

CHAPTER

18

HO

Age 23

ANN ARBOR, JUNE 1948

FROM THE MOMENT HO CHOW ARRIVED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF Michigan in September 1947 to pursue a PhD in engineering, his life in Ann Arbor had gone smoothly, *almost* without a hitch. Having met several other graduate students on his ship from Shanghai, Ho rented an apartment with five other Chinese students at 428 Cross Street, near the campus. Then it was every man for himself, since neither he nor any of his roommates had ever cooked or cleaned for themselves before.

Within a record time of nine months, Ho had completed all of the requirements for his master's degree, earning A-pluses in most of his courses. Though the classes were taught in English, he had managed, since the math and science provided a common language. His lowest grade was a single A-minus. He didn't brag or gloat—he expected excellence from himself and had applied the same laser focus since his middle school days in Shanghai.

Yet a nagging worry continued to threaten his years' worth of careful planning for graduate school and the car factory he hoped to build in China. Money—or more specifically, his family's difficulties in getting foreign exchange—could derail everything. As soon as he'd arrived, he'd opened a bank account with the one thousand U.S. dollars he'd brought from Shanghai, obtained after his family received spe-

cial permission to convert Chinese yuan into U.S. dollars. In theory, when his money ran low, his family would get another authorization certificate to convert yuan and to wire him dollars.

But according to his family's letters, it was getting more difficult and costly to exchange the needed funds. Back in 1946, before Ho had even applied to schools, for every one U.S. dollar, his family would have needed to convert about thirty-four hundred yuan. By the spring of 1947, one dollar cost fourteen thousand yuan. In 1948, a single U.S. dollar cost a million yuan on the black market. If he ran out of money, he'd be in serious trouble, because U.S. law prohibited foreign students from working. That was his biggest worry. That was why he'd pushed himself to complete his master's degree as soon as possible. It was his lack of money, not vanity about getting top grades, that compelled him. The sooner he finished, the sooner he'd end this vexing burden on his family.

Ho followed the routine that had stood him well in Shanghai, cutting a triangular path between his room, his classes, and the library. His daily fare consisted of boiled noodles with a few vegetables tossed in, fried pork chops, and eggs—without variation. His sole adventure was a visit to the nearby city of Ypsilanti, to see how cars were produced at the Willow Run auto plant. He didn't go to parties or dances. Dating was out of the question. There were too few female Chinese students—and the ones he knew were already spoken for. Michigan admitted more overseas Chinese students than other schools, but most were men. Still, on his transpacific voyage, Ho had enjoyed the company of a few women students. He knew that his mother would approve of those young ladies because they came from well-heeled families who could afford to send their daughters abroad.

Without any new Chinese women to meet, Ho's main pastime was fraternizing with the other Chinese engineering grad students—all male. They discussed ways of navigating school, America, and how to meet Chinese girls. Sometimes they gathered over a cheap dinner at a local Chinese restaurant serving "Chinese American cuisine." They all lamented that the Americanized food bore little resemblance to the home cooking they missed.

By far, their most frequent topic of discussion was the situation back home. Because American news carried little meaningful information about China, the students depended on letters from their families for updates, sharing what they learned with the group. Ho received so much mail that he was the envy of other students. Some weeks, he received several letters, each filled with family gossip and news of the rapidly declining political situation.

Ho's letters from home added fuel to his motivation to finish his doctoral program as swiftly as possible. His family often spoke of the extreme inflation and how difficult it was for them to pay for their essential needs, let alone to send U.S. dollars for his studies. His sister, Wanyu, wrote in 1948:

DEAR YOUNGER BROTHER,

THERE IS NO BIG NEWS FROM CHANGSHU, BUT INFLATION
HERE IS TERRIBLE, EVEN WORSE HERE THAN IN SHANGHAI.
LOTS OF THINGS ARE MORE EXPENSIVE. WE HAD TO RENT OUT
MORE LAND TO FARMERS. PRICES ARE RISING LIKE CRAZY.
PEOPLE LIVING ON FIXED WAGES CAN BARELY SURVIVE. . . .

As each letter from home underscored the mounting difficulties, Ho agonized over the strain he was placing on his family. He decided that he had to earn some money—in spite of being forbidden to do so by his visa restrictions. In the spirit of the Chinese proverb “Heaven is high and the emperor is far away,” Ho was certain he could find a solution that didn't exactly violate the rules. By carefully searching university bulletin boards and making inquiries of other students and professors, Ho learned of something called an “internship” that would give him practical experience with the university's approval. If he could find an internship that provided a stipend for his living expenses, he could save money by living cheaply, and it wouldn't be a prohibited *job* under Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) rules. Ho was thrilled to find such an elegant solution to his problem—worthy, he felt, of a clever Shanghainese. All he had to do was find a company to offer him such an internship.

Through his student network, Ho learned of a newly established company called China Motors, founded by Chinese American businessmen and funded by New York's Chinatown merchants. The company had opened a factory in Linden, New Jersey, just outside of New York City, to produce cars and other machines to be sold in China. It was the kind of company he'd dreamed of starting himself.

After writing to the company, Ho was overjoyed to receive an offer of an internship as an engineering trainee in the Production Engineering Department. He would assist with tool design and selection, plant operations, and blueprint controls, with a stipend for living expenses of \$180 per month. That was a huge amount by Chinese standards. He wrote to his family with the good news. Elder Brother Hosun, who lived at the family house in Shanghai, sent a letter in response that arrived soon after Ho's graduation:

10 JUNE 1948:

YOU'RE SO YOUNG AND BRIGHT. KEEP WORKING HARD—
DON'T LET US DOWN.

I'VE HEARD OF CHINA MOTOR COMPANY. IT'S GOOD FOR
YOU TO WORK THERE. YOU CAN BUILD A GOOD RELATIONSHIP
WITH THE CHINESE THERE AND GET TO KNOW LOTS OF
FOREIGN BIG SHOTS. WHEN YOU COME BACK, IT WILL ALL
COME TOGETHER.

IF YOU GO TO A FOREIGN FACTORY, BE CAREFUL IN CASE
THERE IS DISCRIMINATION AGAINST CHINESE OR POSSIBLE
PROBLEMS WITH THE IMMIGRATION BUREAU.

INFLATION IN CHINA IS VERY SERIOUS, LOTS OF INCREASES
EVERY DAY. THINGS FROM OVERSEAS ARE EVEN MORE
EXPENSIVE, SO SEND SOME SILK STOCKINGS. THE WEMBLEY
NECKTIES YOU SENT ME COST A LOT, SO I DON'T DARE TO
WEAR ONE OFTEN.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1948, with his master's diploma in hand, Ho left Michigan for New Jersey and quickly found a cheap room in Eliza-

beth, an old industrial city near Linden. It was a short bus ride down Route 1 to the factory.



After receiving his graduate degree from the University of Michigan in 1948, Ho started his dream internship with China Motors in Linden, New Jersey.

Ho eagerly started at China Motors, excited that it was near a giant General Motors auto assembly plant. His first project involved refrigeration units, not cars, that China Motors was contracted to produce. After living expenses and rent, Ho had about ten dollars a week to spare. From his first paycheck, he sent five dollars to his mother. She chastised him in her next letter, telling him to keep the money and to eat better.

The letters from home included requests to buy items for his family that he could ill afford. Ho shook his head at some of the requests. Do they think I'm rich because I'm making a little money in America? he wondered. The wish list included a wireless radio, a watch with a nightlight on the dial, silk stockings, a camera flash attachment, subscriptions to *Life* magazine for acquaintances, a microscope, a Rollei-flex camera, Botanaire ties, and a new needle for a phonograph.

To save more money, Ho found a cheaper rental. He didn't tell his family about the peeling paint in the dark hallways or the industrial soot and smell. The run-down area was depressing compared to the elegant buildings of Shanghai and even his attic room on Medhurst Road. He didn't mention that he was paring down his living situation to pay for the items he sent home along with the occasional five-dollar bill. The airmail postage took an additional bite, and he could never be sure that his parcels would reach his family.

Now that he was a bit less worried about money, Ho found the reports on the rapidly declining situation at home to be unnerving. His family regularly reported on conditions in frightening detail.

A letter dated July 6, 1948, from his brother-in-law living in Huainan, a city in Anhui Province about three hundred miles northwest of Shanghai, said:

THE COMMUNIST ARMY HAS TAKEN KAIFENG [AN ANCIENT CAPITAL OF CHINA, APPROXIMATELY FIVE HUNDRED MILES NORTHWEST OF SHANGHAI]. THE COMMUNISTS NOW USE ROCKET CANNONS, VERY DIFFERENT FROM BEFORE. THEY ALSO LET YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVE TO MAKE COMPARISONS IF THEY WISH TO GO TO THE NATIONALIST-CONTROLLED AREAS. MANY OF THOSE RELEASED STUDENTS BECOME PROPAGANDISTS FOR THE COMMUNIST PARTY. RIGHT NOW ONE U.S. DOLLAR IS WORTH ONE MILLION YUAN, SO YOUR PAY IS HIGHER THAN THAT OF THE OFFICIALS IN THE GOVERNMENT. IF YOU'RE ABLE TO STAY IN THE USA, YOU'RE VERY LUCKY.

Ho's sister added this note:

I'VE HAD TO RETURN TO CHANGSHU BECAUSE OUR HOUSE IN HUAINAN IS NOW OCCUPIED BY NATIONALIST SOLDIERS. I ASKED THEM TO LEAVE ME SOME SPACE IN MY OWN HOUSE BUT THEY WON'T. I'M SO ANGRY ABOUT THESE BAD NATIONALIST SOLDIERS. EVERYBODY HATES THEM. SOME EVEN WISH FOR ANOTHER WORLD WAR TO GET RID OF THEM.

The letters also detailed the many problems in exchanging Chinese yuan into U.S. dollars. It was necessary for Ho to first apply for the government in China to issue a certificate, which that office would send to him. Then he had to mail the certificate to his family in China, allowing them to exchange their money and wire U.S. dollars to him.

On July 12, 1948, his brother, Hosun, wrote:

I HAVE RECEIVED APPROVAL FOR THE FOREIGN EXCHANGE APPLICATION, SO I CAN EXCHANGE THE MONEY VERY SOON. BUT ACCORDING TO THE NEWSPAPER, THE NEW PROCEDURES FOR FOREIGN EXCHANGE SALES ISSUED BY THE ADMINISTRATION ARE VERY DIFFICULT, AND THE RATE IS NOT THAT GOOD. I'VE TOLD MOTHER ABOUT THE SITUATION, AND WE WILL TRY OUR BEST TO GET MONEY TO YOU. IN THE FUTURE YOU CAN REPAY US SINCE IT'S A LOT OF MONEY.

This was the first time that Ho's family mentioned the need for him to repay them. That had always been his intention, but with the exchange rate now increasing to about 4 million yuan per dollar, his brother wanted to make that expectation perfectly clear. On the black market, the rate was even more shocking, about twice the official rate. By prevailing on their tenants for the rent, Ho's mother gathered more than 2.5 billion yuan to exchange, but even that wasn't enough to send him another one thousand U.S. dollars to cover his anticipated tuition.

Two weeks later, on July 30, 1948, Ho's brother wrote:

THE STRIKE IN OUR AREA HAS BEEN SETTLED, AND THE BASIC SALARIES ARE BEING ADJUSTED TO THE COST OF LIVING AND THE RAPID INFLATION. I WILL GET PAID ONE HUNDRED MILLION YUAN, AND THAT WILL BARELY SUPPORT MY FAMILY. IF I EXCHANGE THE YUAN ON THE BLACK MARKET, MY SALARY IS FIFTEEN U.S. DOLLARS PER MONTH.

Soon came the news Ho had hoped never to hear: The civil war had arrived at his family's doorstep in Changshu. Twenty thousand Na-

tionalist troops were billeted in his hometown and were eying the Chow family home. In spite of the frightening news, his mother reassured him: "Don't worry; if it isn't safe here, we will leave. Stay happy always, Mother." Ho was more worried than ever.

A letter of August 10, 1948, from Hosun described the disastrous efforts of Chiang Ching-kuo, the generalissimo's son, to solve the terrible inflation in Shanghai:

THE CURRENT SITUATION MAY IMPROVE, BECAUSE THE NATIONALIST GOVERNMENT SAYS THAT AMERICAN REINFORCEMENTS WILL COME SOON. THE NATIONALISTS [UNDER CHIANG CHING-KUO] ARE ISSUING SOME NEW ECONOMIC REFORMS. THE GOVERNMENT WANTS TO TAKE CONTROL OF ALL THE GOLD FROM ALL THE PEOPLE FOR THE STATE, AND THEY SAY THAT THEY WILL REFORM THE CURRENCY.

OUR NATIONALIST ARMY IS TRYING TO KILL THE COMMUNIST BANDITS, BUT THE SITUATION IS NERVE-RACKING BECAUSE WE LOST KAIFENG AND WE ARE LOSING THE IMPORTANT CAPITALS [OF THREE PROVINCES]. THE ECONOMY CAN'T STABILIZE WHILE THE MILITARY SITUATION DETERIORATES.

As the Nationalist government spiraled out of control, Ho's family sent him a flurry of anxious letters about Chiang Ching-kuo's economic reforms and currency adjustments that forced citizens to turn in their savings of gold, silver, foreign currency, and old yuan. Like others in Shanghai, the Chow family faced the agonizing decision of whether or not to comply.

A letter from Ho's mother dated August 14, 1948, said:

HO, MY SON, YOU NEEDN'T SEND MONEY TO US, THOUGH I AM STILL NOT CONFIDENT ABOUT BEING ABLE TO COLLECT OUR RENT. YOU SHOULD JUST KEEP IT. DON'T WORRY TOO MUCH FOR ME; I CAN LIVE A SIMPLE LIFE. YOU MUST BE WORKING VERY HARD. PLEASE DO TAKE CARE, AND TRY TO EAT WELL.

In a letter of August 16, 1948, Hosun wrote:

THE FOREIGN EXCHANGE FINALLY CAME THROUGH, AND I HAVE CONVERTED NINE HUNDRED DOLLARS OF U.S. CURRENCY THIS MORNING. I'LL SEND THE MONEY TO YOUR ADDRESS IN ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN. IT ISN'T POSSIBLE TO SEND THE MONEY TO YOUR FACTORY. THE SITUATION HERE IS REALLY BAD; THE COST OF LIVING IS GETTING HIGHER AND HIGHER. INDUSTRY AND COMMERCE CAN'T FUNCTION ANYMORE.

Another letter from Hosun, dated September 4, 1948, said:

DID YOU RECEIVE THE USD? SINCE THE AUGUST 19 CURRENCY REFORMS BY CHIANG CHING-KUO, INDIVIDUALS ARE PROHIBITED TO HAVE GOLD OR U.S. DOLLARS. PEOPLE ARE RUNNING TO THE BANKS TO WITHDRAW THEIR MONEY. THE CROWDS ARE ENORMOUS! ALL THIS INSTABILITY IS DRIVING PRICES HIGHER AND HIGHER, AND PEOPLE ARE PANIC BUYING. CHIANG CHING-KUO IS ARRESTING THE SPECULATORS AND BAD BUSINESSMEN, BUT PEOPLE DON'T TRUST THE NEW CURRENCY SYSTEM.

A letter dated September 9, 1948, from Wanyu, who was staying with their mother in Changshu, reported:

WE'VE LOST HALF OF OUR COTTON HARVEST BECAUSE OF HEAVY RAINS. MOTHER IS WORRIED ABOUT IT. I TRY TO COMFORT HER, BUT DON'T WORRY TOO MUCH. MOTHER IS CONCERNED THAT YOU WILL WANT TO CONTINUE WITH YOUR EDUCATION AND THEN WE WILL NEED TO SEND MORE MONEY TO YOU. WE ARE NOT SURE IF WE WILL HAVE ENOUGH, BECAUSE OUR INCOME THIS YEAR IS BAD. WE ARE WORRIED. MOTHER'S TEMPER IS LIKE A HOT PEPPER THESE DAYS, SO I TOLD HER YOU HAVE A SCHOLARSHIP TO MAKE HER FEEL BETTER.

On October 10, 1948, his brother-in-law in Huainan wrote:

THE SITUATION IS WORSE THAN BEFORE. PEOPLE ARE AFRAID AND THE NATIONALISTS ARE LOSING THE CITIES ONE BY ONE. IT'S GETTING DANGEROUS AND DIFFICULT BECAUSE THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE ARE OUT OF WORK AFTER THE LATEST DEFEATS. YOU GUYS WHO LIVE ABROAD ARE INCREDIBLY LUCKY.

THE TWO STREAMS OF THE COMMUNIST ARMY IN THE NORTH ARE A BIG THREAT TO THE NATIONALISTS, BUT NOT MANY PEOPLE ARE FLEEING YET. ON THE ONE HAND, IT IS HARD TO EARN A LIVING IN ANOTHER PLACE. ON THE OTHER, MAYBE THE COMMUNIST PARTY ISN'T AS BAD AS THE JAPANESE. THE NATIONALISTS SPREAD A LOT OF PROPAGANDA, AND EVERYONE KNOWS THERE'S A BIG DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEIR WORDS AND THE TRUTH. BUT WITH ALL THIS CONFUSION, ORDINARY PEOPLE WILL SURELY LOSE EVERYTHING THAT ISN'T ATTACHED TO THEIR BODIES.

On October 22, 1948, Hosun reported from Shanghai:

THE GOVERNMENT HAS TAKEN SO MUCH GOLD AND FOREIGN CURRENCY FROM THE PEOPLE. IT ALSO RAISED THE TAXES FOR CIGARETTES AND ALCOHOL, SO NOW THE PANIC BUYING IS EVEN WORSE. THE CHEAPEST ITEM IN THE WHOLE CITY IS A TICKET TO THE MOVIES: IT'S ONLY 0.4 YUAN TO GET INTO THE GRAND THEATRE. THE MOST EXPENSIVE ITEM IS A PEDICAB—THE GOVERNMENT CAN'T LIMIT WHAT THE DRIVERS CHARGE. CURRENCY REFORM MAY JUST BE AN EMPTY DREAM. WE WISH YOU COULD COME HOME AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, BUT THE SITUATION IS REALLY, REALLY BAD. MANY PEOPLE HAVE DIED IN THE BATTLES THAT THE GOVERNMENT LOST. IN MY OPINION, THE COMMUNIST BANDITS ARE GETTING STRONGER AND STRONGER, AND IT IS NOT SAFE IN SHANGHAI.

EACH LETTER'S DISTRESS ENGULFED Ho in a new tempest, pulling him down and sending him gulping for air. He struggled to stay focused on his work—what else could he do? As the Nationalist government sank deeper into the abyss, he and his coworkers at China Motors despaired over a possible devastating battle and revolution that could destroy Shanghai and everyone in it. The frenzied exodus from China—and from Shanghai in particular—had begun in earnest. As time went on, Ho's family wrote that they, too, were considering an escape.

In a December 10, 1948, letter, Hosun wrote:

IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE I SENT YOU A LETTER. HOW ARE YOU DOING? DO YOU MISS HOME? THERE'S A LOT TO TELL YOU ABOUT THE WAR. THE SITUATION IN CENTRAL CHINA IS VERY GRIM. THE NATIONALISTS SEEM TO LOSE EVERY BATTLE AND WILL BE DEFEATED BY THE RED BANDITS SOON. BEIJING, SHANGHAI, AND THE CAPITAL ARE IN DANGER, SO THE SITUATION IS SCARY, AND LOTS OF PEOPLE ARE CONSIDERING LEAVING. THERE ARE HUGE NUMBERS OF REFUGEES ON TRAINS AND BUSES. IT'S SO CONGESTED, I CAN'T EVEN DESCRIBE IT. THE PRESENT MILITARY CAMPAIGN IS FOCUSED ON HUAI-HAI [A REGION NORTH OF THE YANGTZE RIVER]. BOTH ARMIES HAVE LOST MORE THAN EIGHT HUNDRED THOUSAND LIVES; IT'S THE MOST TRAGIC SLAUGHTER IN OUR COUNTRY. THE FUTURE BODES ILL FOR THE NATIONALISTS. MAYBE THE CIVIL WAR WILL LAST SEVERAL MONTHS BECAUSE THE BANDITS HAVE LOTS OF SUPPLIES. MAYBE THE NATIONALIST AIR FORCE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

I HAVE MADE MY DECISION TO STAY IN SHANGHAI UNLESS IT GETS REALLY, REALLY BAD. STAYING TILL THE END CAN'T BE WORSE THAN BECOMING A REFUGEE. MANY RELATIVES HAVE MOVED IN WITH US. I HEARD THAT THE BANKS AND GOVERNMENT BUREAUS IN SHANGHAI ARE ALL SHIPPING IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS OUT. THE WHOLE SITUATION IS

TERRIBLY BAD. WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR US SHANGHAINESE PEOPLE? I THINK THERE IS LOTS OF BITTERNESS AHEAD.

On December 11, 1948, Wanyu wrote:

THERE HAVE BEEN LOTS OF RUMORS IN CHANGSHU IN THE LAST FEW DAYS. PEOPLE'S HEARTS ARE WEIGHING WHETHER TO FLEE OR TO STAY. LOTS OF PEOPLE IN OUR PROVINCE ARE RUNNING TO SHANGHAI, WHILE THE RICH PEOPLE IN SHANGHAI ARE RUNNING TO HONG KONG, TAIWAN, OR EVEN TO AMERICA. MOTHER AND I HAVEN'T LEFT CHANGSHU YET. IT'S NOT BECAUSE WE AREN'T SCARED, BUT (1) WE HAVE PROPERTY IN OUR HOMETOWN; (2) IT'S VERY EXPENSIVE TO MOVE OUR BIG FAMILY TO ANOTHER CITY; (3) I AM HOPING TO FIND A JOB IN SHANGHAI; (4) MY HUSBAND IS WORKING IN NANJING TEMPORARILY. HE MAY HAVE A CHANCE TO GO TO TAIWAN, BUT THE ODDS ARE SLIM.

As 1948 came to a close, the letters from Ho's family continued to chronicle the last gasps of Chiang Kai-shek's army and government. In the northeast, the Communists surrounded two Nationalist armies that had retreated to the city of Changchun, laying siege to the walled city for months, starving an estimated 100,000 soldiers and 150,000 civilians to death and forcing those remaining to surrender. At the same time, the Communists had gained the support of millions of farmers by promising land reform—to redistribute the acreage from rich landlords to poor farm families. The Red Army, now called the People's Liberation Army, had killed or captured more than a million Nationalist troops, taking critical firepower from the defeated army's tanks, heavy artillery, ammunition, and other weaponry, much of it from the United States. Hundreds of thousands of Nationalist troops, from foot soldiers to generals, were defecting to the Communists. Replenished, the Communists were ready to advance south to the Yangtze River and the city of Shanghai.

Ho's heart sank as he imagined the soldiers bivouacked in the Chow family compound, helping themselves to whatever they wanted. He

could picture the panicked buying sprees and bank runs in Shanghai, workers getting paid and then rushing out to buy anything they could grab that would hold its value better than the near-worthless paper money. Most of all, he could feel his family's pain as the Nationalist government continually raised taxes on everything, on top of the sky-high inflation. He knew that it would be impossible for his family to send him more money.

The troubles back home meant that Ho's internship was more important than ever. As much as his heart ached for his family, Ho needed to focus on learning how to take an engineer's design into production, from blueprints and machining the tool-and-die works to producing a finished product. Together with some other engineers, he built a prototype of a simple car, a three-wheeled motorized vehicle that could be mass-produced in China. Inside the immense industrial building that housed China Motors, Ho and his colleagues drove around in their little car. They nicknamed it "the Playboy."

When Ho wrote home, he kept his letters upbeat to assure his family that he was fine. There was no point in adding to their concerns when he was safe in America and they were facing disaster. He painted a rosy picture of the factory, its prospects for business, and his experience of building a prototype car. He was making progress, he averred, toward his dream of opening a factory of his own. As often as he could, he'd send a five-dollar bill to his mother along with photos of himself at the factory or in New York City.

But in fact all was not good at China Motors. The company was relying on Chinatown merchants in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco to fund its vision of selling manufactured goods to markets in China. With the Nationalist economy in a nosedive, the business model was collapsing, and investors were abandoning the venture.

For Ho, the first sign of the company's troubles came when payroll was delayed by a week in early December. Then the paychecks stopped completely. Without his stipend, Ho couldn't pay his rent. He quit his rental and moved into the cavernous factory, where he slept on an old couch in the frigid, unheated building.

The new year began with Ho caught in his own crisis, while the

economic turmoil in Shanghai was so desperate that his sister and brother were advising their mother to sell some of the family's land. In the countryside, the growing land reform movement in Communist-influenced areas made it difficult to collect rent from tenant farmers as well as harder to find buyers for their choice farmland. More relatives from the extended Chow family in Changshu had moved to the house in Shanghai, all crammed together. No longer able to afford domestic help, they let their servants go. Even more shocking, one of Ho's uncles, a big landlord, had killed himself, unable to bear the pressures of the Communists' land reform measures. Chairman Mao had declared landlords to be the class enemies of the peasant farmers.

Other students in Ho's circle shared letters telling of mass meetings in rural farm areas that targeted rich landlords. In Communist-liberated areas, landlords were being "liquidated" in the name of land reform and their confiscated land redistributed. Norwegian missionaries observed landlords and other targets being severely beaten, tortured, sent off as beggars, with a death sentence for anyone offering them aid. Some reports estimated that one in six landlord families had had at least one family member killed in these political movements as the Communists gained strength in northern China. Ho realized that none of this could bode well for his family.

Then Hosun wrote on January 1, 1949:

PLEASE IMMEDIATELY SEND NINE HUNDRED U.S. DOLLARS TO US OR AS MUCH AS YOU CAN DEPENDING ON YOUR SITUATION. MOTHER AND I ARE ANXIOUS DAY AND NIGHT. THIS TIME IT'S THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAS ASKED FOR MORE TAXES. IF WE DON'T PROVIDE IT, WE COULD BE ARRESTED.

Ho's brother wanted back the nine hundred dollars that he had sent only a few months earlier. Ho had been counting on that money for his doctoral studies, but he knew that his family must have been desperate to ask for it back—especially when their losses in transaction fees would be doubled. Scrambling to find out how to send money to his family in Shanghai, Ho followed the advice of his Chinese

colleagues—he wired the U.S. dollars to his family via the Xinhua Bank in Shanghai, for conversion into Hong Kong dollars. He sent all that he had.

By early 1949 the great flight out of Shanghai was in full swing—industrialists, intellectuals, businesspeople, the middle and affluent classes, Nationalist loyalists, foreigners, landlords, missionary converts, Eurasians, the frightened and the anxious. Those who lived in the rural countryside headed to regional cities, where they felt they would be more secure from advancing soldiers. Meanwhile, those in the provincial cities with the means to reach Shanghai fled there, hoping to find safety in its large numbers, and of course those in Shanghai with a reason to fear the Communists were rushing to get out of China. Everyone was looking to escape to a safer place. Ho's family, with its large landholdings, would undoubtedly encounter the wrath of revolution. Yet it was still unthinkable that a peasant army could take control of a city like Shanghai, let alone all of China.

Ho felt utterly helpless, unable to do anything to assist his family and struggling to sort out his own tangle of problems. To maintain his student visa status, he needed to be enrolled at a university, especially since his internship at China Motors was in trouble. He made an urgent appeal to the University of Michigan for a fellowship to continue his studies, but immediate funds weren't available. He frantically began to search for alternative schools that could enroll him and sponsor his visa. Desperate, he persuaded a mechanical engineering professor at New York University to take him on as a doctoral student. Ho would receive no financial aid, but he had just enough cash from his internship to register. At least he'd keep his student visa and not face deportation.

Amid this swirl of uncertainty, Ho learned that on January 21, 1949, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek was forced to resign from the presidency of the Nationalist government, ceding his title to a political rival, General Li Zongren. The news was a shocking confirmation that Chiang's military was in retreat and his government doomed. His resignation was headlined on the front page of *The New York Times*: CHIANG RELINQUISHES POST.

Ho and his fellow students were so unnerved that they conferred

daily to glean any information that might help them piece together what was happening to their own families. The tectonic shifts back home were so stunning that Ho's hands shook whenever a thin blue aerogram arrived.

With Chiang's resignation, Communist leader Mao Zedong temporarily ceased fire, attempting to reach a settlement with the new president, General Li. But Chiang still held the real control of the government and its treasury. With little power and no money to pay his soldiers or officials, Li was in no position to bargain. His peace talks with Mao failed, and the Communist advance toward the Yangtze River continued.

On January 22, 1949, the day after Chiang Kai-shek resigned from the presidency, China Motors shut down. Ho was owed more than a month's back pay. He was not only out of work; he was homeless.

ALL HIS LIFE, HO HAD relied on his mother, elder sister, and brother to make the important decisions for him, to guide him on what to do. Should he rejoin his family in Shanghai? At least then they'd be together in this disastrous time. Where in America could he find help? Ho turned to the list of Jiao Tong students that he had volunteered to compile on his transpacific voyage just sixteen months earlier, when his future had seemed so bright. This social network of Jiao Tong alumni was becoming a lifeline for students like him who were caught up in China's upheaval. He contacted some Jiao Tong graduates in the Morningside Heights neighborhood of Manhattan near Columbia University, an area popular with former residents of Shanghai and northern China. They offered him a place on the floor of their small apartment on West 114th Street, just as families had done in wartime China. Ho gratefully accepted.

At the same time, Ho needed cash to support himself, as well as to answer his family's request for money. But he was torn. He had come to America with the expectation of returning with a PhD. Wasn't his family depending on him to accomplish that goal? Ho had penned a letter with his conflicted feelings and his questions to his mother, asking if he should continue working toward an engineering PhD, keep

working in America, or possibly return home. Even with her world collapsing around her, Ho's mother sent an immediate reply.

In a letter dated January 23, 1949, Ho's mother wrote:

SON, YOU ASKED WHETHER YOU SHOULD GO FOR FURTHER EDUCATION OR FIND A JOB. IT IS GOOD FOR YOU TO WORK. FURTHER EDUCATION IS NOT THAT URGENT. WE DON'T KNOW WHETHER WE CAN DO THE FOREIGN EXCHANGE ANYMORE. IT IS SCARY TO LOOK TO THE FUTURE NOW. WE ARE QUITE PESSIMISTIC. DON'T PLAN TO COME BACK. ONE DAY WHEN THE SITUATION IS SAFE, YOU CAN RETURN.

At the end of his mother's letter, Ho's brother had scribbled a somber postscript:

WHEN YOU RECEIVE THIS LETTER, WE DON'T KNOW WHERE WE'LL BE. EVERYTHING IS CHANGING RAPIDLY. THIS IS A TRULY CATASTROPHIC TIME, AND WE DON'T KNOW WHAT LIES AHEAD. WE SHOULD EACH TAKE CARE OF OURSELVES. I HOPE WE CAN MEET AGAIN SOMEDAY.

Ho felt as if his blood were draining from his body as he read his family's messages. Would he see them again? Was his brother saying goodbye? Tears welled up in his eyes. What should he do? What *could* he do? Every instinct in his body said to rush home, to be with his family, and to comfort the mother who had always sacrificed for him. But his mother had told him not to come back. Ho agonized over his impossible choice.

He learned that a hundred or so students were trying to return to China: Some wanted to go home to reunite with their spouses and children; others had run out of money and thought they'd be better off in Shanghai; still others wished to join the Communists to rebuild their homeland. His few acquaintances in this latter group seemed motivated more by their zeal to aid the long-suffering Chinese people than by any love of Communist ideology. None of those rationales were compelling to Ho, but they added to the churn within him as he lay on the floor

of the crowded apartment, unable to sleep. One night he realized, with a start, that he'd begun to rely on himself as he forged a life in America.

DESPERATE FOR MONEY, Ho heard that other China Motors employees had hired a lawyer to get their unpaid wages. He, too, filed a claim, for back wages of \$312. He followed his mother's advice and decided not to return to the University of Michigan to complete his doctorate, even though he'd been surprised to learn that he'd receive a fellowship after all. That came too late; he had already decided to register with New York University as its first mechanical engineering doctoral student. Ho figured that New York was a better place to be during this crisis, since he'd be less isolated and might find a job more readily there.

Ho's other vexing worry was how to maintain his student visa status when he couldn't pay for tuition. If he messed up with immigration authorities, he could face deportation. Unsure of what to do, he wrote to the INS office in Detroit, telling them of China Motors' collapse and his enrollment at NYU with the possibility of a return to Michigan one day. He didn't mention that he was looking for work or that he was suing China Motors as his former employer, which could also get him in trouble with the INS.

After several nervous weeks, Ho landed a part-time job thanks to his Jiao Tong University network. Lin Yutang, the renowned Chinese intellectual in New York whose popular books on China were acclaimed in America, was looking for a clever engineer to help him design a Chinese typewriter. Ho got the job at two hundred dollars per month—a welcome increase from his stipend at China Motors. Now that he had an income, Ho rented an apartment with some friends at 620 West 115th Street, still in the Columbia University neighborhood where many other Chinese lived.

By April 1949, the Communists had swept over Beijing and Tianjin, unstoppable in their drive southward. Much to Ho's surprise and relief, the news reported that no looting or mass destruction had occurred in those big cities. Even so, the panicked exodus from Shanghai swelled to epic proportions. Every petty official seemed to find an ex-

cuse to use official transport out of the city. Shanghai's American-educated mayor, K. C. Wu, who had previously urged calm, announced his own sudden illness requiring treatment outside of China—and that he was unlikely to return.

Ho received word that his sister and her husband were on the run somewhere to the west of Shanghai in Anhui Province. They had managed to send a hasty letter to Ho while fleeing from Communist troops in a desperate effort to find a passage to Taiwan. Their stark message, dated April 2, 1949, read:

DO NOT COME BACK TO CHINA. THE SITUATION IS REALLY BAD. ARE YOU GETTING ACCURATE REPORTS IN AMERICA? NORTH OF THE YANGTZE RIVER, THE COMMUNIST PARTY IS EVERYWHERE. WHAT HAPPENED IN NORTHEAST CHINA IS REALLY SHOCKING. THE NATIONALISTS' STRONGEST ARMIES—THE NEW FIRST ARMY AND THE NEW SIXTH ARMY—COULDN'T DEFEAT THE COMMUNISTS. IF THE AMERICANS DON'T HELP, I'M SURE THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL COLLAPSE IMMEDIATELY. IT IS BEYOND OUR WILDEST IMAGINATION.

THE NATIONALIST GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN LYING TO THE PEOPLE BY PRETENDING THAT THE SITUATION IS GOOD. THEY HELD A LEGISLATIVE SESSION AS THOUGH ALL IS NORMAL, AND THEY EVEN ELECTED A NEW PRESIDENT. IT'S SUCH A PRETENSE, LIKE THE END OF THE SONG DYNASTY IN HANGZHOU. GREAT PARTS OF THE COUNTRY ARE LOST, AND THEY STILL PRETEND THAT EVERYTHING IS OKAY. WE WILL NOT BENEFIT FROM THE COMMUNISTS, BECAUSE WE ARE LANDOWNERS AND PETITE BOURGEOISIE.

Don't go back? How could he stand by in safety when his beloved family and everything he held dear was on the brink of destruction? Ho could only share his worries with his fellow students, meeting up with them at every opportunity to discuss the latest news published by China correspondents and newswire reporters. Ho was glad that he had decided to stay in New York where there were many other stu-

dents in his situation. At least he could always find a *New York Times*, with its frequent coverage of China's crisis.

On April 21, 1949, the People's Liberation Army crossed the Yangtze River, the vast natural barrier that had kept hostile armies away from the prosperous southeastern region for centuries. No longer. Two days later, there was worse news: The Communists had seized Nanjing, the Nationalist capital. Government officials had already fled the country—in spite of public vows that they would make Shanghai "their Stalingrad" with an all-out defense.

By month's end, the Nationalists were so afraid that the ordinary people of Shanghai could turn against them with riots to protest the worthless yuan, the food shortages, and their inability to govern, that they mounted machine guns on top of the city's landmark skyscrapers, turrets pointed at the residents below. Raw recruits in full field gear stormed through the fine restaurants of the Park and Cathay Hotels, startling guests who were dining and setting up their billets inside the luxurious hotels. Other soldiers were so awed by the elevators at the Broadway Mansions, home to many foreign reporters, that they rode up and down for hours, refusing to get off for the residents.

More frightening was the action on the streets as Nationalist soldiers summarily executed dissenters, black marketers, and suspected Communists right on major downtown sidewalks and intersections, including outside the American Club as the lunchtime crowd watched. Nationalist troops dug foxhole trenches at the Bund's Public Garden next to the British consulate in anticipation of the coming battle.

To Ho, each day's news was more unsettling. He worried constantly about his mother or brother getting struck by a stray Nationalist bullet or trampled at the market, if they had money to buy anything at all. By mid-May, embassies issued final warnings to evacuate for Americans, British, and other foreign nationals, while Operation Flying Dragon airlifted Shanghai Jews to Canada. The Nationalist police in Shanghai were using martial law to clamp down hard on those who remained. With the government's arrests and executions, requisitions of property, tight censorship on local and foreign reporters, and destruction of villages and homes, many were more afraid of the Nationalists than the Communists.

On the night of May 24, the residents of Shanghai climbed onto rooftops to watch the sky light up with missiles and firepower aimed at the Bund by Communists in Pudong. The *New York Times* headline of May 25, 1949, brought the news that Ho dreaded: "Red Troops Enter Shanghai, Seize West, Central Areas; Nationalist Forces Flee."

HO HAD NEVER FELT so unhinged. Like their fellow Chinese students throughout the United States, Ho and his friends gathered together, seeking comfort from one another as they scoured the papers and radio reports, parsing each word as though that could help them comprehend the magnitude of this "liberation" and its impact on their families, their country, and themselves.

In Shanghai, the Communists hastened to announce that life would go on in the city—business as usual. To slow the brain drain and flight of capital, to calm the wealthy and middle classes who had not yet fled, the Communist Central Committee announced a policy of "evolution, not revolution" to make the "rational reforms" they envisioned sound less drastic and frightening.

Many of Ho's fellow students were overjoyed that the Nationalists had been driven out. Chinese students in America were well aware of the Nationalists' corruption and had little sympathy for the retreating army. They believed that a new dawn was breaking for the beleaguered Chinese people. But Ho remained skeptical. Influenced by his elder brother's and sister's opinionated letters about the shifting political winds, he knew it was safest to steer clear of politics and politicians. In spite of their criticism of the Nationalists, his family had stood with the old regime. His brother-in-law had worked for the Nationalists as an engineer—and, having heard nothing from his sister in some time, Ho could only hope that her family had made it to Taiwan.

Most maddening of all, Ho hadn't received a single letter from anyone in his family for several weeks, during the worst of the turmoil. It was the same for the other students. Those with extra money tried wiring relatives in Hong Kong or Singapore, grasping for any bit of information, sharing their news, as they all longed to learn the fate of their families.

A few weeks after Shanghai fell, a thin blue letter finally arrived for Ho. It was from his brother and dated June 9, 1949, two weeks after the Communists had taken over the city. Ho realized with a shock that this letter from his brother was quite different. The handwriting was Hosun's, but the tone was unfamiliar. For one, he no longer referred to the Communists as "bandits," as he always had before. Ho had to wonder if someone had dictated the letter:

MY DEAR BROTHER:

THERE IS LIBERATION HERE. AFTER LISTENING TO THE SOUND OF GUNSHOTS THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE NIGHT OF MAY 24, SHANGHAI WAS LIBERATED. WE ARE FINE, JUST A LITTLE FRIGHTENED. MANY ESTATES NEAR HONGQIAO HAVE BEEN DESTROYED. STORES, FACTORIES, AND BANKS HAVE ALL REOPENED, BUT BUSINESS IS BAD.

EVERYTHING IS UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF THE "MILITARY CONTROL COMMITTEE." I DON'T KNOW THE FUTURE NOW. WE ARE TRYING OUR BEST TO LIVE OUR LIVES. THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY HAS REALLY GOOD PRINCIPLES, AND THEY HAVE THE SPIRIT OF WORKING HARD. NOW THE WHOLE COUNTRY FEELS LIKE BUILDING THE COUNTRY AFTER THE WAR. I THINK IT'S GOOD.

OUR HOMETOWN, CHANGSHU, HAS BEEN LIBERATED FOR TEN DAYS. IT'S GOOD THERE TOO. SECOND AND THIRD UNCLES ARE IN CHANGSHU. YESTERDAY ANOTHER UNCLE CAME TO SHANGHAI AND SAID HE WANTED TO CONTRIBUTE A LARGE AMOUNT OF RICE TO THE COMMUNIST PARTY. MOTHER IS HAPPY NOWADAYS, SO YOU TAKE GOOD CARE. YOU KNOW OUR PEOPLE'S GOVERNMENT CHERISHES THE PEOPLE WITH TECHNICAL SKILLS. DON'T WORRY ABOUT COMING BACK. I KNOW FROM YOUR FORMER LETTER THAT YOU GOT A SCHOLARSHIP. I'M VERY HAPPY FOR YOU. YOU CAN DECIDE FOR YOURSELF WHETHER TO STAY IN NEW YORK OR TO RETURN TO MICHIGAN. OUR SISTER AND HER HUSBAND ARE IN TAIWAN; I CAN'T REACH THEM FROM SHANGHAI. CAN YOU

TELL THEM HELLO FROM ME? MOTHER IS HEALTHY AND THE
KIDS STILL THINK OF YOU.

Ho's world was spinning out of control. Had his brother had a change of heart, or was he too afraid to write the truth? Ho hadn't heard from his mother and didn't know the whereabouts of his sister. His entire network of Chinese students was seized by panic, everyone asking themselves the same nervous questions. Where were their families? Were they safe? Should they return to China? If they stayed in America, how could they survive?

With so many questions and so little information, Ho felt stymied, stuck. He was a man of science, not a soothsayer. But one thing seemed clear: Whatever path he chose would determine his future in ways that he couldn't anticipate or fathom.

CHAPTER

19

BENNY

Age 21

SHANGHAI, MAY 1949

ALL THROUGH THE SPRING OF 1949, SHANGHAI HAD BEEN in a state of imminent apocalypse. Even at the insular St. John's campus, Benny was on heightened alert, awaiting the presumed Communist takeover of the city. Any Americans and foreign nationals who had not yet evacuated received "last chance" warnings from their governments. But not everyone at St. John's was disheartened by the turn of events. It was an open secret that his campus, like many others, had underground Communists and sympathizers among its students, even those from wealthy families. Those hidden Communists didn't dare reveal themselves, knowing they'd face summary execution.

Still, the biggest concern in Shanghai was not the Red Army's approach but the crippled economy. Life for the city's six million residents had grown increasingly harsh under the rigid martial law imposed after the Nationalists' string of defeats. A strict curfew prohibited going outside for any reason between 6:00 P.M. and 6:00 A.M., whether to tend to a sick family member or to get some hot water from the corner tiger stove. Violators could be shot. Shanghai's famed nightlife ground to a standstill, further sinking the economy. Only Nationalist soldiers were out past curfew—which gave necessary cover for them to move machinery, antiques, goods, documents, and China's entire treasury onto ships headed for Taiwan.