

2018

The Fisherman's Daughter

Edward Clifford

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/umuhj>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Clifford, Edward (2018) "The Fisherman's Daughter," *University of Massachusetts Undergraduate History Journal*: Vol. 2, Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7275/hkzn-7077>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/umuhj/vol2/iss1/8>

This Primary Source-Based Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Massachusetts Undergraduate History Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

The Fisherman's Daughter

By Edward Clifford

A historical fiction short story, The Fisherman's Daughter seeks to present an imagined life of someone who experienced the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 70s. Split into two parts, the story presents two snapshots of the protagonist's life situated around an unseen tragedy. Along with various secondary sources, the most influential primary sources for this piece were Chen Rouxi's The Execution of Mayor Yin, a collection of short stories, Feng Jicai's Voice from the Whirlwind, a series of transcribed interviews, and Anchee Min's Red Azalea, a memoir about the author's experiences during the Cultural Revolution as well as Ye Weili's Growing Up in the People's Republic: Conversations between Two Daughters of China's Revolution. These sources blend narrative, historical events, and perceptive orientation of experiencing drastic change, and the reading of these texts guided not only the plot events of my story but also the method of recounting personal history. I also consulted secondary sources including Frank Dikotter's article "Looking back on the Great Leap Forward," Gail Hershatter's article "Forget Remembering: Rural Women's Narratives of China's Collective Past," and Zheng Xiaowei's "Passion, Reflection and Survival: Political Choices of Red Guards at Qinghua University, June 1966-July 1968." I hope this piece represents an outsider's attempt to understand this complex mingling of politics and culture while still respecting the people who endured and struggled during this period.

PART ONE

Alone, she stood just outside the schoolyard gate watching the saturated orange sky accompany the early summer sunset. The streets were empty, and she wondered if she was missing an important demonstration. Every day, it seemed that Suyin grew more and more conscious of how she was being perceived. Without the presence of others, she felt psychologically disobedient. Every minute not spent in service to Mao's Thought was a minute wasted. Like a spider crawling up through a drain, the thought of going back and spending the night in the school crept into her mind. Tireless Suyin, they would say. She never goes home. What an inspiring Revolutionary! But, like the woman armed with a rolled-newspaper, her instinct told her to return home.

A cool breeze relieved the cotton Army shirt that had been clinging to her sweaty back. She considered taking it off despite wearing nothing underneath. Even though she was a platoon leader, the approaching darkness cared little for job titles. She knew that there were places she had to avoid despite the respect she and her fellow students had earned in the past months doing Mao's work.

The path home was similarly quiet save for a few students on bicycles and the last of the workers returning home. Seeing the men in their blue jumpsuits, Suyin felt pride in being part of Mao's revolution. She put her arm up to her breast pocket and felt for her hardcover copy of Mao's quotations. Having his words so close to her heart reassured her that, although she hadn't yet met him personally, Mao was always with her. As she approached the workers, she raised her arm, signaling to the men.

"Another glorious day in service of Mao," she shouted.

The men waved back silently. One of them, an older man, turned towards her.

"So it is. So it is," he cheered back.

Suyin smiled and continued towards her home. Her stomach growled loudly, reminding her that she hadn't yet eaten today. She turned down the alley towards her favorite shop that served tofu and scallions, a staple of the rationer's diet. Suyin enjoyed this shop particularly because the cook, known simply as Chen, would serve it in a ceramic bowl that reminded her of the one that her father would use for special occasions when she was growing up. As she stood by a stool on the end of the bar, the cook came over. Suyin bowed and sat down.

"You know what I like, Chen."

He poured water into a small glass and placed it in front of Suyin.

"Very good, Young Zhao. So, what was on today's agenda?" he asked as he began to cube the tofu.

"You ask many questions, I should think you're a reactionary spy," said Suyin. Chen stared at her, unsure of how to react. Suyin smiled before bursting out in laughter. "You are too serious, Chen. Too academic."

Chen chuckled slowly. "I suppose you are right. Maybe I should take a vacation."

Chen had been a cook since the war ended. His shop was a frequent hangout for university students and teachers. Seeing the young people in his shop energized him, made him feel relevant to the country's present. Chen was also a born conversationalist, picking his customer's brains for hours on end as he boiled noodles and chopped vegetables. Surprisingly well-read, Chen always seemed to know something about almost everything,

Chinese or otherwise.

Of course, that was all before the Revolution began. Chen still kept up the conversations, only now, it seemed the only allowable topic was Chairman Mao's revolutionary ideals. He maintained the enthusiasm as well, but now it was a mask. Suyin could tell by the exhaustion on his face that the anxiety had taken its toll. She hoped that someday Chen could remove that mask and once again get enjoyment out of his shop, but she realized that there was little she could do to help him.

As Chen placed the food in front of Suyin, she noticed that it was not the bowl like her father had. This one appeared more modern and plain, and she felt like it belonged in an Army mess hall rather than in Chen's restaurant.

"What's this?" she asked, motioning in front of her with disdain. "Where is the blue bowl with the lettering?"

Chen wiped down the cutting board.

"Some young people from the high school were inspecting the shops around here. They saw my ceramic bowls and began smashing them, saying they were of the 'old' way. I had to scrounge around for replacements. These were the best I could get," he said solemnly.

Suyin was troubled by this, but she ate her meal just the same and talked about the day's political meeting. Suyin avoided discussing the high school student cadres, but she couldn't help but think about their mistake. A misunderstanding, she reasoned. Chen was just a victim of circumstance, and she resolved to make it up him personally.

She finished her meal rather quickly. Chen always gave Suyin a discount, but today she offered to pay the full amount. He refused, however, saying a hardworking student should never pay full price. Suyin thanked the old chef, and as she left his shop, Suyin silently hoped that there would be no more struggle for Chen.

About a block from her house, Suyin heard voices shouting from an alley just ahead of her. A moment later, two high school-aged boys marched a third one out of the alley. A young girl followed them, pushing a bicycle by the handlebars. The two guards were wearing similar jackets to Suyin's whereas the prisoner was wearing just tattered, brown slacks. Suyin could see that one of the guards, who was wearing a worn Red Army cap, was whispering to the prisoner, whose only response was to stare glumly at the ground. Suyin recognized the prisoner, but could not remember his name. All four paraded into the street, moving away from Suyin. Curious, she followed the spectacle.

As she walked behind them, Suyin got close enough to overhear what the boy in the cap was whispering. She could make out something about the prisoner thinking he could 'outrun Mao' and that he would be made an example of to the community. The girl pushing the bicycle would snicker and slam the front wheel against the road. Wondering if these were the students that had harassed Chen, Suyin decided to keep a safe distance.

They approached a busy corner and stopped a few yards from the curb. The two guards forced the short prisoner onto his knees. Suyin walked past them, keeping an eye on the prisoner whose stoic expression remained focused on the ground.

"Long live Chairman Mao," shouted the boy with the cap, waving his hand to the crowd. The passersby looked in his direction and stopped to see what was happening. "We have found this traitor to the Revolution cowering like a turtle in its shell."

He turned to the prisoner and began shouting at him, accusing him of being a ‘counter-revolutionary’ and ‘a thief.’ The passersby watched in silence. Suyin stared at the boy in the tattered slacks, who continued to stare at the cobblestone ground, unmoving. She approached the boy with the cap.

“Why has he run away?” Suyin asked, then quickly added. “How many blows does the coward deserve?”

“He stole food from our storeroom. Two sacks of rice and four scallions, he almost made off with. We will teach him that when you steal from our platoon, you are stealing from Chairman Mao himself.”

The two guards began shoving the prisoner, shouting more insults as they did so. The girl continued to slam the front the wheel of the bicycle on the ground, creating a haunting rhythm. Some people in the crowd encouraged the demonstration, but many remained silent.

“What is the traitor’s name?” asked Suyin. Her voice stole a few glances from the small crowd. Participation was not the intent, but Suyin felt obligated to at least find out the traitor’s name.

“Fu Huan”

Suyin nodded. She knew Huan from school as a quiet bookworm, keping mostly to his studies with little fanfare. Suyin thought he wore glasses, but they were presently missing, so she presumed that they were either lost or destroyed in some uncelebrated fashion. In the glow of the streetlamp, Huan appeared slightly handsome to Suyin, but she quickly chastised herself for thinking so. She walked over to Huan, arms behind her back like a general inspecting his army. The boys held their blows for the moment, eagerly awaiting instruction as Suyin spoke.

“It would seem that you have been caught without excuse. Do you have anything to say?”

Huan continued to stare at the ground. He spoke not a word and moved not a muscle. Out of penance or defiance, Suyin could not discern. Had it not been taboo to do so, Suyin would have likened him to a Buddha.

“Well,” said Suyin, turning to the boy with the cap. “Carry on, comrade.”

The display continued as they began slapping Huan’s face until blood trickled from his mouth. The girl, meanwhile, had been kicking the bicycle’s front tire until it gave out and bent into an aluminum paraboloid. Pleased with her invented deformity, she cackled with laughter and threw the bike on the ground. Suyin continued to watch the violence with the small crowd. This went on for some time until the boy with the cap took out a pistol that he had hidden under his shirt. Suyin thought for a moment that he was going to kill the prisoner. Instead, the boy with the cap slammed the barrel of the gun against Huan’s cheek, causing him to reel backwards and collapse on the street. The boy used his shirt tails to wipe the droplets of blood from the steel barrel and, content with the punishment, walked back towards the alleyway followed closely by the other two.

After they were out of sight, the small crowd began to disperse, whispering small thanks to one another that it was not them on their ground just as poor Huan was now. He lay on the ground in a heap, not moving until he was sure everyone was gone. Suyin knew she had to get home, but pity stirred her and compelled her to stay. She had seen large-scale, sanctioned versions of what she had just witnessed, but it was easy to get swept up in the emotions at those popular events. Here, the immediacy of the altercation had disturbed her now that she was close enough to see the person’s face and the scarlet liquid that trickled into the streets.

After a few minutes, Huan stood up and, with the back of his hand, wiped the blood from his mouth that was bruised and swollen.

“I suppose you won’t be stealing from the Red Guards anytime soon, will you Scallion Thief?” Suyin

said, half in jest.

“I didn’t steal anything.”

“What do you mean? They said they caught you in the act.”

“That was a lie. I was just minding my own business when one of them recognized me. The boy with the cap? He knew my father was a banker before being reassigned, and they all turned on me. They just needed an excuse, I guess.”

Huan picked up his bicycle from where the girl had tossed it aside. He spun the distorted tire, trying to determine just how broken it was.

“Can you fix it?” Suyin asked.

“Possibly. No tools though.”

Suyin hesitated for a moment. She was thinking about the small box of tools in her room and whether she should say something about it.

“I have my father’s old toolkit. He used it to fix boat engines, so maybe you could use it to fix your bicycle. Follow me.”

Before Huan could reply, Suyin turned and began walking towards her neighborhood. She never turned back to see if he was following her, but the sound of bicycle clicks behind her made her smile.

PART TWO

Willie Logan had been in many hotel rooms before this one. Some were extravagant with silk bathrobes and small fridges well-stocked with miniatures. Others more modestly provided a simple bed to sleep in and a shower to wash the day away. But more often than not, they were adequate. A Goldilocks blend of luxury and simplicity. As he awoke, the sounds of bustling Peking just outside, he realized this was one of those hotel rooms.

He rose gently as to not wake the woman sleeping next to him. He showered, trimmed his beard, and put on his favorite corduroy jacket and forest green dress shirt.

“You look like an undercover cop,” said Julie from the bed as he emerged from the bathroom. “What’s on the agenda today?”

“Well, first, brunch with the Honorable Chairman,” joked Willie as he took a cigarette out of the pack on the bureau. “Then, we see the educational system at work in the school.”

“I better get ready,” she said. “We wouldn’t want Mr. Granderson to get upset. Americans are notorious enough as it is.”

Twenty minutes later, they headed down to the lobby. Waiting for them was Wu Hongbo whom they were instructed to call ‘Wu’ for short. He was a tall and thin man with square, hazy glasses and his shirt buttoned all the way up to the base of his neck. Wu was with the Chinese Tourism bureau and served as the group’s guide and interpreter. The three of them chatted for a few minutes until Mr. Granderson appeared at the top of the stairs under a giant portrait of Mao. An archaeological preserve, Mr. Granderson was the department head and Willie’s boss. An old, but sharp man, he applied for a travel visa to visit China soon after Nixon’s trip.

He had to call in a few favors with some friends but eventually received the letter approving three visas. Who better to go with him, he reasoned, than his youngest professor and brightest graduate student.

On the way to the school, Willie looked out at the streets bustling with people, some old and some young. He watched as the shoppers bartered with the street merchants. Children ran and shrieked with laughter through the crowds, and stray dogs slept in between parked scooters while old men strode past, lost in thought. If he didn't know otherwise, Willie would have believed he was driving through Chinatown back home.

When they arrived at the school, Willie tapped Wu on the shoulder.

"Do any of the teachers here speak English?" he asked.

"Not too many, and those that do don't speak it well," said Wu ushering them into the lobby. Inside, the middle school looked much like the ones in America, only with less decorations. Just like in the hotel, a large painting of Mao hung near the entrance way, his eyes staring indifferently at Willie, silently studying the American with a cautious eye.

Wu told the group that they would sit in on a class and then have lunch. The room they were brought to was painted bone white. A map of China hung next to the blackboard, and posters with Chinese characters dotted the walls. The classroom was empty; Wu informed the group that the children would be brought in momentarily. Willie walked over to the teacher's desk, which was really an intricately-carved serving table. He hovered over it, studying the intricacies of the wood as if he was judging it for a competition. Julie walked over to one of the character posters.

"What does this say, Wu?" she asked, pointing to the painted lettering.

"It means 'Sailing the Seas depends on the helmsman; waging revolution depends on Mao Zedong Thought'"

"What about the stokers?" asked Willie looking up the desk. "You can't run a ship without people to produce the fire and steam."

Wu smiled.

"Are you a sailor, Mr. Logan?" he asked.

"No," said Willie. "I just worry about who stays on the ship when it starts sinking."

Wu was about to reply, but the sound of children singing interrupted him. It grew louder and louder until a line of schoolchildren paraded into the room. Willie, Julie, and Mr. Granderson headed to the back of the room and sat down on the wooden chairs that were set out ahead of their arrival. Most of the children wore different styles of dress, some wearing bright and colorful jackets while others wore simple, mono-colored shirts. Many of the girls wore red scarves around their necks. Following the procession was a young woman, no older than Julie, in a blue cotton jacket. She was holding a child who Willie assumed, based purely on sight was the youngest and also must have recently stopped crying.

Wu, who had stayed in the front of the room said something in Chinese to the young woman, who in turn nodded and placed the young child from her hip into a seat in the front row. She took a moment to bend down to eye level with the girl and reassure her that all was well. Wu looked over the class once before walking to the back of the room to join the American visitors.

The young woman, who by now Willie gathered was the teacher, began speaking to the children. At one point, she motioned to the people in the back of the room with an uneasy smile. The lesson began as the

children took out pieces of paper and crude pencils and began writing. The two students closest to Willie, however, did nothing but stare at the intriguing foreigner sitting behind them. More specifically, they were looking at his scruffy beard and long hair and gossiping between themselves.

Their inattention didn't go unnoticed, for the young teacher had crept up silently behind them and stood there until they noticed. The two children spun around in the chair, grabbed their writing utensils, and began writing furiously to catch up with the rest of the class.

"My apologies," said the teacher in English. Willie smiled politely.

"It's okay. They must not be used to a beard like this."

"No, they are not. Most of the men they see have a slight mustache, if that." The teacher turned to face the others and bowed. "My name is Zhao Suyin."

Mr. Granderson reciprocated the bow. "My name is Art Granderson, head of the Anthropology Department at Stanford. This is Julie Casilla, a graduate student. And that over there is Professor William Logan."

"Please," interrupted the young professor. "Call me Willie."

"It's a pleasure to meet you all. Excuse me."

Suyin turned back to the class and continued the lesson. Willie noticed that she paid attention to every student. While some needed more instruction than others, she skipped around the classroom giving every child a moment of personal recognition. Occasionally, she would explain to the group what was going on in the lecture.

"She speaks good English," noted Julie.

"Yes," said Wu, staring at Suyin with confusion. "I regret I myself did not know this."

After an hour of observation, Wu announced to the group that it was time for lunch.

"Will Miss Zhao be joining us?" asked Willie.

"I'm afraid not. her schedule keeps her until three o'clock."

"Surely she must get a lunch break?"

"Yes, but it won't be for another hour. You see, Mister Logan, we are on a tight schedule, and I must insist we stick to it."

There was genuine concern in his voice, as if the demand came not from him, but through him. Nevertheless, Willie persisted, turning to his boss.

"Mr. Granderson, this is perfect opportunity to conduct an interview with a Chinese citizen who speaks English. No middle man, just pure response."

Wu interrupted.

"I beg your pardon, but I assure you my translations are—"

Willie stood up abruptly, cutting off Wu mid-sentence. Suyin noticed the American stand up and glanced over at Wu.

"Miss Zhao, we were wondering if you might have lunch with all of us? We'd love to hear more about your life here in China," said Willie.

Suyin folded her hands in front of her.

"I'm afraid my life has not been that interesting, Mister Logan. I'm sure you will understand a lot more

by talking with other, more respectable people. Like the factory workers,” she added enthusiastically. “They always have such wonderful stories to tell.”

“That may be true,” said Willie, “but I still insist you come to lunch with us.”

Wu tried to make an excuse, but Julie was now on Willie’s side, for she too wanted to have lunch with the schoolteacher. Seemingly outnumbered, Wu quietly surrendered. Once again, the protest felt forced. Willie felt that Wu was being manipulated by strings controlled by an unknown master. Willie recognized in Wu the same uneasiness that he saw in himself when he had to tell his friends that his father wouldn’t let him play football. He was going to make one last plea when Suyin interrupted.

“Perhaps,” she said, looking at Willie, “I could offer you dinner at my home. All of you are invited, of course.”

Willie was about to accept when Mr. Granderson stood up as well, stealing the attention of the whole room including the curious students.

“That sounds lovely, Miss Zhao. We’d be honored to be a guest at your home.”

With that, the conversation appeared to be resolved. Wu seemed content enough, nodding more for self-reassurance than in agreement with Suyin’s offer. As they headed out the classroom door to the lunch the Tourism bureau had prepared, Willie believed that this trip was starting to become worthwhile.

When they arrived at Suyin’s home, the delegation and their translator were greeted by an old man who Willie guessed had to be around eighty-five years old. He introduced himself as the caretaker of the compound and offered to walk the group to Suyin’s apartment.

The compound was a straightforward housing complex, a network of buildings that illuminated the concept of blending domestic with public. As the old caretaker walked him past blue-tiled bathing chambers and a room filled with mail slots, Willie imagined what it would be like if he were to go into residence at Stanford. The tenants they passed by ignored the Americans for the most part, which surprised Willie but also made him smile at Wu’s incorrect belief that they would become a spectacle. The biggest response was from an older woman who stopped to watch them walk by and muttered something in Chinese that prompted the caretaker to laugh. Willie felt comfortably out of the loop.

Eventually, the caretaker stopped at a door and knocked on the wooden frame. Willie heard a soft, female voice mumble something on the other side, and the caretaker slid open the door. The apartment was clean and organized, but mostly empty much like a military barracks. The female voice came from a middle-aged woman lying on one of three beds that were spread out on the floor in the far corner. Willie couldn’t tell if she was sick or just lazy, but he entered just the same.

“Is Suyin here?” Willie whispered to Julie, glancing around the room, then back at the caretaker as if confirming they had the right place. The question lingered in the air before being passed around to all those in the room. The woman in the bed didn’t look at Willie, but instead shouted something at the caretaker, who in turn laughed and shut the door behind the small group.

“Excuse me, ma’am, but I’m looking for Zhao Suyin?” Mr. Granderson asked, and waited for a response before repeating the name.

Suddenly, a door at the other side of the room opened to reveal an even older woman than the one on

the bed. She looked to be as old as the caretaker, but her face was much less wrinkled, and her grin revealed a full set of teeth. The same could not be said of the old man.

“Suyin here,” she said, pointing to the floor. She kicked at the woman in the bed, obviously attempting to get her to stand up for their visitors. The old woman bowed, which Willie and the others reciprocated instinctually. Julie snickered as the old woman took Willie by the hand and led him and the others into the other, much larger room, which was a large kitchen that held a strong scent of onions. A large table had been set up on the floor in the corner, so Willie surmised that this was a dining room as well as a kitchen. Presently, the woman who was at the stove turned around. It was Suyin.

“Ah, Mister Logan. Welcome to our home. I see you’ve met my mother and my grandmother” She motioned to the woman from the bed, who had entered the kitchen behind them, and returned to the stovetop. “Please, everyone. Sit down. Dinner will be ready shortly.”

Suyin’s mother walked past Willie and took a seat at the head of the table. Mr. Granderson and Julie sat next to each other while Suyin’s grandmother sat at the closer end of the table and motioned for Willie to sit next to her. After a few minutes of Wu awkwardly trying to converse with her grandmother, Suyin brought over small pots full of rice, sauteed mushrooms and white cubes that Willie recognized almost immediately.

“This is tofu, isn’t it?”

“You know your Chinese cuisine.”

“It’s become quite popular in America, especially on the West Coast where we work. It’s the ‘ethical’ food of choice,” he said with sarcasm. “I’m sure this will be much better though.”

In all honesty, it wasn’t the tastiest meal Willie had during this five-day tour of China, but it was in the best company. Willie already knew that it wasn’t the rice wine and bean curd that made the meal, but it was refreshing to have lively mealtime conversation. He felt like he was back in San Francisco eating seafood with his differently dressed, but just as loquacious friends. Suyin remained quiet as most of the talking was done by Suyin’s grandmother and Mr. Granderson with Wu translating. After everyone had eaten, Suyin’s grandmother took the others out to the courtyard, while Willie offered to help Suyin clean the dishes. The proposal’s flirtatious tone prompted Wu’s brow to furrow, but he remained silent, reasoning that the American professor would not try anything embarrassing with boss and presumed girlfriend slash associate.

“You’ll have to forgive my mother. She’s not the most social,” said Suyin after the others had went outside. She was wiping down the bowls while Willie scrubbed a grimy pot. “She was deeply affected by my father’s death.”

“I’m sorry,” Willie said. “How did he pass, if I may ask?”

“During the food shortages, he made sure my mother and I ate before he ate anything. Of course, his share grew smaller and smaller as each day past. I believed that he had died so that others could live, but now...”

Her voice trailed off. After they dried off the dinnerware, Suyin boiled a pot of tea, and brought a cup to her mother in the other room before returning to the table with Willie. The steam rose from the cup, fluttering around her face like some ghostly fire. Willie took out a cigarette, making sure it was okay with Suyin before lighting it.

“Sounds like a noble man, your father.”

“Noble?” she asked.

“Sorry. Noble. It means honorable, as in nobility,” Willie tried to explain.

“In China, those are not the same thing, I’m afraid. My father was honorable, certainly. But he was not nobility. He was a humble peasant and proud fisherman.”

“A fisherman in Peking?” asked Willie, trying to lighten the mood with irony. It half-worked; Suyin’s eyes visibly brightened.

“No. We moved to Peking after he died. My family was originally from a small village just outside Tianjin. I come from a long line of fishermen, actually, which is the reason why I know English. My great-grandfather would learn it from visiting American sailors, trading with them for copies of Western books. I spent much of my childhood playing by the ocean and learning from my father.”

“Sounds lovely,” Willie said, reflecting on his own life. “I grew up in the northeast, so it was always ‘chopping wood’ and surviving snowstorms until summer.”

“Oh?” She said. “What was the name of your village?”

Willie tried unsuccessfully to stifle a chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” she asked candidly, leaning forward to set her tea down on the table.

“I just never thought of Bethel, Maine as a village. I mean they’re friendly enough, but everyone keeps to themselves mostly.”

“I see,” said Suyin. “Beth-el, Maine”

“Yeah,” said Willie. “But now I live and work in California. Much more hospitable, both in temperature and vibe.”

“You are a professor, correct?”

“You remembered. Yes, I teach anthropology. That’s why I am fascinated by you, and your experience,” he quickly added.

“My experience. What good will come of hearing my experience? My story?”

Willie tried to come up with a fair answer, but the only reason he could come up with was proving the conclusion that China is, in fact, interesting. Outside, the sound of children running in the corridors pierced the silence. He was reminded of when he was boy at Bethel Elementary. He and his friends would race out to the yard for recess, but Willie would always win because he was the fastest and most determined of all his friends. He was always running towards something. Perhaps he still was.

“Did you fight in Vietnam, Mister Logan?” asked Suyin, breaking him from his nostalgia.

“Did I what?” he asked back, although he heard her the first time. She repeated the question. “No. I didn’t enlist,” he said. “I was— am a conscientious objector. I don’t believe in violent solutions.”

“Violent solutions occur whether you believe in them or not. Whether it’s through direct involvement or willful ignorance, you will always be involved.”

“Aye, but I won’t take up a gun, that’s for sure.” He took a deep breath before deciding to turn the sword on her. “Were you involved in any of the student demonstrations?”

“Yes, I was a proud member of Chairman Mao’s Red Guards. Me and my other friends of good background all joined in ‘66.” Willie wondered where she was going to go next and was about to ask another question when she continued. “We were so happy to be useful for the cause. Working together to serve the

Party.”

“But now you don’t?”

She ignored the question. “It was with my involvement with the Red Guards that I met Fu Huan. He was the son of a banker, a terrible family background to have.”

“Were you two close?”

“We were practically married,” remarked Suyin with a smile. For some reason, a small amount of jealousy arose in Willie, and immediately he felt ashamed because of it.

“Practically?”

“We were preparing ourselves for the ceremony when Chairman Mao directed us and most of the other students to go to the countryside to live with the peasants. Huan and I were lucky to be sent to the same farm close to the northern border.”

“It must have been like going home. Back to Tianjin.”

“In many ways, yes. Apart from the agricultural differences, the farmers had the same down-to-earth mannerisms, but I was surprised at how different things were compared to Peking. Life was more brutal, yet it had straightforward nature that you can’t find here. I’m not sure if we really learned anything from them, or simply gave them extra hands to do the work they had already been doing. I’m not even sure we made legitimate impression on them at all.”

“Maybe there weren’t enough people,” Willie proposed.

“We were probably too tired,” Suyin said. “We worked harder than I ever had before. Our backs ached and our legs were cut up from the reeds. But it felt good to do labor for the Party. After awhile, we grew stronger, making the work easier. We were also able to enjoy each other’s company, although we often had to hide our feelings from the rest of the company.”

“I see. When you two got back to the city were you finally able to get married?”

Suyin diverted her eyes to the ground, and almost immediately, Willie realized what her response implied.

“I’m sorry, Suyin. I didn’t mean to—I should have realized—” He stumbled over his words like a teenager desperately backpedaling from a misplaced ‘I love you.’ He silently hoped that the others would save him from embarrassment when Suyin told Willie the truth.

“One night,” Suyin said, opening her eyes, “there was a fire on the second floor of our dormitory. We never found out the cause. Probably a cigarette or something equally trivial. Huan and I rescued as many people as we could, but there was one woman whose legs were caught under a fallen beam. Huan was helping her when I saw the floor collapse. There was nothing I could do, so I ran outside and collapsed onto the cold, wet grass. Simultaneous sadness and exhaustion, my body gave out. Just as the floor did.”

Presently, Suyin’s grandmother returned with Mr. Granderson and Julie. Wu followed closely behind. Suyin boiled another pot of tea for everyone. As they sat and drank tea, Willie understood that Suyin’s story would be left unfinished. The personal, affecting story gave way to the straightforward optimism that the American visitors had been hearing all week. Eventually, Mr. Granderson noted the time and suggested that they should be leaving.

As they walked down the hallway toward the front entrance, Willie hung back with Suyin.

“Do you think you escaped the fire to tell Huan’s story?”

“No, I wasn’t spared. None of us were spared. The Chinese people, the younger students especially, must now carry the burden of our recent past and try to make of sense of it.”

The others were well ahead of them, now. Suyin’s grandmother was the only one in earshot. Wu was hurrying them along, obviously eager to get them back to the hotel.

“I know we just met,” continued Willie, ignoring his better judgement and place as a guest. “But I feel that this was all meant to happen. Your life is just too endearing to ignore. Please, let me be a part of telling the world about it.”

“You’re not in love with me, Mister Logan,” said Suyin, seeing something that Willie himself could not. “You’re in love with my story. And if you ask anyone else my age, you’ll be just as enamored with theirs as you are mine.”

Willie halted in front of an apartment with its door open. The young couple who were inside said something to Suyin who replied something to assuage their concern over the visibly shaken American that had materialized in their doorway. Suyin’s grandmother, recognizing the stagnant professor, double backed and gave Willie a playful kick to nudge him along.

They walked the rest of the way to the gate in silence. Flanked on both sides by Suyin and her grandmother, Willie felt the weight of the moment in his stomach. With each step, he approached the sad truth of her words. It terrified him to think that there were millions of stories just like Suyin’s. It was even more terrifying to think that he couldn’t see the woman without the story. The others had gotten to the van ahead of Willie, and Wu was standing by the driver side door, arms crossed.

“It was a pleasure meeting you and your associates, Mister Logan,” said Suyin. “I do hope you visit China again soon.”

With nothing left to do or say, Willie nodded and bowed. Suyin and her grandmother in turn bowed as well. Her grandmother chuckled softly and they both turned to go back to their apartment. As he drove off in the seat next to Wu, he watched Suyin’s compound shrink in the side mirror before disappearing entirely as the van rounded a corner.

Back at the hotel, Willie sat in his room reading when he heard a knock at the door. It was Julie. She said that the university called, saying that Mr. Granderson’s wife had contracted pneumonia. The doctors said that she was going to be okay, but Julie suggested they return home. Because the tour was mostly done with anyways, Mr. Granderson reluctantly agreed. Wu had arranged for them to fly to Tokyo first thing in the morning, where they would transfer over to a flight home. Willie didn’t say a word, so Julie took that to mean acceptance.

“So,” said Julie, taking a seat on the bed next to Willie. “Did the teacher have anything interesting to say?”

“Actually, yes. Her father was a fisherman, and her husband died trying to save a woman from a fire.”

“Seriously? Willie, that’s incredible.” She added, “Are you going to talk about it in the report?”

“I don’t know. We already have a lot of compelling stuff.”

“Sure, but one more story couldn’t hurt. Especially one as impressive as hers.”

Willie said no more of Suyin, but could think of nothing else. Julie offered to stay the night, but Willie

turned her down, suggesting they get a good night's sleep. As he lay in the empty bed, his thoughts went to Suyin and whether he would ever see her or her grandmother or her mother or the old caretaker ever again.

The next morning, Wu drove them to the airport. As expected, he gave a dry-eyed farewell, saying only that he hoped to someday visit the United States. They said their final goodbyes and boarded the plane. As Mr. Granderson reclined in his seat, Julie turned to Willie.

"This was a productive trip, don't you think?"

"I believe so," said Willie as he too lowered the back of his seat. "It all depends on how the folks back home perceive it. I mean, what's the point of going if they don't learn or, worse, even care about what's going on here?"

"Well, that all depends on how we frame it, right?"

"What are you, a graduate student?" he said with a smile. "Wake me when we arrive in Japan."

Julie nodded, and took one last glance out the window. The terminal in the early morning slumbered in the grey morning, its windows clean and empty. The tarmac was quiet save for the few attendants standing around, smoking cigarettes and chatting aimlessly. The plane thundered down the runway. Julie stared out the window as Peking faded from view and the Yellow Sea leaked into the Pacific and all the other bodies of water where fishermen caught their daily bread and commercial vessels transported their master's fortunes.



Slickman, Gary. Students march through Amherst, ca. 1970. University Photograph Collection (RG 110-176). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries