

CHAPTER

20

HO

Age 25

NEW YORK, 1949

AFTER HO RECEIVED HIS BROTHER'S CRYPTIC LETTER expressing enthusiasm for the Communist Liberation of Shanghai, he had no further communication from his once prolific family. Overwhelmed with worry for their safety and the staggering guilt he felt over his inability to help them, Ho could focus on little else as he assembled tidbits of information, whatever he and his compatriots could glean from news and letters.

If that weren't enough, another disaster came crashing down on him: In July, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service sent him a notice to appear for a hearing. Ho had sent a letter to the INS requesting permission to work part-time. If he failed to go to this hearing or if he went and said something wrong, he could be deported. If the INS had discovered that he was already working, he could also be deported. What if someone turned him in? Had it been a mistake to sue China Motors for back pay?

Ho knew of other students who had been detained by the INS and threatened with Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) interrogations, imprisonment, and deportation. Ho tried to swallow his panic, knowing that his family was being blown around China like leaves in the Communist wind. He desperately needed their advice, but he didn't

even know where they were. Just thinking about his predicament sent him into a nervous sweat.

He had to consider the possibility of deportation from the United States—but to where? To China and into Communist hands? Or to Taiwan, where he'd never been? On the other hand, if he managed to stay in the United States, he could be dragged down by the anti-Communist tide that was rising in America, targeting anyone Chinese. His family had never favored Communism. Last he'd heard, his sister and her husband were trying to get away from the Communists, to flee to Taiwan. But that might not count for much when most Americans seemed to think all Chinese were alike—and no different from Japanese, Koreans, or anyone from Asia, for that matter.

Most of the five to six thousand Chinese students in America were in the same dire straits, dependent on their families in China for financial support. The students had to find a way to subsist but were prohibited from working. In addition to the students, another three-to-four thousand Chinese professionals on temporary visas were stranded in the United States as well.

A few sympathetic Americans wrote to newspapers and politicians, urging Washington and the INS to allow the students to get jobs. As early as January 1949, the U.S. National Student Association in Cambridge, Massachusetts, asked the INS assistant commissioner for rule changes to permit Chinese students to work part-time. In addition, it recommended that the INS lift the requirement that students carry a full course load, so that they would have time to work. Sororities, church groups, and college administrators made similar appeals.

But there was nowhere for Ho to get basic information on this complicated dilemma. Once again, he turned to his most reliable source of help: other stranded Chinese students. There were nearly three hundred of them in the New York area, attending various colleges and universities. The largest concentration was at Columbia, which was one of the reasons Ho had chosen to live near the university. He'd meet with his compatriots at the student union, the International House, or any available space where they could gather informally and commiserate. Students whose families had fled to Hong Kong were the most likely to receive letters with useful details,

since communications from the British colony were unhindered and the steady influx of refugees there brought constant updates on the situation in China. Letters from Shanghai and Taiwan, in contrast, were scrutinized by censors, forcing the senders to share only the blandest of niceties.

To bypass the censors, some correspondents resorted to code. One educated member of Shanghai's social set, having decided not to leave his home, arranged to send a message in a photo to his family, who had fled overseas: If he was standing, all was well. If he was sitting, things were bad. When he finally sent them a picture, he was lying down.

Some students received news in the form of a rebuke. Chinyee, a painter studying fine arts at the College of Mount Saint Vincent in New York, never imagined that her family would lose its comfortable standing. She had a rude awakening when she wrote to her mother in the spring of 1949 asking for some new *qipao* dresses. Her mother sent a curt reply: "You don't know what's going on here in China. Life in Shanghai has turned upside down. Don't think of coming back here or to Taiwan either; everything is chaotic. Be happy with what you have, and don't ask for such petty things."

The students were by no means unified in their views about the volatile events back home. One organization at Columbia, the Chinese Students Club, had existed as a social group for a number of years. Some members argued that the club had a moral obligation to speak up about China, while others wanted to keep politics out. The openly pro-Communist students decided to organize their own campus group, naming it the Chinese Students Association. Confrontations between the two groups grew so heated that Columbia's administration intervened and refused to continue recognizing either organization, denying use of campus facilities to both.

When Ho arrived in the United States for study, he had joined a group called the Chinese Students' Christian Association. One of the largest Chinese student organizations in the United States, the CSCA had been sponsored by the YMCA since the early 1900s. Though Ho had eschewed politics, as his family had often admonished, he'd figured that a Christian organization was innocuous enough—and a good place for him to meet Chinese girls. The national leader of the CSCA



In the early morning hours of May 25, 1949, the People's Liberation Army marched into Shanghai, passing in front of the iconic Park Hotel.

in early 1949 also made frequent appearances at Columbia, a Chinese Canadian named Paul Lin. It soon became evident that Lin and his wife Eileen were ardent supporters of the Communist government, encouraging students to return home to help build the new China.

After the Liberation of Shanghai, when there was little doubt that the Nationalist era in China was over and the Communists would soon control the country, fear of Chinese Communist infiltrators quickly grew inside the United States. The FBI increased its surveillance of Chinese students and sought out "friendly" ones who might serve as informants. The Chinese Students' Christian Association that Ho had joined came under intense FBI scrutiny as federal agents fanned out across the country, investigating Chinese student groups and their leaders. Paul Lin was tagged with the FBI label of "rabid pro-Communist."

The FBI's surveillance was hardly a secret, as the agency interviewed a broad range of students and Chinese scholars. Everybody knew someone who had been interrogated by the FBI—or had been contacted themselves. Prominent Chinese faced questioning as well, including Dr. Paul Chih Meng, director of the China Institute in New

York, whose board chair was Henry R. Luce, an influential member of the pro-Nationalist China lobby. In a declassified confidential interview, Meng told the FBI that he believed more than 80 percent of Chinese students in the United States were sympathetic to the Communist government but noted that this did not mean they were all Communists. Other FBI sources estimated that at least 90 percent were sympathetic to the Communist government, again cautioning that this was more indicative of their rejection of the Chiang Kai-shek regime, which many viewed as hopelessly corrupt. To uninformed FBI agents and American politicians, however, the political distinctions between anti-Chiang and pro-Communist viewpoints mattered little. To them, all Chinese were potential Communists.

The volatility of the American political climate only made matters worse for the students. Congressional debates on what to do with the Chinese added to the tension as their fates swung in the wind. Under the terms of the Immigration Act of 1924, a student visa status expired upon completion or termination of studies. A debate ensued in Washington over whether to allow Chinese students to return to China—and what to do with their visa status if the students were forced to stay in the United States. Some politicians felt that the students should be barred from returning to China to prevent them from aiding the Communists with their American educations. Others, in the tradition of anti-Chinese exclusionists who tried to drive out all Chinese from the Americas, were afraid of any increase in the "Yellow Peril" population. They strongly opposed granting any form of residency to the estimated ten thousand stranded Chinese students and nonimmigrants, a number which far exceeded the official quota of only 105 Chinese immigrants allowed into the United States per year.

This then was the conundrum: America's decades-long racial exclusion aimed at keeping Chinese out of America was at odds with the preference of politicians now opposed to sending American-educated Chinese into Mao's embrace. Ho knew he had to tread very carefully as he weighed his limited options, especially as stories of missteps by other students began to circulate. Maria Lee Koh, for example, had given up her student visa in order to register as a refugee—only to find that the minuscule quota for Chinese refugees had been filled.

Suddenly she was on the docket to be deported. Through her unflinching determination, she succeeded in persuading an Ohio representative to introduce a private immigration bill in Congress that allowed her to stay in the United States. About a hundred other Chinese managed to seek similar private congressional bills enabling them to remain.

AFTER WEEKS OF WORRY and consultations with his trusted friends, Ho decided he'd be better off answering the INS inspectors forthrightly rather than offering some convoluted excuses. Since it was his own letter requesting permission to work that had prompted the hearing, perhaps they'd view him favorably. By the time Ho forced his leaden feet to the INS office at 70 Columbus Avenue for his hearing, he had decided to tell all. He disclosed that he had been working—at least he wouldn't have to worry about the INS finding out. The hard-eyed agent glared at him and asked for details, sternly informing Ho that he now faced punitive action and possible deportation, pending the agency's investigation and deliberation.

Ho prepared himself for the agency's judgment. He knew he could be jailed, deported, or both. He wasn't sure which fate would be worse.

A week after his hearing, he received a letter from Edward J. Shaughnessy, the acting director of the INS New York District, who minced no words about Ho's previous denials about working:

ON THE BASIS OF THE RECORD IT APPEARS THAT YOU VIOLATED THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH YOU WERE ADMITTED TO THE UNITED STATES AND THAT YOU DELIBERATELY ATTEMPTED TO CONCEAL THAT VIOLATION BY MAKING FALSE STATEMENTS UNDER OATH. DESPITE THE FOREGOING YOUR REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO ACCEPT PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT IS GRANTED SINCE IT APPEARS THAT YOU REQUIRE SUCH EMPLOYMENT IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN YOURSELF BUT YOU ARE ADVISED THAT IN THE EVENT YOU SHOULD COMMIT ANY FURTHER VIOLATION

OF THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH YOU WERE ADMITTED TO THE UNITED STATES APPROPRIATE ACTION WILL BE TAKEN.

Ho had to read the letter a few times before he was certain that he was in the clear. Even though he had committed violations, he now had permission to work part-time. He realized that he could finally get a job without fear. Yet he felt little joy, because he still had no word from his family. They would be glad for him; of that he was certain—if they were alive and well.

Other Chinese students were not as lucky, Ho knew. The FBI had even called one of his roommates to its office for questioning. Ho and the other roommates tried to reassure him—after all, Ho's INS outcome had been favorable. But when their friend didn't return from his interrogation, the roommates grew anxious. They made discreet inquiries, but the young man seemed to have vanished. Soon they discovered that he had been arrested and detained on Ellis Island, within view of the Statue of Liberty. As they pieced together the chain of events, they concluded that a tipster had contacted the FBI, naming the roommate as a security threat. It turned out that the snitch was the jealous ex-boyfriend of their roommate's girlfriend. He had called the FBI out of spite.

Ho and his friends were stunned that such a scurrilous accusation could lead to their friend's arrest. No one was surprised when such things happened in Shanghai—after all, their entire generation of students had been wrongly labeled as collaborators. But Ho had expected America to be different from China. Instead, a chorus of powerful Americans claimed that all Chinese in America comprised a "fifth column" of enemy infiltrators. U.S. senator Joseph McCarthy accused American diplomats with expertise about China of being Communist sympathizers—only one aspect of his claim that government employees, teachers, homosexuals, and Hollywood writers and actors posed dangerous national security threats and therefore needed to be investigated and purged.

EVEN THOUGH HO'S LEGAL status in the United States was now relatively secure, his place as a stranded student and refugee was still difficult to navigate. Most Americans assumed that every Chinese immigrant worked in a restaurant or laundry—the limited job options available to earlier generations of Chinese in America. At every turn, Ho and his compatriots were asked if they were waiters or washers. Armed with PhDs but no jobs, they were offended by the constant assumption that all Chinese were laborers.

Of course, there were complexities and differences among the Chinese exiles. Though many stranded students were in financial straits, the American news media seemed interested only in the wealthiest elite in the United States, such as Madame Chiang Kai-shek and her relatives. Her brother, T. V. Soong, the former finance minister, had a posh address at 1133 Fifth Avenue. Madame Chiang Kai-shek often stayed at 10 Gracie Square on the East River, one of the most prestigious residences in New York, where her sister Ai-ling and Ai-ling's supremely wealthy husband, financier H. H. Kung, owned a home.

Such superelites occasionally appeared in New York's society gossip columns: David Kung, Madame Chiang's favorite nephew, who had been jailed back in Shanghai for corruption, was rumored to be gay, while his sister Jeanette always dressed in men's clothing and reportedly had two "wives." Some members of Congress had suspected Madame Chiang of being a lesbian because of her cross-dressing niece.

Since most of these elite exiles entered the United States on diplomatic passports, they were shielded by diplomatic immunity from the FBI and INS investigations encountered by the other Chinese in America, yet even they could not always escape the prejudicial stereotypes. In order to buy his apartment on Fifth Avenue, wealthy T. V. Soong had to obtain a letter from no less than Henry Morgenthau, a former secretary of the treasury, guaranteeing that Soong would not open a Chinese laundry on the premises. Still, most of the students had nothing but scorn for those wealthy Nationalist exiles, derisively calling them the "White Chinese," like the tattered White Russians of Shanghai.

BUT FOR THE STRANDED STUDENTS of every economic circumstance, the uncertainty and confusion took a toll. Students from families far better off than Ho's were in trouble. Richard Lin Yang, the St. John's student whose father had whisked him out of Shanghai using the ruse of a family dinner on a boat, had made his way to the University of California at Los Angeles but became so unnerved that he spent his time waiting tables, pumping gas, betting on horses at the race-track, and finding bit parts in Hollywood war movies. Jack Tang, the eldest son of P. Y. Tang, one of the most successful textile manufacturers in Shanghai, floundered at MIT as his father's China holdings were wiped out. Before the Communist revolution, Jack's life had been mapped out for him. As the Number One Son, he was expected to take over the thriving family business, one day to become the next patriarch. He had pursued his studies with that future in mind. Now there was nothing. His father had to rebuild the family textile business in Hong Kong. With all the stress, Jack fell ill and was confined to bed rest for several months. As he struggled to reimagine his place in a world outside of China, 1949 became a lost year.

Ho couldn't afford to abandon his studies or to get sick. But with his life spinning in a swirl of uncertainty, his grades plummeted in his science classes—for the first time ever. His flagging performance only added to his dismay and disorientation.

The harsh Cold War reaction to the stranded students stoked their internal debates over whether to return to China. Those with fiancées or spouses and children or aging parents could only despair as the INS, FBI, and State Department, having been purged of knowledgeable "China Hands," imposed rules and procedures that made it more difficult to return to China. Some wished to go home simply because they found the financial strain and limited job prospects for Chinese in America too daunting, while others, inspired by vocal idealists and pro-Communists like Paul and Eileen Lin, were eager to help build a bright future for China. With numbers of Chinese students clamoring to return home, the FBI and INS worried that they comprised an influential mass movement planning to repatriate.

In response, the State Department established a Chinese Assistance Desk to take requests from students seeking to return—with the names of requesters promptly sent to the INS for investigation. Those who had studied science and technology in particular were barred from repatriating on the grounds that it could be “inimical to national security.” Even scientists and engineers who had committed serious immigration violations, like Ho, would not be sent back, while students of arts and letters, humanities and social sciences, were quickly approved for return and shipped at State Department expense to Taiwan or Hong Kong, the nearest locations to Shanghai with diplomatic ties to the United States.

Meanwhile, as American politicians debated what to do with these stranded students and scholars, China’s new Communist government was reaching out and appealing to them to come home. The Beijing government organized a letter-writing campaign to Chinese students abroad, exhorting them to return to their motherland to help chart the course of the new China. A few of the letters came from Premier Zhou Enlai himself, while most came from students’ family members, reassuring the students that the Communist regime would welcome them back with open arms. Every batch of returning students was vigorously lauded in the Chinese news.

No such letter arrived for Ho. He almost envied the students who received them—at least they knew that their families were alive. But he and his friends began to suspect that those letters were written under duress when some received follow-up messages from their families on the heels of the invitational letters. The new messages from home urged them to ignore the prior appeals and rosy promises.

Of the five to six thousand Chinese students in the United States in 1949, only about one hundred received permission to return to China. Untold numbers were rumored to have left surreptitiously, without State Department approval, by taking circuitous journeys through Europe, since the United States government blocked all travel to the Communist country. Still others made their way home by crossing, undocumented, into Canada, which had established diplomatic relations with the new People’s Republic. In spite of his conflicted feelings, Ho couldn’t seriously consider returning, not when his family had made it so clear that he should stay put.

Finally Ho received a new letter, from his brother. Ho had to calm himself as he carefully handled the tissue-like paper, afraid he might tear it in his nervous haste. The message was somber, from Hosun, in Shanghai, and dated September 20, 1949:

IT IS MORE THAN FOUR MONTHS SINCE WE’VE BEEN IN TOUCH, AND IT SEEMS LIKE A CENTURY. MY WIFE DIED ON JULY 20 FROM TUBERCULOSIS. I HAVE BEEN VERY SAD. . . . DON’T WORRY TOO MUCH FOR US. IT’S A REALLY HARD TIME, BUT I’M SURE WE’LL MANAGE. HAVE YOU EXCHANGED LETTERS WITH OUR SISTER? YOU CAN TELL HER MY NEWS AND SAY HELLO FROM ME. AFTER THE WHOLE COUNTRY IS LIBERATED, MAYBE WE CAN BE TOGETHER AND NEVER BE SEPARATED AGAIN.

News of his sister-in-law’s death came as a shock. She was not much older than Ho and had a young child with his brother. Ho could feel Hosun’s pain in the brief note and wished he could somehow comfort his brother. He was powerless to do anything when he was so far away and the mail delivery between China and America was so unreliable. He wanted to send a few dollars to help with the funeral costs. But he couldn’t even do that when his student network advised that the new Communist government was screening all mail, especially from the United States. Anything American, including money, could be considered subversive. In addition, the FBI and other U.S. authorities were surely monitoring correspondence to and from China as well. Ho had to be doubly careful.

It was another month before Ho heard from his sister. She and her husband and children had somehow reached Taiwan.

On October 22, 1949, his sister, Wanyu, penned a letter from Jilong, Taiwan, where her husband had found a job:

THE SITUATION IN CHINA IS WORSE DAY BY DAY. TAIWAN IS BAD TOO, BUT AT LEAST THERE IS NO WAR HERE. GUANGZHOU AND XIAMEN ARE BOTH TAKEN. THE NATIONALISTS AND COMMUNISTS ARE STILL FIGHTING OVER [THE ISLAND OF] JINMEN. IF TAIWAN IS LOST, WE WILL HAVE NOWHERE TO GO.

BUT HERE IN TAIWAN, WE NOW HAVE ANOTHER CONCERN. THE LOCAL PEOPLE ARE ANGRY AT THOSE OF US FROM OTHER PROVINCES. TAIWANESE PEOPLE CALL US *WAI SHENG REN* [OUTSIDERS]. THE LOCALS ARE AFRAID THAT THERE WILL BE ANOTHER MASSACRE LIKE 2-28 IN 1947. IF THAT HAPPENS, WE MAINLAND PEOPLE WILL ALSO SUFFER.

YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO MY HUSBAND? SOME OF THE LOCAL PEOPLE HATE HIM, AND HE CAN'T DO HIS WORK WELL. SO WE *WAI SHENG REN* ARE SUFFERING DISCRIMINATION HERE AS WELL. LOTS OF PEOPLE WISH THAT THE AMERICAN ARMY WOULD COME AND PROTECT US. WE DON'T HAVE THE STRENGTH TO PROTECT OURSELVES. WE CAME TO TAIWAN FOR A BETTER LIFE, AWAY FROM THE COMMUNISTS. WE DON'T WANT TO BE ALWAYS RUNNING AWAY, ALWAYS FLEEING SOMEWHERE.

The letter from his sister added to Ho's anxiety. Like most Chinese, he was unfamiliar with Taiwan or its history, but her reference to a massacre was worrisome. Ho learned from more knowledgeable students that the Nationalists had killed thousands of Taiwanese in a 1947 uprising called "2-28," having occurred on February 28. He feared his sister's family could face more turmoil in Taiwan, but at least they were alive. Ho took on a new role in his family from his distant but stable outpost in New York. Now his dispersed family members were turning to him for information, advice, and support. It was a strange reversal for him, the youngest child who had always followed the guidance of his elders.

A regular mail service was soon in place between Taiwan and the United States, and letters began arriving from his sister much more often than from his mother or brother in Shanghai. Wanyu and her husband had always provided Ho with full details about the goings-on in China, readily offering their opinions. But the Chinese student network in the United States, highly critical of the Chiang Kai-shek government in Taiwan, warned that the Nationalist secret police were extending their draconian reach to the United States. Many believed that the Nationalists had spies in America to keep watch on the students. More than once, Ho advised his sister to be more discreet in her

letters to him, out of concern that the Nationalists and the U.S. government were monitoring their mail.

On December 2, 1949, a longer letter arrived from Wanyu and her husband, again from Jilong:

WE ARE FINE, THOUGH THE SITUATION IS WORSE DAY BY DAY, AND TAIWAN IS VERY NERVOUS. WE MISS HOME VERY MUCH. WE ARE STUCK HERE, CAN'T GO AHEAD AND CAN'T GO BACK. OUR LIFE IS SO TEDIOUS AND BORING. SOMETIMES I THINK THERE IS NO HAPPINESS IN LIFE ANYMORE. WE ARE BOTH FAR AWAY. WHEN WILL THE DAY COME TO RETURN HOME?

OUR BELOVED MOTHER HAS WORKED HARD ALL HER LIFE, WORRYING ABOUT US ALL THE TIME. SHE RAISED US BY HERSELF, AND NOW WE CAN'T TAKE CARE OF HER. I CAN'T EVEN SEND LETTERS TO HER. DO YOU HAVE ANY WAY TO LET HER KNOW THAT WE ARE ALL RIGHT HERE? I WANT TO GIVE HER SOME COMFORT, BUT I DARE NOT SEND LETTERS TO HER, IN CASE IT WILL CAUSE HER SOME TROUBLE.

WE ARE GOOD BUT THE PRICES ARE HIGH HERE. WE CAN BARELY GET THE MONEY WE NEED. RECENTLY, TAIPEI WAS FILLED WITH SHANGHAI BUSINESSMEN. ALL THE FAMOUS OLD SHANGHAI BRAND STORES ARE OPENING NOW IN TAIPEI. SHANGHAI FOOD SHOPS ARE POPPING UP. EVEN THE FAMOUS SNACKS FROM OUR HOMETOWN HAVE BEEN APPEARING.

FROM TAIWAN WE HEAR THAT THE SITUATION IN THE MAINLAND HAS CHANGED DRASTICALLY; IT IS AS BAD AS WE IMAGINED. LOTS OF PEOPLE HAVE NO CONFIDENCE. THE COMMUNIST PARTY ARRESTED FIVE HUNDRED PEOPLE IN THE HOMETOWN OF ONE OF MY COLLEAGUES AND KILLED TWENTY-TWO. THEY ARE SAID TO BE THE LANDOWNERS AND "BAD ELEMENTS." ALTHOUGH THEY KILLED THE RICH PEOPLE UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND TRANSFERRED POWER FROM ONE GROUP TO ANOTHER, THE SITUATION OF THE POOR FARMERS IS THE SAME. MANY DYNASTIES THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE COLLAPSED BECAUSE OF THE HUGE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR. PEOPLE SAY

THAT THERE IS NO CORRUPTION INSIDE THE COMMUNIST PARTY, BUT WHEN THE HONEYMOON IS OVER, THE GOVERNMENT WILL BECOME LAZY AND DO EVERYTHING FOR ITS OWN BENEFIT. IT IS THE EXPERIENCE OF OUR HISTORY FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS. MAYBE I AM TOO PESSIMISTIC, BUT IT IS THE TRUTH.

With the U.S. government barring scientists and engineers like Ho from leaving the United States and his family insisting that he stay away, Ho had to face the possibility of remaining in a country that he had never intended to make his home.

Ho examined his situation squarely: He was now cleared to get a job, but he noted that he was twenty-five and that it was time for him to think about marriage. Among the Chinese students in America, he estimated there were almost ten men to every woman—without a single woman in his engineering circles. Some of the men joined Chinese fraternities with names like Alpha Lambda Phi, “FF,” and Phi Lambda, but Ho had no interest in them.

A Chinese graduate student in New York, a social scientist, completed his master’s thesis on the dating habits of Chinese male students. His findings became a major topic of conversation among Ho’s compatriots: 45 percent of the male students surveyed believed that “most of the Chinese girls [students] in the U.S. are conceited” and play “hard to get.” On the other hand, the female students polled indicated by a large margin that they were interested in finding potential marriage partners. The researcher concluded that a large proportion of the men were daunted by the overwhelming odds against them.

Ho was determined not to become one of those discouraged men. As he analyzed his situation, he felt that he was a strong contender in the high-stakes competition for eligible Chinese women: He was intelligent; his visa was clean; he had a job with a bright future as an engineer. He came from a good family. Had he been in China, his mother and other family members would have already vetted potential mates, possibly even making the selection for him. But stuck in America, he would have to find a wife without family assistance or interference. On this matter too, he was truly on his own.

CHAPTER

21

ANNUO

Age 14

TAIWAN, EARLY SPRING 1949

FROM THE MOMENT THAT HER PLANE LANDED ON THE AIRSTRIP in Jilong, a city just east of Taipei, the island’s capital, Annuo had the uneasy feeling that things might not go as well as they all hoped. The sighs of relief after the airless flight on the cargo plane turned to gasps of dismay when the airplane door opened to a suffocating gust of hot, humid air. Annuo began peeling off the many layers of heavy winter clothes she had donned in Hangzhou’s cold March weather. Her seventeen-year-old brother, Charley, and little sister, Li-Ning, ten, were doing the same, along with everyone else on the plane. The sudden shock of intense heat seemed to catch the grown-ups by surprise too.

Outside, the wilting sun beat down on Annuo as steam rose from the tarmac; the damp air on her clammy skin leached away the joy she had felt for their safe landing. What else should they have known about this place? Even the remote village in Jiangxi Province after her family’s four-month trek five years earlier had seemed more inviting than this.

At least her father’s former superior officer, General Han Deqin, was waiting for their arrival. He had been the governor of the Nationalist resistance forces in Jiangsu. Annuo had known his children from the days after the Japanese war when they, too, had lived in Hangzhou.