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At the Edge of Empire

A Family's Reckoning with China

Edward Wong

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For

Mom and Dad

&

Tini and Aria

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Part Four

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Author's Note

When writing a book on China, it is impossible to find a consistent way to transliterate names. The practical difficulties are compounded by thornier considerations: choices over language and naming are often political issues and involve the exercise of power.

The names of most people and places in this book are written in hanyu pinyin, the official system for transliterating Mandarin Chinese adopted by the People's Republic of China in 1958. The inventors based the system on spoken Mandarin Chinese in the north.

But there are many exceptions in the book. I use the common historical transliterations for some people and places rather than render them in pinyin—for example, Chiang Kai-shek and Hong Kong.

Some of the choices I made were personal. I use forms of Cantonese transliteration for the names of some of my close family members and for places that are important to them. Most of the Cantonese transliteration uses a system called jyutping, but many people's names, such as that of my father, Yook Kearn Wong, are simply written in their official English spellings.

In other parts, I've tried to use transliterations of names from languages spoken by the local people, though I haven't done this everywhere. This includes Uyghur and Tibetan names. For some places, I note both the local and Chinese names. I consulted native speakers and scholars.

I have also included Chinese script in some lines. I chose to write it in traditional characters, the system that is still common in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The reason is because my parents and uncles and aunts use that script, and I studied it in Taiwan. The People's Republic of China uses simplified script, but the traditional form endures.

Forking paths are many—
Where might I be?
Yet a day will come when the winds lengthen, the waves break—
And I shall sail like a cloud across the wind-darkened sea.

Li Bai 李白 (701–762)

I left home in my youth, now returning much older
Native accent unchanged, but temples streaked with gray
Children greet me but don't know me
Cheerfully they ask: "Traveler, where are you from?"

He Zhizhang 賀知章 (659–744)

He remembered the persimmons hanging low from the trees in the autumn light. They dangled from the branches above his head, plump and smooth and the color of burnt copper. He sat in the open back of the truck alongside the other soldiers. Trees lined the road, and the air was crisp and dry. They pointed at the persimmons, marveled at them. How sweet it would be to bite into one. Dust trailed the truck as it continued down the dirt road. They were heading into a vast and sere land, a place of ancient paths and towns, many now long gone. A frontier. The warriors who came before them, also gone. Seven decades later, he remembered the persimmons, golden in the rays of the fading day.


N
RUSSIA
KAZAKHSTAN
Altai Mountains
Burqin
Altay
Wenquan
Zungharian Basin
Sayram Lake
Ürümqi /
Ürümchi
Yining/Ghulja
MO
Flaming Mountains
KYRGYZSTAN
Tian Shan
Turfan
Pamir Mountains
TAJIKISTAN
Kashgar
Hami
Karakoram Highway
Lake Karakul
Muztagh Ata
XINJIANG
Wakhan Corridor
Yarkand
Yumenguan
Tashkurgan
Taklamakan
Desert
Loulan
Dunhuang
AFGHANISTAN
Tarim Basin
Jiayuguan
Bozai Gumbuz
Khunjerab Pass
PAKISTAN
Gilgit
Qilian Mountains
Khotan
Kunlun Mountains
Xining
Leh
Islamabad
QINGHAI
Yellow River
Dharamsala
Tongren/Rebgong
Sangke
TIBET
AUTONOMOUS
REGION
Yushu/Jyekundo
Maqu/Machu
Larung
Gar
Derge
Delhi
Nam Tso
Shigatse
Lhasa
Yumbulagang
Yangtze River
NEPAL
Himalaya
SICH
Gyantse
Mount Everest
INDIA
Kathmandu
Thimphu
Darjeeling
SIKKIM
BHUTAN
Tawang
BANGLADESH
Dhaka
YUN
MYANMAR
Naypyidaw
LAOS
Bay of
Bengal
Vientiane
THAILAND
KEY
Country capitals
City/Town sites
Great Wall
Cantonese name
Uyghur name
Tibetan name
Manchu name


CHINA 中國
Ulan Bator
NGOLIA
HEILONGJIANG
Harbin
Changchun
INNER MONGOLIA
JILIN
Rason
Sea of Japan
Shenyang/Mukden
LIAONING
NORTH KOREA
Mount Kumgang National Park
Gobi Desert
Chengde
Hohhot
Yellow River
Beijing
TIANJIN
Pyongyang
Seoul
SOUTH KOREA
Tengger Desert
HEBEI
Liangjiahe
Yan'an
NINGXIA
SHANXI
Yellow River
SHANDONG
Yellow Sea
Lanzhou
Xiahe/Labrang
Grasslands
Xi'an
GANSU
SHAANXI
HENAN
JIANGSU
JAPAN
ANHUI
Shanghai
HUBEI
Beichuan
Dujiangyan
Chengdu
Yangtze River
Wuhan
Yangtze River
Hangzhou
ZHEJIANG
U A N
Chongqing
East China Sea
JIANGXI
HUNAN
Fuzhou
GUIZHOU
FUJIAN
Taipei
Taiwan Strait
TAIWAN
Kunming
GUANGXI
GUANGDONG
N A N
Guangzhou
Jiangmen
Shenzhen
Taishan City
Hong Kong
Macau
VIETNAM
Hanoi
Hehe Village/
Hap Wo Village
Pacific Ocean
0 Miles
500
0 Kilometers
500
HAINAN
South China Sea
PHILIPPINES
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Prologue

When I was in my twenties, Father showed me a small black-and-white photograph of himself that I had never seen before. He placed it in the palm of my hand as we sat together in the living room of my childhood home outside Washington, DC. It had been taken in China in 1953. His eyes glimmered, and his skin had none of the lines of age. He wore a plain military uniform and a cap. I ran a finger over a darkened spot in the center of the cap. A shadow there. Father said that's where the red star had been, the symbol of the People's Liberation Army of China. After he mailed the photo to his father in the British colony of Hong Kong, his father rubbed out the star, fearful of what the authorities might do if they saw it. Father got the photo back after he left China and reunited with his parents in Hong Kong. He brought it with him when he moved to America, this keepsake of the revolution.

I am the son of two empires. I was born in Washington and grew up in Alexandria, Virginia, a suburb along the Potomac River, when there was talk of the Cold War and containing Communism and preventing nuclear Armageddon. Those were the years of Nixon to Reagan, an arc when global politics was dominated by a titanic struggle between agents

of two ideologies, or rather two systems of power. The Berlin Wall fell in my final year of high school. Radio deejays played "Wind of Change" by the Scorpions. The Soviet Union dissolved, and America became unrivaled in the world. We talked about these events in my household and in classrooms and schoolyards, and I read about them in newspapers, which seemed to me, with their correspondents in Washington, New York, and far-flung world capitals, to be chroniclers of the American century.

There was a surviving Communist power in the world, one that was more obscure to most Americans but better known to me. China, the motherland. My parents were village children in the south as the nation tried to repel Japanese invaders in the Second World War. But there was no peace after the surrender of Japan. A civil war between the ruling Nationalists and the rebellious Communists reignited. Mao Zedong and his Red Army won, forcing the Nationalists to retreat to the island of Taiwan. In 1950, Father was in the first class from his high school to graduate into a China governed by the Communist Party.

The zeal for realizing the revolution, for building up the People's Republic, burned in the hearts of citizens. Father went north to Beijing for university. On October 1, 1950, the one-year anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, Father marched with soldiers, workers, and students in front of Mao, who stood waving to them atop Tiananmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace. They believed Mao would lead China in reclaiming its past glory and standing up to American imperialism. That fall, the American military advanced against North Korean and Chinese forces on the Korean peninsula. The Communist Party exhorted all citizens to aid in the war effort, warning that the American army could march into northeast China and onward to Beijing.

Father enlisted in the People's Liberation Army. He spent most of the next decade on the frontiers, as his military career took surprising turns. He went to corners of the country that the vast majority of Chinese have never laid eyes on. Places of beauty and of strife. He trained for the air force in Manchuria, near the Korean front. Then he spent years in Xinjiang, the northwest region that is home to Turkic-speaking Muslims, the

Uyghurs and Kazakhs, a land that rulers in Beijing have sought for centuries to control. Father saw the extent of the Chinese empire, and he witnessed Mao's efforts to resurrect its power.

I knew nothing about those parts of Father's life when I was growing up. I sometimes watched him put on a red blazer and black pants to go to work at Sampan Cafe, a Chinese restaurant. For decades, this was the only uniform that I associated with him, until he showed me the portrait of himself that he had sent to his father while he was in the army.

He is not someone who revealed much. What sharing there was didn't come naturally. On nights he came home early, he didn't sit on the edge of my bed regaling me with stories, ones about his life or even made-up ones. He had only Sundays off. But he disappeared every other Sunday to do bookkeeping at a takeout restaurant, Chin's Kitchen, that he co-owned. Other Sundays, we watched American football—the Washington Redskins—and he took the family for drives in a blue Plymouth Duster. We looked at my math textbooks, algebra or geometry or calculus. He knew numbers. I would learn later that he had studied engineering after the army.

At moments, I got a glimpse behind the curtain. One winter afternoon, Father and Mother were driving me and my sister through Washington to visit our grandmother in Chinatown, and the two of them were speaking loudly in Cantonese in the front about something. I stared out the window at the boarded-up rowhouses. Mother turned to us. Communism did something to your father, she said. He's set in his ways. He won't change.

I sensed pain there, a wound that I didn't want to press on. At least not yet. They each had their histories from long before I was born. I later learned that Mother was wrong, that Father had made a change, long ago. At a precarious moment, he had made a decision to take his life in a different direction. A choice about ideas and dreams, agency and freedom, nation and home.

My parents said their farewells to China and Hong Kong at different points, under different circumstances. But they never left entirely. No Chi-

nese immigrant I know has ever done that. Another memory: A summer night sitting together in our basement watching the women's volleyball final of the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics, the United States versus China. My parents shouted with glee when the Chinese team won the gold, jumping around almost as wildly as star spiker "Iron Hammer" Lang Ping and her red-clad teammates. "We're cheering for China because it's our homeland," Mother told me.

I started learning things decades later, by having long conversations with them and other family members and by looking through old letters and photographs. It began before I entered graduate school at the University of California at Berkeley and continued throughout my studies there. I was pursuing parallel inquiries: one into the history, society, and politics of China, through coursework and conversations with professors, and the other into my family history. I spent time with my parents and my uncles and aunts around Washington and San Francisco, and in particular with Father's older brother, Sam, who had grown up with him in Hong Kong and Guangdong Province and had come to America in 1948 to attend university. As I was starting to unearth the past, I made trips every year to China and Hong Kong. That stopped when I went to New York to work for *The New York Times*.

I was living in downtown Manhattan when terrorists flew commercial jetliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. That violence and America's invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq confronted me with questions about the nature and reach of empire, about the forces that oppose it and the ones it seeks to suppress. On the day I turned thirty-one, I left New York to cover the Iraq War.

Five years later, I moved to Beijing as a correspondent. It was then that the country and my parents' lives began opening up to me in a way I had never imagined. I now had the time to piece together past events that had remained in the shadows, and to see the connections among people and places and eras. Beyond that, it was exhilarating starting a life in a nation in the throes of transformation, with its cities of gleaming office towers and artists' enclaves and striving workers coming in by the trainload from

villages, looking to be part of the colossal story of change that the first decades of the twenty-first century promised to deliver.

For someone just arriving, it seemed like China's leaders and its people were working every muscle of the country to build the future. It represented the opposite of the abyss I had seen in Iraq. Years of reporting there on the disintegration of a country had left me pessimistic about the nature of humanity and the wielding of power. Two Iraqi colleagues, Khalid and Fakher, were among the many killed in violence that would ultimately result in the loss of about three hundred thousand lives. The destruction and carnage had been more shocking because they were the direct consequence of American actions. They had been inflicted by a nation—my nation—that just a decade earlier had been handed a historic opportunity to use its position as an unchallenged superpower to help lead the world into a better place. Instead, American leaders took their country down the path of imperial bloodletting in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Those in the American political class stayed in denial for years about what they had done.

When I stepped off an airplane in a gleaming new Beijing airport terminal on a warm night in April 2008, I thought that if any power represented an alternative vision of the future, surely it was China. Back then, the path of progress its leaders had taken since the catastrophes under Mao and the violent suppression of protests in 1989 seemed to signal an embrace of more enlightened ideas.

But as with so many things in which one invests a measure of blind hope, the reality turned out to be different, as it had for Father. By the time I moved out of China at the end of 2016, this had become obvious to me: the story of China under Communist Party rule is one of a nation straining with all its might to become an empire that surpasses that of America, and that envisions itself as the inheritor of the rule and the realm of the Qing dynasty. The party is doing so in an era when only ashes remain of all the other imperial powers of that age, and when the

moral failings of empire have been well documented, from the British to the Ottomans to the Russians. And yet, Xi Jinping, China's ruler, has equated the dream of empire with his leadership in deeds and words, in his talk of the great rejuvenation of China.

Many Chinese citizens share the dream. It is rooted in a common telling of millennia of history that begins with an ancient Yellow River civilization and continues through conquests by the first emperor, Qin Shihuang, and reaches a zenith with the commercial, artistic, and intellectual ferment of the Tang and Song dynasties. It is a myth of the motherland of an ethnic Han people whose culture and civilization hold dominion, so much so that even invaders with great martial prowess became Chinese. This was the history I learned when I began studying China.

Then I came across historians and writers with different perspectives. They told narratives centered on the idea that China's history, even up to the last century, was defined by cycles of alternating rule between people from China proper and nomadic or semi-settled people of the Asian steppe and forestlands, ones whose societies were as rich and complex and powerful as those of the Chinese. Several dynasties were established by those peoples from Inner Asia, notably the Mongols in the thirteenth century and the Manchus in the seventeenth century. It was the Manchus, the founders of the Qing dynasty, who carried out conquests to form a vast empire with China at its heart at a time when similar imperial powers were rising across the Eurasian continent.

By 1800, the Qing court in Beijing ruled one-third of the world's population and 10 percent of its landmass. The empire stretched from the Central Asian steppe to the Tibetan Himalaya to Chinese coastal towns. Then the leaders of the Qing surrendered control of parts of their empire to European powers, the United States, Russia, and Japan after defeats in the Opium Wars and other conflicts. Decades later, they were overthrown by rebels who wrapped themselves in the banner of ethnic Han nationalism, and who claimed they would restore their state as one of the world's great powers. These Han elite helped spread the powerful idea of the modern Chinese nation as a continuation of the sprawling and multiethnic

Qing empire. The new rulers, the Nationalists, adopted that project and struggled to fulfill it until they were overthrown by Mao, who made the same promises to reinvigorate the nation.

In the twenty-first century, the world is discovering that the Communist Party is on the verge of realizing that dream. It comes decades after the country imploded under Mao's poisonous policies. Today, the party holds on to much of the territory that the emperors of the high Qing brought together through war and diplomacy. And the party's dominion could grow. The Chinese military is expanding its presence across disputed borderlands, from the South China Sea to the Himalayas. The party seeks to bring the democratic island of Taiwan under its rule.

The nation's economic might allows the party to reach into realms that the emperors could never have imagined. From the internet to artificial intelligence, from higher education to Hollywood, China is reshaping the world, and we are only beginning to grasp the significance of that. Much of the world now treats China as one of the preeminent powers. During the Qing, envoys from distant lands paid homage at the court, and they are doing so again. I have stood in Tiananmen Square during a military parade, as Father did in 1950, and watched as leaders from across the globe—Brazil and Russia and South Korea—clapped in the stands next to Xi. Together they gazed down on tanks, missiles, and rows of marching troops.

Many Chinese citizens are naturally proud of the restoration of their nation, pride that is magnified by the party's nurturing of the fires of patriotism and nationalism. The state has told them in classrooms and films and news articles of a century of China's victimhood at the hands of Western powers. But there is something too that undergirds their attitude: a profound belief in their own innocence. It is the same innocence that the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr says infuses the national character of America. While evil can be done to these societies, they can do no evil. This sense of innocence is what allows an empire to choose to walk paths

of darkness in the name of doing good, with the unwavering support of its citizens.

What I experienced in nearly a decade living in Beijing, the imperial metropole, is only a small part of how I came to see China in this light. Just as important is what I have witnessed along the frontiers, those areas that include Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia—the same contested spaces that were important to Father during his time in China. There is a clarity to the nature of each imperium in the way it exercises power far from the center. I saw this with America in Iraq, and I saw this with China.

Father not only went to the frontier as a soldier, but was born into it. His family came from Guangdong Province, considered part of the barbarian kingdoms of Yue by Chinese rulers of ancient times. In my reporting across southern China, I saw how different those regions were from the north, and it helped me understand better the diversity of the land as much as anything else I witnessed. Those areas of Cantonese speakers that my parents' families called home were liminal spaces, transition zones between China and the outside world. The people from there bound China to America long before the current era of globalized trade. I have ancestors and relatives who looked outward and made the leap, to Southeast Asia, to Brazil, to Canada. They negotiated passages, temporary homes, permanent homes. Was it any wonder, then, that this southern rim was the origin point for rebels and intellectuals who questioned the power of the imperial courts in the north, and who led movements to topple them?

That is how Father came to Beijing and the northern lands: as an outsider, as a subject from the distant reaches of the empire.

I came too as an outsider, as what some would call an agent of another empire whose mission was to document this one.

We made separate journeys, but his came to inform mine. I write here of them. Or rather, I write of how we have each remembered moments in those journeys.

He is ninety-one now, and he tells me some things will never fade from his mind.

A night when he slept in an alpine meadow under the stars, a saddle as his pillow.

A day when he watched fellow soldiers with rifles try to hunt deer on a snowy desert plain.

Years ago, as we sat together after dinner, he told me he still remembered the words to "The East Is Red," the anthem that most Chinese citizens learned by heart in the 1960s. Father cleared his throat and sang the words in Mandarin with no hesitation, even though it had been decades since he had last done this.

The east is red, the sun is rising
From China comes Mao Zedong
He strives for the people's happiness
Hurrah, he is the people's great savior!

After he finished, he sat back on the couch and gave me a faint smile. At that moment, he was again the young man in a tan uniform with a red star on his cap riding a horse through the high valleys of the northwest, there at the edge of empire.

Part One

南

South

1

Colony

Hong Kong 1941

On a bright December morning, the boy looked up when he heard explosions and saw black puffs of smoke in the sky. The British military charged with protecting Hong Kong was firing anti-aircraft guns as Japanese bomber planes bore down on the crown colony. It was Monday, and Father, then nine years old, was walking to school from his family's apartment in the Happy Valley neighborhood with his older brother, Sam, and two cousins. They were accompanied by a great-aunt who carried the rattan satchels of the youngest boys balanced on a bamboo pole over one shoulder. Father was slim and quick and brimming with energy. His name in English is Yook Kearn Wong, in Chinese 黃沃強, which means fertile and strong.

The British imperial administrators had been running drills for months—blackouts, sirens, instructions about bomb shelters. By the end of 1941, residents had gotten used to all of it. Officials in Hong Kong and London knew the colony was vulnerable. The island and its deepwater harbor would make an ideal military base off the southern coast of China for Emperor Hirohito of Japan, who had ambitions to conquer Asia. Four years earlier, the Japanese army had breached the heart of China and had slowly, in battle after battle, expanded its control.

Despite the constant drills, many residents of Hong Kong had thought

that Japan wouldn't dare to attack a colony of Britain, which had built the world's largest empire through its domination of the seas. Even if the Japanese military was pressing an offensive in China and slaughtering civilians, it would surely leave Hong Kong alone, as well as Singapore and Malaysia, the other British colonies in the region.

As the boys walked into Lingying Middle School in Causeway Bay, atop a hill near the harbor, teachers told them the firing of the anti-aircraft guns was just another drill. They sat down in their wooden chairs. Father was in fourth grade, and it was his first year in the school. Sam was four years older and in a different classroom. His geometry teacher handed out graded exams that morning, and Sam was happily surprised he had gotten a score of ninety. The explosions continued through the early classes. At recess the boys rushed outdoors with classmates to watch as the anti-aircraft shells burst into fragments in the sky above the water. Something was happening across from Hong Kong Island, in the areas of Kowloon and the New Territories that bordered China, but it was impossible to tell what exactly was unfolding.

Then Father saw the airplanes swooping through the sky beyond the harbor. He squinted to see if he could make out the Japanese flag on their wings, the red circle on a white field, but the planes were too far away. For all he knew, they could have been British warplanes. Teachers kept talking about drills.

Around noon, teachers told the students that Japan had attacked the United States and that the principal was dismissing school early. The teachers looked worried. "Go home now," Father's teacher said. "We'll let you know when the school will reopen."

The war with Japan had come to Hong Kong. The boys walked home quickly. It was still sunny outside, a morning that should have been like any other. They climbed the stairs to their home on the third floor, beneath the apartment of the two cousins who were their schoolmates. A room in Father and Sam's apartment was crowded with bags of rice and stacks of canned fish that their parents had stockpiled. Refugees from the war in mainland China had flooded into the colony in recent years, and

there was a shortage of food. Officials had tried to fix prices and set up a system of rationing. It had taken the family months to gather these food supplies.

People were living on top of each other in the apartment at Number Eight Tsap Tseng Street. Father and Sam slept in the living room, near a balcony above a street market. A young aunt with a two-year-old daughter and a baby boy occupied one of the three bedrooms. The mother had come more than a year earlier from a village in southern China to see Danny, her husband, who had been making a long visit from New York City. He ran a laundry service there. She had gotten pregnant during his stay. He returned to New York shortly before the Japanese invasion.

The boys' mother was at home when they rushed in, but she didn't know anything about the Japanese invasion. Their father came home that evening from the herbal medicine shop he ran on the west side of the island. He didn't share any news. It would be days before the boys learned more about the backdrop to the invasion.

Eight hours before its attack on Hong Kong, the Japanese military had bombed the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. On the morning of December 8 in Asia, as their forces swarmed into Hong Kong, the Japanese pushed into British Malaya and bombed Singapore. British officials in Hong Kong and their superiors in London had been wrong in their guesswork. They had been so certain that the Japanese would not attack that they had allowed two destroyers to set sail earlier that day from Hong Kong's harbor for Singapore, leaving just one other, the HMS *Thracian*, in position to defend the colony.

That night, Father slept next to Sam and his parents on the wooden floor beneath a bed propped up with clothes, comforters, suitcases, and stuffed cardboard boxes. His father thought this might protect the family from bomb shrapnel, and in the coming days they would scurry beneath the makeshift shelter whenever they heard the sounds of airplanes, antiaircraft guns, or explosions. The government had ordered that all lights be kept off. During the blackout drills, they had become familiar with the feeling that came from staying still and surrendering to the shadows

and silence. Now it was happening for real, and they had the sensation of being at the bottom of a deep well. They didn't sleep. They lay there instead, listening for the drone of propellers and airplane engines.

Like many other Cantonese merchants, the Wong family moved effortlessly between Hong Kong, with all its trappings of imperial Britain, and the subtropical countryside of neighboring Guangdong Province in China. They also dealt with other ethnic Chinese businesspeople across Southeast Asia. That back-and-forth migration, with its fluidity of people and capital, of cultures and languages, was the norm until the disruptions brought on by the Japanese invasion and, later, Mao's Communist revolution. The cross-border movement became hardwired to an extraordinary degree in the people of the county of Toisaan, 台山, called Taishan in official Mandarin Chinese and Hoisaan in the local language, where Father's ancestral village was located. For them, global relocation, from Chinatowns across America to mining settlements in Malaysia to desert outposts in Australia, came almost as easily as stepping across the invisible line between Hong Kong and China.

Just three and a half years before that December morning of abrupt violence, Father and Sam had returned to the colony at the end of a long stay in their home village of Hap Wo in Taishan County. The two had been born in Hong Kong and had never seen the village until that two-year sojourn with their mother. The long visit revolved around the building of a new family home. Their father had saved enough through the medicine trade to pay for the construction of a grander house in the village. The grandfather had only one home and four sons, so in adulthood the sons decided to build two new houses that they would share, two families per house. The fourth son, a young uncle to Father and Sam, was a civil engineer who worked for the county government and volunteered to supervise the construction. Father and Sam's mother went back to the village in the spring of 1936 and took her sons with her.

This is where memories diverge. Father said he remembered his father,

the second of the four sons, accompanying them back to the village for a brief stay before returning to Hong Kong to run the medicine business. The memory of his father on that trip was vivid because of an incident at the customs checkpoint in Guangdong Province where the family transferred from a boat to a train that would take them into the interior. His father had brought along a new red blanket, and the customs officials for the Nationalist government insisted they pay tax on it. But Sam, who is four years older than Father, told me he had no memory of their father ever traveling with them to the home village.

Rice paddies stretched in every direction from the village, bright green before the harvest, brown with mud and silt at other times. Water buffalo plodded through the fields. The boys waded through water looking for snails and eels and Siamese fighting fish. Village life gave a new shape to childhood, far removed from the crowded streets and alleys of Hong Kong.

Father was often ill and lived with their mother in an old house while Sam left for Taishan City for schooling. The home being built was a two-story brick villa, one of twenty-five houses in the village. All the households were part of the same family.

By spring of 1938, the houses were done. And there was another reason to return to Hong Kong: war was creeping closer. The Japanese had sent a large invasion force into northern and eastern China in the summer of 1937. Japanese leaders used a clash between military units at the Marco Polo Bridge outside of Beijing as the excuse to begin a long-planned offensive across the heart of China. Japan had begun its conquest of the borderlands controlled by China six years earlier, when it seized the northeastern region of Manchuria, which bordered Japanese-colonized Korea. Tokyo set up a puppet Chinese court there with Pu Yi, the Manchu boy emperor deposed in 1911, as its head.

In the face of Japan's new onslaught, many Chinese fled to Hong Kong. On their return trip there in 1938, Father, Sam, and their mother were startled when their train across the county suddenly stopped because of a Japanese warplane flying overhead. Everyone knew Japanese

bombers were seeking to destroy infrastructure. The family and other passengers dashed from the train to hide in the fields. The Japanese plane flew away without attacking, and the passengers climbed back aboard the train.

From a collection of partly inhabited islands in the South China Sea spanning thirty-one square miles, British colonists and Chinese migrants had created a central node of seaborne global commerce over the course of a century. The Chinese who lived in Hong Kong did so for the same reasons as many of the British: to trade, barter, buy, sell, haggle, negotiate. They were mostly Cantonese speakers from neighboring Guangdong Province, also the origin point for some of the earliest settlers of Hong Kong.

For my grandfather, the path to a comfortable life in the prewar years lay in herbal medicine. He ran a shop in Sheung Wan, the district west of Central, where the British had their administrative headquarters. The shop was on the second floor of 81 Jervois Street, two blocks from the center of the Chinese medicine market on Bonham Strand West Road, in the middle of bustling blocks of stores selling every variety of herbs from China. The pungent odor of ginseng wafted through the streets. Atop counters sat jars of dried roots, stalks, and leaves, and plants ground into powder. Behind the counters were large wooden cabinets with dozens of small drawers, each one with a handwritten label with the name of the medicine inside the compartment.

Father could remember only one instance when he visited the shop as a young boy. It was on a winter's day around the Lunar New Year, when his father handed out red envelopes with cash to the shop's co-owners and employees to give to their children. They in turn pressed red envelopes into Father's and Sam's hands.

My grandfather took his two sons home to Happy Valley the same way they had come: riding on the tram that ran along narrow rails across the north side of Hong Kong Island, from Causeway Bay to Wan Chai to Ad-

miralty and Central. The colony was quiet then, with streets lined with three- and four-story buildings that were pitch-black at night, no lights to break the surrounding darkness. Above it all rose the hills of the island that culminated in Victoria Peak, their flanks bursting with tropical foliage: camphor and banyan and fig trees, surrounded by ferns and bougainvillea. Wealthy British and European residents lived in manors in the mountain's upper reaches, and the British governor kept a summer residence there. Until 1888, when the government opened a funicular tram that ran along the steep hillside, the residents had Chinese laborers carry them up in sedan chairs.

Grandfather had achieved a certain status because of his modest success in the medicine trade. Like many strivers in Hong Kong, he was a middleman and wholesaler. He imported herbal medicines from mainland China and sold them to merchants in Southeast Asia. He did business with Chinese living in Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, across the southern peninsular lands and archipelago that stretched through the South China Sea to Australia. This was typical of Hong Kong businesspeople, and the government's coffers flowed with tax revenue from overseas trade.

Above the family, out of their reach, was an upper-class stratum of ethnic Chinese whose members were Hong Kong residents educated in the English-language system. They cultivated an air of superiority over other Chinese. They rode on the first-class deck of the Star Ferry that crossed the harbor and, when out in public in groups, spoke to each other in broken or accented English. The men often dressed in pressed white shirts with ties and polished leather shoes, and they had well-combed hair. Their households employed servants.

In Happy Valley, which had the island's horse racecourse and, more important, an attached social club, Father's family lived in a four-story building above a street market where fruit, vegetables, and meat were sold. The building was one of eight that the father of my grandmother had built. My grandmother had given birth to three boys and two girls, but only Father and Sam had survived beyond infancy. Grandmother was

a thin, frail woman who often fell ill, so her aunt helped do housework and walked with the boys to school. That great-aunt was in her early forties, and she lived in the maid's room next to a kitchen and bathroom, a half flight of stairs below the family's apartment.

Grandmother's father was well established in the herbal medicine trade, which he had pursued after ventures in sales of insurance, dried fruit, and property. He helped my grandfather, his son-in-law, get his start in the medicine business at age twenty, after my grandfather had done a stint as a grade school teacher in a Chinese village. The two men ended up co-owning a wholesale business in Hong Kong with other merchants. The co-owners of that company moved back to Saigon, the capital of French-ruled Cochinchina, in southern Vietnam. My grandfather became the sole owner of that business. He worked at all levels of the medicine trade. In 1926, he helped found the Hong Kong Chinese Medicine Merchants Association, and two decades later he was elected its president.

Across the street from Father's apartment, there was a large market building that housed dozens of stalls selling fresh, raw food, from seafood to poultry to vegetables. Out on the street, vendors sold fresh vegetables from large baskets dangling off each end of a bamboo pole. Housewives, servants, and cooks visited the market twice a day to buy ingredients for meals that would be cooked that day. The great-aunt who was helping the family often strapped Father in a sling on her back and walked downstairs with him to do shopping.

From their third-floor balcony, the boys watched as Chinese police officers sometimes drove through in a paddy wagon, parked a block or more away, and clambered out into the narrow streets to look for vendors who lacked proper licenses. Someone would yell "Run, devil," and merchants would scatter, often sprinting for the stairwells of the surrounding buildings. Sometimes the policemen kicked over baskets of vegetables, ruining the produce and forcing the vendors to borrow money to start their businesses again from scratch.

The lanes of the market were wet with mud, dirt, and blood. Merchants

sprayed water on their vegetables to keep them from wilting. To avoid ruining their shoes, people wore wooden sandals with one-inch soles. The harsh clacking sound of the sandals on concrete carried even to the apartment on the third floor, and sometimes the boys covered their ears to shut it out.

The racecourse in the family's neighborhood of Happy Valley was a focal point of elite social life in Hong Kong, especially for British aristocrats and senior colonial officials. The first races were run in 1846. Thirty-eight years later, the Hong Kong Jockey Club opened, and it soon became the colony's premier social club. People even said that Hong Kong was ruled by the Jockey Club, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, and the governor, in that order, the historian Jan Morris noted. The club didn't admit its first Chinese member until 1926. The racehorses were housed in stables on a hill behind the track and streets where Chinese lived. On Saturdays during race season, the horses would often drop manure onto the road as handlers led them to the track. After the races, Chinese who didn't live in the neighborhood took trams home from the Happy Valley terminus, while many of the British got into cars with drivers.

Grandfather had a coveted membership to the Jockey Club. One weekend, he brought Father and Sam there to see the races. Crowds in the stands leaned forward as the horses thundered past, and at those moments the boys strained to get a glimpse of the race.

The British sat in rows of seats at the front, close to the rails. The men wore white suits and the women white dresses and sun hats. Attending them were Chinese maids in white blouses and black pants, their hair braided. The maids carried the bags and umbrellas of the British. The boys had seen the British and European residents of the city before and didn't give them much thought.

The administration of the colony took place in Central District. There stood the Supreme Court with its neoclassical archways and columns, the imposing police headquarters on Hollywood Road that bore the initials

of King George V at the top of the entrance, and sprawling Victoria Prison with its thick stone walls. They were symbols of law and order, as intimidating to the Chinese residents as the stories of punishments meted out by men in uniforms—months of hard labor and strokes of a birch for nothing more than petty theft. Jardine House was the heart of commerce. It was the headquarters of two Scottish merchants, William Jardine and James Matheson, who had first established their business in the city of Guangzhou, on the mainland. Among other goods, they trafficked in opium, and so they came under scrutiny from Chinese officials. Around the time of the First Opium War, which began in 1839, the two men encouraged officials in London to seize Hong Kong from China and build a safe haven for foreign traders.

A century later, commerce still went hand in hand with military might. British soldiers lived in barracks in Central District, emerging each Sunday to attend services at St. John's Cathedral, the seat of the Anglican Diocese of Hong Kong. Overlooking all of it, perched in the hills of Mid-Levels, was Government House, built in a Colonial Renaissance style in the mid-nineteenth century to serve as the residence of the governor. In the months before the Japanese invasion, its occupant was Sir Mark Aitchison Young, who took up his office on September 10, 1941, after postings in the colonies of Ceylon, Sierra Leone, the British Mandate of Palestine, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and the Tanganyika Territory. Leaders in London entrusted to this career administrator—a graduate of Eton and King's College at Cambridge, a veteran of the First World War—the defense of Hong Kong, should the Japanese invade.

Like Young, most of the colonists lived in the hills. To the Chinese residents, the most visible British were the policemen striding through the streets or standing at attention, with their white suits and short pants in the summertime and tan uniforms in the winter. An even more obvious colonial presence was the Sikh men who had arrived on ships from British-ruled India to serve as security guards. Father and Sam found them striking, these men with their thick beards and colorful turbans and starched white uniforms. They stood outside banks and government

buildings and social clubs with rifles or shotguns slung over their shoulders. Some Chinese shop owners had hired them as guards too, and on occasion a Sikh man would say "hello" and a few other words in Cantonese as Father walked past.

Ships connected Hong Kong to the rest of the empire, but aircraft played an increasingly important role after the first recorded flight at Kai Tak left from a grass strip there in 1925. In 1936, Imperial Airways started flights between Hong Kong and London, traveling via the island of Penang off the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, governed as a crown colony. Hong Kong was now connected by commercial air service to the imperial network.

In 1938, the year after the Japanese invasion of mainland China, British administrators turned to crisis control. The Colonial Office in London had directed all colonies to maintain stockpiles of food and essential commodities. In Hong Kong, food became increasingly scarce as hundreds of thousands of war refugees arrived from the mainland. Administrators built camps and emergency kitchens for the new arrivals. In the summer of 1940, the Japanese cut off all supplies from the mainland, and British officials feared that an invasion was at hand. They began building tunnels that could shelter tens of thousands of people.

Even before the Japanese invaded Hong Kong, word of their atrocities in China had spread throughout the colony. Refugees told stories of the cruelty they had seen, of Chinese citizens tortured or sliced open by Japanese soldiers wielding rifles with bayonets, or lined up against a wall and shot. The tales spread in other ways. People in Hong Kong sang songs of resistance, ones that had been popular for years in China. Some lyrics mentioned specific battles, and others lauded wartime heroes or extolled the enduring nature of Chinese civilization. In his early years, Father heard some of these, but he was too young to understand the words. By contrast, Sam sang them constantly in classrooms.

To him, the saddest one was "Along the Songhua River," about a native

of Manchuria, in northeast China, who had left behind his elderly parents when he fled south after the Japanese military invaded the region in September 1931.

September 18, September 18, since that tragic time,
I have left my hometown, given up my endless treasures.
Wandering, wandering, the entire day inside the pass. Wandering.
In which month and which year will I return to my lovely homeland?
In which month and which year will I regain my endless treasures?
My parents! My parents! When can we be together again?

Father would soon learn some of the songs. One night in 1940, the year before the Japanese invaded Hong Kong, as fighting raged in China, Father heard a commotion beneath their apartment. He ran to the balcony and looked down at the street market, which had shut down earlier in the evening. About thirty men were marching in formation there, like a platoon practicing drills. They chanted and began singing "Defend China," with its fiery lyrics: "Defend our five-thousand-year civilization. Come let us get together. Go kill the enemy."

More than a half century later, when I was in my twenties, I saw how deeply the songs had affected Father. One night in Washington, I went with him and Mother to hear Lang Lang, China's most famous pianist at the time, give a solo concert at the Kennedy Center. As soon as Lang Lang played a few notes of the Yellow River Piano Concerto, Father began humming along, and a smile crept across his face. He tapped his fingers on his leg. The piece was adapted during the Cultural Revolution from a song composed in 1939 by Xian Xinghai to rally resistance against Japan. The adapted concerto also had a melody from "The East Is Red," the Chinese Communist anthem that Father, like most Chinese, came to know well during the Mao era.

The two boy cousins of Father and Sam who lived on the floor above them in Happy Valley had an older sister, Wan Heung, who took part on weekends in a patriotic singing troupe. She sang in theaters to raise money for the war effort in China. Father and Sam sometimes heard her

practicing. Other students sold flowers in the street, collecting money in cans. The funds were intended to support the Nationalists, who had reached a truce with the Communists in the civil war to form a united front against the Japanese.

In seventh grade, Sam's first afternoon class was Chinese history. Sam often walked in late because he and other children played soccer outdoors at the end of the lunch hour. One day, as the boys were doing this, the teacher, Wang Qian, looked Sam and the others in the eye. "You monkeys are late again. You kids have played too much," he said. "You shouldn't waste your fathers' hard-earned, blood-soaked money." Wang told them children in China had few opportunities for schooling and often didn't have enough to eat.

The teacher's gold teeth flashed as he spoke. He had fled to Hong Kong during the war, and Sam thought that maybe he had once worked as a government official under the Nationalists. He would sit on the edge of a student's desk and talk instead of writing on the blackboard. He taught in Mandarin. It was the dominant language in most of China, but few Chinese in Hong Kong or neighboring Guangdong Province used it, since they had grown up speaking Cantonese. Wang taught Chinese history through a lens of dutiful patriotism, though he avoided certain topics. He lectured on the different periods of the Qing dynasty, for instance, but did not address the opium trade of the nineteenth century, the invasions by European powers and Japan, and the concessions those nations had forced on the Manchu court. The penalties included the granting of Hong Kong to the British Empire and allowing favorable trade conditions along eastern and southern ports to the various governments. Those topics would have been too sensitive in a classroom in the British colony. When Japan seized Hong Kong in 1941, it must have brought back to Wang the horrors he had experienced just years earlier in China during the war there. Sam heard he killed himself soon afterward.

Before the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong, Chinese-language newspapers in the colony published special issues when the Nationalist military won battles in China against Japan, even small ones. On humid summer

nights, in the darkness of the apartment, Father and Sam listened to their father and uncles talk about the war. The front lines shifted constantly, but the Japanese were steadily taking territory. As the Japanese seized city after city in the north, word spread across China of widespread atrocities by the soldiers—rape, torture, and executions.

The men talked in grim tones about the future of China. Father and Sam would stare out the window sometimes at the pitch-black street, where all the lights had been turned off because of blackout drills ordered by the government. It was easy to become despondent, but there was also fervor and determination in the talk among the men. The same conversations took place in thousands of homes and classrooms and teahouses across the colony. The Japanese soldiers conquering the mainland seemed to have an insatiable bloodlust that frightened the residents of Hong Kong. But it made them furious too, and they talked often of the history of aggression by foreign powers in China. What would it mean to have a strong, unified nation again, for the Chinese? Decades later, Sam wrote about an inevitable conclusion reached by many people at that time: "Most Chinese in Hong Kong abandoned the previous idea of a supreme British culture."

Schools in Hong Kong stayed shut after Japanese troops swept through Kowloon and the New Territories, across the harbor from the island where Father and Sam lived. Most of the bombing runs by Japanese pilots took place on that far side. The family continued using the makeshift shelter they had built beneath the bed. The explosions were regular and distant. But one day, the boys were startled by a loud burst nearby as they lay beneath the bed. After everything fell silent, the boys slowly crawled out from beneath the bed. They saw a mound of salt on the kitchen windowsill in the shape of a jar. The glass around it had cracked in the explosion, and shards lay scattered across the kitchen floor. The explosion had also knocked out a chunk of a wall in the apartment next door. Father gaped at the hole.

No one ventured outside the home even though the fighting had not reached the island yet. Like other store owners, their father had shut down his shop. People on the island weren't sure whether the British military could repel the invaders, and they anxiously braced for the arrival of the Japanese soldiers. The day after the initial invasion, the boys waited for news of an uncle who had gotten stranded across the harbor, on the Kowloon side. He had gone there the day before the invasion to pick up his fiancée and her family for the wedding ceremony. The same day, the Wong family had gathered at a bustling restaurant on the west end of the island in anticipation of his arrival with his bride-to-be. Then they heard that the uncle had gotten stuck in Kowloon when the operators of the Star Ferry had temporarily halted service. The boys went home disappointed. The uncle eventually hired a man with a rowboat to bring the couple across.

Of course, the Japanese soldiers had no intention of stopping their advance in Kowloon or the New Territories. They took boats to several landing spots on Hong Kong Island. One of the narrowest points in the harbor was the stretch between Kowloon and Causeway Bay, where the boys had been attending school. Japanese soldiers clambered ashore and fanned out into the streets there. Three or four days after the landing, the soldiers arrived in Happy Valley.

In the morning, Father heard a loud banging downstairs from the main door of the apartment building. "You'd better get ready," one of the tenants below yelled up the stairwell. Inside, the boys heard heavy footsteps coming up. Then came a knock on the front double doors to their apartment. Knuckles rapping hard on the wood. The boys stood frozen, as frightened as they had ever been. Their father told them to stand back, then he opened the door on the left.

Through the narrow opening, the boys could see the face of a Japanese soldier, a tan cap atop his head. He glared at their father and told him to open the other half of the double doors. The soldier was short and bowlegged, and he gripped a rifle with a bayonet that extended a foot above his head. A single thought flashed through the boys' heads: This

soldier will kill our father here, in front of us, right now. Their father bent down to undo a latch on the floor. The soldier curled up a fist and hit him on the back of his head. The boys jumped back. Their father undid the latch and pulled the door open, letting the soldier into the room.

All the family members knew the soldier could shoot them where they stood, or stab them with his bayonet. The soldier told everyone to go down to the street. Other residents of the building were already making their way down the central staircase. Then the family members realized what was about to happen—they would be killed along with all the other residents who were being ordered into the street, in a mass execution. Why else would the soldiers be rounding up everyone? The family slowly made their way down.

Father and Sam saw people standing up and down the block, all looking anxious. Some soldiers kept watch over the residents, while others remained inside the apartment buildings. After a half hour, the boys watched as soldiers walked out of their building. Some of the soldiers motioned for the people to go back inside. They had been searching for people in hiding and for caches of weapons, but had found nothing.

Back in the building, the boys saw their great-aunt, the one who helped take care of the family and lived in the maid's room. In the chaos, no one had bothered to look for her. Now they all realized she had barely avoided the wrath of the soldiers. She told them she hadn't seen the soldiers enter the building, though she had heard heavy footsteps in the main rooms of the family's apartment, a half flight of stairs above her room. For whatever reason, the soldiers hadn't searched her room or the communal kitchen or the bathroom on the same floor. "Imagine if they had come down there and found me," she told the others. "I might not be standing here alive."

On Christmas Day, after eighteen days of fighting, the governor of Hong Kong, Sir Mark Aitchison Young, walked into the Japanese headquarters on the third floor of the Peninsula Hotel in Kowloon and surrendered.

The date would be known as "Black Christmas." It was the first time the British had handed a colony over to an invading military power. Their forces in Hong Kong had been thin, and officials and commanders had known for months by then that the chances of fending off a Japanese invasion were slim. The garrison consisted of two British infantry battalions, two Indian Army battalions, a local volunteer force, some artillery, a handful of small warships, two flying boats, and three older torpedo bombers, without torpedoes. The month before the Japanese invasion, two battalions of half-trained Canadian troops had arrived.

In London, officials had feared that Japanese military units occupying the island of Taiwan could take Hong Kong at will. The Japanese had seized other territory near Hong Kong—Hainan Island, the Spratly Islands, and French Indochina. Winston Churchill wrote in a letter to General Hastings Ismay dated January 7, 1941: "If Japan goes to war with us there is not the slightest chance of holding Hong Kong or relieving it." But British officials knew they had to put up some kind of fight, in order to send a signal to the other armies in Asia trying to resist Japan.

Neither British officials nor Chinese residents of Hong Kong imagined that the forces would be routed so quickly. It was the collapse of a house of cards. A pale-skinned people from a distant island nation had claimed racial and cultural superiority to justify military expansionism and the creation of the largest empire in history. Yet, before the onslaught of this Asian army, they had melted away. Was this the sum total of the steel warships, the soldiers in their khaki uniforms, the Indian conscripts?

On December 27, the Japanese hoisted their flag in Central District. The next day, they held a military parade in which two thousand of the men who had fought in the battle of Hong Kong marched from Happy Valley to the western districts. The Japanese commander, Lieutenant General Sano Tadayoshi, who led the Thirty-Eighth Division, the main invading force, rode at the head of the troops on a white horse and wearing a long sword. The parade included small white caskets that held the

ashes of dead soldiers. Japanese soldiers had told Chinese residents to stand along the route and cheer and wave flags that had been handed out. The occupiers wanted a show of local residents welcoming the army that had liberated Hong Kong from the white imperialists. The era of Asia for the Asians had arrived, according to the propaganda. But the Chinese residents showed little enthusiasm. Europeans were ordered to stay indoors and not look at the parade; otherwise they would be shot.

When they finally began venturing outside—mostly women looking for missing husbands—they saw debris and broken glass, as well as steel helmets, armbands, and gas masks left behind by Chinese members of the civil defense force. The Chinese defenders had stripped those off to avoid capture by Japanese soldiers. When the Europeans encountered Japanese sentries or checkpoints, they had to bow. The soldiers saluted them in return.

Word spread of wanton aggression by the Japanese. Sometimes it was as mild as soldiers taking watches from people in the streets. But there were episodes of horror that echoed what refugees from China had witnessed. In one hospital, soldiers raped nurses before killing them and bayoneted patients in their beds.

In the first weeks, the Japanese kept prominent Chinese residents detained in their homes or in hotels. The goal was to coerce them into cooperating with the occupation. On January 10, 1942, Lieutenant General Sakai Takashi invited 133 of them to a lunch at the Peninsula Hotel. The general told them the Japanese had invaded Hong Kong not as part of their war on China, but to liberate it from the British. The public line was that Tokyo was building what officials there called the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, and everyone in the region would benefit from it. The general said Chinese merchants should reopen their shops. He also suggested Chinese residents could help alleviate shortages of rice and fuel that had arisen because of the influx of war refugees over four years. Two prominent businessmen in attendance, Sir Robert Kotewall and Sir Shouson Chow, promised that they and other Chinese would help rejuvenate the commercial life of the city.

Over the coming weeks, the Japanese occupiers restored public water, street lighting, gas, telephone service, the tram, and ferries. Soon, they began drawing up plans to have the schools teach Japanese and the city celebrate Japanese holidays. They took down the British street signs and replaced them with ones with Japanese names. Even the horses in the stables of the Happy Valley racecourse were renamed.

In the first months of the occupation, the schools remained closed, and Father and Sam stayed at home with the rest of their family. Most of their father's clients were in Southeast Asia, and the Japanese invasion of those countries and of China, the source of the herbs, had disrupted the trade.

The family broke into their food stockpiles and ate rice and canned fish for most meals. They became more and more gaunt. The city's supply of flour ran low. Their mother soaked rice until it was soft and put that into an empty cookie tin, then the boys used a hammer to pound the rice into flour.

The Japanese occupiers realized they would have to do something about the food shortage, but they had a larger problem. By March 1941, the spring before the Japanese invasion, the population of Hong Kong had swelled to 1.65 million. Just four years earlier, at the start of the Sino-Japanese war, it had been less than one million. British officials struggled to manage the flood of people coming from China. They had set up about a dozen refugee camps around the colony, but those became inadequate as the war raged across China.

Japanese officials took a different approach. They set up a repatriation bureau in the civil administration department. They told clan and district associations that the groups were expected to help pay for the costs of moving people back to China. In the first week of January 1942, the Japanese announced that everyone who lacked employment or permanent resident status would have to leave. By mid-January, boats were available, and Japanese officials asked for volunteers to file applications for depar-

ture. The boats took the paying passengers to nearby ports along the Chinese coast, as well as to the Portuguese enclave of Macau and to Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province, upstream along the Pearl River Delta.

The parents decided the two boys should return with their mother to the home village in Taishan County, where they had a new house and could farm. Their father would stay in Hong Kong in the hopes that his business could weather the war. The boys knew Hap Wo village from their two-year stay there during the building of the new family villa. Taishan was still under the control of the Nationalists, and if the boys were lucky, they would not be harassed by Japanese soldiers there. Their parents could not know that the war in China would continue for nearly four more years, and that their sons would encounter Japanese occupiers in Taishan.

The other family staying in the boys' apartment would travel with them too. That was the aunt with two children, one of them a baby only a few months old who would be given the English name Robert. Their home village was also in Taishan County, so it made sense for the entire group to travel together for at least the first stage of the journey, when they would take a boat along the Pearl River Delta.

One morning, the families boarded a Japanese steamship, the *Silver Maru*, on the west side of Hong Kong Island and plopped down on the steel deck. People sat or lay everywhere, sometimes atop their bags. The boat began to pull away from the island. Father looked back at the coastline as it got smaller, the gray British colonial buildings now adorned with Japanese flags receding into the distance. He had barely begun fourth grade in a new school, and his childhood had taken a sudden and bewildering turn. But he thought he would return soon, to be in the warm embrace of both of his parents in their apartment in Happy Valley.

2

Handover

Hong Kong 1997

The airplane swooped in low over Hong Kong's harbor, descending toward the islands and the tankers, container ships, and cruise liners drifting among them like silver coins scattered across a blue carpet. I stared out the window at the lush hills of the Kowloon peninsula to the north, an undulating wall of green that separated the British territory from China. The plane dipped into a sharp turn toward the airport. The city swallowed us, our view reduced to apartment windows and balconies and clothes fluttering from wires. The tips of the wings almost brushed the buildings.

This airport was where my parents had said their farewells to family and friends and to an entire world before crossing the Pacific to new lives. The British colonial government opened an airfield here in 1925. Pilots of the Royal Air Force landed on a grass strip surrounded by open fields. Kai Tak Airport expanded into an international hub over the decades, as the city around it grew. In 1998, its function would be replaced by a sprawling complex set to open on Lantau Island, and planes from New York, Frankfurt, Dubai, and Jakarta would no longer land and take off in the middle of this dense pocket of apartment buildings.

I was arriving as the British were packing up. Within weeks, the British flag would no longer fly above this or any future Hong Kong airport.