

nearby building, they'd save lots of money. They'd get their deposit back from their current landlord, and they could sell their excess furniture. Kristian, Elder Sister, Peter, and Bing would move into the hotel room, while Ah Mei and Ole would continue to stay with Ma only a few blocks away. In 1947, the four moved into the Weida Hotel on the corner of Avenue Joffre and Avenue du Roi Albert. It thrilled Bing to stand at the window and see the Cathay Theatre lit up in neon at night across the street.

Big, bright, and modern, the hotel had a shiny elevator with mirrors and elegant brass trim. Their room was only on the second floor, but Bing could keep three-year-old Peter entertained for hours by riding the elevator with him. The huge bathroom had white marble on the floors, walls, and sink counter. Elder Sister arranged the furniture to create sleeping and living areas. They brought a table and chairs from the old apartment and fashioned a small cooking area with a kerosene-burner hotplate. Elder Sister and Kristian slept in the big bed with Peter on a child's bed next to theirs. There was no room for Bing's cot.

Bing didn't mind going back to the bedroll on the floor. She liked the hotel. From their balcony, Bing could watch the bustling street scene below. In the evening, shiny cars driven by chauffeurs in white uniforms pulled up to the entrance. Bellboys with pillbox caps and white gloves rushed to open the car doors. It was fun to watch a silk-stockinged leg appear as a bejeweled woman emerged in a fitted, embroidered *qipao* or a flowing French gown. Dapper men with slicked-back hair offered their arms to the ladies before disappearing into the hotel.

Sometimes Bing joined Elder Sister and her friends at the hotel's dance club. Its sparkling lights and music performed by a Filipino band mesmerized. On special occasions, American Negro musicians were the headliners, drawing in the crowds as dancers floated across the smooth parquet floor. It was a magical sight, straight out of a Hollywood movie. Except the magic was right in front of her. So close, she could almost grab it.

CHAPTER

14

HO

Age 23

SHANGHAI, 1947

IN THE FIRST WEEKS OF MAY 1947, AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES mailed their admissions notices to prospective students for the fall. On May 22, Ho received letters of acceptance from both MIT and the University of Michigan for their doctoral mechanical engineering programs. He was ecstatic to be accepted by his top choices, especially knowing that every engineering graduate in China would have applied to both schools.

Ho couldn't decide which school to choose. The University of Michigan would be the less expensive alternative for his family, but MIT had the big name and reputation. As he prepared the documents to apply for his visa, he suddenly noticed that the letter from MIT had no signature. Ho went to the visa authorities to see if the unsigned letter would be accepted. Their answer was an unequivocal no. The hard decision was made for him—he would go to Michigan, home of the American automobile.

Forging ahead to make arrangements, Ho had no time to waste, for the conflict between the Nationalists and Communists was spiraling downward. At the start of the year in 1947, the American general George Marshall had made it clear that he had given up on his attempt to bring Chiang Kai-shek to the table with the Communists. Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai had agreed to talks, but Chiang had refused. General Mar-

shall announced that he was leaving China and pulling out most of the U.S. troops. The world war had ended two years before—now hundreds of thousands of American GIs across the globe, including those stationed in Shanghai, were mounting protests, demanding to be demobilized and sent home. Once the Americans pulled out of China, Chiang's Nationalists would be on their own against the Communists. There was no telling how the government might change its rules if the civil war exploded. Already, economic conditions had grown even more volatile.

After weeks of waiting, Ho received his passport and exit visa on July 19. With his doctoral program beginning in less than two months, he bought a one-way ticket for third-class passage on the American President Lines, the only company carrying passengers across the Pacific to the United States. The cost was 171 U.S. dollars, a large expense already but only a fraction of what his family would have to spend.

Those first postwar passenger crossings from Shanghai to San Francisco were made by two converted World War II troop transport ships, among the thousands built by Rosie the Riveters after Pearl Harbor: the USS *General M. C. Meigs* and USS *General Gordon*. Ho would sail on the *General Gordon*, departing August 24. After the sixteen-day voyage, he planned to take a train to Ann Arbor. He'd make it just in time for the start of school on September 13.

But Ho wouldn't let down his guard until he was on his way. Other students ran into problems that stopped them from leaving. Living just a few blocks from Ho, a McTyeire graduate named Lo-Lo Zhang Pan had cleared all the same hurdles as Ho: She had passed the national visa exam; been accepted for graduate studies at the University of Illinois College of Education; obtained her passport, visa, and ship's passage. Her suitcases were packed—but at the last minute, her father, a poor scholar, was unable to pull together the required amount of foreign exchange. Lo-Lo didn't make it onto the ship. Instead she wept with her parents over her lost opportunity to get an American graduate education—and to get away.

ON THE MORNING OF his departure, Ho went by taxi with his mother, brother, and uncles to the Shanghai Hongkou Wharf on Broadway. Ho



Ho, the number one graduate of his 1946 Jiao Tong University mechanical engineering class, commands front and center in the class photo.

was so excited that he had barely slept in days. The dock was already crowded when they arrived. After going through customs and leaving his bag on his bunk among the three hundred beds in his third-class deck, he returned to the dock and his family. By then, several of his classmates had arrived to see him off, joking and teasing, "Don't forget your old friends when you're the number one PhD in America!"

His family showered him with gifts: shirts, food for the trip, and five hundred thousand yuan—worth about thirteen U.S. dollars. When it was time to say goodbye, his mother clutched his arm and began to weep. Ho's brother gently pried his mother away. As they headed to the street, she kept looking back and calling out, "Ho, my son! Ho!"

Ho fought back his tears. "Mother called after me again and again, it made my heart break," he wrote in the brand-new journal that his sister had given him. "Yet I can't feel sad, because I'm in command of my future. My ten thousand-li journey has begun."

THE AMERICAN SHIP OFFERED Ho a first glimpse into his upcoming life in America. To cool off from the heat of the sticky August day, he took a shower—his first experience with such a contraption. Nearby was the water fountain—another first. After a few cautious sips, he quenched his thirst from this amazing device that dispensed a continuous stream of clean water—no boiling necessary. In the third-class dining room, he waited in a long but orderly line for servings of sausages, potatoes, carrots, rice, bread, fruits, tea—and sugar, a precious commodity in Shanghai. The unlimited quantities stunned him, especially the sugar. That night he jotted down a new American phrase: “All you can eat.”

With Ho, more than three hundred of China’s brightest young minds were heading to the United States to continue their educations. Like him, fifty-two were Jiao Tong University graduates, and thirty-three were headed to the University of Michigan. The students held meetings onboard to prepare for life in America, with topics ranging from transportation to their schools to dealing with American culture and cold Michigan winters. Ho attended all the meetings and volunteered to compile a list of everyone’s names to help them stay in touch once they scattered to their respective destinations.

The ocean voyage exposed Ho to another new concept: leisure. He’d brought along some books to study but barely opened them. Instead, he played bridge, watched movies, and spent time with new acquaintances. Most of the students were male, but several were female—including a lady professor. Ho had never gone to school with girls or women—and he was surprised to learn that they had big dreams for their educations too. At some point, Ho realized that he wasn’t practicing much English, in spite of the many American passengers and crew. “I could pass the entire voyage to America speaking only Chinese!” he wrote, resolving to start using more English. It was for this reason that the father of another Shanghai student, Ming Cho Lee, insisted that his son enroll at Occidental College in California—he feared that if his son went to school in the northeastern United States, he would spend his time mostly with other Chinese.

Ho, ever the engineer, eagerly explored the bowels of the ship to

understand its mechanics. He admired the genius of a vessel that could cut through the powerful waves as though gliding on ice. The vast beauty of the ocean, with its different hues of blue, gray, and black, mesmerized him.

When they reached the open sea, sick passengers began skipping meals. Ho, too, grew queasy, but he had paid for the meals and was determined to eat them all. He took careful notes on the Americans’ habits. He wondered why people would want to eat bread at every meal but then realized that the rice was just for the many Chinese passengers—it was the only item familiar to most of them. By week’s end, the students grew bored with the bland American food. One of Ho’s cabinmates groaned, “I miss Chinese food more than I miss my wife.”

One thing disturbed Ho: the vast quantities of wasted food. He thought of the starving beggars in Shanghai. “One would exclaim in astonishment at the amount of leftover food at every meal,” Ho wrote in his journal. “The leftovers are all dumped into the ocean, along with countless boxes and bottles.”

On day eleven, the ship docked in Honolulu. Ho couldn’t wait to step on land again. Before disembarking, all third-class passengers were assembled to play “Search for the Yellow Fish”—a hunt for stowaways—with no instructions on what to do if they found any. At the harbor, a huge crowd welcomed them, including representatives from the Consulate of China. After he’d posted his letters to his family, Ho and his friends took a tour of Honolulu. Most impressive to him was the courteous traffic on the smooth wide roads painted with lines. Motorists stopped briefly at intersections without a traffic cop, while pedestrians crossed the roads at spots designated by white lines. He questioned whether Shanghai’s teeming millions could ever be so orderly.

The California coastline came into view toward evening on day fifteen. After saying goodbyes and settling accounts with the purser, Ho joined the cheering crowd on deck as they passed under the dramatic arc of the Golden Gate Bridge. He thought that with all these talented students going to study in America, they should be able to build such bridges in China one day.

Ho entered San Francisco in the early morning of September 8,

1947. He was brimming with enthusiasm: "From this day forward, everything will be new: I will see what I have never seen and hear what I have never heard before," he wrote in his journal that night. "By learning from my new experiences, I will be able to accomplish much with my life."

IN SAN FRANCISCO, the shipmates went their separate ways. Back home, the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists was heating up. The stability that had allowed the students to exit Shanghai and to change their yuan to dollars peaceably had been a fleeting moment in time. Now the storm that had raged throughout Ho's youth threatened to explode with renewed fury. Ho and his fellow travelers were far away and unaware that they were at the front of a mass exodus soon to follow.

PART
THREE

EXODUS