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Proximate Things

ON THE EVE OF THE NEW YEAR, the teacher is looking back. Not on the year just passed, but on past years that might help her make sense of this one. This interminable year, plagued by not merely a novel virus but something else that has been around a lot longer and is now spreading rhizome-like, shooting up in disparate environments around the globe. In the United States, the country of her birth, a deadly variant emerged and grew over the last four years to monstrous proportions. In China, the country of her father's birth, it lay deceptively dormant for decades but is now reproducing rapidly. And in Hong Kong, that in-between place where she cut her teaching teeth, it has been growing stealthily and reached such magnitude this past year that it made COVID pale in comparison.

In each case, she failed to see it coming.

Now she is trying to recall those years in Hong Kong, just before and after the handover, when she like so many answered the call to return and seized the opportunity to be part of an educational experiment on the periphery of China. It's been exactly three decades since she took up her post there, so she shouldn't be surprised how difficult it is to remember. She's a memory worker, after all, trained in the arts and sciences of recovering what has been lost, buried, or disappeared. She's got three degrees and a toolkit of methods for accessing the past: the interview, the archive, the dream. She knows this work is more art than science, that it's as much about the present moment and the person who is doing the remembering—where and when they stand in proximity to the past—as it is about what is actually recalled. Memory is never the same twice, she tells her students, quoting one of her own memory work mentors.

But memory is also slippery. Like an accomplice, it likes to hide behind neat facts, glossy brochures, and grand narratives. Sometimes you need to turn over a few facts in order to trigger it. Sometimes you have to trick the past into letting you in.

IN THE DECADE leading up to the handover, a brand new university of science and technology was boldly envisioned, generously endowed,

and expeditiously built on the steep slopes of a peninsula jutting out into the bay at the southern tip of the giant land mass known as China—a show of confidence and commitment to the future of an autonomous Hong Kong.

The university was an architectural miracle, erected in just two years, with a terraced campus that spanned the cliffs and snaked along the hillsides, giving each towering office building and residence hall an unobstructed panoramic view of mountains, sea, and sky.

The founders of the university proclaimed Hong Kong as the nerve center of South China, a site of global culture and creativity, promising a world-class education to young women and men of the soon-to-be decolonized territory, helping them to become *versatile, innovative, and caring* citizens. Other ambitious adjectives were used to describe the new university: *state of the art, agent of change, high speed, well-stocked, premier, eminent, exceptional. The MIT of Asia.*

The university sought to reverse the brain drain that many Asian countries faced. It did so by recruiting faculty from top schools in the United States.—two-thirds of whom, like the teacher, were ethnically Chinese. The strategy was simple: bring back the Chinese diaspora. The language of instruction would be English, the style of education decidedly American, and the faculty overwhelmingly Chinese.

The teacher was recruited in the lobby of a Days Inn outside New York City by two graying academics in suits—Chinese-born Taiwanese to her American-born Chinese. They were as interested in her family background as her scholarly research. When they asked why she wanted to teach in Hong Kong, she stated the obvious and clinched the job. She was hired to teach in the smallest school at the university, offering courses with the words social, cultural, and political in their titles, and charged with the responsibility of bringing students of science, engineering, and business into *the philosophical aspects of a meaningful life*; in short, as the first president of the university liked to put it, it would be her job to *humanize* the students.

The students were mostly local women and men, the first in their families to seek a higher degree, along with a small but growing cohort of mainlanders, most of whom had never experienced this kind of education before. They took the teacher's courses as a requirement, unaware that a grand plan had been set in motion, bringing Chinese of all varieties and backgrounds together on this resplendent campus at this opportune moment in the history of Hong Kong.

IN A BOX MARKED “Teaching Portfolio,” shoved all the way under her desk where it had lain dormant since coming out of the shipping container, the teacher finds what she has been looking for: course syllabi, student papers, emails (that novel way of communicating in the early ’90s, pages and pages of them printed out like letters), and other evidence of her teaching life in Hong Kong. Evidence of not merely what she and her students and fellow teachers did but of what they wanted to do and what they believed they were doing. When she opens the box and begins to flip through the papers, a current of preserved air is released—the smell of the past as it comes in contact with the present—and the flooding begins. It’s just as the Nobel Prize-winning memory worker described it: memory, like water, trying to find its way back to where it used to be, to recall the lay of the land, the way the light fell, how people looked at each other. The appearance of things: real, imagined, proximate.

THE LECTURE HALL was brand shiny new, brightly lit with fluorescence and equipped with the latest educational technology: lectern with A/V system, built-in overhead projector, dry erase board, Personal Response System for soliciting student feedback. The students were spread out across the tiered hall, many of them far up in the back, but a few eager ones sat down in front and smiled shyly at the teacher. She used the overhead regularly but found the PRS ridiculous: Why would you use a piece of technology to communicate with students in the same room when you can just speak with them directly?

She knew the names of all seventy-five students in the class, not only those with English monikers—Katty, Winnie, Mandy, Sunny, Rico, Harris, Alma, Dodo, Pancy, Peony, Poon, Vivian, Victor, Wallis—but also those who preferred to be called in the Cantonese way—Ah Ling, Ah Hong, Ah Fei. When she called on them, they were shocked at first, tongue-tied, but over time some became emboldened by this new dynamic, raising their hands to ask questions about a reading or share their newly forming thoughts on a film. *I found that some things cannot have objective explanations, and feelings cannot be measured in a scientific way. If I try to measure them, I will become like the “white” man in the film who just dreamt of his own predictions, and did not care about others’ experiences and feelings, and eventually walked away from fact and truth!* After class, there was always a small group of students eager to continue a conversation about culture, race, ethnicity, nationality—all those new

and complicated ways of talking about identity in Hong Kong. *Is Chinese a race, an ethnicity, or a nationality?* One student who went by the name of John, a sullen boy with a stubby mustache over lips that never smiled, was always there asking questions that didn't have easy answers. *What is human nature? What are the origins of despotism? Why do most people follow while only a few lead?*

"We will not need any equipment today," the teacher announced. She stood at the front of the hall holding a stack of index cards. On the table beside her were multiple stacks, each bound by a rubber band. "Today we will play a game," she told the students, "one that I learned as a student living on a kibbutz. It's called the Good Society Game." She explained to them about the small socialist communities that were part of the early nation-building efforts of the state of Israel. She asked them to imagine that they have been appointed to one of the new citizen task forces that were being formed to develop proposals for building a better Hong Kong. "Before you can come up with concrete policies, you must agree on a set of core values on which your society will be based." The room began to buzz.

The students counted off and broke into small groups, each with a stack of cards bearing words in both English and Chinese: achievement (成就), benevolence (仁愛), democracy (民主), education (教育), equality (公平), freedom (自由), happiness (快樂), human rights (人權), justice (正義), love (愛), loyalty (忠誠), moderation (中庸), peace (和平), progress (進步), propriety (禮), prosperity (繁榮), responsibility (責任), security (安全), stability (穩定), tradition (傳統), truth (真理). There were 40 value cards in total, along with three blank cards on which students could add values that they felt were missing yet important. Each group must work *collectively*—the teacher emphasized the word—to reach agreement on which values to discard and which to keep, and in the process come up with a clear rationale for their choices—a political philosophy for their good society—that they would present to the class. At the end of the game, a vote would be taken for the best society. "Individuals who are unhappy with their society," she added, "will be given the chance to switch to another group whose values you more closely share." The students laughed nervously.

The teacher circulated around the hall, dropping in on each group to see how they were doing. She was surprised to see the students engaged in heated debates, with even the quiet ones animated and outspoken as

they argued for the importance of happiness over achievement or how tradition can get in the way of progress. She noticed that loyalty and propriety were quickly discarded. Several groups divided along gender lines, with female students pushing for equality and one student writing the word feminism on a blank card. In another group, faith was added to the mix. In his group, John was making a halting argument for moderation, sweat breaking out on his upper lip as he tried to convince his group mates that extremes of any kind are dangerous for a society. They nodded in agreement, but eventually the card was discarded without any discussion or vote.

When it came time to present their societies, the spokespersons for each group were passionate and persuasive in their arguments for the values on which a future Hong Kong should be based. Not surprisingly, education was among the top three. *Education is the foundation of democracy*, one spokesperson declared, and nearly everyone agreed. Democracy remained a core value in several groups—it is one of the steps in a society's development, but some students cautioned that it should not come at the expense of stability and prosperity. Another group asserted that freedom and responsibility must always go together: *we must cherish the freedoms we have in front of us—freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of everything—and care more about the society around us, raising our voices when things go off track*. Faith stayed in the game and became the foundation for one society. Final arguments were made, a vote was taken, and several defections occurred. Five women broke off from their own groups and formed a feminist society. The classroom rang with youthful exuberance. John was silent. The teacher was speechless.

IN THE BOX, the teacher finds one well-worn set of value cards, the rubber band disintegrated, along with the rules of the game. There is also a stack of handwritten student responses to an essay question: *A nation is not merely a geopolitical fact; it is also a state of mind. Interpret this statement in light of your own experience of Hong Kong's return to the motherland.*

There is no evidence of John: no essay, no emails. Yet she can still clearly see his brooding face, even though she barely got to know him before he took his own life by jumping out an upper-story window of the university. There was no mention of his death in any university publications—in order not to bring shame to his family, officials insisted when she asked. He was there in class one day and quietly disappeared the next. If he had friends who missed him, she didn't

know. He had hard questions that he didn't hesitate to ask and strong opinions that he wasn't afraid to test out. Like many students back then, he was trying to figure things out for himself during a time of tremendous uncertainty.

The teacher remembers how back then, when faculty got together, they liked to complain about how passive and apathetic their students were. Now she is not so sure. They brought their American teaching tools into the classroom and were disappointed when the students didn't meet their expectations. Yet the students were hungry for more than the rote rations they'd been raised on, and the teacher fed that hunger, often without realizing it. In a handwritten farewell message from a student who she doesn't remember, these words burn:

What you taught closely resembles the life I had. I can take out a certain piece of experience and analyze it again. This kind of rethinking is more than to talk with my friends about my intimate secrets or my past. The stimulation you give me made me understand more about myself. For years, I think I do not understand quite well (even I tried the religious experience). In these few months, however, I enjoyed quite a progress.

Now she wonders, is her memory, like water, trying to fill in the cracks, exaggerating the budding democratic spirit of her students in order to make up for her failure to see what was happening right in front of her at the time?

INSIDE A SMALL seminar room, a wall of glass windows looked down upon the bay as evening fell, squid boats twinkling against the deepening blue-black of the water. Eleven students, nine women and two men, bespectacled and blue-jeaned, sat around a rectangular table debating the merits of various strains of feminism: liberal, cultural, Marxist, radical, postmodern. These students were older, some working full-time jobs during the day, so the class was held at night. The table was littered with books, coffee cups, and half-empty containers of food. The women students were taking turns speaking. They were trying on words for size and fit, at first self-consciously like articles of clothing, then fiercely like coats of armor: *reproductive labor, sexual domination, the personal is political*. They flushed as they savored the taste of the words on their lips and tongues. Some of the women shared stories of harassment and abuse at the hands of men they admired, respected, even loved. When they entered the room, they had looked exhausted, sighing as they unpacked

their heavy bags and eating quickly to replenish themselves, but now they glowed from the power of words to make sense of experiences that had gone unspoken for too long.

As the teacher wrote the words on the dry erase board, she experienced a jolt of comprehension. As if she hadn't understood what she was teaching until that very moment. A child of the sixties, she took the slogan for granted, believed in it, shaped her teaching around it, but had never dared to name her own experiences in the way that the women in the class had just done. She felt a camaraderie with them that was lacking with her mostly male colleagues. She felt like a student again, debating ideas as if her life depended on it.

In that classroom perched on the darkening rim of the Pacific, an old slogan breathed with new life.

ON THE CARD SIGNED by all eleven members of the postgraduate feminist theory class, one of the students wrote: *Thank you for articulating an outlet during the last lesson.* The teacher cannot recall what she offered during that final class, but she does remember the feeling of something being split open in that seminar room and something else rising up in the space they had created together.

She hadn't come to Hong Kong planning to offer a course on feminism; it just kept coming up in conversations with students, in their efforts to push for a policy on sexual harassment, in their willingness to talk about what was difficult to talk about. When the government issued an ordinance banning discrimination on the basis of gender and establishing an Equal Opportunity Commission, she remembers how it reverberated through the university. In pointed conversations with her male colleagues. In her appointment to the university committee charged with creating a sexual harassment policy. She felt as if she had stepped onto a moving stage. As social movements flowered and political organizations mushroomed, gender became one site where new ways of being, speaking, and participating could be tested out. *What it means to be a Hong Kong woman. How to be both Chinese and a modern Hong Kong man.* And as power shifted and identities unraveled, the classroom, the university, and the city at large became a testing ground for new ways of being political.

She was hired to teach a course with the words political and psychology in the title. She told her students that they would focus not on well-known public figures but on their own lives and experiences—from

their political socialization and education to their participation in the life of their communities. They started with the psychology of groups. *This was really delighting to me, since I thought a group was just a collection of individuals, but no—it makes me keep myself still awake while I am in a group.* After watching a film about the Milgram experiments, one student wrote: *I wondered why the Jews did not just disobey the Nazis and gamble for a chance to survive, since no matter what, there were deaths waiting ahead.* She sent them out in groups to interview their teachers about their educational philosophies, and they quickly uncovered a fundamental conflict. *The reality found inside the university does not fit well with the expectations of the teaching staff.* She sent them into the city to participate in one of the many social change organizations that were springing up across the territory. *Longer time is needed in discussing this topic, since this can help us to clarify our identity mist, especially after Reunification.* She invited local organizers to campus for a panel discussion on political reform, and when one of the panelists pointed to the low subject competence of Hong Kong citizens, the students pushed back. *As education level progresses, political competence will grow, and a change in Hong Kong political culture can be foreseen.*

In her teaching statement, written at the time of her first contract review, she laid out her own educational philosophy. She invoked John Dewey and his student Hu Shi, who invited him to China during the May 4th movement to lecture on his theory of experience. Both teacher and student were later denounced, then rehabilitated, but the idea of seeking truth from experience lived on. *In my classroom, the teacher wrote, I encourage my students to make connections between the subject matter of the human sciences and what matters to them as subjects of their own lives.* For this, she was awarded a medal for distinguished teaching. No one was more surprised than her. Admittedly, perhaps naïvely, at the time she saw herself, her students, and the university as part of a larger pedagogical arc stretching from 1919 to 1997 and beyond.

THERE WAS A tentative knocking at the door, and the teacher looked up to see Ah Wai standing outside her office, a pained expression on his face. He had been quiet all through class yesterday, and she'd wondered what he felt as his female peers shared stories about their male employers, co-workers, and teachers.

Ah Wai came in and sat down, his thin frame shifting uncomfortably in the chair. "I've been thinking . . ." he began haltingly, "what

to study for my thesis . . . and I've decided . . ." He took a breath and blurted out, "I want to study gender."

"What do you mean, gender?" The teacher was used to students coming with big ideas and enjoyed the process of trying to figure out with them what lay underneath. "Tell me more . . ."

In a rush of words, Ah Wai told her about a recent proposed amendment to a colonial law that had turned into a heated public debate. The law gave indigenous male residents of villages in the New Territories the right to inherit land according to traditional Qing Code. The amendment, proposed by an up-and-coming female politician, argued that indigenous women should be given equal inheritance rights.

"Sounds reasonable to me," the teacher interjected. "So why does this matter to you?"

"As a Hong Kong man, I don't know where I stand!" Ah Wai's voice broke, but he quickly regained his composure and went on. "The democrats and those feminist organizations all support the amendment, but the villagers are against it because it violates cultural tradition. That tradition was protected by the colonial government, but now the government is trying to break their promise. Of course I support gender equality—maybe I'm not a typical man, but I also think it's important to preserve Chinese tradition, especially at this time."

The teacher was confused. She didn't understand why this mattered so greatly to Ah Wai, who was neither a woman nor a villager. "So why can't you support both equality and tradition?" she asked.

"No, you can't do that," Ah Wai spoke slowly as if teaching a lesson to a child. "You must choose. And either way, I lose. If I choose gender equality, I'll be seen as standing with those British colonialists. And if I choose cultural tradition, I'll be accused of being a sexist and backward man. How can I be both Chinese and a modern man in Hong Kong at this time?"

If Ah Wai's intention was to convince the teacher to be his thesis supervisor, he had her hooked. And if the teacher had been slightly suspicious of her student's motivations, now she was completely sympathetic. His words touched a nerve in her.

"OK," she said, "let's work on this together."

Ah Wai breathed a sigh of relief.



WHEN THE TEACHER had stated the obvious during her job interview about why she wanted to work in Hong Kong, she was not telling the truth. It was not because she was Chinese, but because she was not Chinese enough. Like many Chinese Americans, she'd come to Hong Kong in search of identity—a way of being Chinese that was grounded in something more than the empty stereotypes and humiliating caricatures that she'd grown up with and which her father had performed for his own survival. The kowtowing. The self-deprecating humor. On the Chinese New Year, when her father would don his silk jacket and wield his calligraphy brush for the amusement of white Americans, she would stand sullenly next to him, an unwilling accomplice to his performance. By the time she was in high school, she refused to participate in anything that smacked of so-called “Chinese culture.” Truth be told, she came to Hong Kong to make up for a childhood spent denouncing all things Chinese—including her father.

Forty years before she took up her post at the university, her father had come to Hong Kong like millions of others at that time, fleeing a country racked by occupation, civil war, and mounting revolution. Like so many, he left behind a mother, a wife, a son. In Hong Kong he waited for them as long as he could. Another interminable year during which he got baptized to inoculate himself against the uncertainties that lay ahead. He finally gave up waiting and hitched a ride to the United States on a Fulbright while his compatriots fled to Taiwan. He bought a camera and recorded the moment of his departure. Dressed in a white suit and bow tie, he set off to realize his American Dream and seek his own way of being a modern Chinese man.

Chineseness, the teacher realizes now, was dividing and subdividing at that very moment into so many different ways of being in the world.

She remembers how, when China finally opened its doors in the early '80s and she began to travel back and forth, the first time with her father and then by herself, she had made it a point to always stop in Hong Kong, sometimes for only a few days, sometimes for a longer stay. The first time, as a college student studying Putonghua in Beijing, she came to Hong Kong as a respite from the starkness of that purely Chinese environment that was still emerging from revolution. Crossing the border by train, she relaxed into the syncretic mix of East and West, the mash-up of faces, tongues, and hearts that made her feel more at home in her own skin. Later, as a graduate student, she spent a year studying in Hong Kong, this time learning to read traditional Chinese characters

and recite classical poetry, even winning a city-wide language contest. When she was invited by the local radio station to recite the winning poem, she was aware that her efforts to speak flawless Putonghua intersected with government attempts to promote Mandarin, but she didn't think too much about it at the time. For her, Hong Kong was not the Middle Kingdom but the Middle Ground: a liminal place for liminal people with no expectations of racial, cultural, or national purity, a place where identity was always a work in progress, where she might be able to carve out her own motley way of being Chinese.

INSIDE THE MEETING ROOM, the excitement was palpable. Eighteen faculty, mostly young, ambitious, fresh-faced, and forward-looking, armed with their respective theories and methods for studying the world, eager to be part of this academic enterprise on the edge of China. Since her arrival, the teacher had made small talk with many of them in the hallway and the office, but this was the first official gathering of the small but intrepid school of the human sciences.

Surveying the room, the teacher noticed that she was one of only two female faculty; the other was a local woman who stood apart and looked like how the teacher felt. She noticed a group of Mandarin speakers, who she knew hailed from both Taiwan and the mainland, clustered together sipping wine and already growing slightly red-faced. And a smaller huddle of English-speaking men, drinking and slapping shoulders as if they'd known each other since childhood.

She sidled up to a thin man wearing an ascot with whom she had made an earlier connection over their shared approach to teaching. "Cheers," she said as they clinked glasses.

"OK, let's get started!" The chair of the department clapped his hands together and spoke in a jovial voice with an easygoing American accent that reminded the teacher of the way her father spoke English. "Welcome, welcome!" He smiled broadly and opened his arms in a virtual hug. "It's great to finally see you all here in the same room."

He shared with them his vision for the school, a place where the boundaries between disciplines would be broken down, where the best of East and West would come together, and where the proximity to China at this historical moment offered a unique vantage point from which to do research on development, democratization, and change on all levels: economic and political, social and individual. "We will study change in the making!" he declared.

At the chair's invitation, they went around the room and one by one introduced themselves. The first to speak was a frail-looking man with a shock of white hair, clearly the elder in the room; he had written a classic on industrialization in China and had worked for one of the largest think tanks in the United States. He was followed by a short burly man with a goatee and a missing digit on his right hand who declared his interest in "comparative everything"—Marxisms, authoritarianisms, democracies, dictatorships—all the while sipping directly from the spout of a clay teapot that he carried with him. A wiry man with bristly hair, whose staccato accent gave away his local origins, also avowed the importance of a comparative approach—in his case, comparative crimes and comparative democratizations. A short balding man with a slight paunch spoke animatedly about his research on population movements between China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. A tall curly-haired man with intense blue eyes shared his work on nationalism and ethnocentrism in China and the United States noting how anti-Black racism was prevalent in both contexts. An athletic-looking fellow in a polo shirt and sneakers spoke energetically, rocking back and forth on his feet as he shared his novel approach to studying Chinese politics using game theory. The local woman had originally trained as an engineer but now studied the way businesses are transforming and being transformed by the Chinese diaspora. The colleague in the ascot had written a book on the animal rights movement in the United States and now expressed an interest in studying Hong Kong culture.

When it was her turn, the teacher felt the heat rise in her cheeks but took confidence in the fact that she had been chosen for this job. Each of them was carrying their own complicated relationship to this land, straddling borders both internal and external, drawing comparisons as if their lives depended on it. It dawned on her that they had all been handpicked by the chair, assembled like the pieces of a jigsaw, the completed image of which still remained to be seen.

THEY HAD TALENT, they had ability, but in the end what brought them here was their hearts.

Reading these words, spoken by the president upon the ten-year anniversary of the university, the teacher is reminded of a song that was popular in China during the '80s called 我的中國心, "My Chinese Heart." She had memorized the lyrics as a student and is surprised to discover that she can still sing it now, albeit without the emotional lift

it once gave her. If she had been present at the ten-year anniversary, she would have scoffed at the president's words as so much patriotic BS, even as she knew deep down that there was an element of truth to them. Yet by that time, her motley heart had taken her elsewhere, to a small experimenting college in New England where motley was the norm.

Now the president's words, like the song lyrics, trouble her. How easily they fall from the tongue and curl comfortably inside the ear. The way the heart lays all the other organs to rest. The easy answer to the question of why she took the job. The obvious answer to the question of who you are and why you are here. Because I am Chinese at heart. And yet during that decade in Hong Kong—as money flowed from the north, higher education expanded from within, the diaspora came back from without, and one power prepared to take the place of another—there was nothing easy or obvious about such questions or declarations. *Is Chinese a race, an ethnicity, or a nationality?*

In those days, Chineseness itself was the question on everyone's minds if not their lips. And if you declared your heart Chinese, as she had, it was likely because it had been bruised or broken. Maybe your heart had suffered a loss, hit a glass ceiling, been bowed or snubbed one too many times. Maybe you cut off a piece of it and left it behind, like a missing digit that still aches, that you are forever trying to find. Maybe your heart had been transplanted but never took root in its new environs. Or maybe your heart was so full of itself that it could not be contained in one place. She tries to imagine all the reasons she and her colleagues listened to their hearts and answered the call.

AT THE TEACHER'S REQUEST, her students write emails to her about how they spent the evening of June 30, 1997: who they were with, what they did, how they felt. *I find there are too many celebrations. Why celebrations? My classmates and I asked this question many times. Hong Kong, my home, what will it become?*

Most stay at home and watch the ceremony on television. *I witness the whole process of the handover, the British flag down, the Chinese and SAR flags up, and at the very last minute of colonial Hong Kong, I wrote an email to my good friend who went to an alternative gathering in Statue Square to find other political lonely hearts, and I said, "Let's wish Hong Kong will have a brighter future and peace forever," and I sent it at the first minute of the SAR.*

Some go out to see the lights and watch the fireworks. *I went to Times Square to count down our last minutes to the handover to China. I'm really happy to see Hong Kong can become a part of China again. When I look back on our history, I'm very angry to see the British sold opium to China. China is a weak country, and now that Hong Kong became a part of China again, we can serve as a window for China to communicate and link with the rest of the world. We can help China to become stronger.*

One student refuses to watch and stays up with her novel all night. On the first day of the SAR, she goes to sing in her church choir to raise money for charity. *Isn't that more meaningful than seeing \$1 billion blowing away on fireworks?*

Some spend the whole day with friends, cooking and eating together, playing májiàng, getting drunk. *If you found any misspelling in this email, forgive me, cos I'm drunk this night!* They say the celebration doesn't mean much to them, they don't even like it, but it's a good excuse for a public holiday and a chance to get together and play.

They write to the teacher that they feel *happysadproudworriedhope-fulmadconfused*. Their feelings have never been this complicated before. They welcome reunification—*we can finally wash away the shame of 150 years, we can get back what we lost in the past*—but there is so much to worry about (*worries > happiness*). They worry about the lack of translation on TV. *I'm afraid we'll be forced to learn that afterward*. They worry about the hiding and distorting of truth. They worry about self-censorship. *The problem that people will keep their mouth shut before the government tells them to do so*. They worry about what the radical actions of a few may cause the CCP to do. They cannot forget 4/6/89.

They write to the teacher with their wishes: *I wish that we can still see opposing phrases on the street. I wish that no one will ever again have to speak against their own heart.*

WHEN WE SAW the Chinese flag rising, we all stood up and shook hands and called each other "Chinese men" and "Chinese women."

The teacher remembers a television show she used to watch as a child called "To Tell the Truth." Contestants posed as people with unusual jobs or life experiences, while a celebrity panel asked questions to try to figure out who were the imposters and who was the real thing. She used to imagine her father on the show, trying to dupe the American panelists about what a real Chinese was like. During her years teaching in Hong Kong, she was reminded of this show again

when she went to lunch with her colleagues, observing how their different tongues, tastes, politics, and personalities vied with one another across the table. She imagined them in a lineup of contestants, being cross-examined about their Chineseness until the host called the question: Will the real Chinese please stand up?

Now she envisions a different lineup composed of her former students, many of them having become teachers themselves. Ah Wai is there along with other members of the feminist theory class. And teachers with whom she had worked closely during those years. And of course her father.

She imagines the ways they would each introduce themselves.

“While everyone else was running in the opposite direction, I came back to this city I had left as a girl, where crisis posed as opportunity if only you could seize it as it streaked past. And I did, applying to the new university and getting accepted into the first class of postgraduates. No longer was I the rug under someone’s feet, no longer his punching bag, the object of his ill affections. I remade myself in this city that no longer feels like home.

“While my fellow students and teachers were preoccupied with looking north, I headed downtown and sat cross-legged and stocking-footed on the carpet with my Muslim brother. We sipped tea and swapped stories of this city that birthed both of us. We talked of the end of empire and what comes next, taking turns holding up mirrors to one another’s faith.

“When my students took to the streets, I followed them, believing that my presence could protect them. When they went on a hunger strike, I sat with them on the bridge, arms raised in the air as we faced down the police together. When one of them lost her backpack, I went down into the fray looking for it and found myself in a war zone. In that moment, I realized what can and cannot be safeguarded and understood why I was there.

“Even though I long ago applied for and received BNO, I stay here and bake bread. All kinds, but especially sourdough. You have to learn how to grow your own starter, watch and feed those hungry wild yeasts daily as they rise and fall, double and deflate, rest and sink. Their hunger is their hope, like mine, lidded and contained but threatening to erupt at any moment.

“After three decades of teaching the young people of this city, I am retired and taking singing lessons. I am learning to sing Italian opera

in Chinese and Latin from a mainland woman who teaches in Putonghua and was once a member of a PLA cultural troupe. I am learning to use my body as an instrument, to free my vocal cords and use all the cavities inside of me to amplify sound. My teacher wants me to increase my power by holding my breath in my tummy and stretching my diaphragm. You have to push down and rise up at the same time. She keeps telling me. “Liudong, liudong!”

“With the border closed behind me, I waded out into the muddy waters of the harbor, waist deep, shirtless. I closed my eyes and gripped the arm of the white-robed reverend as he leaned me backward, afraid he would let me go. My faith in men was already damaged and my faith in god was still only a hopeful gesture (‘Rice Christian,’ I heard them hiss). My belief in myself was all I could carry as I crossed over from one life into the next.”

The celebrity panel, consisting of some of the most accomplished Chinese actors and actresses in both Hong Kong and Hollywood, is mesmerized. They dig deeper into the stories of each contestant, asking for details about the yeast, the chest cavity, the different kinds of faith that each holds, inviting them to elaborate on what makes each of them the kind of Chinese they are. When the host finally calls the question, everyone stands up.

BEFORE THE TEACHER departs Hong Kong, her students present her with a farewell gift in a small rectangular box tied with a gold ribbon.

“What is it?” she asks, surprised and touched by this gesture.

“A weapon!” they shout in unison, clearly prepared.

Mystified, she shakes the box, sniffs it (much to her students’ delight), but cannot deduce anything. “Give me another clue.”

“It will give you power.”

“What?”

“It’s really sharp, so you must take care when using it.” They’re laughing, but there’s an earnest edge to their words.

She’s confused. Why would her students give her a knife?

“Open it!”

Slowly she unties the ribbon and unwraps the box. She lifts the lid to find a black resin rollerball pen inlaid with that unmistakable symbol of a snow-covered peak. Not a pen. A writing instrument. A weapon. She lifts it out of the box, feeling its heft in her hands, and unscrews the top. A blank sheet appears on the table in front of her

and she puts pen tip to paper and writes in silky black ink: *the personal is political*.

The students cheer. They take photos with the teacher and the weapon, grinning triumphantly at the success of their gift.

“I’ll carry this with me at all times,” the teacher promises, “and be careful how I use it.”

Yet by the end of the first year at her new job, the weapon will have disappeared into the tall blue switchgrasses of a New England field.

AT THE BOTTOM of the box, the teacher finds one more shiny zine. This one offers an even more unobstructed, gods-eye view, the image of planet Earth as seen from outer space: *glowing and irrefutable, marking the onset of a deep change in consciousness that has yet to run its course*.¹

NOTE

¹ All the italicized text in this essay are words that came out of the box.

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