Animalness and womanness may not be necessarily contradictory and the association of women with animals may not be necessarily essentialist. On the contrary, it can even be productive. Nonetheless, I would detach organic animal-woman relations from the forced animalization of women, for example, the animalization of African American women and Asian American women in pornography to serve male prurient interests.

The picture of Nü Wa as woman and snake can be read alongside Cajete's description of the kinship between human and plants in *Native Science* (2000).[22] He states:

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[21] For a fuller discussion of "the female principle," see M.A. Jaimes Guerrero, "Native Womanism: Exemplars of Indigenism in Sacred Traditions of Kinship," *Hypatia: Indigenous Women in the Americas* 18.2 (2003): 58-69.

[22] I was intrigued by the Amazon water lily that changes sex. Plant sexuality might have inspired concepts of human sexual fluidity in indigenous knowledge systems.

> In reality, plants and humans have been biologically and energetically intertwined since the beginning of the human species…It is no accident that human hemoglobin and plant chlorophyll share similar biochemical structures or that humans breathe oxygen produced by plant respiration and that plants depend on the carbon dioxide produced by humans and animals. (108)

Cajete's argument brings out another side of humans, the plant element, which is often not recognized in contemporary life where the presence of nature including the elements of animal and plant in human, has been denied. As I mentioned above, the denial of human's naturalness is also a serious problem in the process of China's modernization. Detachment of humans from nature has eliminated human's moral responsibility toward nature and thus ensured the abuse of nature with no emotional guilt.

Di Mu Jing (*Songs of Earth Mother*), a scripture I came across in my field research conducted in Dragon Bone Village, offers a spiritual dimension to understand the human-nature relationship. This scripture is rarely seen in officially recognized temples or monasteries in China today. It was classified as apocrypha by Yinguang Fashi, an influential Buddhist monk.

What intrigues me is the etymology of Di Mu. The name of Di Mu is composed of two Chinese characters—*Di* and *Mu*. *Di* means Earth as opposed to *tian* (Sky). *Mu* can be roughly translated into *mother* and *origin*. A careful examination of the etymological origin of *di* and *mu* shows ancient Chinese correlated the creativity and the productivity of woman with the creativity and the

productivity of Earth, and vice versa. Earth is perceived to be female in principle.

According to *Di Mu Jing*, Di Mu is a primal *mu shen* (female spirit, goddess). The nature of Di Mu is *tu* and *yin*, which means *soil* and *female*. Mu is the primal *chi*, or driving life force. She is the *mu*, or mother of the six wise emperors—Tianhuang, Dihuang, Renhuang, Fuxi, Xuanyuan, and Shennong. She regulates the four orientations and the four seasons. She nourishes forests, grains, grass, trees, flowers, fruits, and medicinal herbs. The Buddha of the past, present, and future is from her. All deities reside in her. She is different from *tian* (sky), which is perceived to be male and yang. *Di* and *Tian* are complementary with each other. Together, they govern everything. People, however, are not able to recognize her significance. They see only *tian*.

The neglect and subjugation of Di Mu reflects the subjugation of women and nature under China's patriarchal social structure. Privileging of *tian* (sky, man) over *di* (earth, woman) facilitates the masculine and militant governance driven by a goal of expanding wealth and power. *Songs of Di Mu* objects to such a master narrative. It cautions us of the consequence of masculine politics: war, natural disasters, disease, and poverty. The three works I study, in my view, are variations and a coincidental continuation of this meta-text just as Pueblo stories are a (conscious) continuation of the meta-text, the story of the Thought Woman.[23]

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[23] See Leslie Marmon Silko, "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective," *English Literature: Opening Up the Canon*, eds. Leslie A. Fiedler and Houston A. Baker, Jr. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1979).

Di Mu particularly embodies an alternative trinity—*di* (earth), goddess, and woman. The tripartite identity of Di Mu indicates that Earth and her corporeal representation, woman, encompass sacredness, humanness, and naturalness simultaneously. Among the three natures, sacredness is perhaps the least recognized in the biological ways of knowing nonhuman nature and humans. I argue that revitalization of the Di Mu belief has the potential to enrich our minds, which are programmed to privilege scientific knowledge.

The tales of Pangu, Nü Wa, and Di Mu present an ecological and spiritual perspective in thinking about nature and gender, which previously existed in China's knowledge system and yet has been disjointed and forced underground in China's contemporary mainstream life. A reconnection with this undercurrent may reshape China's ecological future, which is important not only for China but also for the global earth-healing praxis.

Reclaiming the sacred is widely explored in Asian American literature, too. Amy Tan is one of the most influential trailblazers of this body of literature. She consistently explores the theme of spirituality in her works, such as *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), and *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005). Spirituality in Amy Tan's works centers around issues of identity and resistance. One difference, however, is that there is a telling female tradition in Amy Tan's works. Her heroines identify with female ancestors and female deities. There is no gender ambiguity. What her

heroines have to battle with is sexism and/or racism.

One of the roles spirituality plays in Amy Tan's works is to mark Chineseness and Americanness. Chineseness is often associated with what is referred to as "superstition" in an American context, for example, belief in ghosts and spirits. Mothers from China usually embrace these beliefs. Americanness is defined as rejection of these beliefs and acceptance of American values free of ghosts and spirits. American daughters usually claim American values. The contest between Chineseness and Americanness is dramatized through conflict and resolution between second generation American daughters and first generation Chinese mothers. The generational tension hinges on American daughters' identity crisis living in an environment where belief in ghosts and spirits is inferiorized and rejected. Chinese mothers and American daughters battle over "superstition" and atheism. American daughters are often ridiculed by their American peers at school and feel ashamed of their mothers' beliefs in ghosts and spirits. Reconciliation occurs when the American daughters begin to embrace their mothers' beliefs.

Similarly, the generational tension resulting from the difference in belief happens in the Hmong American community. Forced immigration compels the older generation to renounce shamanism in America. As the second generation is assimilated into American culture through American-centric education and popular culture, a generational gap is developed within the community around the question of faith, among other things. The implications of losing spiritual traditions are

explored in *Death of a Shaman*[24] and *The Split Horn: the Life of a Hmong Shaman in America*.[25] In both documentaries, shamans have a hard time keeping the traditions in America. To survive, their children have either adopted Catholicism or become skeptical of shamanism. While some Hmong Americans still hold the traditions dear, shamanism is losing its audience. The two documentaries invite us to think about the costs of losing one's traditions and the necessity of preserving them.

There has been an increasingly shared call for validation of other ways of knowing among scholars in ethnic studies, including Asian American scholars. I argue Asian-inspired spirit knowledge constitutes an alternative epistemology. Restoring other spiritual traditions in America would help de-center American cultural hegemony and truly pluralize it.

The work of reclaiming the sacred is not an easy task. Many feminist and womanist scholars identify Euro-American centric epistemologies with a tendency to overlook the significance of spirituality as an effective way of self-knowing, knowledge production, resistance, and personal and social transformation. Jacqui Alexander refers to such a tendency as spirit closeting.[26] AnaLouise Keating calls

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[24] Richar Hall and Fahm Fong Saeyang, *Death of a Shaman*, Great Blue Productions, 2003.

[25] Taggart Siegel and Chai Tao, et al. *The Split Horn: the Life of a Hmong Shaman in America*, Filmmakers, 2001.

[26] Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing:Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2005) 15.

it "academic spirit-phobia."[27] Likewise, Layli Phillips points out that a spiritualized method of social transformation would be "potentially controversial" (xxvi). In theorizing her womanist idea of "luxocracy, rule by light," Maparyan is aware that she is "going out on a limb" (3). Laura Peréz also contends that it is difficult and risky to talk about the spiritual in serious intellectual settings.

Peréz notes that reference to the spirits is dismissed as superstition, primitive animism, or psychological delusion. Spirituality is also subsumed to organized or institutionalized religion—especially those accepted in the West. Engagement with and discussion of the spiritual with respect to disempowered communities and women are even more fraught with dangers because connections have been made between the spiritual, the female, and people of color in imperialist and racist thinking. She argues that the linkage has been made to contrast the inferiority of the spiritual and women of color with the superiority of the rational and "the western man" and thus to marginalize the former and reinforce the latter.

Nonetheless, claiming the sacred is important. Pérez insists, "Reclaiming a belittled spiritual worldview, is crucial to many, particularly if it is a personally and socially empowering worldview, and especially so for women" (20). She points out that spirituality is "inseparable from questions of social justice, with respect to class, gender, sexuality, culture, and 'race'" (20). She echoes Norma

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[27] See AnaLouise Keating, "'I'm a Citizen of the Universe': Gloria Anzaldúa's Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change," *Feminist Studies* 34.1-2 (2008): 53-70. Keating refers to the term on page 55 of this article.

Alarcón that the "spirit work" is "not so much to recover a lost 'utopia' nor the 'true' essence of our being" but rather to bring into focus violence inflicted upon the body of the indigenous woman as a result of imperialist and sexist practices (21). The "spirit work," she maintains, should be "refocused for feminist change" in order to seek "personal wholeness, communal interdependence, and purpose in the social, global, and cosmic web" (22-23). She continues to argue that the "spirit work" is a conscious act working toward "reintegration of the psyche fragmented by the internalization of loathing the native self" (21); it is an act "vital to decolonizing practice" (21). The "spirit work" in the context of art and cultural production is about seeking spiritual and aesthetic altarities to "express, preserve, and transmit cultural and gender-based religious and political differences.…that are visionary with respect to social justice and transformation" (92). In short, it is about radical thinking and cultural reconstructuring.

Gloria Anzaldúa's spiritual activism illuminates this "spirit work." In AnaLouise Keating's 2008 essay "'I'm a Citizen of the Universe': Gloria Anzaldúa's Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change," she reminds us that spiritual activism has a great potential to make social changes because it is deeply rooted in a "relational worldview" (60). Keating points out that Anzaldúa's relational worldview is based on her belief in spirit in everything, for example, the tree, the swamp, the sea, the organic, and the inorganic. Spirit transcends boundaries of categories. Keating makes explicit that, "This belief in the

interrelatedness of all life forms is a crucial component in Anzaldúa's theory of spiritual activism and facilitates the development of new tactics for survival, resistance, and transformation on all levels" (60).

Key to spiritual activism is that self-change is not an end in itself. It must be, in Keating's words, "part of a larger process requiring both intense self-reflection and back-and-forth action on individual and communal levels" (69). Spiritual activism, as Anzaldúa conceives it, is an art of intertwining inner works with public acts. It involves personal and communal healing and transformation. It encourages an identity politics that transcends dualistic assumptions about one's gender, class, sexuality, nationality, and species. Anzaldúa imagines the left-handed world to be a place to enact such identity politics. Anzaldúa's left-handed world is inhabited by "Third World women, lesbians, feminists, and feminist-oriented men of all colors"[28] and "non-human nature."[29]

Anzaldúa's way of seeking affiliation with habitants of this left-handed world is through spirit work, or spiritual activism. In her poem "The Coming of El Mundo Surdo," she imagines "I am the temple. I am the unmoving center. Within my skin, all races, sexes, all trees, grasses, cows and snails, implode."[30] This poetic image of radical implosion within the corporal spiritual temple offers us a

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[28] This cross quote is originally from Anzaldúa's "La Prieta" collected in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* edited by AnaLouise Keating. See AnaLouise Keating, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham & London, 2009) 50. Also see Pu Xiumei, rev. of *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating, *Feminist Formation* 23.1 (2010): 281-87. The quote appears on page 284.

[29] Both quotes appear on page 284 of my book review.

[30] See AnaLouise Keating, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham & London, 2009) 36.

rich example, to quote Keating again, which "we can build on as we create new theoretical perspectives, pedagogies, and social justice actions."[31]

In the context of ecowomanist literature, reclaiming nature-ness and sacredness of woman is presented as a means of healing and re-membering fragmented bodies, minds, and identities. One example is *The Temple of My Familiar* by Alice Walker. *The Temple of My Familiar* presents a unique character, Lissie. Lissie is simultaneously woman, goddess, lion, monkey, plant, male, female, white, and black. That Lissie simultaneously embodies these identities is especially meaningful in the context of colonialism and racism, in which black women's bodies have been animalized and made inhuman. Reclaiming the natural side of Lissie refutes forced animalization and meanwhile does not deny her naturalness. It is worth noting Lissie once lived as male and white. I read her maleness and whiteness as her internalized masculine and white values in the long process of colonization. It suggests the colonized can internalize the values of the colonizers and become colonizers without knowing it. To decolonize the mind, one has to be critically self reflective, learn to unravel the alienating masks and start "making face" and "making soul," in other words, reconstructing one's identity physically and spiritually.[32]

The embrace of one's multiple identities is an oppositional consciousness to

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[31] Ibid. 66.

[32] Gloria Anzaldúa, ed. *Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990) xvi.

dualism entrenched in a race-, gender-, and class-biased social system. Such representation is a way to resist fragmentation. It suggests an ecological sensibility that recognizes the inseparability of humans from plants and animals. I insist Walker's literary representation of the organic trinity of nature, woman, and goddess is not a rhetorical device but a reflection of her ecospiritual ideas.

In her novel *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, nature becomes an independent, active, and knowing entity; nature presents itself as a character. Yage, a plant and medicine, is also embodied as a character, Grandmother. Yage calls Kate and helps her to heal. This plot development formula acknowledges the agency of nature and thus reverses the convention of presenting human characters as all-knowing subjects. This poetic representation of nature's agency is not personification, or merely a metaphor, or simply a proof of the writer's rich imagination.[33]

I hesitate to read yage-as-a-character as personification because personification implies anthropomorphic centrism that privileges humans. Personification seems to endear nature, and yet making nature human and claiming it as one of our kind neglects human's humble origins from nature. This rhetorical act of personification ignores the order of things (nature came before us), severs the nature-human tie of parent-child, and usurps nature's authority. The act

[33] Plant's agency has recently been analyzed by Michael Pollan in his book entitled *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World*. Despite the book's male and western perspective, it illustrates how plants such as the tomato, the tulip, marijuana, and the potato survive and multiply by manipulating human's desires for sweetness, beauty, intoxication, and control.

is very similar to the colonial act of making the colonizer the present host and the native guest, which reverses the order of things.

Yage-as-a-character is about a sort of reality as understood in indigenous knowledge and as documented in indigenous stories, which, however, are classified, referred to, and studied as "mythology" from a non-indigenous lens. "Mythology" actually provides a rich reservoir for contemporary ethnic women writers, including Alice Walker, to imagine a different reality that counterbalances the dualism of human and nonhuman nature, that acknowledges the nature-ness of humans and humanness of nature, and that does not worry about detaching from nature to make humans superior or to make nature superior.

Place—a local nature—can be a character as well. Carter Meland has a provocative argument about place in American Indian literature. He elucidates:

> In much American Indian writing, place is as crucial to the story as character: place may even be a character, and even if not a character it has presence. That is, it is not a setting within which people move, but is rather an active participant in the action. Place also has a long memory. It remembers times before colonization as well as the effects of colonization in the lives of the characters.[34]

Edna Escamill's *Daughter of the Mountain* provides an example of how place is crucial to the story as a character. The place which takes on the role of a character in *Daughter of the Mountain* is named La Madre (Mother), a mountain which calls out. The story starts with La Madre's calling:

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[34] This quote is drawn from Carter Meland's course description for *American Indian Literatures in Place.*

> Daughter of my blood and of my heart, I'm going to tell you something. But the words of this story do not come from this world. They are the souls of memories hidden in an apparition of spirits. They are a breeze to crying eyes. In remembering we have hope and can play hide and seek with one another. Therefore I hold this story in the world only for your ears and your eyes: So, that day was not like any other. It was the day La Madre called me by my real name. She had never spoken to me in that way and I had to obey her. She determined that I walk in this new world where words live and where I was dumb. That day when I heard my name I dragged myself to the place where there is a window in the mountain. When I reached the hills I began to vomit the damage from my being. I began to live. I began to speak. (3)

La Madre is where Grandmother wants to go when she is ready to die. It is her ultimate home, the spiritual home. The quote above, as if a heart-to-heart talk between a mother and her daughter, sets the tone for Maggie's journey. Maggie's struggle is her struggle with the reality of losing her home, the place where her grandmother lives and where she grows up. With the coming of developers and *progress*, Maggie and her people are pushed farther and farther away from the land where they have lived. The story is developed around Maggie's movement within the two spaces of the urban and the rural. The mountain, like her grandmother and as an elder, calls her back in the end. Just as Grandmother goes to La Madre, Maggie's trip home is to follow the mountain. The story ends at nightfall. "You see, my daughter, the road going is also the one coming back" (211).

Returning to the mountain, however, is not escapism as so often presented in earlier American literature, *Rip Van Winkle*, for example, in which the protagonist retreats to the mountain in order to escape his domineering wife.Maggie's going

back to the mountain is a reunion with her body, spirit, and community from which she is forced to part. In presenting the mountain as Maggie's eco-spiritual-cultural home and guiding orientation, *Daughter of the Mountain* is different from the British Romanticism and American Transcendentalism that emphasizes "solitude, meditation, non-participant observation, accurate detail, ego dissolution or expansion, and personal epiphanies" (Murphy, 37); and literature that romanticizes nature as a place to escape urban vice, noise, and pollution or to have the scenery all to oneself. *Daughter of the Mountain* pictures a different relationship between people and the place. The mountain ecosystem is where Maggie's people are. The ecosystem and people are interdependent and interactive with each other. The place provides people with home, food, and meaning; people have an emotional and spiritual attachment to the place. A strong sense of community and interdependence embedded in *Daughter of the Mountain* stands in contrast to the individualistic mentality depicted in British Romanticism and American Transcendentalism.

The natural world is spiritually embodied in *Daughter of the Mountain*. Coyotes and rabbits lead Grandmother to reach La Madre. The scent of mountain sage guides Maggie out of the mountain. That nature tells and leads reverses the anthropocentric tradition of objectifying and personifying nature. That nature speaks and leads is not naivety, passivity, or primitivism. A willingness to listen to nature reflects an acknowledgement of nature as a knowing subject. A person

growing up in an ecospiritual tradition is more likely to notice and be deeply concerned about non-human nature in a story. This tendency influences one's memory, determining what this person will consider important in a story and what this person will remember about a story. One example is Leslie Marmon Silko's memory of the robins:

> There was Dick and Jane, and I can remember reading that the robins were heading south for winter, but I knew that all winter the robins were around Laguna. It took me a long time to figure out what was going on. I worried for quite a while about the robins because they didn't leave in the winter, not realizing that the textbooks were written in Boston. The big textbook companies are up here in Boston and *their* robins do go south in the winter. (67)

That she remembers and is worried about the robins is not necessarily the result of a literary theoretical approach she consciously uses, but rather, the fruit of her upbringing—an exposure to the storytelling tradition. To put it another way, her memory of and concern for the robins is a reflection of her worldview, or an ecospiritual mind, so to speak. This ecospiritual mind enables one to notice and hear the voice of non-human nature in stories. Silko's ecospiritual mind is also about cognitive dissonance—the tension or contradiction between what her textbooks (formal education) told her and her lived experience.

The ability of listening to the voice of nature can diminish in a culture where culture is segregated from nature and privileged over nature. Appreciating literature of the kind I discussed above requires a change of habitual stand point from one that is above and outside of nature to one that is alongside nature. To

appreciate nature as a character involves releasing what Cajete calls the metaphorical or natural mind. Cajete defines the natural mind as “our oldest mind” which has evolved approximately over three million years. Cajete argues that the natural mind “develops from birth to about the time a child begins to learn language” and that the natural mind “has none of the limiting conditioning of the cultural order. Its processing is natural and instinctive. It perceives itself as part of the natural order, a part of the Earth mind” (29-30).

Cajete points out that oppositional to and complimentary with the natural mind is the rational mind. The rational mind enables us to learn language and come to understand our environment. He posits that indigenous philosophy does not privilege the rational mind. The natural mind and the rational mind are compared to sacred twins or two brothers who “can both complement and oppose each other” (29). Unfortunately, anthropocentric philosophy tends to “legitimize the oppression of nature, and consequently…the metaphoric mind” (30).

Conventions of Western novels and non-ecologically conscious literary criticism that focus on plots and human characters reinforce and perpetuate the repression of the natural mind. Repression of the natural mind can result in a loss of intuitive ability to register signals sent out by nature itself and nature represented in literature. Appreciating nature as a character may function as an exercise of the natural mind.

Moreover, Cajete’s discussion of the two minds offers a useful frame to think

about colonization and modernization. Oppression of the natural mind by the rational mind can be likened to the process of colonization and modernization, during which nature and those associated with nature are subjugated. An ecospiritual perspective brings to light the centrality of nature in shaping our consciousness and producing knowledge. Ecospirituality acknowledges that nature is a speaker. It communicates with us through shape, color, scent, flavor, sound, and movement. We have built-in facilities—senses of sight, smell, taste, hearing, touch, and the sixth sense—to respond to nature's speaking. When our senses are healthy, communication can occur naturally, infinitely, and effortlessly as we breathe in and breathe out.

The natural world's communication with us is not purposeless. By displaying its beauty or terror, it is teaching us, playing with us, manipulating us, guiding us, or warning us of danger. A great number of ecospiritual traditions have developed sophisticated techniques to bring to light the knowledge the natural world tries to teach us. Nowadays, those techniques are disappearing or are already extinct as a result of colonization and modernization. De-spiritualized modern technologies can send humans to the moon and research devices to outer spaces, but they also make humans technology-dependent and vulnerable. What we might do to is to put bits and pieces together and re-imagine ecospirituality to rebalance the world "soically, environmentally, and spiritually" (Phillips xxx).

Ecospirituality nourishes a different sense of self. An ecospiritual sense of self

is felt through connection with the natural and/or spiritual worlds. It sees the self as part of nature, nature is within the self, and the self and nature are bound through spirituality. The self is simultaneously a child of nature, a child of biological parents, and an individual of a social group that is also part of nature. Linda Tuhiwai Smith expresses a similar idea when she discusses the essence of a person in an indigenous context. She states that the essence of a person "has a genealogy which can be traced back to an earth parent, usually glossed as an Earth Mother" (74). The ecospiritual self is within yet simultaneously outside social boxes which individuals, especially vulnerable social groups are forcefully put in. By viewing the self as a subject living at the nexus of the natural, spiritual, and social realms, ecospiritual ways of knowing are capable of liberating the self from rigid social constructs and meanwhile broadening our sense of community.

Layli Phillips's definition of the womanist community gives us an idea of this broader community. She imagines that the community encompasses "Black women or women of color," "the Black communities and other communities of color," "all oppressed people," "all humanity," "livingkind," "the 'inanimate' components of earth," "the universe(s) beyond earth," "the spiritual worlds(s) and transcendental realm(s)," and "all of creation" (xxv-xxvi). Phillip's idea of the womanist community is similar to Anzaldúa's concept of the new mestiza. While Phillips's discussion of the womanist community is culturally specific, it provokes us to think about a broader definition of community where we could (re)orient

ourselves.

Ecospirituality offers me a literary analytical lens, verbalizing a keen awareness of nature and spirituality in my practice of literary criticism and analysis. This approach utilizes a consciously ecowomanist lens to scrutinize forms of oppression, especially oppression of nature, women, and vulnerable social groups who are naturized and/or feminized. Ecowomanist literature and criticism is concerned about giving a language to self-knowledge gained from women's intimacy with nature. Ecospiritual self-knowledge plays a critical role in decolonizing and liberating the minds. Being unregulated by social norms, ecospiritual self-knowledge functions as the *chi* that women fall back on to sustain themselves when indoctrinated knowledge fails to nourish their minds, or even poisons their minds. Equally importantly, ecospirituality as a lens brings to light a distinctive mode of resistance to oppressions as delineated in the three texts I study including *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, *Daughter of the River*, and "Maverick."

In a transnational context, an ecospiritual reading of these stories serves as a corrective to mainstream reception of them in the West. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* is usually read as a memoir to expose Chinese patriarchy and China's totalitarianism. This reading identifies gender oppression, class struggles, anti-intellectualism, and persecution as the main themes in this memoir. *Daughter of the River* is also primarily read as an exposé of China's classism, poverty, and

mei you minzhu (having no democracy) under the rulership of the Communist Party. In like fashion, “Maverick” is read by some of my American students as hard evidence of a dark China marked by the Chinese communist dictatorship and the Chinese people’s lack of environmental consciousness. To be sure, cross-cultural misreading is unavoidable. But how did the image of a horrible China become fixated upon? Why would exposé literature have great currency in Great Britain and the United States? What political environment facilitates this type of misreading?

I propose that an ecospiritual reading of the three texts would be more balanced and more fruitful. I want to draw attention to some equally important motifs explored in these three tales, such as women’s ecospiritual resistance to China’s master narrative. I would argue contemporary diasporic Chinese women’s literature, especially literature by women writers of the wounded generation, should not be “othered” as exposé literature of China’s darkness despite the fact that the content may be distinctively Chinese and the setting of the stories is China. These texts explore new ways of knowing, new ways of making sense, and new ways of achieving completeness. What makes those ways new, as I observe, is an ecospiritual sensibility. I am interested in how nature inspires the women’s resistance to the dominant social system, how nature is felt by characters through a deep spiritual connection, how ecospiritual awakening helps characters to develop a sense of belonging and a sense of responsibility, how development of

ecospiritual knowledge motivates activism, and strives for environmental and social justice.

Bringing nature, spirituality, and gender to the forefront of analysis is to imagine an ecospritualized and decolonizing language in a translational Chinese context. While these works may not neatly fit the decolonial imaginary, they offer new angels to it. Cultural hegemony, gender norms, and classism work in ways similar to the processes of colonization. Subjects internalize dominant values and willingly embrace these harmful values which lead to a sense of fragmentation and internal conflicts. My work of decolonizing involves two tasks. First, I examine how characters unlearn what they internalize, in other words, how they decolonize their colonized minds. My second task is to look at how the writers themselves could internalize certain dominant values and accept them as unspoken agreement. These unspoken agreements are often invisible and outside the texts, for example, the romanticization of democracy.

The romanticization of democracy determines a recurring plot development pattern in coming-of-age novels by "the wounded generation." This plot formula posits Western democracy in opposition to China's totalitarianism and presents democracy as a corrective and desirable social politic to China's one-party institution. I would caution the risks of fantasizing about western democracy. First, western democracy is accepted as a whole package; the various problems inherent in it are not questioned. Second, the writers' love affair with western democracy

might overshadow their exploration of other ideological thoughts and thus render those equally important points less transparent to western eyes. Numerous book reviews indicate it is “the democracy versus dictatorship” that is recognized by western readers the most.

The decolonial imaginary in *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* is the process of the narrator internalizing Mao Thoughts and undoing them as she develops her critical consciousness. The various methods she takes to decolonize her mind include reading books, listening to stories, witnessing her parents’ tragedies, and sightseeing. Decolonization in *Daughter of the River* involves unlearning classism, gender and sexual norms by (re)connecting with the natural and the spiritual worlds. “Maverick” goes back to the state of being indigenous and natural. It presents an un-colonized state. All together, the three works delineate a decolonial imaginary from diverse angles, they engage with multiple ways of knowing including ways that have indigenous roots, and thus disrupt the seemingly hegemonic Chinese social and cultural system.

I consider Di Mu, China’s indigenous *nü shen* (goddess), part of the decolonial imaginary. She is Tonantzin’s Chinese counterpart. Just as re-membering Tonantzin makes it possible to eradicate patriarchal and colonial projections upon Nahua culture, revitalizing Di Mu belief makes it possible to shake loose China’s dominant masculine politics.

A decolonial awareness infused with ecospirituality informs my short fiction,

too. My short fiction engages with streams of Chinese ecospiritual traditions indigenous to the greater Yangtze River eco-cultural region including Di Mu (Earth Mother) belief and Tibetan Bön. Spirituality is demystified in the fiction. Medicine women are portrayed as the way they are, they are part of the family and the community; they are subject to political pressure and relocation; they use a combination of herbs, chants, and ritualistic techniques rather than supernatural magic to heal. Spirituality is understood as a way of making sense of one's life, relating to the land, organizing everyday activities, and coping with migration and mental wounds.

A decolonial ecospiritual awareness, like a password, activates my memories of things I have observed, read about, heard of, and experienced. Without conscious work, memories, like ink drops in a glass of water, tend to dissolve and fade out into the background with time. The decolonial consciousness allows me to retrieve these memories, which otherwise would be buried deep and forgotten. Examples might include the already disappeared trees which seemed trivial and inconvenient for city planning and development; the Kuan Yin temple which was replaced by the Three Gorges Dam relocation buildings; the young rural women who have committed suicide. An important counter memory might be those who struggled to navigate their way through social turmoil and China's modernization by holding on to the shrinking land, spiritualized knowledge gained from living with the land, and memories of plants, animals, and life experiences, no matter

whether or not they continued to live in rural places or migrated to cities.

Decolonial consciousness means that I pay special attention to the issues of internalized superiority and inferiority based on one's gender, ethnicity, and class and their complicated effects on characters. I write about the process of breaking away from these toxins of the mind on both conscious and unconscious levels. In addition, my short fiction intends to demystify spirituality, and meanwhile, looks into the ways in which people living in the margin make the "master's tool" work for them.[35]

My work is the fruit of my decolonizing journey. Like the lotus roots buried under layers of silt, deep down, I feel a silenced self who is female, rural, spiritual, ancient, and Chinese. I lived in-between, moving from a small village to a town, from the town to a county, from the county to a provincial capital, and from China to the United States. If each environment is a vat dye, I am a white-shelled egg in it. Each time I come out of the vat dye, I am stained. As I developed my dissertation, I have become more explicit in my decolonial consciousness and more self-reflective of my stains. Did they enrich my mind or colonize it? This endless questioning, to borrow Kimine Mayuzumi's words, "is not intended as a self-indulgent exercise nor is it meant solely for individualistic learning or growth. Instead, it aims to inspire the readers to cultivate their own-reflective mode of

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[35] See Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *Sister Outsiders: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007) 110-113.

learning and become active agents of change" (352).[36]

My decolonizing journey started with my moving to the Women's Studies Institute at Georgia State University where I was introduced to discourses of critical thinking, among which were womanism and decolonial scholarship. Womanism and decolonial thinking have become the theoretical foundation of my intellectual inquiry ever since. Two distinct themes emerging from these bodies of knowledge I identified and identified with are spirituality and the work of unveiling the "white mask."[37] I started to rethink the suppressed knowledge systems in the process of modernization in China. My inquiry was expanded when I moved to the feminist studies program at the University of Minnesota where I encountered American Indian philosophies and literature, Chicana feminism,[38] and Asian American feminism.[39] I began to think more seriously of the Chinese mythical stories and books on Daoism which I read in my spare time, and my grandmother's practice which was labeled *mi xin*.

Considering the following questions, I have realized some colonizing, or

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[36] David K Korten also talks about this self-reflective process as part of a communual shift in our collective way of thinking. For a fuller discussion of this idea, see David K Korten, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2007).

[37] See Frantz Fannon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

[38] I owe much gratitude to my advisor, Edén Torres who has introduced me to Chicana feminism. She encouraged me to pursue what my heart told me to do and not to worry about *de shi* (gains and losses). Her book *Chicana Without Apology:The New Chicana Cultural Studies* inspired me to look for the meaning of personal experience as it relates to social activism.

[39] My interest in Asian American feminism has been nurtured by Jigna Desai, Josephine Lee, and the Asian American studies program at the University of Minnesota. My experience of teaching *Asian American Women's Cultural Production* has tremendously deepened my understanding of Asian American feminism.

mind-constraining patterns entrenched in cultural hegemonies. Those questions include: why did my grandmother, a village healer lose her faith? Why was there so much disappointment that I, the eldest child, was a girl? Why did my mother so firmly object to my becoming an artist or a writer? Why was there so intense a sense of inferiority being a peasant or a peasant's child? Why was there a great emphasis on physics, chemistry, and mathematics? Why were we required to spend so much time memorizing and getting tested on Maoism and Marxism from secondary school to college but were not introduced to other ways of knowing? Why did my education in the English department in China start with the European and American male cannon but not women writers, especially women writers of color? Finally, when I am physically in the so-called Promised Land, why do I still feel so split?

These questions are very personal but political. Through years of study in the field of women's studies, I have come to realize that I am not alone in facing questions of this kind. I posit my decolonizing journey in the context of a transnational and international move away from hegemonic knowledge systems. I make a connection between my personal journey and the Third World US feminism, womanism, and the indigenous renaissance. By looking inward and outward, I intend to connect with this wave of *imagining otherwise*. It is my humble wish that I will be able to offer contribution to the global earth healing praxis and the (eco)womanist architecture of "putting the ecological, social, and

spiritual houses back in order--but in a life-affirming, love-grounded, and light-filled way."[40]

[40] This quote is from my email correspondence with Layli Marpayan in May, 2011.

Chapter Two

"I Spread Manure in the Paddy Fields and Composed Poems to Water Lilies": Eco-memory in *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*

Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China is a memoir by Chinese-born British woman writer, Jung Chang. Since its publication in 1991, it has achieved phenomenal success and has aroused considerable controversy. Covering the life experiences of three generations of women—Chang's grandmother (Yu-fang), her mother (Bao Qin, later renamed De-hong),[41] and herself (Er-hong, later renamed Jung),[42] the memoir stretches from the turn of the twentieth-century to the end of

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[41] Jung Chang's mother had two fathers. Her biological father General Xu named her Bao Qin. Bao Qin means precious Chinese zither. Chinese zither is a musical instrument which women of noble and wealthy families were supposed to learn in Old China. Knowledge of Chinese zither was once considered a maker of feminine beauty. Bao Qin's mother, Yu-fang played Chinese zither well. Bao Qin was renamed as De-hong by Dr. Xia, her step-father. De is the generation name, meaning "virtue." Hong means "wild swan."

[42] Er-hong was a maiden name Dr. Xia gave to Jung Chang. Er means "the second." Hong means "wild swan." Jung Chang is the second daughter of De-hong, hence the name Er-hong, meaning the second wild swan. The name Er-hong was used until Jung Chang went to middle school when Cult for Mao surged. At that time the color red was politicized in the campaign against capitalism. "To Change color," meaning to go from Communism to capitalism was highly cautioned. One day Jung Chang's politics teacher said: "If your aren't careful, our country will change color gradually, first from bright red to faded red, then to gray, then to black" (268). "Er-hong" had exactly the same pronunciation as "faded red" in the Sichuan dialect expression. Er-hong was renamed by her father as Jung. The character "Jung" "was a very old and recondite word for 'martial affairs' which appeared only in classical poetry and a few antiquated phrases. It evoked an image of bygone battles between knights in shining armor, with tasseled spears and neighing steeds" (269). According to Jung Chang, her father first suggested "Chang," "meaning 'prose' and 'coming into one's own early,' which expressed his desire for [her] to become a good writer at a young age" (269). However, she did not want the name. She preferred "something with a military ring to it" (269). Her father then suggested Jung. The writer accepted both characters as her name for the book. Like the heroine in Maxine Hong-Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Jung Chang becomes another woman warrior. The weapon she brandishes is not spears but pens.

the Cultural Revolution. Personal histories are set against major historical events such as the Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese Civil War, and the Cultural Revolution. Through retrieval of personal histories, Chang offers her bold yet controversial reassessment of contemporary Chinese history and the iconic historical figure Mao Zedong.

The controversy centers on the question if Chang's account of the Cultural Revolution and her evaluation of China's political idol—Mao Zedong—is authentic and just. The controversy *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* has caused is far less phenomenal than the intensity of the debate over *Mao: the Unknown Story* (2005), a critical biography of Mao which Chang co-authors with her husband Jon Halliday. In less than five years after the book was published, several anthologies responding to *Mao: the Unknown Story* saw light.[43] Concerned Chinese bloggers joined the debate on the Internet. A widespread criticism of the authors is that they have manipulated materials to create a monster out of Mao.

While both *Mao: the Unknown Story* and *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* are banned in China, the latter has gained less attention among critics. At the very least, so far there hasn't been an entire anthology of literary criticism dedicated to *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* yet. That *Wild Swans: Three*

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[43] See Gregor Benton and Lin Chun, *Was Mao Really a Monster? The Academic Response to Chang and Halliday's Mao: the Unknown Story* (New York and Londong: Routledge, 2009). Also see Timothy Cheek, *A Critical Introduction to Mao* (NY: Cambridge UP, 2010).

Daughters of China is overshadowed by *Mao: the Unknown Story* is not surprising. The former is written in the form of a personal history, to be more exact, *herstory*. Being personal and woman-centered, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* seems less provocative and threatening. On the contrary, *Mao: the Unknown Story* is hooked with grand history—the master narrative—and about a "history-maker"—the master. Even though *Mao: the Unknown Story* is written from a critical revisionist point of view, it rekindles the fire for Mao studies, especially when the book openly questions Mao as a revolutionary hero. My point is the reception of both books reflects an established power disparity in history and politics which extends to the field of literature and criticism. When a master narrative and a woman-centered narrative are placed together, the latter is usually obscured.

I wish to redirect our attention to *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*. In reading publisher's blurbs and book reviews published in influential journals and magazines in Great Britain and the United States, I have noticed some patterns among Western perspectives. I understand that reviewers read this memoir from their culturally specific perspectives, and I respect their different ways of reading. However, I want to draw attention to some issues these varying perspectives may cause.

Because of the memoir's length, scope and depth,[44] *Wild Swans: Three*

[44] The first edition has 524 pages. The second edition contains 538 pages including an "Introduction to the 2003 Edition" by Jung Chang.

Daughters of China is introduced to the reader by the publisher as "a landmark book with the intimacy of memoir and the panoramic vision of a monumental human saga."[45] Is "human" here merely an idiomatic expression to signify some level of affect other than a gendered signification, or is it used as a gender neutral term to encompass both sexes or as a word to differentiate humans from animals, plants, and spirits? Why not just the word "saga" since the word itself already means a series of stories involving generations of people? If a modifier is truly needed to name the genre more precisely, why not choose to say "a woman saga"? After all, the title *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* invites readers to read it as such. At first glance, being named "a human saga," the memoir seems to gain an elevation in status given that a human saga is usually granted a status superior to a woman saga. Can the elevation in status from a woman saga to a human saga be liberating?

Admittedly, the elevation is meant to be a high praise of Chang's artistic achievement. However, I am cautious of a hidden premise the elevation seems to rest on, that is, a woman saga is read as inferior to a human saga. Following the logic, it seems inevitable to label Chang's memoir a human saga in order to make it larger in scope. But making it larger in scope, we lose focus. To put a woman saga in the category of a human saga, or women's experiences in the box of human experiences is similar to dripping a drop of ink in a larger container of water. The

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[45] This sentence appears on the front flap of the hardcover edition of *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* published in 1991.

focus on women is as likely to be obscured as the ink is to be diluted.

As Denise Riley points out in her 1988 essay "Does a Sex Have a History," there is no easy passage from woman to humanity. The same goes for literary criticism. Considering the male dominance and western domination firmly entrenched in world literature, a sex-blind reading may further benefit androcentrism and Euro-centrism in the field of literary criticism. This type of reading helps to absorb ethnic women's literature into the western male literary canon.[46] The seeming boost may actually result in erosion and erasure. The emphasis on humanity, in other words, human beings collectively, may result in another erasure, the erasure of the natural and spiritual dimensions. If a reader's attention is solely given to human characters, other non-human characters, including animals, plants, and spiritual figures, are likely to be neglected unless a reader has a deep ecological and spiritual consciousness.[47]

To go back to the question of reading *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* as "a human saga," could it be that it is trying to generalize so that Chinese is human and not just Chinese—a ploy to western readers? This is problematic

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[46] Henry Y.H. Zhao proposes to consider literature in English by Chinese born British writers as part of British literature. See Henry Y.H. Zhao. "Introduction," *Another Province: New Chinese Writing from London* [天外有天：伦敦华人新写作选], eds. Lim, Jessie and Li Yan. (London: Lambeth Chinese Community Association, 1994) xi.

[47] Vine Deloria Jr. attributes the sole interest western intellectual traditions place in human affairs to the temporal religious thinking habit that is characteristic of Christianity. The temporal mode of thinking considers human affairs alone important. The earth is secondary to the human race. See "Thinking in Time and Space," *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 1994) 70.

because both Chinese and woman are implicitly not automatically human. Even if we situate *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* back into its Chinese context, the claim for "human" becomes equally if not more problematic. A human saga in a traditional Chinese context means the family history of three generations of men from grandfather to father and to son. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* presents a counter saga, a woman saga. The pillars that support the structure of the book are the stories of three daughters of China including the writer, her mother, and her grandmother.

Contrary to the way "jia pu" 家谱 (family tree) is traditionally traced, the family tree in *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* is traced through a matrilineal line, starting from Yu-fang, the grandmother. It is necessary to point out that the family tree before the grandmother is still traced through a patrilineal line. The two opposite ways of tracing family linage combined in one family tree suggests continuity with and an intentional break away from the patriarchal tradition. To read the book as a human saga would neutralize and thus obscure the telling motif of women's liberation in the memoir. Therefore, the "elevation" ironically can obscure and trivialize the revolutionary aspect of the memoir.

However, to read *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* as a woman saga may be as equally restrictive and reductive as to read it as a human saga. After all, women are part of the human race. To read *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* as a woman saga still is to place the human race in the center of analysis. The only

difference this time is that the male subject is now replaced by a female subject. Who else can be the subjects? What else can surface if we deconstruct human-centrism in our reading habit?

In looking at the reception of *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* in English-speaking countries, especially the United States, I see that its reception hinges on two different approaches. Here I am referring to approaches exemplified in book reviews in authoritative journals, newspapers, magazines, and library networks, for example, *the New York Times*, *Library Journal*, and *American Libraries*. I acknowledge that my review is far from exhaustive and that there may be approaches which I have been unable to locate so far. The two approaches I have identified in printed book reviews include the reading of *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* as a piece of women's literature or as a story about China through a woman's perspective. The former highlights women characters and their stories, while the latter treats the book as a reference to study contemporary Chinese history and local cultures. One example in case is James D. Seymour's review.

Seymour reads *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* as a book about China as seen through the eyes of three generations of women. He suggests that parts of the book will be rewarding for historians who study Chinese history of the 1920s. Another point of interest he points out to readers is Chang's account of her life in Sichuan province, which he finds invaluable to area study specialists studying

Sichuan provincial culture. Although I understand that any published text is open to interpretation and I respect readers' freedom to use texts to suit their needs, I wish to point out two problems this way of reading might cause.

First, to read *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* as a book about China runs a great risk of undermining the revolutionary potential of the book as I have discussed above. It re-centers China rather than the three generations of women as the focal subject matter of the memoir. Second, to read *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* as raw material for western specialists reminds us of a familiar colonialist treatment of texts produced by ethnic writers who have close connections with non-western cultures. This treatment of ethnic texts mirrors a legacy of colonialism and capitalism. Just as natural resources in developing countries are used by developed countries and remanufactured to cater to western tastes, cultural texts produced by immigrant writers who have cultural roots in Third World countries—often seen as "native informants"— are rendered as reference books to be studied and their value to be extracted. I am not suggesting that it is wrong to read *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* as a reference book, but I do want to call attention to various contested meanings a reading like this might induce in an era when literary reading is intricately webbed into complex social, economical, political, and cultural nexuses.

When *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* is read as women's literature, the reading gets equally messy. Written by a Chinese-born British woman writer,

the memoir somehow cannot neatly fit into the category of women's literature. It stands on the borderline between women's literature and ethnic literature—a new position but still an awkward one. Yes, the writer is a woman, but she is not a woman as understood in a British context; she is a Chinese woman, an ethnic woman. The literature she writes, therefore, is not women's literature as defined in British women's literary canon; it is Asian women's literature. Grown out of the fissure of the contest between the West and the East, the competition between democracy and communism, the genre of Asian women's literature has been burdened from the very beginning with a responsibility to inform, to testify, and to satisfy. Readings of Asian women's literature, particularly literature by first generation Chinese immigrant women, are often harnessed to serve a certain political agenda, to testify to the horror of communism, and to satisfy a voyeuristic curiosity over China's social problems and its Third World-ness.

Donna Seaman's review "Tales of China" illustrates this sort of reading. In her essay, Seaman identifies "a great wave of new books by Chinese immigrant and Chinese-American writers" including *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (688). From Seaman's perspective, "these novels, memoirs, and historical studies explore the complexities of immigration, family life, and sexuality during the violent transition from the old Feudal China to the Communist regime with all its brutal and tragic failings." She says, "China has long intrigued and infuriated the rest of the world with its complex, often puzzling traditions and culture, insularity,

and contempt for human rights" (688).

This way of reading tends to view literature by Chinese immigrant writers as a window into the hidden history of China veiled by the Communist tight media control, in particular, to see Chinese immigrant women's literature as testimonies to the atrocity of Chinese patriarchy and Communist dictatorship from which they escape. This mode of reading tends to identify and highlight China's Communist dictatorship, its brutality and infringement of human rights, and its indifference to the environment, imagining China as the most uninhabitable and unjust place on earth compared with the United States where Americans and American women enjoy democracy and freedom. The trouble lying in this categorization of immigration literature is that it assumes there is a past that forces characters to flee their home countries to the United States, the Promised Land, or in the case of *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, Britain where they are allowed to tell their stories without being censored. This framing of immigrant literature is caught in and reflects ideological struggles between western capitalism and eastern Communism. It also reflects the West's xenophobia and its desire to see itself as superior to the East. This depends on a denial of patriarchy and sexist inequalities in the West.

Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China, although it was published in London, seems to have a number of things that can satisfy a filtered reading in an American context, for example, concubinage, foot-binding, physical and emotional torture of

intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution. As a result, the memoir is vulnerable to a reading lens that favors a sad horror story of China. A reading lens like this can perpetuate misunderstanding about the Chinese community in America. Although I have no intention to deny the existence of social and environmental problems in China, I contend that it is problematic to read a text by an overseas Chinese woman writer who has been socialized in the West and inculcated with Western mythologies about the East to have it prove a preconception.

I wonder if *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* were not about suffering, not about the Cultural Revolution, not about Red Guards, not about Mao Zedong, not about these sensitive "marketable points" that have drawn BBC and VOA coverage throughout the years, would it still become a bestseller in the western hemisphere? Would it be published at all? Or if it were not written in the genre of memoir, a form of testimony, would it still achieve phenomenal success? By writing in the genre of memoir, Chang satisfies the role of a "native informant" who has to allege a forced commitment to realism.[48] When overseas Chinese women's literature is published and disseminated in the West, it is immediately driven to the intersections of gender and nation, which can be useful, but often discourages and even prevents other ways of reading. Their works are often read

[48] Leslie Bow argues that Asian American women's literature is often forced to a commitment to realism. The same goes for *Wild Swans* although it is written by a British-Chinese woman writer. For a fuller discussion of the connection between Asian American women's literature and realism, see Leslie Bow, *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion: Feminism, Sexual Politics, Asian American Women's Literature,* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001) 75.

for the atrocities.

The reception of *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* by British reviewers shares a similar approach in reading it as Chinese immigrant women's literature to testify to the horror of China. The following reviews I quote were originally published in magazines and newspapers in Britain. If we consider that reviews are to introduce the book and to suggest ways of reading, these reviews represent authoritative interpretations of the memoir. Almost unanimously these reviewers identify in the memoir a horrifying China and an oriental nightmare. Here I quote at length a few reviews printed on the front and back covers of the second edition to illustrate the striking similarity in each reviewer's perspective. In the following quotes I use boldface to highlight the similar pattern of perspectives that keeps reoccurring.

> Of all the personal stories to have emerged out of China's twentieth-century **nightmare**, *Wild Swans* is the most deeply thoughtful and the most heart-rending I've read. It moves, in part, like a **ghostly oriental fairytale**, but the authority and the reticent passion with which Jung Chang speaks her memories-and those of others-is unmistakable. Colin Thubron, *Spectator*.
>
> An extraordinary story, popular history at its most compelling. Her readiness to record life's small pleasures as well as its looming **horrors** is not only an index of Jung Chang's honesty and good humour, it is a part of what makes *Wild Swans* so fascinating. To compare *Wild Swans* to sagas of the kind that fill the bestseller lists may seem to trivialize the real and deadly seriousness of its subject matter, but the book offers many of the pleasures of good historical fiction. Lucy Hughes-Hallet, *Independent*

> Riveting, an extraordinary epic. A work of true, living history drawing deep on family memories, and unmatchable insight into the making of modern China and the impact of **war** and **totalitarianism** on the destinies of a quarter of the human race. Richard Heller, *Mail on Sunday*

Horror is unanimously identified in these reviews. I argue that readings like these can obscure other significant aspects examined in *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*. I suggest an ecowomanist approach to read the memoir. An ecowomanist perspective identifies three interrelated motifs—nature, spirituality, and women's liberation in relation to the making of New China—which, otherwise, have escaped existing cross-cultural readings by British and American book reviewers. An ecowomanist lens brings to light an oppositional awareness inherent in the memoir. *Wild Swans* shows appreciation for the beauty of nature and an acknowledgement of spiritual ways of knowing. This perspective is in sharp contrast to the Maoist politics that exploits nature and suppresses religions.

Copious research on Maoist environmental politics has been done by American intellectuals. Judith Shapiro's *Mao's War against Nature* (2001) is a good example. Through a set of case studies, Shapiro compellingly advances the argument that the abuse of nature and the abuse of people are inseparable. She shows how the voices of Ma Yinchu and Huang Wanli, two environment-conscious scientists, are ignored during the 1957 Anti-rightist movement. Ma Yinchu cautioned against the risks which unchecked population growth might bring to the environment and people's lives. However, his viewpoint

was ignored because it was against Mao's belief in *ren duo li liang da* 人多力量大, or "population is power." Similarly, Huang Wanli's opposition to the construction of Sanmenxia Dam on the Yellow River was nullified because it contradicted Mao's insistence that *ren ding sheng tian* 人定胜天, which means "Man Must Conquer Nature."

Shapiro then illuminates how the Great Leap Forward leads to deforestation, impoverishment of the land, and consequentially the Great Famine. However, this did not stop China's conquest of nature. During the Cultural Revolution, agriculture nationwide was called upon to learn from the Dazhai model—remolding mountains into crops terraces, completely ignoring regional ecological differences. Following the conquest logic, the wetlands in Yunnan's Lake Dian were drained to produce land which turned to be unusable for grain. This led to irretrievable damage of the ecosystem in the lake region.

In addition, Shapiro looks into the environmental consequences of the War Preparation Campaign during which millions of Chinese youth are sent to the wastelands in the north to open up virgin soil for military farms and prepare for war. In light of environmental politics, Shapiro's work presents us a cautionary tale of the conquest logic applied to nature. But how have women been historically configured into this logic?

A 1953 propaganda poster gives us a visual image of the Iron Woman as

engineer.[49] To become such a woman, a woman has to, as the caption says, "study the fighting spirit of the Red Army's long march" and "conquer nature to build the fatherland"(Cheek 165). The poster clearly shows the hierarchy of power: the domination of humans over nature, science over non-scientific way of knowing, and masculinity over femininity. Conquest of nature is seen as the first step toward progress. Backwardness is viewed as a historical stage at which production and life is at the mercy of nature. A nature-inspired way of knowing, often referred to as primitive religion, is understood as a product of fear of nature for the primitive mind. Likewise, femininity, often simplistically equated with love of flowers, pink dresses, and high heels, is regarded as weakness. Only by putting on military uniform, shouldering gauges (a replacement of rifles in peace time), and appearing stone-faced, can the Iron Woman as engineer move from the background to the front and become men's comrades. Her role is to conquer nature to build the nation-state led by a man.

The building of the nation-state has been rooted in the national legacy of treating wild nature—virgin soil, undeveloped prairie, and rivers—as natural resources. In Sun Yat-sen's 1922 *The International Development of China*, he envisioned an intricate six-program proposal to develop the natural resources of China, including developing the virgin soils of Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet.[50]

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[49] This poster is collected in the Collection of International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam.

[50] In his proposal, Sun Yat-sen used the word "colonization," which was considered appropriate in his time but problematic today.

This legacy was carried on by Mao. In the 1950s, Mao mobilized tens of thousands of veterans, youth, and officials to develop “bei da huang” 北大荒 (wilderness in the north). What is environmentally destructive in hindsight was considered progressive at the time.

Maoist environmental politics finds its expression in Mao’s writing. The image of the Iron Woman as Engineer in the poster mentioned above is emblematic of a de-spiritualized combat thinking that is consistent in Mao’s poems. The desire to yoke nature, goddesses of nature (the sacred embodiment of nature), and woman (the mundane embodiment of nature) to man’s will is best illustrated in Mao’s poem, “Swimming”:

> Now I am swimming across the great Yangtze, looking afar to the open sky of Chu.
> Let the wind blow and waves beat, better far than idly strolling in a courtyard…
> Great plans are afoot: a bridge will fly to span the north and south, turning a deep chasm into a thoroughfare;
> Walls of stone will stand upstream to the west, to hold back Wushan’s clouds and rain, till a smooth lake rises in the narrow gorges.
> The mountain goddess if she is still there will marvel at a world so changed. (31-32)

It is telling the swimmer wants to exert his power upon the landscape, changing the sacred landscape and shaming the mountain goddess. This poem foreshadows the construction of numerous dams and bridges along the Yangtze River, including the Three Gorges Dam.

Mao’s concept of nature shares a lot of similarities with what Stacy Alaimo

calls patriarchal and capitalist notions of nature. The act of swimming across the great Yangtze symbolizes man's capability to swim with social tides and succeed. The waves of the great Yangtze become a test of man's strength.[51] The wilderness provides a place to strengthen the body and willpower of the male, which is believed to be essential for his success in society. Similarly, Mao's poem conveys that swimming in wild water signifies his love for challenge and a successful swim proves his stamina.

Wild Swams criticizes this mode of thinking and practice that emphasizes man-versus-nature. "Man-versus-nature" also applies to female apprentice communists including De-hong. To qualify for a full Party membership, De-hong has to complete her long march to Nanjing by way of treacherous mountains and rivers. Only when she successful overcomes nature will she be accepted into the Party. Chang recalls:

> [The group] had to walk long distances every day, often on rough paths, carrying their bedrolls and other belongings on their backs…after one day the soles of my mother's feet were covered with blisters. There was no way she could stop for a rest. Her colleagues advised her to soak her feet in hot water at the end of the day and to let the fluid out by piercing the blisters with a needle and a hair. This brought instant relief, but the next day it was laceratingly painful when she had to start walking again. Each morning she gritted her teeth and struggled on…
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> One day they had to walk over thirty miles in heavy rain. The temperature was well over 90F, and my mother was soaked to the

[51] Using nature as a test of man's strength reminds me of the practice of the Boy Scouts which Stacey Alaimo has problematized. For an insightful analysis of how wild nature is used by the Boy Scouts, see Stacey Alaimo, *The Undomesticated Ground*: *Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2000).

> skin with rain and sweat. They had to climb a mountain—not a particularly high one…but my mother was completely exhausted. She felt her bedroll weighing on her like a huge stone. Her eyes were clogged with sweat pouring from her forehead. When she opened her mouth to gasp for air, she felt she could not get enough into her lungs to breathe. Thousands of stars were dancing before her eyes and she could hardly drag one foot in front of the other. When she got to the top she thought her misery was over, but gong downhill was almost as difficult. Her calf muscles seemed to have turned to jelly…Her legs were trembling and she felt sure she was going to fall into the abyss. Several times she had to cling to trees to keep from toppling over the cliff.
>
> After they had crossed the mountain there were several deep, fast-flowing rivers in their path. The water level rose to her waist and she found it almost impossible to keep her footing. In the middle of one river she stumbled and felt she was about to be swept away when a man leaned over and caught hold of her. (142-143)

Meanwhile her husband is being driven along in a jeep, with his bodyguard, because his rank entitles him to transportation. When Dehong, being pregnant and vomiting all the time, finally asks if she can get a ride, Wang explains she can not. She, a young student, is supposed to experience hardship in order to receive her full Party membership.

Tears are absolutely not allowed. One night she cannot stand anymore and cries. She immediately receives complaints and criticism about her not behaving like “a proper revolutionary” (144). Her crying is interpreted as a behavior of “a precious lady from the exploiting classes” (144). She never cries again. But the body remembers the pain. Her pregnancy ends in miscarriage after the long march.

During these trying moments in Dehong’s life, Wang, a communist in principle, rarely shows tenderness to her. It is not that he does not love her but that

the principle he embraces makes him unable to express his love and concern for her. The gap between what Dehong wishes to receive from Wang—a gesture of gentleness—and what he gives in return—silencing and cold-shoulder—illuminates how much this principle can brainwash a man, damage his psychological integrity, and harm his intimate relationship. From Wang's perspective, De-hong should experience hardship just as he has done before, but that's a one-way communication. De-hong's voice is never heard.

Measuring a woman's qualification for her party membership with the same standard is false gender equality. "The same standard for all" is about forcing women to comply with the standard established by male leaders but made universal. It does not transcend the Confucian gender ethics of "three follows and four virtues." Whereas Confucian gender ethics demand a woman's absolute obedience to her father, husband, and son, Maoist gender ethics (embraced by Mao's followers) compel women to follow suit of their iron-willed male counterparts and become "iron girls."

"Iron Girls" is a term used to refer to women who grew up under Mao's rulership (1949-1969). In Wu Hui's "Introduction" to *Once Iron Girls: Essays on Gender by Post-Mao Chinese Literary Women*, she defines "iron girls" as those who " have done whatever men do in all walks of life—heavy physical labor on the farm or in factories, truck driving, construction work, military training, professional work, or academic work. You name it, we have done it" (1).

De-hong is one of these iron girls. As a first generation Communist woman, she has to go through “the Five Mountain Passes,” which means “adopting a completely new attitude to family, profession, love, life-style, and manual labor through embracing hardship and trauma” (141). “The Five Mountain Passes” is a male politics imposed on both genders (141). To be eligible to participate in the revolution movement with male comrades, female comrades have to be equally iron-willed. Feminine personality is considered a weakness. Feminine behavior is despised. When femininity is fundamentally devalued hyper-masculine and militant politics come to prevail. This hyper-masculine and militant politics, as is foreseen in *Songs of Earth Mother*, has led to devastating social and environmental consequences.

The hyper-masculine and militant politics was intricately linked with a peculiar nature rhetoric in the decade of the Cultural Revolution. This peculiar nature rhetoric was a continuation of Mao’s de-spiritualized idea of nature, that is, nature as resources for man’s use to either support national development or test man’s stamina. Animals were used as metaphors to condemn anti-Mao and anti-Communist enemies and thus justify persecution. For example, “snakes in their old haunts” were used to label “established powerful local figures” (131). These figures were viewed as “especially dangerous for the Communists because they commanded loyalty from the local population, and their anti-Communist inclinations posed a threat to the new regime” (131). Oxen were demonized to

stigmatize intellectuals who were pro capitalism. Sparrows had to be sacrificed when their existence threatened people. Mao actually mobilized a nation-wide sparrow-killing campaign.[52] The four seasons took on political messages to facilitate class struggle:

> Like spring, I treat my comrades warmly
> Like summer, I am full of ardor for my revolutionary work
> I eliminate my individualism as an autumn gage sweeps away fallen leaves
> And to the class enemy, I am cruel and ruthless like harsh winter (257)

Grass and flowers were labeled "bourgeois" and were to be eliminated. Another nation-wide campaign was mobilized to get rid of grass and flowers and replace them with cabbages and cotton. Chang recalls the story of uprooting the grass at her school:

> The grass in the lawns at our school was of a type I have not seen anywhere outside China. Its name in Chinese means "bound to the ground." It crawls all over the hard surface of the earth and spreads thousands of roots which drill down into the soil like claws of steel. Underground they open up and produce further roots which shoot out in every direction. In no time there are two networks, one aboveground and one belowground, which intertwine and cling to the earth, like knotted metal wires that have been nailed into the ground. Often the only casualties were my fingers, which always ended up with deep, long cuts. It was only when they were attacked with hoes and spades that some of the root systems went, reluctantly. But any fragment left behind would make a triumphant comeback after even a slight rise in temperature or a gentle drizzle, and we would have to go into battle again. (270)

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[52] Sheldon Lou's short story "Sparrows" gives us a glimpse of the sparrow eradication campaign. See Sheldon Lou, *Sparrows, Bedbugs, and Body Shadows:A Memoir* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005) 35-51.

The resilience of the grass is not understood as an invaluable trait of the grass that is essential for its own survival but rather as a nuisance to people. The resilience of the grass is also compared to the tenacity of ideologies and practices that pose threats to the communist ideology and practice. To clear the grass—that is seen as useless to humans— and replace it with cabbages and cotton—plants that provide food and clothing—reflects a human-centric environmental politics that plays great emphasis on the production of the land while ignoring the importance of bio-diversity. Dismissal of bio-diversity and dismissal of ideological diversity run parallel to each other.

The invasiveness of weeds in particular is likened to the invasiveness of capitalist ideology. Being linked with capitalism, weeds acquired a political meaning. Any books that did not quote Mao or were suspected of non-proletariat content would be labeled "poisonous weeds." A great number of books were destroyed the way the grass was uprooted. The "weeds" rhetoric shows how Mao projected his own biased view on the plant and books. A plant only becomes a weed when it poses a threat to desirable plants; books only become "poisonous weeds" when they threaten Mao's favored beliefs. Politicization of animals and plants and the general disrespect for nature left no room for appreciation of nature; it also justified the persecution of intellectuals and the purging of intellectual thought-forms labeled "bourgeois" and "poisonous weeds."

Flowers particularly were made in association with femininity. Just as flowers

were to be uprooted, so were femininity and feminine behaviors. Indulgence in feminine activities, such as love of flowers, make-up, and pretty things was viewed as a legacy of feudalism and a bourgeois trait imported from the West. This indulgence was thought to weaken women's minds and their bodies. In differentiating socialism from its foes, capitalism and feudalism, the New Woman, or the Communist Woman was advised to renounce femininity, including feminine clothing. Relinquishing one's femininity became a premise for a woman to enter the public domain where pursuit of feminine beauty, in other words, soft skin, fancy skirts, high heels, and lavish hairstyles would be a hindrance.

Mao especially encouraged women to take off their feminine clothing. In his poem, "militia women," he writes:

> How bright and brave they look, shouldering five-foot rifles
> One the parade ground lit up by the first gleams of day
> China's daughters have high-aspiring minds
> They love their battle array, not silks and satins. (38)

To qualify as China's daughters, women need to shoulder rifles and love battle array, embracing militant values to ensure strength and control. In schools, physical training became compulsory and sports became political. A popular slogan during that period of time proclaimed "Build up a strong physique to defend our motherland" (269). Inclusion of teenage girls into sports and politics at a national level in 1960s' China bears no similarity to second wave American feminists' fight for entry to sports and the military; on the contrary, the awakening

of Chinese feminist consciousness in the 1960s was formed as a dislike for sports and the military and a wish to refrain from such activities.

The masculine logic applied to nature and femininity in the Mao era also manifests itself in religion. The Communist Woman, who is freed from the control of nature and femininity, has to be liberated from religion in order to be accepted by her male counterpart. In Mao's 1927 "Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan," he stated that Chinese men were subjected to the domination of three systems of authority, one of which was religion.

Mao was not the only person who condemned religion. Religion was radically challenged by the New Culture Movement at the turn of the 20th century when China was facing tremendous interior and exterior crises. The Opium Wars and colonization of Manchuria by Japan compelled left-wing intellectuals to question the "divine governance" of "tian zi," or god-emperors. As the power of emperors was supported by religion, left-wing intellectuals advocated "science" to save China. Communists also adopted science as a corrective to social life organized around religion. However, the process was not orchestrated well. Departure from religion turned out to mean the destruction of temples and the persecution of monks and nuns. Quasi-religious sects, such as the Society of Reason to which Dr. Xia had belonged, could not escape the purge. Being influenced by Mao's attitude toward religion, Wang tries to persuade his sister to give up her Buddhist beliefs, "and even to get her, a vegetarian by conviction, to eat meat" (440). Later on, he

regrets it when he realizes his mistake. Being isolated from the center of the political world and completely immersed in the natural world—mountains, rivers, and forests—where the labor camp is located, Wang finally rethinks the communist principle to which he rigidly conforms. Once he lets go the arbitrary principle, he begins to understand his sister and respect her Buddhist way of knowing and living. The natural world has a healing and liberating power that the frigid communist princinciple—a hypermasculine and militant one— lacks.

Liberation from nature, femininity and religion in the Mao era does not really liberate women because this rhetoric is again defined by males, this time by Communist cadres. It regulates women's morality and behavior in a forceful way. It is a new type of control of women in the name of equality. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* offers a counter-narrative to the oppressions of nature, femininity, and religion; it imagines nature, the relationship between women, nature, and spiritual ways of knowing differently.

Bringing nature in *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* into the forefront of analysis requires an acute ecological awareness. Whereas the environmental message in Shapiro's *Mao's War against Nature*, which is explicitly an environmental text, can be easily noticed by readers, the environmental aspect in *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* often fails to register. The memoir, after all, is marketed to the reader as a saga about human sufferings and hope and it is often read as such. The reader's attention is directed to human characters and their

stories—often read as "the important stuff" (Glancy 20)—rather than natural subjects—often read as the setting, metaphors, symbols, of which the meanings are extracted to articulate the importance of human characters and their stories.

The book itself in many ways seems to invite readers to read it as a human-centered text. Although the words *wild swans*—a reminder of the nature aspect in the memoir—appear in the book title, the colon redirects readers' attention to human characters—*three daughters of China*. The story is told in the voice of the granddaughter. The chapter titles, arranged chronologically, delineate genealogies of Chinese history and three generations of women rather than Chinese natural history.

The title *Wild Swans*, however, indicates a connection between the bird and the three women which should not be glossed over. *Wild swan*, the English equivalent of the Chinese character "hong"鸿, is a component of the names of three women, including Chang's mother, her elder sister, and herself. Chang's mother was given the name of "De-hong" by Dr. Xia (52).[53] Chang's elder sister was named "Xiao-hong" by her father Wang-shou Yu, meaning "to be like her mother, De-hong" (168). Chang herself was given the maiden name of "Er-hong" by Dr. Xia, which means "second wild swan" (177).

"Hong," also called "hong yan," is a species of migratory birds. They spend

[53] I wonder if "De-hong" 德鸿 has an additional meaning to it. "De-hong" 德鸿 and "hong de"鸿德 are often used in *Lun Heng* 《论衡》to mean great virtue. In these expressions, "hong" means "big, great." However, Jung Chang does not make the connection in her memoir.

the summer in northeastern China, and migrate to the lower reaches of the Yangtze River in winter. As fate would have it, Chang's mother De-hong comes from northeastern China and ends up in the Yangtze River region where she and her daughters—Xiaohong and Erhong—call home. In this sense, the connection between wild swans and these women is literal, metaphorical, and ecological.

"Hong" is a favored literary trope in classical poems. It frequently appears in *The Book of Songs*. "Hongyan yu fei, susu qiyu"鸿雁于飞，肃肃其羽 is an example.[54] Another example is "hongfei zunzhu" 鸿飞遵渚.[55] The former describes the sound of wild swan feathers when the swan spreads its wings to fly, the latter pictures a wild swan circling an islet. In both poems, the wild swan invokes the narrator's feeling of solitude, moral purity, and a longing for home and safety. In these poems, the "wild swans," in other words, the persons the wild swans represent are males—one is a traveler, and the other a master.

Chang's "wild swans"—now three women—continue with this literary tradition and simultaneously revise it. The poetic undertone imbued in the title should be brought to the surface and given equal attention. "Wild Swans" in the title indicates the writer's consciousness of the natural world in remembering the past. As a result, animals, plants, flowers, and the countryside are interwoven into the fabric of her memoir.

Reading from an ecowomanist point of view, the eco-memory in *Wild Swans*

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[54] This line appears in *Shijing.Xiaoya.Hongyang*《诗经．小雅．鸿雁》.

[55] See *Shijing. Binfeng.Jiuyu* 《诗经．豳风．九罭》.

becomes salient. I will start with the connection between Yu-fang—Chang's grandmother—and her garden. The bond between Yu-fang and her garden is different from and yet similar to the relationship between Zora Neale Hurston and her garden. That the relationship between Yu-fang and her garden bears a similarity to the bond between Hurston and her garden invites us to imagine a cross-cultural community in which women living on the margins of society relate to their gardens in a way different from the male domination model. In Alice Walker's journey to look for Zora, Walker finds out:

> [Zora] was crazy about them [flowers]. And she was a great gardener. She loved azaleas, and that running and blooming vine [morning glories], and she really loved that night-smelling flower [gardenia]. She kept a vegetable garden year-round, too. She raised collards and tomatoes and things like that. (114)

Zora's garden, a small corner in an alienating world, provides her with a place where she creates beauty and produces food—both botanical and spiritual—to sustain her body, mind, and soul. Metaphorically, her garden is an independent literary field, or a literary tradition that is different from mainstream literary cannons. Her garden is simultaneously about beauty, aesthetics, creativity, nourishment, and sustainability. Alice Walker, daughter of womanist literary foremothers, imagines gardens as alternative spaces where plants and black women, beauty and creativity meet. The term "mother's gardens" has become a widely recognized metaphor for diverse non-western female heritages. One example is *Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World*

Perspective edited by Letty M. Russell, Kwok Pui-lan, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, and Katie Geneva Cannon.

In *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, the garden becomes Yu-fang's sanctuary where she cultivates flowers, dreams, and her independent consciousness. Grandmother entered womanhood in the 1920s, a time when polygamy and foot-binding was still practiced in China. Her father was an opportunistic patriarch. To secure promotion in the local police station, he strategically married his daughter Yu-fang off to General Xu even though Xu had already had many concubines.

Yu-fang was placed in a big house and lived in seclusion from Xu's residence in another city where his wife and other concubines lived. By living alone she was able to avoid concubine rivalry. However, Yu-fang's luck was ephemeral. General Xu reported to duty three days after their marriage and had to go into hiding in another city when his garrison lost the battle. Yu-fang was left alone for six years. Nonetheless, being provided with a regular allowance and servants, Yu-fang could enjoy a life of leisure.

Unlike women of the peasant class in Yu-fang's time who had to struggle with poverty and hard labor, what she had to cope with was idleness, solitude, and boredom. She was a Chinese "Angel in the House," a caged bird. Her servants were practically watch dogs for General Xu. She was not allowed to go out except to the opera. With her feet bound, she could not go far anyway. Her visits to her

parents often ended up with a lecture on virtue from her father. Her mother, Er-ya-tou, a victim of prenatal betrothal who was despised by her husband, could not offer any counsel.

With no place to go and no person to confide in, art could have been an outlet for Yu-fang. She was trained to learn the art of *qin* (Chinese zither), *qi* (chess), *shu* (calligraphy), *hua* (painting). The training, however, was to produce a lady or a high courtesan. Knowledge of those four art forms was to entertain and please a master. Without General Xu around, Yu Fang's obligation to demonstrate her creativity in order to entertain was eliminated. To kill time, she had the option of smoking opium, which was widely available for women like her at her time. General Xu even encouraged her to take up opium-smoking. Unlike many concubines who became addicted to opium in their attempts to cope with their loneliness, Yu-fang chose a different path.

With all other doors closed on her, she found solace in the courtyard garden. There she "tended her favorite flowers, garden balsam, hibiscus, common four-o'clock, and roses of Sharon in pots in the courtyard, where she also cultivated dwarf trees" (34). Compared with General Xu, her father, and her servants, the flowers and plants became her true trustworthy friends. Taking up gardening instead of opium-smoking helped Yu-fang to maintain her health and sanity, which assisted her in rebellion and ensured her survival in due time. When General Xu fell seriously ill, she was summoned to his residence and her daughter

was taken over by General Xu's wife. Anticipating a confined life cohabiting with Xu's wife and concubines, Yu-fang fled and took her daughter with her. If Yu-fang had made a wrong decision in the opium-or-flower question, the history of the three generations of women would have forever changed.

Yu-fang and her courtyard garden are emblematic of a class of Chinese women at the turn of the twentieth century in China. The courtyard garden in a big house that cages the young beautiful concubine provides a space for relative freedom to a woman in bondage, no matter how minimal the space for freedom is. It is perhaps this first taste of relative freedom that urged Yu-fang to escape the compound where General Xu and his first wife and concubines lived and later to move out of her father's house. Yu-fang married Dr. Xia regardless of opposition from her own relatives and Dr. Xia's children. Despite the tremendous age gap between Dr. Xia and Yu-fang, their marriage was because of romantic love. Considering marriage at large in Yu-fang's time was arranged and did not concern affection, Yu-fang's courage to love and marry Dr. Xia was revolutionary. Like a womanist, she is "responsible," "in charge," and "serious" (Phillips 19).

Dr. Xia, a qigong practitioner and herbalist, showed a passionate interest in gardens, animals, plants, and trees. His compound had "a big garden with cypresses and winter plums" (51). He "loved birds and had a bird garden, and every morning, whatever the weather, he did qigong…while he listened to the birds singing and chirping" (51). Unlike Yu-fang's passion for her courtyard

garden, Dr. Xia's knowledge and love of the nonhuman world is characteristic of landed gentry in his time. He enjoyed a stable profession and owned land, which was a privilege Yu-fang did not have. His love of birds and trees was to "xiushen yangxin" 修身养性 (to cultivate his morality and nourish his inborn nature), or "yangsheng" 养生 (to conserve his vital powers and maintain good health).

Being liberal-minded, he was a Manchu genteel family head and a patriarch nonetheless. The Xia family observed the hierarchy of senior over junior, husband over wife, and complicated etiquettes of a Manchu. While Yu-fang, as wife of the family head, was respected by Dr. Xia's children, she had to endure daily routines of morning greetings, wear heavy Manchurian headdress, and sleep in a separate room from Dr. Xia. Dr. Xia had a seat of his own, which was considered sacred and nobody else was supposed to sit in it. Despite Dr. Xia's love of his wife, he was unable to tear down gender hierarchy. Yu-fang's move to Dr. Xia's brought her "a real measure of freedom for the first time-but also a degree of entrapment" (52). Unlike the garden Yu-fang cultivated herself, the garden in this big house—a miniature patriarchal system—was designed to the taste of and for the well-being of the master. The sense of entrapment would not be eliminated unless she had her own garden, or her own space.

Caught between Dr. Xia's democratic ideas and his conformity with gender hierarchy, De-hong, Yu-fang's daughter and Dr. Xia's step-daughter, occupied an interesting space in Dr. Xia's great mansion with a big garden. Like her mother,

she was isolated from the rest of the family. Apart from her mother, pets became her friends. “[Her] closest friends were her pets. She had an owl, a black myna bird which could say a few simple phrases, a hawk, a cat, white mice, and some grasshoppers and crickets which she kept on glass bottles” (53). One could argue that her friendship with nature is with domesticated nature – like herself. De-hong’s friendship with domesticated animals extended to a larger world when Dr. Xia’s coachman, “Big Old Lee” introduced her to the outskirts and the mountains of the north:

> In the spring, as the snow and ice were melting, they watched people performing the important annual ritual of “sweeping the tombs” and planting flowers on the graves of their ancestors. In summer they went fishing and gathering mushrooms, and in the autumn they drove out to the edge of town to shoot hares.
>
> In the long Manchurian evenings, when the wind howled across the plains and the ice froze on the inside of the windows, Big Old Lee would sit my mother on his knee on the warm kang and tell her fabulous stories about the mountains of the north. The images she took to bed were of mysterious tall trees, exotic flowers, colorful birds singing tuneful songs, and ginseng roots which were really little girls—after you dug them out you had to tie a red string around them, otherwise they would run away. (53)

Her expeditions to the woods, lakes, and rivers and her imagination of the mountains of the north had exposed her to a bigger, new world, which her mother was unable to see. Her excursion to the outskirts was analogous to women’s entry into a new social space that was in contrast with women’s domestication of her mother’s generation. De-hong’s adventure to the outside world in her childhood paralleled her journey on the Communist path in her youth and adulthood. The

travel on a Communist path, which had not been taken before by women, was in many ways like a journey into the wilderness. De-hong, the first generation of revolutionary woman, was placed in the Communist wilderness and managed to survive. The animal lore De-hong heard from Big Old Lee in her childhood prepared her for such a journey:

> Big Old Lee also told my mother about animal lore. Tigers, which roamed the mountains of northern Manchuria, were kind-hearted and would not hurt human beings unless they felt threatened. He loved tigers. But bears were another matter: they were fierce and one should avoid them at all costs. If you did happen to meet one, you must stand still until it lowered its head. This was because the bear has a lock of hair on his forehead which falls over his eyes and blinds him when he drops his head. With a wolf you should not turn and run, because you could never outrun it. You should stand and face it head-on, looking as though you were not afraid. Then you should walk backwards very, very slowly. Many years later, Big Old Lee's advice was to save my mother's life. (54)

De-hong's ecological education in her childhood nurtured her audacious spirit, which later guided her to the Communist path. The endless challenges which she had yet to encounter during her long march to the south, China's Liberation movement, and the Cultural Revolution were ferocious bears and wolves in the animal lore she heard in her childhood. She had learned the tactics to deal with them long before. De-hong was a woman of the social wilderness who survived.

De-hong's experience illustrates the paradox of nature as battle ground and nature as inspiration and medicine. The Yangtze River particularly was turned into a battle ground where the National People's Party and the Communist Party fought

with each other. Nonetheless, De-hong was tremendously impressed by the Yangtze, “a whole new world of climate and nature” (149). Traveling from Nanjing to Yibin, she found herself moving through a scroll of mountains-and-rivers. Chang writes:

> The Yangtze Gorges were known as “the Gates of Hell.” One afternoon the bright winter sun suddenly disappeared. My mother rushed on deck to see what had happened. On both sides huge perpendicular cliffs towered over the river, leaning toward the boat as thought they were about to crush it. The cliffs were covered with thick vegetation and were so high that they almost obscured the sky. Every cliff seemed steeper than the last, and they looked as though some mighty sword had smashed down from heaven and cleaved its way through them. (148)

What De-hong saw was to look much less precipitous after the construction of the Three Gorges about half a century later. Her memory of “the Gates of Hell” serves as a tribute to the magnificent gorge which has forever been altered by human intervention.

The tranquility and beauty of the river was constantly jarred by collision between the two parties. Once the boat carrying ammunition was shelled and the whole burst into fire. Most of the guards on the boat were killed. The contrast between the beautiful scenery and the violence of war (inflicted upon both the river and humans) compels readers to think about the ethical questions of the war against nature and the war against each other. Once the boat escaped the bomb, De-hong entered another section of this mountains-and-rivers scroll. Chang puts:

> The precipices along the gorges were covered with gigantic rattan

> creepers which made the eerie atmosphere even more exotic. Monkeys were jumping from branch to branch in the luxuriant foliage. The endless, magnificent, precipitous mountains were a stunning novelty after the flat plains around Jinzhou. Sometimes the boat would moor at the foot of a narrow flight of black stone stairs, which seemed to climb endlessly up the side of a mountain with its peak hidden in the clouds. Often there was a small town at the top of the mountain. (149)

A landscape like this is great medicine. It has the power to free people's hearts, clearing harmful emotional deposits on their minds. Moving through the scroll of mountains-and-rivers, De-hong's resentment against Wang evaporated. Instead, "she had imagined the excitement he must have felt along the way at seeing so many sites described by the ancient poets, and she felt a glow of warmth in the sure knowledge that he would have composed poems for her on the journey" (149). In her imagination, Wang became mellow once he acted like a poet rather than a communist official; the river was capable of bringing out his gentleness buried deeply underneath his communist persona. De-hong's emotional stress was to be fully released when she arrived in Yibin:

> Yibin stands on a hill overlooking a promontory at the confluence of two rivers, one clear, the other muddy. She could see electric lights shining in the rows of cottages. Their walls were made of mud and bamboo, and to her eyes the thin, curved tiles on the roofs seemed delicate, almost lacelike compared to the heavy ones needed to cope with the winds and snow of Manchuria. In the distance, through the mist, she could see little houses of bamboo and earth set in the midst of dark-green mountains covered in camphor trees, metasequoia, and tea bushes. She felt unburdened at last, not least because my father was letting his bodyguard carry her bedroll. Having passed through scores of war-torn towns and villages, she was delighted to see that there was no war damage at all. (151)

De-hong's eco-memory illuminates that appreciative connection with plants, animals, and landscapes can help individuals to make sense of themselves in an alienating and violent social landscape. Moreover, this appreciative connection invites us to think about a more healthy relationship with the natural world. By seeing and relating to the natural world differently, we move away from the destruction logic into a healing praxis.

Chang's experience with nature was quite differently from that of her grandmother and mother. I read Chang's love of nature as her resistance to Mao's nature rhetoric, which Chang finds problematic. Rather than seeing nature as mere material or a wild thing to conquer, Chang chose to look at the tender and beautiful side of nature. Her eyes were always searching for flowers and scenery in a wasteland.

Chang was once forced to go to a house raid with a group of Red Guards. When the group leader attempted to beat the accused woman, Chang objected. When her objection was turned down, she "turned and walked quickly into the garden in the back" (307). The gesture of turning back and walking into the garden symbolically summarizes Chang's personal politics during the Cultural Revolution. She quit her Red Guards group and went with her girlfriends to tour the country. "Back to nature" obtains a unique political meaning in this situation. It becomes a way of resistance.

In Chang's eyes, the beauty of nature was in sharp contrast with the ugliness,

cruelty, and violence of political war misnamed the Cultural Revolution. Nature became a healing place to put together a fragmented psyche, to enjoy ephemeral moments of peace in a time of chaos. It was a place to nourish moral integrity in "a moral wasteland and a land of hatred" which Mao's ideological struggles were left behind (496).

Chang is highly aware of the therapeutic function of staying close to plants and flowers. Her idea is expounded through detailing the environment of the mental hospital where her father was treated. Chang's father broke down after a series of persecutions. He was sent to a mental hospital and diagnosed with schizophrenia. He gradually recovered in a suite in a small self-contained courtyard where the beautiful environment somehow helped him to regain sanity. Chang recalls:

> We wandered along the lanes lined with hedges of Cape jasmine. The fist-sized white flowers gave off a strong fragrance in the summer breeze. It seemed like a dream of serenity, so far away from the terror and violence. I knew this was my father's prison, but I wished he would never have to come out. (354)

In the center of chaos and despair, Chang maintains an appreciation for beauty and a piece of "the Pure Land" in her heart. The family was later forced to move out of the elite compound to a poorly facilitated three-story house:

> Unlike our apartment in the compound, which was in a featureless cement block, our new residence was a splendid brick-and-timber double-fronted mansion with exquisitely framed reddish brown-colored windows under gracefully curving eaves. The back garden was dense with mulberry trees, and the front garden had a thick vine trellis, a grove of oleander, a paper mulberry, and a huge nameless tree whose pepperlike fruit grew in

> little clusters inside the folds of its boat-shaped brown and crispy leaves. I particularly loved the ornamental bananas and their long arc of leaves, and unusual sight in a nontropical climate.
>
> In those days, beauty was so despised that my family was sent to this lovely house as a punishment. […] Still, on a calm night, lying in bed with the moonlight filtering through the windows, and the shadow of the tall paper mulberry tree dancing on the wall, I was filled with joy. I was so relieved to be out of the compound and all its dirty politics that I hoped my family would never go near it again. (374)

The featureless buildings in the elite compound symbolize totalitarianism with respect to architecture. The monolithic look of these cement buildings is in sharp contrast to the more artful design of the brick-and-timber mansion where a diversity of plants, trees, and flowers lushly grows. The building materials of the mansion—brick and timber—and the plants and trees in the gardens and the moonlight invoke a feeling of being closely connected with nature and with one's innermost emotion. The mansion—used by the Communist Party as a prison to cage the dissenters but seen by Chang as an oasis outside the elite compound and a haven in the midst of the political and cultural wasteland—offers the coming-of-age writer room and freedom to imagine an alternative to the Communist structure. Unlike the Communist structure that stiffens different voices, vitality, creativity, individuality and diversity while incubating violence, the lovely house is an environment where a joyful interaction happens between the moonlight, the mulberry tree, the wall, the girl, and the bed. Outside, the moonlight is shining on the tall paper mulberry tree; inside, the shadow of the mulberry tree is dancing on the wall. Calmly lying in bed and being bathed in the moonlight, the girl is

tracing the shadow of the mulberry tree. At this moment all—the moonlight, the tree, the shadow, the wall, the girl, and the bed—harmonize with one another. The boundary between the outside and the inside and the divide between the material and the spritiual blur.

Similarly, in Chang's eyes, the countryside is an alternative space outside the Communist structure and the center of the Cultural Revolution. While her classmates and friends enthusiastically engaged in Red Guards gang fights, she went sight-seeing. She enjoyed the scenery in the country every minute:

> As the train whistled north, my feelings were a mixture of excitement and nagging disquiet about my father. Outside the window, on the Chengdu Plain, some rice fields had been harvested, and squares of black soil shone among the gold, forming a rich patchwork. The countryside had been only marginally affected by the upheavals, in spite of repeated instigations by the Cultural Revolution Authority led by Mme. Mao. Mao wanted the population fed so that they could "make revolution," so he did not give his wife his full backing. The peasants knew that if they got involved and stopped producing food, they would be the first to starve, as they had learned in the famine only a few years before. The cottages among the green bamboo groves seemed as peaceful and idyllic as ever. The wind gently swayed the lingering smoke to form a crown over the graceful bamboo tips and the concealed chimneys. It was less than five months since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, but my world had Changed completely. I gazed out at the quiet beauty of the plain, and let a wistful mood envelop me. Fortunately, I did not have to worry about being criticized for being "nostalgic," which was considered bourgeois. (312)

The country nourishes Chang's poetic imagination. Like the youth in her generation, Chang was sent to the country to be re-educated. Life in the country is

not easy for a teenage girl like her. The beauty of the country helps to compensate the poor living conditions in the country. More importantly, being alone in nature, she is able to indulge in poetic imagination. Chang has a pleasant memory of her tranquil life in De Yang:

> The view was perpetually magical to me. Beyond our door lay the village pond, overgrown with water lilies and lotuses. The path in front of the cottage led up to a pass in the hill about 350 feet above us. The sun set behind it, framed by black rocks. Before darkness fell, silver mist would hang over the fields at the foot of the hills. Men, women, and children walked back to the village after their day's work in the evening haze, carrying baskets, hoes, and sickles, and were met by their dogs who yapped and leaped about them. They looked as though they were sailing in clouds. Smoke curved out from the thatched cottages. Wooden barrels clicked at the stone well, as people fetched water for the evening meal. Loud voices were heard as people chatted by the bamboo groves, the men squatting and puffing their long, slender pipes. Women neither smoked nor squatted: these were traditionally considered unbecoming for women, and no one in "revolutionary" China had talked about changing these attitudes. (414)

In this environment, Chang started to compose poems again since she had torn apart a poem she composed at her 16th birthday:

> While I was working in the fields I was often absorbed in composing poems, which made working bearable, at times even agreeable. […] I lay on my back on a stack of canes, a straw hat partly shading my face. Through the hat I could see the vast turquoise sky. A leaf protruded from the stack above my head, looking disproportionately enormous against the sky. I half-closed my eyes, feeling soothed by the cool greenness. The leaf reminded me of the swaying leaves of a grove of bamboo on a similar hot summer afternoon many years before. Sitting in its shade fishing, my father had written a forlorn poem. In the same gelu-pattern of tones, rhymes, and types of words-as his poem, I began to compose

> one of my own. The universe seemed to be standing still, apart from the light rustle of the refreshing breeze in the cane leaves. Life felt beautiful to me at that moment. (423)

Chang's "barefoot doctor days" are another important experience to shape her nature aesthetics. She recalls:

> I enjoyed living on that hilltop, far away from any village. Every morning I got up early, strolled along the edge of the hill, and to the rising sun recited lines from an ancient book of verse about acupuncture. Beneath my feet, the fields and cottages began to wake up to the cocks' crowing. A lonely Venus watched with a pale glow from a sky that was getting brighter every minute. I loved the fragrance of the honeysuckle in the morning breeze, and the big petals of nightshade shaking off pearls of dew. Birds chirped all around, distracting me from my recitations. I would linger for a bit, and then walk back to light my stove for breakfast. […] In the warm evenings, I sat by the fragrant medicinal garden encircled by Chinese trumpet creepers, and thrummed to myself. Once the shop next door closed for the night, I was entirely alone. It was dark except for the gently shining moon and the twinkling of lights from distant cottages. Sometimes fireflies glowed and floated by like torches carried by tiny, invisible flying men. The scents from the garden made me dizzy with pleasure. My music hardly matched the enthusiastic chorus of the thundering frogs and the wistful croon of the crickets. But I found solace in it. (427-428)

Chang's love affair with the country can be summed with her statement, "I spread manure in the paddy fields and composed poems to water lilies" (444).

The harmony of nature, poetry, and romance is unmistakable in Chang's narration. Of past days, Chang remembers:

> One early spring day, after finishing a maintenance job, we spent the lunch break leaning against a haystack at the back of the foundry, enjoying the first sunny day of the year. Sparrows were chirping over our heads, fighting for the grains left on the rice plants. The hay gave off an aroma of sunshine and earth. I was

> overjoyed to discover that Day shared my interest in classical Chinese poetry, and that we could compose poems to each other using the same rhyme sequence, as ancient Chinese poets had done. In my imagination, few people understood or liked classical poetry. We were very late back to work that afternoon, but there were no criticisms. The other electricians only gave us meaningful smiles. (448)

In a sense, her depiction of nature is idyllic and sometimes even escapist. During the "Educated Urban Youth Going and Working in the Countryside and Mountain Areas Movement," she was eager to go to the country in order to escape from politics:

> I looked forward to Ningnan… I imagined an idyllic environment where there was no politics. An official had come from Ningnan to talk to us, and he had described the subtropical climate with its high blue sky, huge red hibiscus flowers, foot-long bananas, and the Golden Sand River—the upper part of the Yangtze—shining in the bright sun, rippled by gentle breezes.
>
> I was living in a world of gray mist and black wall slogans, and sunshine and tropical vegetation were like a dream to me. Listening to the official, I pictured myself in a mountain of blossoms with a golden river at my feet. (382)

When she became a university student, being confined to a politically charged environment, she began to feel nostalgia for her years in the countryside and the factory where she had been left relatively alone. She felt very distressed that "universities were much more tightly controlled, being of particular interest to Mme. Mao" (468). I read her "escapism" and nostalgia as her protests against a dystopia where the natural world is banished from everyday life and replaced by propaganda. Her longing for natural beauty and freedom reveals her criticism of

the fanatic cult of Mao, a human being, who is worshipped as *shen*, or god. Taking into consideration Mao's nature rhetoric, I feel that Chang's infatuation with the natural world is a reflection of her political dissent consciousness. It is her response to and rejection of the domination and control over nature. In her depiction, there is a sense of harmony, and more importantly, there is a sensory aesthetic—the smell and sight—that is being forwarded. The sensory aesthetic Chang uses counters the aesthetics that Mao is forwarding.

From an aesthetic perspective, her nature writing continues with the tradition of tang pastoral poetry represented by Wang Wei and Meng Haoran.[56] Both poets come from a privileged class. Their class privilege ensures them time to appreciate nature and develop the art of writing poetry. Unlike the peasant class, they do not have to endure hard labor and worry about taxes and natural disasters that lead to no harvest and starvation. In their poems, nature, especially the country estate, serves as the object for aesthetic appreciation. Their affiliation with nature mediates their love of nature and disillusionment with politics, the man's world. Withdrawn from man's world to nature is temporary. The natural world comes to be a retreat where disillusioned intellectuals are to be recharged and wait for a more glorious return.

In *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, the writer's affiliation with the

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[56] For detailed discussion of Chinese classical nature poetry, see Zhan Ying [詹英], *Tang Poems* [唐诗], (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 1979). Also see Wei Shiheng [魏士衡], *Origin of Chinese Nature Aesthetics* [中国自然美学思想探源], (Beijing: Zhong Guo Cheng Shi Chu Ban She, 1994).

rural is a modern day version of the exile of a female intellectual-in-the-making. Her affiliation with the rural is temporary. Her sojourns in the countryside are more or less like retreats. The motif of nature as a retreat from the chaos and vice of city life resonates with Transcendentalist nature writing. Transcendentalist nature writing emerges at a historic moment when American intellectuals are disillusioned with the acceleration of modernization and urbanization and the social vices associated with modernity. Return to nature is seen as a corrective to modern life styles. Reconnection with the natural world, however, is temporary, for example, Thoreau's experimentation with a rustic life style at the Walden Pond.

Like transcendentalists, Chang's return to the natural world is for individual moral integrity in a time of social chaos. Mountains, rivers, and lily ponds in the country are contrasted with the barren political, cultural, and spiritual landscapes in urban areas during the Cultural Revolution. Ephemeral moments of immersing in nature or semi-natural spaces help to keep the writer's sanity in a time of madness. Nonetheless, Chang's experience with the rural is different from the peasant class. Whereas she has the social mobility to leave the countryside when necessary, the peasant class is deliberately kept in the rural area. In this sense, the rural becomes an aesthetic object for the socially mobile and yet a social margin—an entrapment— for the underprivileged people.

Chang especially criticizes the destruction of gardens, in particular reconstructed natural spaces like the garden in the elite compound where she used

to live, the flower bed at the school for children from elite families, and parks she spends time with her parents. Destruction of gardens only intensifies her passion for them. Her good impression of Britain perhaps is assured by the rose garden in Hyde Park, among other things. The garden poses a sharp contrast with the rigidity of daily political study sessions of Mao's works.

Although I understand her love of gardens, I am aware of the colonial history of botany. The English rose—the symbol of love, passion, romance, royalty, and the perfect English lady—disguise oppressions with their irresistible beauty. The rose is perhaps the most unnatural flower, hybridized again and again to satisfy the human desire for its color, scent, and shape. It is interesting that certain roses hybridized for the purpose of color tend to lose their original fragrance. The display of color is sacrificed at the costs of scent. The beauty of roses can overpower the invisible process of hybridization, an act of colonizing the rose family. A decolonizing consciousness is necessary to bring to light this dangerous invisibility.

Similarly, I ruminate about the many sides of femininity. As femininity is forbidden, claiming femininity becomes a revolutionary and yet reactive gender politics against uniformity and male control. The desire to look feminine, to wear colorful clothes, hairstyles, and pretty things becomes a bold challenge to the nationalist dress codes. De-hong's pink blouse underneath her military uniform symbolizes her audacity to taste the forbidden fruit of femininity and her contained

challenge to the male dress standard for both the male and female sexes. Chang details a great number of adventures herself, her mother, and her grandmother take to appear "feminine" and beautiful. However, Chang does not question why pink is the color a woman is supposed to wear, why red ribbons is what a girl should wear, and why rouge is what a woman should put on her lips.

Women's liberation in China is fashioned as part of the "New culture" and "New China," supported and encouraged by male intellectuals. Inclusion of women's liberation into the making of New China actually helps to disguise gender problems. In an environment that favors masculine politics, feminine mystique, which has troubled American feminists, does not seem to bother their Chinese counterparts. Instead, the latter desire femininity. As femininity is rendered a forbidden fruit and thus reinterpreted as covetable and revolutionary, Chang is not concerned about the problematic roots of femininity and problems femininity might bring about in the future when Mao's rulership ends. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* ends in 1978 when Chang leaves China and thus does not cover the rebound of femininity in the 1980s and 1990s in China.

Chang's contemporary Chinese counterpart Lu Xing-er has an insightful discussion on the implications of "return to femininity." In the 1980s and 1990s, earlier "iron girls" were now called "superwomen," women who achieved success in their professions. Once role models, "superwomen" were now looked down upon as non-women. Lu Xing-er diagnoses the problem as follows:

> For many years, women's magazines have been flooded with fastidious consultation on how to enhance femininity, how to dress, how to apply cosmetics, how to tone the body, and so on and so forth. It is understandable that this kind of advice balances the aftermath of poverty and political suppression in the past. When bound by poverty and censorship, we were unable to dream about better lives and diverse lifestyles. Today, a better economy and higher life standards allow us to develop femininity, which, unfortunately, has been turned into a hot topic in extreme terms. As a result, "superwomen" are looked down upon as non-women. The overemphasis on "femininity" forces a large number of women to remain "virtuous wives and good mothers," while maintaining the momentum of their successful careers. After describing their career successes, writings about "superwomen" have never failed to add that these women have fully observed feminine virtues for fear that the public would doubt if they still belong to the attractive female sex. At the same time, women who are desperate to demonstrate their female sexual appeal are popular and promoted, feeling satisfactions everywhere they go…By promoting "femininity," these magazines indeed serve as their own advertisements. Under their influence, some women trade themselves, perhaps unconsciously, as commodities with men for social status and material life…A close look at the law and decree shows instead that the components of "femininity" are developed by human beings according to male tastes and demands…Yet bleaker is the fact that some women identify male demands as their own life goals to pursue "femininity," worrying whether or not they measure up to men's tastes and likes…Even intelligent and competitive strong women are afraid of being blamed for being unfeminine or undesirable. (101-102)

The post-Mao return to femininity is actually a return to Confucian gender ethics that have influenced Chinese women's lives for thousands of years. Women have internalized those gender laws and passed them on generation after generation. During the Mao-era, the desire for femininity was repressed, not eliminated. When the grip was loosened, women's internalized notion of femininity, coupled with the aid of popular culture, nursed Confucianism back to life.

Unlike second generation Chinese feminist writers born in the Post-Mao era who have been greatly influenced by French and British feminists such as Helen Cixous, Lucy Irigary, Simon de Beauvoir, and Virginia Woolf, Chang's critical consciousness is nurtured by her father, her brother, her boyfriends, the novels written by male writers, the Declaration of Independence, political writers, and her own observations. She aspires to western ideologies as a result of her disillusionment with the Communist Party. Her aspiration is understandable. In a time when there is no freedom of speech, any new ideas and thoughts can be fresh, eye-opening, and enlightening. However, it is important to not to romanticize western ideologies.

Chang gives a nod to spiritual ways of knowing. Rather than seeing spiritual modes of thinking as oppressive, Chang offers a different perspective. Chang laments the destruction of China's cultural heritage—ancient temples that double as the landmarks of villages, towns, and cities. Readers can get a glimpse of these disappeared temples in her memoir. In Yixian, a market town where Chang's grandmother grew up, "there was a magnificent 900-year-old Buddhist temple made of precious wood and standing about a hundred feet high"(28). At the center of the Number Four Middle School where Chang once studied, there was "a magnificent temple, formerly dedicated to Confucius" (267).

Women of the older generation, such as Chang's aunt, grandmother, and her grandmother's sisters find solace in Buddhism. Buddhism allows them a space

when there is little other support for women in their generation. In the grandmother's youth, "Temples were among the few places women of good families could go on their own" (28). In an environment where spiritual beliefs are ruthlessly condemned, Chang seeks a new spirituality which she finds in gardens, the countryside, poetry, and democracy. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* tells a story about how women find fissures in the controlling tumultuous environment to indulge in spiritual pursuits, feminine behavior, and idyllic dreams.

Chapter Three

"The River Flows through Our Heart: Nature, Eroticism, and New Spirituality in *Daughter of the River*

Daughter of the River (1997)[57] is a fictionalized autobiography by Hong Ying, who is another London based Chinese-born woman writer.[58] The autobiography was originally published in Chinese with the title of *Ji E De Nv Er*, which literally means a hungry daughter. The quotes I draw on in this chapter are from the1998 English translation by Howard Goldblatt. Goldblatt changed the original title to *Daughter of the River*.

Goldblatt's rendition of "the hungry daughter" into "daughter of the river" seems to dissipate the intensity of hunger the original title accentuates. The Chinese characters *ji'e* (hungry) in the original book title indicates the triple hungers for food, love, and faith from the 1960s to the 1980s. These three decades included a series of national traumas in Chinese history starting with the three years of the Great Famine (1959-1961), which was followed by the Cultural

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[57] Its sequel, *Hao Er Nv Hua* (*Good Children of the Flowers*) was published by Jiang Shu Ren Min Chu Ban She (Jiang Shu People's Press) in 2009. While the protagonist of *Daughter of the River* is the author, the heroine of *Hao Er Nv Hua* is the author's mother. *Hao Er Nv Hua* features the life of Hong Ying's mother and her reconciliation with her mother.

[58] Hong Ying is affiliated with London through her autobiography and marriage with Adam Williams. *Daughter of the River* is written in London. The success of the autobiography makes her a well-known author within the circle of London based Chinese writers. Her affiliation with Britain is further secured through her marriage with Adam Williams in 2009. Adam Williams is a British writer, speaker, businessman, and novelist who does business and lives in China. Hong Ying herself travels frequently across the continents of Asia and Europe. For more information of her life, see www.adam-williams.net. and blog.sina.com.cn/hongyinghongying.

Revolution (1966-1976) and the June Fourth Movement (1989). What I am interested in, however, is not whether Glodblatt's translation of the title is faithful to its original meaning but that the English title brings to light and correlates with the centrality of the Yangtze River in the author-narrator's life. Goldblatt's placement of the Yangtze River in the title coincides with the ecological lens I employ to read the memoir.

Daughter of the River picks up where *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* has left off. If *Wild Swans: Three Daughter of China* paints a picture of the women-nature-spirituality tie from an elite perspective, *Daughter of the River* takes readers to a working class slum on the southern bank of the Yangtze River where the author-narrator, named Little Six struggles to make a way out of the environmentally and culturally polluted environment, or in womanist theologian Monica Coleman's words, "making a way out of no way" (33). The womanist idea of making a way out of no way constitutes moving into the wilderness, among other directions. As in the case of Hagar, the wilderness is a natural meeting place for the divine and humanity. The wilderness where the patriarchal apparatus exiles its unwanted becomes the very ecospiritual location where the banished woman finds hope and freedom.[59] Ecowomanism acknowledges the ecospiritual connection between the banished woman and the wilderness, seeking comfort and

[59] This is my interpretation of Monica Coleman's analysis of Hagar and the wilderness. See Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) 35.

empowerment in this connection. The wilderness in *Daughter of the River* is neglected corners of the slums, women who are ostracized, spiritualized ways of knowing (thought to be closer to nature) that are trashed, and sexuality—the wild within the body— that is stigmatized. Through connection with the wilderness, Little Six finds her way out.

Little Six's troubled adolescence is set against the backdrop of the Great Famine, the Cultural Revolution, and the June Fourth Movement mentioned above. The temporal trajectory of the plot runs parallel to the spatial movement of the female protagonist from a slum to the streets of the city of Chongqing, the provincial capital of Chongqing Municipality,[60] and eventually to Beijing, the capital of China.

The slum, Compound Six, and Chongqing City are divided by the Yangtze River. On the southern bank is the slum; on the opposite bank is Chongqing City. If we consider the river a natural site, an ecosystem in its own right, it is arguable that the author-narrator's move from the river side to a provincial city and lastly to a metropolitan city is a step-by-step removal from nature. Paradoxically, as Little Six moves from a place close to the river to a place away from it, trying by every means to sever the tie with her life in a slum on the South Bank of the Yangtze River, her connection with the Yangtze River becomes closer. What the

[60] Chongqing used to be part of Sichuan Province. It became a municipality directly under the Central Government of China in 1997. It is one of the four municipal cities under the direct governance of the Central Government of China. The other three cities include Beijing, Shanghai, and Tian Jin.

author-narrator presents to us, however, is not a romanticized idyllic life on the river but a raw and realistic portrayal of slum life in a forgotten corner along the river.

In China's nationalist discourse, the Yangtze River is glorified as the cradle of southern Chinese civilization. A great number of poets and essayists celebrate the grandeur and beauty of its scenery. *Daughter of the River* presents an oppositional narrative. It features a teenage girl's life in a slum, a landscape that idyllic poets would not care about. Wasting no words in the very beginning of her memoir, the author-narrator immediately draws our attention to the eyesore of the scenery—a hillside slum for coolie labor and the garbage flushed down from the filthy alley to the river:

> The hills in South Bank teem with simple wooden thatched sheds made of asphalt felt and asbestos board. Rickety and darkened by weather, they have something sinister about them. When you enter the dark, misshapen courtyards off twisting little lanes, it is all but impossible to find your way back out; these are home to millions of people engaged in coolie labour. Along the meandering lanes of South Bank there are hardly any sewers or garbage-collecting facilities, so the accumulated filth spills out into roadside ditches and runs down the hills. The ground is invariably littered with refuse, to be carried into the Yangtze by the next rainfall or turned into rotting mud under the blazing sun. The garbage piles up, with fresh layers covering their fetid predecessors to produce an astonishing mixture of strange odors…I sometimes wonder why the people of South Bank, living amid all that stench and walking among such filth, are punished by having noses on their faces. (3-4)

What's striking here is that the river is made a receiver of garbage. Like the

river, slum people are cast to the margin where they are treated as disposable. They themselves become bearers of verbal garbage—the slurs hurled at them. The slum on this side of the river is in sharp contrast with the city on the other side of it. As sharp as the contrast is, it remains unseen. The gap between the poor on this side of the river and the rich on the other side of the river is as wide as the river itself. The Yangtze innocently serves as a natural yet artificial divide:

> The other side of the river is as different as night from day. The center of the city might as well be in another world, with red flags everywhere you look and rousing political songs filling the air. The people's lives are 'getting better every day', with youngsters reading revolutionary books to prepare themselves for the life of a revolutionary cadre. South Bank, on the other hand, is the city's garbage dump, an unsalvageable slum; a curtain of mist above the river hides this dark corner, this rotting urban appendix, from sight. (5)

The sharp contrast testifies to the demarcation of natural space along class lines.[61] There is a stunning resemblance between the slum people who constitute the social bottom and the garbage dump that lies at the margin of the city. Both are created over time; both are treated as disposable; both are circumscribed and

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[61] There have been an increasing number of literatures on environmental racism and environmental justice in recent years. Women of color and indigenous women have a great contribution to this body of literature. See Shamara Shantu Riley, "Ecology Is a Sistah's Issue Too: The Politics of Emergent Afrocentric Ecowomanism," *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams, (NY: Continuum, 1993) 191-206. See Delores S. Williams, "Sin, Nature, and Black Women's Bodies," *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams (NY: Continuum, 1993) 24-29. Also see Sean M Connors, "Ecology and Religion in Karuk Orientations toward the Land". *Indigenous Religious: a Companion*, ed. Graham Harvey, (London and NY: Cassell, 2000) 139-51.

isolated; both are loathed; and both are there to ensure the beauty, sanitation, and luxury of the core and those who inhabit the core. The slum is demarcated to provide space for growth of the urban center. Slum people are kept immobile to provide cheap labor for development of the social core. As a slum girl, Little Six is highly aware that her fate is fixed if she continues to live in the slum.

Life on the other side of the river, or in other words, urban life lures the young author-narrator. However, the desire to enter the urban space is more to seek "its myriad scenic changes" and its "always sad and enigmatic" atmosphere rather than the promise of a better life in the city (3). The imagined rapid changes in urban life contrasts with a potential impasse the young author-narrator anticipates if she is unable to leave the slum. Life for a teenage slum girl is predictable—marriage and labor:

> I was sure I was fated to end up like everyone else on this hillside: carrying sand, emptying chamber pots, and raising kids. I told myself that, no matter what, I had to have dreams; even an impossible dream was better than no dream at all. Without them I was lost, doomed to live out my life as a South Bank woman toiling for the rest of my life. (57)

Seeing her mother turning from a beautiful woman into an unhappy, unpresentable, and unhealthy woman due to years of coolie labor, the author-narrator is horrified to imagine a similar fate. The impasse, however, is hard to overcome for it is socially constructed and intentionally maintained. The author-narrator observes that no matter how history changes the slum will never

change. She sees continuity of classism from Chiang Kai-shek's rulership to Mao's. She recalls:

> Hidden amid the lush green hillsides surrounding the city stood the English- and French-styled summer houses of the rich and powerful; once occupied by Chiang Kai-shek's closest aides and his US advisers, they now accommodated high-ranking Communist Party officials. I'd never set eye on those houses, so I could only guess what they looked like: that part of the city was an alien world to me. (21)

History changes hands among the rich and powerful, passing on power from one ruling class to another, no matter if the ruling class is the National People's Party supported by the United States or the Communist Party. The Communist government which boasts to be the government of the proletariat is not that different from its predecessor. Located on the best location of the landscape, the summer houses they took over from Chiang Kai-shek display the similarity of the ruling class despite the fact they have different names. Directing our eyes to the luxurious landscape, the author-narrator offers her poignant criticism of political hypocrisy.

The poor are perpetually outside of social and political changes. The author-narrator doubts if "there had been many changes in the city's slum neighbourhoods in half a century, except that they were more crowded now" (85). She realizes that "a bleak future was our lot, no matter how we tried to change it, that the fate that befell our parents would surely befall us as well" (148). Urban life on the other side of the river represents an unknown future and an

unfamiliarity that makes life interesting and enticing. What the author-narrator seeks perhaps is not a middle-class urban life but rather a taste of a more meaningful life. However, the meaning of life remains unclear.

One thing the author-narrator is clear about is the social food chain. The poor's relation to the rich can be likened to the frogs' relation to meat-eaters. Little Six vividly remembers how frogs are slaughtered on the spot to satisfy customers' greed for freshness:

> To ensure that the meat they bought was fresh, customers demanded to watch the animals being slaughtered. A vendor seated on a long bench took a live frog out of his bamboo basket and slit its throat, then deftly skinned and gutted it, revealing four pale limbs that were still twitching. His hands and rubber apron were splattered with blood; piles of red and black intestines, livers, stomachs and lungs cluttered the area around his feet; and green skins were thrown everywhere. Slaughtered frogs lay in his basin, legs intertwined; bloody water ran at the base of the rough stone wall. (59)

The slaughter of the frogs is a metaphor for the merciless oppression and exploitation of underprivileged people. The poor, like frogs, occupy the bottom of the food chain as a proverb goes, "*ren wei dao zu, wo wei yu rou* [人为刀俎，我为鱼肉]," which literally means I am fish and meat for those who hold knives. Witnessing the slaughter of the frogs and terrified to be swirled to the bottom and into a bleak future of South Bank women, the author-narrator is driven by a desire to surface and to stand high and safe above. Throughout the memoir, standing on top of a high spot and looking yonder comes to be a recurring motif.

The mountain top provides the author-narrator a vantage point. Her house, Compound Six, is located on a mountain top. Despite the fact that the house is within the slum in "a spot where moss and mildew stained the walls and rooftops," it gives her a sense of security (6). She firmly believes that "in the event of a thousand-year flood, should the entire city be swallowed up, our hillside would stand stubbornly, the last island to go under. From early childhood, this was a strangely comforting thought for me" (3). She occupies the attic, the highest spot of the slum. She loves to "look out the window at the clouds, since they drift in different directions than at the riverbank" (129). Knowing that it is in attics and lofts that French writers and artists have incubated revolution, she finds a sense of comfort and hope in her shabby attic. In a sense, she is a golden phoenix rising out of an out-of-the-way mountain area.[62]

There are three occasions when she ascends to high spots. On the date of her eighteenth birthday, she goes to the top of a department store where she has a bird's eye view of the land below:

> I went up to the top floor, where a spectacular view spread out below me: there, to the north, were the Yangtze and Green Grass Flatland on its north bank, the shipyards, and an ancient tower. Off to the east I saw Stonebridge Square, which didn't seem so big from this distance. It was bordered on one side by an open-air market, on a second by crisscrossed patches of farmland, and on the other two by dirty, nondescript buildings, including a steel-processing plant and Provincial Prison Number Two, where political prisoners and hardened criminals served long sentences. (60)

[62] The Chinese expression is *shan wo li fei chu jin feng huang* [山窝里飞出金凤凰].

This bird's eye view of her house from the top floor of a department store on the other side of the river also is a panoramic view of the social landscape of the poor and the outcast. Her reminiscences of what happens in Stonebridge Square from this vantage point on her eighteenth birthday awaken her to the insanity of persecution of people during the Cultural Revolution. Standing above, she vents out her contemplative critique of social injustice.

The second time she goes to a mountain top is after her birthday. She is to meet her history teacher at People's Clinic Number Five as he suggests. To reach there, she has to pass by a mountain top:

> Standing on the mountain peak and listening to pine trees swaying in the wind, I looked down at China's greatest river. From that high up, it looked like a sash girding the city with tender intimacy before merging with the Jialing at Heaven's Gate and widening out to flow to another city. Boats sailing up and down the river raised waves on the surface, but I was so far away I could barely hear their horns. Gusts of wind rustled my clothes and mussed my hair. In my imagination, this scene required only me, and that was fine. (137)

Little Six imagines the river to be "a sash girding the city with tender intimacy" as if it were a woman wrapping the waist of her lover gently and passionately. In her eyes, the scenery is erotic, gentle, and comforting. In contrast to the prison and factory she sees on her birthday, this scenery is more intimate and cheerful. Eroticism as a means of salvation, or in other words, a way to save desperate people such as Little Six and her mother from the abyss is a central

message the author-narrator conveys to the reader. To be in love is to stand outside of and above the mountain of social norms that forbid two lovers to come together. I will come back to this topic later.

The third time she goes to a high spot is a few days after this trip. It is on her lunar calendar birthday. Her mother arranges a meeting for Little Six to meet with her birth father for the first time. Her birth father insists on taking her to Loquat Park, the highest spot in the city:

> As we stood together in Red Star Pavilion, I could see that he'd done the right thing. There weren't as many people as there'd been in the shops below, and this hilly city looked so different from up here. Houses were lit up in both parts of town, and cars continued driving through the streets, but now only their headlights showed, like fireflies flittering around in the dark to illuminate the rolling hills and the city's skyline. Two parallel rows of lights on the Yangtze River Bridge stretched through the darkness to South Bank, and ships' lights were reflected on the calm waters of the two rivers, shimmering like stage lights when the wind raised ripples on the surface. (223-24)

In the dark, the contrast between the periphery and the center, or the slum and the city look less striking. Night hides the ugly side of scenery. Her home looks different from another angle at another time. Home, like the many-headed hydra, scares and seduces the author-narrator. Although she wishes to rise above it and to move out of it, she constantly returns to it. The place holds a magic power over her.

In spite of the hardships of slum life, the author-narrator captures ephemeral moments of beauty and happiness. Not surprisingly, these moments occur with

drizzle. Drizzle, rain in its gentlest form, moisturizes and soothes the dry relationship between the author-narrator and her mother. Over time a wall has developed between Little Six and Mother. Little Six feels ashamed of her mother. Years of coolie labor has turned Mother into an unpresentable woman. She has a deformed back that looks like a camel's back. She curses and cusses. She is opinionated and objects to Little Six going to college. She has poor health with heart problems, high blood pressure, rheumatism, a damaged hip, and aches and pains all over. She constantly complains and orders Little Six around. In short, Mother fails to be a role model for Little Six. The author-narrator recalls, "Age created a wall between Mother and me, above which grass and shrubs grew, taller and taller, until neither of us knew what to do about it" (14).

Like fire, the tension between the daughter and mother dries up the mother-daughter bond. Water is needed to balance the dried up relationship. With its gentle touches, drizzle quenches Little Six's thirst for motherly love:

> Once, and only once, I woke up to the sound of Mother's wooden sandals banging against the stone steps, a surprisingly pleasant sound. Carrying a paper umbrella, she was walking out of the compound in the drizzling rain, and I was struck by the thought that she once had, she must have had, silky-smooth skin and a young, supple face. (14)

As spring rain brings back life from the ground, drizzle brings out a deep connection between the daughter and mother. Little Six is actually conceived on a drizzling day after Sun, Little Six's birth father, perms Mother's hair. "He was the

first man ever to do her hair. His fingers were nimble, his work expert. The lamp cast a dim light, as a fine drizzle fell outside" (208). As if the drizzle were imprinted in Little Six's subconscious, she has a special connection with and affection for drizzle. When she visits the history teacher's office after an evening class, "a drizzle was falling outside; the light inside the room was soft and gentle, and I had the feeling I was home" (103).

With its gentle caress, drizzle creates a mystic and romantic atmosphere of tranquility and joy. Like a silk curtain, it encloses lovers in a private space. It slows down traffic, diminishes noise and anxiety. It is an invitation to be here and now, to forget worries about the unknown future. It unites and holds everything in its bosom. It erases boundaries.[63] "Sometimes the drizzle is so fine it's little more

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[63] A few weeks after I wrote this passage, I came across Michael S. Hogue's book, *The Promise of Religious Naturalism*, in which he discussed how his experience of being caught in a rain shower sitting on a bench at the Old Mission Peninsula in Lake Michigan changed his perception of nature and his relation to it. His revealation occurred when he realized that the rain erased the boundary between the sky and the lake and the boundary between "I" and the surroundings. He writes: "I was accustomed to sitting on the beach and perceiving the water and the sky as my surroundings and to seeing the line of the horizon as a relatively clear boundary between sky and the water. But as the rain came across the lake, the notions of 'surroundings' and 'boundaries' became very fuzzy. Eventually, my surroundings and the perceptual boundaries that framed them dissolved. As the rain came in, the smudged horizontal line that had been the horizon became a vertical veil. The sky and water quite literally dissolved together. I was in the middle of it all rather than surrounded by it" (200). Although his sense of *in*, *of*, and *as* nature is experienced through his detailed observation and rational reasoning, which does not transcend Transcendentalist tradition, the example shows how rain can impact human consciousness. The feeling of the rain as boundary eraser is not unique to Hogue. There is a passage in *The Dead* by James Joyce that expresses a feeling similar to this. This feeling, perhaps is what the rain wants us to experience. Otherwise, how could people who have never met before become infatuated with the rain in a similar way? Is it related to what Cajete calls our nature mind? For more details, see page 15 and page 16 of Hogue's introduction to his book and page 200 of his book. Michael S. Hogue, *The Promise of Religious Naturalism* (NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010).

than a mist floating in the air, eating away at the visibility until you can't see the opposite bank" (105). The mist recreates a womb-like environment, triggering a feeling of home. Little Six's affiliation with drizzle is actually her connection with her mother from whom she wishes to sever the tie. The mist, the essential water for the dried-up mother-daughter relationship, moisturizes and infiltrates into Little Six's emotional cracks, reconnecting her with her mother.

Another reoccurring image of water is the Yangtze River.[64] For Little Six, the Yangtze River is a means of survival and a way of life. She claims, "We riverbank dwellers have a special attachment to the river" (136). She explains, "For people like us, who had never seen a private bathroom, having a river nearby, whatever its colour and however choppy it might be, was a true blessing" (113). In blazing hot summer, men go bathing in the river. When there is no room for privacy in the house, lovers would go down to the river bank to have their moments of intimacy. During the years of the Great Famine, the river becomes people's source of food.

The river, the epitome of nature, mother, and nation, however, is not always caring. Likened to the main artery of the Motherland China, the river sometimes fails to sustain. The water is not fit for drinking or cooking. Its powerful currents

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[64] In her book chapter "Cycles of Return," Amy Tak-yee Lai gives an in-depth analysis of the multiple meanings of river in *Daughter of the River*. She argues that the river functions as "a source of life and a symbol of rejuvenation," "a symbol of love," "a symbol of continuity," "baptism," and "the backdrop to the repetitious cycles of the author-narrator's life that cannot be transcended" (65-67). For a fuller view of her discussion, see "Cycles of Return," *Chinese Women Writers in Diaspora: Jung Chang, Xinran, Hong Ying, Anchee Min, Adeline Yen Mah*, Amy Tak-yee Lai, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007) 40-92.

overthrow boats and swallow swimmers. Its floods wash away houses and animals. For poor people who cannot live elsewhere, the river is a threat as well as a blessing. Nonetheless, people who are bonded with the river develop a special feeling for the river which non-riverbank dwellers cannot comprehend. Hong Ying writes:

> People who came only to visit the river enjoy it for a moment, then put it out of their minds as soon as they turn and walk off, laughing at how we 'foolishly' skim stones on the surface. A river, they say, is fine to look at, but that's all. Just think of the time you waste trying to cross it, and when a boat capsizes, the river becomes a killer. But the river flows through our hearts, it's with us from the day we're born. If we stop to rest on a hill, we turn to look back at the river, which invigorates us and keeps us going. (136)

In her heart, the river is not just a river. It becomes a way of feeling, thinking, living, making sense of oneself, and (re)orienting oneself.[65] The river outside, the Yangtze River, shapes the river inside, the river of consciousness. Over time the internal psychological landscape of Little Six mirrors the external ecological landscape which is the familiar of her inner self. Through contemplating upon the river, Little Six comes to understand herself. This process is similar to the ecowomanist process of coming to know through ecospiritual connection with the natural world as in the case of the black daughter in Alice Walker's definition of

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[65] Hong Ying's novel *Peacock Cries at the Three Gorges* gives us her insights into the controversy which the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River has aroused. This novel explores the tensions between science and spirituality, including shamanism and Buddhism, against the backdrop of development and corruption. See Hong Ying, *Peacock Cries at the Three Gorges*, trans. Mark Smith (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 2004).

womanist. Just as the black daughter comes to understand race by thinking about the multi-colored flower garden, Little Six comes to understand sexuality by ruminating about the river.

In flooding season, the river is wild. The wild river is emblematic of the adolescent author-narrator whose sexuality is surging. For her, the river is as passionate as a lover. She discovers that corpses washed to a muddy bend in the river maintain one peculiar position:

> The women would be belly up, the men face down. Once I knew a bit about what went on between men and women, my heart fluttered when I pondered those unfortunate individuals. As the river was eating away at their flesh and bones, wasn't it also embracing them, giving them their last tender touch, their final sexual caress? (113-4)

The desire to be carried away by passion predicts that the author-narrator is bound to succumb to her infatuation with the history teacher. Her passion, like the river, drives her to do something wild. She knows her love of the teacher is forbidden. Being years her senior, the history teacher is married and has a daughter. However, she cannot help loving him. He is the only person who would listen to her. He inspires her critical thinking and encourages her to become a writer. The author-narrator reflects:

> My family figured I never had anything important to say, and the only person in the world who was interested in my views was the history teacher, who earned my complete trust. Finally I'd found someone who understood me. He viewed the world from a higher plateau than the other people around me. His expression as he listened encouraged me to pour out all my troubles, big and small.

(28)

There is a mutual recognition between the author-narrator and the history teacher. Both of them hold a speaking position from "a higher plateau." This speaking position enables them to see what other people are unable to see, and meanwhile, it separates them from the rest of the group. Both of them are outsiders. Their marginality draws them together. She finds it hard to contain the river of passion flowing through her heart. She recalls "when my heart was touched [by love] a sticky fluid flowed from within me" (137). The river inside her and the Yangtze River outside merge the moment she makes love with the history teacher.

> The spots of sunlight bound our bodies together like a ring of fire, as the mighty Yangtze flowed past the window, turning the city on the opposite bank into a mirage…The river turned upside-down, with ships sailing in the sky and mountains hanging from the heavens, crashing down on his tongue, his fingers, his gaze, his angry face, his ecstatic face. I was in the sky's embrace, waves were rising and falling around my head and ruthlessly swallowing me up. (192-93)

Lovemaking with the history teacher has a profound meaning. It invokes a primordial connection between nature and human. Reference to river, sky, and mountain reminds us of the story of Pangu[66] whose body turns into natural landscapes. The moment of becoming one with the history teacher is a moment of becoming one with the first human and nature and thus with history, which has been split into human history and natural history in the processes of civilization.

[66] See my discussion of Pangu in Chapter One.

This moment is a symbolic return to the beginning, the indigenous, and the undivided. Of particular note is heterosexual lovemaking here should not be read as reinforcement of heternormativity,[67] rather it is revisionist mythmaking.[68] It reinserts the female subject into the creation story, the moment and scene of human history and natural history making, in which she was traditionally written off.

This moment marks the climax of the plot scheme and the first turning point in her life. Savoring the first taste of love, she crosses the river. The river crossing takes on a number of meanings here. The river, stretching hundreds of meters wide, is a boundary. Spatially, it is a boundary between the slum and the city. It is a barrier between the periphery and the center. Symbolically, it is a boundary between two stages of life—the stages of girlhood and womanhood. Stepping into the river, in other words, surrendering to passion and bodily desire, the author-narrator breaks the boundary. At that moment, she transforms from a girl to a woman, from naivety to maturity. More importantly, she imagines herself as an upside-down river in the sky, crashing down on the History Teacher. Her imagination reverses the erotic positioning between a man and a woman,

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[67] It can be argued that the author has no intention to privilege heterosexual love. Although she does not focus on queer sexuality in this book, she points out that oppression of queer people is one form of oppressions. For her work on queer China, see *A Lipstick Called Red Pepper: Stories and Novellas*.

[68] The term is used by AnaLouise Keating to describe Gloria Anzaldúa's rewriting of mythic figures such as La Llorona and Coyolxauhqui. A distinct example is Anzaldúa's poetic essay titled "Llorona Coyolxauhqui." See *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, 295-297.

metaphorically Sky Father and Earth Mother. Assuming the top position, the position of Sky Father, she takes back the autonomy of Earth Mother who is thought to be passive and secondary and rendered beneath Sky Father.

This experience also helps Little Six to unlearn the stigma associated with sex. Sexual freedom became taboo during the national campaign on communist morality. Non-normative sexual behaviors such as premarital sex, extramarital sex, and queer sex were ruthlessly condemned. Those who contracted venereal disease would be mercilessly stigmatized. Growing up in this environment, the author-narrator internalizes those controlling public opinions on sex and has a profound fear of it. She recalls:

> This was a picture of the monstrous life of China's poorest city dwellers, nothing more, and there was no way to romanticize it. There were always posters proclaiming "VD Treatment, Guaranteed Cure" on the filthy, moss-covered walls in our area:
>
> Genital Warts Leprous Glans
> Yeast Infections Genital Herpes
> Itching Vulva Suppurating Vagina
>
> [A]ll those confusing and frightening symbols pointed unmistakably to things that were dreaded and shameful. Even when…Chinese society was at its revolutionary peak, boasting that it was the only place in the world where venereal disease had been eradicated, these ads never completely disappeared; and in the early 1980s, they were again everywhere. I never dared to look at them closely, nor did I know who was curing what and for whom. (101-02)

Association of the poor with venereal disease creates a strong bias against them.

This bias justifies contempt for the poor and helps to maintain the class lines. The bias is especially difficult to break when it is purposefully manipulated by the state to contain and control the poor and when there is no proper sex education. Celebrating her first intimate moment, the author-narrator comes to know her body. Presenting this moment as pleasurable and beautiful, she resists the demonization of bodily desire. Similar to the process of decolonizing the colonized mind through (spiritual) self-authorship, the process of coming to know her body is the process of unlearning controlling discourse on sex.

Eating the fruit of forbidden love, she claims her agency denied of a slum girl. Her agency is mythically linked with her difference. She is different from the rest of the family and the community in numerous ways. She is a love child, an extra and a disgrace to the family. As an illegitimate child she is ostracized by her siblings, her neighbors, and her classmates. Her other striking difference is that she is something in between human and non-human. She identifies with what is not quite human. She compares herself to "the green moss hanging from the stone wall beside the street, which resembled tangled locks of devil's hair" (2). Those locks of devil's hair remind us of Medusa's snake hair. Like Medusa, her power lies in her sexuality and non-humanness. With her kitten-like bright eyes, she attracts the attention of her history teacher. Her connection with the green moss and cat invokes the plant-animal-woman tie frequently represented in ecowomanist narratives, such as Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* and the Di Mu

scripture *Songs of Earth Mother*. These narratives present an interactive nature-woman relationship that is different from the violent nature-human relationship entrenched in narratives of domination logic.[69]

The erotic interplay between her and her history teacher seemingly is that between a model and an artist, of a muse and a writer. She kindles the fire in her teacher, who involuntarily sketches her face:

> He handed me the piece of paper. A pencil sketch. It was my face, all right, and all it had taken was a few lines. But the eyes were too bright, and were filled with passion. My neck and shoulders were bare—no collar—and I guess that must have expressed his distaste for what I was wearing. He'd drawn it at the top, leaving most of the page black.
>
> 'What do you think?' he asked.
> 'It looks like a kitten,' I said. 'Those aren't my eyes.'
> He took it from me. 'What do you know? You're too young.' He signed, a little too loudly, I thought, and shoved the sheet of paper back into the drawer. I begged him to give it to me, but he said no, not until it was finished. (28)

At this point of time, the author-narrator is still an unconfident girl unaware of her innate power. However, the history teacher, a supposedly all-knowing subject of history, recognizes it and takes it to heart, which symbolically means the young girl walks into history unawares. The portrait is to be completed on her eighteenth

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[69] Delores S. Williams criticizes animalization of black women's bodies under slavery and capitalism. Ecowomanism considers self-identification with the non-human to be empowering. It is a resistance to the dominant discourse that devalues the non-human. Claiming the non-human is an invitation to think otherwise. For Williams' full discussion of the problematic, see "Sin, Nature, and Black Women's Bodies," *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams (NY: Continuum, 1993) 24-29.

birthday after their lovemaking.

> My naked body! My nipples and navel were drawn with great care, so was my pubic hair. The face was the one he had drawn in his office, with the body added. So that was me, the woman, more natural than when I had clothes on, a wild erotic animal. To me, being that brazen was right on the mark. And that's why he'd drawn the head at the top of the page, waiting to fill in the rest later. He had been manipulating me all along! How wonderful, I had aroused him from the very beginning! (195)

Unlike Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*, Hong Ying's memoir is more erotic and naked. Exposure of the body, however, is not depicted as her vulnerability; instead, it indicates her power to draw the history teacher's attention. Her naked body welcomes his male gaze. Turning the naked body into an aesthetic object does not objectify it; on the contrary, it refutes a sexist idea that the female body is something dirty and should be hidden. Looking at the sketches of her body, the author-narrator herself becomes a gazer. Appreciating her self image, she comes to know her true self and her value which she was not aware of before. More importantly, her naked body embodies the author-narrator's quest for the naked truth of social reality in a hungry era.

There is another level of gaze I want to point out. When the memoir is packaged as a text by a Chinese woman writer and presented to western audiences, the text together with the Chinese female body within it might become an object of imperial gaze. In like fashion, an Asian male body may be turned into an object of colonial gaze. An example is Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* (1985), in which her

Chinese lover, an opium-addict, succumbs to her seductive look. Without straying too far off the track, let me go back to the sketch.

Knowing that a love affair would ruin the future of the author-narrator, the history teacher burns the portrait to ashes. Destroying the portrait, in his mind, is to protect the young author-narrator. He states, “You have your whole life ahead of you, and you need to live it as cleanly as you can” (197). The burning, however, reflects what cannot be accepted by society during that period of time. The destruction does not eradicate normative sexual morality that disciplines women and men. On the contrary, it erases the evidence that a young girl is capable of exercising her agency on a history teacher, and by extension, history. Through writing, the author-narrator restores this portrait of her and thus her place in history.

The author-narrator suggests that her power and desire to know, unrecognized by any of the people around her except the history teacher, is deeply rooted in her spiritual connection with her protector Manjusri, the Buddha of Wisdom. It is worth noting that the author-narrator’s account of her memories of Manjusri is placed in the same chapter her portrait is completed by the history teacher and predicts what is going to happen:

> Manjusri’s sword is the sword of knowledge, the lion the source of intelligence. Maybe she knew all along that I would spend my life suffering over my yearnings to know, that I needed an answer for everything, and that a yearning to understand could only add to my troubles and take a heavy toll. How fortunate to go through life ignorant, letting nature take its course, bearing children and

> avoiding complications, then dying in peace and letting your ashes flow to the sea. (187-88)

It is interesting to read that Majusri is chosen by the author-narrator's Mother to be her protector. By acknowledging her Mother's pick and claiming Majusri as her protector, the author-narrator refutes the idea that women are unintelligent animals, passive receivers of norms and predestination. Little Six's birth is a story of fate and choice. When Mother and Sun, her lover, are struggling with the question of aborting the child or not, they decide to draw a stick in the Temple of the Arhats. It turns out to be a "no" stick. They decide to have the child anyway. The triumph of choice over fate signifies a revisionist faith in the unseen and supernatural.

In addition to Buddhism, the author-narrator turns to animistic knowledge to understand her fate and life. There is a mystic connection of her fate with the temporal and spatial place she occupies. A touch of mysticism is telling when the author-narrator contemplates the meanings of the three numbers of 3, 6, and 18. She is told by her Mother that Manjusri is her guardian bodhisattava at the age of three. She is the sixth surviving child in the family. She comes to know her sexuality, the mystery of her birth, and her dream at the age of eighteen. The three numbers of 3, 6, and 18 have salient Buddhist and Daoist meanings. 3 represents the primordial male energy and 6 the female energy. 18 is the state of enlightenment. Through connection with the spiritual meanings of those numbers, the author-narrator suggests that her power as an individual is a bestowed asset

which cannot be easily stripped away. Interestingly, the number six has a spiritual dimension across knowledge systems. The number six is the symbol of Venus, the goddess of love. In the Tarot, six is the card of the Lover. It is a symbol of completeness. The Pythagoreans considered six to be a perfect number and in mathematics six is the first perfect number. Being the sixth child in the family, Little Six has "Innate Divinity."[70]

Inhabiting the slum, however, the author-narrator is socially faceless. She suffers utter invisibility and silence. She is humiliated by the cadres in the office of the Provincial Steamboat Company when she goes to request a raise of her Father's pension. She is bullied by her classmates, both boys and girls. Her neighbors rarely talk with her and she often hears innuendo around the mystery of her birth. Mother makes decisions for her. Her siblings keep a distance from her. She is isolated as the slum is segregated from the rest of the world. Her invisibility reaches its peak when she is twelve years old. One morning she cannot see her reflection in the mirror. As twelve is believed to be the age of threshold between worlds in Chinese cosmology, her not seeing her reflection in the mirror signifies that her previous twelve years of life does not matter.

Her birthday is not a point of interest to anyone. "I never bring up the subject of my birthday, not with my family and not with my closest friend. At first an intentional omission, eventually I truly forgot" (1). Despite the fact that she was

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[70] For a fuller definition of "Innate Divinity," see Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea* (NY and London: Routledge, 2012) 8-10.

born on the National Day, there is no celebration of her birthday. It is through reading of numbers, alternative ways of interpretation, mapping, and connecting that the faceless author-narrator is inserted into the chapter of history and her value is secured. Her lovemaking with the history teacher is, by extension, history reclaiming her identity. She begins an infatuation with mirrors the next morning:

> My infatuation with mirrors began that morning; their tiny images became my world, a place where unhappiness was forbidden entry. I walked around in it, passing through fog and rain, stopping from time to time to look at the images of familiar people and places. (201)

Mysticism is linked with death and life, love and survival. Plants function as the medium to tie the two together. There are two stories related to this theme. One is about the grapevine and the other is the story of the black fungus.

> There was also a grapevine behind the history teacher's house, but it had wilted from lack of care. He had a brother, who had died in factional fighting during the Cultural Revolution. Soon after his death, the grapevine had a sudden spurt of growth, reaching out in all directions to entwine itself around the malus tree and nestle up to the wall and roof tiles, its leaves dense and lush, its purple fruit juicy and sweet. Green caterpillars that fell from the vine sparkled like crystal as their plump bodies writhed on the ground. The grapevine attracted thieves with a sweet tooth. (103-04)

> Black fungus grew in front of [Grandmother's] grave every time it rained, and on moonlit nights, they would pick them and bring them home to be eaten without washing, since no mud stained them. (162-63)

In these two stories, beloved ones come back as food to be consumed by the living and to sustain life in a time of famine and spiritual crisis.

Plants, however, have their own needs. This is exemplified by the haunted tree located in a village at Mount Wu where Big Sister is sent down:

> Once a richly forested area, political movements in the Commune, plus 'backyard furnaces' and hunger, had denuded the place of its trees. The village could still boast a single malus tree, which the city kids wanted to cut down for firewood.
>
> But the villagers said it was a haunted tree, and there'd be trouble for anyone who cut it down.
>
> Superstition be damned. They cut down the tree anyway, and released its demons. One of the girls got pregnant and died in childbirth on Mount Wu. Not long after that, one of the other girls was raped by a district cadre, but didn't tell anyone, and married a local peasant. She too died in childbirth. Local custom decreed that anyone who died in childbirth must be buried after midnight. It rained heavily that dark night, turning the roads to mud, and the pall bearers and the coffin they were carrying fell over a cliff. (155)

This story cautions the risk of labeling the veneration of nature as superstition during the Cultural Revolution. Environmental disaster foresees human tragedy. When nature and humans compete for resources, humans may not have the upper hand. The zoo keeper and the tiger is another allegorical story about this competition and the vicious cycle of environmental destruction and social disaster:

> The municipal zoo owned a very rare and extremely valuable South China tiger, one of the world's most endangered species; the zoo keeper was instructed to supply it with living prey…. [T]he tiger's keeper was a squat little man who had developed a fondness for the ferocious animal and was the only person it would allow near it….[T]hen came the famine, and the zoo keeper suffered from hunger like everyone else. Somehow he managed for the first year, but before he'd made it through the second, he began holding back one of the rabbits earmarked for the tiger each week, killing and cooking for himself. People said it wasn't just gnawing hunger that caused the tiger to tear its keeper limb from limb one day, but the

> smell of rabbit that clung to him. But that doesn't explain why the animal ate everything but one of the man's feet…eventually, the tiger starved to death, and if its keeper hadn't already been eaten, he would likely have shared its fate. (38-39)

Of important note is that the South China tiger became an endangered species because of massive killing in the 1950s and deforestation in the Steel-making Movement. The South China tiger was once treated as one of the *si hai*, or four enemies.[71] Tiger hunting squads formed by the Chinese Liberation Army and militia as well as villagers were mobilized to hunt and kill them.[72] The tiger, a carnivore and thus a metaphor of the "human eating old society," became a convenient target in earlier Communist political rhetoric that affected the Party's environmental policies. The message in this story is that environmental destruction and social chaos go hand in hand.

Being born into the year of tiger, the author-narrator is a tigress. Unlike the caged tiger, she is forced to move out of her home to seek survival:

> Mother always said that three was my lucky number. In the Sichuan dialect, the words for 'three' and 'hill' sound the same. I was born in the year of the tiger, so living near mountains brings me good luck; but once a tiger is out on the plains it is at the mercy of its enemies. Mother also said that fortune-tellers were unanimous in proclaiming my 'eight natal numbers' to be unpropitious, too loaded with the Yin element, and that I was in for hard times if I moved away from the mountains. Maybe she was

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[71] Fly, mosquito, rat, and sparrow were listed as *si hai* in the 1958 "Guan Yu Chu Si Hai Jiang Wei Sheng De Zhi Shi" (Instructions on Hygiene and Eradication of Si Hai) issued by the State Council of China. Translation of the article is mine. Accessed August 8, 2012. See http://baike.baidu.com/view/670.htm.

[72] See the entry on *hua nan hu*, South China tiger. Accessed August 8, 2012. See http://baike.baidu.com/view/3346.htm.

> just trying to scare me, who knows. (246)

These ways of making sense of who we are were labeled as superstition and suppressed in the processes of becoming modern and Communist. People who openly engage with religious groups were persecuted. The author-narrator constantly reminds us of the spiritually barren social life during this historical period. Instances of religious oppression are frequently mentioned as the author-narrator tells the story. For example, Third Aunt's husband was labeled as a bad element and sent to a labour-reform camp after he was discovered to be a member of a religious society (49). "People shot there included the abbot of the local Buddhist temple, who had never involved himself in worldly affairs" (159). Temples were destroyed. Kitchen God was left unattended. The addition of these stories into the memoir creates a compelling undertone of spiritual hunger. It is obvious there is a symbiotic relationship between the purge of spiritualities and social calamity.[73]

The spiritual practice goes underground. The invisibility of the slum ironically offers a relatively safe space for secret spiritual practice and gossip. The author-narrator grows up with an exposure to diverse sorts of spiritual traditions and stories. Circulating among South Bank dwellers is a tale about the magical Waterhouse that survived a severe storm:

> That storm washed away whole shaky houses, furniture and

[73] The Cultural Revolution is referred to as *shi nian hao jie*, which means ten years of social calamity.

> garbage included. But miraculously, Waterhouse, which was on stilts, stayed right where it was. Three days after the water receded, leaving mildew spots on its walls, it was open for business again. And now that the storm had passed, the captivating aroma of Waterhouse's meaty dumplings and pot-stickers filled nearby lanes. People said the owner owned his success to his father, who had studied Taoist magic on Mount Emei, and exerted his power on the filling of the buns. I only noticed how good the meat was, how much there was of it, and how deliciously fresh the garlic and onions were. (63)

This tale appears in the chapter where the author-narrator celebrates her birthday herself. The miraculous survival of the house shines a ray of hope that the author-narrator might survive the frantic social flood. Interestingly, her response to the tale of the "Taoist magic" is ambiguous. Her matter-of-fact explanation of the reason for the good taste of the meat buns seems to refute that the flavor has anything to do with magic. Nonetheless, she does not negate the tale directly and absolutely. Her ambiguity is an alternative to the dominant attitude toward Daoism at that time, which is characteristic of censorship and persecution.

Her family provides a micro environment to infuse her with other ways of knowing. Her Mother, Big Sister, and Father, though not ordained Buddhists, are bearers of traditional spiritual beliefs. Interactions with them familiarize Little Six with those ways of knowing which are not taught at school. Big Sister strongly believes her lot is related with her qi, which a local fortune-teller at Mount Wu told her was unstable. She instills a sense of predestination in Little Six. She tells Little Six "a mole on the face means your lucky star shines bright and drives bad luck away. You won't suffer my miserable fate" (75). Big Sister introduces Little

Six to the Riverside Guanyin of Patched Clothing when Little Six presses Big Sister to tell her the secret of her birthday. The author-narrators recalls:

> She turned and ran down the slippery stone steps, amid the reek of rotting piles of garbage, and into a dark cave under a ledge, where she fell to her knees and began kowtowing to the stone wall.
>
> 'Come in here and kowtow three times to the bodhisattva,' she commanded me.
>
> 'What bodhisattva are you talking about?' I asked as I walked hesitantly into the dark hollow.
>
> 'The Riverside Guanyin of Patched Clothing,' she said. 'She was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, so you've never seen her. But local Buddhist devotees restored her recently. Come over here and ask her to protect the family.'
>
> It was so rare to hear Big Sister speak about the family's well-being that I fell to my knees and kowtowed to the wall of stone, while she scooped up a handful of water from the base of the damp wall and drank it. Then she told me to do the same. I could picture the filthy run-off water that ran alongside the wall in our compound and told her I wouldn't do it. She bent down, scooped up another handful, and held it up to my mouth. 'It's Buddha water,' she said, as it dripped through her fingers. 'It's fresh, and it's a cure-all,' she said stubbornly.
>
> So I opened my mouth obediently and drank it down. It tasted like pure spring water. (81)

It is necessary to point out here that Big Sister and Little Six are never friends. Indeed, Big Sister is the direct reason for Little Six's misery. It is Big Sister who makes Mother's adultery a scene in the compound and later reports Mother's love affair to Father. Disclosure of Mother's secret results in a lawsuit against Sun in which Sun agrees not to see Little Six until she is eighteen years old. I speculate that Big Sister might feel guilty and wish to ask for Guanyin's forgiveness, or she might still think she does the right thing and wish to ask for Guanyin to protect the

family from further misfortune. Nonetheless, to guess Big Sister's motivation is of little importance; what is important is that this moment opens up possibilities of salvation and hope. The garbage above and Guanyin beneath, the filthy run-off water from above and the pure spring water from below signify order out of chaos, and purity out of filth. Hearing Big Sister say it is fresh and it is a cure-all, Little Six willingly drinks the water. Her obedience is not obedience to Big Sister, rather, it is her faith in the healing power of Guanyin, the Buddha of Compassion.

There is a special and close connection between Guanyin and the women who live at the social margins, including the mad woman, Big Sister, and Mother. The statue of Riverside Guanyin of Patched Clothing is symbolically located "amid the reek of rotting piles of garbage, and into a dark cave under a ledge" (81). The garbage dump, appendix to the city, is also where the mad woman has her shelter. Guanyin and these women share a similar marginality in that specific historic moment of the Cultural Revolution, during which religion was forbidden and sexuality was politicized. The three women by no means live up to the one-wife-one-husband policy enacted by the Party. The mad woman is a nymphomaniac, Mother is bold to have a lover, and Big Sister dumps men when she finds them unappealing. Because they do not observe the norm, they are all cast as outsiders. The mad woman is morally an outsider as her sexuality is not disciplined by moral standards. Mother is an outsider as she is poor. Big Sister is an outsider for she was born in pre-New China and lives in-between two historic

periods.

Another outsider of the social structure is Auntie Wang, who is a former prostitute. She is the person who cleans the Kitchen God covered with soot in the compound. For the older generation, spirituality provides an avenue for understanding one's life and giving emotional support in time of hardship. Indeed, Mother invites the Buddha into the house when she finally can not bear the pain upon hearing the news of her lover's death. The Buddha becomes her only counsel. "She didn't love Father, but she cared for him in ways she'd never cared for my natural father. There was no one to whom she could reveal her loneliness and what was in her heart, no one except the Buddha. She had no one at all to talk to" (273).

For the younger generation, spiritual hunger is entangled with hunger for intellectual nourishment. In the memoir, the author-narrator depicts foreign books, the Bible, and VOA and BBC as substitutes for religion to satisfy her spiritual hunger. Little Six grows up in an environment where there is no proper education. She reflects:

> I was four when the Cultural Revolution began, fourteen when it ended. At lease seven of those ten years should have been spent in a classroom, but most of our time was spent in some form of voluntary labour: building terraced fields in a village, scrounging for scrap metals in factory garbage heaps, even sneaking into factories at night to steal usable machine parts and turn them in to the recycling station. (106)

Lack of proper education intensifies the author-narrator's hunger for knowledge and truth. As truth is covered up by national propaganda and aspiration

to western thoughts is labeled as “bourgeois,” the author-narrator develops a strong curiosity to anything from the West. She secretly tunes in to shortwave broadcasts from the BBC and Voice of America. She experiences a moment of epiphany when she hears a passage from the Bible:

> For the first time in my life I heard someone read passages from the Bible:
>
> Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me…
>
> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.
>
> Those words could have been spoken directly to me; otherwise how could they have moved me so, how could they have brought tears to my eyes? I fell in love with the Psalms and the Song of Solomon by listening secretly to short-wave radio broadcasts. I didn’t care where that particular god came from, so long as he entered my heart and protected me. I’d sometimes unknowingly make the sign of the cross in front of the Buddha at the temple, or put my palms together in front of the cross, to the merriment of anyone who saw me do it. Some accused me of blasphemy, but I didn’t think I’d done anything wrong. (108)

The point is there is need for spiritual guidance and connection with the unseen. Institutional oppression may not eliminate such need. On the contrary, it can intensify such need and force people to look elsewhere. I read Little Six’s synthesis of Christianity and Buddhism as her strategy to disassociate herself from the national identity during this time. She is exploring parallels, what Irene Lara calls, the decolonial imaginary—developing an oppositional consciousness without a guide or model for doing so. Like a lot of people in this situation they grasp at anything that is not the normalized or expected way of being. However,

there are risks in this process. Just as Jung Zhang criticizes cultural dictatorship and romanticizes western democracy in *Wild Swans*, the author-narrator aspires to western knowledge systems such as Christianity and democracy whole-heartedly. I argue this attitude fails to recognize the problems intrinsic to these religious and ideological systems. I wish they offered a more balanced view of western knowledge. Let me go back to how aspiration to democratic thoughts is presented in the autobiography.

Aspiration to democratic thoughts manifests in various ways, one of which is sexual liberation. In this autobiography the author-narrator plays with taboo topics of sexuality.[74] If *Wild Swans* is a clean text, hers is semi-erotica. Her description of sex is bold and direct. Erotica was labeled as "poisonous weeds" in Mao's Communism versus capitalism era. Her direct description of sex is a challenge to censorship on sex during and shortly after Mao's rule. Sex liberation is viewed as one of the freedoms democracy ensures. The horror inflicted on people who breach sexual norms is vividly captured in the story of abortion:

> Actually, no one cared whether you wanted your child or not; for the sake of population reduction, the more abortions the better. But at the same time, they couldn't afford to give up time-honoured moral standards, and had to humiliate publicly sex outside of

[74] Also see Hong Ying. *K: the Art of Love*. Trans: Henry Zhao and Nicky Harman. London: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd, 2002. In this novel, Hong Ying portrays the love affair between Julian Bell and Lin, celebrating Lin's bold pursuit of sexual pleasure despite the fact that her marital status and social customs forbid her to do so. Lin is a practitioner of *fang zhong shu*, which is rumored to be a secret Daoist art of love. She seduces Julian and teaches him the art of love she secretly learns. By portraying Lin as the teacher and seducer, the novel subverts the norm of female sexual passivity. The novel was banned in China for its explicit depiction of sex scenes.

> marriage…
>
> A scream like that of a slaughtered pig tore into the room. You'd have thought they were butchering people alive in there, and I was so scared I nearly wet my pants. It was all I could do to keep from running.
>
> "First comes the pleasure, then the pain, so stop shouting!"…That was the doctor talking as she scraped the foetus from the womb: no anaesthetics and no pain-killers. (256).

The author-narrator reverses the idea of "poisonous weeds" through characterization of Auntie Wang. Her "poison" serves as nourishment for the young author-narrator:

> A tall woman was cleaning the grease off the Kitchen God in the communal kitchen…It was Auntie Zhang, one of our neighbours. She lived in a room in the easternmost corner of the compound with a balcony that was the envy of all. Seven squares metres in size, it housed potted cactus plants, orchids, Solomon's seal, and lady's slippers…She had an oval face, fair skin and fly-away eyes behind single-fold lids. Unlike most other women, she always earned a second look. (150)

The author-narrator's kinship with Auntie Wang undoes the stigma imposed upon sex workers and demonization of sexuality. Instead of portraying her as a bad woman, the author-narrator presents her as a beautiful and deeply spiritual person. Of special note is the association of Auntie Wang with plants and the Kitchen God. The triangular relation reminds us of Pure Brightness of Spring:

> [Pure Brightness of Spring] was a particularly strange type of wild green, since it was tender only in the days before Pure Brightness Day. After that, it was tough and stringy, even when the leaves were covered with clear dewdrops in the early morning. Something like a woman's life: the good days passed far too quickly. (118)

Pure Brightness Day is the day to commemorate one's ancestors. Like sheep, Pure Brightness of Spring becomes a ritual plant to be made into flat cakes and consumed. Its ephemeral freshness is where its value resides yet it is also where its vulnerability rests. A woman resembles Pure Brightness of spring in her vulnerability, value, and ritualistic service. The author-narrator's contemplation on the life of Pure Brightness Day and that of women allows her to understand her life better. In other words, the plant is the author-narrator's teacher from which the author-narrator comes to know her life as a woman.

In summary, *Daughter of the River* is a counter-narrative to the master narrative of her time through her quest for spiritual and sexual ways of knowing. Communism is presented as a masculinist narrative characterized by torture, lying, coaxing, revenge, and no concern for the poor. The author-narrator's criticism of lack of freedom of speech, religion, and pursuit of sexual pleasure inherent in the master narrative is telling throughout the memoir. Toward the end, the author-narrator realizes that a nourishing father figure is absent from her life:

> I suddenly understood that what I'd sought from the history teacher all along was neither a lover nor a husband, but the father I'd been denied all my life, a father as close as a lover, yet old enough to comfort and console me, intelligent enough to give me direction, and close enough to share my most intimate emotions, to treasure me, and to take pity on me sometimes…
>
> But all three of them had let me down. My natural father had paid dearly for my sake, yet had brought me nothing but shame. The father who raised me had done so with care and determination, in spite of the humiliation he suffered, but had never tried to get close to my heart. And the history teacher had failed to provide a deeper understanding of my life than I could have provided, and

> had simply left me, treating our relationship as an eminently forgettable affair. (252-253)

While a Freudian analysis of the Electra complex may partially explain her desire for a fatherly figure, it neglects important social meanings. Lack of a fatherly figure symbolizes the void of a caring fatherland during that historic moment. Little Six does not have a father because her mother has to obey her role as a mother, to sacrifice her personal interest to raise her children and care for her disabled husband. Mao, the father of the nation, is unable to take care of his citizens.

Daughter of the River gives an example of how a woman comes to know who she is in a fatherless social and cultural wasteland through other knowledge, including a new type of spirituality. A new type of spirituality emerges in *Daughter of the River* as a syncretism of Buddhism, Daoism, shamanism, "superstition", Christianity, democracy, and counter culture. Like the Yangtze River, it contains tributaries of various origins.

Through a creative reorganization of these different modes of knowing, *Daughter of the River* is a bold challenge to the masculine narrative of the Mao and Post-Mao Era. What stays with me is the image of a five-year old girl running through a downpour to seek help from her mother (rather than a male figure). The image symbolically captures the position of the female subject going within and against social tides. Merging with demonstrators on June Fourth, the author-narrator's thoughts drift back:

> I saw a little girl beside the Yangtze River in that mountain city of south China, running as fast as she could through the gloomy rain. That was me at five. I was thinking as I ran that, even though I didn't know exactly where I was, as long as I kept following the river downstream, sooner or later I'd find the shipyard where Mother worked as a porter. I'd tell her that Fifth Brother had been run over by a cable car and beg her to hurry back home to save him. The rain was falling more heavily, turning the riverbank into muddy swamp. I tripped and fell into the mud, clambered back to my feet, and started running again.
>
> Just then the sound of a harmonica, alien yet familiar, came on the air from across the wave-swept river, and it was as clear as when I first heard it inside Mother's womb. A smile spread across my water-drenched face. (278)

Harmonica**,** the music of love from the remote past urges the female subject forward, to find balance in crisis. The author-narrator experiences transformation at this very moment. Her feet sinking into the mud invokes the imagery of the lotus plant. Her water-drenched face resembles a lotus flower in bloom after a rain shower. The smile on her face indicates her awakening to love and her courage to move on in spite of the difficult situation.

The-little-girl-in-the-image-of-the-lotus-plant resonates with the ideas of water and the lotus as symbols of transformation, which Dr. Gus Lott illuminates in his essay "Water and the Mind." The boundary between the water surface and air symbolizes the interface where the subconscious moves from darkness into light. The lotus flower, with its roots in the mud and flower high above the water surface, becomes the epitome of consciousness transformation. Lott observes that "In Hinduism and Buddhism, the lotus floats at the boundary of water and the air

after rising up out of the muck of the pond revealing a beautiful flower."[75]

That the rainfall, water in its motion, reoccurs in the concluding scene has a profound social meaning, too. The downpour, like heavy rainfalls in flood stories, symbolizes cultural shifts.[76] The rainfall, like Dharma Rain,[77] also signifies the author-narrator's awakening, healing, and spiritual-political activism.

The female subject, treading through the rainfall, assumes responsibility and achieves subjectivity at this very moment of social changes in Chinese history. More importantly, the rainfall is a connection to three aquatic environments: Mother's womb, the downpour, and *ren hai* (people sea).[78] Little Six's journey through these environments marks the three stages of her consciousness development. Mother's womb is the first environment where Little Six develops her consciousness. This consciousness, however, is limited to a biological bond between the prenatal baby, her mother, and her father. It is an enclosed tie. This tie is expanded to include her sibling when five-year-old Little Six runs through the downpour in order to save her Fifth brother. This plot disrupts the conventional plot formula of *yin xiong jiu mei* (a hero saves a beautiful woman). Little Six's act

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[75] See Gus Lott, "Water and the Mind," http://datadivine.wordpress.com/2011/03/28/water-and-the-mind.

[76] Ibid. Gus Lott writes, "Flood stories abound oddly coincidental with cultural shifts in human history."

[77] Dharma Rain is part of *Lotus Sutra*. For an English translation of the verse, see *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, eds., Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2000) 43-48.

[78] *ren shan ren hai* is a four-character expression in contemporary Chinese to describe crowds of people. A word-for-word translation of this expression is *people mountain people sea*.

demonstrates her courage to be a responsible person and be in charge. This trait is later developed into her social consciousness that compels her to participate in the demonstration on June Fourth. Like a drop of water Little Six, now an adult, merges into *ren hai* (people sea). From the bodily fluid in Mother's womb to the downpour and eventually to *ren hai*, the author-narrator defines her subjectivity in both intimate relationships and the nation-state in "the language of water." She presents a methodology of immersion, merging and love.

Chapter Four

Swimming across Boundaries: Gender, Nature, and Shamanism in "Maverick"

"Maverick" is a short story collected in *The Last Communist Virgin: Stories by Wang Ping* (2007). The story is Wang's response to the Three Gorges Dam controversy.[79] According to Wang, the story resulted from her trip to the Three

[79] The Three Gorges Dam is by far the world's largest hydro-electronic project to date. Construction of the Dam involved raising the river 175 meters above its original level, submerging countless archeological sites, towns, and land, and relocating 1,200,000 people. The project has turned out to be an international environmental controversy because of its scope, possible infringement of human rights in the process of relocation, and potential environmental disasters for years to come. For U.S. media coverage of the controversy, see Jeff Hutchens and Peter Hutchens's *Lost in China with the Hutchens Brothers: Three Gorges Dam* (2009) and Aung-Thwin Mila's *Up the Yangtze* (2008). Photographers worldwide have also been drawn to record the enormous changes the Three Gorges Dam could have upon people and the environment. For an exhibit of the Three Gorges, see "Three Gorges" organized and presented by Minnesota Center for Photography from November 17, 2007 to February 10, 2008. Chinese photographers in this exhibition include Qin Wen, Zhang Deli, and Zhang Xiaowen, to name only a few. Qin Wen's works, such as "Ku Tao Zi Shoal" (2002) present the grandeur of the Three Gorges scenery. Zhang Deli's photography documents the process of relocation and construction of the Dam. A series of "The Three Gorges Debris Clearing Team" (2004) by him alerts viewers to the environmental problem the construction has brought to the river. Zhang Xiaowen's works capture street life, life of all walks of people, and local art. Examples include "Haggling" (2005), "Raining Lane" (2004), and "Customer in Tea House" (2004). In addition to photographic representation of the Three Gorges Dam Project, cinematic representation of it is abundant. An independent documentary that is worth special attention is *Still Life* (2006) by Jia Zhangke, who is famed as a filmmaker of China's film directors of the "seventh-generation." The Three Gorges Dam Project has also become a concern in fiction by Chinese writers, among which are *Peacock Cries at the Three Gorges* (2004) by Hong Ying, and "Maverick" (2007) by Wang Ping. In this bulk of cultural produce centered on the Three Gorges Dam Project, Wang Ping's is the only one I have known so far that recognizes the importance of indigenous spirituality, especially the tradition of Wu in this eco-cultural region. Besides writing, Wang Ping has experimented with the art form of photography. For her photographic documentation of the Three Gorges, see her exhibit *Behind the Gate: after the Flooding of the Three Gorges* (2007).

Gorges Dam before the Yangtze would rise to the red mark of 175 meters.[80] An old man Wang met on her trip inspired the story. The old man was one of those whose home was going to be submerged under water once the river rose to 175 meters high. He refused to be removed from his home where his family had lived for generations. People like him were labeled *ding zi hu* (nail households), who refused to be removed from the place where new construction would be set up. Wang is deeply touched by this old man's love of his ancestral land, his courage, and his good sense of humor.

Drawing upon the real life story of the old man and *The Book of Mountains and Seas*[81] that documents the thousand-year-old legacy of *Wu* (shamanism) in this region, Wang imagines a love story between a shaman and a fish-woman. The shaman, named Wu Pan, is modeled on the old man. The fish-woman who has multiple names is a variation of the archetypal Yao Ji. The shaman's name and some of the fish-woman's names are drawn from *The Book of Mountains and Seas*.[82] Seamlessly weaving the past with the present, and the real with the

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[80] Wang Ping told this outside-the-text story in her book reading sponsored by Institute of Advanced Studies at the University of Minnesota on April 17, 2007.

[81] I borrowed Wang Ping's translation of the book title. The book title in Chinese is *Shan Hai Jing*[山海经]. The words *hai* and *sea* actually are not equivalent in meaning. *Hai*, as it is used in *Shan Hai Jing*, includes sea and big rivers.

[82] For a book entry dedicated to the name of Wu Pan, see Yuan Ke's *Shan Hai Jing Jiao Zhu*. 453. The multiple names the fish-woman has include *nv shi*, or woman cadaver, and *chou nv shi*, or ugly woman cadaver. The original name of *chou nv shi* in *Shan Hai Jing* is *nv chou zhi shi*. Wang Ping alters the word order to give it a more contemporary color. For an entry on *nv shi*, see Yuan Ke's *Shan Hai Jing Jiao Zhu*. 171. For entries on *chou nv shi*, see Yuan Ke's *Shan Hai Jing Jiao Zhu*. 262. 458.

mythical, Wang creates a unique Chinese-American magical realism tale that breaks down boundaries of gender, nature, and spirituality. It is informed by a keen awareness of the sacredness of nature and the feminine. Awareness of the sacred is accompanied by a great concern for the survival of ecosystems and underprivileged people who inhabit them.

The nature-woman tie in "Maverick" is imagined differently from that in *Wild Swans* and *Daughter of the River*. In *Wild Swans* the boundary between woman and nature is clear although woman moves in and interacts with the natural world. Nature is imagined as something out there in the gardens, woods, mountains, and the countryside, functioning as an object for aesthetic appreciation. *Daughter of the River* makes a symbolically spiritual connection between nature and woman, consciously comparing the heroine to green moss, a cat, and the river. In both *Wild Swans* and *Daughter of the River*, the speakers are women subjects. "Maverick" takes this a step further. In the story, nature becomes a character itself. The fish-woman, being simultaneously fish and woman, is an embodiment of nature and woman. The story is told through a call and response between her and her lover, Wu Pan. Her voice, symbolically, the voices of both nature and woman are given equal attention.

While letting a woman subject speak is a commonly used narrative technique in fiction by women, letting nature speak challenges such convention. That nature speaks is not so much a unique narrative technique but rather it de-centers and

reverses a human-centric way of thinking, knowing, and telling stories. It guides us back to a cognitive and literary tradition that is closer to indigenous ways of meaning-making and story-telling. “Nature speaking” is often utilized in indigenous folklore and contemporary fiction that carries on indigenous literary traditions. Nature as an agent of speech is also commonly seen in children’s literature. However, “nature speaking” is not a childish imagination. Instead, nature’s capacity for telling stories is premised on an ancient yet profound understanding that nature is an independent entity, which is not subject to the will of humans. As Diane Glancy points out in “Culture and Environment: Voices in the Wind,” nature has its own words, voices, and stories. Glancy makes a point stating, “The earth can ‘spew us’ if it wants” (24). “Maverick” shares a similar concept of nature.

In “Maverick,” the deconstruction of human-centrism opens up a space not only for the natural but also for the spiritual. *Wu*, or shamanism functions as the *chi* of the story. It ensures the flow, or travel from the past to the present, from the river to the land, from the natural world to the human world, from the divine non-human non-heteronormative kingdom to the mundane world, and vice versa. Wang’s bold imagination becomes real and logical when the story is conceived and read from a shamanic view. A key principle of *Wu* is that there is a deep connection between the realms of humans, the spiritual and the natural. Spiritual travel serves as a means to cross the borders of different domains. Life forms,

including gender, can transform in the course of spiritual travel.

This metaphysical conceptualization of border-crossing is helpful to understand gender-crossing and sexuality-crossing, which constitute part of the many forms of border-crossing in “Maverick.” Gender-crossing in “Maverick” is described as gender complementarity and a breach of gender roles. Sexuality-crossing is imagined as a fluid move from a queer space to a heterosexual realm and vice versa. Gender-crossing and sexuality-crossing become possible through a union between a shaman and a goddess. To expound upon the idea of gender-crossing and sexuality-crossing, let me start with gender complementarity.

Grounded in a gender complementary point of view, “Maverick” portrays gender oppression a double-edged sword cutting both male and female genders. This portrait differentiates “Maverick” from *Wild Swans* and *Daughter of the River*. Although *Wild Swans* and *Daughter of the River* suggest that both genders suffer, they emphasize women’s oppression. Women’s oppression is manifested in different forms in Jung Chang’s memoir and Hong Ying’s autobiography.

Wild Swans features isolation and silencing resulting from the apparatus of male domination. Take the stories of Chang’s grandmother and mother for instance: her grandmother lives an isolated life because of her concubine status, while her mother can rarely get her voice heard in the family because Wang Shou-yu views her opinion as womanish. Being isolated and silenced, their struggles for

recognition are kept at an individual level. This reality preconditions the writer's consciousness and informs her gender perspective in her writing.

A strong awareness of the self is unmistakable in the memoir. Pursuit of personal happiness and freedom becomes the primary concern of the author. It is understandable the memoir focuses on the individual. This focus is partially conditioned by the genre, partially by social contexts of the time, and partially by individualistic values embraced by the narrator. The pursuit of individual well-being can be revolutionary when it is developed as an oppositional consciousness to tackle totalitarianism. However, (eco)womanism does not see the pursuit of individual happiness and freedom as the end in itself, but rather, as the starting point of "universalist" commitment to survival and well-being of entire people and the planet. *Wild Swans* represents the preliminary stage of feminist/womanist awakening—a concern for personal survival and well-being—which has laid the foundation for "universalist" commitment.

Women's oppression leads to the disabling emotion of hatred in *Daughter of the River*. Little Six's neighbor despises her mother because her mother has an extramarital love affair with a man who is much younger than her. Little Six herself bears a grudge against her mother for the shame she has brought to the family. She is unable to forgive her birth father for his not being present in her life when she needs fatherly love. Anger prevents the heroine from recognizing that both her mother and birth father are victims of gender oppression. Failure to see

the suffering her mother and birth father experience results in the heroine's individualistic pursuit of happiness, ignoring her parents' struggles and miseries.

"Maverick" approaches gender oppression differently from *Wild Swans* and *Daughter of the River*. Instead of focusing on oppression of women by men, Wang gives a more nuanced view of gender oppression. Gender oppression harms and can be perpetuated by both genders. The idea is brought to light through stories of Yao Ji and Wu Peng,[83] Wu Luo [84]and the Number One Chongqing Beauty.

Legend has it Yao Ji, the twenty-third daughter of the Sun and the Queen Mother of the West[85] falls in love with Wu Peng, a mortal being who is a great shaman. Once the secret love affair is discovered, Yao Ji is banished to Wushan[86] where Wu Peng lives. However, to maintain the boundary between an immortal and a mortal, symbolically, the order of heaven and earth, Yao Ji and her eleven maids are turned into twelve pillars, known as the twelve peaks of Wu Goddess we see today. [87] If Wu Peng "wants her in blood and flesh, however, he must find her through chou nu shi—the Ugly Woman Cadaver—the sacred whore who sings, dances, makes love with priests in temples and teaches the youth how to love in mulberry woods during festivals" (185). In this story, both Yao Ji and Wu Peng are

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[83] Wu Peng is a name drawn from *Shan Hai Jing*. For entries on him, see Yuan Ke's *Shan Hai Jing Jiao Zhu*, 352 and 453.

[84] Wu Luo is a name drawn from *Shan Hai Jing* as well. For an entry on him, see Yuan Ke's *Shan Hai Jing Jiao Zhu*, 454.

[85] See Yuan Ke's *Shan Hai Jing Jiao Zhu*, 59, 358, and 466.

[86] See Yuan Ke's *Shan Hai Jing Jiao Zhu*, 422, 465, and 470.

[87] See "Maverick," 184-85.

punished for trespassing boundaries. Yao Ji loses her life. Wu Peng loses his lover. Admittedly, the loss is different in terms of degree, but both suffer. Tragedies like this are not rare in Chinese literary classics. Another similar story that comes to mind is *Herdboy and Weaver Girl*.[88] By retrieving the story of Yao Ji and Wu Peng, Wang invites us to consider that gender oppression is a double-edged sword that cuts both genders.[89]

The story of Wu Luo and the Number One Chongqing Beauty is another example to advance the idea that gender oppression applies to both men and women. Men are not women's enemies. The real enemy is the male domination logic. The story goes like this. Wu Luo, as Wu Peng's descendant, is supposed to carry on the family knowledge of *Wu*. A marriage is arranged for him with a distant cousin in Fujian. The union would help to "recover the secret knowledge of transformation" (185) which "had been lost since the Wu Clan fled to escape the emperors' greed for the elixir. Their marriage would have pieced together many puzzles and increased their power a hundred fold" (186). As fate would have it, he falls in love with his patient, the Number One Beauty of Chong Qing who is possessed by the mountain spirit. She falls in love with Wu Luo. However, she is engaged to a Flying Tiger pilot. Her parents lock her in a room and rush her

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[88] For a study of the story, see Hong Shuling, *Niulang Zhinv Yan Jiu* (Taibei: Taiwan Xue Sheng Shu Ju, 1988).

[89] Wang cautioned against a binary view of gender oppression in an interview with her on Kare 11 on her book *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China*. For her discussion of body mutilation of both genders, see "Aching for Beauty" at http://www.wangping.com/events.html.

toward a wedding. She climbs out of the window and marries Wu Luo. Outraged, Wu Peng's family denounces him. He retreats to the mountains with his wife and lives as a hunter and fisherman. Their happy life does not last long. When the ripples of "Big Leap Forward into Communist Paradise" reach the mountain, she is taken away and raped by the Party Secretary. She commits suicide, and Wu Luo loses his will to live. The forbidden love is later tasted by Wu Pan, their love child, and Shan Gui, a descendant of Yao Ji whose mother is saved by Wu Luo, Wu Pan's father.

The intriguing recycled fate of the Wu Clan with Yao Ji, her descendants, and her various forms incarnated seemingly follows a love story convention. Under close scrutiny, however, we realize that the bonding has a deeper meaning. If we peel the layers of meanings as an onion, we see the heterosexual love story produces the outmost layer. Residing in the second layer is a love story between a shaman and a goddess who is incarnated as a woman. As a shaman has a deep connection with nature, which is imagined as a woman, the third layer of meaning associated with their bonding is an intimate tie of a human being with nature. This tie cannot be severed by mechanisms of power structures such as gender and class structures. The bonding is not to normalize and perpetuate the two-gender system; rather, it suggests the interdependence of genders and the interdependence of humanity and nature. It cracks the fortress of gender hierarchy through, to borrow

Chela Sandoval's term, a methodology of love.[90] It is necessary to recognize that the heterosexual love bond is only one differential on the axis of many love differentials. According to Sandoval, various love differentials, like gear wheels, have to interlock to set social changes in motion.[91]

In both stories, the lovers are ostracized from their families. They suffer life and death while tasting the sweetness of love. Despite the tragic side of forbidden love, Wang focuses on the potential of the love relationship to sustain life and to make social changes. Wang names characters who dare to trespass boundaries "mavericks." Any individual despite gender can become a maverick. Interestingly, Wang's depiction of mavericks resonates with the definitions of "maverick" as an animal that cannot be domesticated or an unbranded cow or horse found on the range—one that is masterless. Yao Ji, Wu Peng, and the fish-woman—being untamed and living outside social constructs, the womanist wilderness, so to speak— are all mavericks. Love creates mavericks and mavericks create new order:

> Love is anomaly, chaos, the overthrow of all orders. Without it, however, the world would never have come into being. In the beginning, when everything in perfect order, when darkness and light balanced each other like a mirror image, nothing could live. Everything was a ball of heated light. Then something strayed away from the order, a maverick, an extra that tipped the balance, and bang, the universe was born. (194)

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[90] For a detailed discussion of love politics, see "Love in the Postmodern World: Differential Consciousness III" and "Love as a Hermeneutics of Social Change, a Decolonizing Movida" in Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed*.

[91] Ibid.

The two love stories of Yao Ji and Wu Peng and Wu Luo and the Number One Beauty of Chongqing City are presented as corrective to oppressive systems across time. In case of the love story between Yao Ji and Wu Peng, the oppressive system is patriarchy. When it comes to the love story between Wu Luo and the Number One Beauty of Chongqing City, the oppressive system is totalitarian ideology. The two love stories indicate the potential of a continuous liberating methodology of love.

Love takes on multiple meanings. It can be love of a lover, love of nature, and compassion for the sick, the poor, and women. Compassion engenders a greater love that goes beyond personal interest. Wu Luo exemplifies the idea. He puts food outside the door of the old and young and sick despite the risks of being caught and punished by Red Guards. Set against the backdrops of the Land Reform, the Great Leap, years of communal canteen, the False Report and the Great Famine, the love story of Wu Luo and his lover functions as a political commentary on the destruction of the environment, forced migration, destruction of ancient knowledge and spirituality by Red Guards. As Wu Luo is a healer, his love symbolically is a cure to violence.

As a healer, Wu Luo performs the dual roles of father and mother. He is a feminine male in many ways. He takes up the role of a mother after his wife dies. He also takes care of people in the mountains. His caretaking extends to nature. As a shaman, he is the guardian of the land, river, and trees. This mother-father figure

is not unique in “Maverick.” Another example is Little Six’s adoptive father in *Daughter of the River*. His femininity is read as silence and caring, qualities that are often attributed to women. Just as Wu Luo mothers Wu Pan, Little Six’s adoptive father mothers her. His mothering, however, is a way to soothe his tormented psyche. He regrets having taken Little Six’s birth father to court. His action turns his wife, her lover, his children, and himself into laughing stocks in the compound. To compensate for what he has done, he silently supports Little Six and gives her more tender love than his wife does. What’s more, his gentleness and silence is rooted in his wounded self-esteem. After he is injured in an accident at work, he loses his job. Being crippled and jobless, he is unable to financially fulfill the role of husband and father. Instead, he becomes a burden to his wife and the family. It is his tenderness and silence that helps him to maintain a place in the family. While Little Six’s father’s caring is a result of harsh living conditions, Wu Luo’s caring is rooted in his knowledge of transformation, healing, love, and compassion. As a Wu man, he is “a messenger between heaven, earth, and the underworld” (179).

The characterization of fathers as caretakers challenges our view of gender roles and concept of femininity. These two feminine male caretakers belie the association of femininity with the female gender. In both stories male femininity is not described as a character defect but a quality to sustain life, family, and the community. To be sure, both fathers are outside the norms of gender structure with

Wu Pan as a shaman and Little Six's father as an underprivileged person. The two examples of Wu Pan and Little Six's father bring to light aspects of class and spirituality that reshape gender roles and femininity in association with male characters. While low class status may emasculate males, it may also offer a vantage point to break gender norms. Likewise, shamanic ways of knowing can possibly liberate male individuals from socially designated gender roles and social constructs of masculinity and femininity. [92]

Feminine males in "Maverick" and *Daughter of the River* can be read together with nurturing fathers, uncles, and brothers in Alice Walker's works. Walker considers hyper-masculine men incomplete. They become integrated only when their masculinity is counterbalanced by femininity. Two exemples are Suwelo in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990) and Yolo in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004). In the beginning of the stories, both Suwelo and Yolo are flawed for possessing mere masculinity in their psyche and acting as such. Suwelo matures only when he develops a deep connection with Mr. Hal who teaches him to respect women and not be afraid of being soft. In like fashion, Yolo becomes a fuller character only after he is educated by a group of Mahus, males who take up the role of women. Aunty Pearlua, a Mahus tells Yolo:

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[92] Gender in contemporary shamanism is highly debated. Some argue that contemporary shamanism privileges males, while others contend that shamanism is liberatory for women. For discussion of gender discrimination in shamanism, see Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993). For analysis of the potential of shamanic aesthetics, see AnaLouise Keating, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2009).

> There was a time, long time ago…when Mother rule was the dominant way of life, not only here where the original, original Hawaiians lived, but everywhere else too. The first Hawaiians were small dark people, but they were wiped out and intermingled with the tall Tahitians who, from some accounts, were pretty mean…we are some of both of them and more besides…Our origins as Mahus, that is…The story goes that we were in a position to see the overthrow and enslavement of woman, the consequent ruination of her children, which was so horrible to us that we decided that until woman was restored to her rightful place we would live her life. That is to say, we would live openly as women. That is to say, we would live openly the feminine part of our nature, which, as we know, is sometimes the dominant nature with which we are born, whether as 'men' or as 'women.'" (122)

By stating femininity is part of human nature despite gender,[93] Aunty Pearlua refutes differentiation of men from women based on discrimination of masculinity against femininity. Femininity, which is part of the nature of men, is stripped away from them only later. To be socially responsible, men should reclaim the feminine part. Femininity is not just for women and it is crucial for social continuity.

The role of femininity and Mother in sustaining life is referred to as "the female principle" by M.A. Jaimes Guerrero. In her essay "Native Womanism: Exemplars of Indigenism in Sacred Traditions of Kinship," she defines "the female principle" as follows:

> This principle is connected with the indigenous image of the Earth as Mother, or what many of us call Our Mother Earth, and as an

[93] The idea that masculinity and femininity simultaneously coexist in an individual is shared by Daoism as well as Igbo and Yoruba cosmology. See my monography *Spirituality: A Womanist Reading of Amy Tan's The Bonesetter's Daughter*, 5. Also see "An Excursion into Woman's (s) (p) ace" in *Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*, 37.

> enspirited presence as well as metaphoric in one's Native Spirituality…she is…about the restoration and renewal of Native women's rightful authority and leadership for a universal indigenous world view. (38-39)

The feminine, however, is suppressed and repressed in the practice of patriarchy and in the process of colonization. To release the feminine from the control of patriarchal and colonial power structure, and to decolonize internalized patriarchal and colonial values, the feminine has to be recovered. In Paula Gunn Allen's book The *Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1992), she points out that women's literature stands on the forefront of taking up this task. One way to recover the feminine is to recover and reconnect with the ways of our grandmothers and women warriors. Another way to do it, I would argue, is to question the privileging of masculinity, and meanwhile, to imagine male characters who embody alternative masculinities and femininities.

In case of "Maverick," the story of Wu Pan's education exemplifies the idea that a male becomes psychologically and spiritually sound when masculinity is integrated with femininity. Wu Pan, raised by his father, is dumb and dull before he meets with Shan Gui and her mother. Wu Pan is able to speak only after he sucks the milk of Shan Gui's mother, symbolically nourishment of feminine power. Wu Pan's bond with Shan Gui and her mother has other significances, which I will discuss later. The notion of masculine-feminine complementarity is not to advocate for heterosexual relationship; rather, it is to criticize favoritism of masculine ideologies entrenched in social structures, customs, and the psyche.

In “Maverick” a queer space coexists with the heterosexual domain. The queer space, however, is not something that has newly emerged in contemporary Chinese literary imagination. It goes back to the earlier literary genre of folklore and mythical legends. Queer space in Chinese literary classics is portrayed as the non-human non-heteronormative kingdom. One case in point is the Moon Palace in *Legend of Moon Goddess*.[94] The Moon Palace is where Chang’e and her maids live. Casting as an extraterrestrial female space, the Moon Palace is outside the mundane world where gender normative is privileged and perpetuated.

The non-human non-heteronormative kingdom reoccurs in “Maverick.” Shan Gui tells Wu Pan, “I come from a family that knows no father…I have many names—Goddess of the Twelve Peaks, Yao Ji, Fish Woman, Ugly Woman Cadaver, shaman, witch, whore” (177). Here Wang plays with the reoccurring motif of the non-human non-heteronormative kingdom and takes it a step further. While the non-human non-heteronormative kingdom in earlier legends is a place to segregate females from the normal social structure, the non-human non-heteronormative kingdom in “Maverick” is a space of female bonding and self-governance, or in other words, a place where “the female principle” is enacted. By reclaiming Shan Gui’s multiple identities of witch, whore, and goddess, Wang provides a revisionist

[94] For English translation of the legend, see http://www.chinaculture.org. Legend of the Moon Goddess is appropriated by Amy Tan in *The Joy Luck Club*, in which the Moon Goddess, Chang’e is referred to as the Moon Lady. Wenying Xu has a thorough discussion of the use of myths in Amy Tan’s works. For Xu’s analysis, see “A Womanist Production of Truths: the Use of Myths in Amy Tan.” For my review of Xu’s essay, see *Spirituality: A Womanist Reading of Amy Tan’s The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, 7.

corrective to patriarchal representation of the non-human non-heteronormative kingdom in earlier legends.

It is interesting to note a reoccurring plot development in earlier legends, including *Legend of the Moon Goddess* and *Legend of the White Snake*.[95] In both stories, the heroines are immortals living in non-human non-heteronormative kingdoms away from the mundane realms where people experience birth, marital life, old age, illness, and death. They fall in love with male mortals. Their love lives with mortals usually do not last long. There is a strong force to pull them back to where they come from. The strong external force is usually imagined as intervention of feudalist patriarchy represented by powerful parents or the Buddhist church.

Here I wish to suggest an alternative reading: the perceived external force can be internal. Tired of heterosexual life and obligations as wives, the heroines themselves may have a strong desire to go back to the non-human non-heteronormative kingdom. This queer desire, however, is flavored with predominant heterosexual ethics of the time and presented to us as heterosexual love stories we are familiar with today. What intrigues me is why the ending is always a return to the non-human and non-heteronormative kingdom.[96]

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[95] For the whole story, see *Bai She Zhuan* (Taibei: Wen Hua Tu Shu Gong Si, 1982).

[96] Irene Lara and Paula Gunn Allen's decolonial readings of indigenous myth and tales inspire my reading. Both of them suggest the feminine tradition in indigenous myth and tales can be usurped by colonialist and patriarchal interpretation and re-encoding. I suspect a similar patriarchal re-encoding happens to Chinese legends. For an elaboration of decolonial reading, see Lara's "Goddess of the Americas in the Decolonial Imaginary: Beyond the Virtuous Virgen/Pagan Puta

Going back to the non-human non-heteronormative kingdom is also true in "Maverick." Habitants of the non-human non-heteronormative kingdom can easily transform life forms. Shan Gui, the heroine of the tale, changes from a mountain spirit to a sturgeon, from a sturgeon to a woman, and from a woman back to a sturgeon in the end. Return to her original form is return to the origin of things, nature. Nature itself, through embodiment of Shan Gui, becomes one of the protagonists in "Maverick." Embodiment of nature transcends the narrative convention of human characters as the primary subjects of concern in *Wild Swans* and *Daughter of the River*.

Homecoming, or in other words, going back to nature and woman means mutual survival. While survival in *Wild Swans* and *Daughter of the River* means to leave "home"— China and the slum for Britain and the city respectively— survival in "Maverick" means to go home, to return to nature. To survive, Wu Pan retreats to the mountains and Shan Gui goes back to the river. The survival of the shaman and his lover is interdependent. The survival of the fish, the woman, is also the survival of the shaman. Through a call and response, the shaman and the fish woman are brought to a much closer bond than the tie between the daughter and her home in *Wild Swans* and *Daughter of the River*.

Equal attention is given to the survival of endangered species. By imagining

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Dichotomy" and Allen's "Kochinnenako in Academe: Three Approaches to Interpreting a Keres Indian Tale" in *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. I am indebted to Bianet Castellanos for the reference to Irene Lara's article.

Shan Gui a daughter of the green sturgeon Queen, Wang invites us to think about environmental consequences the Three Gorges Dam might bring to the green sturgeon. The Dam poses a great threat to the survival of the green sturgeon. It is another dangerous obstacle on the migration route of the green sturgeon To save the green sturgeon from mass destruction, Shan Gui is to perform three tasks and die three painful deaths. Shan Gui's mother predicts:

> First, you must find a new route through the Gezhouba Dam so the green sturgeon pods can return to their birthplace in the Golden Sand River. Second, you must find another new route through the Three Georges Dam so the green sturgeon can go home and spawn. If you can't find a new route for the royal fish, the flower of the river and sea, you must sacrifice your own life to show them that their origin is no longer there and they have to settle for a new home. You'll hurl yourself against the dam over and over, your flesh splashing over the concrete. You'll be shredded by the turbines, your blood dying the reservoir scarlet red. Your violent death may or may not be enough to shock them into finding a new home, but it's the only chance for those stubborn prehistoric creatures. They have seen the rise and fall of dinosaurs, the coming and going of the big ice and floods, the birth of mammals and humans. Will they survive this? We can only hope, before they disappear, before we all disappear.
>
> [For] millions of years, they've been living like this: born in the Golden Sand River, swim to the sea, grow up in the ocean, then go back home to mate and spawn, no matter how many rocks and damns they have to jump over, how many fishhooks or nets awaits them…If your sacrifice can't stop them from the mass suicide, you'll have to offer your body as a breeding vessel. You'll be kept in a tank as eggs grow in your belly. You'll feel extremely agitated because your sturgeon instinct will urge you to swim to your place of origin at any cost. But you will be restricted in the tank until the ova are ready to be harvested, and you'll be injected with hormones to let go the caviar that will be hatched in a tank then released into the river. After you're emptied, you'll be shipped to the capital in the name of scientific research and displayed for money. You won't be able to eat because you'll be homesick. You'll hear the calling of

> your lover, but you won't be able to reach him. You'll wither in front of the crowd. Even in your dying, you'll not be left alone. You'll be prodded and cajoled to please the crowd. This will be your most painful death because you're away from your home air, soil, and water. (182-83)

The bleak future Shan Gui faces is imagined as a punishment and redemption for her loving Wu Pan, a mortal being she is forbidden to love. Fulfilling tasks for redemption is a conventional plot formula in classical Chinese literature. *Journey to the West* is a good example.[97] Shan Gui's counterpart in *Journey to the West* is the Monkey King. Although the Monkey King's redemption is not about a love story, it provides interesting reference points to think about the nature-wo/man relationship which is imagined differently in "Maverick" and *Journey to the West*.

The Monkey King has absorbed the essence of nature and gained tremendous power. Being super-powerful, the Monkey King does not obey the order of things in the three realms of heaven, earth, and the underworld. He is outwitted by Tathagata and subdued under the Mountain of Tathagata's Five Figures. Guan Yin intends to redeem the Monkey King. He is assigned as an assistant for Tang Seng to help him reach India and bring back Buddhist literature to the emperor. Guan Yin predicts they would go through eighty-one hardships and accomplish eighty-one tasks.

The Monkey King's punishment and redemption has a significant difference from Shan Gui's. To punish and redeem the Monkey King is to contain his wild

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[97] For the complete story, see Wu Cheng'en's *The Journey to the West* translated by W. J. F. Jenner.

nature and maintain the order of power structures in the three realms. The ultimate goal is to maintain the social order of the empire. The empire, or in other words, the human world is the central concern of the tale. The rewards the Monkey King obtains by going through the eighty-one hardships and accomplishing the eighty-one tasks is an achievement of nirvana in the end. Nirvana means a final departure from the mundane world, which includes the human world and the natural world of animals. The Monkey King is assimilated into the order of things and resides in another world disassociated from the kingdom of monkeys. He would no longer have responsibility for his monkey race.

On the contrary, Shan Gui's punishment and redemption is to reconnect with her fish race, the sturgeons. No redemption will be possible if her race fails to survive. Her mother warns her, "Once that happens, your soul will plunge into the dark abyss from which nothing ever returns. I won't be able to pull you out, even with the help of your grandma, aunts, and sisters" (183). If her race survives, she will survive; if her race perishes, she will perish. The interdependence between Shan Gui's survival and the survival of her race offers a counter narrative to the tale of the Monkey King, which favors personal enlightenment and a shedding of social responsibility. Undaunted by her mother's warning, Shan Gui plunges into the arms of her lover. Her determination indicates a strong bond with this material world. However, when her race is in danger she sacrifices her personal happiness and returns to home to complete the three tasks of saving her race. Her love of

mortals and her sense of responsibility for her race signify an audacious womanist politics of passion and eco-social responsibility.

Shan Gui's fluid travel between worlds, the world of the mortal and the world of the sturgeon, the world of dual genders and the world of the non-human non-heteronormative kingdom is made possible through not only traditional plot formula but also a spiritual way of knowing. *Wu* is affirmed in *Maverick*. The key principle of *wu* is a belief in the possibility of communicating with the natural and spiritual worlds. In the story, training of a *wu* man, or shaman is through direct interaction with nature. Wu Pan is trained to be a shaman by his father. A prerequisite for apprenticeship is an exposure to nature. Living in the mountains, Wu Pan's playmates are monkeys, birds, and other animals.

Exposure to plants is of great importance as well. One species mentioned is *shui shan*, or the water fir. It is one of the four prehistoric species surviving to this day in China. It is under this giant tree that Shan Gui and Wu Pan play when they finish nursing. Wu Pan's first bite of food other than milk is nuts from this tree. Symbolically, Wu Pan's mother is nature: a mother sturgeon whose breast he sucks and a tree whose nuts he feeds on. This mother is invisible to his father. His father is unaware of Wu Pan's life with the mother sturgeon, her daughter, and the trees. It is through communication with them that Wu Pan has learnt to eat solid food and speak. The first sound he makes is *wuuuuuu*, a belly language when Shan Gui puts a crown of flowers on his head. The crown of flowers symbolizes

enlightenment from nature, which is represented by feminine beauty and transmitted through a woman. His first cry is *jiao*, new moon when his father catches him laughing. His father's sweaty body odor and burning heart terrifies him. "Jiao" is Shan Gui who disappears when Wu Pan's father approaches them. *Jiao*, new moon also resembles Shan Gui's moon-shaped fragrant baby feet. The contrast of male body odor and the female body, of fatherly love and motherly love is unmistakable here. The contrast, however, is not to essentialize maleness and femaleness but to illuminate the importance of gender complementarity in shaping integral consciousness discussed above.

To bridge the gap between male and female, the invisible and the tangible, special training is needed. Wu Pan's father, as an heir to the lost knowledge of shamanism, a master hunter, fisherman, and medicine man, teaches Wu Pan "the names of the plants, the tunes of birds and insects, rocks, the soil, the clouds, and the words that link them all together" (174). To be a shaman, one has to build a relationship with the natural and spiritual world as intimate as two lovers. Wu Pan is initiated into shamanhood through tasting the first taste of love released by a magical mushroom. The magical mushroom is the food of love and a connection to the female world. Legend has it the magical mushroom is Yao Ji, Wu Goddess incarnated. Tasting the mushroom means to surrender to the Wu Goddess's power of love and thus to be connected with her, the woman, flower, and spirit in one. To put it another way, the power of a shaman is realized through connection with the

feminine power.

As a shaman, Wu Pan is to be the next guardian of the bell tower and trees. In the mountains, there is a bell tower where a giant tree stands. The giant tree "was older than the first man, older than the giant dragons that terrorized the earth for hundreds of millions of years, older than the green sturgeon in the Long River" (192). Under the tree are the ruins of an old temple, upon which a bell tower stands. It is the Wu Clan's duty to ring the bell six times a day and seven days a week. The salt-making works follows the ringing to make salt. It is Wu Pan's father's wish for him to keep ringing the bell. As salt is an essential ingredient in food to sustain health and strength, salt-making is life-making. Life-making is possible when there is still a giant tree. The giant tree near the bell tower symbolizes life.

Knowledge of plants is key to survival. The tree sheltering the bell tower is the tree that Wu witches and wizards have made home. "The tree is the ladder to flee the rising sea. It has been home for generations of Wu witches and wizards…They knew the past and future from grass, bones, turtle shells, and stars. They cured the sick and revived the dead with herbs" (202). This tree is also the same tree where Shan Gui and Wu Pan play; it is where Wu Pan learns to eat and speak. It is the Tree of Knowledge.

Ecologically, the condition of the giant tree is an indicator of the condition of the eco-system. The tree, however, will be submerged when the river rises to the

red mark of 175 meters on the trunk. Wu Pan's father calls out, "Guard the tree, Wu Pan, Guard it with your name. We have hope as long as the tree stays alive. So do the mountains and rivers" (202).

Through the call and response between Wu Pan and Shan Gui, or in other words, the call and response between a shaman and a mountain spirit, or the call and response between an ecologically consciousness person and the endangered environment, Wang alerts her reader to serious questions in cultural and environmental conservation:

> On the barren hills and abandoned beaches, teams of archaeologists dug like mad with shovels, spatulas, and toothbrushes. They were racing against time. They said the Three Gorges hosted the earliest humans and oldest cultural artifacts that traced as far back as three millions ago. There were tears in their eyes as they talked.
>
> Yet who will cry for the tree that survived the ice age and is about to go under? And the green sturgeon that has been spawning in the Gold Sand River for millions of years but is blocked forever behind the dam? Who will cry for the million people displaced from their homes and land? (203-04)

Shamanic connection with nature not only engenders an effective critique of the implications of human intervention to the environment but also allows space for fluid boundary crossing. The boundaries between humans, nature, heterosexuality and queer sexuality are deconstructed through the spiritual travels of Shan Gui. Her family has been the keeper of the lost knowledge of transformation. Her various names indicate her different life forms. She is La Zi. La Zi means spicy woman. She plays the role of lover and wife for Wu Pan in the

name of La Zi. She is Shan Gui, which means mountain spirit, mountain ghost, and mountain goddess. She is three in one: woman, nature, and spirit. She is a variation of the archetype of Di Mu, Earth Mother.

In my essay "Nature, Sexuality, and Spirituality: A Womanist Reading of Di Mu," I point out the multiple dimensions of Di Mu:

> Di Mu is one of the earliest female deities in Chinese spiritual history, dating back to the Stone Age. Di Mu is a multidimensional, transcendental, and primal goddess. Di Mu is corporeal; she is a woman, a female archetype, a human mother. Her West African counterpart is Green Lady. Di Mu is chi; she is an omnipotent principle of life. Di Mu is simultaneously nature, woman, goddess, and chi in one. The simultaneity of sacredness, humanness, and nature-ness in her is not contradictory but organic. Womanist characters like Kate, Lissie and Rebecca Jackson are contemporary African American counterparts of Di Mu. Like Di Mu, they embody holiness, humanness, and nature-ness simultaneously. (69)

Shan Gui is another Di Mu-like character. Emerging from this group of characters is a literary imagination that emphasizes "roundness" of identity, inseparability of humanness from holiness and nature-ness, and interdependence of the three dimensions of the human world, the natural world, and the spiritual world. It calls for equal attention to the natural world and the spiritual world.

In creating Shan Gui, Wang invokes the tradition of magical realism. A magical realism approach does not see contradictions and boundaries between nature and humankind, the spiritual and the social, the mythical and the real. *The Book of Mountains and Seas* Wang refers to is one of those Chinese classics that have set up this tradition. The book does not discriminate between historical

events and legends, or the natural and the social. In the book, documents of mountains, rivers, plants, animals, minerals, human figures, and half-human half-animal figures are put next to each other. The organizing principle is the five orientations of south, west, north, east, and the center. Mountains and rivers in each orientation are used as land marks to guide the reader to species and figures in that geographical region. The book also documents the origin of Wu, or shamanism. While the organizing principle of orientation is not obvious in "Maverick," Wang follows landmarks, the twelve mountain peaks of the Wu Goddess. Centralization of nature is telling in "Maverick."

Another element Wang extracts from *The Book of Mountains and Seas* is *Wu*. As a shamanic approach acknowledges transformation and boundary crossing, the transformation of the Peak of Wu Goddess to the River Sturgeon to Shan Gui and back to the River Sturgeon becomes explicable. Her love story with Wu Pan helps to retrieve the history of the Cultural Revolution through which Wu Luo and his wife weathered. Her magical transformation thus becomes socially real. Through their love stories, Wang offers a touching and convincing critique of environmental destruction that leads to loss of home and spirit.

Coupled with a retrieval of the spiritual and natural, the indigenous surfaces in "Maverick." I trace *Wu* to an indigenous spiritual tradition. *Wu* has originated in what is known as the Three Gorges today. It is the first religion of the Ba people. The Ba are now considered to be one of the indigenous ethnic groups in this region.

The Ba people are seen as barbarians as opposed to the ruling class in pre-Qin [先秦] time. *The Book of Mountains and Seas* Wang is based on is the cultural product of the Ba people. By retrieving stories of shamans from the book, Wang brings the indigenous from the past to the present, and from the background to the forefront.

The snow lotus takes readers to another indigenous tradition. As a plant species only growing in Qin-zang Plateau, the snow lotus becomes the most prominent spiritual symbol in Bön and Tibetan Buddhism. Knowing that she has to leave Wu Pan, Shan Gui is determined to find a snow lotus. It is to be a souvenir for Wu Pan to remember her by. To find the snow lotus, they only have to go upstream to where the Yangtze River originates. The Yangtze River flows from Qin-zang Plateau to the Three Gorges and finally to the sea. The snow lotus, a flower from the origin of the Yangtze River, symbolizes the connection between the indigenous tradition of *Wu* and the indigenous tradition of Tibet. As a souvenir, it becomes a reminder of and a link between the past, present, and future. The snow lotus, like Shan Gui herself, is simultaneously material and spiritual, indigenous and present. Its presence in the story, in Wu Pan's memory, and thus in readers' memories is enigmatic yet real.

Like a fish, Shan Gui is slippery. Her identity slips the moment we wish to solidify it. Like the indigenous and the natural world, Shan Gui is both ancient and now. She comes from the past and is with Wu Pan and us. However, her presence

is vulnerable in this modern technocratic time. If not treated respectfully, she would disappear as green sturgeons would become extinct. Wu Pan would go with her and Wu Pan's knowledge of nature would go with him as well. The snow lotus she brings to Wu Pan and readers would become true material culture on exhibit in museums. Through new mythmaking, the tale of "Maverick" cautions us of a worrisome future for the indigenous and endangered species.

"Maverick," *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, and *Daughter of the River* provide three examples to study an emergent sensibility in literature by diasporic Chinese women writers who were born in the 1950s and the 1960s. Women writers such as Jung Chang and Wang Ping who were born in the 1950s underwent the Cultural Revolution in their teens. The nationwide Shang Shan Xia Xiang Movement, or Go to the Mountains and Countryside Movement has tremendously influenced their life paths and worldviews. Women writers such as Hong Ying who were born in the 1960s were not directly involved in the Shang Shan Xia Xiang Movement because they were too young to be sent to the countryside when the movement took place, however, as young witnesses of the Cultural Revolution, their psyche was also significantly influenced by the Cultural Revolution. Memories of the Cultural Revolution constitute the nucleus of the stories in *Wild Swans*, *Daughter of the River*, and "Maverick." As the Cultural Revolution attempts to yoke the whole nation to a single socialist ideology characteristic of militarism and technocracy, narratives by women writers

simultaneously bear witness and resist cultural hegemony. Their works often explore themes forbidden in their times, among which are the themes of spirituality and nature.

Wild Swans and *Daughter of the River* present two utterly different paths to awakening along class lines. Jung Chang, the narrator of *Wild Swans* is a pampered Communist high-official's daughter, while Hong Ying, the autobiographer of *Daughter of the River* is the illegitimate daughter born to a porter and her lover, who is also a porter.

Chang's decision not to have a boyfriend results from her devotion to her family, especially her determination to take care of her sick grandmother when her parents are away in labor camps. Even though she reaches the age to entertain romantic relationships, she decides to contain her desire and personal interests to make room for family obligations. She is rendered into a stronger bond with her natal family because regular family life is impossible. Her parents are devoted communist party officials. In the beginning of their career, they have to live separately to attend to the party's needs first. During the Cultural Revolution, they are put into separate labor camps. Chang's siblings disperse, too. For Chang, regular family life is almost a luxury. Her plan not to have a boyfriend and her own family life is temporary and there is no wish not to have it later.

Chang's awakening is modeled on male characters. She finds inspiration primarily from male characters. Her father, her male friends, and male writers

rather than her mother and grandmother have nurtured her love for books and knowledge as well as her inclination to seek truth. Chang's bond with women is emotional, while her tie with men is intellectual. Her awakening is characteristics of a transitional stage, having one foot in the male tradition and one foot in the new environment that encourages "iron girls."

On the contrary, Little Six, fictionalized Hong Ying, makes a conscious determination not to have family but to pursue sexual relationships based more on romantic love than obligation. Her decision perhaps has to do with her witness of the unhappy life her mother has. Hong Ying's work signals a more radical version of awakening, while Jung Chang's is a gentler one. Here I do not wish to privilege the radical over the gentle because both are shaped under particular situations. What matters is that both have carved out space for the growth of the self. Both Chang's devotion to family and Little Six's flight from family actually kindle their awakening.

However, the resolution imagined by Jung Chang and Hong Ying is held mid-air. The stories end the moment they are out of the traps they want to escape. *Wild Swans* ends when Chang leaves China for London, and *Daughter of the River* ends when Little Six leaves South Bank for Beijing. Is London a better home? Does Beijing promise a better future? In Chang's and Hong Ying's stories, China and the slum are packaged as bundles that weigh the heroines down. Does the packaging risk romanticizing the West and rejecting the past and China? What

about people who are left behind? What about the land? The river? What responsibility do liberated Chinese daughters have for the people, the land, and the river when they sever the umbilical cord with their mothers and motherland? These questions force me to look more closely at alternatives in a third piece of work, “Maverick.”

Awakening in “Maverick” is motivated by love. Yao Ji’s love for Wu Peng and Shan Gui’s love for Wu Pan prompts them to break gender rules. However, there is a greater love that drives Shan Gui to move out of her happy familial life and return to her communal group. This greater love means a greater responsibility for the survival of the entire species. It requires sacrifice of personal interest to the wellbeing of the community. As Shan Gui doubles as a fish and a mountain spirit, her awakening is ecospiritual. Put together, *Wild Swans*, *Daughter of the River*, and “Maverick” delineate a move from a human-centric and de-spiritualized literary direction to a more environmentally conscious and spiritualized one.

Human-centrism and de-spiritualization is the predominant time spirit of the Mao-era. Rooted in such an environment, *Wild Swans* bears witness to the destructive implications of human-centrism consolidated through masculine ideology, environmentally unfriendly practices, and anti-spiritual politics. Lacking an environment for alternative ways of knowing, the writer has minimal access to spiritualized knowledge systems. Although Chang writes spirituality into her memoir, her depiction of religion is unsophisticated. She is an observer rather than

a scholar or practitioner. She has memories of her grandmother and aunt's Buddhist beliefs but she does not have any deep conversations with them on the subject. Buddhism does not seem to have any influence on her worldviews. Buddhism is part of her memory, reminiscences of the past. It is something people at the margin such as her grandmother and aunt believe. It is safe to say that spirituality comes into her writing partly due to her pity for the loss of Buddhist architecture, partly because of her satisfying memories of her grandmother and aunt, partly because of her oppositional consciousness, and partly because of her respect for spiritual ways of knowing. Spirituality is presented as a side dish rather than the main course. It is understandable that Chang gives us only a glimpse of women's spiritual lives because spiritualized ways of knowing are not part of the modern curriculum and thus not part of her education. A deeper engagement with spirituality occurs in *Daughter of the River*.

Living at the social margin, Little Six has a greater exposure to spiritual traditions practiced by the poor, including Buddhism, Daoism, and indigenous traditions. *Daughter of the River* acknowledges the mysterious connection between the unseen and worldly material life. Little Six's mother intentionally educates her with Buddhist beliefs even though her beliefs are mixed with "superstition." Little Six's education of spirituality is challenged by her education at school. She has mixed feelings about religion. She simultaneously reconnects and detaches from her mother's religion. Unlike her mother, her spiritual belief is

mingled with a faith in political democracy.

"Maverick" radically departs from *Wild Swans* and *Daughter of the River*. While *Wild Swans* skims the surface of spirituality and *Daughter of the River* is ambiguous about it, "Maverick" completely affirms spirituality through a very conscious reconnection with folklore and the past. Spirituality in "Maverick" takes a new dimension. Whereas spirituality in *Wild Swans* and *Daughter of the River* mainly mediates the present and future life of individuals, it harmonizes human-nature relations in "Maverick." Read alongside one another, the three works symbolically indicate a gradual return to spirituality and traditional knowledge systems pioneered in diasporic Chinese women's literature since the Cultural Revolution.

Running parallel with the trajectory of returning to spiritualized narratives is an identifiable rise of environmental consciousness in the three works. Nature is salient in all three works. However, the three works take different approaches to nature. In *Wild Swans*, nature is depicted as a sanctuary from urban violence. It is an aesthetic object. In *Daughter of the River*, nature is indifferent to human conditions. It is a natural divide between the rich and poor, the city and the slum. Nature and the female characters are metaphorically linked.

A commonality nature in both works shares is that natural landscapes are demarcated along class lines. *Daughter of the River* and *Wild Swans* map two social and natural landscapes that are peripheral to the urban, that is, the urban

slum and the countryside. In *Wild Swans*, the countryside, although beautiful, is reserved for the peasant class. The heroine has no intention to make it a permanent home. In *Daughter of the River*, the South Bank, a filthy slum designated for the poor, is anything but a home. The heroine tries all means to leave it behind.

"Maverick" takes us back to the mountains, a landscape that is further peripheral to the urban area. It also takes us back to an older time. Relatively remote from the center, nature is a magical space filled with life and love. However, the peaceful place is jarred by the noise of engineering machinery. In "Maverick" the boundary between nature and the human race is not distinctive and the survival of nature and the human race is not separable. The love relation between Wu Pan and Shan Gui symbolizes the deep emotional and spiritual connection between humans and nature we should strive to build. Shan Gui's, symbolically nature's, survival is Wu Pan's survival. From nature as an aesthetic object to nature as an indifferent natural divide and a metaphor to nature as a lover, *Wild Swans*, *Daughter of the River*, and "Maverick" present the three writers' varied views of nature, a myriad of meanings associated with nature, and an invitation to know nature comprehensively.

Discussion of spiritual and environmental consciousness is central to the question of a womanist future. *Wild Swans*, *Daughter of the River*, and "Maverick" suggest three different types of future. A better future for the heroine in *Wild Swans* is to leave China, its totalitarianism, and barren mountains, for London, its

democracy, and rose gardens. A brighter future for Little Six in *Daughter of the River* is to leave behind the slum together with its filth and ignorance for the center of the city and imagined democracy. Both individuals, the protagonists in the memoir as well as the writers themselves do achieve their goals. Both writers marry British males of class privilege. Both are assimilated into the British mainstream.

"Maverick" imagines a different future. Instead of leaving home and becoming mainstream, homecoming and returning to nature is emphasized. Homecoming and returning to nature is not to escape but to rebuild connection and to save the entire race. While futurity is achieved by conforming to individualism and social mobility in *Wild Swans* and *Daughter of the River*, futurity is only possible if we "guard the tree" in "Maverick." "Maverick" resonates with womanism's universalist concerns for the environmental, social, and spiritual.

"Maverick" signals an increasing environmental consciousness in diasporic Chinese women's literature today. It offers a fictional approach to the environmental controversy of the Three Gorges Dam project. Admittedly, international media coverage of the controversy has opened up space for publication of women's writing on environmental issues. Commensurate with a concern for environmental issues in "Maverick," new narrative techniques are explored. In the story, Wang Ping invokes mythical folklore, a Chinese literary tradition ignored by many contemporary Chinese writers.

Mythical folklore offers a narrative tool that allows fluid passage between boundaries of the human world, the natural world, and the spiritual world. An example in case is *Legend of the White Snake* I mentioned earlier. It is a love story between Bai Shu Zhen and Xu Xian. In their past life, Xu Xian was a shepherd, and Bai Shu Zhen was a white snake. The shepherd saved the white snake from a snake-hunter who was about to kill her. The white snake was reborn as a female by the name of Bai Shu Zhen, and the boy a male by the name of Xu Xian. While the transformation of Bai Shu Zhen from a snake to a woman may entail Buddhist belief of causality, and gender values of femininity and pure love, it provides an alternative to imagine a fluid boundary crossing. Mythical folklore not only represents a unique literary genre but also a unique conceptualization of nature and human.

While Wang's story takes the form of a mythical folklore, it entertains the writer's concern for environmental issues. What makes Wang's story unique is that her narrative is sophisticatedly infused with her concern for environmental issues and loss of indigenous spiritual traditions in the Yangtze geo-cultural region. Invoking a classical Chinese literary genre and filling it with contemporary content, Wang's story signals a new direction in contemporary diasporic Chinese women's literature. It is new not because it creates a literary genre or a new theme from scratch but because it picks up on a tradition left off by her Chinese counterparts who aspire to more human-centric and more dualistic traditions. It is new because

it has a salient concern for environmental issues and indigenous spiritual traditions many of her Chinese counterparts do not take into consideration. Wang's creative synthesis of tradition and contemporary issues is an invitation to explore the full potential of folklore in contemporary environmental writing.

Although an awareness of spirituality and nature is salient in these three texts, the relationships between rural women, spirituality, and nature are still obscured and even stereotyped. In Chang's depiction, rural life is associated with backwardness. To live in the country permanently is viewed as punishment. Peasants are associated with superstition, ignorance, and low taste. The peasant class is depicted as dirty, illiterate, ignorant, and accustomed to foolish feudalist customs.

In particular, rural women's relation with nature does not surface in *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*. The few rural women appearing in the book represent ignorance and an undesirable life style assigned to women. Friendship with rural women was impossible due to various sorts of barriers. Chang makes one attempt to cross the boundaries when she first arrives in the countryside. But she decides to withdraw into her comfort zone after the sight of a country woman cleaning bloody pig intestines. If there is emotional attachment to the scenery in the country, there is no emotional attachment to the land. The countryside is a place to travel, not to settle.

The idea that the peasant class is the lowest social class and life as a peasant is

a sort of punishment reoccurs in *Daughter of the River*. To be a registered resident in the city becomes a life goal which is dealt with seriously as if it were a matter of life and death, happiness and misery. Big Sister tries every means to come back to the city even if it involves divorce and separation from her daughter. Fourth Sister's fiancé is hesitant to marry her because her possibility of returning to the city is not promising. Little Six's natal father is thought to have a tragic life because he marries down, meaning he marries a peasant woman. Compared with slum life, life as a peasant is even worse. Like the peasant class in *Wild Swans*, they are portrayed as ignorant and observe foolish customs.

Little Six's mother leaves the country to escape an arranged marriage. Does life in a slum get better? At least she enjoys ephemeral moments of happiness in her brief marriage with an overseer and her love affair with her young lover. Her daughter, however, suffers from the result of her mother's brief happiness. Moving out of the slum becomes Little Six's goal.

The plot development pattern of moving out of the country to the slum and then to the center of the city seems to suggest a removal from the country, or nature further and further. *Wild Swans* takes a step further, the protagonist moves out of China. To be sure, Chang's mobility has to do with her class privilege. While the familiar motif of "leaving for a better place and a brighter future" satisfies an innate desire for happy ending, it leaves behind those who are unable to move. It is dissatisfying that individual mobility of the heroines does not bring

any changes to the communities from which they come.

"Maverick" gives a richer representation of the rural and brings us back to the Yangtze River. However, stories of rural women are still left untold. My short fiction "Let My Head Split like a Sunflower, My Tears Fall like Raindrops—Stories from Tianfu" is intended to tell untold stories.

One of the characters in my short fiction is named Wu. Wu can be read as "吴," "呜," and "巫." "吴" is a common family name in China. "呜" is the sound made by a person when the person cries, or by a train or ferryboat when it pulls forward, encounters an obstacle, or reaches a destination. Therefore, "呜" is the utterance of grief, danger, warning, and hope. Wu can also be read as "巫" meaning a woman shaman in the Chinese language.[98]

In terms of plot, the surface story is about Wu's homecoming before she goes abroad; but she is not the protagonist. She plays the role of a guide rather than a heroine. Through her eyes and ears, readers see the trees, plants, and marks of development in her hometown and hear stories about villagers' struggles, joys and sorrows, passivity, flexibility, resilience, and resistance against the backdrop of social and environmental crises. The fiction is also used to document disappearing medicinal herbs and knowledge about herbs.

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[98] A male shaman is called *xi* 觋 in the Chinese language. Both *wu* 巫 and *xi* 觋 have the ability to see and communicate with spirits. However, they use different ways to make that happen. Whereas *wu* dances, xi fasts. Eytmologically, *wu* implies body movement, and thus emotions; *x*i implies discipline, and thus rationality. In terms of word origin, many linguists contend that the word *wu* comes first and *xi* is a word constructed by adding a radical to *wu*. *Xi* is *nanwu*, or male *wu*. A reverse parallel in the English language is "writer" and "woman writer."

The structure of my short fiction departs from the convention of diving a piece of fiction into chapters by numbering them. The chapter titles of my short fiction are two symbols from *The Book of Change*, including *kun* 坤 and *dui* 兑. *Kun* is associated with the feminine and the Earth and *dui* the female and *wu*. By singling out the feminine symbols from the Daoist classic, a meta-text by male masters, organizing stories around these symbols, and filling up each chapter with stories from the margin, I intend to advance the idea that the textual and cultural structure established by the male tradition is porous. The structure is not as intact as we think it would be. The seemingly intact textual, cultural, and social fabric is split in the middle by stories from the margin—stories about ordinary people. It is stories from the margin that tip the balance, set social change in motion, and move us toward new possibilities. The symbol of *kun* recycles and the second cycle is not complete. I do this to indicate the simultaneity of temporal progression, circularity, and an open ending. I have chosen to use the symbol of *kun* also because it lines up with the divine trigram symbol of Tianfu, the place where these stories take place. The symbol that concludes the fiction is *dui*, a symbol associated with *wu*, the feminine magic power for change.

In each chapter, what's happening in the present is juxtaposed with mythology. It is structured this way to remind readers of the continuity of ecospiritual understanding of the human race and humanity's relationship with Earth Mother.

Part Two

Chapter Five

Let My Head Split like a Sunflower, My Tears Fall like Raindrops: Stories from Tianfu

As if

A

Drop of

Ink

Were

Dripping into

A

Glass of

Water

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Stories happened.

MENG PO, the Dream Woman was the guardian of the bridge from Sky to Earth. She lived in a hut close to the bridge. In that hut she brewed the concoction of forgetfulness day and night. She gave a bowl of the concoction to everyone

passing the bridge to enter into a new cycle of life. Everyone had to drink it to the bottom of the bowl in front of her; otherwise, Meng Po would not allow the person to pass. The concoction of forgetfulness was effective. People forgot who they were and what they had done before. Once they landed on Earth—the world of ocean, land, plants, animals, and humans—they started to pursue earthly happiness, spinning tangled webs of relationships. Sometimes they got into confrontations without knowing that they themselves were once like their opponents. Both sides suffered from a vague and deep yearning to become someone other than themselves. It was the secret and sacred plant which Meng Po stirred into the concoction that planted the yearning in their hearts and dreams. The plant would keep a portion of the memory that was just the right amount to guide human beings back to their familiar, no more, no less. Human beings would feel the yearning but they had no language for it. Only shamans knew the language. Shamans had to keep the language secret because words would betray divine secrets which humans were not supposed to know.

My mind drifts

My thought flows

I cross the bridge

My thought flows

My mind drifts

…

I was a plant in my past life

…

It was the year of 2006 on the western calendar, the year of the dog on the Chinese lunar calendar. In that year, there were two Julys. That meant two mid-Julys, or two ghost festivals; one fell on the eighth day of August and the other on the seventh day of September. The elders said July was the month to determine one's fate. The luckiest ones would be born in July and the most unfortunate ones would die in July. In that year more lucky people came to this world and more unfortunate ones went to the other world.

My readers, if you think temporal abnormity has no effect on human behavior, consider this story. It was in this very year that Wu reached the third twelve-year cycle of her life. It was also in this year that Wu was numb to herself and decided to give up everything she had—her plants, her career, her apartment, her husband, and her lover—and to take an outbound journey to a place that was on the opposite side of her home on the terrestrial globe, a habitat where migrating cranes would choose to stay and where she would be lost and be found again.

My readers, how did I get to know those stories? This was how it happened. It was spring; the Maiden Spring came to the earth again and all looked fresh and gay. One day, I was sitting there in the sunlight, watching green tea leaves moving up and down in the glass and honey bees diving into the crabapple flower cups. A

breeze arose, carrying the fragrance of flowers into the room. I closed my eyes to breath in the scent. Suddenly, my right earlobe became intolerably itchy as if it were bitten by a bug. I rubbed my ear lobe so hard that I felt fire on the spot. Just at that moment I heard a whisper. It was a familiar voice but I could not recall where I had heard it before. The voice doubled, tripled, multiplied, and rapidly blended together. The voice told me story after story, stories as many as the tea leaves in my glass and the crabapple blossoms on the tree. The following stories were what the voice whispered into my right ear. Strangely, they did not go straight out of my left ear; instead, they diverted directions, traveled through my heart and belly like green light. They came back up to the back of my head and sank into my skull as sands sink to the bottom of a river. These stories must be told as if they were my own; otherwise, stories clogged in the head could be lethal.

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[Shu]bordered Ba in the east, Yue in the south, Qin in the north, and Ebo in the west. It was called Tianfu (Heaven on Earth) by the locals. Its original name was Huayang.... [K]un was its divinatory trigram match.... [T]rees were bountiful in the mountains; fish were abundant in the lakes; gardens yielded melon and fruit in the changing seasons. (History of Huayang: History of Shu)

Kun symbolizes Earth. Earth nourishes all things of creation.... [K]un

symbolizes Earth, mother, fabric, wok, stinginess, balance, cow, carriage, literary grace, abundance, handles of utensils (power). The Earth symbolizes black soil, cow, confusion, orientation, sack, bottom undergarment, yellow, silk, mud. (The Book of Yi: Interpretations of the Divinatory Trigram)

"I am going home tomorrow." Wu announced her plan. Wu handed a pair of chopsticks to Gui without looking at him.

"You should." Gui said flatly while dipping his chopsticks into his rice bowl.

"I will probably stay for nine days." Wu picked a mouthful of sauté bitter melon and put it on her rice.

"Fine."

"Will you go with me?"

"You should go by yourself. Going to a foreign country is not like going to Beijing. You should spend time with your family before you go." Gui replied uninterestingly.

Wu bit the bitter melon with rice. The mixed taste of bitterness of the melon and sweetness of the rice brought tears to her eyes. Inner tears. Wu forced the tears down before they welled up in her eyes. The word "family" stung her ears. Wu captured the sarcastic message in her husband's tone. When she did her annual teacher's profile update, she put her parents' and siblings' names in the box of family but did not write down his name in it. She did not realize it until the

secretary pointed it out to her. She printed her husband's name in that box and laughed it off. The secretary was surprised that Wu had not cultivated a sense of family with her husband even though they had been married for about a year by that time. When Wu told her husband the story, he did not laugh and simply said she was possessed by her hometown. She still did not have a sense of family and home with Gui nine years later. She wondered why that feeling gripped her as burs stuck to a dog's fine hair. While Wu was digesting her husband's sarcastic message, Gui turned on the TV. The voice of the young anchor filled the room.

"The Governor of Si Chuan Province and the president of Southwest Construction Company attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony today on Heaven's Street. In a few months, Heaven Plaza will display its beauty and grandeur to citizens in Chengdu. The statue of Chairman Mao will remain on its original site; so will the Science and Military Museum. Small restaurants and stores on Sky Avenue and Book Avenue will be taken down to make room for a giant stairway. This phenomenal stairway will lead to the subway. The subway will greatly eliminate the problem of traffic jams caused by the increase of cars in a time of economic boom. This subway will be a miracle in the history of urban subway construction. In the past, a subway in Chengdu was merely a dream because of its porous soil formation and its high moisture content. Now we have advanced technology to overcome the obstacles. As a proverb goes, 'Man can conquer nature.' The Plaza will be decorated with numerous flower beds, monuments, and

a beautiful music fountain. The city government has not made any final decision on the music yet; however, the public opinion poll shows ninety percent of the residents favor 'Blooming Flowers and Full Moon' over the other three pieces of music recommended by professors and students from prestigious music institutions across Sichuan Province. We eagerly look forward to the new plaza, the new image of the West. City Evening News."

Watching City Evening News became a habit at dinner. It was a convenient time-killer for estranged couples like Wu and Gui who had not much to talk about. When silence was filled by the reporter's voice, an invisible gap had developed and widened day after day. As time went by, Wu could understand her husband less and less. Like one cloud pushed by east wind and another by west wind, Wu and Gui had drifted further and further away from each other. Gui's body became a wall Wu could not see through. Gradually, she retreated to her shell like a hermit crab. They conversed about groceries, routine visits to relatives and friends, daily chores, news, but they carefully avoided knocking at the door of each other's heart. Wu had come to deeply understand what was meant by "The belly skin separates people's hearts."

"What a shame! Many people are going to miss the Muslim restaurant on Sky Avenue and the French maple trees on Book Avenue." Wu was irritated by the

news.

“The restaurant might survive. I’ve heard the Muslim Association protested. The government definitely does not want to agitate the Muslims. Lucky for the government, the Muslims compromised with relocation and compensation. They will still have the restaurant but have to move it further back and build a wall high enough to hide the restaurant so it won’t mar the beauty of the Plaza.”

“I hope they will move the trees to parks. But they are too big to be removed. I bet they will just cut them down. It is much cheaper and more convenient to cut them down than to move them. ” Imagining the trees falling down like giants, Wu felt a big hole developing in her chest.

Book Avenue was one of the few remaining streets lined with French maples. When Wu first came to Chengdu, French maples were thriving on numerous streets. It was said they were introduced to the city by Catholic missionaries. Who brought the French maples to Chengdu was not important. The maples had a will of their own. They adjusted to the foreign soil very well, flourishing in their second home, regardless. By the time Gui courted her, those trees were about a century old. Wu loved taking strolls on those streets on weekends with Gui. The arms of the trees on both sides of the streets stretched high and above, touching one another, forming a long arcade. Walking underneath them was like walking into green dreams with elders—tranquil, protected. The more they came back to

walk under those trees, the stronger her love for Gui had become. Only later did she realize she confused her love for the trees with her love for Gui. Trees had the magic power to make her surrender to a mood for love. Gui was smart to take her to Book Avenue, an oasis in the heart of the city. Her memories of those happy days made it hard for her to leave Gui when their relationship turned miserable.

Those trees were rapidly disappearing in the decade of economic boom boosted by Chairman Deng Xiaoping's economic development policy of "white cat and black cat" and his public statement that "a good cat is any cat that catches a rat, no matter whether it is a white cat or a black cat." The message of "white cat and black cat" was interpreted by opportunists as "making money by fair means or foul."

The nouveau riche sprang up like fungi. The poor envied, hated, and severely criticized those, usually contractors and real estate agents, who decorated their apartments and houses like hotels with dirty money. The most outrageous story was about a contractor who used pure gold for his custom bath tub and toilet, and he did not even feel ashamed to show them to his relatives, friends, and the journalist.

When the nouveau riche were springing up like fungi, the problem of giving "I own you" promises to migrant workers from the country spread like a disease. Some desperate workers jumped off the skyscraper scaffolds, some went on hunger strikes, and others silently swallowed their "bitter liquor."

It was the age of construction. Wherever people went, they saw deserted buildings with *Che*— demolish—painted on the broken walls of old tile houses. With their interior exposed, these houses looked like bad dreams. Construction cranes raised their arms high into the air like transformers. Nostalgia became an artistic trend. Photograph exhibits and books on old streets, old buildings, and old family pictures surged.

Poor people were happy, optimistic, and eager to move into bigger apartments. Dust and noise, noise and dust rose up as people's hopes soared. Evening news called upon people to endure the dust and noise. Anchors, with their professionally trained smiles and voices, sent out the messages that inconvenience was only temporary and temporary endurance would be paid off by permanent happiness.

Gui grimaced at the news report of Heaven Plaza and changed the channel to CCTV. Miss Margaret, a city preservationist from France, sat in the studio, speechless. She was watching photo slides of old Beijing—giant honey locust trees, winding hutongs, and Peking opera theatres. Tears were rolling down her square face silently.

"What does she see in the old city we Chinese can not see?" Wu thought to herself.

The gold fish next to the speaker was startled. Raising gold fish had become Gui's obsession for a few years. The breed of gold fish was genetically weak. They

died fast. They looked fresh and alive for the first couple of days and then suddenly dropped dead. They floated to the top. Their bulging eyes looked dim. It was hard to look at those dead eyes. Wu watched more than thirty pairs of gold fish die in the same fish tank. Their dull eyes were all in her memory, staring at her silently, pulling her into that water tank like suicide water ghosts.

A few days ago, Gui brought home another pair, the thirty-second. Wu's heart sank to the bottom when she watched him emptying the gold-colored creatures into the fish tank. She hoped this pair could survive so Gui's frustration would ease off.

——

In the Year of Tai Yuan of Jin Dynasty, in Wu Ling Prefecture, there lived a fisherman. One day, he went fishing as usual. He pedaled his boat along a creek. He pedaled and pedaled, forgetting how far he went. Suddenly, a peach tree woods appeared in sight. Peach trees lined both sides of the creek, stretching about hundreds of bu. A gay profusion of fallen blossoms coated the fragrant fresh grass. The fisherman was stunned by the scenic view.

Lured by the beautiful scenery, he went farther and farther. When the fisherman reached the end of the creek, he saw a mountain. The mountain had a narrow cave. A sliver of light traveled through the crack. The fisherman

abandoned his boat and walked into the cave. The entrance to the cave was very narrow. The fisherman had to squeeze through it. But when he adventured about ten bu farther, the cave suddenly opened to a spacious and luminous world. Stretching before the fisherman were a vast piece of flat fertile land, rows and rows of neat and tidy cottages, beautiful ponds, luxuriant mulberry trees, lush bamboos, and a diversity of plants. The footpaths crisscrossed in the fields, connecting with each other. Resonant in the village were the crowing of roosters and the barking of dogs. Men and women tilling the crop fields were dressed in clothes alien to the fisherman's contemporaries. Children and elders looked happy and content.

People were shocked to see the fisherman. They asked where he came from. The fisherman answered their questions in detail. He was invited for dinner and treated with great hospitality. When other villagers heard about the stranger, they all came to see him. It turned out the villagers' ancestor came to this place with his wife to escape the wars during the Qin Dynasty. Since then they had never been out, living in isolation from the outside world. They were unaware that history had already changed several times since the Qin Dynasty. They had not even heard of the Han Dynasty, not to say the Weijin Era. The fisherman shared with them what he knew about the outside world. He was then invited to different families and treated with food and drink.

The fisherman stayed in the village for a few days. When he parted, the villagers requested him not to tell people about this place. The fisherman went

back by the way he came, marking the path with signs. When he reached home, he told his experience to the procurator. The procurator sent a group of men with the fisherman to look for the village. They searched in vain for the signs the fisherman marked. They never found the path to the village.

In Nan Yang, there was a noble hermit named Liu Ziji. He was elated when he heard about this village, longing to visit it. Unfortunately, his dream did not come true. Shortly after he was determined to find the village, he fell ill and died. Since then nobody had searched the Peach Blossom spring. (Legend of the Peach Blossom Village)

The bus was packed.

"Keep moving, keep moving. Didn't your mother feed you lunch today? Oh, it stinks in here." The bus assistant yelled at a migrant worker from the countryside who carried a big bundle. Her tattooed willow leaf-shaped eye brows slanted upwards like the angry eye brows of Zhong Kui, the Judge of Hell.

The man's sweat-drenched face went red. He apologized.

A scar-faced migrant worker sitting next to him helped him to squeeze the bundle under the seat.

"We all have mothers. You do not need to be so ferocious." The scar-face reproached the assistant.

"What did you say? Say it again." The assistant lost her temper.

“It is already hot and crowded. Noise would only add heat,” an elderly white-bearded man tried to mediate, “Modesty, please.”

“Be quiet.” The bus conductor stared at the assistant.

The assistant gave in.

The two migrant workers settled into their seats. Wu’s seat was right behind theirs. She smelled a strong sweat odor similar to the smell in the coach zone of a train. They must have been on the train for days before they got on the bus. It was near the rice harvest season. Many migrant workers were recalled by their families to go back home to help with the harvest.

Wu quietly listened to their small talk in local dialect and somehow felt connected with them. Like them, Wu’s brother, cousins, and neighbors went to the city to work as cheap laborers. Mother always said, “Who will leave home if life is easy and sweet at home? East or west, home is best. Making a living in a place far away from home is pitiful. At home you may have a thousand days in comfort, away from home you are in constant trouble.”

Wu sat in her seat silently, watching rice paddies and village houses receding. The bus drove through the heart of the Chengdu Plain, which was also called Heaven on Earth. The ripening rice turned the plain into a greenish yellow sea. Bamboo-shaded village houses dotted the sea of rice paddies. It was shortly after noon. Cooking smoke was curling up in the breeze like white clouds.

Occasionally, Wu saw slogans and commercials painted on the adobe walls of

village houses. “Carry Out the National Policy of Family Planning; Commit to One Family One Child.” “Boys and Girls Are the Same.” “Rainbow Mosquito Repellent.” “Meihao Pork and Beef Sausage.” “King Soy Sauce.” “Hope Feed for Pigs, Fish, Ducks, and Chicken.” A knowing smile spread over Wu’s face. Mother was highly skeptical of these commodities; she believed factory processed products were the root of health problems of domesticated animals and people.

As the bus pulled forward at an even pace, many passengers dozed off. Inhaling fresh air carried into the window by the breezes, Wu closed her eyes. When she opened her eyes again, she saw a scroll stretching horizontally across the road, “Welcome to the City of Poetry and Scholars.” Cultural tourism had grown much faster than Wu expected. The last time she went home, the scroll was not there yet.

The scholars were the three Sus—Su Xun and his two sons, Su Che, and Su Shi. Su Shi was better known as Su Dongpo among ordinary people. All of them were great men of letters in the Song Dynasty, but Su Shi was the most well-known among country folks, not for his poems and essays but for a dish called *dong po zou zi*, which was pork leg braised in broad bean sauce. Wu felt a mysterious connection with the Sus. When she was seven years old, her First Aunt suggested they go visit the three Sus one day. She said it in such a casual and endearing way, Wu thought the Sus were her relatives. That feeling never went

away.

Wu forgot many things she saw in San Su Ci, a historic park dedicated to the three Sus, but she remembered the two myrtle trees and the ink pond. Legend had it Su Dongpo washed his brush in the pond every time he finished practicing calligraphy. Over time the water in the pond turned black. The pond was a must-see for school-age kids. Parents took their kids to the pond to educate them about the importance of diligence and the Chinese credo of “everything is beneath contempt except school.”

The pond was not far from the myrtle trees. The trees were hundreds of years old. It was said they were planted during the Tang Dynasty. The trees were in full bloom when Wu first visited San Su Ci. The purple blossoms swayed gently in the breeze as if they were greeting her. Kids called the myrtle “itchy itchy tree.” The trunks of the barkless trees were as glossy and fair as the arms of a beauty in the Tang Dynasty. When gently touched, the tree leaves would tremble like a child being tickled. Wu was amazed how ancient and sensitive the trees were. Compared with the trees, humans were minimal and pathetic. Who could live hundreds of years and still bloom?

“Here we are. This is the final destination. Everybody should get off here.” Wu’s reverie was interrupted by the bus assistant.

“In half a year, going home will be much faster,” said the white-beard who

mediated the quarrel earlier as he stood up, reaching for his bag on the rack, “My old bones will not have to endure hours of bumpy long-distance bus ride.”

A number of passengers echoed his sentiment. The white-beard was alluding to the first express way from Chengdu to Leshan which was under contract with a company from Singapore. When complete, the highway would cut through the most flat part of the Chengdu Plain, connecting Chengdu, Meishan, and Leshan. It would shorten the road trip from Chengdu to Meishan from three and a half hours to forty-five minutes. The road was part of the economic development plan promoted by the municipal county and the province.

Officials and economists compared the highway to the artery of the economy. In the vernacular, people said, “If you want to get rich, build roads first.” A few villages protested against turning fertile crop land into a highway. Their complaints were ignored. Who could go against the current of economic growth? The majority of people were convinced that reduction of land was only a small sacrifice compared with the many opportunities that might open up with the construction of a highway.

To go home, Wu had to make a transfer to a town bus line which was actually a minivan. Minivans were usually privately owned. In the past, public transportation was state owned and strictly controlled by the local government. All passenger buses looked similar. Each bus had a capacity for sixty passengers. Each

line only ran according its schedule no matter if there was a greater demand.

The economic reform changed this. To boost the economy, private owners were encouraged to join public transportation. Not everybody who had a van could get in. Nepotism thrived once again. Minivans ran more frequently than regular buses. They stopped wherever the passenger needed to get off or wherever they spotted a potential passenger. Minivan lines offered passengers convenience and efficiency, but disputes too.

There were about twenty passengers in the van. A few were squeezed in on the aisle where the assistant inserted portable plastic stools. The van bounced off and crossed the boundary of the city in about twenty minutes. Once out of the crowd and noise of the city, the van drove past another greenish yellow sea.

The country road was lined with eucalyptus trees. Rice paddies extended for miles and miles on both sides of the road. Adobe houses surrounded by dense bamboos and trees were dispersed here and there in the field. Wu ignored the smell of sour sweat and screams of babies in the van, looking far and beyond. Occasionally, among the rice fields there were deserted land lots overgrown with wild grass. Mother told her those neglected land lots usually belonged to country youth who went to the city for jobs.

Looking at the overgrown land lots, Wu suddenly recalled what Mother said on a hot summer day.

“A sister of your Nainai once said within fifty years we would only see

white-hair and yellow-hair in the country. I did not know what she meant then. Look around us, there are fewer and fewer young adults. Only elderly and children are left behind. Nowadays, girls and boys adopt the fashion of yellow hair. What your Nainai's sister talked about is life today. The elderly are the white haired. The children are the yellow haired." Mother sat in a bamboo chair in the courtyard facing the crop fields, peeling fresh soy beans. Words rolled out of her mouth as soy beans were rolling out of their shells.

The van made a right turn and pulled toward a bridge. A giant banyan tree jumped into sight. The tree was so gigantic that it would require four people hand in hand to circle it. Wu learned from Nainai there was once a shrine next to the tree. The shrine was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Red guards attempted to cut down the tree and use it for fire wood. A branch fell. It hit the head of one and the other guards rushed him to a hospital. He was paralyzed. Nobody dared to bring up cutting down the tree again. The news that the tree had *ling xin*, spirit, spread out. Even people from nearby counties traveled on foot to the tree to put prayer ties on it. Usually they came during the night for fear they would be caught and forced to wear a paper hat with derogatory labels on it and to walk through the streets before the public with the hat.

Wu knew the tree well. The tree was the spirit mother of Wu's sister, Mei. Mother said Mei was born in the date, month, and year of water. The water

element outbalanced her other elements. A healer suggested she be adopted by a tree. The element of wood would help balance her five elements and keep her safe and healthy. Mei was renamed *shu rong* (banyan tree) by her healer. Only Wu's family knew Mei's spirit name. The name was to make a tie between Mei and the tree. The healer warned that the name *shu rong* should be kept secret because the bonding should and could only be secured by the heart, not the mouth. Wu was worried for her sister. The new highway would pass near the tree.

The road pierced through about another mile of rice fields and entered the zone of People's Village. The minivan stopped at the side of an empty lot for a passenger to get off.

The empty lot was about nine acres. It was designated for a wholesale leather market. The idea of a leather market had to do with the new highway. The town government smelled the opportunity and proposed to the county government to have a market built next to the highway. In the proposal, the nine acres of fertile land were described as nine acres of flooded riverside land. A gang caught wind of the proposal, invited the town cadres to a three-star restaurant, and got the contract.

The truth sneaked out through the mouth of a drunken town official at a dinner especially arranged for new interns who were children of county high officials. One of the interns was classmates and friends with a young man from People's

Village. The intern called his friend. A letter signed “Villagers from People’s Village” arrived at the county government the next day. The land was now under investigation. This was one version of the story Wu heard. Nobody knew the inside story.

Villagers suspected the investigation would be only temporary. The central government had a policy to protect arable land. The local governments would of course stay away from trouble. Nonetheless, when the wind blew away, the rats would come out to play. It would reopen eventually. It was only a matter of strategic game and time. Some villagers were cynical about the scandal. As a seasoned villager said, “it does not make any difference no matter who gets it. What we villagers care about is a bowl of food.”

Wu looked at the desolate lot. Piles of logs and fire bricks lay bare on the ground. Grass took over the rest of the space except for a few spots where villagers had replanted it with vegetables. Wu exhaled a deep sigh. Although she felt a connection with the land and the people, she was no longer a member of the place.

Wu’s residence in the country was transferred to the city the date she was admitted into college. The piece of land assigned under her name was returned to the village. Technically, she was an outsider. She had been absorbed into the city. The gap between the city and the country was too big to cross. She had become an observant and mourner step by step.

Wu remembered her Yeye said she was endowed with the talent of a leader but unfortunately her talent was to be a piece of gold buried deep under layers and layers of sands. It was too bad she was a girl; otherwise, she could make a powerful leader. Yeye called her Ya Tou, little servant girl, when she was a little girl. She once had the dream of becoming a village leader to serve her village.

The dream had somehow been shattered by the reality of moving out of the country to establish esteem for her parents. Her parents were criticized by relatives for their stupidity in sending a girl to school. What if she failed the college entrance examination? Your money would go to waste. Even if she succeeded, would you count on a girl to raise you when you were old? Wu's parents swallowed insults in the face of the relatives but passed on the pressure to Wu.

Wu's goals were: to go to college, to be economically independent, to earn extra money, and to take good care of her parents. Only by doing so, could she defeat her relatives' foolish talk, to show them that raising a girl was worthwhile. She did not know that her determination could be a chain.

The van honked and pulled over in front of a post office. Across the door of the post office hung a scroll "we are happy to mail locally grown produce to your relatives in other cities for you." The scroll reminded Wu of Mother's story. Their neighbor spent a hundred yuan to send a jar of homemade broad bean hot pepper sauce to their son in Guangdong. He had never liked broad bean hot pepper sauce

when he was at home. But he had started to crave it soon after he arrived in Guangdong. His parents assumed Guangdong food must be bland; it was hot pepper sauce that went well with rice. Even though they had to bear the high costs of mailing the package, they were happy their son had finally appreciated homemade sauce.

Wu got off the van. A number of motor tricyclists crowded around her. She waved them off. She decided to walk home.

It was the same road she walked every day to go to the primary school. The road was formerly a dirt road but was now paved with poor quality gravel. Wu carefully avoided pot holes here and there. Father told her the funding for the road was eaten away by the county, the town, the commune, and then the villages. What was left was barely enough to cover costs for mortar and pebbles. Only the rice fields did not fail villagers. The land continued to produce rice year after year like a faithful friend. A lot more buildings sprang up along the road, blocking the rice fields.

Wu had to hasten her steps when she passed a hog hair factory next to the road in the zone of Whole Heart Village. The factory was operated by a relative of Whole Heart Village head. Villagers protested against the foul air and black water released from the factory. Nonetheless, the factory had still been there for years. “Yes, I do not like the smell myself but it offers job opportunities for people,” the

village head rolled his eyes whenever he heard complaints.

The dirt footpath Wu walked to school was deserted. As more and more people bought bikes, tricycles, and motorcycles, the footpath was abandoned. She had to follow the main road. A motorcycle raced from behind, roared by, left behind a cloud of dust. The rider was a teenage boy with spiky hair dyed gold. Sitting on the back seat was a girl wearing a yellow T shirt with the letters New York printed in the front and a pair of blue jeans with shiny sequins sewn on the back pockets. Wu walked at an even pace, looking yonder.

Wu was now in Whole Will Village. Where there once was a Guan Yin temple there were now two brick and cement apartment buildings. They looked out of place in the middle of the rice paddies and adobe houses surrounded with bamboo and trees. These apartments were built to accommodate people who were relocated from the Three Gorges. Wu wondered if Aunt Nong was at home. Aunt Nong was a relative of Wu's former roommate. Wu had a package from her friend for Aunt Nong. Wu walked by, planning to come back another day.

The next village Wu passed by was Yellow Temple. She passed by two more ditches, a bamboo grove, a bridge, and a slope.

The dark green tile roofs of her home appeared in sight. The house was a traditional adobe quadrangle with its main door opening to the south. The walls

were hidden behind luxuriant navel orange trees. The oranges were turning gold, lightening up the trees like lanterns. The house was the second house Wu had lived in. It was built by her parents in 1982 when the land allotment policy was enforced. The new house stood on the same site as the old one did.

The old house belonged to Wu's grandparents. They shared the quadrangle with two other families of the Wu clan. The old house had a backyard. It was Wu's childhood Eden. The yard had to be cleared to make room for the new house. The only trace of the backyard left were two dents in the two corners of the courtyard in the front. The two dents were where two native orange trees had grown.

To the left was a two-story fire brick and cement building which Wu's brother had built. The new building faced the east. With no wings of rooms on the left and right sides of the building and no vegetation in the front, the brick and cement building looked naked and vulnerable. A cemented country road pointed at the main room like a sword penetrating the heart. Wu's brother deliberately positioned the house this way in order to introduce fortune to the household. The night the foundation for the new house was dug, Wu dreamed of her grandparents. They complained in her dream that they did not have a place to live.

Wu had been trying hard to learn to love the new building, but she still had reservations. Something about the building did not feel quite right. Somehow, the feeling of not-quite-right was diminished by the fish pond resting between the adobe and fire brick buildings. Around the fish pond grew a diversity of trees and

vegetables—plum, pear, peach, camphor, water fir, cypress, winter melon, silk melon, pumpkin, hot pepper, leek, and Chinese cabbage.

The fire brick building lay at a T intersection in Riverside Village. Riverside Village lay in the heart of Little Sun Flatland. It stretched seven li, approximately two miles, before it met with a chain of undulating hills and finally merged with forested mountains. To the south was Emei Mountain, one of the five sacred Buddhist Mountains. When the sky was clear and blue, people could see its peak, where tens of thousands of Buddhist pilgrims and visitors went to watch the magic glow of *fo guang*, the rainbow light. It was said only a few could have the luck to see the rainbow light. To the north flowed Minjiang River, which joined Dadu River and Qingyi River at the foot of Leshan Dafu, the Big Buddha of Leshan. The Big Buddha was Maitreya, the future Buddha. Sitting against the mountain the Buddha watched the three rivers, one rapid and turbid, one placid and clear, and the other patient and opaque, flowing tirelessly.

In the 1960s, Riverside Village was renamed *You Yi Sheng Chan Dui* (Friendship Production Unit), bordering with *Quan Xin Sheng Chan Dui* (Whole Heart Production Unit), *Quan Yi Sheng Chan Dui* (Whole Soul Production Unit), *Ren Ming Sheng Chan Dui* (People's Production Unit), and *Huang Miao Sheng Chan Dui* (Yellow Temple Production Unit). When Wu was old enough to understand the meaning of names, she realized *Quan Xin*, *Quan Yi*, and *Ren Ming* were components of a slogan, "*quanxin quanyi weirenming fuwu* (serve the people

heart and soul).” You Yi, or friendship was part of another slogan, “*youyi diyi, bisai di’er* (Friendship is first, competition is second).” The name Huang Miao was hard to change because people were so used to it and there was a profound fear for the golden Guan Yin temple after which the village was named. “*Sheng chan dui* (production unit)” was changed back into “*cun* (village)” in the 1990s when urbanization was in full swing. Riverside Village stood on a higher ground than neighboring villages. In Wu’s heart, the place was a paradise. It never flooded. With numerous rivers and drains, droughts never struck the village. Should the whole world sink, it would still be there, safe and sound.

The doors were locked. Wu did not see her parents around. They must be inspecting oranges. Wu followed the trail among the orange trees.

“Ba. Ma.” She called out.

“We are here.” Her parents’ voices echoed among the trees.

Wu followed the sound to find her parents inspecting the rice paddy next to the orange orchard. Father was wearing a gold colored cotton T-shirt with the characters of “Datang Century Garden” printed on the chest. It was a used T-shirt from Wu’s brother who worked as an interior decorator assistant for the construction company headed by Wu’s brother-in-law.

Mother was wearing a loose blue cotton blouse with an elephant print on the front. She had to wear long loose blouses since she had birth control surgery in

1976 when family planning was enforced in the country. Some women were scared while others resisted. Mother had a different opinion. Whereas up to that time women of her age usually had four or five children with each child one or one and a half years apart, she only had three with each child three years apart. Sister was actually an accident. Mother did not plan her.

Mother had no admiration for but only sympathy with Mother Dai who was honored as the “hero mother” in the village because she contributed nine sons and two daughters to the nation. But nation was only an abstract concept for a peasant “hero mother” whose mundane life in her old age depended solely on her sons. Too many sons meant endless family quarrels and even fights around filial responsibility. Worse, the mother who sacrificed herself would eventually be ridiculed as a sow.

In the very moment Mother was under the pressure of “are you planning to have another child” and in a dilemma if she had to do so, the policy of family planning was announced. As if possessed by a ghost, Mother became the first woman to have the surgery when family planning was still at its preliminary stage of implementation. Men could have the surgery for their wives if they wanted. Some men in the village did that. But Mother insisted she have the surgery. Her argument was she was much stronger than Father and it was not good for a man to have birth control surgery. After the surgery Mother put on weight. Her waist gained rings of fat. Two-piece clothing was uncomfortable for her in summer.

“Are you tired? Hungry?” the eyes of Father beamed when he saw Wu. Wu took after her father in many ways. She had his square face, mellow temperament, soft heart, and tendency to shed tears easily.

“It is about time to cook dinner.” Mother smiled at Wu, “what do you want to have?”

“Fresh vegetables.” Wu took a deep breath, feeling the fragrance of orange trees and garden vegetables permeating her lungs.

“You go home and fetch some firewood. We will go look for vegetables.” Mother suggested.

Father took to his feet and walked toward the fire brick house.

Mother had a secret vegetable garden in the back of the old house, where she planted vegetables and native wild herbs. Wu identified a few—artemissa annua, verbena, and five-grass. They picked handfuls of snow-pea tips and a pumpkin. The scent of the snow-pea tips was refreshing. Mother detested vegetables from the market. Wu once invited Mother to Chengdu to stay for a month, but she insisted on going back to the country two weeks earlier. Nothing in the city was fresh enough for her.

Dinner was simple—rice, snow-pea tips soup, and boiled pumpkin. Although Brother bought a rice cooker, a gas stove, and a container of liquidified natural gas for Mother and Father, Mother still preferred to cook on the adobe kitchen range. She believed food cooked in a cast iron wok was healthier and had a better taste.

Wu helped set the table in the courtyard. She asked for a teaspoon of home-made broad bean sauce and a few pickled Thai chili peppers.

Dusk set in but it was bright enough to see the food. Water in the irrigation ditch next to the courtyard was running leisurely. The crickets sang like a choir. As the voice of one cricket fell, another rose. Evening primrose flowers silently opened up, emitting scent into the evening mist. A fish or two jumped in the pond. A parent was calling her son to go home for dinner. Wu put a mouthful of rice with a piece of snow-pea tip, a bit of broad bean sauce and a chili pepper into her mouth. The taste of home. They ate quietly, enjoying the peace of evening. Wu felt the fog in the back of her head was lifted. The hole in her chest closed. At that moment, the feeling of “not quite right” did not bother Wu. As if in a dream, she saw a fisherman strolling in the land of peach blossoms.

After dinner, Wu followed Mother to feed the pigs. Mother raised five pigs to produce fertilizer for the orange trees. The pigs were kept in the old house. Mother decided to put the pigs in the old house because she had discovered that an adobe room was much cooler than a fire brick room in summer. It was important to keep pigs cool.

Wu watched Mother cooking food for the pigs. It was a mixture of rice, chopped sweet potato and sweet potato vines. Mother was firmly opposed to feeding pigs with processed pig feed made out of fish bones and additives. Yes, pigs grew a lot faster if fed with pig feed, but pig feed caused problems. The pigs

were more likely to get sick, and oranges from trees fertilized by their manure tasted a lot blander. Mother's theory was like this: pigs were vegan by nature; they would be shocked when forced to eat undesirable food; the negative energy would then accumulate in their bodies, causing *guai bin*, unknown disease, which would be transmitted to meat-eaters. Mother believed that animal feed, in addition to pesticides, was responsible for the increasing unknown diseases found in animals and people.

Mother poured well water to cool down the food, stirring a dipper of rice chaff into the wooden barrel. The pigs screamed when they saw Mother.

"Just a second." Mother consoled the hungry pigs.

The pigs dashed forward, knocking into each other. The fastest one put his front paws on the fence. A stream of saliva was dripping from his mouth.

"Don't fight. Don't fight. Line up. Line up. How can you get your food if you fight? Stupid head." Mother scolded in a soft tone.

The pigs pushed against one another and finally lined up. They dipped their mouths into the sandstone bowl. Their ears swung eagerly. While they were eating, Mother lighted a bundle of wild sage to repel mosquitoes. Mother had a theory that pigs would grow slower if they were stung by mosquitoes. She had a knack for raising pigs, which women from the village envied. She would share tips with them; but they could not get as good as her. Mother's secret was she was born in the year of pig. She had a predestined bond with pigs.

Brother considered Mother's small-scale pig-raising business a waste of time. Based on his careful calculation of the monetary value of the pig food and Mother's labor, Brother concluded Mother's way of raising pigs was not profitable. He tried to convince Mother that scale and speed mattered. Mother ignored Brother's "a pig factory or no pigs" statement and continued to raise pigs the way she believed to be the best. For her, health and happiness was of the number one importance. If pigs were happy, she would be happy, the vegetables would be happy, the orange trees would be happy, her whole family would be happy. Mother had her own way of calculating on her abacus: spending no money on medical bills was making money.

Wu shared the same bed with Mother as usual.

"How is Gui?" Mother asked.

"Busy. He could not get permission to leave." Wu lied.

Mother did not persist. Wu could tell that Mother knew something had gone wrong between her daughter and her son-in-law. Mother once suggested Wu keep her salary in a separate account. "Don't be naïve and foolish." Mother had warned her.

"Is Mei coming tomorrow?" Wu changed the subject.

"She will. She called this morning. She came back yesterday."

Although Wu did not see her sister often, she knew everything about her.

Mother was the news reporter in the household. She also was an excellent storyteller. She could talk for hours without repeating a story. But tonight, Wu wanted to rest. Yes, rest was what she needed.

"Ma, I am very tired. I want to sleep."

"Don't worry. Sleep. As Shorty Deng said, when the sky falls, there will be a giant supporting it for you."

Wu chuckled about Mother's and the villagers' wit and humor. Everyone in the village called Chairman Deng Xiaoping Shorty Deng as if he were a neighbor's pride son who had a shortcoming which turned into a source of strength for him. "Yeah, I can use this life philosophy." Wu thought.

Wu heard her mother snoring, which was echoed by her father's snoring from the bedroom downstairs. Their snoring merged with the sound of crickets, the ditch, the pond, and the night. Wu soon fell asleep.

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When spring comes

My mother with a yellow face

Sows corn on the sunny side of a mountain

When the season of harvest arrives

My mother with a yellow face

Is not convinced by our prosperous neighbor

To the west of our shabby old house

To spray pesticide on the corn ears

She says

"Let the birds eat some

Let the rats eat some

We will still have some."

When Wu opened her eyes, Mother was not in the room. She must be feeding breakfast to the pigs. Many women in the village fed their pigs once a day, but Mother fed them twice a day including breakfast and dinner. She figured two meals would help the pigs to digest food more thoroughly and absorb nutrients better.

Wu did not bother to wash her face with cleansing foam and stepped into the morning immediately. She stood at the T intersection, looking in the direction of the east. The vast field was covered in mist. The mist erased the boundary between the land and the sky on the horizon. Wu felt where she stood was the center of the world. Standing there like an embryo enveloped in the mother's womb, Wu took a deep breath of the fresh morning air.

The tranquility was soon disturbed by the noise of motor tricycles,

motorcycles, bicycles, and occasionally a pick-up truck. It was a market day. The country roads got busy quickly. The intersection where Wu stood was a natural stop for motor tricycles. The roads joining the main road were dirt roads, which were difficult for motor tricycles to travel. Motor tricycles were privately owned by villagers who charged a fee to transport those who wanted to go to the market faster. Fewer and fewer people walked to the market nowadays. Even the old generation used transportation. Most of them did so not because the three-legged vehicle ran faster than the two-legged but because they wanted to save their children's faces. If parents were spotted traveling on foot, their children would receive criticism. The noise of the motor tricycles mingled with the roar of motorcycles, and the ding of bicycles, muffling people's greetings to one another.

As the mist lifted, dust rose up. The trees Mother and Father planted along the ditch were still too short to bar the dust and diminish the noise. Mother watered and fertilized the trees regularly, encouraging them to grow as fast as possible. She objected to orienting the house to the T intersection; however, she had to consider her son.

Brother never liked farming. Drawing upon the knowledge he learned from school and witnessing the hardships of country life, he came to the conclusion that farming meant living at the mercy of both the elements and politics. Realizing that the country would eternally remain in the background of China's social fabric, he had determined to leave the country from a young age. When leaving the country

turned out to be impossible, he planned to do small business. The house was oriented this way so it would be convenient for him to open a small store or tea house when the New Village Project was implemented one day. What could Mother say? She kept her opinion to herself and planted trees to reduce the nuisance of dust and noise on market days.

To escape the noise and dust, Wu strolled toward the orange orchard. She saw Father's porcelain tea mug sitting quietly on the knife sharpening stone placed in the corner of the adobe house. Father had a habit of drinking tea while he was doing meticulous work such as inspecting the leaves of orange trees. Even without lifting the mug cover, Wu could imagine it was filled full to the brim with loose tea leaves. The tea was so strong that it tasted bitter, bitter enough to bring tears up to her eyes. Nobody in the family would drink Father's tea. Mother saw Father's bitterness capacity as emblematic of his life. However, Father had his own tea drinking philosophy—sweetness came after bitterness. In Mother's eyes, Father's bitterness was he did not know how to enjoy leisure. While men of his age killed time in tea houses, Father spent all his time in the crop fields and the orange orchard.

The mug was decorated with red plum flowers. The red plum flowers contrasted with the green hyacinth bean vines climbing on the adobe walls. Red was Father's favorite color. Wu bought the porcelain tea mug for Father when she received her first salary envelope. Father had a weakness for fine porcelain rice

bowls, soup bowls, and plates decorated with plants, birds, and animals. When Father inherited the banquet tableware from Yeye, he attempted to replace all the plain ceramic bowls and plates with flowery ones. Mother poured cold water on the fire in Father's mind.

"You have the habit of a feudal prince, but the fate of a peasant. Be realistic! Don't forget you are a father. You have three children to take care of. Why don't you use the money smartly?" Mother lashed out at Father as if waves were beating on a boat. Father had to abandon his "crazy" idea.

"Ba, Ma." Wu heard her sister's familiar voice from behind.

"Jiajia. Jiagong." Wu's niece announced her arrival in the crisp voice of a spring swallow.

Wu turned back to see her niece hopping on the winding trail among the orange trees vivaciously. Her blue blouse with white aster flowers ballooned. "Ma, look, guo guo." She pointed at a yellowing orange excitedly. Sister was walking behind her, warning her not to step on the vegetables.

"Mei, you are early." Wu greeted her sister.

"Greet Daniang, Minyi." Mei tried to draw her daughter's attention away from the navel oranges to Wu.

The little girl halted, looking at Wu curiously. The last time she saw Wu, she had been a toddler. She seemed to recall who Wu was after a second of scrutiny.

“Daniang.” She greeted.

“Ai.” Wu smiled at her.

Minyi was born in the year of dog. Upon her sister’s request, Wu named her niece Minyi. Min means intelligent and yi comfortable. By naming her Minyi, Wu hoped she would be intelligent and be comfortable with her being born a girl and embrace the sorrows and joys she was going to encounter in her life to come. The name soothed Mei’s agony. Her parents-in-law and husband wanted a boy. When the infant girl suffered from an eye ailment, they discouraged treatment. Her parents-in-law even made the statement—to her face—to let the girl go blind because their son was destined to have a son.

When Mei confided in Mother, Mother was outraged.

“Don’t be foolish to take in their nonsense. Raise her well. Don’t pretend she does not know anything. A child is a spirit. She knows. Don’t underestimate her. I say she is not easy to be dealt with. She came to this world with her feet out first as if sitting on a sedan chair. She never crawled before she learned to walk, which was unusual. She is unusual. Who dare mess with her? Remember, when she was only a few months old, she knew how to manipulate her father. Her father had to obey whatever she wanted him to do. He had to sit if she wanted him to sit. He dared not lie down if she wanted him to stand up. She is bestowed the temper of a powerful person. She is going to be such a person. If you want to believe in fate,

this is her fate. Treat her well; otherwise, you will regret it. Her father, hah, she knows how to handle him, believe me."

With her cuteness, wit, and sweet temperament, the little girl gradually won over her father and became the apple of his eye. Mother and Mei started to notice the little girl shared a similar trait with Wu. She could not stay inside. She was drawn to flowers, plants, and trees. "The nature of dogs," Mother said, "dogs love wandering and sniffing around."

Wu, Mei, and Minyi followed the footpath meandering through the orange trees.

"I am here." Father stuck his head out of the trees leaves. He was doing routine inspection of the navel oranges. "You are early. Your mother is feeding the pigs."

"Jiajia." The little girl ran into the room, "zhu zhu, zhu zhu," she climbed up the pig stall, "how fat." She commented.

"Are they as fat as you?" Mother teased.

The girl grimaced, studied her grandmother's face, and said, "The oranges Mother bought were not good. Jiajia and Jiagong's oranges are good."

"Smart downy bird." Mother laughed.

Breakfast was as simple as usual, hard boiled eggs, porridge, and pickled ginger. The little girl insisted on eating outside. While they were sipping porridge, she asked where the swallows were. Mother immediately understood where the question came from.

"You little downy bird, you still remember the swallows? She saw the swallows under the eave when you came to visit in spring and she still remembers it. There were two swallows attempting to make a nest under the eave over there. The nest is still there, do you see? I think they are the same swallow family who come back every year. Your father does not like their making nest under the eave. Their droppings mess up the floor. Your father has to clean it everyday. You know your father. Last year, your father could not stand the mess any longer, when they left for the winter your father torn down the nest. The swallows came back this year to find their nest gone. I thought they might go find a new home but they did not leave. I saw them picking cinders from the road, attempting to stick them to the wall. They tried and tried and tried, and finally got really tired and frustrated, resting and chirping on the telephone line angrily. I said to them, stupid swallows, how could you stick cinders on the wall? Go get mud somewhere. They seemed to understand what I said and did find mud to make a nest. When you came to visit, they had three baby swallows. Minyi still remembers them. I said before, treat her well, she remembers things."

Wu and her sister and niece spent the afternoon in the backyard to the old house while Mother went searching for herbs to make a concoction for them. There was a lot for the little girl to explore. The backyard was a narrow strip of land with dense vegetation. The three rows of trees Mother and Father planted when they built the house were now tall and luxuriant. There were cypress, eucalyptus, qianzhang, and nüzhen. Each type of tree carried a hope. Cypress was for longevity and everlasting wealth and health. Eucalyptus was for safety. Qianzhang was for prosperity, and nüzhen for a bright future for the children. Beneath the trees were wild rose bushes, Aloe Vera, Chinese Iris, green Chinese mugwort, purple mint, and a variety of wild plants whose names Wu did not know. The purple mint covered the surface of the water well. Mother believed this could purify the water and prevent run off from getting into the drinking water.

Under a nüzhen tree, Wu found Mother's treasure. It was a volunteer horsewhip plant. Horsewhip plants were once very popular in the area. They could be found almost anywhere. They rapidly disappeared in recent years. "Herbicides and insecticides killed everything. Even grasshoppers are rarely seen." Mother often complained. The horsewhip Wu saw now was found by Mother a couple of months ago in the peanut lot next to the front courtyard of the fire brick building. It was too easy to be spotted and the peanut plants would compete with it once they started to grow like mad. Mother dug it out and transplanted it to the back yard where it would be protected from theft and competition. Mother required

everyone in the household to keep their mouths zipped about the plant. She hoped the plant would multiply in the yard. Mei warned the little girl not to step on the plant.

Wu plucked a purple mint leaf, crushed it, and applied to her nose. The little girl studied her and followed suit. “zisu.” Wu told her. “zisu.” She repeated. She plucked more leaves, made them into two balls, and stuck them in both of her nostrils. She closed her eyes and strongly inhaled. She did that in such a dramatic manner, both Wu and Mei laughed out loud.

Unlike Minyi, Wu received her ecological education from the backyard of their first old house. That backyard was much bigger than this one, almost ten times the size. There were more varieties of trees, plants, and flowers—Chinese green ashes, Chinese oaks, apple trees, native orange trees, plum trees, grape fruit trees, loquat trees, three different kinds of bamboo, wild grape vines, gardenias, and various wild flower families. Hidden among the trees and shrubs was a little pond where Wu studied frogs, eels, and water insects. Underneath the green ash was a natural flagstone washboard, which Wu used as a desk to do her homework. On hot sunny days, Wu loved lying flat on the flagstone. Rays of sunlight traveled through the bamboo leaves, turning the spot into an emerald world of light. Wu discovered colors magically became intensified if she closed her eyes for a few minutes and opened them again. On the grape fruit tree hung a swing which Father installed for Wu. The sensation of flying intrigued Wu.

Wu realized she had always been searching for her backyard since she left home. The backyard was her second home, a home that came next to her first home, her mother's womb. The first home was an enclosed space with a window, the umbilical cord, to the other world. The backyard, secluded from the quadrangle's front courtyard where the life of three families was staged, was Wu's secret paradise. The plants, trees, animals, and insects were seducers. Wu could never resist touching them, studying them, and talking with them. Talking with them was different from talking with people. It was silent communication, an exchange of feelings through the body—Wu's hands, nose, and eyes; the plant's leaves, stems, and flowers; the tree's leaves, branches, and bark; the animal's skin; and the insect's wings, antenna, and legs. The secret joy of silent communication never left Wu. The sensation was awakened whenever Wu stepped into spaces and architecture structures resembling her backyard, her second mother's womb, such as a kiva, a sky pesher, and a skylight courtyard.

When Wu was lost in thought, Mother came back with a bundle of native plantains and calamus roots. She had to go to a river bed to get the calamus roots. The river was near the adobe house of the Min family. Gossip had it the Mins were under a spell. Women could not survive in that house except for the mad mother. Wu ran into the woman several times when she went with Mother to gather herds. The woman was short. She had grizzly white hair. The stare from her ghostlike eyes chilled Wu to the bones. Nobody in the village spoke with her except Mother.

Ma called her biao shao, the daughter-in-law of one's remote uncle. Mother often consulted with her about where to find herbs.

Biao shao was actually the only person living in the crumbling adobe house. Her husband died of an unknown disease years ago. Her eldest son disappeared after his wife eloped with a vendor and took their daughter with her. Her younger son was sentenced to fifteen years in prison for theft. She had a fierce black dog to keep people from getting close to her house, but she would yell at the dog if Mother passed by her house. Mother took pity on her. She would give biao shao seasonal produce from her vegetable garden such as squash, winter melon, and new rice.

The woman was actually not mad. She was sold to the Mins by her family from a remote mountainous area in the last year of the Great Famine. Her family meant well for her. Life in the plains was considered to be better than life in the mountains; at least, people would have something to fill their stomach with. Besides, she had five brothers who competed for food at home. Whatever her family's intention was, she did not have a better life. Her husband was an abusive alcoholic who was mean to his parents. His parents were happy to buy a shack near the river for him and his wife and be done with them. Her two sons were not any different than their father. Biao shao once told Mother in tears that her younger son crept into her bed one night and attempted to have sex with her. She was happy he was arrested.

“Biao shao looks much older than when I saw her last time.” Mother said while handing a handful of wild rose berries to Wu, Mei, and the little girl. Like horsewhip, wild rose berries were hard to see nowadays. Mother found them near a slope next to the Mins. The little girl’s eyes lit at the sight of those golden berries.

Drinking a home-made herbal concoction and bathing their feet with the dregs became a ritual whenever Wu and her sister went home. Mother made up the prescription. It contained horsewhip, purple mint, lophanthus, yellow and silver honey-suckle, and calamus roots. Mother believed the concoction would help to purify the body clogged by what she called city food and air. Sister coaxed the little girl to gulp down two rice bowls of the concoction. Like Nainai, Mother did not trust hospitals.

Nainai went to the hospital only once in her lifetime. She was taken to it when she was unconscious. When she came to, she insisted on going home. She passed away the next morning. According to Mother, Nainai chose to die. Three days before Nainai was taken ill, she told Mother her dream. In her dream, the *pusa* asked her if she was willing to live another five years. Nainai said no. She was invited to a wedding feast the next day. She came back with a fuzzy head and went to bed immediately. She did not answer when Father called her to have breakfast the next morning. Father and Brother took her to the town hospital on a bamboo

slider. Thinking of Nainai's dream, Mother knew Nainai would not have a chance, but Mother did not object to taking Nainai to the hospital. She did not want Father to feel guilty. "How can a doctor cure a healer if she does not have the will to live?" Mother spoke to herself.

Mother never went to a hospital, either. She gave birth to her children at home. Jiajia, her mother was a midwife. Jiajia cut the umbilical cords for all her grandchildren. Mother regretted she did not give Mei an after-birth bath. Minyi was born in the children's hospital in the city where Mei and her husband worked, which was thousands of kilometers away from home. Mother believed that Mei's not receiving a proper bath contributed to her gynecology problems. Mother herself was fortunate to have baths prepared by Jiajia, her mother, each time she gave birth:

Medicinal herbs: horsewhip, Chinese water sprangletop, and huo ma.

Procedure:

Prepare a wooden barrel, a sandstone, and a straw mat.

Bury the sandstone in hot ashes until it gets hot.

Put the sandstone in the barrel. Pour the herbal concoction over it.

Squat over the barrel. Cover yourself with the straw mat. Make sure to leave a hole on top.

Add more concoction when the steam starts to diminish.

Repeat several times until you sweat thoroughly.

Mother intended to give Mei a make-up bath. Unfortunately, she could not find all the herbs she needed. Mother agonized that today's pregnant women had to suffer as a result of disappearing herbs. Mother sighed deeply when she heard the news that her neighbor's daughter-in-law, who worked as a seamstress in Guangzhou, had to have one of her breasts removed. Breast cancer was never heard of in old days.

Mother had a profound suspicion of urban food. Mother and Father were self-sufficient in terms of food. The only things they bought from the market were salt and vinegar. Vegetable oil was compressed in a local mill from mustard seeds Mother and Father grew by themselves. Father had a household rice-grinding machine to make rice from rice grains they produced. Mother thought cow milk was dirty. For her, milk was an imported concept. It was promoted as a lifestyle for the urbanite. Mother forbade Father to buy pork from the market for fear of contaminating the food source for her pigs. She discovered chicks from the market easily contracted disease. She raised hens and chicks by herself. She stored extra food for Wu and Mei. Every time they went home, they would leave with sacks of food. This time Mother prepared a bundle of herbs for Mei to take back to the construction site where Brother and migrant workers from the neighboring villages

worked. What Wu received from Mother was a pillow filled with sun dried purple mint.

Another home-coming ritual Wu loved was to take a stroll after supper. Mother led the group like a pack leader. She was also the commentator.

“Be careful. Walk in a single file. The path is narrow.” Mother commanded, “Once upon a time, there were two neighbors. One was industrious and the other lazy. They had a piece of land next to each other with a shared path. The Industrious chopped away the path inch by inch and turned it into crop land. The Lazy complained. The Industrious gave the Lazy a lecture. ‘Yao xiangfu, yao walu, rang she dou shubugu (if you want to be rich, you need to dig the path until it is too narrow to allow a snake to pass)’. The Lazy answered, ‘Yao xiangfu, xian xiulu (if you want to get rich, construct a road first)’.” The Industrious thought the Lazy stupid and continued to dig the path. One day, he broke his ankle tiptoeing on the narrow path. The money he got from the crops planted on the piece of land chopped away from the path was far from enough to cover the costs for a broken ankle.”

The little girl giggled, walking careful in front of Mei. Wu and Mei listened silently. Mother told this story so many times that Wu could recite it word by word, but she did not bother to remind Mother she had told the story before. Like the four seasons, Mother’s stories became part of the way life was.

As they passed by the reeds, Mother voiced her opinions.

“There are advertisements of reed mattresses and pillows on TV everyday, bragging they are green product. How healthy can reed mattresses and pillows be nowadays? Do you know how much artificial fertilizer, herbicide, and insecticide they spray on the reeds? Green? They can only cheat city people who don’t know how reeds are grown and harvested.”

The moon was out. Crickets were chirping to their hearts’ content. Mosquitoes droned, looking for opportunities to drink blood. Mother distributed a bamboo fan to everyone to drive away those “humming blood-drinking helicopters.” The little girl was asleep on her mother’s lap. Mei cooled the little girl with a fan. Wu opened her ears to the sound of night and her nose to the aroma of earth and plants. Mother and Father discussed this year’s rice harvest. Brother did not want to come home to help with the harvest. He reasoned it was not worthwhile to come home. A train ticket would cost money worthy of three days of labor. A trip home would waste at least ten days. Mother and Father hired relatives to help harvest the rice last year but did not like the way they did the job. They handled the rice stalks in such a rough manner that a great number of rice grains dropped to the ground. Mother and Father decided to buy a rice harvesting machine this year.

Wu was woken up by the ringing telephone and Mother’s voice from the kitchen downstairs. Wu looked outside the window. The eastern sky just turned the

color of a fish's belly. Who would call at such an inconvenient time? Wu rested her head upon the pillow, waiting for her headache to go away. Headaches were something she had experienced since she entered society. She never had headaches from her childhood throughout college. Mother often bragged about the fact that none of her children had headaches in their childhood. Mother had a theory that headaches would damage children's brain cells and their memory. Wu did not remember when she had her first headache but she did remember she was susceptible to headaches in the last five years. Any explosive sound, such as a telephone ring, a sudden burst of swearing or a raised voice could induce her headaches. Wu took a deep breath. The scent of the pillow filling—sun dried rice seedlings—soothed her.

The familiar aroma of sunlight and rice plants reminded Wu of a similar pillow she had when she was a high school student at the boarding school. Mother hand sewed the pillow case from a piece of leftover cotton fabric. The fabric had a yellow background printed with tiny red flowers, the kind of color and flower pattern country women loved. The filling was rice seedlings Mother carefully selected and sun dried. Many of Wu's roommates did not take a second look at the rustic-looking pillow. It surprised Wu when one of her roommates, whose father was an herbalist in the cities' best hospital, wanted to exchange her pillow with Wu. Compared with Wu's pillow, her roommate's pillow case was snow white. The pure white cotton cover was artistically embroidered with red roses. It was

filled with puffy high quality synthetic cotton fibers.

“Why would you exchange your pillow with mine? Mine looks too rustic.” Wu blushed, blinking her curious eyes.

Wu’s roommate did not answer her. She held Wu’s pillow to her nose, taking a deep breath. She closed her eyes. A big smile spread out on her cheeks like water rippling on a pond. Wu did not exchange her country-looking pillow with her roommate. The scent of sunlight and rice seedlings was a cure for her homesickness and loneliness at night.

“Your Aunt called. She said she had something important to discuss with me but she did not say what. I guess your Uncle is dying. She did not know what to do. Your father and I have to go to your aunt’s today. Your sister and her daughter are going to visit your brother-in-law’s parents. Cook for yourself.”

“I am actually going to Aunt Nong’s. Her niece has a package for her.”

Uncle was the youngest son of his family. Being one of the few men of his generation who made their way to the city, he was the pride of his family, the village, and all the villages in the vicinity. Uncle became an urbane resident through military service. He was admitted to a military college on full scholarship for his pure family background, loyal morality, and his academic excellence. This was a great honor for his clan who had been poor peasants for generations. A

military college diploma guaranteed urban life and significant elevation of social status. Now that Uncle had an opportunity to shed his peasant's skin, he became the envy of the whole village. Marriage proposals from many families flooded in. Aunt became the luckiest girl.

Aunt was the measuring stick of Mother's life and the fish bone in Mother's throat. In Mother's eyes, Aunt had a much easier life than she did simply because Aunt was born to a relatively wealthier family and married well. While Mother was laboring next to men in crop fields, Aunt was sheltered from the burning sun. As the wife of an army man and the daughter of a less poor family, Aunt had the privilege to be the barefoot doctor of the village and was exempted from labor in the crop fields. When Uncle was promoted to be a battalion commander, Aunt and their three children moved to the city as his dependents. In Mother's generation, marriage determined a woman's life. As a proverb said, "Follow the man you marry, be he a rooster or a dog." A good marriage was a ticket to a good life, for "when a man attains the Dao, even his pet dog and chicken ascend to heaven." Mother and Aunt had never been friends.

Whenever Mother had a chance to educate Wu about the reality of life, she repeated her unhappy stories and strong criticism. Her words were imprinted on Wu's mind forever as if characters were chiseled on stones.

"The haves and the have-nots can never be friends even if they are in-laws. I was engaged with your father when I was twelve. Your Jiajia arranged it for me.

Your father, your aunt, and I went to the same school, which was an hour's walk from home. I had to carry your aunt's book bag for her every day. What could I do? Your father did not say a word for me. Your Jiajia asked me to keep silent. What could I do? I am the second daughter of a poor widow. "

"Only the daughter of a rich family is human. The daughter of a poor family is always a servant even if she becomes a mother. You know why I have bad teeth and stomach problems? When I was pregnant with you, I had to wash dirty clothes for the entire family even in winter, get up at dawn to cook for the family and the pigs. Because your Yeye and Nainai loved hard rice and fried vegetables I had to have the same food. Everybody knows a pregnant woman should never touch cold water and hard rice; otherwise, she will have problems with her joints and teeth as she ages. Your cousin was born three months earlier than you. Your Yeye and Nainai took all the chicken and eggs to your aunt. What could I say? My own mother could not afford such things for me. I was married to your father to pay debts."

"Rich people's children are children. You are not. When your cousin was infected with hepatitis, your aunt left her here for fear she would infect her younger brother. Your Yeye and Nainai let her eat from the same bowl with you. I knew that hepatitis was contagious and objected but your Yeye and Nainai did not listen. Who are you? You are the daughter of a peasant. She is the daughter of a battalion commander."

“Do you still remember your aunt tried to coax you into going with her to Shanxi? You believed her and wanted to go. I was angry. Teacher Xu warned me not to let you go there. She regretted that she gave her daughter to her brother. When her brother had his own son, her daughter was mistreated. The same thing happened to your Aunt Luo’s youngest son. Go to the same private school with your cousins? No, like me, you will become a servant to her children.”

“The truth is they despise peasants, thinking they are superior even if they themselves came from the country. You cannot believe that your Uncle, an educated battalion commander once said to me I should not waste money on a girl’s education.”

Despite Mother’s knife-sharp tongue, she had the heart of tofu. Mother remembered good things about Aunt and Uncle. Mother learned from Aunt basic medical skills through observation. Wu and her siblings did not suffer from measles because Aunt had access to vaccine. Aunt left her *Manual for Barefoot Doctors* to Mother when she moved to join her husband. The manual became Mother’s treasure and later a must-read for Wu in her spare time. The manual introduced Wu to medicinal herbs, modern medicine, and the anatomy of the human body. Uncle named Brother “peng chen, a mythic bird that could fly a great distance non-stop,” wishing Brother a bright future. Although Mother renamed Brother “zi neng” (self-reliance), she understood Uncle’s good intention. Mother was educated to believe “blood is thicker than water.” Being poor but proud, she

gave Uncle and Aunt everything best— the best oranges, the best pork, and the best rice.

Mother took pity on aunt and uncle in recent years. When things changed and stars moved, Aunt became a servant herself. Uncle's mother was paralyzed and confined to bed for years. Aunt had to do the work even a country woman considered too dirty. Aunt was finally liberated from her duty when uncle's mother passed away a couple of years ago. Their biggest unhappiness, however, was their children who did not live up to their expectations. Their daughter was bit by a dog infected with rabies and went mad. Their second son, also their favorite son, was still unemployed after he finished his military service. Their youngest son, also their most beautiful child, got involved with a gang and did not even graduate from high school. Rumor had it he went to Shanghai and became a dancer in a gay bar. The rumor was the last straw that broke the camel's back.

Feeling ashamed of his children, Uncle isolated himself from his army friends. While his army friends were enjoying their sunset stage of life at family get-togethers, at alumni reunions, in scenic resorts and popular getaways, Uncle rented a fish pond from a neighboring village and opened a fishing business, hoping to "kill two birds with one stone"—to escape solitude and to earn extra retirement money. On the contrary, he made himself a laughing stock among relatives. How could he become a peasant again after enjoying the privilege of being an urbanite? His disappointment, isolation, and labor took its toll too quickly.

He was diagnosed with liver cancer and heart problems. In order to save money, aunt sent him to a second class hospital. His health deteriorated after the surgery. He was now relocated to a hospital in the town. Their beautiful son, who had disappeared for several years suddenly came back home. “Perhaps he comes back for the apartment,” the relatives guessed.

To Wu, uncle had a pitiful life. The glory of his prime was washed away like fish in a flooded pond. Failing to climb up to a higher rank, having a wife who did not have a degree and three children who did not make it to college, his self-esteem collapsed when he retired. Over the years, he gradually became an outsider to the military circle and an outsider to his poor peasant relatives in the country. The army and the state-run electronics company he was once in were now out of date. As a battalion commander, he lived in the wrong time. His wishful thinking of working for a state-owned civilian industry in order to pave a smooth road for his children exploded like a bubble. History changed rapidly, “the working class,” the once “big brother” to the peasant class, “the second brother,” was no longer guaranteed “iron rice bowls” and the privilege of passing on the bowls to their children. Uncle was only sixty years old that year. Compared with the centenarians in the village, he was young. His own mother died at the age of ninety-eight. Who knew he was going to the other world so quickly?

Wu blinked her eyes and sighed.

The land dried up. The cracks were so wide that a baby's foot could easily sink in. Aunt Nong looked at the thirsty land on the TV screen, shaking her head sadly. It seemed to her that natural disasters had increased in recent years.

"Something went wrong," Aunt Nong murmured, "Di Mu, open your eyes to this."

She went back into her bedroom where she set up an altar for Di Mu. She felt sorry she could not find a better place for Di Mu. "I'd better not to put you in my bedroom. *Shen* and people have boundaries, but the living room is not a good place for you. People come to visit. I do not want them to see you. I never know what people will say about you. It's safer to put you in my room. Please forgive me for doing this."

The relocation apartment was completely different from the adobe quadrangle in her hometown. People, ancestors, deities, and livestock had their own places in the quadrangle. Ancestors and deities shared the central room. Livestock occupied rooms of the quadrangle's wings.

Rays of sunlight shone on Di Mu's earth-colored cheeks and her half-open lotus-petal-shaped eyes. The dust became visible under the sunlight. Aunt Nong carefully flicked away the dust from Di Mu's cheeks and her eyes.

The relocation completely changed Aunt Nong's life. In her hometown she was a well-known medicine woman, but she became nobody in the Whole Will Village where people did not know Di Mu. Aunt Nong and her husband were

relocated to the village in 2003, which was the last year of the second phase of the Three Gorges Dam Relocation Project.

The relocation disintegrated Aunt Nong's family. Seeing no future in becoming country people in an unfamiliar place, her daughter and son-in-law joined the wave of migrant workers. Her daughter found a job in a garment factory in Guangzhou where her husband worked as a chef's assistant in a spicy food restaurant. They dreamed of opening their own chain of hot pot restaurants when they saved enough money.

Living in a new place far away from her hometown and her daughter, and having no patients to attend to and no place to search for herbs, Aunt Nong aged rapidly. A sense of emptiness and unease attacked her frequently. Uncle Nong, her husband, seemed to encounter a problem similar to hers. Aunt Nong noticed more and more white hair popping up on her old man's head.

In her hometown, which was now buried under water, Aunt Nong was a magic medicine woman among the older generation. However, among the younger generation, the generation who were born in the 1990s, she was the creepy woman who built a haunting ghost house next to the primary school. The haunting ghost house was in fact a Di Mu shrine.

The call of Di Mu struck Aunt Nong when she turned eighteen. On that morning, on her way to fetch water from the spring, Aunt Nong crossed paths with a mad woman whom she had never seen before. The mad woman looked into Aunt

Nong's eyes, singing "seven days and seven nights, seven days and seven nights, seven days and seven nights." The woman disappeared before Aunt Nong knew how to react.

Aunt Nong told her mother about her encounter.

"Do not worry, it is nothing," Aunt Nong's mother said so calmly that Aunt Nong did not even notice the abnormality in her mother's voice. Aunt Nong's mother swallowed the next sentence, "Oh, no. What the diviner said is going to happen finally."

Aunt Nong felt weak and dizzy in the afternoon. She went to bed without having supper. Seven days and seven nights had passed when she woke up. It was midnight. She walked into the night with a hoe without saying a single word. She returned with bundles of native medicinal herbs in the morning. The Nong family kept this a secret. The next morning, Aunt Nong's First Uncle appeared. He produced a statue of Di Mu to Aunt Nong's mother and asked her to keep it in a safe place for Aunt Nong.

First Uncle was known as the crazy shaman in the Red Star Village, formerly known as Sky Pits Village, which was named after two gigantic natural pits near where the Mountain God Temple stood before. The temple was destroyed by red guards who were eager to demonstrate their determination to follow Chairman Mao, the red sun of new China. Only First Uncle's big sister and his brother-in-law, Aunt Nong's parents, knew he was not mad. He faked madness when the wind of

“eradicating superstition” swept China. When the red guards stormed into his thatch, they found him eating his own excrement. His “madness” saved him. None of the shamans from neighboring villages survived humiliation and physical torture.

The year Aunt Nong encountered the mad woman was the year of 1976, an eventful year in Chinese history and the Nong family. Chairman Mao went to heaven. Aunt Nong’s Third Uncle, the only person in the Nong family who went to Tian’an men Square to see Chairman Mao, went blind without warning. First Uncle mysteriously disappeared the day after he appeared at the front door of his big sister’s house. Afterwards, the grass on the Nong family’s ancestral graves suddenly flourished.

In 1982, the Catholic Church in town reopened. It was said the church was founded in 1896 by a missionary from Poland and later handed over to a priest from France. The last foreign priest was asked to leave in 1951. The church was a sanctuary for children of poor families. Aunt Nong’s grandparents had pleasant memories of the church. They were taught to read by studying the life of Jesus Christ. They had meat twice a week, once on Wednesday and the other on Sunday. In the same year the Catholic Church reopened, the production unit was dissolved. The Red Star Village resumed its previous name, The Village of Temples. The land was allotted to individual families. Before long, villagers saw a shrine erected on top of a hill facing the valley. The door was decorated with a couplet:

地母庙

保　　佑

一　　四

方　　季

风　　国

调　　泰

雨　　民

顺　　安

The news that Aunt Nong had a gift spread out. For the past twenty years or so, Aunt Nong was as busy as Premier Zhou. Now she had to learn to adjust to a retired life. Aunt Nong wished her knowledge could be passed on but she knew she might not be able to find an heir. Both gift and effort were needed to make one a shaman. Her daughter was interested more in seeing the world than in memorizing the names of herbs and their medicinal effects. Her granddaughter was educated in the city. Being completely immersed in an urban environment, she was drawn into comic books and animated movies. She could not even tell chives from wheat. Aunt Nong once had two students but she decided not to pass on the knowledge to them for fear they would do more harm than good. They seemed to be more interested in making money than healing people.

Underneath the feet of Di Mu was a wooden box. It was Aunt Nong's treasure box—an old copy of *Di Mu Jing*, a collection of native medicinal herbs from her hometown, and folk prescriptions which she had gathered and persuaded Uncle Nong to write down. Aunt Nong hoped these treasures could find their true home someday. Wu seemed to have the right vibe but she received too much modern education. Aunt Nong made up her mind to wait and see.

The room temperature rose. Aunt Nong had noticed that fire brick and cement buildings had poor protection from the heat in summer and the cold in winter. She turned on the electronic fan her daughter bought for her and sat on a bamboo stool to handwash her own and her old man's clothes. She carefully singled out her white cotton T-shirt from a pile of dirty laundry. The T-shirt was a present from her daughter. Her daughter had one similar to hers. The only difference was the color of the camellia flower embroidered on the left chest. Hers had a red camellia flower. Her daughter's had a yellow camellia flower. Her daughter embroidered the flowers with a sewing machine by herself. Aunt Nong's heart melted when she received the T-shirt, which became a reminder of what generations of women from her hometown shared—a story about a smart woman's wit.

Once upon a time, there was a scholar. People called him *luoyang xiucai* because he came from Luoyang. On a sunny spring day, he went horsebak riding. As he passed by a rice paddy, he saw good-looking maidens and lads stooping next to one another, planting rice seedlings. He decided to humiliate those

good-looking illiterate lads by challenging them with a hard question. “Rice planting lads, rice planting lads, how many rows of rich seedlings have you planted?” The lads looked at one another, having no idea how to answer the question. “Clip-clop, clip-clop, how many steps have you taken?” a maiden answered back. Surprised at her quick wit, the scholar put a flower on her blouse near her heart. From that moment onwards, girls and women became obsessed with flowers. Men believed women had become less smart ever since they fell for flowers. They did not know women’s love of flowers was their strategy to kill two birds with one stone—to beautify themselves and to fool conceited men.

In front of Wu stood two rows of identical, motel-like, two-story fire brick and cement buildings. In front of each row were flower beds, which residents used mainly as vegetable plots. Wu knocked at the wrong door when she came to visit Aunt Nong the first time. She had learned from Aunt Nong to use flowers and vegetables to identify who lived in which apartment. Wu glanced around the flower beds, searching for okra flowers.

A joyful gleam lit up her eyes. The okra plants were in full bloom. Their yellow flowers were as delicate as baby faces.

“Aunt Nong, Aunt Nong.” Wu called at the door.

Aunt Nong appeared at the door shortly with a warm smile on her face. Wu immediately felt a mysterious connection with Aunt Nong. Wu saw Jiajia, Mother, Nainai, and Big Aunt in her. Her short silver hair reminded Wu of Jiajia, her clear

and sharp eyes Mother, her breath Nainai, and her round face Big Aunt.

Wu seated herself in a bamboo chair next to a ribbon back chair. The ribbon back chair was one of the Nong family's most cherished pieces of furniture. This beautiful chair was made of solid wood and painted with red lacquer. According to Aunt Nong, the ribbon back chair was hand-made by Uncle Nong from scratch. Both the wood and the lacquer were from their hometown, the former from a cypress tree Uncle Nong's father planted to the south side of their old house and the latter from the lacquers trees in the back of that house. From what Aunt Nong said, Wu had the impression that Uncle Nong was a versatile man. He was a skilled carpenter, an excellent fisherman, a self-made herbalist, and a seasoned navel orange grower. Wu had never seen Uncle Nong in person. Every time she came to visit, he was in the Whole Will Tea House. It was no exception this time.

"He is a wild horse. He cannot stay at home. An old horse will never change its nature," Aunt Nong smiled.

Wu handed Aunt Nong a bundle of dried purple mint, which was a gift from Mother to Aunt Nong, a package of sesame powder and a package of walnut powder, which were gifts from Aunt Nong's niece.

"Please say thanks to your mother and my niece for me. Tell my niece not to buy me gifts. I have an abundant supply of fresh vegetables. I am house-sitting for a young couple who work in a restaurant in Beijing. They allow me to plant vegetables in their flower beds. Besides, I have my own flower bed. To be honest,

I prefer vegetables to tonic."

"I will." Wu smiled at her. How like-minded Aunt Nong and Mother were, she thought to herself.

Aunt Nong excused herself and went to the kitchen. She came back with a glass jar and a ceramic jar. Wu wondered what was in the jars.

Aunt Nong opened the glass jar and put it under Wu's nose. It was mustard flower honey.

"I bought it from an honest beekeeper. He does not add water or sugar to the honey."

Wu inhaled deeply the fragrance of the rich mustard flower honey.

Before Wu took a fourth breath of the aroma, Aunt Nong opened the ceramic jar.

"This is wild mint from my hometown." Aunt Nong picked a couple of leaves and handed them to Wu.

Wu rubbed the leaves softly and breathed in the minty scent remaining on her finger tips.

Aunt Nong pulled out an old-fashioned enamel tray from the solid wood cupboard sitting against the south side wall of the room. In the center of the tray was a pair of magpies perching on red plum blossoms and a double happiness. Wu wondered if it was Aunt Nong's wedding souvenir.

Aunt Nong put a pair of Mickey Mouse mugs on the tray.

“The Mickey Mouse is cute, isn’t it? The mugs are my birthday gifts from my granddaughter.” Aunt Nong put some mint leaves in each mug.

She went back to the kitchen again and came back with a thermos. The thermos was decorated with a pink peony flower and a red one.

Wu stood up to offer help.

“Honey goes well with mint tea, but we have to wait until the tea cools off. Honey with hot water can cause excessive internal heat.”

That explained why Wu had had the perennial acne problem. She made a mental note not to mix honey with hot tea any more.

They smiled at each other and waited patiently.

“I’m going abroad to study, Aunt Nong. I am leaving next week.”

“That’s very good. Don’t be afraid of going to an unfamiliar place. You’ll be where you should be,” she looked into Wu’s eyes, “I have something for you.”

Aunt Nong took to her feet and walked into her bedroom.

Wu left with a happy mouth perfumed with the aroma of honey mint tea, a seed from a thousand-year-old juniper tree from the backyard of a temple in Aunt Nong’s hometown, and a handful of okra flowers from Aunt Nong’s flower bed. The seed would be a talisman for Wu’s long journey, and the flowers the essential ingredients for home-made bone soup.

Mother and Father came back in the evening. Mother’s grudge with Aunt and

Uncle disappeared completely. Aunt was helpless, not knowing how to properly prepare passing at all. Having organized three burial ceremonies, Mother became her counsel. Mother's intuition told her Uncle had only a few weeks left. She advised Aunt to look for Uncle's military uniform. Mother thought his military uniform, a symbol of the glory of his life, defined who he was. Sadly, where his body would eternally rest was still up in the air. Aunt had not found an affordable public cemetery. Sympathy triumphed. Since Mother came back, she had been talking over the phone until she finally found a reliable shaman and a piece of burial ground in the village.

"Life is a mystery, you will never know beforehand what stage of your life will be good and what stage of your life will be bad," Mother signed a great sorrow, "As the old saying goes, life is divided by a river. You live on this side of the river for thirty years and on the opposite side of the river for thirty years."

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In the beginning, there was a turtle. Jiang Boyang, God of Knowledge, shot an arrow at the turtle. The arrow penetrated deep into the midsection of its body. The turtle fell down to the ground. Its head touched the south direction. Blood gushed out from its head and turned into fire. Being numbed by pain, the turtle urinated in

the north direction. Its urine turned into water. The arrowhead went straight through the turtle's body, dropped to the ground in the west direction, turned into metal. The arrow shaft remained in the east direction, turned into wood. The turtle's four legs gripped the ground, turned into earth, mountain, wind, and sky. The eight elements of fire, water, metal, wood, earth, mountain, wind, and sky became the essential matter of the universe. Inhabiting this universe, living beings relied on the eight elements to survive. Inseparable from the eight elements were twelve animals—snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, pig, rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, and dragon. Human beings were inextricably connected with the four directions, the eight elements, and the twelve animals. The four directions, the eight elements, and the twelve animals mutually promoted and restrained one another, turning the universe in motion. In the south were fire, snake, and horse; in the southwest were earth and goat; in the west were metal, monkey, and rooster; in the northwest were sky and dog; in the north were pig and rat; in the northeast were mountain and ox; in the east were wood, tiger and rabbit; in the southeast were wind and dragon. All human beings were travelers in this universe; each one had a direction to follow, an element to rely on, and an animal companion to seek comfort from. The companionship between a person and this person's direction, element, and animal was lifetime, but the companionship between human beings, especially between men and women was transient. Men and women traveled the universe in opposite directions. A man's orientation was clockwise, a woman's counterclockwise.(The

Bön of Tibet)

The next day, it was weirdly humid at dusk. Mother suggested they sit in the courtyard.

In the distance, a Tibetan woman was circling a rice paddy counterclockwise. She made three full circles and left.

"Zhuo Ma is industrious and smart," Mother commented. "Everybody says Tibetans are lazy and barbarous, but my observation tells me that is prejudice. Her crops are doing very well under her care. Like animals, plants are very sensitive and responsive to the *chi* of the person who takes care of them. I can tell she has good *chi*."

Like everyone else in the village, Mother's and Wu's introduction to Tibetans were through a film about the life of a slave named Qiang Ba. He was skinned. His skin was used to make a human-skin drum. The film was to teach people how barbarous Tibetans were before the People's Liberation Army entered Tibet. The film had planted in villagers' minds profound fears for Tibetans. The fear had been reinforced by endless news reports and rumors about hate crimes committed by Tibetans. Zhuo Ma was unaware of the deep-seated bias which had been sowed in the dark corners of the villagers' hearts and brains long before she moved to the village.

Zhuo Ma carefully pulled out an incense stick from the box, lit it, and placed it at the foot of Sa-trig Er-sangs, Mother of Space. The familiar scent of grass and cypress made her homesick. Tears welled up in her eyes, streaming down her face silently like two crystal clear creeks. Her belly began to stir the moment she tasted the salty flavor of her tears. She reached out her hands to caress the little life growing within her belly, imagining how life could be like in an enclosed place as dark as a cave where monks meditated for months and even years in order to achieve enlightenment.

She looked outside the small window of her room. Night crept into the U-shaped courtyard like a cat. Zhuo Ma did not bother to turn on the light. Sitting on her bed in the dark, she let night embrace her as if she were a monk in a cave. The darkness helped Zhuo Ma to digest her father's words. Father warned her that marrying a Han was like jumping off a cliff into a dark hole, and now Zhuo Ma had a taste of being in the dark — feeling isolated and lonely. Solitude only intensified her worries about Jing Ru.

Was Jing Ru all right? Zhuo Ma once went to visit him. The construction site where he worked looked sad. Without a single tree and plant, the site was a wasteland. It turned muddy when it rained and dusty when it shined. Zhuo Ma sobbed when she had to part from Jing Ru. The contractor did not like wives to visit their husbands. It was distracting, he said. Zhuo Ma felt sorry for her husband and his co-workers who had to labor like slaves in the city and had to tolerate the

humiliation when city people covered their noses at the sight of them. Zhuo Ma knew how it felt when Han city people turned their heads away from her. She heard about that Han people thought Tibetans were dirty and barbarous but she refused to believe that until she stepped into the train. A middle-aged couple clad in shirts and pants immediately moved to the rear of the compartment. Zhuo Ma felt hurt but decided not to internalize the wound.

Zhuo Ma desperately wanted to bring Jing Ru back home. For her, working the land was much more pleasant than toiling in the city, but she knew Jing Ru could not afford to fall out of the construction team. There was no future for farming in the village. Arable land in the village was shrinking. The plots allotted to the family were only big enough to produce food for two mouths. Even these plots would be lost in due time once the New Village Project started.

Change was inevitable even in her home village Bönri. Ever since Guangdong Province reached its magic touch-a-stone-and-turn-it-into-gold hands to save this once ill-famed “beggar village” from poverty, more and more youth had moved out to “see the world.” Like the turtle whose body scattered in all directions, most of Zhuo Ma’s childhood playmates and friends dispersed in all places outside the village.

Bian Ba, influenced by her father who renounced religion, went to the Tibetan High School in Chengdu and was now studying modern medicine in a medical university in Beijing. Ci Yang and her husband “went on the road,” transporting

local produce in their truck to faraway places for a Han Chinese couple who traded Tibetan local produce. Yi Xi hoped to travel to faraway places, too. His dream was to visit Beijing when he earned enough heads of Chairman Mao, hundred yuan bills. To make his dream come true, he worked in town as a janitor for the Mulberry King Hotel owned by an entrepreneur from Guangdong Province. The hotel name was inspired by the ancient male mulberry tree in the backyard of Father's house.

The tree, once a sacred tree for Bön believers, was now designated as national heritage and opened to tourists. Zhuo Ma's father, who was appointed as the ticket-collector of the ancient mulberry tree, had noticed an odd phenomenon in recent years. As if the North Pole and the South Pole had changed position, when young people in the village moved out, tourists and construction workers poured in; when tourists and construction workers flooded in, vultures—the sacred birds that carry the souls of people to the other world—flew away. Only the sixteen-hundred-year-old male mulberry tree remained rooted in its origin; its roots, leaves, and branches reached far, luring visitors from the four corners of the world.

The third time the young man came to see the ancient mulberry tree on a rainy day; Zhuo Ma could not resist her curiosity. He was tall and slim, like a bamboo plant Zhuo Ma saw on TV. Holding a purple umbrella in his hand, the young man was silently circling the tree clockwise. His sun-tanned and olive-shaped face

looked relaxed like clouds on a calm day. Between his eyebrows was a deep vertical crease shaped like a third-eye or a canyon. His eyebrows were as narrow and long as willow leaves were, his eyes were as clear and gentle as spring water was. Zhuo Ma smiled at him when he found her studying his face. He smiled at her in return and walked away. A breeze arose, blowing the rain onto Zhuo Ma's and the young man's faces. The mulberry tree leaves rustled.

When it rained again, Zhuo Ma was happy. She decided not to let this slender beautiful man slide away this time. She offered to take him to the sacred spring of Bönri. They communicated in mandarin. Zhuo Ma spoke mandarin with a strong eastern Tibetan accent, the young man a distinct Meishan accent. Neither of them felt embarrassed or awkward about their accents. The young man was a road construction worker in a neighboring village. His name was Jing Ru. The name, meaning "calm" and "natural," mirrored the man. He had an almost feminine quality in his mannerism, speaking with a very soft voice. His words swam into Zhuo Ma's ears as drizzle fell on her hair.

Coming to know Zhuo Ma, Jing Ru now understood landscape and people mutually shaped each other. Zhuo Ma and the landscape became each other. Her eyes were the sacred lakes and springs; her soul was the spirit of eagles; the mountains were her breasts; the trees and plants were her hair; the color of the earth was the color of her skin; the scent of *sang* was the fragrance of her breath; the crescent moon was her smile; the sun was her mannerism. Holding her in his

arms, Jing Ru felt safe, relaxed, steady and sure.

After a rainstorm washed the mountains and trees, Zhuo Ma took Jing Ru to the Yalong River. The torrents rushed against the cliff, roaring forward. The cliff was an abandoned water burial site, but people still came to tie prayer flags along its edge. Zhuo Ma and Jing Ru stood on top of the cliff, watching and listening to the five-colored prayer flags fluttering in the wind. Beneath them, a lizard was hiding underneath the stone stairs leading to the river flowing southward for thousands of miles to join the Gold Sand River, the Long River, and the East Sea.

When Jing Ru's contract was due, Zhuo Ma proposed to marry him in spite of her father's objection. Blinded by love, Zhuo Ma refused to believe the barbarity of Han Chinese. Although people in her husband's village were nice to her, there seemed to be a wall between them and her. Jing Ru's mother, a good-tempered Buddhist, was kind to her, but Zhuo Ma found it difficult to have a deep conversation with her because her mother-in-law only spoke the local dialect.

When Jing Ru left home for his new job in a city, she had to endure solitude she had never experienced before. Zhuo Ma sometimes regretted she did not listen to his father and did not receive the Bön masters' blessing. For many times, she longed to go back to her father's but her pride held her legs back. Besides, the crops and a new life needed to be attended.

She developed a fondness of the lotus pond in the back of the house. Watching ducks floating on the surface of the water, feeling the kick of a little life in her

belly, she savored the taste of life—its uncertainty and hope; its joy and sorrow; its chaos and order; its transience and eternity.

Outside, the moon moved out from behind the shadows of clouds.

The work shed where Jing Ru and some ten construction workers shared was bathed in the moonlight. The cool moonlight diminished the summer heat accumulated from the scorching sun during the day. Sipping the moisture of night, plants and trees regenerated. If you listened carefully, you could hear vegetables growing.

Jing Ru turned around to face the wall. The man sleeping next to him was snoring with his mouth open. The smell of rotten teeth and a bad lung escaped from his mouth. This was a problem the man developed over the past few months. Rumor had it he was a released prisoner from the contractor's hometown. The foreman made him do the heaviest and dirtiest jobs, which he never complained about. He seemed to be content with the distance his co-workers kept from him. Being a loner, he smoked non-stop. Jing Ru tried to chat with him once.

"Smoking is not good for your health." Jing Ru suggested.

"What is life for?" the man forced a smile, "when my stomach is full, my whole family is not hungry. Unlike you, I do not have a family to feed. What is the good of money if I do not smoke?" he puffed. Cigarette smoke circles curled up, changed shape, and disappeared into thin air.

A gentle breeze squeezed through the tiny window, bringing the smell of fart

into Jing Ru's nostrils. It was the smell of indigestion and rotten meat. The quality of meat and fish was bad nowadays. Fish tasted like bean dregs, meat like jell-o. They suspected the cook embezzled money and put it in her own pocket. Her hollow cheeks had apparently fattened up like balloon since she came to work in the kitchen. The workers complained. The contractor pretended to scold the cook, but the food quality did not change. Workers finally gave up when they found out the cook was a relative of the contractor.

Jing Ru felt lucky to have Zhuo Ma. Unlike the mean cook, Zhuo Ma had the heart of Tara. For the sake of her and their child, Jing Ru was determined to eat bitterness, enduring the unhealthy food, the drudgery of everyday labor, limited sleeping space, and various kinds of foul body odors of stinky men in a small room. Zhuo Ma had the scent of mountains, rivers, plants, and flowers. Jing Ru loved sniffing Zhuo Ma, breathing in her fragrant breath. Jing Ru took a deep breath, tracing his memory of the smell of Zhuo Ma. Gradually sleep crept up on him.

Outside, the moon moved higher in the sky. Brighter.

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In the center of the East Sea, there was an island. On the island was a giant

female mulberry tree. The tree bloomed at midnight, bore fruits in the morning. The fruits turned into men. The men matured at noon and died in the evening, thus the life of a man made a cycle. When one cycle was completed, another began.

On the next day, Wu went to sweep the graves of Yeye, Nainai, Jiajia, and Jiagong. The graves of Yeye and Nainai faced a rice paddy, in the front of which a river meandered quietly. In the back of their graves was a bamboo grove. Left to them grew a native myrtle. Its branches stretched over a bitter tree stump. Tender green shoots circled the stump like a garland. To the right of the graves was an heirloom potato patch. On top of the graves two stalks of wild sugar cane grass stood tall and luxuriantly.

To Wu, Yeye was like a character in a wartime epic, of which Mother was the story-teller. His marriage to Nainai stunned villagers. Yeye was Nainai's brother-in-law. He was ten years younger than Nainai. He was as tall, handsome, and muscular as Nainai was short, ordinary, and skinny. Yeye had established his authority in the family and the village for his extraordinary appetite, physical strength, big voice, and quick temper. The amount of food he ate each meal could feed the rest of the family for a meal. In terms of lifting heavy weights, no one in the entire village could compete with him. When he lost temper, his voice pounded people's ears like a roll of thunder. Buffalos and chickens would freeze with terror; babies would be shocked, forgetting to suck milk and starting to cry. Wu and her

siblings were in awe of him. Whenever they spotted Yeye within their range of vision, they crept around on tiptoes like rabbits.

According to Mother, Yeye's elder brother—Nainai's first husband—became an opium-addict when opium-smoking swept the village. His addiction cost him his life. One day, he ran into a press gang on his way to the opium den. He was forced to become a soldier for Guoming Dang, the National People's Party, and died shortly after in a battle, leaving Nainai with a broken heart, a three year old daughter, and an unknown future.

Like millions of peasant soldiers who died in the Civil War, Wu's Yeye, who died in the war, broke Nainai's heart, and changed Nainai's life, was nobody. His story was as common as the crab grass people saw everywhere. It was too ordinary to excite interest of anybody outside the family. Even within the family he was forgotten except for the annual Mid-July Festival, the festival to commemorate ancestors. Like any ancestor, he would receive an envelope filled with memorial paper money. The envelope addressed to him would be burnt in the courtyard together with envelopes addressed to other ancestors.

Watching the flame licking the pile of envelops, Wu imagined the other world where people existed in the form of air. Wu took a quick peek at Nainai, there was no sadness on her face. Nainai carefully poked at the burning envelopes for fear too much force would break the ash of paper money sheets into pieces. It was believed broken paper money sheets would be devalued in the other world like

torn money bills in this world. “Please protect and bless the children in the family, help them remain healthy and safe.” Nainai talked to the flaming pile, which soon burnt down to ashes. The ashes would be swept off the ground and dumped underneath a tree when they cooled off. The only trace the ancestors left was a burnt spot in the courtyard which would gradually be erased by footprints, chicken shit, rain, and lichen.

Somehow, the Yeye, whom Wu had never seen, made the dry history books about the Opium wars and the Chinese Civil War intriguing. Just as the empty spaces water-and-ink artists left in their mountain-and-water paintings allowed room for the audience to imagine, the void Wu’s never-met Yeye left in this chapter of the family and national history fuelled her imagination. How did he feel when he was handed a gun, a lethal weapon he had never seen before? Was he scared when he was ordered to march to unknown terrains with other peasant soldiers who had never received any military training like him? How did he die? Was he shot to death by his commander when he was trying to escape? Or was he struck to death by a stone when the troupe was passing a valley? Or did he die of hunger and disease? Did he regret smoking opium? Did he miss his wife and daughter? If he survived the war, would he be forced to move to Taiwan? If he chose to stay, would he survive a series of eradication campaigns?

Mother considered his death a matter of fate and good luck for him and the family. Being a solider for Guoming Dang, the enemy party of the Communist

Party, he would live a life of oblivion and fear in New China. Worse, the lives of his family and relatives would be endangered during the Cultural Revolution. Anyway, if he survived, the family tree would be different. This opium addict and Guoming Dang solider, as the family's connection to the other side of Chinese history which Wu had never fully known, completed his life journey at the speed of a shooting star. Whenever Wu thought about her Yeye whom she had never seen, she recalled a line from Rabindranath Tagore's poem, "a wild goose flew over the sky, traceless." A goose, a sick and yet lucky goose he was, Wu mused.

Yeye, Nainai's second husband, led the family to a different path, the New China path. In spite of his illiteracy, he had the luck to be elected as the production team leader when the socialist agricultural economy movement was in full swing. What villagers needed was not a scholar but a yokel, a man of physical strength, big appetite, deep resonant voice, simple-mindedness, and warm-heartedness.

Mother considered Yeye's warm-heartedness selfish and foolish. Warm-heartedness meant to help others at the expense of his family. Yeye followed the suit of Chairman Mao, embracing the ethics that a leader's children should take the lead. Whereas Mao sent his son to the front line of the Korean War, Yeye required Father and Mother to go to the crop fields half an hour earlier than other villagers. Mother suffered from Yeye's warm-heartedness the most. She had to get up the minute the rooster crowed in the morning to cook for the entire family and the pigs. Women's liberation in New China only meant multiple

burdens for Mother. She had to toil at home, labor with men in the crop field, and take care of the family's old and young.

When Yeye passed away, Mother felt partially liberated, at least she could decide when to get up and when to go to bed. In spite of Mother's grudge, Yeye could go to the other world with no regrets. He had the biggest funeral of record in the village. Mother prepared a seven-day feast for Yeye's funeral. Two pigs were slaughtered, hundreds of kilograms of rice were cooked, and numerous baskets of money paper were burnt. Every family in the village came with or without invitation. "I have to admit your Yeye did give people tremendous help when he was alive. Look at the guests who come to pay respect to him. They all received this and that kind of help from your Yeye."

Wu remembered the year Yeye went to the other world the bamboo on the east side of the house flowered and died; the yellow dog dug a hole at the front gate and then disappeared. Wu was reading the story of the Silk Lady when Uncle appeared at the classroom door to deliver the news of Yeye's passing.

Kneeing down in front of Yeye's coffin, Wu's tears fell like a string of beads with a broken string. This was the first time Wu came so close to a person who would no longer breathe and speak. She was struck by the anguish of not knowing what the other life would be like. Death was a runaway dog. Its mystery followed the footsteps of the deceased person into a realm unknown to the live. The image of Yeye faded as time went by. What Wu still remembered about Yeye was the

tobacco smell in his bedroom and his face. He looked like Lenin, the Russian communist leader.

After Yeye passed away, Nainai moved from the room she once shared with Yeye to a room in the west wing of the house. She survived Yeye for five years. Nainai's heart remained unfathomable to Wu like a deep spring. Although Wu remembered bits and pieces of Nainai, she did not really know her. As time went by; however, Wu developed a deep yearning for her. She patiently waited for Nainai to come back to her, longing to learn from her how to see the unseen.

On a rainy night, a time that was perfect for a person to sink into a mood of longing, Wu closed her eyes, opened her heart, and waited. Nainai's grandmotherly eyes and Wu's searching eyes locked together. Wu heard Nainai's voice but did not see her lips moving. The voice, originated in her belly, came out of her wind eyes. Through Nainai's wind eyes, Wu saw her walking toward her.

Nainai was a small woman with small feet. Her feet were naturally small. She did not have to endure the pain of foot binding like Jiajia who had big feet. Nainai was always dressed in traditional blouse that had wild strawberry-shaped buttons on the side. Her blouses were made of cotton fabric either in the color of indigo or red. She wore her indigo blouse to go to the market and her red blouse to meet with her sisters in temples. Nainai also had a green outfit. Wu could never forget the day she watched Nainai making her green outfit that included a shirt, a pair of pants, and a pair of shoes in the shape of two identical miniature ferryboats. Nainai

told Wu the outfit was her “lao yi,” clothes she was to wear when she passed away. Wu was saddened at the thought of her being wrapped in green and lying in a black lacquer coffin. Yet she pretended to be calm because Nainai mentioned “lao yi” matter-of-factly. There was no trace of sadness in her tone. Wu was too young to grasp the meaning of preparing for one’s death long before the final day came.

A few years before Nainai made her “lao yi,” she instructed Father to look for a coffin for her from the market. She insisted the coffin was made out of fir wood and painted with black lacquer. Wu did not see Nainai lying in this black coffin with her green outfit. When she passed away Wu was a junior at college. It was the finals week. Uncle persuaded Wu’s parents into not telling her the news. Nainai came to her dreams every night for about a week. The dreams were all the same. Nainai looked at her from above but did not say anything. There was a smile in her eyes. Wu wanted to ask her where her mother was but could not open her mouth. In every dream Wu would struggle and wake up with a sense of nameless unease.

Wu came to understand her dreams and unease the minute she stepped into the house. The *chi* in the house was different. As usual, Wu asked Father where Nainai was. Father remained silent but his face told her everything. After a while, he said, “Your grandma left us.” The funeral was over and the house returned to its normal state. An empty feeling hung heavily in the air. Wu felt the oxygen thin and stood still under the eaves. When she regained her posture, she found a big bruise, a ghost beat, on her right leg. She asked Mother if Brother and Sister had ever had

ghost beats. Mother said they were younger than Wu and did not have the same connection with Nainai as she did.

Wu, however, had never learned Nainai's healing knowledge partly because Mother had a grudge against Nainai, partly because Wu had to swear loyalty to Mother, partly because what Nainai practiced was labeled superstition, and partly because she was away most of the time to receive modern education at school. Wu tried to piece together what she remembered about Nainai over the years.

Nainai was a *pusa*. Her knowledge was transmitted from her mother. Nainai had two moon-shaped oracles which she tossed at night and chanted to after each toss. She had several sisters who came to visit on important dates, such as the birthday of Guan Yin. Wu remembered one of her sisters had long fingernails that looked like the beaks of birds. On the first and fifteenth days of each month, Nainai dieted on only vegetables and grains. Her practice remained primarily personal and at home. Occasionally, she was called out by neighbors to heal their sick children.

One day, the youngest son of a neighbor had the problem of "zou yin." The boy's testicles moved to the wrong place and caused him severe pain and faintness. Nainai asked the boy's mother to stay calm and to put the boy on her lap. She found a bamboo broom and beat it around the water drainage corner in the courtyard while chanting spells. She later burned pieces of money paper and soaked the ashes in a bowl of water. When the ashes sank to the bottom, she fed

the boy with the water. The boy soon regained energy.

Nainai was called out less and less when more and more people preferred to see a doctor in a hospital. She was reduced to be a family doctor. Mother let Nainai cure her children's minor ailments, such as stomach gas, sudden change of mood and behavior, and Wu's eye infection. Nainai treated stomach gas with massage. Wu still remembered how deftly and strongly her fingers traveled around her stomach to guide the gas out.

Nainai considered the sudden change of mood and behavior a sign of a visit from "the unclean." Small children were especially susceptible to this type of visit. Wu and her siblings all experienced unclean visits. Nainai usually used a chicken egg to help diagnose what was "the unclean." Once, Wu had an unclean visit. Mother held Wu in her arms. Nainai circled an egg in front of Wu's face, chanting. When this was finished, she wrapped the egg with cotton threads then buried it in fresh rice stalk ashes. Eventually, the egg shell broke. The egg white hardened and took an odd form. Nainai knew how to tell what "the unseen" was from the shape of the egg white. Wu's favorite part of the whole process was eating the part of the egg that remained clean.

Wu did not remember her eye problem. She was too young to remember it. Mother told Wu the story. Wu was born with "fire eyes," a type of infantile eye ailment. The ailment had lasted about two years since she was born. Wu's eyes looked clean and clear for a better part of a day. However, whenever she went to

sleep, she woke up with a huge amount of sticky gum in her eyes that sealed her eyelids together like stitches. She would scream with no consolation. Her eye problem tested Father's love. Every morning Father never failed to boil water, soak a towel in the hot water, and gently wipe out Wu's eye gum which was dried up by her body heat overnight.

Wu's eye problem worried Nainai. She tried to heal Wu's eyes with "tu fang," folk prescription. She chewed Chinese mugwort and Chinese prickly ash in her mouth, put her mouth on Wu's eyes, and gently sucked her eyes with the herbal juice. Mother objected after she watched Nainai doing this for a few times.

By that time, a group of educated youth was stationed in the village. One of them was the daughter of a doctor in the provincial capital city. She made friends with Mother when she was assigned to dine with the family for a week. Mother told her the folk prescription and this educated youth told Mother that mouth could transmit viruses. She also advised Mother to use a separate washing bowl and washing cloth. Therefore, while families in the village often shared a washing bowl and washing cloth, Wu's family had three sets: one for Wu, one for Father and Mother, and one for Yeye and Nainai. Mother received criticism from the relatives for splitting washing bowls and washing cloth. It was "*qiong jiang jiu*, a pauper who had the habits of the rich." Mother ignored the criticism and was in fact pretty proud of her "advanced thought."

What Mother could not control was time. It was a time when the commune

was in fashion. Villagers had to get up at dawn and went to work in the crop fields together. Wu had to be left at home with Nainai. Mother suspected that Nainai continued to treat her eyes with the method she believed correct in secret. To prevent Nainai from doing so, Mother took Wu to the municipal hospital at the costs of being fined for a day's wage and a fifteen percent deduction of her whole annual wage. The doctor gave Mother a bottle of eye drops. Wu's eyes recovered shortly. Mother believed it was the eye drops that cured her eyes. Wu was surprised years later when Mother suggested Sister to use this folk prescription to treat her daughter's "fire eyes." She modified the procedure of sucking, instead, she advised Sister to soak a towel in the herbal infusion then apply the towel to her daughter's eyes.

Mother said Nainai's healing power diminished when Nainai closed the door to the sick during the Cultural Revolution. Mother became to suspect that Nainai partially lost her gift because Nainai had rarely complained of pain in her sleep like before. It was through pain that *Pusa* made connections between the healer and the sick. The healer knew the patient's pain because she experienced the same pain in her sleep.

When history walked into the 1980s, Nainai took to the habit of visiting Emei Mountain each year. She and her sisters went there on foot. It took them several days to get to the foot of the mountain and another few days for them to climb up to the mountain peak. Nainai did this for three years and then stopped going there.

One morning she told Mother she had a dream. In her dream, the *pusa* asked her if she wanted to live longer, she answered she was tired and did not want additional years of life.

A few days later, Nainai was invited to the wedding feast of a remote niece. The next morning she did not show up for breakfast. Father found her unconscious. Struck by panic, Father forgot Nainai's distrust of hospitals. He borrowed a *fa gan*, rustic bamboo sedan chair, and rushed to the only hospital in town. Nainai woke up to a white room and insisted on being taken home. She passed away at night on the next day. Nobody knew when she stopped breathing. Big Aunt was looking after her that night. But she was overcome by an irresistible fatigue and fell asleep. She felt guilty but was relieved by Nainai's prophecy. Everyone in the family knew that Nainai believed none of her children would be around her the moment she transited from this mundane world to the other world.

Compared with Yeye's passing, Nainai had it easy. It was short and painless, the kind of passing the elderly desired but not everybody had the good fortune to have. Yeye was a hospital frequent flyer. He had been sick for so long that he himself felt him a big burden and all of his children took his sickness for granted. When he was in pain, he crawled on the floor.

From Mother, Wu learned that Nainai's funeral was quite different from Yeye's. Compared with Yeye's funeral, Nainai's was quiet. Only close relatives and Nainai's sisters gathered together for the funeral. Mother arranged vegan food

for Nainai's sisters and regular food for the relatives. To ensure food for Nainai's sisters was completely free from meat and lard, Mother had the food cooked in the neighbor's kitchen. The dishes were taken back to the kitchen and washed separately from the ones serving regular food. Both the cooking and the cleansing were done by female relatives. Nainai's sisters were very impressed by Mother's consideration. They were shocked; however, when Mother refused to be the heir to Nainai's legacy. Instead, Mother recommended Big Aunt, daughter of Nainai and her first husband who went to the opium house but never came back. Little Aunt tried to talk Mother out of giving up the once-in-a-life-time opportunity but Mother was determined.

Mother's excuse was she had to take care of her three children and thus was unable to commit to a Buddhist way of life. To not offend Nainai's sisters, Mother kept the no-list to herself—routine visits to temples, vegan diet and fasting, constant communication with the unseen in sleep, severe physical pain, various kinds of bodily discomforts, and the risk of being feared and judged. Her biggest concern was how her children would be judged if she accepted Nainai's Buddhist baggage. Seeing Mother's determination, Nainai's sisters agreed to pass the bamboo oracles, the incense burner, the eight immortals table, and the portrait of Guan Yin to Big Aunt. The transmission ceremony took seven days and seven nights to complete.

While Wu believed what Mother said was true, she was not sure if Mother

told her all the truth. Having been greatly influenced by the educated youth and what she learned from the literacy class, Mother was always dubious about Nainai's "old thought." But Wu knew that Mother was not completely convinced of the non-existence of the unseen. Mother's ambiguity toward to the invisible was revealed in her pet phrase "Sichuan is a magic place. It exists if you believe it. It does not exist if you do not believe it." In spite of her doubts, she took over Nainai's job—sweeping ancestors' tombs on Pure Brightness Day, Mid-July, and the Spring Festival, offering sacrifices to the kitchen god and door gods, giving advice to the younger generation who were ignorant of burial ceremonies. Sometimes Wu wondered if Mother chose to stay outside the Buddhist system because she deeply believed the power of the unseen that could exert on the believers.

Mother heard the story that Great Grandmother, Nainai's mother from whom Nainai received the Buddhist baggage, went blind for betraying *pusa*. Was there freedom staying outside? What instilled doubts and faith into Mother's mind? Was it because Mother grew up with one foot rooted in Old China and the other in New China? Did Nainai have a slightest hesitation to accept her mother's legacy? After all, Nainai was an ordinary woman even though she was a healer. Mother said, to live the life of a healer was not enjoyable. To diagnose, the healer had to suffer the sufferings of the patient. How sharp the pain the patient had how sharp the pain the healer would feel; how miserable the patient was how miserable the healer's heart

would be. The healer did not sleep, s/he communicated with the *pusa* at night. S/he received beatings as signs while dreaming.

Wu burned three sticks of incense and placed them in front of Yeye's and Nainai's graves respectively. She lit the memorial money papers. The ashes were lifted up and carried away by the breeze. The wild sugar cane grass swayed in the wind.

Wu traveled downstream along the river. The river looked much narrower than the one in Wu's memory. The river channel was compressed to the size of a ditch. Cattails, reeds, and water cabbages took over the shallow forks on both sides of the river. Rotting dead chicken, piglets, cats, plastic bottles, and rags were washed to the forks and deposited among the plants, emitting a foul odor. Mother said the river had not been dredged for years. It was difficult to mobilize people to clean the river after the land was allotted to individual families and the production unit lost its power to force people to offer free labor.

Wu passed by her family vegetable plot. The site was once the village's storage warehouse. The warehouse was a quadrangle. Rooms in the north and south wings were used to store straw; those in the east wing to store grain. The west wing was offices. The offices had been remodeled as a tea house when the economic reforms were enforced. The tea house became the village's pilot project in response to "China's spring breeze of reform." To comply with "the Chinese style socialism," the tea house was village-owned but put out to contract. While

many men were watching which way the wind would blow, Wu's maternal Big Uncle took action. This did not surprise Aunt, Mother, and Jiajia. Big Uncle had the temper of a bull. Any objection would only spur his resistance. He became the village's first rat meat eater simply because the rat was made one of the four national enemies—sparrow, rat, fly, and mosquito— and rat meat was considered to be a transmitter of disease. He took great pride in being "the first person to do something."

He bought the first black and white TV set in the village. Villagers fluxed in the evening to watch the freak—a box that was so small that there seemed no crack for actors and actresses to go through. Wu was mesmerized by the Japanese animated films "Iron-armed A Tou Mu" and "The Clever Little Monk Yi Xiu." She wished she could fly as the iron-armed boy and were as smart and admirable as the little monk. Big Uncle also brought in acrobatic shows, war films, and shadow puppet shows.

The warehouse was demolished and turned into vegetable plots when the production unit was dissolved. No trace of the warehouse, an epitome of the commune, was left except for the malnourished vegetables that testified to the arid soil where the warehouse once stood. Mother gave up growing vegetables on the plot after a few trials. She chose to plant sweet potatoes which seemed to do fine here and did not need too much attention once the vines started to crawl over the ridges. The bamboo trees Mother planted along the edge of the river to keep what

she called, “dirty things,” away from the vegetable plot during the flooding season now multiplied, creating a dense green barricade for the maturing sweet potato vines.

On the opposite side of the vegetable plot was a pond. The pond was once operated by a production unit and now was under contact with a family. Giant salamanders disappeared from the pond after the family started to raise fish for the market. Yet Wu’s fascination with the salamanders, fish that cried like babies, stayed with her. The pond was hugged by a grave yard, which added a touch of sacredness and mysticism to the pond. Rumor had it people heard the wailing of women and sometimes loud splashes of water in the pond at night. At charcoal dark nights, people saw green light flashing over the pond like fireflies. But witnesses sworn the light was definitely not made by fireflies. Fireflies became extinct ever since pesticides were introduced to the village. Mother never allowed Father to buy fish from the pond.

Wu followed the river silently, treading through soybean stalks on the narrow trail. She was glad she listened to Mother and did not wear shorts. The rice plants straying through the soybean stalks could easily slice her legs like blades. Jiajia and Jiagong’s graves appeared in sight when she reached the stone bridge. She made a left turn at the bridge. She followed the rustic road until she reached her maternal grandparents’ graves which lay on the left side of the rustic road. Compared with Nainai and Yeye’s graves, theirs looked shabby and exposed.

Like Wu's never-met Yeye who attested to a time of war, Jiagong was a reminder of the Great Famine. He died of starvation in 1959, leaving Jiajia with four children, a heart stroke, and a leaking thatch hut. He saved his food for his youngest son whose face turned green out of starvation. Mother was nine years old when he died. His death changed Mother's life fundamentally. Mother had to quit school to take care of her siblings and her mother who was in grief. Mother and Jiajia never reconciled. Mother blamed Jiajia for marrying her off to Father who was three years younger than her, shorter and thinner than her, and much less smart than her. "It was a contract between your Jiajia and Yeye. I was traded off for help from your Father's family." Mother lamented repeatedly.

Jiajia was too pretty and delicate to bear the stress of labor. She was the village beauty. She was about five foot five, having fair-skin, a high forehead, big eyes, and an olive-shaped face. Unlike Nainai who had naturally small feet, Jiajia's feet were enormous. Her big feet were the result of, in her words, her weak-mindedness and her mother's soft heart. She could not tolerate the penetrating pain of foot binding, so she tore off the wrapping cloth only a few days after her mother bound her feet. Once unbound, her feet grew like mad. Her weak-mindedness turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Thanks to her big feet, she could walk with ease to the farmer's market to sell chicken eggs, and to her vegetable plot to plant and pick vegetables. She was also the first woman of her generation who had her hair cut short and dressed herself in modern shirt and

pants.

Her fate, however, was not as beautiful as she was. The price for her beauty was loss of her husband in her middle age and her eldest son in her old age. In her sixties, her eldest son died of a stroke. That a grey-haired parent buried a black-haired child was the most unfortunate thing for a parent.

Being intelligent, and physically and emotionally strong, Mother was Jiajia's favorite daughter. Wu—Jiajia's favorite daughter's daughter—became Jiajia's favorite granddaughter. Wu still remembered Jiajia would buy her shoe bottom shaped cookies every time she sold her chicken eggs in the market. She would give Wu twice the amount of money in her Spring Festival red bag. What Wu could never forget was Jiajia's warm hands. In winter time when Jiajia was invited to stay overnight, she shared the same bed with Wu. Jiajia would hold Wu's freezing feet in her palms to warm them up.

In Wu's memory, Jiajia had a connection with rainy days, spicy broad bean sauce, and pickles. Every year when the hot peppers were ripe, Jiajia would come over to help Mother make spicy broad bean sauce. Jiajia made the best pickles in the village. Her pickles were cures to Wu's emotional wounds from Mother's criticism, her classmates' scoff, dissatisfactory grades, and Yeye's yells. Whenever Wu felt unhappy she went to Jiajia's and her clay pickle jar at her dinner table. Wu's favorite pickle was string beans. Aged in the dark with ginger, garlic, and hot peppers in the jar, the pickled string beans tasted spicy, sour, and stimulating. The

biting flavors watered Wu's mouth, eyes, and heart. Having tears in her eyes, fire on her tongue, and pain in her heart, Wu savored the string beans' subtle natural sweetness that followed the spicy and sour taste.

Jiajia died of dementia. She could not even recognize Mother, her own daughter. Nobody knew what pain she endured in her life she wanted to forget, and as a result, she forgot everything. Everyone in the family knew Jiajia suffered from the physical pain of a broken arm. Brother once saw her walking alone to town at daybreak. "She must be in great pain," Brother said. "Otherwise, she would not do that so early in the morning." Like many women of her generation, Jiajia became a lonely woman in her old age. Everybody wanted to have sons; the irony was a woman who had more than one son usually was left alone in the end because nobody wanted to take care of the old woman.

The greatest pain she endured perhaps was a secret she buried so deep that none of her children knew until the last days of her passing. One day, Mother was giving Jiajia a towel bath. Jiajia was murmuring unconsciously, "Red scar, red scar." When Mother lifted Jiajia's blouse, she noticed a red scar on Jiajia's belly. Mother suddenly realized the innuendo of what she heard when she was a child. "A bug sucks a bull's penis," the old woman living next door would spit at Mother every time she went to help with household chores in Father's family. Jiajia secret love affair with Yeye struck Mother like a thunder blast. Jiajia had been bearing the red scar, an eternal reminder of her unborn child, a marker of her misery and

shame, for decades. Mother finally understood the subtle eye contact between Jiajia and Nainai every time she came to visit.

Wu wondered if Jiajia became forgetful as a result of this great trauma. The Buddhist teaching said life was suffering in a bitter sea. A person had to go through eighty-one hardships to reach the other side of the sea. What were Jiajia's eighty-one hardships? What were Nainai's eighty-one hardships? What was Yeye's suffering in this bitter sea? What would be Wu's eighty-one hardships? The future remained as unknown as the unknown stories of Jiajia, Nainai, and Yeye. Wu knelt down to burn incense sticks and money paper. A heavy feeling descended on her heart while the smoke was curling up in air.

Further downstream was the community vegetable garden Yeye and his two colleagues built in the 1980s. It used to be a graveyard. Yeye, as the production unit head at that time, suggested make a vegetable garden to better villagers' lives. Yeye was cursed by those whose ancestors' graves were on that site. For Wu, the garden was a mysterious and beautiful place. A river, the same river his grave was now facing, girdled the place. Yeye called upon his villagers to build two dams to form a horse shoe-shaped fish pond.

Now Wu closed her eyes, she heard the sound of fish eating water plants and splashing when they were startled by foot steps. The water cabbages were blooming. Their purple blossoms opened like the eyes of peacocks. The pond produced water delicacies: water chestnuts and water asparagus. The pond kept

Wu's eyes busy all the time: dragon flies, water spider, and schools of fish. Women sometimes washed their clothes in the pond. To scare children away from the pond, they were told there were water monsters who would pull children to the water if they got too close. For adults, the pond was an economic source, for children, the pond was a place full of magic and beauty.

When Mother had time, she helped in the garden. While she was weeding, Wu would take a stroll in the garden, studying ants, butterflies, and bugs and sniffing in the fragrance of vegetables. There was a diversity of vegetables—garlic chives, lettuce, squash, cabbage, tomatoes, and potatoes. When Wu read Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, she knew exactly how the little boy felt when he was lying among squash and being in that space.

To the east side of the garden was the river. It was a natural divide between Production Unit Three and Production Unit Four. Yeye built a bridge across the river to shorten the travel distance so that it was easier to carry mulch to the garden. To say it was a bridge was an exaggeration. It was actually a big log. It required skills and patience to cross the bridge. It, however, became children's entertainment and adventure.

Brother took a fancy to the single-log bridge. One day, he was trying to balance himself on the bridge while a black dog was walking from the opposite direction. Brother got nervous and fell into the water. Scared by the loud splash and Brother's scream, the dog fell to the river, too. The nervous dog quickly swam

to the river bank, but Brother was washed downstream by the currents. Luckily, Yeye's colleague saw the accident and pulled Brother out of the river. Another story Wu remembered about the river was that Uncle Dai, an educated youth from Chengdu, kicked a football from this side of the river to the other side of it. Wu was awed by the strength of his legs.

The new production unit head took over the garden after Yeye passed away. He then signed the garden over to his son. His son exhausted the land and the pond and handed it over to another contractor. The garden was now populated with orange trees and the pond no longer produced fish. Although Yeye was hated by some, he was respected by many more who received his help.

Yeye was born into the year of ox. Nainai said the ox was a beast of burden. An ox man had to labor to remedy his karma. Wu sometimes wondered if it was a coincidence or inevitability that all the males in the family—Grandfather, Father, and Brother— were born into the year of Ox. Each ox was the only male in his generation. As if the lineage was not vulnerable enough, each ox restrained each other. Grandfather was born into the element of water, Father the element of fire, and Brother the element of wood. Being the only carrier of the family blood tie in their generations, they were lonely but they were stubborn and averse to each other. Nainai explained that was the nature of ox men. Their luck of being born as males had to be balanced out by misfortune. Be patient with them, they were here to look for their own familiar. Their fate was told in the illustrated story of a man and his

ox.

In the first picture, the man was looking for his ox. In the second picture, the man saw the tracks of his ox. In the third picture, the man saw the ox. In the fourth picture, the man caught the ox. In the fifth picture, the man fed the ox. In the sixth picture, he rode it home. In the seventh picture, the ox died but the man lived. In the eighth picture, both the ox and man died. In the ninth picture, both the man and the ox were on their way back from whence they came. In the tenth picture, both the man and the ox turned into dust. Do not be fooled if someone said rebirth as a male was a reward. The man and his ox was an example. After taking nine steps, they all entered the tenth realm, the realm of the dark, the feminine. Even Laozi, the father of Daoism was no exception. Laozi had an ox as his companion. They were made a pair. They came from dust and returned to dust. We all had a similar fate, no matter if you were *nan* (male) or *nü* (female).

Nainai said even Sun Wukong and Tang Seng had to overcome eighty-one obstacles to reach the West for the holy Buddhist scripture. Life was like a journey to the west. It had to go through numerous hardships. Life was like a journey to the Emei Mountain. You had to climb up one thousand and eight steps to reach the mountain top. We were all oxen and horses in this life; we were all beasts of burden.

Watching wild grass on the graves of Jiajia and Jiagong swaying in the wind, Wu thought about the entangled relationship between the two families and what

Nainai said about karma, endurance, and the inevitable suffering of men and women.

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In front of Amitabha and ten other Buddha, Guan Yin vowed, "I will let the past Buddha, the present Buddha, the future Buddha manifest themselves in every cell of my body and every corner of my mind to help all sentient beings to achieve Bodhi. If I fail to accomplish the goal while enjoying a carefree life, let my head split like a sunflower."

Guan Yin worked day and night to save sentient beings from their miseries. One day, when s/he opened her eyes, s/he found out the number of suffering sentient beings had not been reduced. Tears rolled down Guan Yin's eyes like pearls. A drop of tear was followed by another, and another. Soon, Guan Yin's tears merged together, expanding into a sea. Suddenly, a beautiful lotus flower rose up from the sea of tears, changing into a Tara. Seating herself serenely in the heart of the lotus flower, Tara vowed, "Please do not lose heart. I will follow you to save sentient beings."

The moon was out, but the heat was still lingering in the air. Wu and her parents sat in the courtyard to cool off. Watching the moon traveling in the Milky Way and rusted iron- colored algae bubbles surfacing in the fish pond next to the courtyard, Father said he would plant lotus in the pond once a thick layer of silt deposited. Wu imagined a pond of pink lotus flowers swaying in the wind like smiling faces, sending forth a purifying fragrance.

“I ran into Xiaolin the other day in the farmer’s market. She asked when you would come home. Are you going to visit her?” Mother suddenly asked.

“I don’t know.” Wu hesitated.

Xiaolin was married to a man in Yellow Temple Village. Xiaolin and Wu went to the same high school, but she had to drop school when her mother lost her mind. Xiaolin’s father had an affair with his neighbor’s wife who set him up. Her goal was to help her husband get the piece of land they coveted. Xiaolin’s father became alcoholic. On a hot summer day a stroke took his life while he was fishing in a river, the same river the graves of Wu’s grandparents were facing.

Xiaolin had to marry a man from Yellow Temple Village whose family offered her a big dowry and offered to pay tuition for her two younger brothers. Her husband had suffered from a slight mental condition since he had a high fever in his childhood. Xiaolin was in deep distress when she had to marry in haste. Her agony was more or less diminished after an emotional bond between her and her husband had been formed. Her husband was a gentle and loving person. For the

first time in her life Xiaolin experienced a tender love she had longed for, but her neighbors could not see her internal emotional transformation. They continued seeing her husband as a *foolish squash* and her an exchange for money. Unable to find a better way of dealing with her mixed feelings of love and shame, she deliberately isolated herself from people.

Her son, the smartest child in his class, became her consolation. Xiaolin put all her hope on the boy, expecting he would realize her unfulfilled dream one day—going to college. The last time Wu ran across Xiaolin, she was harvesting collard green for minimal hourly payment. Wu greeted her, but Xiaolin avoided Wu's eyes.

"We are different now." Xiaolin cast her eyes sideways.

Wu recalled the days she and Xiaolin shared homemade spicy broad bean sauce soup in the boarding school to dilute their homesickness. On weekends they would walk downtown to have spicy noodles from Rice Aroma Village Restaurant. Xiaolin would order noodles of five-star heat level. It was not that she was immune to spicy heat. On the contrary, whenever she had the five-star spicy noodles, she would burst into tears, sweats, and screams. Wu once had a taste of Xiaolin's noodles. Instantly the burning heat on her tongue sent her jumping around the table, gulping for oxygen like a fish out of water. Wu wondered if it was the pleasure of extreme feelings and temporary loss of oxygen the spicy noodles brought to the mouth and brain that Xiaolin was seeking in order to forget

her anguish—the dysfunctional family she was bond with.

Her father was a cynic with a sharp tongue. The Cultural Revolution changed the direction of his life path. When he just started his training in a teacher's school, history played a joke on him. To answer the call for revolution in this historical moment, the school was dismissed. He had to go home and later on married in order to carry on the blood line. For him, children were the burdens of his life. Xiaolin dreaded tuition and meal plan due dates on which she had to beg her father for money at the expense of receiving verbal abuse from him. For reasons unknown, her mother never intervened.

Looking at Xiaolin's wrinkled forehead, a thousand words jammed into Wu's mind but her tongue was as tight as the Three Gorges Dam. "Am I luckier and happier to go to college and now have a job and a life in the city?" Wu asked herself. "Who would know the burden of my heart? But if I were Xiaolin, will I be happy? What has created this gap between Xiaolin and me? Is it merely fate?"

"I won't waste your time. Let's chat when you have time someday." Wu was startled to hear her saying something so irrelevant to her inner thoughts which rolled back like waves before they reached her tongue.

When Wu was lost in thought about Xiaolin, a middle-aged woman walked toward her. Wu did not recognize the woman until she called out to her.

"Yanru." Wu was surprised.

"Come and take my seat. I will go get another one." Mother offered.

“No, thanks. My parents are waiting for me.”

Mother, Wu, and Yanru stood next to the flowerbed, chatting.

“I always know I am a good-for-nothing, you will have a bright future.” Yanru smiled, “I feel very happy for you.”

“Thank you for your kind words. Believe it or not, I always wanted to be you.”

“Yanru, you are too polite. A good-for-nothing?” Mother chimed in, “You do not know how much your mother is proud of you. Every time I met your mother, she praised you for your generous help to her, your father, and your brothers. I myself am very grateful for your help. Do you still remember I borrowed money from you? You had to sell your rabbits. Thanks to your help, Wu could pay the tuition and fees in time.”

Yanru was Wu’s childhood idol. Unlike squared-faced Wu, Yanru had an olive-shaped face which Wu envied. In Wu’s eyes, Yanru was as beautiful as a fox spirit in *Strange Tales from the Make-Do Studio*. She was about three years older than Wu. When Wu was a third grader, Yanru was already in junior high school. Besides their difference in appearance and age, they were different in other aspects just as the North and South poles are. Yanru was tall for her age; Wu was short for her age. Yanru would rather cut grass for pigs than write poems from memory; Wu would rather write poems from memory than cut grass for pigs. Yanru raised rabbits to make pocket-money; Wu traded her *shuang bai fen*, full points for both

math and Chinese, for pocket-money from her parents. Yanru received no pressure from her mother to be a good student at school; Wu had to bear the burden of her mother's unfulfilled childhood dream of going to school. Yanru envied Wu's good memory and good grades; Wu envied Yanru's beauty and zero pressure from her parents.

For Yanru's lack of what Wu had and Wu's lack of what Yanru had, they had developed a fondness for each other. Together, they loved sneaking into Yanru's Great Grandmother's room when she was taking a nap, anticipating the old woman to shout out loud at them. They would flee out of the room, screaming and laughing at the top of their lungs. Yanru's Great Grandmother and her room were mysterious to the two youngsters. The room looked and smelled as old as the woman. Yanru and Wu had found rusted coins of the Qing Dynasty in the drawers of her bedside cabinet. The original carvings of the cabinet were buried by a thick layer of dust and grease except for the winter plum blossoms and a pair of mandarin ducks. Even those flowers and birds lost their luster like this old woman who lost her sight during the Great Famine.

Yanru heard from her father that a hungry rat ate one of her Great Grandma's toes one night, but she did not feel the pain. She had already starved for days and lost her consciousness when the rat was nibbling her toe. It was a miracle she did not die of infection, but she gradually lost her sight. More miraculously, this old woman still had a dense mass of hair as black as raven feathers even though she

looked a million years old. Nobody, including herself, knew her exact birth date. Much to Yanru and Wu's regret, they never had an opportunity to touch her hair, to peep at her missing toe, and to hear more about her life.

The missing toe planted a peculiar fascination in Yanru and Wu's hearts. Whenever they got a chance, they would beg Yanru's two brothers to play the game of feet-counting with them. The rule was like this:

Step One: play the finger-guessing game to decide who is going to count. There are three hand gestures: fist, v (scissors), and palm. Palm beats fist, fist beats scissors, scissors beat palm. The one who wins counts.

Step Two: play the chanting-counting game. One word represents one foot. the chant is: dian jiao ban ban, jiao ta nan shan, nan shan dao kou, dian dao jiu zou.

Step Three: shower the looser with fists.

What Wu loved about this game was the uncertainty of chance and the fear and sensation of becoming the unlucky person.

Fear was a catalyst for curiosity and adventure. Yanru and Wu's greatest fear was the haunted pond in the back of Uncle Yang's house. It was where Aunt Yaba drowned. Uncle Yang said it was accidental; Aunt Yaba had a false step and fell

into the pond. Since Uncle Yang was the Party Secretary of the Village, what he said was believed to be true. But nobody was going to know when and how Aunt Yaba fell into the pond now that she was mute forever.

Aunt Yaba was not born mute. She lost her voice only after she gave birth to her second son. Afterwards, her words were so broken that it took someone great efforts to understand her. People just would not bother to talk with her. Aunt Yaba had the most beautiful insole patterns in the village. Wu once followed her mother to borrow insole patterns from her. When Wu heard her speaking without making sense, she felt a repressed anxiety in her belly.

Parents had a different story about the accident for their mischievous sons and daughters. They said there was a water ghost living in the pond. It was the water ghost that pulled Aunt Yaba down to the pond. But teachers said there was no such thing as ghost or water ghost. It was all superstition. Yanru and Wu did not know if they should believe their parents or teachers, but they could not resist the temptation of doing something forbidden. They dared each other to circle the pond at dusk. They passed by the castor bean plants. Their jagged leaves raised up like witch's hands. The willows and bamboos looked denser, swaying in the evening breeze. The water cabbages populated the entire pond surface except for a small area where Uncle Yang fetched drinking water. Any sound was suspicious. Yanru and Wu held hands together. Their hands were wet, shivering like birds in each other's palms. The noise of a fish jumping out of water sent their feet off ground.

They fled as if they put on the wind-fire wheel-feet of Neza.

People said the death of Aunt Yaba broke the yin-yang balance of the family. With no female in the household, the family seemed cursed. Uncle Yang remained a widower the rest of his life. No parents would marry their daughter to him. No daughter was willing to gamble their youth on a widower with two sons. Rumor had it, the house had too much yang energy; a woman simply could not balance it. Life was vulnerable. Why run possible risks? Although nobody had ever seen a ghost, nobody could prove it did not exist. Rather believe it to be true than not. In spite of decades of rural communist educators' efforts to indoctrinate atheism, the awe of ghosts continued to occupy the country folks' minds. The mysticism about ghosts, like pollen of mustard flowers, was unseen but could be felt. Yanru, Wu, and Mother were no exception.

The path to school zigzagged through several graveyards, one of which was an enchanted grand mound. There was a widespread story that a man was found circling the mound for an entire night. Even daredevils would hasten their footsteps when they passed by the mound. Undisturbed, wild yellow chrysanthemum thrived on the mound. What worried Wu's Mother most was the flowering chrysanthemum. She knew Wu could not resist the flowers. Mother entrusted Wu to Yanru. Being older and physically stronger than Wu, Yanru became Wu's escort to school. Every morning she would walk together with Wu about three and a half kilometers to school.

It was spring time. The mustard flowers were blooming cheerfully. Wu lingered behind Yanru. Suddenly, Yanru froze. Wu thought she was angry with her for they were going to be late for school if she continued to walk at a slow pace. Wu fastened her steps.

"Come on, don't be angry with me. Look, I am here." Wu stood in front of Yanru, trying to please her.

Yanru covered her eyes with one hand, pushing Wu around with another, and then turning Wu's head to face the mustard field.

Wu's heart almost leapt out of her body. Her legs trembled like a sieve. Among the golden flowers lay an old man. His grey-haired head rested on the ridge. His mouth was open. Streams of blood on his grey beard turned dark. The old man was motionless. Wu saw this pose in a picture-story book, *Nv Hou, the Careerist*. The only difference was there was a raven perching on one knee and a beggar's bowl on the other knee of the old man in the picture-story book. But what happened to this good-looking old man?

When Yanru and Wu came back from school in the evening, the country road was crowed with police cars and people who loved watching the scene of bustle. It turned out the old man was from Whole Heart Village. Rumor had it his daughter-in-law was like a scorpion. His son was hen-pecked. They often starved the old man, yelling at him to go die somewhere. Was it murder, or was it suicide?

Before Wu woke up from the traumatic tragic scene, she was struck by

another thunderbolt. Yanru got married. Her grandmother was seriously ill and the bridegroom's family promised to offer a handsome sum of dowry money. Wu did not know how to feel when she saw Yanru's husband. Yanru's face was emotionless at her wedding day. People signed she was "a flower planted on a pile of bull dung."

She was not the only flower planted on a pile of bull dung. Wu's classmate Xueqing had a similar fate. Xueqing's father was an illiterate communist. He could not afford to send Xueqing to college. Xueqing was soon married to a man ten years of her senior in a nearby village. She had a son with him. Later Wu heard she committed suicide. Nobody really knew why she chose to end her life.

Suicide was rampant in the mid-1990s in Wu's village. Man Man's suicide became a legend in the village. She was the precious daughter of her family. Her parents were an exception in the village. They had two boys but what they wanted was a girl. Their first daughter was drowned in the drinking water pond when she was four years old. They prayed hard and finally had Man Man when they were forty years old. She was the pearl on their palms and the apple of their eyes. Man Man turned a beautiful maiden at the age of eighteen. She aspired to city life and persuaded her parents to let her move to the city to learn typing, dreaming of becoming a typist some day. She took a fancy to high heels and mini skirts. On a rainy day, Mother saw her walking barefoot in the mud with a pair of pink high heels in her hands. Mother asked her,

“Are your high heels uncomfortable?” Mother asked.

“They are not made for the dirt road.” Man Man smiled.

A few days later, Mother saw maternal Little Uncle carrying Man Man on his back. Her limbs were dangling.

“What happened?” Mother was curious.

“She swallowed DDT.”

Mother saw her pants were wet. “She is not going to live.” Mother thought.

At dusk, Mother heard wails. “I regret I objected you. What got into my mind? Why did I not allow you to marry him?” Man Man’s mother was wailing and blaming herself. Nobody could console her. Nobody knew what exactly happened. Whenever asked, her mother would tell people she was regretful.

That afternoon, Man Man had a verbal fight with her brother and went to her room. She did not come out for dinner. Her mother felt strange and went in to check. There was a stink. Foam was coming out of her mouth. Her mother blamed herself for not noticing the signs. Her first daughter had a verbal fight with her brother before she drowned.

Man Man’s parents decided to give her an elaborate burial ceremony. They invited a band and monks. Villagers came in swarms to watch the ceremony. The day she was buried, a black bird flew over their house. At night, people heard a bird crying like a human. Its cries chilled people to their bones. The bird cried nine nights and days and flew away.

White Crane followed suit a few months later. People only knew that his parents objected him to marry a girl who had city registry.

Death plagued the village since the death of the two youth. Every time Wu went back to visit her parents, she heard a person died. Some died of snake bite, others of car accidents. The youth who migrated to the city to work came back with odd diseases: breast cancer, kidney failure, AIDs, and oral cancer. What happened to Zhongxue was the strangest disease. When he came back form Guangzhou, he had red spots all over and could not eat. He shrank to the size of an eight-year old. When he died, he was as dry as a mummy.

Guai Shi, odd things, took place as well. One day, Wu's neighbor got a phone call from their youngest son. He was sobbing. "Help, I am kidnapped. Please send ten thousand yuan; otherwise, they will kill me." They arranged for ten thousand yuan. A month later, the youngest son returned and refused to go back to Shanghai.

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Shennong Shi: *the patron of agriculture and the first herbalist. Shennong Shi's birth date was April 26. He was a filial son. To find a cure for his mother's illness, he tried hundreds of wild plants to test their medicinal function. He was poisoned while testing "intestines breaking grass," gelsemium elegans.*

As fate would have it, Wu was born on the same day Shennong Shi was born. Wu had no memory of her life as a toddler. What she knew about her toddler days was what Mother remembered. She was chubby. Her face was as round as a red apple. Her big eyes were as dark as charcoal. Her hair was as black as the feathers of a raven. Her plump arms and legs looked like lotus roots. She was the cutie pie for the educated youth stationed in the village, receiving countless hugs and gifts from those urban teenagers who were about two or three years younger than Mother. One of the most unique gifts she received was a plastic green chili pepper from Big Sister Rong.

According to Mother, Wu was drawn into wild flowers since early age. It was early summer. The native aster purple blossoms were nodding in tune with the fresh breeze moisturized by morning dew. Mother took a deep breath and instantly felt refreshed by the aster flower-scented and dew-moisturized morning air. Suddenly, Mother heard Wu babbling as if she were crying. Mother ignored Wu. Wu cried louder, struggling to move out of the bamboo baby carrier strapped on Mother's back. Mother finally understood Wu wanted to get on the ground. Wu stopped crying the moment Mother put her down on the ground. She immediately went for the aster flowers. Mother was amused but had to tear Wu away from the flowers. Mother had to hurry up. Mother and Father planned to have Wu's picture taken in town. An old photo attested to Wu's heartbroken day. In that photo, her mouth was shut, her eyebrows were frowning. Mother said Wu almost cried her

eyes out when she was torn away from her flowers.

Wu did not have any memory of Chairman Mao's death, either. When Mao passed away, Wu was six years old. She remembered things but not Mao's death. What occupied Wu's childish mind were grass hoppers, water insects, plants, and flowers.

Wu remembered she was a self-employed guardian of the two giant gardenia shrubs in the backyard. One day, she spotted Guo, her cousin living next door, picking gardenia flowers. She ran as fast as her legs could carry her to stop him. Guo quickly put the flowers in his shirt pocket, attempting to run away. Wu grabbed the hem of his white shirt, reaching her arms for the flowers in his pocket. Guo resisted. Wu did not release her arm. His pocket was torn apart.

Outside the backyard, Wu became vulnerable. She became the object of criticism when she was in third grade. Miss Min was scribbling down Arabic numbers on the black board. Wu did not want to listen to her. Miss Min wronged her. Her table mate, Lao Da, the barefoot doctor's son reported to Miss Min that Wu stole his pencils. Wu explained that she did not allow Lao Da to plagiarize her homework and he brought a false charge against her. But Miss Min did not listen to her. She believed him and scolded Wu.

Wu looked out the window. A boy from another class was circling a tall eucalyptus tree. His lips were moving. His eyes were blinking like an animated chipmunk. He must be punished by Mr. Gao for not being able to recite Chairman

Mao's poem. Wu heard Mr. Gao was a stone-faced teacher who had no mercy for poor pupils who did not prioritize study. Wu blinked her eyes as he did. As if a devil possessed her, Wu developed a habit of blinking her eyes at an abnormally fast speed. In her young mind, that was exhilarating. She did not know blinking one's eyes faster than the normal speed was not what a human should do. The behavior was named *gui zha yan*, the ghost's blinking eyes, by the locals. Mother threatened to beat her up if she did not quit doing it.

The outside world seemed to be filled with danger and insanity everywhere Wu's young feet carried her. Once, Wu saw Bald Li, the well-known widower in the village, stealing a cat. Witnesses dared not tell the owner. Wu thought that was wrong and told the owner that his cat was stolen by Bald Li. Mother was angry when Wu told her about her heroic act. Mother warned Wu not to mess with widowers. They could do anything to an innocent girl.

"Mind your own business." Mother demanded.

"Ok," she answered but spoke to herself, "But why? What was justice? The world was skewed by these adults."

Being precocious, Wu became Mother's number one worry. Mother was relieved when Teacher Xu proposed to transfer Wu to a primary school in town where she and her whole family would move.

"Wu is a smart girl. She will have a brighter future if she receives higher education." Teacher Xu reasoned.

“I think so, too. I myself did not have an opportunity to go to school. I will try my best to see her through higher education. Her fate is different from mine.” Mother echoed. What Mother did not tell Teacher Xu was that Mother chose to believe what Nainai and the fortuneteller said about Wu’s future. Wu was made for school and she would *chi bi mo fan*, depending on ink and brush for a living.

Teacher Xu was Mother’s confidant, a person from whom Mother learned about life from the urban world and history’s absurdity. With a face as beautiful as an opera singer, a sweet voice that could melt an iceberg, and a head that could compete with her husband, Teacher Peng, she was the envy of the village, especially women. Teacher Xu, however, had her own hard nut to crack. She confided in Mother, she could marry a better man if she was not born in a wrong time. Teacher Peng was the reality of her present life which she had to accept. He was slim and tall but not handsome, or “not pleasant to the eyes” as Teacher Xu said. He had a soft voice, patient temperament, and five carriages of book knowledge, but those personal qualities of Teacher Peng could become unbearable for a person like Teacher Xu who had the temper of a thunderbolt. When frustrated, what Teacher Xu wanted was a verbal avalanche. Much to her distress, Teacher Peng would shower her with reason and gentle words, putting down the flames of her rage before they spread out.

Thanks to Teacher Peng’s calm personality, Teacher Xu never had a chance to become a phoenix rising up from the ashes of her burning rage. She said her

marriage with Teacher Peng was a twist of history and fate. Teacher Peng was born into a petty bourgeois family and Teacher Xu a much less prominent family. They once lived in the city, but the strong wind of historical change blew them together and threw them down in the country. Like everybody else, they were allotted a piece of land to plant vegetables. The vegetable garden was at the corner of the primary school compound. Mother taught them how to grow chard to feed pigs. They were exempted from laboring in the crop fields but got their share of fish, rice, and wheat.

In 1976, Teacher Xu and Teacher Peng were joined by the educated youth who came down to the countryside to be reeducated by peasant uncles and aunts. Villagers laughed at their awkwardness in the crop fields. They were not much of a help but a hindrance. The village head decided to let them open a kinder-garden to keep them occupied. Some of them were assigned to help the barefoot doctor. Mother learned from them the use of alcohol wipes to clean wounds and keep her children's palms cool. The majority of them eventually returned to the city. A few stayed because they were married in the country.

Teacher Xu and Teacher Peng's "returning to the city" time finally came in 1980, a watershed year in their teaching career. In that year, eight of their students successfully crossed "the single-log bridge"—the national college entrance examination—and were admitted to the number one high school in the county. The phenomenal success pleasantly surprised the education bureau of the county, who

suddenly realized the great contribution these two country teachers made to China's elementary education. Teacher Peng's aunt, then the president of a town-level high school, seized the opportunity and pressed the bureau to honor her nephew's and his wife's contribution. With the history wind blowing in a different direction this time, Teacher Peng, the son of a petty bourgeois family, and Teacher Xu, the wife of a man from a questionable family, were lifted up from the country at last. Their twist of fate led to Wu's twist of fate.

At the age of nine, Wu became a hiker. Every morning from Monday to Saturday, she hiked three and a half kilometers to the primary school in town where Teacher Xu and Teacher Peng were placed. The school opened Wu's eyes to a bigger world. It was the first time Wu sat in the same classroom with the descendants of the working class. Wu knew the working class was a privileged class. The admiration in Father's eyes when he said "a worker is Big Brother, a peasant is Second Brother" told Wu a peasant was inferior to a worker. That explained why Father, in Mother's words, "kissed the cold asses" of Uncle and Aunt, why he would blush when Wu's teachers talked to him at parents meetings, and why he loved porcelain dishes and white shirts.

The working class people whose descendents Wu first encountered were workers from a national weapon factory. The factory switched from manufacturing military products to goods for civilian use. Some workshops were torn down. The empty land was converted into a vegetable garden to produce produce for the

workers. Two of Wu's remote cousins were recruited as laborers for the garden. Rumors had it the factory had a secret workshop system underneath the garden. The life of the working class remained a mystery to Wu. What she remembered was bugle calls at six o'clock every morning and laser lights at night.

Wu noticed it was not difficult to tell peasants' children from workers' children. Peasants' children walked to school on foot. Workers' children got free rides. Every morning a minivan pulled over the school gate ten minutes before the class started. Workers' children filed out. Their apple-cheeked faces seemed to tell people they had enough sleep, ate a big breakfast, and life was good. On rainy days, the apple-cheeked became the envy of peasants' children who had to tread through muddy country roads barefoot.

Children were flowers of the nation, but flowers were not the same. Peasants' children were wild flowers. Workers' children were greenhouse flowers. When Wu learned the story of the country mouse and the city mouse, she played with the idea of naming peasants' children country mice and workers' children city mice. Country mice wore everything homemade—homemade underwear, homemade shirts, homemade pants, and homemade shoes. In one word, **Rustic!** City mice wore everything factory made. And of course, the hair style was different. Country boys did not need to worry about their hairstyle. Every school boy was required to have their hair cut short. However, shaved heads—a hairstyle reserved for monks and criminals—was forbidden. For country girls, hairstyle was a different matter.

Their braids betrayed them. City girls wore pony tails. And, ah, yes, names, names mattered. The names of country mice had three characters—Li fa cha (strike rich Li), Zhang Xue Qing (study hard Zhang). The names of city mice usually had two characters—Li Na (graceful Li), Liu Yun (clouds Liu). At lunch breaks, the country mice and the city mice went into two opposite directions. The homemade headed east to the dinning hall where they had their homemade food warmed. The factory-made headed west to the best restaurant in town where they ordered specialty food. Father felt sorry that Wu was as thin as a bamboo stick. “Too bad. Did not eat well,” Father reasoned.

No moving-you-to-tears sworn friendships were developed between the country mice and the city mice in Wu’s grade. There perhaps were such friendships in the school Wu did not know of, but Wu knew the gap. Even films such as *Yi Jiang Chun Sui Xiang Dong Liu* (The River Flows to the East) and *Zao Chun Er Yue* (Early February) attested to the impossibility of romance and friendship between the country and the urbanite. The theme reoccurred in movies about the educated youth generation. *Cuo Tuo Sui Yue* (*Life in the Country*) was another example of the country-city gap. The country woman was left behind when the hero moved to the city. The hero, an editor for a magazine, was in dilemma. Xiao Fang, nicknamed Big Braids, was as innocent, beautiful, and passionate as a wild red rose. Xiao Yang, nicknamed Short-haired, was educated, intelligent, and career-driven. The hero eventually realized Xiao Yang would be

his choice when he received a letter from Xiao Fang informing him of the news that the sow just gave birth to eleven piglets.

Wu focused on developing other types of relationships. Wu found Spring River, the river that girdled the school, a companion. At lunch breaks in hot summer days, Wu loved taking her lunch to the delta where the water was shallow and placid enough for pebbles to deposit. The river gently washed the pebbles. From the geography teacher, Wu learned that it took years for rocks to become pebbles. Wu stood on the pebbles, feeling schools of tiny fish nibbling her toes and water caressing her feet.

Poetry and nature essays Wu learned at school and the poetry of nature Wu saw in the country echoed each other. Wu's heart became poetic in a world that overshadowed her.

鹅，鹅，鹅　Geese, geese, geese

曲颈向天歌　Necks in graceful curves, singing to the sky

白毛浮绿水　White feathers against the green surface, floating on the water

红掌拨青波　Red feet against the green ripples, pedaling across the water

碧玉妆成一树高　The willow is dressed in emerald green

万条垂下绿丝绦　Thousands of green silk sashes are hanging down

不知细叶谁裁出　Who cuts out the fine leaves?

二月春风似剪刀　The February breeze is the scissors

These poems touched her senses gently, bringing her into a milk-and-water state of being. The secret joy of interacting with nature, words, and her senses was a flavor of life she had never tasted before. A new world was formed in her heart. The world in Wu's heart was her pure land, a state she aspired to, a world other people did not see. What people saw in her was a normal and well-behaved elementary school student from the country.

Like any ordinary student, Wu swam with the tide. She was never late for class, submitted her assignments in time, kept her elbows folded on the desk as instructed, sat straight on the bench, looked at the teacher attentively, and took in every word the teacher said. Every time she got new textbooks, she covered them with book jackets to prevent them from getting dirty. She kept to the moral standards of "*wujiang*—the observance of decorum, etiquette, hygiene, order, and morality; *simen*—the beautification of heart, language, behavior, and the environment; and *san reai*—the love of the nation, socialism, and the Communist Party." She was even serious with physical exercises, chanting slogans at the top of her lungs like the instructor:

"tigao jinti, baowei zhuguo—Be vigilant, protect our nation."

"Duanlian shenti, baowei zhuguo—exercise our bodies, protect our nation."

The tide of life washed away many things but not the blindfold eyes of a

buffalo from Wu's memory. One day, when Wu and her classmates were about to finish sweeping the classroom floor, she spotted three strong-armed men raising a scaffold in the west corner of the sports ground. They looked like ravens in their black rubber aprons and rubber boots. Wu and her classmates hid behind the window and watched. A buffalo was led to the scaffold. The buffalo looked old but bulky. It walked along with a heavy and limping gait. Two butchers pushed the buffalo underneath the scaffold. One man picked up a piece of black cloth from the ground and covered the buffalo's eyes. The buffalo moaned. Wu heard that buffalos had emotions. They would shed tears when they sensed they would be butchered. Seeing a buffalo's tears could soften the butcher's heart and weaken his hand. Wu did not stay to see the buffalo's blood oozing out and hear him crying. She imagined the buffalo's tears welled up in his blindfolded eyes.

Flowers were one of the few things Wu liked about school life. Every grade had a flower bed. The flower bed of Wu's grade introduced her to many flowers she had not seen in the wild—pink, zygadene, heronsbill, and so on. Botany became one of her favorite courses. She learned that there were four ancient plant species—ginkgo, water fir, Chinese dove tree, and emmenopterys.

Spring was the happiest time for Wu. The flowering mustard turned miles and miles of crop fields into a yellow flower sea. Every morning Wu walked into the flower sea to go to school; every evening, she walked back into the flower sea to go back home. The mustard stalks were taller than Wu. Traveling through the

flowering mustard field was like swimming in a flower sea perfumed with sweet scent, which was enriched by purple broad bean flowers and pink snow pea blossoms planted along footpaths passing through the mustard field. Seduced by the sweet lector of mustard, broad bean, and snow pea flowers, honey bees came.

Outside the mustard flower sea, Wu walked into a world of pink peach flowers and green willow leaves. While watching dashes of pink and green that decorated bamboo-shaded village adobe houses, Wu contemplated the expression “taohong liulv, pink peach flowers and green willow leaves.” Just as pure water reflected trees, words became crystal clear and live, reflecting what the eyes perceived. Immersed in this environment, Wu experienced ecstasies. Looking back, Wu realized this environment nurtured in her subconscious a kind of relationship she cherished.

When she walked down a steep slope she wondered if the Great Famine was real. Mother said many people fell on the slope and died of starvation.

Weather was predictable. The rainy season came in the beginning of September like a faithful friend every year. When autumn came, rice straw piles were standing in the field like fishermen with coir raincoats and bamboo hats. Irrigates were migrating. Winter was mild, but it could get foggy and frosty. Treading through a thick fog was like fumbling through a dream. Frost was important for winter vegetables. Wu learned from Mother dykon and cabbage would not sweeten up until the first frost came.

When the thirteenth cycle of the four seasons returned, Wu crossed the first threshold of her life. For the first time, she felt blood oozing from her lower body. The sensation of blood touching the tender skin was that of soft mud sliding against the toes. Wu was not frightened by the blood. She knew what it was. Although there was no sex education at school, news and giggles about “the red” circulated among girls. One of her classmates had it when she was nine years old. Wherever “the red” came, she would send her brother to buy feminine paper for her. It would be too embarrassing to open her mouth to the salesman.

Wu also learned about “the red thing” from a short story published in Youth Literature. A group of young female soldiers volunteered to fight a flood side by side with their male comrades. To praise their heroic deeds, the author singled out a few girls who sacrificed great personal interests in order to protect people’s life and property. One of them even risked her health. Her *sam browne belt* was soaked by dirty flood water. In a footnote Wu found the meaning of “sam browne belt,” which was euphemism for sanitary belt. Even Mother used evasive words, “the clothes get sloppy.”Wu wondered why menstrual cycle had to be talked in a coded language as if it was a great shame or crime. She learned from her Chinese class that bandits used codes to communicate among themselves. But why the menstrual cycle? Wasn’t the human body like a plant which would bloom when its time came?

Only Nainai was frank about the nature of the red sloppy thing. One day,

When Wu passed under Mother's shirt hung on the aluminum washing line in the courtyard, she accidentally knocked the shirt off the clothes line. Mother's feminine belt was exposed to the bright sunlight. She quickly put the shirt back on the line. The moment she was fleeing from the spot, she heard Nainai's chuckles. "It's your Mother's *yue jing dai*, menstrual cycle belt," she said, "when you have your cycle, remember not to eat raw and cold food, do not touch cold water."

Even if the menstrual cycle belt could be hidden, there was one thing Wu could not conceal. Her breasts rose up from her "airport runway" like ant mounds. To avoid boys' stares on her chest, she wrapped it with the purple silk scarf Mother bought her when she reached the age of twelve, the threshold for girls and boys. The scarf more or less evened out the curve on her chest.

A secret was a tiger crouching in the subconscious, it would ambush you unawares. To defeat the tiger, Wu wrote her secret on a piece of paper, burnt it, and buried the ashes under the orange tree in the west corner of the backyard. This was the best way she could handle the tiger's attack. She thought about telling it to Yanru, or Mother, or Nainai, or Jiajia, but something held her back. Exposure was what she was afraid of. Nakedness could be so vulnerable.

When Wu squatted down and balanced her legs on the two wood logs placed above the waste pit, the wooden door of the outhouse swung open. A ray of sunlight poured in, followed by a shadow. Wu's heart raced, forgetting to pee. The shadow closed the door, moving toward Wu. It was Yanru's Big Brother. Wu

stared at him, involuntarily moving back. Her heart was leaping like a frog, her legs shaking like quaking aspen leaves. All of a sudden, the boy reached his fingers in between her legs, swept across her private part, and fled out of the door. Wu held on to a pigsty bar, gasping for oxygen to regain her balance. She heard the sow groaning. The pig's groan helped to stabilize her a little. Wu managed to pull up her pants and fled. The shock was gradually washed away by time, but the horror crouched down in Wu's memory like a tiger. She concealed it as Jiajia hid her scar. Would she also develop dementia to forget the secret? Did the attacker still remember the fear in her eyes?

Wu's knowledge of her body came from *The Barefoot Doctor's Manual* Aunt gave to Mother, which she read in secret. The anatomy of the female body appeared in the chapter of practice midwifery. So, Sister was not picked up from the vegetable garden as Mother said after all. Why the lie? Like a thief, Wu placed a mirror between her legs while studying the illustrations of the female body. The open "dark channel" in front of her eyes brought a warm flush to her face.

When Wu was ruminating about the meaning of puberty, Xu Gang became the target of boys' mean jokes. While other boys started to have change of voice and consciously formed "boys only" packs, Xu Gang still had the voice of a girl, walking with Wu like peas and carrots. His skin was fair and soft. His fingers were slim, long, and flexible. His face was olive-shaped. His mannerism was as gentle as drizzle. By that time, Wu had already read quite a few of Pu Song Ling's ghost

stories about the romance between bookish scholars and fox spirits. Wu imagined Xu Gang was an incarnated bookish scholar from Pu Song Ling's ghost romances, but she was definitely not a fox spirit. A fox spirit possessed the beauty which is unattainable in the mundane world: a face as smooth and oval as an olive, lips as supple and juicy as cherries, eyes as clear and deep as springs, eye brows as long and narrow as willow leaves, and shoulders and waist as slender and flexible as willow twigs.

Wu inherited her father's square face and arrow-like eyebrows and her mother's thick legs. Everything that made a girl unattractive, she had it. My readers, she must be very unhappy about her appearance at that time. Once, Wu held onto her mother's legs and sobbed. Surprised, Mother asked her what happened. With a great effort to push her tears back to the lachrymal gland, Wu muttered why her legs were so thick. Mother laughed out loud. "Silly girl. Thick legs allow you to stand firm on the ground. When the whole world tumbles down, you will still stand rooted."

Mother also had an explanation for Wu's square face and arrow-shaped eyebrows. Just as a boy who took after his mother would have good fortune, a girl who had the face of her father would have good fortune, too. Square face and arrow-shaped eyebrows were signs of intelligence and a successful career. While envying Xu Gang's natural beauty, Wu felt relieved to know her ugliness would be compensated by a good future. Xu Gang and Wu shared the same table in class.

Whenever he attempted to start a conversation while the teacher was giving a lecture, she hushed him and signaled him to listen to the teacher.

Time elapsed unawares.

The boarding school was Wu's convent. The school was one of the two best high schools in the county. Students were divided into two categories—resident and nonresident. Resident students consisted of two groups—those whose parents were county government officials, and those who were from working-class families in the city but passed the entrance examination with high scores. Nonresident students were usually from small towns and the countryside. They were the best "little carps" which jumped over the dam of the entrance examination.

Living at a distance from their hometowns, nonresident students were required to live in dorms and only allowed to go back home to visit their parents once a month. For twelve and thirteen year olds who had never lived alone before, four weeks were four years. Lanlan, the youngest son of his family, became a bad example in Wu's grade because he could not endure the misery of not seeing his parents for a month. Weak-mindedness had consequences. Lanlan had to write a letter of self-criticism and read it out loud in front of the whole class.

Wu was determined not to be a weak-minded person like Lanlan. Public humiliation was one thing. Wu was afraid of receiving the criticism of "*mei chuxi*, good for nothing" from Mother. Mother admired women warriors like Mu Guiyin

and Shuang Qiang Lao Tai Po, the old woman with two guns, who had the will of iron. They did not believe in tears and feared neither death nor separation from families. Mother believed schooling was an opportunity to exercise one's fortitude.

Wu had limited spare time to miss her family, Mother's vegetable garden, and the crop fields. The day started at six in the morning and ended at ten at night every day from Monday to Saturday. The day was diced into segments: physical exercises, self-study, class, and breaks:

6:00 a.m.	Get up
6:30 a.m.	Morning running exercises
7:00 a.m.	Breakfast
7:30 a.m.	Morning self-study
8:15 a.m	Chinese
9:00 a.m.	Break
9:10 a.m.	English
9:55 a.m.	Eye and Gymnastic Exercises
10:20 a.m.	Mathematics
11:05 a.m.	Break
11:15 a.m.	Physics

Noon	Lunch
13:00 p.m.	Nap
14:30 p.m.	Chemistry
15:15 p.m.	Break
15:25 p.m.	Geography
16:00 p.m.	Break
16:10 p.m.	Afternoon Self-study
17:00 p.m.	Supper
19:00 p.m.	Evening Self-study
21:00 p.m.	End of the day
22:00 p.m.	Bed time

Nap time and bed time were under surveillance. The door of each dorm room had a square inch wide glass window. Those who attempted to cover the glass window would be punished. Teachers were assigned each day to monitor the behavior of dormers during the nap and bed times. They could peep through the glass window if necessary to check if students were violating the rules. No

flashlights and candles were allowed after the power was cut off. No talking. Punishment for breaking the rules included standing still outside the dorm for as long as the superintendent wished or writing a letter of self-criticism. Those who refused to obey the superintendent's orders would receive a demerit on their official record. To honor her parents who sacrificed their personal interests in exchange of Wu's education and a brighter future, Wu never violated any of these rules, but she felt like a caged animal. The daily routine reduced every day into the same pattern. Life became static and boring.

Wu sat gazing out of the window. The banyan tree standing in the center of the sports grounds shed all its old leaves overnight. The new jade-colored leaves were shooting out their shells as ballerinas were standing on their toes. Wu was amazed by the overnight transformation of the giant tree. Nainai said banyan trees were not ordinary trees. They were usually planted near bridges, in temples, or on market plazas. Wu imagined she was perching on the tree like a bird. Being enamored with the fresh tender leaves and the blue sky, the bird was about to sing.

"Girls and boys, there is something true in the proverb, '*xuehao shulihua, zoubian tianxia dou bupa*, if you are good at mathematics, physics, and chemistry, you can travel all the world with no worries." The chemistry teacher's eyes swept the classroom, "Wu, what is the 25th chemical element on the periodic table of the chemical elements?"

Wu's silent communication with the banyan tree was ruthlessly interrupted by

the chemistry teacher. Saying no words, she lowered her head and blushed. Wu lost her interest in listening to the chemistry teacher after she heard him openly making the remark that girls should not learn chemistry in front of a group of girls.

Feeling suffocated, Wu wished she could be blown away by wind. The corn stalks and honeydew melon vines swayed like green ocean waves in the gust. Wu stood against the gust, stretching her arms like a scarecrow. Her hair was flying about in the wind. The gust carried the smell of earth and plants into her nostrils and down her lung. Wu hoped the gust could lift her up into the air. How did Chang'e feel when she flew to the moon?

Wu's flight from the daily routine at school was the teachers' gardens, the crop fields, the ferry, and the military horse ranch. Wu found flowers in the teachers' gardens she had not seen before—peony, morning glory, and dahlia. She had a special admiration for the geography teacher's yellow and silver honey-suckle arcade leading to his apartment. In summer time, walking into the blooming arcade was like walking into a flowering green umbilical cord that led to one's first home. The yellow and white blossoms looked plain but had a sweet soothing scent.

The three winter-sweet plum trees in the teacher's compound were Wu's companions during winter time. The plain waxy tiny yellow flowers opened up like little prayer oil lamps. The scent, moisturized by the morning fog, permeated the heart like spring rain saturating the soil. Flowers were poetry generators. In

return, poetry cultured Wu’s love of them.

墙角数枝梅	In the corner where two walls meet, a few branches of plum
凌寒独自开	Are blooming in the cold, alone
遥知不是雪	You can tell they are not snow flakes even from a distance
为有暗香来	A secret fragrance is wafting in the air

The crop fields surrounding the school were different from the rice paddies in Wu’s hometown. Unlike the dark soil in Riverside Village, the soil here was sandy. People grew corn, potatoes, soybean, peanut, and a variety of vegetables such as cabbage, lettuce, and chard. Wu roamed the fields whenever she had a chance. Watching white butterflies darting here and there, farmers weeding their vegetable plots, and clouds floating high above the fields, Wu’s mind drifted like a piece of drift wood.

To the west of the crop fields flew the Mingjiang River, a tributary of the Yangtze River. The river separated the crop fields from the military horse ranch. At sunset, Wu saw horses running freely or grazing leisurely on the ranch. The evening sunlight caressed their necks, manes, and robust bodies, casting long shadows on the grass. No verse captured the scenery and the emotion invoked in Wu’s heart better than the poem:

古道西风瘦马	Ancient road, west wind, slender horse
小桥流水人家	Small bridge, flowing stream, cottages
夕阳西下	Sunset
断肠人在天涯	A heartbroken person at the land's end

The mountains in the distance stood like thinkers.

Like a string bean seed, Wu's dream of becoming a writer and an artist silently took root. Wu's first artistic competition sponsored by the County Children's Palace was a drawing of Rodin's *Thinker*. It won the first prize for Creative Youth sponsored by the County Children's Palace. Teacher Gong, Wu's fine arts teacher, suggested she join the summer camp to learn fine arts from renowned local artists.

Wu's artistic fire was extinguished by Mother. Mother did not see a future for a girl from the country to become an artist. Having no illusion of marriage, she did not see a future for Wu to marry well and thus have money and leisure to play with paint brushes and colors, either. Mother firmly believed that Wu's going to college, getting a job, and becoming economically independent would be the most secure future for her. Mother also warned Wu not to mess with the children of workers and officials.

"Remember in your whole lifetime, you do not have any *hou men*, back door, to support you. What we can do is to see you through school as best as we can.

Our job is labor in the crop fields; your job is study in the classroom. '*Shaozhuang bu nuli, laoda tu shangbei,* if one does not exert oneself in youth, one will regret it in old age.' I could not go to school because my father died young and my mother was poor. Now that you have the opportunity, you should cherish it. Be a good student. Go to college. Don't let other people laugh at you and us."

Wu buried her dream deep and devoted herself to study. Schooling was examination-driven. For a student like Wu who came from the countryside and had no back door, success in examinations was the only ticket to a brighter future, a life different from her parents whose fingernails were stained dark by dirt, whose hands became coarse from handling pickaxe and manure, whose happiness and misery were at the mercy of Sky Father and the government.

The number of examinations Wu took was about that of the grains of rice she ate. Endless examinations stored mathematical formulas, historical dates and facts, English vocabulary and sentence structures, scientific names of plants and microorganisms, and Maxist theories in Wu's brain, but they also took up a great portion of her brain capacity which should be saved to nourish her creativity. Unlike her parents who suffered physical pain from labor, Wu endured psychological misery. If workers were alienated from their labor as Karl Marx said, Wu was alienated from her passion for nature and art. Something that was as gigantic as an invisible mountain was weighing Wu down.

Isolation was another thing she had to endure. The best word that described

Wu was: misfit. When many girl students took fancy to Qiong Yao's sentimental romance novels, she found no interest in them. Her romance stories to Wu were as blonde-haired and blue-eyed Barbie dolls to a black-haired and black-eyed Asian girl. Wu was not affected by "*gangtai mingxin re*, cult of movie stars from Hong Kong and Tai Wan," either. Many of her girl classmates would save their pocket money for snacks to buy stickers of movie star portraits.

Sharing no common interests with these girls, Wu escaped into literature whenever she could squeeze in time amid infinite examinations. She was attracted to novels and essays in which she could find the familiar—the countryside, the aroma of the earth, wild nature. In her limited spare time, she managed to read the Chinese translation of *War and Peace*, *The Hunter's Diary*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Call of the Wild*, *Octopus*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Although she did not fully understand the stories, she was fascinated by the fictional world. Looking back, Wu realized these novels by internationally well-known male writers also intimidated her.

At the main entrance to the school, there was a black bulletin board. On it was a story about a girl going to school in the morning. She spent about half an hour doing her hair and putting on make-up. Walking in her high heels, she wasted another twenty minutes or so on her way to school. When she finally made it to school, she spent about ten more minutes in the restroom to refresh her make-up. The result? She failed her examination. Somehow the caricature affected Wu. She

had her hair cut short to contradict the axiom, “Long hair short wit.” She noticed Madame Curie, the famous woman scientist whose portrait was hung on the classroom wall, had short hair. Sometimes Wu wished she were a boy. Didn’t Yeye say if she were a boy her fate would be different? Wu despised girls who screamed at the sight of rats. And, hell no, she was not interested in ribbons.

Soon, Wu lost her only friend, Xu Gang, who was admitted to the same class and same school with her. It was the fault of the English possessive pronoun “my.”

It was a bright spring day. The politics teacher took the class to White Tower for a picnic. When Wu reluctantly tore herself away from the pine woods and sat next to Chubby Gong in a circle to sing the “Shooting Practice March,” Chubby Gong leaned over with a sinister smile on his cheeks.

“My Wu,” He laughed wickedly, “Xu Gang said this in his sleep.”

Wu picked up a pebble. She threw it at Chubby Gong with such force that she almost plunged forward with the pebble.

Wu tried to avoid Xu Gang ever since.

The school routine was sometimes interrupted by “educational events.” Once a public judgment pronouncement was held at the county’s sports ground. High school students from every nearby district in the county were gathered to watch prisoners denounced. Students lined up and walked into the sports ground like athletes at the Olympics. When the crowd finally settled on the sports ground in order, the sun was burning relentlessly in the sky. A number of army green trucks

moved in. On the trucks stood the prisoners. All of them held their heads down like sun-beaten vegetable leaves.

The condemnation droned on. One of them had robbed a woman in a public restroom. He found thirty yuan in her pocket, approximately four U.S. dollars. His crime was not about the amount of money but about the nature of robbery. The death penalty was what he deserved. *Kao sha guan*, crack an earthen pot, was the vernacular expression for "being shot to death in the head." Rumor had it the criminal's family had to pay for the bullets. Wu imagined the wasteland where these public criminals would be taken to have their heads cracked. In less than a second, they would be in another world.

Public condemnation and the death penalty did not seem to produce the preventive effect. 1989 was a year of chaos in the nation as well as at the school. The biology teacher's entire family was stabbed to death one night. It turned out it was a robbery. Gradually, going back home was like going to a different world. The contrast between the urban and the rural became clear and sharp. Whereas Wu felt like a canoe at sea at school, she became the center of attention when she went home. Father would make a big meal, and Jiajia would be waiting at the door. When she went back to school, Mother and Jiajia would walk her to the bridge. While at school, Wu learnt how to read botanical illustrations; at home, *tudi*, the local god of land, was venerated.

Then the Fourth of June came. Wu knew nothing about the June Fourth until

the principal publically gave a warning to Guoyong on the school radio. Wu suddenly realized why Mother told her to concentrate on her study no matter what her fellow schoolmates were doing.

Whereas Wu was unaware of the outer world, Mother sensed something unusual was happening. The school started requiring students from the country to turn in rice instead of money. Mother read the new requirement as a sign that there was a shortage of national grain reserve. Her experience told her that whenever there was a shortage of national grain reserve, there would be a social crisis looming; and whenever there was a social crisis, there would be a social movement brewing. But Mother, a survivor of the Great Famine and a witness to the Cultural Revolution, was suspicious of any political movement on a massive scale. Mass movements, like hurricane, tornado, or earthquake, had wicked power which Mother feared.

The tragic stories Mother told Wu also made Wu skeptical of mass movements. Unlike Guoyong who knew the outside world through his parents in a state-run weapons factory and brother in college, Wu's world was limited to the school where book knowledge was used to indoctrinate, and her political consciousness was yet to be formed. In her young mind, she only knew that politics was the game of privileged people who were like animals at the top of the food chain. This was evidenced by two proverbs: "Kill the chicken to frighten the monkey" and "The big fish eats the small fish; the small fish eats the shrimp; the

shrimp eats dirt."

The June Fourth in Wu's life meant she was becoming the shrimp. The June Fourth significantly disrupted the higher education system. Fewer students were admitted to colleges that year. Wu's heart sank to the bottom of the bitterness abyss when she found out the daughter of a teacher was admitted to the program she herself was rejected from, even if Wu had a higher score than that girl. Imagining the satisfied grins on her relatives' faces, her self-esteem was broken into pieces as a delicate ceramic urn dropped to the hard floor. Her depression, hanging heavily in the air like a ghost, affected everyone in the family. Brother lost his interest in study, so did sister.

Dragging her legs as if pulling two sticks filled with lead, she wandered among the orange trees and vegetables. She stood next to an orange tree. It was the champion tree last year, but now it looked exhausted. Only a few oranges were hanging among the leaves like malnourished children. Wu looked over the once champion orange tree and the pathetic orange tree now. Her eyes followed the rice field and then rested on the bamboo grove that sheltered the graves of Nainai and Yeye. Nainai said life was suffering and one's fate was predestined, but the path to one's destination was a mystery. She felt like a lost child; tears rolled down her cheeks and silently slid into her mouth. The tears tasted like sweat and salt. Mother said salt was the source of strength. In harvest season, Mother always made sure to add more salt to the food. Tasting the salty flavor of her tears, Wu wondered if

tears, which she never lacked, could become the source of strength.

Standing still next to the orange tree and looking in the direction of the bamboo grove, Wu was lost in thought. The idea of becoming a country woman was terrifying, although she loved the land tremendously. Having been away from home for years, she loved the edge of being an outsider. Since the day she entered school, she had believed she had the fate of becoming a person of letters, a fate as predicted by the fortuneteller and reiterated by Mother again and again. Wu wanted to hold on to the belief that she was predestined to travel far and the west was her direction. Becoming a country woman contradicted her fate she believed in and meant being fixed to one place. Standing still next to the orange tree and looking in the direction of the bamboo grove, Wu released her bitterness and worries.

She went back to school. She buried her self deep in books, sacrificed her hobby of reading novels and roaming in the fields. She was admitted to college, but fate was as protean as the moon. Although Wu's first choice was Chinese Literature, and her second choice Chinese History, she was admitted to the English Department.

In that year, a new post-June Fourth order—a one-month involuntary military training—was issued. Universities involved in June Fourth were required to have a longer period of military training. Wu and all first-year students were taken to a military training base shortly after they reported to school. In that confined

environment, Wu and her “comrades-in-arms” were taught that obedience was the first duty of a solider. They were trained to attain the goal of uniformity in everything—marching, eating, and sleeping. Even the angles they placed their toothbrushes in the cups had to be the same.

Many “comrades-in-arms” could not help laughing when they were practicing the goose step—marching like robots. Boys who laughed were kicked; girls who did so were punished and made to stand still under the scorching sun. Soon, they succeeded in killing their laughing bug before it had a chance to tickle their nerves. Wu did not find solemnity and beauty in the goose stepping, but she did not laugh. Instead, she was overcome by sadness.

When she came back from the military training, her world shrank to the English world. The curriculum in the English department was limited to the English language, classical Chinese language, military theories, law, and pedagogical ethics and morality.

Wu shared a dorm room with seven urban girls. Bedtime gossip expanded Wu’s limited world to the world of cosmetics, bras, actresses, and sex scandals. Wu was the nerd and *Xiaofang*, the country girl, among the girls. She had little to contribute to bedtime chatting. She was still wearing a cotton shell when all her dorm mates were wearing bras. Nana, daughter of a surgeon and the fashion and health expert of the dorm, suggested that breasts would become unattractive if not properly supported by a bra when they were developing. No one doubted Nana’s

authority on fashion and health after her father came to visit. Everyone was impressed by his taste in style—bold red button-up shirt with snow white jeans and white leather shoes—and his medical vocabulary which Nana had adopted.

Did what Nana said explaine the question mark on the nurse's face when Wu stood on the scale, naked, to endure the compulsory physical examination every first-year student had to go through? Wu wondered if the breasts of Nainai, Jiajia, and Mother—who had never worn bras— looked pathetic. When Nana volunteered to accompany Wu to a bra store, Wu did not object. But Nana had to push Wu inside the store because Wu attempted to flee. Once they were inside, Wu flushed with embarrassment. Her heart was pounding like mad. She would have collapsed on the floor if Nana had not been standing with her arm in arm. Once Wu started to wear a bra, she understood how a buffalo felt when yoked by its master.

The Lion Hill became Wu's Eden. The Lion Hill was on the north side of the campus. At the foot of the hill lay an abandoned old railroad running from west to east. Its black wood ties were embedded in crushed stone roadbed. Touched artfully by the hands of time—the changing seasons—the wood ties had harmonized with the roadbed over time. The railroad ended at the Peach Blossoms Bridge, where acres of land were fenced for some kind of projects Wu could not know. On the left side of the railroad were crop fields and village houses; on the right side honey locust trees. Whenever Wu had a chance, she would hike the

railroad until she reached the Peach Blossoms Bridge, then turned around and hiked back to school through the honey locust woods.

Like plants and trees in the backyard of that old house where Wu spent her childhood, the locust trees were also seducers. In spring, their tender compound leaves turned light yellow like the color of fluffy goose chicks. In April, their white blossoms opened like the lips of beautiful women. A delicate sweet fragrance escaped from the blossoms. In summer, the leaves turned dark green, and in fall gold. Honey locust flower pancakes were a delicacy when there was a bountiful supply of food. However, during the Great Famine, they became a substitute for food. Although they could not satisfy your stomach like chalk clay, they would not kill you like this white stuff. Chalk clay produced gas to fool the stomach. But the gas would not stop accumulating in the stomach. Many chalk clay eaters died of stomach gas during the Great Famine. Wu wondered if the honey locust trees on the Lion Hill had fed starving people during those years.

Wu had to stop passing time there after four girls from the history department were raped in the woods when the honey locust trees bloomed. One of them committed suicide. Her parents found a letter at her bedside table. In her letter she apologized to her parents for not being able to fulfill her filial duty to them, but she could not endure the shock and shame any longer. Supervisors of all departments, especially departments of which the majority of students were girls, held emergency meetings with girls, requiring them not to wander in the woods.

The administrative board decided to block the north door. The door was immediately sealed up with firebricks and cement.

Romance was absolutely discouraged.

“Falling in love is distracting.” The supervisor explained, “This is especially true for girls. From the data I have collected and observations I have made, girls who fall in love cannot concentrate on their study. Their grades drop drastically once they become feverish with romance. May I offer you a piece of advice? Keep your heads cool. Boys won’t lose anything. It is girls who will get the worst of it. I am serious.”

Every now and then, Wu saw notices on the bulletin board in the lobby, announcing who was expelled for disobeying disciplines. Among those girls, one was the number one student in her class and spoke English fluently. On her twentieth birthday, she was invited for wine and peanut butter bread by that blue-eyed, golden-haired American exchange student whom many girls in the English Department fell in love with secretly. After a glass of wine, she could not resist the flames flicking in the boy’s ocean blue eyes. She surrendered to her whim and fell into the most azure pools of the world. She shared her excitement with her best friend, who was also the class monitor. Her friend, out of duty, jealousy, good-intention, or for reasons yet to be determined, reported to the supervisor. Precedent should not be set. She had to get the worst of it.

The other girl who got the worst of it neither spoke English fluently nor was

enchanted by blue eyes and blond hair. She was in love with her childhood sweetheart, who was a sophomore in the Chinese Department. Somehow, the news that she was pregnant sneaked out. This also was a precedent that should not be set.

These stories were twining round Wu like wisterias, choking her. When a thunder storm came, Wu dashed out into the downpour to wash away emotions clogged up in her mind.

To make sure her life could move forward without any unexpected brutal interruptions like these girls, Wu dedicated herself to studying the English language, her future rice bowl. She wished she could become Professor Niu II. Professor Niu was acclaimed as the best professor in the English Department because she had mastered the English language, especially the British accent. When asked her secret of success, Professor Niu suggested the best way to learn English was forget your own language, completely embrace English, think in English, and dream in English.

Being eager to excel, and curious about how it would feel to enter the English world, Wu decided to give it a try. By saving on food and clothes, she managed to buy a short-wave receiver and a walkman and from then on she had immersed herself in the English world. She listened to English tapes when she walked; she tuned in news from the Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Cooperation before she fell asleep. Once she had an argument with the supervisor

in her dream. Wu was speaking English fluently without a trace of accent. The supervisor was so stunned that she forgot to scold Wu; Wu laughed so hard that she woke up.

Professor Niu was right. Immersion was truly effective. Sometimes when Wu walked by a group of people, she only heard a babble of voices. It took a while for her to realize they were speaking Chinese. She did not know immersion in English and disconnection from Chinese had side effects. She was unaware that her native language was her chi; without it, her mind would collapse. Gradually, an emptiness—a hole-like feeling—had developed in the back of her head. Her memories stored in the Chinese language were pushed down into that hole like beasts. They were lurking in that dark space, waiting for opportunities to climb up, to gnaw at her, to fight back the English invader. The internal language war, like crossfire, scorched the trees of knowledge—one in English and the other in Chinese—in her brain. Wu tried in vain to build a bridge to connect her memories stored in Chinese with those stored in English. There was no bridge. She knew she could never become a simultaneous interpreter. She was stuck with the English-Chinese disconnection.

Deep inside, she felt some indescribable dis-ease developing. Her dreams were troubled with the image of a little white mouse running on a miniature spinning flat disk suspended by a metal stick. Wu had seen this mouse before. It was the year she became a first-grader. To make Wu a new outfit that was proper

for school and presentable to her teachers and classmates, Mother took Wu to the fabric store in town.

It was a market day. The streets were jammed with merchandise booths and customers. Suddenly, a white mouse at a rat poison stall attracted her attention. The moment the mouse was put on the disc, it began to run like mad. Wu was amused in the beginning. But after watching the mouse running in circles for about five minutes or so, she became dizzy and exhausted.

“Ma, can the mouse stand still on the disc to get some rest?” She asked.

“No. The mouse will fall if it stops running.”

“Will the mouse die of exhaustion?”

“This uncle will not let the mouse die. He needs the mouse to attract customers.”

The rat poison seller looked at Wu in bewilderment. “This little sister is funny,” he said. He pushed the disc faster and shouted, “Come buy rat poison.”

Wu’s brain was swirling like the mouse the whole afternoon and the next few days. As time went by, she had gradually forgotten this poor white mouse, which was pushed into the sheer purgatory of running forever. How come it visited Wu’s dreams years later?

The language battle in her conscious would temporarily cease when Wu went back to her hometown for a visit. The local dialect her family spoke pacified her anxious nerves as rice soup soothed the empty stomach. At school, her

dialect—not every word but a few words which people considered typically local to her hometown—was imitated by her classmates and supervisor when they talked with her. Wu could not tell their intention. Were they trying to be friendly with her? Did they find the sound funny? Or were they making fun of her? Wu was very annoyed by the guesswork. This happened to her classmates who came from remote rural areas where the local dialects were distinctly different from the two privileged languages on campus, Mandarin and the Chengdu dialect. Gradually, Wu and her classmates, whose dialects were like chickens standing among cranes, had adopted either Mandarin or the Chengdu dialect. At home Wu could speak her local dialect without doing the guesswork; she could also put aside her bra and wear a cotton shell like Nainai, Jiajia, Mother, and Sister.

In evenings when the weather was agreeable, she loved sitting in a circle with her parents, siblings, and grandmother in the courtyard, watching the moon moving from the east to the west side of the bamboos, chatting into the night. The English language, the student conduct code, punishment, betrayal by one's best friend, all seemed faraway and unreal.

Sometimes Big Aunt came on a sunny and warm day to comb Nainai's hair. The way the peach wood comb ran through Nainai's grey hair never failed to fascinate Wu. Nainai twisted her lost hairs into 8-shape coils and asked Wu to throw them into the pig waste pit, where they would decompose with manure and eventually became fertilizer.

The water fir was a delight to watch. It had been Wu's companion tree since she was a fifth-grader. Wu bought a seedling after she learned from the botany class that water fir was one of the "living fossils." Mother planted the seedling at the fish pond near the eastern corner of the house. Mother believed the tree and Wu were connected in this life; otherwise, Wu would not have found the seedling hidden among tens of different kinds of tree saplings. Mother hoped the tree would counterbalance Wu's metal element.

Wu was born into the year, month, date, and time of metal. The excessive metal element in Wu made it difficult for her parents to raise her. Since childhood, Wu had various sorts of health problems which doctors could not diagnose. The fortune-teller said she would not "take root" until the age of twenty. Mother carefully attended to the needs of the tree as if it were a barometer of Wu's health. With Mother's care, the seedling had grown into a luxuriant young tree. Compared with the water fir, the grape plant was a fast grower. The grape vines Wu rescued from her high school trial garden had already started to bear fruit by the time she went to college.

Wu realized although home was water to fish, it was only a place for repose. When the moon rose and set again, Wu had to go back to school.

It was a sunny Sunday in May. Wu wandered along the Imperial City River aimlessly. The beer-colored river was flowing lazily under the warm spring sun.

Willow trees were swaying along the river banks like foxy girls. Under the willow trees, old men sat around stone tables, playing Chinese chess; young men, cards. Now and then some middle-aged women—with fake leather purses on their shoulders and rouge on their lips—darted through the willow trees and stone tables attempting to start conversations with those chess players and card players, but were ridiculed in dirty words. Some kept silent and went away, but others talked back. Dirty words, anger, and laughter burst out, and soon diminished in the noise of cars roaring by.

Wu gazed into the river. Foam, plastic beverage bottles, shoes, and other unidentifiable trash gathered around bridge supports. Wu walked along the river bank, crossing under the bridge.

A circle of people, young and old, gathered under a young banyan tree. Wu stood on her toes to look inside the circle. A fortune-teller! How much she looked like Nainai. Struck by a pang of homesickness, Wu stopped.

A man walked toward the circle, standing next to Wu.

The man, Gui, was born in the year of horse. Wu was fascinated by the world he lived in. Born into a working class family, he was exempted from the “going back to the mountains and the countryside movement” and hired by the state-run railroad company before he graduated from high school. He was the famous fist-fighter of “railroad boys.” The railroad took him to almost every place in

China. He trekked up the misty mountains in Guizhou, explored the most beautiful and dangerous lava cave in Yunnan, and slept on brick beds in Sanxi. When the economic reform started, he smashed his iron rice bowl, quit his job, and became a hot-pot restaurant owner. Unfortunately, he had too many friends. Having too many friends meant free food or discount, which ruined his business. He was now a loafer.

That night Wu had a strange dream. She was on her way back to her hometown. Near the bridge which she crossed everyday to go to school when she was a fifth grader, she saw an old woman walking with a stick. The old woman could barely move, panting breathlessly. Wu went up to the old woman, intending to help her along. The moment Wu touched her arms, the old woman's face changed. Gui's face!

Looking back, Wu was still bewildered why she trusted Gui, a stranger in her life. She allowed him to come back again, and again, and again to take her to every park and every old lane that had old trees. Both Wu and Gui's parents objected. It was a mismatch. Gui was older than Wu. He did not even have a high school diploma. He managed to find a job in an auto-parts factory, but that was far from a decent job. Their parents' objection was too late. On a warm summer evening, Wu tasted "the forbidden fruit" at a secluded lotus pond when she was intoxicated by the perfume of lotus flowers and the surreally beautiful sunset.

Eager to have a room of her own after graduation, Wu rushed into her marital

life. Back then, only married couples would be assigned an apartment in the university where she taught. As a junior faculty, she could only get a small room in a motel-like three-story old building constructed in the 1950s. Seven giant characters, "*Mao Zhu Xi Wan Shou Wu Jiang*, Long live chairman Mao," painted on the front wall had faded away with the bygone revolutionary time but were still faintly visible. Wu recognized the character "wu" creeping at the window like a faded red spider.

Having shared a dormitory with seven roommates at college, Wu was content to have a room of their own even if it was small. The room served as their kitchen, living room, and bedroom. The dinner table, which was converted from a hot-pot table from Gui's former restaurant, was also Wu's desk. They shared a public restroom and a communal washing room with twelve families on the same floor. She did not know that the date she went to the marriage registration office, she had started brewing a bitter wine which she had to drink by herself later on.

Wu found herself a loner among her cohort women colleagues who married officers, professors, and engineers. She kept silent when they bragged about new shoes, purses, dresses, and luxurious accessories their husbands bought them. Soon they moved to either better housing at the university or to apartments where their husbands worked. Afterwards, their maternity dress could not hide their happy bellies pregnant with the sweet fruits of their love lives.

Motherhood was beyond Wu's imagination. Their income barely made ends

meet. The auto-parts factory where Gui worked was shrinking. As an adjunct worker, he would be the first person to pack and get lost. With no diploma in a time when diploma mattered, there were little chances for Gui to find a job. Wu herself was still at a critical stage in her career. When the gynecologist in a white robe told Wu her pregnancy test was positive, Wu's heart sank the minute her tears welled up.

Wu had the first taste of the bitter wine she had brewed. "Get an abortion. It is easy. A woman in the auto-parts factory had an abortion in the morning and came back to work in the afternoon." Compared with the pain caused by Gui's "don't-care-a-pin" attitude, the piercing pain induced by the wrenching scalpel was nothing. Part of Wu died on that operation table. As if that were not enough, Wu overheard the doctor whispering with her assistant. "What a pity, twins."

A month later, Gui brought home a homeless kitten; another month later, a homeless Pekingese puppy. Gui named the kitten Cat Sister, the puppy Dog Brother. Cat Sister and Dog Brother had never become close to Wu even though she tried her best to be friends with them. Worse, they were avengers. Cat Sister often interpreted Wu's tease as irritation, clawing her hard as if they were enemies in their past lives. Dog Brother was Cat Sister's faithful ally. Every time Cat Sister showed any sign of unhappiness, Dog Brother would look for opportunities to shred Wu's books or her teaching notebooks. Sometimes Wu wondered if Cat Sister and Dog Brother were her past life foes or her unborn children reincarnated.

Whenever Wu made eye contact with them, she saw rage in their eyes.

When the moon waxed and waned six times, Gui was laid off. He was not unique. It was a massive social change. The newspaper phrased it as "*xia gang*, walk off your job," a euphemism for unemployment. All of his siblings lost their jobs at about the same time, too. That was the danger of the policy of allowing daughters and sons to take over their parents' duties when they retired. All of his siblings worked in the same state-owned railroad company where their father worked. His father was the perfect proletariat who was born into a dirt poor family. Back then the proletariat class was favored; the children of a proletariat father were taken care of. All of his siblings got iron rice bowls in the state-run railway company where their father was a superintendant. They had years of good happy lives. But the wheels of history rolled, pulverizing the iron bowls. It must be hard for Gui to adapt to the fact that he and his siblings all lost their jobs at the same time.

Wu tried to put herself in her husband's shoes. But her husband was as silent as the genetically modified goldfish he raised. They could not talk. Both of them resettled to their own shells like turtles. They dreamed different dreams sleeping on the same bed.

The longer he stayed at home, the more silent he became; the more silent he became, the more cigarettes he smoked. Wu tried to suggest he stop smoking so much.

“What? Are you worried about money or are you worried about my health?” Gui put on a false smile, which made Wu want to punch his face. To protect his wounded self-esteem, Wu repressed her anger.

Stars moved, things changed, life went on. Wu realized she had only herself to rely on. She felt relieved her mother had showed no interest in coming to visit her again since her first visit. Wu kept silent about Gui’s unemployment and his changing temperament in order not to make her parents worry. Complaining to Gui’s parents was out of the question. They were good-hearted ordinary working-class people who had weathered through many hardships in their pre-retirement years. Wu could never gather up herself to talk with them about their son’s situation. Friends? She had none.

The weight on her heart gradually migrated to the back of her head and petrified in her skull, blocking her energy channels. Only long walks along a river, a lake, a bamboo grove, a crop field, or a fish pond could partially open the channels in her brain. Watching water flowing, rain drops falling, ripples spreading, and birds flying somehow helped to diminish her misery. In this big universe, she was minimal, so was her misery.

She dreaded going back to their room where life seemed to fall into a dark hole. Gui felt the same. One day, he asked Wu for money to buy a motorcycle. His plan was to charge people a fee to give them rides. This was illegal, but Wu did not say anything. She knew he would not listen to her. Gui had gone out early and

returned home late since he had the motorcycle. Sometimes, he stayed somewhere overnight. Wu had no idea where he went, but she would not ask unless he wanted to tell her himself. Gui started to bring home local specialty food from neighboring counties; cheap eggs, vegetables, nuts, pork, and fish from night market; plants from vendors wandering about the streets.

Life went on day after day as if a cat were chasing its own tail. Nonetheless, economic development had accelerated. No matter whether universities liked it or not, they had to respond to the economic boom. To meet the demands, more and more business and technology disciplines had been invented, as a result, more and more students had poured in. Her enthusiasm for teaching had died away as the curriculum placed disproportionate emphasis on business and tourism English. Corruption made its way into higher education. The ethics of teaching were trashed. The French maples had prematurely shed their leaves before they even turned gold. Watching dehydrated and discolored leaves falling down to the cement ground, Wu suddenly felt completely hollow inside.

“I have to leave this place.”

Gui did not object her going to graduate school.

Dear readers, graduate school did not relieve Wu’s anxiety and agony. Her anxiety and agony were evident in her diary:

Date: April 26, The Year of Dog Weather: Rainy

"In your past life, you were the carrier of books for a Bodhisattva in Emei. You will make a living by brush and ink this life." The diviner said, the bird said, Nainai said, Mother repeated. And here I am, sitting in front of a computer, typing in English. I fulfilled the diviner's prediction, the bird's prediction, Nainai's prediction, and my mother's wish. I betrayed them. I am not writing with brush in ink on rice paper, three of the four treasures of the study of a Chinese scholar. I am not even writing in Chinese. For whom am I carrying the books now? What books am I carrying?

The future Buddha is carved into a mountain, facing the water where three rivers in different colors converge, one black, the second yellow, and the third transparent. The future Buddha is a curly-haired square-faced giant who is seventy-one meters high. His head is about fifteen meters in height and ten meters in width, decorated with a thousand and fifty-one coils. His foot extends eight point five meters wide. The future Buddha is seated, smiling an unfathomable smile with hands resting on the knees, lips touching, and eyes closed.

Two plank trails, one on the left side of the Buddha and the other on the right side, lead to his feet. Each of his feet is broad enough to hold a hundred people sitting in a circle, each toe wide enough to support an eight-diner table. The plank trails are constructed along perpendicular rock-faces and supported by wooden brackets fixed into the cliff. I was told the two trails were the only paths to the

table-sized toes of the future Buddha.

I did not go down the plank trails to stand on the table-sized toes of the future Buddha as my seventh-grade classmates did. I was determined to find a path less travelled by. I ventured alone along a mountainside, attempting to reach the Buddha from the back. I failed and missed the chance of standing on a toe of the future Buddha with seven other humble earthlings.

I thought I would not be punished by my childish indulgence in seeking a path that did not exist. I thought I had unconditional love from the future Buddha as my father had unconditional love from the Bodhisattvas in my great-grandmother's worship room. My father raised his tiny fists to the fierce-looking Bodhisattvas and declared he was not afraid and he would fistfight with them if they meant a fistfight by staring at him. My great-grandmother gasped with amusement. "Milk child does not mean it. You know that, right?" she said to the Bodhisattvas. My father was thus blessed with a mind of simplicity and honesty. In my mother's opinion, low intelligence.

My mother was the intelligent one in the family. She demonstrated her extraordinary intelligence when she was nine years old. One day, when she spotted the food- searching team coming to their thatch she had a brainwave. She immediately grabbed a bag of soybeans—their only lifesaver—and quickly ran into the buffalo's room. She coaxed the buffalo to lie on the side where she put the soybean bag. The team searched the entire thatch except the smelly buffalo's room.

They left with empty hands. My mother would make a much better student than me if she had the opportunity to go to school. Even though she could not afford to buy textbooks and pencils, and had to frequently skip classes to help with household chores, she became the only student in her class who passed the entrance examination. If Jiagong had not died, she could have finished high school. Mother loved school.

I believe I have inherited my father's honesty and simple-mindedness. If I had a choice between reading a book and wandering in the woods, I would always choose the latter. I roamed around in the fields after class as much as I could, dreaming, dramatizing dialogues with clouds, wind, plants, willows, crickets, horses, water buffalos, and rivers, imaging a world yonder. I did not belong; I lived in-between, between the yin and yang. My father is the yin, my mother the yang. My father is the simple, my mother the intelligent. I was loved by both. I had both the desire not to think and the fate to be at school, to be the carrier of books. I am a reluctant thinker like a reluctant warrior who loves peace. I prefer to living in the form of a plant in a forest. Yes, to be a plant, to live, to not think vain questions like the meaning of life.

Dear future Buddha, whose books am I to carry? I am now lost among the rivers of books I was recommended or required to read. I was the new generation, remember? the generation who was born to New China and grew up under the five-starred flag. I was educated to the subjects of mathematics, physics, chemistry,

and English, remember? I have left home for too long and you have been too far away from me for too long. Whose books am I to carry?

I broke my pelvic bone. They gave me a general anesthesia and pain killers. My mind is now cloudy; my right leg is shorter than the left one. I lost balance, I can not see you. I can not practice the lifestyle of going to bed at sunset and getting up at daybreak. I am losing my memory, my connection to the other world. I stopped wandering about, dreaming, and talking to trees. I am losing connection. What is wrong?

Wu felt she was an exile. A lecture entitled "Culture in Exile" attracted her attention. The room was packed. Wu found a seat next to the back door. She sat down quietly in the corner.

"Good evening, everyone. My name is Yu Gong, but the two characters in my name are not the same as 'yu' and 'gong' in the legend of *Yu Gong Yi Shan*. That old man had the ambition of leveling down a gigantic mountain with his shovel. I simply don't believe I am able to accomplish a goal like that. My name means 'unnecessary worker.' " the audience laughed, amused by the artist's humor.

"Yu is the character *yu* as in *duo yu* (unnecessary); gong is the character *gong* as in *gong ren* (worker). I have four brothers. They have the characters *nong* (peasant), *bin* (soldier), *xue* (student), *shang* (businessman) in their names respectively. Together, we represent all the classes in China, gong, nong, bin, xue,

shang." Yu Gong paused, sweeping the room with his eyes. From a distance, his eyes looked like two deep dark pools. It was hard to decipher what was in those pools.

"I did not have any memory of starvation. I was too young to remember things, but like anyone else of my age I experienced a different kind of hunger, the hunger for knowledge and liberation. During the 'going to the mountains and the countryside movement,' I was sent to a small village in a remote mountain. When I heard the college examination was resumed, I walked a whole night in order to make it to the examination. I had an opportunity to learn art in America and received funding to travel in Europe. In retrospect, I had the life of a traveler, to be more exact, an exile. Two subject matters interested me the most—rice and tunnels. For me, rice is the food for the body, a reminder of starvation, a metaphor for spiritual and psychological sustenance. Tunnels represent the transitional stage of today's China. They also resemble the process of my personal search for meanings. What do rice and tunnels mean for you? I will leave that to your own discretion."

An assistant turned down the lights. Slides flickered in a rhythm that calmed down hearts. Wu was in tears. Silently, she wiped them off with her fingers.

What is my rice? Will there be light at the end of the tunnel? What is my light? What are the books am I supposed to carry? Wu had a mental conversation with herself.

The Book Scent Alley was packed with vendors. Wu stopped in front of a flower vendor's stand shaded by a giant scholarly tree. This was the only surviving scholarly tree in the alley. The tree was enveloped by a house, stretching its branches far and wide. Half of the tree had turned yellow by the greasy smoke from a restaurant. Wu picked a red rose from the basin.

It was a three-story fire brick building. Yu Gong's apartment was on the third floor. It was easy to identify. Yu Gong's apartment had large sliding windows. The rest of the apartments were installed with paned windows. The door was locked. Wu knocked at the door, her heart pounding like a startled deer. Nobody answered the door. Wu put a note card and the red rose in the pouch attached to the door and fled.

The room was perfumed with the scent of rosin. On the walls were shrine-shaped holes where things from the past—a military water canteen and a flash light—rested. Albums of painting scattered on the floor carpet in front of a decorative fireplace. On the western windowsill stood a glass. In it was the red rose Wu picked from a basin at the Book Scent Alley. Its petals looked dehydrated. Wu looked again. There was no water in the glass. On the eastern side of the room was the bedroom. Behind a half-opened canvas curtain was a tatami bed. At its foot stood two oil paintings. The one on the left was complete, the one on the right

unfinished. In the complete painting, a South China tiger was barred inside an iron cage. Its eyes were staring at something unknown, its right paw following its gaze, stretching outside the frame. In the unfinished painting, a hairless alien-looking creature was walking on black-and-white grids, or pavement. The creature was about to walk out of the frame.

"Sleep." Yu Gong whispered in Wu's ears, turning over to lie on his side.

Lying against his back, Wu closed her eyes. A girl was looking at her from outside the window. Wu looked into her eyes. The girl looked back. Her eyes changed into a dark well, pulling Wu in. Struck by a pang of vertigo, Wu opened her eyes. She traced the moles on Yu Gong's back. Wu identified seven moles spreading out on Yu Gong's back like the Big Dipper.

Unable to fall asleep, Wu sneaked out of the bedroom. She seated herself in front of the decorative fireplace, flipping through an album of Bauhaus Art. Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus" caught her attention. A few days later, she came across Walter Benjamin's reflections on this painting which she copied into her notebook:

> *An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles*

rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm.

She became critical of the rapid social changes she had been aware of, but she was also depressed by Benjamin's view.

Postmodernism and deconstructionism were the buzzwords in cultural studies and fine arts. Nonetheless, Wu did not feel she and her folks in the countryside were connected with this intellectual and artistic trend. The river which cultural critics and artists swam in, the one where Wu swam, and the one in which her country folks swam did not converge.

Wu felt extremely lonely when Yu Gong went on his "Zone Zero" art exhibit tour in Canada. He seemed to have evaporated from her life. Were Gui and Yu Gong her connections to the Cultural Revolution generation? Were they her karma she had to endure to understand history and life? Her intimate relationship with the older generation left her in utter solitude among her generation. The bridge to either side was broken. Dear to her heart was a song adapted from the poem of San

Mao, a woman writer who called the Sahara Desert her home:

不要问我从那里来	Don’t ask me where I am from
我的故乡在远方	My home is in a faraway place
为什么流浪 流浪远方流浪	Why do I wander, wander far, wander
为了天空飞翔的小鸟	For birds flying in the sky
为了山间轻流的小溪	For streams flowing in the mountains
为了宽阔的草原	For vast plains
流浪远方流浪	I wander far, wander
还有还有	Also
为了梦中的橄榄树橄榄树	For the olive trees in my dreams
不要问我从那里来	Don’t ask me where I am from
我的故乡在远方	My home is in a faraway place
为什么流浪 流浪远方	Why do I wander, wander far?
为了我梦中的橄榄树	For the olive trees in my dreams

Cat Sister disappeared. Gui blamed Wu for not closing the door quick enough.

Wu started to conceive her first novel but she could not find a resolution for her heroine. Did her heroine, like Mrs. Pontellier in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, have to die, too? Unable to find hope for her heroine, she gave up writing the story. She wished Sula, “an artist with no art form,” were her own flesh and blood, so

she could talk with her about how to find the form together. But her yearning for companions was contained within her body. She had not learned how to let out a howl yet.

Wu found solace in circling the locust trees, watching the river flowing, touching the wind blowing. For Wu, solitude in crowds and solitude in nature were different. She felt lonely in crowds, but when she walked alone in the woods, or along a river, she felt connected. Her heart was open. Her senses opened to the songs of birds, the voice of the trees, the scent of flowers. Solitude in crowds created anxiety, repression, and closure. Being alone in nature brought peace and joy to her heart.

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"Zhenqi weimu, mu shi qi (Chi is Mother is Chi)." (Songs of Earth Mother)

On the ninth day of her homecoming before Wu left for the opposite side of the globe, Wu wondered if she should take her wooden doll with her. After a second thought, she decided not. The three wooden dolls were now sitting on the wardrobe in Father's bedroom. They were the spirit dolls of Wu, her younger brother, and her younger sister. In spite of their differences in height and attributes, they were very similar with one another. Their square faces were painted white,

the upper bodies were dressed in blue, and the lower bodies were pink. Brother's doll was the tallest; Wu's was the shortest. Unlike Brother's and Sister's dolls, her doll was holding a book on her bosom, with the two Chinese character of *Yu Wen* 语文, which meant language and literature. The base of her doll was carved with lotus petals.

"You all had spirit dolls," Nainai had said. When each of the three children was born, Nainai had their birth year, month, date, and time divined by a healer of good reputation, and performed the rituals in person. She selected the best salt, tea, rice, and beans and the brightest threads of five colors, carefully stored them inside the dolls, and firmly sealed the little door opened in the back of the dolls. They were not toys to play with.

When Wu was old enough to remember things, she saw three dolls sitting on a wooden platform installed on the wall of her parents' bedroom, too high to be reached even when she dragged the highest chair underneath it, attempting to touch them. She could only have a close look at those dolls when Mother dusted them. She asked every sort of questions, but Mother would ignore them. The only message she received from her mother was that she was a *bao shu tong*, spirit doll holding a book, from Emei Mountain, which meant she would have a life with books. Her brother and sister were *er e shan tong* (spirit dolls from little Emei Mountain). That explained why her mother would say very harsh words to her if she showed the slightest sign of neglecting her study, but her mother never had

such expectations upon her brother and sister. Mother imprinted in Wu's mind that Wu and her brother and sister would have *zimei yuan*, predestined sibling bond, which would last their whole lives. Unfortunately, she would not have such luck. Wu wondered if that was Mother's wishful thinking or her parenting tactic.

Nainai came to Wu's dream the night before she went back to the city. They were mountain people. It was a market day. Nainai and Wu were walking to the market. Nainai was wearing a cotton dress in the color of indigo. It was the traditional dress women in the village no longer wore. It had buttons stitched to the right side of the chest. The buttons were made out of cloth in the shape of braids. Wu used to have dresses like that, but Mother decided the style was old fashioned, inconvenient, and not compatible with modern life's pace. Wu no longer wore traditional outfits but Nainai was too old to change.

Nainai walked ahead. Wu followed. It was early summer. The sun was bright and the wind warm. Wu's mouth became dry but her breath remained steady. She walked at the pace set up by Nainai, watching her indigo back. When a gust of wind passed by, Wu smelt of the indigo cotton and Nainai's sweat. The smell of indigo cotton and Nainai's sweat was mingled with the breath of the mountain—the wild flowers, rice sprouts, and bamboo. Wu heard the music of a stream.

The path they traveled was a dirt road. The dirt road circled the mountain like a girdle. In the corner of the girdle stood a dry goods adobe store. The dirt-colored adobe store organically merged with the dirt road and the mountain. It had one

room and a big window opening to the dirt road. The window had no panes. Under the window stood a counter. On the counter were a glass money jar and rows of glass jars. In the belly of the glass jars lay various kinds of sweets that had colorful wrapping. Behind the counter was a shelf. Standing on the shelf were bottled water, packages of dry mushrooms, day lilies, rice cakes, garlic flavored roast broad beans, sour and sweet dry plums, Blue Mint chewing gum, wood soap, incense sticks, memorial money paper, and other daily necessities and luxuries. The store smelt of vinegar, salt, and kerosene oil.

Nainai ignored the store and walked by. Wu stopped to buy two cutting knives. When she walked out of the store, she found three knives in her hands. The storekeeper had overcharged her. She had stolen one to make the balance. When Wu was studying the stolen knife, it fell out of her hand and dropped down to the foot of the mountain.

Wu quickened her pace to catch up with Nainai. Nainai kept silent when she learnt about the stolen knife. Nainai decided to come back to the place where Wu had dropped the knife.

There were stone steps leading to the foot of the mountain. Nainai asked Wu to wait on the dirt road while she was going down to look for the knife. Wu watched Nainai's blue back disappearing down the mountain. Wu waited and waited. Nainai did not come back. Wu leaned over the cliff to look for Nainai. Vertigo struck her. In her last attempt to peep downward, Wu fell. Her mind was

quicker than the falling. She quickly jabbed the knife in her hands onto the cliff and held onto the handle. She kept doing that like a cliff climber until she finally got to the mountain foot.

Nainai was nowhere to see. Spreading in front of Wu's eyes was a prairie. The prairie smelt warm, sweet, fragrant, and clean. The wheat was freshly green. Mustard flowers were blooming. Honeybees were humming and drinking nectar. When a breath of breeze came, the wheat grass, mustard flowers were nodding to the breeze, sending off streams of fragrance.

When Wu woke up, the fragrance still lingered in her nostrils.

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The gardenia, the honeysuckle, and the pomegranate were withering when Wu came back to the city. Although Gui watered the plants regularly, they gave up their wills to live. The cat disappeared again. Dog Brother lost his appetite. He starved for about a week and exhaled his final breath on a rainy morning. As usual, they pretended nothing had happened and mechanically followed their daily routine.

It took years for Wu to make up her mind. Once she decided, she was determined not to look back. She kept silent about her plan. Her memories of Gui's violent action were still fresh. Direct confrontation would only risk her

safety. Wu decided to take a different strategy—leave. From all the legal information she had gathered, she learned three years of separation would automatically guarantee her a divorce. Wu longed to move to a place where Gui's hands could not reach her, where nobody knew her, where she could hide, lick her wounds, and heal. Wu had always known she would go to a faraway place, but she had not imagined it happen this way. Unlike those who were enthusiastic about golden diplomas from abroad, Wu felt relieved but was not elated when she received her visa.

Her sleep had been troubled with dreams since she obtained her visa. She was always in the past in her dreams. The places she traveled alone in her dreams had lotus ponds, bamboo forests, tiled roofs, and rice fields. In her dreams she was with her parents, siblings, high school classmates and friends. She was with dead people—her grandparents and classmates and friends who died at a young age. "Why do they not let me go? Or is it I who do not want to let them go?" Wu pondered.

There was a dream that came back to Wu several times. It was always the same. Wu was traveling alone, having no plans before she went on her journey. She did not plan but follow. According to Nainai, one's future could not be planned; each individual is a feather; the wind would carry it to its destination; only by trusting and riding the wind could a person have peace of mind.

Night in the city was never dark with roadside lights. Her eyes felt the light even when they were closed. Only in darkness could she drift into sound sleep. She turned over to face the wall and tried to imagine she was still in that old house, the house that was even older than the one her parents built. It was a quadrangle which her grandparents shared with their two brothers' families. The room was as dark as charcoal at night, permeated with the scent of clay bricks, tiles, fir windows, rice straws under the bed mat, and the breath of her mother, little brother, and little sister. The darkness was so deep and intact that it wrapped her body in its entirety. She could see a constellation of stars in the colors of the rainbow swirling infinitely. Her body was stretched so thin by the darkness and the swirling stars that it dissipated; she became so light that she could float in the dark.

Old Man Jiang was fishing with a rod with no hook.

Yu Gong was knocking in a nail on the wall violently, accusing Wu of leaving him. Wu looked at him with a smile on her face, amused by his frustration. "I will hang the portrait of Yang Paifeng, the kitchen servant girl who became a commander, on the nail you are knocking in." She thought.

Sister was a white moth frozen in amber. When all relatives chatted in the house, the moth was transformed into a chubby girl toddler. The toddler looked like Minyi. Wu held her in her arms and took her outside the house to practice walking in the backyard where bamboos were swinging in the breeze. When Wu

let go of her hand, the girl changed into a moth and then transformed into a white bird. The bird flew away into the sky and disappeared where a giant purple lotus flower was opening up. Wu intended to give out a cry to alert all the relatives inside the house to the magic but could not open her mouth. Her first cousin saw her gesture. When she popped her head outside the door to follow Wu's gaze, the lotus flower vanished. In her dream, she also saw a bitter wood wardrobe painted in maroon. Mother wanted to sell it, but Wu disagreed. She persuaded Mother to keep it for her until she had her own house. "I will move the wardrobe to my house," she said.

Wu woke up with the rhythm of rain. Rain drops were patting the roof gently and firmly. Replaying her dream and listening to the rain, she felt a temporary relief. At least, last night she stopped dreaming of the dead.

Wu left Gui her bankbook and cell phone. She also left her books behind.

The plane was airborne. There would be no return.

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Seven years from Wu’s last visit to her hometown, Highway 106 was no longer a plan. The one- hundred-and-twenty-kilometers-long highway pierced straight into and through the land like a concrete sword until it reached the three rivers where the future Buddha seated. The land assigned to People’s Village had been sold to developers. People were told the land was on the map of an industrial district. Households would be relocated to a compound next to Highway 106. Despite the minimal compensation for each household, many people happily conformed. They were persuaded that the relocation meant a taste of semi-urban life, convenience of transportation, and opportunities to get rich. The leather market scandal was reevaluated and cleared up. The market was acclaimed as pioneer of the industrial district and praised by the county government for providing jobs for villagers who would soon become the new urban population.

Whole Heart and Whole Will had been collectively rented out to a contract farmer from Guangdong Province. Rumors had it he was going to grow economic mat grass and commercial medicinal herbs.

Riverside Village had been designated as the future suburban agricultural base to provide agricultural produce for the expanding city. Zhuo Ma and Jing Ru had a daughter. After Jing Ru’s mother passed away, they moved back to Bönri where

Zhuo Ma's father helped Jing Ru find a job on a team to restore temples. Xiaolin's son was admitted to a teacher's college. Yang Ru's son opened a hair saloon in town. Uncle Nong was invited to be the technical adviser for a navel orange grower. He loved the navel orange orchards in the mountains so much he decide to live there. When Aunt Nong visited him, she, too, decided to move there. Uncle Nong negotiated a five-year contract with the grower so they could have at least five years of mountain life. Aunt, maternal Big Uncle's wife, had joined Shangdi Hui (God's Association) in a neighboring village. She persuaded Mother to join. They offered free food, she said to Mother. Mother politely declined by claiming she did not have time. The real reason was Mother trusted the dark soil, her hand, and Father's loyal assistance more than anything else. That was her new faith for now. Mother had not seen the Peak of Emei Mountain for years, even on sunny days.

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