5,100 words

How About Chinese?

My father was a dignified man. The kind of man who refused to wear his socks inside out, never wore his reading glasses while napping, and rinsed his cup after each drink. Jeremiah Benjamin Coleridge Lin was his name. A missionary had bestowed a first name upon him in Taiwan and my father appropriated and accumulated more names of people he considered great men. I knew him as father.

He raised me well, kept me on his dental plan until my braces had come off and wisdom teeth out, and invested a generous sum annually on my behalf in dividend bearing stocks. As a wedding present, he provided the down payment on my house, located in a suburb of Washington, D.C. nestled outside the Beltway with no street credibility, but access to public

transportation and reputable public schools. He advised me, “Maintain your lawn around the mailbox. Pull weeds out at the roots.”

My father lived in suburban Minneapolis, a place he called home after fleeing war torn China, being raised in Taiwan, and immigrating to America to attend university on a partial scholarship in Kansas. I only returned to my birthplace when my mother summoned me under the pretense of a holiday or family crisis, ranging from deaths of long-lost relatives---whose convoluted family branches called to mind images of concubines and emperors and at whose funeral I was obligated to make an appearance as the all-American son--- to Thanksgiving fusion dinners featuring steamed pork buns and pumpkin pie. On these sojourns, during which I never set my watch to a different time zone, my father and I talked while we fixed objects in the house. He found it easier to communicate over a broken sink. “Hand me the wrench.” He added on the subject of things needing fixing, “You should talk to your mother more.”

My mother passed away after a prolonged illness so rare it had featured on every medical procedural television show. First treated by the most advanced lasers and then with rare imported Chinese herbs procured in dingy Chinatown pharmacies with crooked aisles, the disease wasted her body. My parents spent decades adjusting to the wonders of American living, including the complexities of frequent flyer miles and all-you-can-eat, but, in old age, returned to their roots.

As a child, I recalled my mother memorizing the Bible, committing archaic names to memory and praying as if this were a shortcut to assimilation. Heaven was a topic she could use in conversation to engage our neighbors--- hale and cheerful folks who boasted of their Scandinavian heritage by never admitting it was cold. Late in life, my parents had a change of faith and adopted ancient Chinese customs that they likely misinterpreted.

They began observing Chinese holidays, bowing to ancestors, and trying to balance the elements in their bodies. They recalculated their birthdates according to the Lunar Calendar thereby adding a year to their lives because the moon did not match Western time-keeping.

My mother's funeral became an amalgamation with Christian psalms tempered by chanting Buddhist monks. The end result seemed not so much devotional as hedging your bets for the afterlife.

My father carried on in his routines after my mother's death, embracing them with more dedication. He woke at four a.m. before the morning paper arrived and let his tea leaves settle for five minutes. We never acknowledged my mother's passing. Her absence made itself felt in the lack of Christmas and birthday cards, events my mother commemorated.

A person's life should be remembered for two hundred years, the span of an individual's lifetime, overlapping their child's, and their grandchild's lifetime. This seemed a long enough period to recognize a person's existence, to bring dignity to the mistakes and beliefs a person held, sanitize them, and translate them into legend. After three generations, no one thought of their dead. My mother had died early enough that my daughter had already forgotten her. I would be the last person to think of my mother.

In life, my mother communicated with me by commenting on my eating and study habits. Any sentimentality felt gratuitous. She would have an unobserved grave in the middle of America once my father's cremated remains were inurned next to her and I died. Strangers in the future would pass by the burial site and remark, if at all, on the engraving that told of my mother "born in China, raised in Taiwan, died in America" and appreciate how far she had advanced.

My father, in a rare concession to modern technology, still emailed her regularly, as if cyberspace and eternity overlapped. He said to me after my mother's cremation, as we readjusted the sectional sofa, "Now we've left something behind in America. Just like when we had you."

"Your father called," my wife, Linda, told me over her fruit drink, "from a pay phone. Says he knows where he is and will meet you at work."

"I wasn't expecting him," I said. We had not spoken since my daughter Julia's fifteenth birthday eight months ago.

"I haven't made up the guest room," Linda said, signaling the end of the conversation by gathering her dishes. She twisted everything up: her hair in a bun, her waist cinched by a thick belt, her feet in high heels. She worked at a philanthropic foundation, distributing obscene amounts of money based on the principle that you should give cash to anyone but a government.

My daughter appeared and pronounced, "Two Chinese words that have a meaning in English are *gung-ho* and *kow-tow*."

I gave Julia a tentative shake of her shoulder. Communication with her had become challenging ever since we had given her a smartphone she consulted at random moments. It chimed to an unknown rhythm. The object had usurped our authority. I said, "The kids at my school thought *ching-chong, ding-dong,* and *wee-wee* were Chinese words."

"Not that we know the difference between real and made-up Chinese," Linda contributed. Both my wife and I were ethnic Chinese and other folks noticed this first. We served as default experts on Chinese food and the merits of various forms of martial arts.

My parents claimed I spoke Chinese before English, but my earliest memories included learning the ABCs in front of the television. Somewhere between the ages of two and five, Chinese became an unnatural tongue.

From my daughter, I could see how I resembled my father, all of us inheriting the same aquiline nose from a distant ancestor. Julia's slang, fashion sense, and concerns were as foreign to me as life in imperial China. Julia was well-adjusted and popular in school, wearing her knitted cheerleader top and the letter jacket of her first boyfriend without any hint of irony. I recalled my own childhood as a daily struggle to avoid spitballs and slouching as low as possible on the school bus to avoid the menacing glare of Billy Jansen who occupied the very last seat on the bus and the whole world representing a potential victim to him.

As an only child, my parents regarded me with a mixture of bewilderment and anxiety. They blamed my bad traits on American culture, although they would be hard pressed to define what constituted this vague all-encompassing and ever-present threat. Their idea of American culture was rooted in the 1960s when they had initially come to America and most of the references they cited, including the rock bands and movies, were British. The anxiety manifested at odd moments when they cited all they had given up so I could have a better life, as if I had been a gestational concept in their minds right when they got off the figurative boat, part of a scheme that included six years of graduate study and several decades of work in middle-management at a multi-national company specializing in adhesives, culminating in the conception of an American son.

When I reached my office, close enough to Capitol Hill to live vicariously and imagine the power and corruption from behind the safety of parked lunch vans, my father was waiting.

He wore his tweed jacket recalling the musty odor of an overstuffed laundry hamper. I said, "You found me."

"Is that your secretary?" my father said. "She calls you Mr. Lin so at first I thought she was talking about me.'"

"She's the office secretary." I said. We were a small firm of three, all alumni of the same law school, sharing the identical dream of not working at a big corporate firm born of an idealism that we reminisced over each Christmas, but regretted the rest of the year. Between us, we covered family, tax, and immigration law.

"So many powerful people here," my father said. "My son is one of them."

Washington represented a perpetual revolving door. Influential brokers recycled through the public and private sector, sitting out entire administrations by serving on boards of foundations and major companies. But an entire other population existed who did not deal with world peace and whose biggest issues were the best after school activities and playdates. I existed in this realm.

"What do you do every day?" my father asked, sitting on the edge of my desk next to a stack of files with its own intricate architecture. He spoke English, only using his second language when he wanted to lecture me. As a child, whenever my father broke into English, I knew a scolding was going to follow. "Can I help?"

"I don't think you'd find this interesting," I said, shoving the folders onto my blotter. Immigration lawyers dealt with stacks of documents. We handled paper copies of birth certificates of dubious authenticity from far-away places and police reports from countries reputed for general lawlessness. One life summarized by countless documents. Immigration law had not caught up to the twenty-first century and gone electronic. Instead, we had hand scrawled

documents on parchment. Every country seemed to share basic familial relationships, though. "These are petitions for immigrant visas."

"People want to come here," my father said, thumbing through the nearest file. "My son can help."

"I interpret the law," I said. I never knew what my father thought of my career path. As a child, he preached practicality as many immigrant parents had. He wanted me to become an engineer, the shortest course to stability, as opposed to a doctor or lawyer, professions requiring years of extra education. He never dealt with lawyers and, in a sign of assimilation, shared American's opinion of lawyers as living off other people's problems.

My father had done something I never asked about as an engineer, coming home through the garage door each evening to eat his meal in silence before commandeering the reclining chair. He ordered me to bed each night at ten sharp. I never saw him go to bed in my childhood. My father's struggles to adjust to his new homeland or build a better life left no room for him to teach me how to throw a proper curveball or ask a girl to the dance.

"Who is Manny Arocha?" my father asked, looking at a photo.

"Those are private," I said. My firm filed standard immigrant visa petitions for spouses, siblings, and children. We reunited long-lost relatives. Occasionally, we handled complex claims for asylum. We saw Chinese families with five children protesting China's one-child policy, Indian Sikhs invoking fears of religious persecution, and foreigners reborn as Christians to stay in America.

"I went through this long ago," my father said.

I had heard his tales of traveling to the U.S. Embassy to secure a student visa many times. He spoke of the two-day train journey he embarked on with only a satchel, putting on his best

suit, and eventually speaking with a young consular officer who held my father's entire future in the "issue" and "deny" stamps that he abused. Over the years my father elaborated upon the tale. His entire image of American policy had been determined long ago by one bureaucrat who, thankfully, had made the right decision. I said, "You made it here."

"How do you become American?" my father asked.

"There are many ways," I said. "To become American. We have preferences."

"Maybe Manny is my brother," my father said, thumbing through Manny's thick file.

"There are a lot of made-up relationships," I said. "Brothers marry sisters. Fake deaths. In some cultures you are supposed to marry your sister-in-law if your brother dies."

"Once you become American, you stay one?" my father asked.

"We have the most liberal immigration and citizenship laws in the world outside of countries where you can buy citizenship," I said, sounding like my high school civics textbook. "You can renounce your citizenship or commit expatriating acts such as fighting for a foreign army."

"Your mother became American first," my father said. "I had paperwork problems. I didn't have a birth certificate. I took her to the courthouse in Minneapolis and she swore-in. The Mississippi River had frozen over and gas cost fifty cents full-service. I don't think she felt different, but she was relieved. We had gotten something that could not be taken away."

"We're all Americans now," I said. Our citizenship laws were founded on both the principal of citizenship through blood and land. You could become American if your parents were or if you happened to born on U.S. territory. Other countries had narrower interpretations, but even our definition had evolved over time, reflecting our social mores. An out-of-wedlock

child, for example, could now become American more easily than decades ago. For years, Chinese were specifically excluded from immigration to the U.S.

"You can't always tell who is who. People used to accuse me of being a spy," my father said. "They would say 'You commie spy. Go back where you came from.' Now the insult is being called a 'terrorist'. Fortunately, I don't look like one of those."

I wasn't used to engaging in political debates with my father. I assumed he voted Republican. We never argued. My father dictated when I was a child, dispensing advice in English for emphasis. Even if I disagreed, I did not speak up, but got back by smoking in the mall parking lot.

"You were lucky. You were born American," my father said. "Maybe one day we won't have nationalities. Just people. I've been American most of my life now."

I said, "We've always had tribes since the cavemen. We need to belong."

"Are you happy?" my father asked. "Doing what you are doing?"

"I can support my family," I said.

"I remember the last time I made you happy," my father said. "You were nine. I folded you a paper spaceship from an origami book. The instructions confused me. I ended up creasing the paper every which way and crumbling the paper into the semblance of a spacecraft. You didn't notice and spent the whole afternoon flying it around the house, pretending to be an alien from the planet Yood. You crashed the ship in the end."

"Parents aren't supposed to make kids happy," I said with the benefit of hindsight, having an adolescent child of my own. Perhaps parents served as a source of happiness for children, but that transitioned to frustration and embarrassment. I recognized the shift in my daughter. "Why are you here?"

"There's a lot of history I haven't seen." my father said. "What better place to start than in the capital?"

"History is all around us," I said, feeling disingenuous because I did not appreciate the museums, artifacts, and monuments. The White House represented a major traffic detour for me. "Did you know Washington wasn't the first capital?"

"In China they had two capitals at the same time, one for the Communists and one for the Nationalists." my father said.

"I'll show you the history," I said. "I know where it is."

"These are the great Americans in history?" my father asked as we strolled along Independence Avenue, and made our way to the National Mall, museums surrounding and shielding us.

Tourists mingled with joggers on lunch break and homeless people. All of them seemed to have a destination. The tourists consulted maps to arrive, the joggers barreled and weaved to go faster, and the homeless accepted theirs. College students played games of catch and lounged on the grassy surroundings. They might have been protesting fifty years ago.

We started at the Jefferson Memorial tucked around the Tidal Basin. The high ceilinged rotunda offered shade and cool air. We walked across the Inlet Bridge to the Roosevelt Memorial and meandered and mingled with the sculptures in the park. At the Martin Luther King, Jr. park, we took in the massive half-formed sculpture that bled into his supporting foundation of rock.

We circled the World War Two Memorial, scuffling down the awkward steps. My father felt the engraving on a plaque. "I used to hate the Japanese," my father said. "That's what I was taught growing up in China. I got to America and realized nobody could tell the difference

between Chinese and Japanese. We were in the same boat. For me to hate Japanese was to hate myself."

"Enemies changes," I said. I didn't tell my father about the one ethnic Japanese classmate I had during high school in Minnesota. We avoided one another in mutual shame, recognizing that being together would multiply our ethnicity exponentially. The last time I visited Minneapolis, I had ate lunch in Hmong and Laotian neighborhoods, Asian brethren that I didn't relate to at all.

My father said, "Isn't it interesting we name wars?"

"We wouldn't know what we were talking about if we didn't give it a name," I said. Memorials lent authenticity and authority to events, cloaking history in inevitability.

"But not everyone calls a war the same thing. Do the English call our war the 'Revolutionary War'?"

"Wars are named after the principle we are fighting for. Or the place," I said. We had the Great War, Dessert Storm, and the War Against Terrorism. "Having a name helps define the war."

"Why do you think we put up statues?" my father asked. He stopped at a plaque commemorating our newest state. "I remember when Hawaii became a state. People in Taiwan were proud because Hawaiians looked like us."

"The United States has grown up," I said.

We exited the World War Two Memorial and made our way towards the Reflecting Pool. The Washington Monument to the east of us loomed against the skyline. We lacked the tall skyscrapers and lurking shadows that defined other metropolitan cities. I said, "Monuments help us reconcile with the past."

"Or forget," my father said. "Build a statue and we can move on."

"Every country needs heroes," I said.

"But why did it take decades to build a memorial for Martin Luther King, Jr?" my father asked. "Wasn't he a hero from the start? How do we pick our heroes?"

"It takes time to decide," I said. "right from wrong."

At this time of year, the Mall dirt was muddy and the grass dead. Construction sites littered the path that stretched from the Capitol behind us to the Lincoln Memorial. Tour buses circled.

"We need a monument to people who never claimed any itemized deductions," my father said. "Never had overdue book from the library."

"They haven't done anything." I said, steering him forward. "Except what every citizen is supposed to do."

"What has anyone who hasn't started a war done?" my father said.

"You've achieved a lot," I said, feeling obligated to compliment my father. I never knew if he considered his life a success or obligation.

"When I arrived," my father said, "all I had was a backpack of summer clothes and the address of my dormitory. When you were born, your room was a closet."

We entered the Vietnam Memorial Wall, a sunken gash of angled and polished stone. A child scratched paper over the etched names to take an imprint. I felt conspicuous the few times I walked through this venue, as if I were a sniper in enemy territory.

"The Wall wasn't here when we visited. You were eight," my father said. "Nobody wanted to talk about the Vietnam War then."

We reached the Lincoln Memorial, the sixteenth President housed in an imposing structure. The older monuments protected tourists from the environment. The new structures exposed us to the weather. When it rained, you wanted Lincoln more than MLK. I said, "Here we are."

"What did Lincoln do, again?" my father asked.

"He freed the slaves," I said.

"How?" My father looked up at Lincoln.

"You know this. You passed the citizenship exam. Lincoln gave a speech."

"Everyone listened?" My father asked.

"There was a war first," I said. "People had to die."

We descended and made our way back, stopping at the Reflecting Pool. My father crouched and peered at the shallow water. "How deep do you think it is?"

My father tipped his foot in the water. I imagined drones swooping down on us and security forces descending, but the only disturbance was a discarded American flat bobbing on the water. I said, "Don't fall in."

"I see foreign currency at the bottom," my father said. "Is this a wishing pool?"

My hand created a cushion of air behind my father's elbow. I expected him to protest since this was the venue of so many famous speeches. I had reached the point in life when I had to question my father's common sense.

"I witnessed a lot of history," my father said. "JFK shot. Watergate. Abortion legalized. School busing. The space shuttle explosion. The remote control. I didn't realize any of it would become history at the time. To be honest, I thought the 8-track and automatic seatbelt were more relevant at the time, but who remembers those today?"

I watched my father gazing into the water and saw his reflection. To end his reverie, I said, “I’m hungry. Let’s eat.”

“How about Chinese?” my father asked.

The restaurant was longer than wide. Strategically placed mirrors along the entire wall created an illusion of depth. The floor slanted ever so slightly reminding me of the Chinese grocery stores with cramped aisles my parents frequented.

An affluent lunch time crowd descended on the premises. The proprietor had mastered processing the take-out orders of federal white collar workers with efficiency to match appetites. A huge tub of steaming rice occupied a corner of the visible kitchen. Endless variations of food appeared from the same vats. The sullen cashier tongued a toothpick to communicate and topped packages off with a generous helping of fortune cookies.

My father and I opted to eat-in. We got shoved into a teetering table near the bathroom. My father perused the laminated menu, printed on both sides. Dishes coded with a letter and number assisted in ordering.

“This is what the Chinese are famous for in America,” my father said. “Food and cheap products. Chinese restaurants combine both. None of this tastes the same in China.”

“That’s what’s great about the U.S.,” I said. “We can turn anything American.”

“The people who work here are from Vietnam,” my father said.

“What will you have?” I asked. “This is on me.”

“An interesting menu. They have Southern and Northern dishes. Different flavors.”

“We used to drive all the way to Chicago to eat authentic Chinese food.” I said, recalling the long weekends when my father woke us early and converted the back seats of our van into a

bed so I could sleep during the drive. These were the days before seatbelts were mandatory and diversity had become profitable.

"Your mother never got to leave the neighborhood except on those trips," my father said.

My mother's cooking revolved around the principle of using leftovers at any cost. Disguised in the steamed vegetables and meat would be remnants of yesterday's pork and peas. As a measure of economy, onions and hot dogs served as garnish. I remembered my parents struggling to fit in and to get by, economizing with the fear that at any given moment they might be deported. After our meals, my father ensconced himself in his recliner and watched American sitcoms. He prided himself on his ability to predict the next gag and punchline. He was in on the joke and confirmation made the pratfall funnier. He also announced who had committed the crime on detective shows by the second commercial break.

Our food arrived. My father inspected it and said, "Someone accused me of eating dogs once. An old woman who clutched her poodle."

"There's no name for dog meat," I said. "We have beef for cows. Poultry and pork."

"We need a name for it," my dad said, "before we can accept it. Like wars."

"I wonder if dogs taste the same?" I speculated.

"All meat tastes like frog to me," my father said.

I shoveled rice into my mouth. As a child I learned chopsticks could be used to spear, saw, and spoon food. We cracked open our fortune cookies. Along with lucky numbers, "know yourself better than others" was scrawled on my fortune. I said, "I don't know if mine is good or not."

"There is a time you have to leave," my father read his fortune. "I think it should be 'there is a time you have to love.'"

I took my father home.

We sat in my formal dining room. Linda served dinner. She reverted to the role of dutiful wife when my parents were present and reserved her best behavior for them, not recognizing they had only expected her to produce a grandchild.

Julia gave her grandfather a hug. My father possessed a natural ease with Julia. He had nothing to prove to her and no stake in her growing up, allowing him to express an affection that had skipped a generation. Julia didn't give a second thought that her grandfather had turned up out of nowhere and exhibited the greatest gift of youth: the inability to be surprised.

"What brings you here?" Linda asked, shoveling out brown rice for us.

We ate family style, big platefuls of quinoa, tofu, and chicken curry parked in the middle of the table. My wife purchased locally grown food and eggs hatched by free-range chickens. We could afford these luxuries. My father used to tell stories about slaughtering chickens so my family was going back to our roots by purchasing from a self-sufficient farm.

"I have news," my father said. "That I want to deliver in person."

"That sounds exciting," Linda said. She topped off our wine glasses with a vintage from South Africa.

"You can't post on-line?" Julia asked. She created instant testimonials documenting her every move in crisis mode and broadcasting to all for time immemorial. "I do it six times a day."

"That's not news," I said. "That's complaining."

"They call it a Wall," my father commented, "where you post your pictures. Like the Vietnam Wall we saw today."

"People share too much," Linda said.

My father never shared. Our dinners consisted of ten minutes of digesting food in mutual silence while my mother monitored my eating habits, occasionally commenting about my weight. My family history would effectively die out with my father. I didn't invest time in discovering my heritage, afraid I would discover bound feet and opium. My knowledge of my past was informed by American movies more than my own parents.

If I drew a family tree, I imagined my parents coming to America would require new roots. I said, "Imagine if the internet existed when people came to America by boat to Ellis Island?"

"When you immigrate," my father said, "you can't be who you are. You don't know how to talk the language, you don't know where to go for help. You don't know what an express check-out line means. All your mother and I had were each other. Then you came."

"You and Caroline shared fifty years together," Linda said, calling my mother by her Christian first name. "Not many people know someone that long."

"I could never take care of her," my father said. "People call your wife bad names and you don't have the English to respond. You swear in the only words you know how. That makes people laugh more."

"Caroline was my grandmother," Julia said to remind herself.

"I love her, of course," my father said. "She would like what I'm doing now. I wanted to tell you that I've met someone."

The idea that this whole time my father had been living, wanting, and feeling while I thought he was merely surviving shocked me. The world order had been disrupted. I said, "You came all this way to tell us you've met someone? Why?"

“These things aren’t planned,” my father said. “At any other time in my life, I wouldn’t have been attracted to her.”

“Where is she from?” I asked imagining the Ukraine or Philippines.

“China.” my father said. “She has crazy ideas about America. She lives in Shanghai and buys Western name brands. She’ll be surprised when she sees Minnesota.”

“Do you,” I asked, “love her?”

“Love isn’t always the same feeling and means different things at different times,” my father said.

“Is she your age?” I asked.

“At my age, anyone over sixty is my age,” my father said.

“Are you going to have children?” Julia asked. “That would be weird.”

“This is wonderful news,” Linda said. “Quit asking so many questions. We should toast.”

“What’s her name?” I asked. A name would make the relationship concrete.

“Mei Lin,” my father said. “Makes sense in Chinese and English.”

My father produced a staged photo in traditional sepia-tone depicting a woman of indeterminate age gazing off camera in slight profile. The photo had been created to look instantly old and harmless. Time made things credible, couching events and people in legitimacy and innocence. What didn’t we know then?

“We’d love to have her over,” my wife said. “This will be a whole new life.”

“You don’t outgrow being a father or son. I’ll still be who I am to you,” my father said.

“Is this what you want?” I asked my father. Children and relationships provided a meaningful measure for growth. I remembered courting Linda, our marriage, Julia’s first day at school. My father could start, again. “Is this happening?”

“I’m counting down the days to her visit,” my father said. “She needs a visa.”

“I can help,” I said. Other than taking out the trash and picking up sticks on the lawn, I had never helped my father. He had never asked.

My father paused. His eyes took in the table. He smiled. He shrugged. I saw my father. The realm of possible things got a little bigger, a little brighter.

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