

An Oral History Project of
Chinese Americans:
Life in Between

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An Oral History Project of Chinese Americans: Life in Between

Why Did I Choose This Topic?

In September 2011, I enrolled in the master's degree program in oral history at Columbia University. In October 2011, I sat in the backyard of a Chinese American restaurant, which was actually a white tent, to conduct my first oral history interview.

"I was born in Tibet, but my mom thought the children's education there was not good, so she left and settled down in Chengdu later," said Jennifer, a Chinese female who had been struggling in this country for more than 17 years. Jennifer has a round face, a brisk voice, and dynamic facial expressions. Like many Chinese Americans, she speaks Chinese while inserting English phrases constantly. Her eyes shone and her speaking pace changed from sentence to sentence. Sometimes she choked on sobs while I kept silent.

During our interview, I was riding her memory train. I experienced what oral history was for the first time. Time and space seemed to disappear. We—the interviewer and the interviewee—went through the tunnel of time together. It was similar to a treasure hunt as both of us tried to dig out past memories.

When the first interview was over, Jennifer fell into silence before saying, "I never thought oral history was this amazing."

"Me neither!" I replied.

From that moment forward, I fell in love with oral history, feeling that it brought me so close to my interviewees and their souls. After meeting Jennifer, I approached Chinese Americans and listened to their stories, all of which deeply

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enriched my life. When I began interviewing people, I had only recently arrived in the U.S., so I took in this country not only through my own feelings, but also through the eyes of Chinese Americans.

Why did I choose this topic as my first oral history project? It can be traced back to the days before I came to U.S. I was born in 1979 and was always an average student in school. My parents were both employees of an airline company and had no media background, so they were quite surprised when I entered the media world at a young age. Thanks to my good writing skills, when I reached high school, I was chosen to be a journalist for the only secondary school news agency in China. Since I was 17 years old, my classmates saw my name in a newspaper every week. I felt that I was destined to interview many people.

Before I came to Columbia University, I spent nine years as a financial journalist in China, which allowed me to experience the decline of the newspaper firsthand. In the past, whenever I handed out my signature business card with its red-colored background, people gave me an envious look that seemed to say, "You have a brilliant future." But as the Internet blossomed, that look became increasingly rare.

In 2009, I got a chance to co-write the autobiography of the founder-CEO of Google Greater China, Dr. Kai-Fu Lee. This book, titled *Making a World of Difference*, contains 400,000 Chinese characters and turned out to be a hit. As a result, I went from a journalist to a best-selling author almost overnight. As I sat in press conferences and tried to answer questions from other journalists, a very weird feeling emerged. In the past, during occasions like this, I was the one who sat in the audience, throwing questions at business elites. But at that moment I

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was the one on the stage, answering the questions of others. I stammered a bit when I talked.

My first experience as an author told me that writing was satisfying. I felt the wonder of getting close to a person's history. It gave me opportunities to understand the world better. Dr. Kai-Fu Lee emigrated to the U.S. from Taiwan when he was ten, so he fluently speaks English and Chinese, and also blends western and eastern cultures in his blood. He could recount the Pledge of Allegiance in a minute, yet he could also discuss characters in classical Chinese novels. In his autobiography, I wrote about how he carries these two difference cultures.

While I was writing this book, I interviewed the employees of Google China, and they exposed the world of the Internet to me. One day, a programmer turned on his computer and showed me that so many words and images had been blocked in China. I was shocked when I saw the long list of blocked words. I had been working as a journalist for more than 9 years, and thought I had a complete understanding of what censorship was in China, but the heavy Internet censorship made me realize I was wrong. After seeing this, a strong aspiration took root in my heart: one day, I needed to go to the western world and broaden my horizons.

I applied for Columbia University's Oral History Master of Arts program and received the official admission letter by email at 5:45 a.m. on May 3rd, 2011. I knew this was what I wanted most. I thought, "*There is a splendid dream waiting for me. It is the American dream, which can propel me to success, since it has showered success on many people before me.*" I rushed into the bedroom where

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my husband was sound asleep and shouted, “I got it! I got it! I got into Columbia University!” My husband woke up and gave me a look. “I told you that you could get it!” he said, before rolling over and falling back asleep. I ran back and forth in the glow of the orange lamplight in my bedroom that morning but knew it was too early to make a phone call to my parents. I hoped that 9 a.m. would come quickly. I felt as though I was floating through the air and couldn’t stop smiling for days.

It wasn’t until I came to America that I realized how naive I had been in my understanding of what such a move would entail. I had no idea what I was to face. From the moment I arrived at John F. Kennedy International Airport in Queens, I realized what I had imagined before was too simple—the real American Dream begins with pain.

When I first arrived, my loneliness felt like cancer. Nobody called me to attend press conferences anymore. No friends made jokes and called me “the famous writer” anymore. Even my email inbox was no longer filled with press releases. I lived in an apartment half the size of my bathroom in Beijing and had to deal with all kinds of bills that I had never needed to worry about before. My previously stable life had disappeared, and I woke up in a place of which I couldn’t make sense. I couldn’t even order a cup of coffee using proper English and had to deal with strange looks on waiters’ faces. I observed in front of the counter how local people placed their orders and found out that you needed to tell the waiter, all in one breath, the size of the coffee cup you want and if you need sugar and cream. I couldn’t understand the strong Italian accent of my building’s superintendent, so he had to repeat a simple request several times:

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“Sign-your-name-on-the-check!” “Sign-your-name-on-the-check!” He repeated himself over and over again, but to me this sentence did not sound like English at all.

In no time, helplessness flooded my heart. I knew how tough my life would be in the coming years. In the past, I had participated in exciting press conferences and discussed company strategies with CEOs. I posed questions to Google’s Eric Schmidt when he visited China. “How could Google China achieve an ideal market share when the headquarter of Google actually had a lot of concerns on entering the Chinese market?” I challenged Dell’s CEO Michael Dell in a press conference: “How will Dell Computers close a space deal with the Chinese PC market when Lenovo has merged the PC department of IBM?” In 2009, I attended several book-signing events and received numerous compliments. People wanted me to sign their books and even followed me to the bookstore’s exit. They were nervous when they talked to me. I was unused to getting those looks and tried hard not to laugh.

As a financial news journalist in China, all kinds of delicate gifts from business companies would pile on my desk. I didn’t earn a lot from salary but received gift cards from companies with which I worked. I didn’t care much about those gift cards. My husband always found them around our home, some which had expired with balances left on them. It drove him crazy. In his eyes, I was a high-maintenance girl, who was incurably wasteful.

In the States, my life changed dramatically. Because my husband has a career in Beijing, it was not realistic to ask him to come with me. I dragged two heavy suitcases to the fifth floor of my building and couldn’t breathe. I pulled a

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heavy trolley full of second-hand items from a thrift store and scrambled my way home. Or I put my arms around a one-dollar red tea table with some paint peeled off, and stumbled my way home. When I first came to New York, I woke up every morning with a strange feeling. I felt like the main character in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, turned into a bug, unable to understand my immediate environment. Not knowing how to adjust my eating habits, I felt hungry often. This was my status before I began my first oral history project.

Numerous questions arose during the times when I felt desperate. How does a Chinese person overcome all these difficulties and live a stable life in America? How do people deal with these struggles when they first come to the U.S.? How long does it take them to hold two cultures in one body? I had an unspeakable curiosity about this community of immigrants. Unfortunately, I couldn't find any books or resources that presented detailed answers to my questions. I began thinking that interviewing Chinese Americans could lead to a good oral history project.

When Columbia's program began, I started learning about the discipline of oral history. We listened to recorded interviews with relatives of those who died on 9/11. The testimonies were powerful and emotional. I learned that one of the functions of oral history is to record the personal history; the other is to fill in holes that exist in popular, mainstream history.

I decided I wanted to fill in some holes in the history of Chinese Americans' experience as well. Currently, the Chinese economy is booming and a lot of rich people want to immigrate to America. But there is not much literature or programming that tells the truth about immigrants' lives. For example, ten

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years ago in China, there was a popular TV drama called *A Native Beijinger in New York*. It revealed two Chinese Americans' tough lives in New York City, supposedly serving as a window for Chinese people to understand immigrants' life in the western world. This show went viral overnight and ignited discussions about the situation of Chinese people in the U.S. But when I saw it, I realized something was missing. On the one hand, this story is adapted from a novel and had limitations in portraying the real lives of Chinese Americans. The main characters start a sweater factory several months later after coming to the U.S., but not every Chinese American makes a living through self-employment. On the other hand, the story is only about a particular couple's life, so it couldn't encapsulate the diversity of all Chinese Americans. Real life in the U.S. is much tougher and more complicated than portrayed by this television show.

I decided to interview Chinese Americans for my oral history project, with the goal of giving a fuller picture of the actual struggles and triumphs that these immigrants face. As a Chinese woman who had recently moved to New York City, I was certain that a lot of darkness and tragedies were waiting to be shared. I knew these interviews could provide an insider's view of this community. This project went on for a year-and-a-half. Not every interviewee became my soul mate, but all interviewees became my friend to some extent. I talked with them, exchanged ideas with them, and attended interesting events with them.

They deepened my understanding of oral history and American society. Their experiences enriched my experiences, and listening to and conversing with them became a journey I never expected to take, and will never forget.

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How Did I Find Interviewees?

When I first came to the States, I found it was very difficult to find ideal interviewees. I had been here for only a month when I had to conduct my first interview. I knew no one.

Then I decided to seek help from local Chinese media. But very soon I found out that they had no understanding of oral history. They were eager to introduce me to privileged people or people with a privileged family background. I explained to them that I wanted to interview some ordinary people—those who would not have the resources to shield themselves from the difficulties most face in immigrating. The people I spoke with could hardly understand why I wanted to interview such people.

I went on the Internet to seek help. I typed the key words “Chinese American” into the search box in Sina Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter. @NewYorkklanlan was the first Twitter handle to pop up, representing a woman by the name of Zhang Lan. She has an accredited account identifying her as “a famous blogger.” Her self-introduction on her website reads, “I was born in Guizhou and love arts. My first marriage failed. Now I live in NYC.” I wrote her a private message and hoped she would call me.

I knew what kind of interviewees I needed. First, my interviewees should have stayed in America long enough to deeply understand both eastern and western cultures. Their ages should be between 30 and 55. Second, I wanted interviewees from diverse backgrounds, which represented different walks of life, so I could explore a variety of living situations. Third, I hoped my subjects

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would have experienced as many important historical events as possible, so I could explore how those events affected them.

Lanlan called me soon after receiving my message. I got her call when I was waiting to cross Broadway at 110th street. She told me about two of her friends. One was Jennifer, who came to America in the early nineties and successively set up seven small businesses; she now owns two popular restaurants in Brooklyn. The other was Xina, who came to the U.S. over ten years ago, after she was disqualified from graduate school in China because she participated in the Tiananmen Square protests. Lanlan's voice was passionate as she shared the stories of her friends. She invited me to her house to have dinner. I didn't know then that Lanlan herself would become one of my interviewees. Later she provided excellent stories about interracial marriage.

I interviewed Jennifer and Xina and was immediately enthralled by their stories. Later, Jennifer introduced me to some interesting friends of hers who were good fits for my project; Ding Lina and a young artist named YOYO were among them.

Ding Lina was born in the 1950s and became my oldest interviewee, so I call her "Aunt Ding." She came to America in her early thirties and was a manicurist for seven years. Later on, she decided to leave this low-level job and pursued work at a library. In order to realize her dream of becoming a librarian, she first became a library volunteer and eventually, in her forties, earned a master's degree in library science. Years later, she became a curator at one of the 58 branch libraries in Brooklyn. I was interested in her stories for two particular reasons. One, she went through the very important and historic Cultural

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Revolution in China during 1965 to 1968. Two, her personal struggle for success is a living example of the “American Dream.”

Although I have interviewed many people, I am only including four people in this project due to the limited size of my thesis. But I want to record other interviewees’ names and background here:

- Wei Rong: A professor when he came to the States as a visiting scholar and now a contemporary art curator in New York City.
- Zhang Wu: A high school dropout in China when he came to the States with his mom. He is now head of the Interview Department at American Chinese Television.
- Robert Wang: A computer science graduate from Columbia University, who has worked at different companies on Wall Street.
- Lanlan: Came to the States with her husband, whom she divorced. She eventually married a white man and proved to be a good subject who could speak to the complexities of interracial marriage.

What My Oral History Project Reveals — Ambivalence?

The eight people I interviewed all shared struggles related to living in the U.S. But what I saw most was ambivalence. Chinese Americans, who were born and raised in one culture and later live in another, encounter inevitable cultural clashes and have to compromise their sense of dignity significantly over time. I observed east-west cultural fusion and final settlement. I saw how Chinese Americans deal with the two different cultures while pursuing their American Dreams. Today, most of my interviewees live relatively stable lives in the U.S.,

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but they remain sandwiched between two cultures and still have to work to balance those cultures. Below is my summary of what I learned during this project.

The Ambivalence of Identity Recognition

A certain type of ambivalence was the most interesting phenomenon I observed in the Chinese American community. When these individuals first arrived in the U.S., what they wanted most was to get American citizenship. This is not out-of-the-ordinary for a foreigner who wants to settle down. To get work opportunities and earn money, a work permit is essential. From what I observed, Chinese Americans try their best to get their legal identity first and then try to live a stable life. As time goes by, an inarticulate conflict grows in their hearts. They may love the freedom and equality American society provides for them, but they also suffer from it. Chinese culture is indispensable to these people, but when they are immersed in a totally different culture, sometimes they don't know how to view their original one.

Jennifer was desperate to become an American citizen when she first came to this country. As her life became more stable, her thoughts towards Chinese culture began changing. She shared a story about attempting to help a Chinese company hold an exhibition in America. While she was hoping to use her deeper understanding of the two cultures to bridge gaps between the two countries, she became confused. She told me:

For the first time, I vividly sensed the many clashes between the two cultures. For example, some exhibition items were supposed to arrive in the

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States on a specific day, and everything was prepared in Philadelphia, but for some reasons, these items failed to arrive. So we had to reschedule, but you know what, the rescheduling generated fees, but the Chinese side asked the U.S. side to share the cost. The Americans thought, "It is none of my business!" So the Philadelphia Museum refused to write a check to the Chinese side, and everybody came to me to negotiate about the money issue! Sandwiched between the two sides, I finally had to fish the reschedule money out of my own pocket.

Jennifer's ambivalence is clear. The vision of her project was to make peace between the two cultures, but instead she was faced with the problems that arose when those cultures collided. American culture highly values obeying rules, and Jennifer learned this in a difficult, costly way. When she tried to run a small business by herself in America, she suffered from the strict contract rules. She ultimately lost her store because she didn't do enough research regarding how to sign a contract. She claimed she felt "coldness" in this culture:

These kinds of people are robbers. I felt that so many Chinese immigrants are like me! We are passionate about everything, but know nothing about the game rules. We rushed into signing all kinds of contracts that we didn't really understand. When I look back at the lease I signed before, I felt that it is full of traps.

The ambivalence in Jennifer's case continues to be evident. I also noticed that Chinese Americans, coming from a background that lacked legal education or training, are mostly confused about how to navigate the stricter legal environment of America. Such cases came up again and again in my interviews.

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Another interviewee of mine, Ding Lina, went through a long journey to attain a stable life in the U.S. She worked at a nail salon for seven years and did all kinds of low-level jobs. In her forties, she earned a degree in library science and in her fifties, she finally became a curator of a branch library in Brooklyn. During our interview, she subconsciously compared China and America. I sensed that she has grown to subtly despise Chinese culture:

I have been in New York for more than 20 years. Sometimes, when I go back to China, I can't get used to it anymore. People talk so loud in public. Who do you think you are! Is your father Li Gang?

I used to work at a manicure salon—a decent job. You know American people don't usually care about dressing, especially in New York City. Sometimes they wear saggy T-shirts and flip-flops out. But on special occasions, for example important holidays or for wedding, they would dress up, and they would definitely do manicure and pedicure. When I went back to China to attend a wedding ceremony, I was shocked. My god! People wear jeans! Pretty girls wear open-toe shoes. My god! Their stuck-out big toes are bare and look ugly. How would you attend a wedding like this?

This testimony belies a sense of superiority. But when I talk to Ding Lina outside of our interviews, I can tell that she still views herself as a Chinese. When she returns to China for vacation, she uses the word “back,” which indicates she still subconsciously thinks China is her home. When she said things such as “Who do you think you are. Is your father Li Gang?” I identified her as a typical Chinese who knew the latest hot topic of gossip in China. She told me she checks Chinese

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news online everyday, which means Chinese culture is still an inseparable aspect of her day-to-day life. She vacillates between two cultures and two identities. Though Jennifer said during the interview, "I've gotten used to thinking in the American way!" I saw her trying her best to keep Chinese traditions in her home. During the Chinese Spring Festival in 2011, the spirit of the festival atmosphere was absent from Columbia University. Jennifer, who has been in the U.S. for 17 years, came to pick me up. She drove me to her home, where her whole family was preparing for the traditional Chinese reunion dinner.

When I entered Jennifer's house, I was immediately surrounded by the familiar smell of Chinese food wafting in the air. And when I got up to the second floor and entered the living room, I saw a typical Chinese family reunion scene. On a round tea table, there were several plates of snacks. I saw almonds and watermelon seeds. I saw a delicate teapot with some blue flower decoration on the exterior and small teacups in the same blue flower pattern sitting around the pot. Jennifer's two sons, aged 6 and 13, were running around in the living room and giggling. Jennifer's brother Li Yao, who is plump and has a happy face, was trying to tune in to the traditional Chinese Spring Festival Gala on TV. He was kneeling on the carpet, working on the flat screen with a serious look. As he surfed the channels, flipping through them quickly without noticing their content, I could hear periodic whooshes of static. I laughed and said, "Even Chinese young people wouldn't watch this banal program anymore." I was not joking. The Chinese are so sick of this tasteless program that many talk about abolishing it. Surveys online confirm the negative opinions of many Chinese

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regarding the program. But Jenifer replied, “You always feel you are missing something if you don’t watch it during the Spring Festival.”

That night at Jennifer’s home in Brooklyn, I witnessed a typical Spring Festival scene—one that I was so used to seeing in China: many Chinese Americans came in from different places, they got together at Jennifer’s house, and they talked loudly and happily. The evening embodied to me the reality that most Chinese Americans try to let two different cultures coexist within them. (For example, they enjoy Christmas but won’t give up traditional Chinese festivals.) I returned to my apartment from Jennifer’s house very late that night. Sitting together and waiting for the New Year to arrive at midnight is the most important part of the Chinese Spring Festival, and neither of us wanted to miss it.

As time goes by, I feel the two cultures start to coexist with less tension in my body as well. While I embrace the openness in American culture, my conservative, anxious disposition remains intact—a disposition shaped by my experiences growing up in China. Gradually, I began to understand why Chinese Americans always spend time together. As mentioned above, they are a group of people sandwiched between two cultures; a single-cultured people could hardly understand their mindsets. Only people who have experienced similar ambivalences could truly understand them. I see Chinese Americans chatting at midnight during home parties and eating Chinese food together for all sorts of occasions. It seems that they are eager to find a comfortable cultural zone into which they can retreat. They support each other to live through difficulties and inaccessible loneliness.

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Racial Discrimination or Social Equality

Chinese Americans simultaneously experience racial discrimination and social equality, both of which are key aspects of my project. They feel discrimination sometimes but overall they think the American society provides the most social equality.

Racial discrimination is not a new topic among Chinese Americans. When I first came to America, I sensed that the American society has been putting a lot of effort into dealing with this issue. When I attended orientation at Columbia University, I got a brochure that said, "If you feel any discrimination, please petition to The Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action." In everyday life, I feel that although students come from different countries and speak English in different accents, there is no discrimination on campus.

"That is not a real world. That is on campus!" Jennifer told me. "Once you enter the business world, you can feel white males hold strong discrimination against Asians." She said:

In this society, the true tough guy is the white male. Why is that? They use every way to humiliate you. When they get some power, or when they step on some senior positions, at this point if you sign agreement, contract, lease, whatever it is with them, they would use the most elegant attitude to humiliate you. They talk about things that are unfavorable to you, emotionlessly.

Jennifer recounted these stories with anger. From my perspective, these stories do not just indicate discrimination, but they indicate that Chinese Americans are

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unfamiliar with the American legal system. Chinese Americans always pay a high price to deal with that which is unfamiliar.

Ding Lina also spoke about racial discrimination during her interview:

It is not very often that I feel criminal discrimination in the library. But sometimes I do. Once I went to work on Saturday. There were only two employees there, me and another librarian who came from Philippines. Later a female came in and asked some questions. But when she saw me, she stopped and said, "Do you have another librarian?" I immediately knew what she meant.

During my interviews, my subjects touched upon this topic from time to time. Staying in this society always means conquering the psychological barrier first. But at the same time, they all agree that the American society has provided them a fairer environment than China.

Ding Lina didn't tell me directly about how wonderful it is to live in this country, but her testimony showed that she benefited from the helpful environment. When she suffers from bullying, people always give her a helping hand. She said:

Whenever this (the discrimination) happens, my colleagues step forward to help me out! I remember one time my boss came out and said, "Yes, she has her accent and you don't, but I don't think you can get a master's degree in your whole life." His voice was firm and silenced the kid.

Chinese Americans appreciate the social equality they've experienced in this society. In China, people know that if you have privileged parents, you don't have to work hard to get a good job. But Chinese Americans know that even if

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they only have a humble background, as long as they put in enough effort, they can get a job fit their capabilities.

Jennifer said that all her college classmates from Shanghai, who later came to the U.S., held a reunion in America several years ago. According to Jennifer, her classmates all said, “More than ten years have passed, our experiences tell us as long as we work hard, we can achieve a not-so-bad life. The American society, when compared to the Chinese society, offers ordinary people more justice.”

American Dream: To Get or To Lose

Only after beginning this project did I realize how shallow my understanding was of the American Dream. Before I came here, I always thought the American Dream was about living in a big house with a big green lawn and two shiny cars parked in the driveway. It seemed that Chinese Americans could live in America free of worries. Perhaps the mainstream media in China showed me too many good stories about American Dreams being realized; I couldn't imagine how much they might lose in the process.

I now know I am wrong in two ways. First, the authentic American Dream is like the two sides of a coin: it is not only about what people earn, but also about what they lose. Second, the American Dream is not only about living a better life, but also about how to become your true self.

When you lift the veil that often covers the American Dream, you discover many scars. If you were to meet Jennifer now, you would see diners flooding into her restaurants and hear her two lovely sons speaking perfect native English.

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You might consider her the epitome of an immigrant who has successfully achieved the American Dream. But after listening to her stories, you become acquainted with the deeper pains she experienced on her road to success and fulfillment. After talking with her, you realize she was on the brink of bankruptcy many times and became extremely desperate. You would also learn that she wanted to commit suicide several times, and you would discover how much she suffered from all kinds of pressures and cultural clashes.

Jennifer's stories reveal another side of the American Dream. During an interview, she told me how depressed she was after selling one Subway restaurant she owned to the district agent:

I've never felt the humiliation like that before. I lost my Subway. It seemed a relief. But I carried a stigma in my heart. It is just like you lost your own baby. I sank into the deepest depression. I did not dare go to the top of high buildings. Whenever I went onto a tall building, I wanted to jump down from it. I felt terrible. What am I busting my butt for? Some simple contracts made you lose your baby? And I couldn't find a place to vent out. At first, I wanted to tell things to my husband, but later he got impatient. He never heard good news from me. All news was bad. And he is always an escapist, just like an ostrich, always burying his head under sand. I got used to handling all hard things by myself.

Jennifer's story is laced with desperation. And now we know how much she has dedicated to her American Dream.

My interviews with Chinese Americans taught me that the core of the American Dream is not about material abundance; it is mostly about self-

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fulfillment. Jennifer was presented with many opportunities to live a more stable life, but she chose instead to pursue self-realization. She attends all kinds of events in New York City, stays up reading books until midnight, and helps young people organize art activities in Williamsburg. A few weeks after our interview, she told me she was helping her mother hold a weekly I-Ching lecture at the Brooklyn Public Library. She said, “My goal is not to be a successful restaurant owner. My goal is to be true about myself. And I can be myself right now. I think it is the most important thing American society endows me!”

Another Chinese American I interviewed, Yoyo, who is a young independent artist, believes the only aspect of the American Dream is self-realization. “To earn money is to waste time!” he told me. Although he lives in a shabby, small place, you can tell how fulfilled he believes himself to be by how he carries himself. Living in New York City and having the opportunity to be immersed in this artistic atmosphere matters the most to him. No matter what kind of home he lives in, he considers himself successful. As an independent young artist, staying in this country provides him spiritual satisfaction.

Ding Lina’s story sounds like a splendid American Dream on the surface—but I also know how much she has lost. Born to a privileged family, Ding had a very rich childhood. As mentioned above, after coming to America, she spent seven years working as a manicurist. She admits that even today, her apartment in New York is smaller than her house in China. But her testimony indicates that now, after finding her dream job, she has a strong sense of fulfillment. She said, “When I go back to China, people at my age even don’t know how to send an

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email.” The way she talks proves that she is proud of herself and is spiritually content.

After eight interviews, I also grew to understand that not everybody could achieve the American Dream and find success as an immigrant. Annie Huang’s tumultuous life has played out like a tragic movie. Though she cannot get a decent job because of her extensive criminal record, she insists on staying in America. A series of unfortunate events led her to marry a man casually, and give birth to an autistic child. I think about her life from time to time. If she had not insisted on staying in the U.S., she probably could have lived a much better life in China.

The longer I lived in America and the more Chinese Americans I interviewed, the deeper I grew to understand the American Dream and its complexities. On the one hand, it is very positive. It is about freedom, uniqueness, creativity, and self-fulfillment. On the other hand, I see difficulties and even ugliness.

Jennifer almost sacrificed her marriage in her attempts to achieve her dreams. Ding Lina spent more than ten difficult years reaching her successful life today. Annie Huang struggled for years and still couldn’t find a way to live a decent life. People who say they have realized their American Dreams know how much they’ve lost along the way. They store their pains and bitterness in the bottom of their hearts. They believe that what they’ve lost cannot compare with what they’ve earned. Those sorrows are buried in their memories, and if you don’t ask, you would never hear about them. Personally, I believe the American Dream costs too much, despite its benefits.

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During the time I've been in America, my understanding of the American Dream has deepened. Now I know American Dream is way beyond material satisfaction. It endows me opportunity to experience democracy and freedom.

In October 2011, I visited Zuccotti Park to experience Occupy Wall Street. I saw people holding slogans high and letting out their anger. These people believed they were the 99% of American society, while the remaining 1% worked on Wall Street and owned the vast majority of social fortune and resources. The protesters shouted slogans such as, "All day! All night! Occupy Wall Street!" People held their arms high and their chants had a sense of rhythm. At first, I was too shy to shout with the crowd. But later, out of curiosity, I raised my arm and tried to shout out the same sentences. At that moment, a very strange feeling flowed through my body, which came as a shock. I felt the feeling of freedom. As a child who was raised in a socialist country, to cry out your discontent on the street seemed incredible. We were educated to obey authority, no matter where we were. When I was shouting in Zuccotti Park, something released from my body; I felt I was emancipated in a democratic world.

On the other hand, my American Dream is also about self-realization. As time went by, my embarrassment and terror of staying in this country dissipated. I now watch the news on TV every morning, and I got over the language barrier only a few months after moving here. And when I review the project I conducted and the profiles I've written, I realize I have reached a point I never could have imagined reaching before. So now, I am grateful for this journey.

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Methodology: Why Profile?

My decisions about how to format my project were heavily influenced by my literature professor, Gerry Albarelli. In September 2011, I was sitting in the first class of the oral history master's program, which was Gerry's literature class. He read a strange novel that seemed like a montage; I was totally confused. I realized the class had a very high English language requirement, and I deeply doubted I would survive the course.

The second week I managed to finish Gerry's homework, which was to write a profile of a friend. The requirement was to show the person's character without using any adjectives. I wrote about a funny Chinese friend who misuses English. I read my article in class, and everybody laughed. Despite the positive reactions of my classmates, I stayed after class to express my concerns about my difficulties with English to Gerry. But he told me, "I think you should stay in this class. Although you are not a native speaker or writer, I feel humor in your work. And I believe you can make it."

Attending Gerry's class has benefitted my work significantly. I went to the Fortune Society in Harlem to interview former prisoners and honed my interview skills. Also, as mentioned, Gerry taught us how to write a profile without using adjectives. He always said, "Let the peoples' facial expressions and gestures speak for themselves!" When Gerry mentored me on my profile writing, he stressed this rule as well, and eventually, he convinced me to turn my interviews into profiles.

I am not unfamiliar with oral history in written format, since they are very classical and traditional types of writing. The first oral history book that I

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read was *After the Fall: New Yorkers Remember September 2001 and the Years that Followed*, a collection of testimonies from those who experienced 9/11. The other book was *Inside This Place, Not of It: Narratives From Women's Prisons*, which gathered testimonies from female prisoners. The two books provide simple testimonies and narration from interviewees, which is a comparatively simple way to display a project.

"Can I just showcase interviewees' testimonies like these?" I asked Gerry one day. He replied, "No, it will prove too simple. You should include your observations in your profile and show your point of view." After that conversation, I began to think about the relationship between oral history and writing.

Gerry read the first drafts of my profiles and said, "I like your stories, but I don't think they are profiles. They are testimony." I realized my problem was one of proportion: I included too much testimony and not enough description of my subjects and their current lives. Gerry pushed me to shorten what I included from my interviews, and to add more of my own observations. He also persuaded me to read Franz Kafka, whose writing style he believed I could learn from.

So I went to the Hungarian Pastry Shop one afternoon and sat down. I ordered a cup of coffee and a piece of lemon cake, and began to read *Metamorphosis*. In the dim light, I was sucked into the book and became that clumsy bug. I listened to peoples' conversations around me and crawled onto the wall. As night fell, I started to understand why Gerry introduced me to this book. He was telling me to write like Kafka, as a somber onlooker—to amplify every tiny detail, to lengthen every space, and to give detailed description of peoples'

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moves. These realizations did not make applying them to my writing any easier. I had to fix and revise my profiles many times, until they were appropriately proportioned. I learned that when I conduct an oral history interview, I should be invisible, but when I write my profiles, I need to show up.

With all sections of my project, Gerry and I worked together to find the best approach. He advised me to insert myself as a supporting character in my profiles, so that readers could see my interviewees' lives and also have access to my observations. I would serve as a window, alongside my interviewees, to display how I overcame the hard transition period of coming to America and what this country has taught me. Writing my personal feelings was not easy, and exposing my inner thoughts was challenging, but as the profiles evolved, I realized such writing provided a good opportunity for me in which to reflect on my life.

My Understanding of Oral History, in Four Parts

One: Accessibility Provides More Truth

Before I came to Columbia University, I worked as a financial journalist and used to interview CEOs or successful entrepreneurs. When I look back on the stories I wrote, I realize now that those elites provided me stories with some degree of commercial packaging. They included exaggerations and deifications. But oral history interviews pursue the core truth of what has happened.

The first time I conducted an oral history interview for Gerry's class was when I interviewed a former prisoner who was living at the Fortune Society. My

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interviewee was a former drug dealer, currently in his fifties. Although he wasn't very literate, his plain style of talking was captivating. He described how he drank methadone in the clinics and then spit it into a container in the bathroom. He described that one of his fellow inmates filled the hole of his fake leg with heroine when his girlfriend visited him. When the inmate came back to the cell, he poured the powder onto the floor and people would come up and snatch it.

During our interview, while we were sitting in a not-so-spacious meeting room at the Fortune Society, I almost forgot that he was speaking in English. What raced through my mind were all kinds of images, so vivid yet indescribable. And I was struck by a world I didn't have a chance to encounter before. I felt his narration was plain in style but full of emotion. I suddenly felt a sense of ridiculousness about my past interviews with Chinese elites, and that I had considered them to be successful interviews.

So when I began my oral history project with Chinese Americans, I decided to choose ordinary people as well. I believe they represent the majority of Chinese Americans. I didn't need to sit in luxurious surroundings and finish an article in a rush. My subjects felt accessible, and I felt at ease when I did my work. I only needed to take my recorder, and I could create dialogue with plain souls. I remember when I first went to Jennifer's restaurant, I forgot to put the memory card in my machine, so Jennifer asked her elder son to take me to RadioShack to get one. The boy asked for pocket money in exchange. Jennifer sighed and said, "I've gotten used to it. Every time I ask him do something, I need to give him money!" For Jennifer, this was just a simple aspect of their daily life; for me, this scene provided a lot of information for interpretation, such as the different kinds

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of tension in American and Chinese families, and the differences in parent-child relationship in immigrant families. I sensed there is more equality within families in the U.S., and parents treat their children like true friends.

When I interviewed Lanlan, she invited me to sit down on the beige carpet lining her bedroom floor. She brought two cups of green tea in delicate China teacups and handed me one. When our interview ran late, she invited me to have dinner with her family. When she was preparing the food, I stood by the stove, making small talk with her. We joked and laughed together. She could cook several Chinese dishes in a short time and we tasted them together.

Later, Lanlan's husband Michael, an American, came home from work. He sat down at the dinner table. I spoke Chinese with Lanlan and English with Michael. Michael got up from the table and opened the refrigerator, pulling out some wraps. He put aside the hot, fresh Chinese dish that Lanlan had cooked and instead ate the plain wraps. This scene stunned me. It gave me vivid insight into an interracial marriage—or at least showed me that eating habits are very different between cultures. In China, having hot dishes on the kitchen table when your husband arrives home from work is the most satisfactory experience. Furthermore, a Chinese man would never ignore hot, fresh food and instead eat cold food in the refrigerator. When later Lanlan explained how she deals with the cultural clash in her marriage, this scene helped me understand what she meant.

My interview with Yoyo embodies the difference between journalistic-style interviews and oral history interviews. When I visited him, Yoyo made a salad for us in his greasy kitchen. Inside that kitchen, he talked about his dreams in a relaxed tone. He deliberately put different-colored vegetables into a glass

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bowl and stressed that you shouldn't add any salt to the vegetables, so as to maintain a fresh flavor and not let any sauce overshadow the raw materials. Watching him make that salad helped me understand to what extent an artist cares about the arts, in all forms.

Oral history interviews reveal human nature and are more emotional. Although unavoidable subjectivity exists, I believe oral history interviews are more sincere.

During our Fieldtrip course (a class that teaches how to conduct an oral history interview), separate from official recording of the narrations, we also recorded the color and smell of the interviewees' homes, and any other details that have to do with the environment and conversation. Through these we can better understand our subjects. This technique helped me a lot. Whenever I went into an interviewee's home, I silently absorbed and collected this information, and I got to know more about my subjects beyond what they said in our interviews.

I am deeply thankful for the Chinese Americans who have generously opened their worlds to me and allowed me to present a truthful portrayal of immigrants' lives to others.

Two: Oral History Reveals Humanity

During one of my class sessions at Columbia, I listened to Gerry interview a 9/11 victim. The woman casually mentioned that her husband abused her. Gerry quickly asked "For example," which was meant to elicit more details of her

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husband's abuse. The woman paused for a second, but then elaborated. I also experienced such "pause moments" during my interviews, and I think these moments revealed the humanity of my subjects.

Most of my interviewees never expected that they might become emotional while discussing their parents' marriages. Their stories and emotions revealed the general marriage situation of our last generation in China. Jennifer talked about fights and coldness in her parents' marriage. Her parents forbade her to associate with men while she was away at university, and their instruction instilled her with a twisted concept of relationships. Jennifer said she was affected by those concepts for a long time and had a bad first marriage as a result. When Jennifer and I talked about business, she couldn't stop. But when I asked her about relationships, she sighed and said, "My knowledge on this topic is zero! I am a complete failure."

Another interviewee, Xina, said her parents' marriage impacted her significantly and as a result, she even didn't want to have children. She cried when she recalled her mom bribing somebody with a beautiful cloth. Tears were streaming down her face as she said, "I feel I was inferior to others because of my mom's act!" Before our interview, I anticipated that her greatest suffering would be her participation in the Tiananmen Square protests, which deprived her of admission to graduate school and also crushed her dream of finding a decent job in China. But she never shed a single tear when she recounted this setback. Instead, she wept when she told me about her parents. "I don't know I could be this emotional!" she told me later.

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Sometimes, I discovered that the interviews reminded my subjects of some of the deepest memories of their lives. Yoyo recalled a dark secret in his childhood when I first interviewed him. I encouraged him to talk, but he refused, “It is too dark, I want to keep it to myself!”

After so many of these special moments, I realized that oral history is not only a process in which the interviewer learns about the interviewee, but also a process in which the interviewees learn about themselves. Some memories are buried deeply in peoples’ hearts, and even the interviewees themselves can’t anticipate what will strike them in the act of remembering. Self-analysis is a phenomenon that happens often during oral history interviews.

Annie Huang, who also suffered from her parents’ disastrous marriage, has long been haunted. Not knowing how to deal with a relationship, she earned a criminal record and lost the opportunity to become an American citizen after university graduation. She self-analyzed in her narration:

Both my boyfriend and I inherited strong personalities from our respective families. My family, as I mentioned, had too many fights and violence. So, in my mind it was normal to fight in a relationship. It was a vicious circle. He didn't enjoy happy family life either. So we fought a lot. Even worse, we were both science major nerds. We didn't have any consciousness to adjust ourselves.

People tend to review themselves after years, and oral history can be a mysterious time machine that ships us back to the past, providing an opportunity to face or discover our true selves. Sometimes we see greed; sometimes we see bitterness. And almost every time, we reflect on what we see. I

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befriended a lot of Chinese Americans and learned their secrets. In an interview that I did not incorporate in this thesis, a male Chinese American talked about his extramarital affair. When I turned off my recorder, he said, "Men are bad. I am angry with myself. I want to cut my off penis!"

This is the magical power of oral history. I described my feelings on my Sina Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter): "Completed two unprecedented oral history interviews, each time I talked with my interviewees till midnight. Those stories are not fakes like stories of some successful people. Sometimes the narration can hardly be put under the sun. Yet they are truthful with cries and laughter, carrying flesh and blood. They are as firm as pearl. Whenever I pick them up, I feel holiness in my heart."

Three: Subjectivity

In oral history theory, many scholars talk about subjectivity in great depth. Oral historian Luisa Passerini said her book, *Memory and Utopia: The Primacy of Inter-Subjectivity*, "This (oral history) approach to oral source, which needs to be used in conjunction with other sources, opens the way for analysis of behavior in society."

And what is "subjectivity"? In *Narrative Inquiry*, the two authors Michael Bamberg and Allyssa McCabe tell us, "With narrative, people strive to configure space and time, deploy cohesive devices, reveal identity of actors and relatedness of actions across scenes. They create themes, plots, and drama. In so doing, narrators make sense of themselves, social situations, and history."

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Every interview includes “subjectivity” and “inter-subjectivity.” When I kept this knowledge in mind regarding my interviews with Chinese Americans, I learned to interpret their testimonies in a new way. These testimonies are closely related to the subject’s age, family background, literacy, and social status.

Because of subjectivity, oral historians stress “multi-voice” in interviews and larger projects. Interviewers need to interview many people about one historical event in order to get the maximum possible truth. But to an individual, subjectivity is quite precious, and can be the best “indication manual” or guide to himself or herself. When Yoyo talked about his rebellion, for example, I could clearly identify his subjectivity:

I was extreme rebellious when I finally got into my dream school. I had a great abhorrence toward education. It is absolute brainwashing. Everything is wrong. Professors don't systemically explore the culture and have narrow vision.

After ten years in New York City, Yoyo has become an extreme lover of New York and art. His criticisms are full of subjectivity; Yoyo’s major in college was traditional Chinese painting, and it is impossible that Chinese art education has no advantages.

Four: Mirror Phenomenon

In class, we were taught the concept of “mirror phenomenon” in oral history. “Mirror phenomenon” means how we relate ourselves to the interviewee as we interview them. Gelya Frank, author of *Venus on Wheels: Two Decades of Dialogue on Disability, Biography, and Being Female in America*, talks about this

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phenomenon and quotes anthropologist and filmmaker Barbara Myerhoff, “You study what is happening to others by understanding what is going on in yourself. And you yourself become the data-gathering instrument. So that you come from a culture and step into a new one and how you respond to the new one tells you about them and about the one you came from.” When I first heard this viewpoint, I did not understand it completely—but I did as I began to conduct my interviews. Many times, I was impacted by my interviewees’ narration and it brought up similar experiences from my past. While listening to my subjects, I did a lot self-examination and self-reflection. I learned from their lessons in life and made decisions about my future.

For example, I am stubborn about religion. But when I first came to New York City, I was pulled into a Bible reading group. People were talking about their pains and listening to other peoples’ sufferings. They encouraged people to open up and speak out about their pains. Unexpectedly, I told people my pains and burst into tears. I said I felt guilty about moving abroad when my mom was seriously ill. People were so moved, and they began to pray to God for my mom for 15 minutes. Miraculously, from then on, my mom began to do the acupuncture and got better. That was the first time I felt the presence of God.

My interviewee Jennifer is a Christian. She talks about God from time to time. During one interview, she talked about how she prayed on a cold winter night. Wind had blown her store window into pieces and she couldn’t reach anyone who might be able to help. She stayed at the store alone, worrying about the money she would lose from the broken window. She talked to God in desperation and hoped for his salvation. And a miracle showed up within one

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month—an unexpected buyer bought her store and saved her from becoming broke. Whenever Jennifer talked about God in our interviews, I thought about my own experiences with religion. I don't mean to say I've been converted to Christianity, but whenever Jennifer discussed her faith, I experienced a "mirror phenomenon." Furthermore, Jennifer's desperation reminded me of my own desperation upon arriving in the U.S., which was the first time I needed to depend on my faith.

As I mentioned, another frequent topic was the marriages of my interviewees' parents. Because of the lack of appropriate education about love and sex in China, many Chinese pay a price. Several people spoke of great tension and numerous fights between their parents. Similarly, I experienced many quarrels, violence, and cold wars in my family while I was growing up. As a result of my own experiences, I intimately understood how my interviewees were impacted by their disastrous family lives. Reflecting on my parents' bad marriage leads me to consider how I will educate my children in the future. I will try my best to teach them how to love others and enjoy marriage, and I will not hurt them with cold violence.

I know what Chinese Americans have been through in the U.S. I know it is a long journey to reach a stable life. To some extent, knowing this influences my decision about what I am going to do after I graduate. A lot of people ask me whether I will stay in America. I smile in response. I know it is not easy for a female to start life all over again in this land. And I wish to bring oral history back to China.

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Mirror phenomenon leads me to believe that an interview is not only a journey to know your interviewee, but also to find a true self. Whenever it begins, it becomes inalienably part of your own life.

Summary: The Greatest Gift in My Life

I have been conducting this Chinese American project for over one-and-a-half years. It is not an easy project for me, especially when I have to write in a second language. But this project enriches my soul in a way I've never experienced before. My interviewees endowed me with a chance to learn oral history and to enter the immigration world.

Jennifer became a good friend of mine. I now consult her whenever I have a problem. She has introduced me to a lot of traditional New York events. We went to the Armory Show and the Brooklyn Blossom Festival together. She took me to the new emerging arts area in Williamsburg and a teahouse that hosts interesting events. We explore the city together.

My other interviewee Lanlan invited me to her house for a Thanksgiving dinner party. I saw her delicately roasting a 12-pound turkey and making delicious Guizhou food. Sometimes, Lanlan invited me to attend her younger daughter's recitals. Lanlan indicated to a cello player sitting in the front row of a symphonic orchestra and said, "See, that is our Eva!" Against the backdrop of beautiful music, I experienced the difference between Chinese education and American education. Over the last winter break from Columbia's program, I put a publisher in Beijing in touch with Lanlan, hoping she will publish a book about American education.

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This is another benefit of oral history: once you interview a person, the potential for new interactions with them opens up.

Sometimes, we learn about America together. I remember Jennifer called me one day and said she was going through a crisis. One of her restaurants did not pass the restaurant inspection. She described how strict the inspector was. The inspector dismantled a desk leg and used a flashlight to see if there was a bug in it. In order to pass the inspection, Jennifer drove to Long Island to buy a high-pressure water gun to flush the stove. She divided the restaurant into different areas and examined it inch-by-inch. We discussed food safety in America and decided that this country has a much more stricter standard than China.

I know I have been deeply changed by this country. I attended my friend Remie's party held in her luxurious apartment last month. More than ten of my classmates from Columbia University attended. I joked around and talked about the latest news with them. In regard to the language barrier, I know I have gotten over it.

The English language has brought me to a new world, where I've encountered ideas that had never showed up in my past life. When I first held my arm high and shouted out slogans on the street with protesters in Zuccotti Park, I felt the meaning of democracy for the first time. When I saw the poster sticking on my apartment door to encourage people to vote, I felt the irresistible impulse to see the polling station, since I never had a chance to see what one looks like before. Before the Presidential Election in 2012, I went to an Obama campaign office in Philadelphia and saw volunteers sitting there talking about how to help

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Obama win. I went to a nearby community with two senior volunteers and did door-to-door campaigning. One young man stood behind the door and gave us a contemptuous smile, “ Obama is the worst person ever!” he said. I stood there and didn’t know how to reply. Then, a ten-year-old boy who was biking through the driveway saw us. He naughtily raised his one arm high and shouted, “Obama sucks! Obama sucks!” To American people, these kinds of scenes are common, but openly criticizing a President is quite rare to me, and is a privilege Americans experience daily.

During so many moments like this, I had a strong feeling in my heart. I saw myself as if from the outside: a ridiculous young person who used to believe the Internet had made the world a village. As a seasoned journalist and best-selling writer, I considered myself well educated about the outside world and believed I knew all the differences between the western world and eastern world. Now, sometimes I have the impulse to cry; I know that this country has changed my worldview, and all the things I saw and felt will be forever imprinted on my mind and stored in my blood. I am grateful that I have the chance to experience the western world.

This change coincided with the period during which I conducted my Chinese American oral history project. I felt the same change has happened in the lives of my interviewees. I discovered they were more willing to be vulnerable and honest than those I had interviewed in China, because they don’t fear anything here. At least three interviewees vividly unfolded their memories about many sensitive topics in China.

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I think about my own future career in a new light. And I've come to realize I love oral history so much and can't afford to stop it. Though I am struggling regarding which country I should live in, I know I will take oral history as my lifelong career wherever I go.

Oprah Winfrey once interviewed the author of *Night*, Elie Wiesel, who survived the Nazi German concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Wiesel witnessed innocent children thrown into burning flames. He recounted seeing his mother sent into the death group—people who went to the right side when they entered the camp. Oprah asked him how he could keep his faith in life after witnessing these things. In 2009, I saw this interview by accident and decided I wanted to do interviews on personal history in the future. In 2012, I took up oral history for my master's degree. I always remember what Oprah said about Wiesel after that interview: "Because of his presence, I was struck by his wisdom. And his valor and strength has passed on to me. I feel it is the biggest gift in my life." The greatest gift in my life has been my Chinese American oral history project and studying at Columbia University.

A Profile of Xiao Wei

The first time I met Xiao Wei was at the Armory Show, a world-class art fair held annually in New York City. That was the first year I had the chance to attend. My friend Jennifer took me with her. I was stunned by all the avant-garde pieces I encountered in the hall. Jennifer and I were walking fast and out of breath. We knew we were running late. In a crowded hallway, Jennifer led me to a short Chinese man. “I am gonna introduce you to a friend. His name is Xiao Wei. However, we all call him Yoyo.”

Yoyo, when I finally met him, seemed typically Chinese. He was about 35 years old, not very tall, and was dressed in a black leather coat and a pair of black jeans. He carried a small bag across his chest and wore a small cowboy hat, making him appear a little unusual. However, Yoyo’s most remarkable accessories were his glasses, which were uncommonly large. The black circles felt out of proportion against his small, beady eyes. I felt instantly that this fellow was a little eccentric, even cartoonish—almost like a villain in an animated series. I said, “Nice to meet you! I heard about you from Jennifer. You are an artist.”

The short, beady-eyed cartoon villain stared at me. A faint, naughty smile flickered across his lips. “I am not an artist. I love art. I just love art.” His voice was low, while he spoke quickly. His accent was not standard Mandarin, and his speech a little unclear. He was, at least in this setting, just a little ludicrous.

The open space was partitioned into different rooms. Many precious art pieces had been transported to New York from all over the world. The ceiling of the gallery was extremely high, and every nook of the gallery was filled with modern elements of art. Some art was traditional, while some pieces were too

modern to understand: steel balls stuffed into pantyhose, a fake hill wrapped in steel. To a layman such as myself, much of it seemed absurd.

However, Yoyo took the work seriously. He folded his arms before his chest and stared at each piece for a long time. It was as though he had traveled to another world. His commentary, spoken with his peculiar turns of phrases, was both penetrating and somehow childlike in its sincerity: "See, this piece is a mechanical eagle, and it is famous. The producer used compartments to assemble it carefully so that it can fly so vividly. Every movement is accurate and beautiful. It is a combination of coolness and gentleness!" Alternatively, in front of another work: "This is Damien Hirst's most famous masterpiece! His artwork is known for its rounded crystals and diamonds. Like this, different round points make different pictures. His most famous artwork is a dead human head encrusted with diamonds. It is priceless..." This short, ridiculously dressed man transformed into another person when speaking about art. He became talkative and full of confidence. The mischievous streak was gone, and out came, indeed, a man who "just loved art."

"Why are you staying in New York City?" I asked him. He answered without even a pause, "I learned art. Of course I should stay in this city. If not," he said with a sly smile, "I will lose my soul."

Sitting under the high ceiling in an open space, Yoyo told me about his childhood. "I was born in a faraway countryside in China, absolutely isolated from the outside world. I was eager to go out when I was young."

I was born in a small village in Shaoshan, actually the same birthplace of the late Chinese Chairman Mao Zedong. My village is 10 kilometers away from

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Mao's hometown. It is an incredibly tiny village, with a population of only dozens. Many things happened when I was little. I felt my village was too backward, and people are fatuous. It's like a primitive tribe. Every day, I looked forward to going out of that village. Sometimes, I would climb up to the mountaintops and look outside. Gaze at the endless mountains. I imagined all the time what the outside world would be. "What's beyond these mountains? What does the so-called sea look like and what does the Tiananmen Square look like?" I didn't have any idea! I had a strong aspiration to get out of that village.

One day, I just ran away—I simply jumped onto a train. I had no idea about the outside world and big cities. I was afraid my parents wouldn't let me go. However, I made up my mind to leave anyway. I knew if I stayed there, I would have no hope and no future. I was 17 years old.

I took a small bag with me, in which I put some clothing. I wore a short coat and jumped on a train. At first, I didn't buy a ticket, so I couldn't get through the checkpoint. So I pretended to be transporting some goods with railway workers and got on to the platform through the back door. I made marks on a map tagging the cities I wanted to visit. I wanted to travel all over the country no matter what. I was a kid and had never been outside the countryside. I knew it was risky and even life threatening. However, I roamed around for more than two years.

I heard Yoyo's brief account of his youth in a hall full of postmodern artwork and wondered when I first developed a curiosity about the outside world. I decided I've probably felt a degree of wanderlust since high school. I was born in a very special community near Beijing Capital Airport, far from downtown Beijing, and everyone in our community work around or in the airline

industry. For example, my parents and my sister all work for Aircraft Maintenance and Engineering Corporation, a joint venture between Air China Limited and Lufthansa German Airlines. And a lot of people work for Air China. The best jobs in peoples' mind are those of pilots and flight attendants. When I was little, I watched people in pilot or flight attendant uniforms pulling their suitcases and proudly walking along the street. Many years after I graduated from University and became a journalist at Beijing Youth Daily, I always ran into my middle school classmates in the airport when I went on a business trip. They all worked at the airport. In the community where I grew up, everyone knew each other and children all went to the same schools. After graduating from college, they mostly found jobs in the same community and perpetuated the lifestyle of the previous generation. I was sick of this repetition and vowed to leave when I was 16 years old. So in a sense, my journey to America began in high school.

What made Yoyo come to New York City? This question aroused my curiosity. I wanted to dig more, but Yoyo changed the topic, "My story is too long, maybe next time I will tell your more. How about seeing some of my artwork?" Yoyo took out a black iPad on which his art was displayed.

His work was too strange for words. Every piece was processed by computer software, and it was weird, twisted, and mysterious. In one picture, the original image contained nudity, but it's not a realistic depiction, nor is it an abstract expression. It seemed that all the torsos and limbs had melted; the bodies like spilt milk spreading out on paper with a breast or a leg looming out. Another piece brings you to the sight of a castle. It seems you are flying over a

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castle, but you can't see through it. It's blurry, like a photo taken with a shaky hand. Many twisted souls seem contained in this piece, and it made me uncomfortable.

Regardless of my discomfort, Yoyo's images are powerful. They have a certain force, exuding the determination, fear, and ecstasy of a 17-year-old peasant who has fled his home and rightful place as a laborer in the fields—who has escaped his destiny in pursuit of his calling.

This is the seventeenth year he has lived in this country. I invited Yoyo to Columbia University to record his story. He gleefully agreed, and gave me his business card, which was characteristically unusual. On one side was a huge portrait of him that filled the entire card, his name and email address scrawled shyly at the bottom. The flip side is completely black.

He continued to recount his life when he came to visit me at Columbia.

One day, at about ten in the morning, I boarded a boat heading east, but something bad happened. When I got into the boat, it was very crowded. I put my money in a small bag. When I finally found my seat and wanted to buy some food, I found the bottom of the bag had been cut by a knife, and all my money was gone.

What could I do? I got off the boat at the stop of Jiujiang River. I was starving. I wandered along the riverbank. I didn't know how to survive. I walked to a garbage can and tried to find something to eat. But I felt humiliated—how could a young guy sink so low to eat out of garbage? However, I was dizzy and dreamy. I had no other option. I pretended to roam around the dump and picked up some rotten apples. Although it could save my life for a while, I got hungry very soon. I went to restaurants and begged the owners to give me some odd jobs to do. But no

matter how I talk to them, not a single person believed me! People drove me away like driving away a dog! I didn't believe I couldn't find a job just for a bowl of noodles! I knocked on one door to another, losing count of how many restaurants I tried. Finally, a man gave me 1.5 Yuan, and I ordered a bowl of noodles.

After that, I roamed to Mt. Huangshan. The trip is unforgettable to me. I made a decision there, which changed the course of my life. When I was wandering at the top of the mountain, a famous Chinese artist came to sketch. I went there six times and couldn't get in. The last time, I thought it was the last chance, so I wrote a long letter to the artist. I arrived there about 11 a.m. and tried to get in, but his students blocked me repeatedly. They said, "We would relay the message and give the letter to him, but he is not available right now!" They tried to drive me away. But I knew it was my last chance, so I said I want to see him no matter what. It was raining heavily that day. I was pushed into the rain, standing there with no cover! I stood there for 40 minutes. I'd never been mistreated like that before. From there, I made up my mind that I would learn drawing. I swore I would become the best artist.

After exchanging email addresses with me at the Armory show, Yoyo sent me some emails of mostly short sentences from time to time. Usually, there were no subject headings. Most emails consisted of a single-sentence, enigmatic inspiring phrase in a large and bold font: "The place you want to go. Let us make a road!" "If you want to reach your dream, you should start off right now!" "Real life is elsewhere!" Sometimes, I received a longer email: "ICFF, a modern furniture exhibition. Today, I just passed by this show and looked around. Design talents have gathered in New York. It has a lot of wonderful productions and so

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many masterstrokes. I was in heaven and didn't want to return. I strongly recommend this. Next time you should go!"

At the time I started interviewing Yoyo, I had been in New York City for seven months, and people immersed in the city's rich inner world were no longer strange to me. New York is the center of the art world, and I know art is carried in the city's DNA. It is like another planet when compared to where I grew up in Beijing. Talking about art in Beijing is considered alternative and vaguely antisocial. Friends talk about the price of housing and the return their aunt is getting on her coal speculations. In New York, we go to galleries, museums, and discuss art. As I gradually fell in love with the city, I grew to enjoy talking to independent artists as well.

Yoyo was sitting in front of me in the office, tilting back in his chair. He wore a dark-blue hooded sweatshirt and a baseball hat. He still had his signature round black glasses on. His voice was calm and even-tempered, but his hand fidgeted with a paper cup, creating noises in the recorder: "Peng... Peng... Peng..."

I asked people where was the most ideal place to learn art. They told me it was the Central Academy of Fine Arts. However, people said it was the most difficult school to get in. Students there either come from family of artists, or they practiced drawing when they were little. They told me I was not competitive, but I didn't believe them! Later, I went to Beijing to prepare my entrance examinations, and all of my life back then was about going to that school.

I was extreme rebellious when I finally got into my dream school. I had a great abhorrence toward education. It is absolute brainwashing. Everything is

wrong. Professors don't systemically explore the culture and have a narrow vision. What is wrong? I majored in traditional Chinese's art, but the dean of my department, his idea about art was totally wrong. He imported old and vulgar local culture from Russia and had no sense of the essence of Chinese's culture. The Cultural Revolution brainwashed him and ruined real Chinese's culture. I've seen through everything. If an artist doesn't go to New York to get nutrition, it's meaningless. So from then, I made up my mind that I will go to New York City one day.

During even the most dramatic moments of our interview, Yoyo's tone stayed calm. He liked to repeat certain phrases: "I was rebellious!" "I don't believe..." "If I want to do something, I will definitely do it," "I don't care!" and "I never yield!" Some of his favorite sayings are almost superstitious: "Supernatural power!" "Unnatural power!" and "An external force is pushing me forward." The sentences he said most were: "I always feel that I belong to this country, belong to New York City. I would go to this city anyway. I knew there was a supernatural power pushing me here!" When he said this, he looked piously into the air, as though communing with his "unnatural power."

There was a paradox in Yoyo's self-confidence. On the one hand, he spoke proudly of his implacable determination to overcome all hindrances and achieve whatever he desired. On the other hand, he seemed fatalistic, convinced that his fortune had been decided by supernatural powers. He deeply believes there is a space beyond this earthly world. And this is why, despite his implacable will, he believes some things are out of his control.

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As he kept repeating his key phrases, I suddenly felt these contradictory aspects of Yoyo were very familiar, but I couldn't figure out why I felt that way. Later, I realized that I had sensed the contradictions in Yoyo's art pieces. All his artwork—those twisted bodies, foggy castles, and struggling lines—have said as much for him already. He struggled his way out and keeps struggling, which is clear in his work. This realization helped me better understand how he translates his worldview and feelings into art.

I came to Chicago in 1996: an art gallery invited me to attend an event. I had a strong aspiration to see the real America, to see if this country is the same country I read from newspapers. That time, I stayed. And I never left the U.S. from then on.

I stayed in Chicago for three years. I did my art sometimes. However, for most of my time, I did drudgery. I worked in a Chinese restaurant for more than ten hours a day. That restaurant was full of employees from South China's Guangdong province, and it had four bosses. They asked the master chef to take charge of the kitchen, and he bullied me every day. I thought I should quit. So one day I threw the knife on the cutting board and stormed out. But there was a lot of oil on the board, the knife slipped into the air, and then fell into an iron shelter. The chef thought I wanted to kill him. He skirted away whenever he saw me.

I came to New York City in 1999! How could I make a living in this city? People told me I could make a living by painting portraits. I have no other expertise but painting. So I went to Times Square.

At first, it didn't work. Some customers returned their portraits and asked their money back. I am a stubborn person. I tried everything possible to realize my

thoughts. I wouldn't stop until I get the result I want. At that time, I was near broke, with almost no money to pay rent. After one week, I painted a cartoon with new thoughts, and it worked. When the business was good, I could earn \$1000 every day. Sometimes, my guests were so happy and excited even the police came to ask what had happened.

The first few years in New York were hard, but I've never felt that way. I fought harder when the situation was worse. I viewed the bitterness as a gift from God.

It was lunchtime, and I decided to end our first session. When I wanted to put away the cables that twisted out of my microphone and recorder, Yoyo picked up my notebook and flicked through it.

“How about drawing a cartoon portrait of me?” I asked.

A huge smile spread across Yoyo's face. “I have stopped doing this for years!”

“Never mind.”

“Ok, sit down and stay put!”

He skillfully picked up my fountain pen, and then rubbed the pen tip twice on the notebook to see if there was ink in it. Staring at me for a few seconds, he began to draw. He brandished his pen swiftly, and seemed at ease with his work. He smiled when he was drawing—the carefree smile a student has after a serious examination. He became completely submerged in his work. In less than two minutes, he finished.

I grabbed the notebook back and eagerly took a look. It was a funny, exaggerated, and cute version of me. My eyes and mouth were bigger, but it still

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was easy to recognize that the drawing was of me—not because there was a tiny mole in the same place on my cheek, but because the caricature had a spiritual affinity to me. I fell in love with it immediately.

That was the first and the only time I saw Yoyo draw. And it's the first art piece of his I saw that does not relate to twisted lines, foggy bodies, and blurry castles. It's a cartoon, which was cute, bright, and full of happiness and animated feelings. I think if you put the two styles of his art in front of people—the cartoonish work juxtaposed with surreal images—they wouldn't believe the pieces all came from the same artist.

"It's great! I love it so much!"

Yoyo was sitting there, smiling, like a villain in a cartoon. *How many aspects are there to him*, I wondered to myself.

"You know what, I was once a gambler. I got lost in my life for a long time," he said suddenly. I was stunned by this admission.

Yoyo continued, "I will tell you my other stories in my house. And I will make my signature salad for you." I stared at him, imagining how many tumultuous stories he still had yet to share.

During the second session, Yoyo began:

I went to graduate school and majored in art in New York City. But after graduation, I got hooked on gambling. The first time I sat by one table and began to bet, I won a lot several hours later. My friends left, but I stayed. When I returned, they asked how much I had won. I said \$5,000. They were dumbfounded. To my friends, it was unbelievable. A terrifying thought popped out my mind, "Is a gamble

really this easy? If so, does it mean I am the only smart person in the world? It's impossible!" My subconscious told me if I kept on doing this, the dead end is just ahead of me. However, I continued anyway.

The second time I won \$60,000. The third time, everybody knew me in that casino. One time, I pushed all chips toward the dealer and held it. The dealer said, "Hands off!" I said, "If you don't let me hold it, I quit!" They gave in! Several hours later, I won all the money from the four tables. It was \$90,000.

Many things happened during those years. I gambled for three years. But my lucky streak was over three years later. I never got my luck back. The worst thing was my girlfriend left me. My then girlfriend was also crazy about art just like me. She told me if I quit gambling she wouldn't leave me. I agreed but couldn't control myself. I continued gambling for the next two years. One day, when I went back home, I saw a big mess! She had moved her stuff out and left a letter on the table. It said, "I won't contact you ever again!"

My world turned upside down. Nobody loved me at that time. When I needed a bank certificate to prove I had \$8,000 on my account, I called everybody I knew. However, nobody picked up the phone. My worldview collapsed. I felt I was a superfluous person. I realized that I had to quit. You should provide value to this world.

I recorded the above narration at Yoyo's home. I had some questions deep in my heart at that time: How does a young person deal with the reality of the outside world while holding otherworldliness in their heart? Can he really reconcile his own spiritual struggle? In my home country, I had too many friends compromise their dreams and yield to reality. Life is cruel to middle-class

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families. Housing prices have been skyrocketing for the last five years. If you want your kids to go to a better kindergarten, you have to pay 30,000 RMB in advance. Food inflation runs rampant. The pressure and anxiety of living in Beijing can be unbearable. It is not easy for people to earn a living in fine arts. One my artist friends with two children gave up his dream, going into interior design to support his family, but he never felt good about giving up art. I remembered one day he sat with my family. He looked far away and sighed, "I am shameful that I have given up art. But I have no other way to go. I have to pay bills!" A dim light shone in his eyes.

Because of this, Yoyo's perseverance is as unique as it is impressive to me. Sometimes, I contemplate the firm attitude he possesses. I had similar experiences when I gave up many peoples' dream job to go to abroad for graduate school. The moment I resigned from my journalist job, money stopped coming into my bank account. When I stood in front of a vending machine in America, I saw that the price of bottled water is six times more expensive than in Beijing. Bills flooded into the tiny apartment I was renting. I doubted my dream at the time, and I understood then that dreams are expensive.

I took my recorder to Yoyo's house for our second session. Yoyo rents the second floor of a two-story house, located in a lovely and quiet community in Long Island City. He lives with his family, which includes his wife Annie Huang and his wife's autistic child.

The house's interior is poorly decorated compared to its beautiful facade. It is old, and the walls are peeling. A patch board hangs down in the air. "*It is really a shabby place,*" I thought to myself, but I tried to hide my surprise.

The two rooms of the apartment were messy. In the master bedroom, a simple bed without a headboard sat against the far wall, a quilt casually sprawled across the mattress. A double sofa rested under a window; piles of clothes were all over the room. A very long desk sat against the wall. Everything was laid out in plain sight—metro cards, pens, notebooks, children’s toys, and keys.

But then something caught my eye: a paper pinned to the bookshelf just above the desk. It was a piece of paper with a hand-painted picture on it. It was a caricature of a much older, scowling Annie Huang. Beside her portrait was a handwritten note, “If we don’t sleep by 11:30 p.m., we punch each other to death!” The sentence ended in a series of huge exclamation marks.

I laughed out loud. “Why did you draw this? Why do you need to punch each other to death if you don’t go to sleep at 11:30 p.m.?”

Yoyo wasn’t wearing a hat that day, revealing his bald head. His signature black-framed glasses were still on his face, and whole face looked rounder than before. “Oh, it’s because I dedicate all my time to art,” he replied. “I don’t go outside unless absolutely necessary. I stay up too late and get up at noon. It’s not healthy. I need to change. So I drew this!”

I nodded, and then posed a question, “How can you make a living in this city?”

“I use my savings. You know what? To earn money is to waste my life!” At that moment, I almost forgot the person who sat in front of me used to be an incorrigible gambler.

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I needed to earn money to pay back the loan sharks, to pay back my friends. But I didn't even have two dollars cash with me. Later, I made a phone call to a young guy who came from Wenzhou. I told him, "All my possessions are here, a computer and a mobile phone. Let us look for information and make money." In order to earn money, we tried everything. I knew selling a kind of small turtle is a good business. However, federal law stipulates that it is illegal, because children could be infected bacteria from them. However, I knew it's a really good business: you sell one for seven or eight dollars, and if you provide a small cage, you sell one for 15 or 20 dollars. I like small turtles. When we began to sell them, people lined up to buy. One day, a person with a baseball cap, carrying a camera came and asked us, "Are you selling small turtles?" I paused. A strong instinct told me this person was a journalist; he knew it's illegal. Not surprisingly, the police came later. One man asked me, "Are you selling small turtles?"

"Yes, we are!" I said.

"Do you know it is illegal?"

"No, we don't know!"

"Do you have other turtles?"

"No, we don't," I said.

"Yes!" My partner stuttered out while giving me a look. I felt so betrayed. Cops searched our wooden box and found a whole box of small turtles. They become enraged and handcuffed us immediately. I whispered to my partner, "Everything is ruined! Everything is ruined!" We were so worried. Later, the police gave us fines, but we didn't get anything on our record.

Looking back, I know I intended to do some observations about American society. I wanted to know how this society runs and how people live here. I found Jewish people are the smartest in the world. They are sensitive; they detect the most interesting inventions and buy the intellectual property rights and turn them into products. They test the market.

Yoyo's wife Annie Huang came back to the apartment. She just nodded to Yoyo and smiled. Annie Huang is one of my interviewees as well. She never seems to wear makeup and has a head of unruly long black hair. She wears black-framed glasses as well, but her eyes behind the lenses always appear tired.

Annie Huang has experienced a lot of ups and downs in her life. When she studied at the University of Michigan, she fought badly with her boyfriend at the time. Twice, her neighbors called the police, who took her to the police station. Because of that, she has a criminal record and can't get a green card. Eventually, she married a man much older than her and later gave birth to Tom. The father never loved his autistic child or Annie Huang, and the old man eventually divorced her.

By the time I was sitting in Yoyo and Annie Huang's kitchen, they had only been married for several months. Annie Huang looks older than her age, and Yoyo looks younger. So, when they sat together, they didn't look like a couple; instead, they look liked brother and sister. Despite all the mishaps in Annie Huang's life, however, she seems peaceful and gratified.

Annie Huang and I sat by a small table near the kitchen as Yoyo began to make lunch. Their tiny kitchen was greasy. The stove was burned black and a lot

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of dirty dishes rested in the sink. Yoyo washed all of them before taking out a shining grater.

“Now, I will make an amazing salad,” he exclaimed. “You would never have it elsewhere!”

Yoyo took out colorful fruits and vegetables and began to grate them into a big glass bowl. Soon everything was grated into slices. I saw celery, apple, cucumber, and carrot piling up, and Yoyo worked carefully on them. Unlike the time he was quickly drawing a cartoon for me, his moves now were very slow.

Annie Huang smiled at me and said, “You know what, Yoyo is crazy about cooking! But he has a lot of rules, like how to make the dish color better, how to put as little sauce as possible. To him, everything is art...”

Before long, a bowl of colorful salad was ready. All kinds of fresh fruits and vegetables were simply mixed together. But different from other homemade salads, all the raw ingredients were grated into very slim and long slices, like all kinds of threads gently woven together.

I used a pair of chopsticks and put some slices in my mouth. Immediately, I was stunned by the fresh and natural taste and stared at Yoyo in awe. It tasted almost like lotus. I felt for the first time that food could become art—that you could feel the soul of that food. I puzzled over how such a transcendent dish could come out of such a greasy kitchen.

“I always think making a dish is like making art. You’d better put some effort into the colors; also the flavor. And it doesn’t mean that the more sauce you put, the better the flavor. On the contrary, a real great chef puts less sauce...”

Yoyo was giving a speech about cooking. And Annie Huang, who was staring at him, smiled in satisfaction.

The shining glass bowl of colorful salad was put in the middle of the wooden kitchen table, giving the kitchen a different feel. A homey atmosphere took over the ugly little space.

I resumed my art creation from 2007. I created thousands of works. Creating art is a basic need. I can't live without it. I don't care if my work sells. What I care is if I can express myself through my art. At one time, whenever I picked up my brush, I felt so weak. I felt so terrible.

I love New York City. There are shows here from all over the world. You find ideas and new thoughts all the time. I am sensitive to these inspiring thoughts. I can see some artists here use artificial intelligence to express their artistic thoughts. It is quite new. That is why I came here. As a young artist, you absorb artistic nutrients from everyday life. When you are creating, you will have a very good mentality. It seems something is pushing you forward. I just want to express my own thoughts and ignore the outside world. I want to create real art. I want to create new languages.

Yoyo couldn't stop talking about art since we touched upon this topic. It seemed that no one needs material life any more. He has taken you into another world—a crazy but incredible and holy wonderland. In that world, you have Matisse, Picasso, and Monet. In that world, you have Impressionism, Cubism, and Fauvism. You have all kinds of cultural legacies and unspeakable greatness. It reminded me when I first met Yoyo, at the Armory Show, when he stood in front of those art pieces, totally immersed in another world.

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He was glowing in his home as he pointed to a book and read from it: “Matisse experimented with many different styles of painting from Impressionism to Abstraction, but is best known for his involvement in the Fauvist movement. He began drawing when he became seriously ill and was confined to bed for nearly a year, and soon after made art his career.”

He raised his voice when he told me, “Do you know how much I love Cubism and Picasso? Picasso is a real genius. A lot of people can’t understand Cubism. However, those pieces are holy pieces to me. In front of a Cubist painting, it is a material world. Moreover, behind a Cubist painting, it is another space, an unseen space. There is a religious dimension to Picasso’s painting. You have to know there is a God in it.”

I quietly sat in front of this Chinese man, not sure if I understood him completely. Annie Huang did not talk much that day, though she also didn’t show any discomfort. Everything felt natural. When Yoyo was excitedly talking about Picasso and Matisse, Annie Huang left the kitchen and closed the door quietly. When we were having our lunch, they told me that Tom didn’t receive good special education at his current school, so Huang was determined to find a private school with better special education. She had been going out every day and to consult with the private schools in their neighborhood. She wanted to find a school that would take Tom.

When the door was quietly closed, I turned my head to see that Annie Huang had disappeared. I felt a tension, or perhaps sadness, in the air. I pressed pause on the recorder and asked Yoyo, “Is Annie OK?”

Yoyo was silent for a moment before saying, "Tuition for special education is nine times more expensive than normal school. We don't have the money." His tone changed dramatically. It seemed he fell from the sky and was forced to come back to earth to answer the question. I'd woken him abruptly from a pleasant dream. His countenance became empty, his tone grim.

"We will try to sue the government," he continued, "and let the government pay for us. It is the war for this family now."

After that, he fell into low spirits, and it was hard to return to the joy he seemed to experience before when he was discussing art.

In July 2010, Annie and I decided to get together. Before that we fought several times, because we had different worldviews. I still thought that people could have some spiritual beliefs. But she never listened to me. She couldn't understand how God leads me forward in my artistic world. When I create something, I do need the power of Mother Nature to lead me. I want to go to somewhere unknown to the world to capture some information.

I know she has an autistic kid. I feel that as a woman, she has difficulties living in the city, let alone she has to take care of a sick kid. I cannot bear to leave her alone. Since we met and fell in love, I have done my best to help her. We solve problems together. As long as we make efforts together, we can get over problems. I know a lot things are about money. As long as we solve the money issue, we can get stability in American society.

This is the first time Yoyo seriously talked about money issues during our interviews. In our first interview, he had simply said, "To earn money is to waste my time!" His tone had been full of scorn for monetary concerns. Now, sitting in

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his shabby apartment, I thought of lyrics to a song I'd heard: "If you love somebody, you send him to New York, 'cause it is a heaven. If you hate somebody, you send him to New York, 'cause it is a hell." Between his pursuit of art and his dire straits, Yoyo was indeed sometimes in heaven and sometimes in hell.

After our second interview ended, Yoyo and I remained sitting in his kitchen. We were talking casually when Annie Huang brought Tom back from school. Small in stature, eight-year-old Tom stood in front of us, murmuring. His hair was trimmed short, almost bald. His skin was fair, unlike Annie Huang's dark complexion. Tom was immersed in his own world, and didn't make eye contact with me.

"Hi little boy, what did you do today?" Yoyo asked him. After spending some time with Tom, I discovered he always has a smile on his face and murmurs to himself, and won't look directly in your eyes.

Tom raised his head, glanced at Yoyo, and then looked down again. He played with his fingers and murmured, "Yoyo..."

We all laughed. Yoyo smiled and turned to me. "You know what, I would never expect him to call me Daddy."

A profile of Ding Lina

I met Ding Lina through my friend Jennifer. The three of us had planned to meet at a pastry shop in Flushing. I had heard about Ding before—how she came to the United States in her thirties, worked as a manicurist for seven years, earned a master’s degree in her forties, and now, in her fifties, served as a library curator.

How would a person like this feel about staying in America? I thought to myself on the way to the interview.

Jennifer, a 41-year-old Chinese American, was standing in front of a store when she saw me. She spoke briskly as usual. “Ding and I have been waiting for you for hours!”

I quickly complimented her. “Sexy glasses!” I said, and walked toward her.

“Thank you!” she replied.

We hugged. I checked my watch and found out that I was only ten minutes late.

Jennifer led me through a hall that smelled of bread and opened a glass door to our meeting place. Compared to the cold air outside, the room was invitingly warm. Many guests wore short-sleeved shirts and had their coats on the backs of chairs. The walls were painted purple, and music played softly, almost inaudible. The environment was comfortable, feminine even.

Ding Lina sat on a red sofa by a French window, peacefully looking outside. In front of her was a white stone table with her order—a three-tier snack set and tea served in a small teapot adorned with delicate flower patterns. A milky scent hung in the air.

When she turned her head, I saw a typical Asian face with a yellow complexion. She parted her short black straight hair on one side, revealing shallow wrinkles on her forehead and face. Her eyes were thin and black, while her eyebrows were a comparatively lighter shade. She had a flat nose and a slightly protruding jaw.

“Thank you for meeting with me!” I said, “I’ve been so curious about your stories.”

Ding smiled and responded in Chinese. “No problem. We’re all immigrants, after all! I’m happy to help anytime.” She spoke rapidly in a high-pitched voice, looking straight into my eyes as she talked.

Ding picked up the delicate porcelain teapot on the table and poured some pink liquid into a teacup she handed to me. “It’s rose milk tea. Veeeery smooth!” Though she poured with ease, the wrinkles in her tiny hand betrayed her age. Her fingernails, however, were well-manicured and painted light pink. *Passionate and warm-hearted.* These were the words that popped up in my mind.

Jennifer sat down next to Ding, and I sat across from them both. Jennifer passed me a strawberry and said, “It’s incredibly fresh. Try it!”

As I ate, Ding launched immediately into a fervid account of her arrival in the US: “I used to work at a manicure salon—a decent job. You know American people don’t usually care about dressing, especially in New York City. They often just wear saggy T-shirts and flip-flops outside. But on special occasions—like important holidays or weddings—they dress up and love to get manicures and pedicures.”

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Ding Lina spoke with excitement. Her eyes suddenly opened wide. “When I went back to China to attend a wedding ceremony, I was shocked. My God! People wore jeans! Pretty girls wore open-toed shoes. Their stuck-out big toes were bare and looked so ugly! How could you attend a wedding like that?” Ding sighed, and we laughed again.

Jennifer looked at me and said, “I told you Ding is a conventionalist. We all call her Aunt Ding!” Later when I conducted the oral history interview with her, I was to learn that Ding had a very privileged childhood.

I was born in the 1950's, an era in which China and the Soviet Union were close. Compared to millions of other children in China, I have to say that I had a golden childhood due to my parents' privileged jobs. My father was a senior officer, so we had everything we wanted at home. In a poverty-stricken era in China when most families were struggling to make ends meet, we already had a car, a telephone, and a nanny. And we lived in a villa, which was very rare at the time in China.

I remember that once, my parents took us out on a picnic. We spread a plastic sheet on the ground and took out a lot of canned food, which was rare at the time in China. So many people came over just to look at what we were eating. My father later said we couldn't do that any more.

Ding recounted this in Jennifer's office later, after we had finished our dessert in the store. I remember vividly how we left the store and went to Jennifer's office.

On that cold night in Flushing, New York, I could see our breath and hear our steps echo. We walked across a parking lot, heading for Jennifer's office.

Darkness had fallen, and I breathed in the cold air through my mouth. Through the dim light, Chinese characters were still visible, hanging from buildings around us.

Flushing is a famous Chinese community in New York City. Whenever I come here, I get a strange feeling. The familiar Chinese characters and Chinese faces give the illusion that you're in a Chinese city. But when you examine the construction more carefully, you notice the buildings are less modern than in Beijing and that some Chinese characters are written traditionally, reminding you it is not really China. I feel the same way toward Chinese people I meet in the U.S.—when I talk to them, I feel as if they are my countrymen, yet some parts of them are no longer Chinese.

“I've lived in New York for more than 20 years. Sometimes when I go back to China, I can't get used to it anymore. People talk so loudly in public places. Who do you think you are? Is your father Li Gang?” Aunt Ding said.

Jennifer and I laughed. She was referring to a scandal that had taken place in China two years ago. A young driver was speeding and ran over a pedestrian. When the police blocked his way, instead of stopping, the driver gunned the engine and yelled out, “My father is Li Gang!” Li Gang was an official at the local public security bureau. “My father is Li Gang!” soon went viral in social media in China as a symbol of the children who have parents in power.

I understood what Ding meant when she said that people talked loudly in public. After spending months in New York, something strange was growing in my heart. I no longer viewed my home country the same as I did before. When I landed in Beijing during winter break, the rudeness of my countrymen at the

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baggage claim staggered me. They shouted and shoved me from behind. When people spotted their suitcases, they jumped in front of me without excusing themselves and flung their bag out from the baggage carousel with no regard for the safety of others nearby. I suddenly realized Beijing was no longer an environment in which I felt familiar. At that moment, I missed New York City, where even the deliveryman smiles at me and says hello.

After sending us into laughter, Ding laughed herself. She seemed to be encouraged by our reaction. “Who do you think you are? Is your father Li Gang?” she repeated at us, joking. Ding’s personality is infectious. I wondered if her life had always been prestigious. She later told me emphatically in our interview, “No!”

When I was young, my mom sent me to the Nanjing Military Training Platoon. How was life in the military? I remember for some time we had “self-criticism meetings” everyday. We put two shabby brooms in the corner and hung slogans on them like “Down with Liu Shaoqi!” and “Down with Deng Xiaoping!” Liu and Deng were China’s top-ranking State leaders at that time, but in the turbulent Chinese “Cultural Revolution,” they were denounced. So with those brooms in sight, we began to criticize ourselves; we dug out our tiniest selfish thoughts, pronounced them out loud to everybody, and did soul searching. It was ridiculous!

One time, a worker in the dining room came and told us to reflect on our behavior. He said, “You guys are living a very good life, yet you spit out the fava bean’s skin. You are wasteful. Don’t you know a lot of people don’t even have fava bean skin to eat? Don’t you know that fava bean skin has a lot of nutrients?” I

couldn't hold my tongue back and burst out, "What kind of nutrient?" He looked at me and said, "Fava bean skin has a lot of political nutrition."

Aunt Ding is not very tall. She is quite slender, possessing a figure hard to maintain for most her age. When she walks, she stoops a little. When she is not smiling, she likes to frown. But she always seems to be in a cheerful spirit, an enormous amount of energy stored in her tiny body.

"When you stay in America long enough, you know Flushing as 'China in the U.S.," said Aunt Ding. "It is different from other parts of New York. And let me tell you, some Chinese are so undereducated!"

"Once, I was at a bank and some Chinese people wanted to cut in line," Ding recalled in anger. "I was annoyed and stepped forward. I asked them in English, 'Why are you jumping the line? If you don't know where the end of line is, I can tell you!'"

"Did you need to speak it in English?" I asked Ding.

"Of course!" she answered. "When you deal with these impolite Chinese, you need to speak English. If you speak Chinese, they won't listen!"

Everything Aunt Ding says is laden with an element of comedy. She seemed to have an almost ineffable, tender love for her adopted homeland—similar to what I feel now, and what makes this city so hard to leave.

That day, Ding also told me:

After graduating from university, I became a teacher at Suzhou Intermediary Technical School for Supply and Marketing Workers and Staff. I went to a training program in northern China's Shanxi province. Life there was tough. Sand was always blowing all over the place. Dust covered the tables. And when I

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went to bed, I had to first shake the sand off my bed sheet. When I washed my hair, I saw sand sink to the bottom of the basin.

There was no bathroom in the room. All the water faucets were outside. The strangest thing was that local people squatted when they ate. They held their bowls and squatted on chairs. Wouldn't you defile the chair if you stomped on it? We could never find a clean place to sit. Looking back, I'm still glad I went through this, despite the hardships.

I left for America in 1988. It was because my husband came here first. The first apartment I lived in, located in New York, was better than I could have ever imagined. It was big, although a bit shabby. It was the cheapest place in that area, which was an African-American community. When night fell, rats ran around and you could hear their biting everywhere. I even found cockroaches once. But here we are today. I love America. And I love New York City. I feel New York City is a melting pot, and you get what you want. This is an immigrant city. I didn't feel any discrimination here. Everybody is an immigrant. If you have an accent speaking English, nobody laughs at you, because he or she probably has traveled through the same road. They understand.

Ding's narration at Jennifer's office was full of suspense, emotion, and comedy. Her facial expressions, speaking tone and body postures changed as she retold different stories. At first, she stared into the air, trying her best to get ahold of her past. She spoke more slowly than in our past conversations. Her self-mockery sometimes made me laugh. When she spoke about the political self-criticism meeting in China, her tone was full of cynicism. She laughed at the twisted political atmosphere and described it as a ridiculous drama. When she

recalled her arrival in America, her voice raised unconsciously. Her eyes opened wider and her bodily gestures grew larger. She was thrilled to talk about rats and cockroaches. And she smiled when she described New York City as a melting pot.

With her narration, I came to understand Ding's talkativeness and her joyful expression. It reminded me a lot of interviews with Chinese Americans. They were more talkative and spoke more than people I had interviewed previously in China, where I had been a journalist and author. In an environment without a controlled press, people are less subdued and released to speak freely. I believe that, like Aunt Ding, they have found in America what they had been looking for by coming here: freedom. And it reminded my own experience in New York.

The first time I clearly experienced this word was in Zuccotti Park during Occupy Wall Street. Out of curiosity, I shouted the slogan with the crowd. "All day! All night! Occupy Wall Street!" People repeated these seven words for 15 minutes, and I held my arm high and shouted along with them. When we finished, I almost cried. It was a feeling I never could have expected. Growing up in China, I'd never had the chance to shout slogans on the street, let alone openly call for social justice. This moment was a watershed in my life. Something burned in my heart. I felt it. Freedom. For the first time, I felt released.

I now understood why some immigrants were willing to put up with such extreme hardships in the U.S., being grateful just to live here—like Aunt Ding. She told me she started at the bottom when she first came to New York City.

I did all kinds of jobs when I first came. My friend's wife had a factory that made sweaters for soldiers. They had electric sewing machines, which I had never

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seen in mainland China before. People worked on an assembly line. I was afraid I couldn't keep up with the pace of others, so the boss gave me another job—clipping sweater samples. The job was to follow a sample and clip raw cloth patches together in a machine. It was very dangerous—the machine had hurt one of my fellow workers once. Every day, I had to sit and keep still for seven to eight hours with only a half-hour break. I quit that post three months later as I felt it did no good to my future. I didn't have any time to communicate with other people, let alone practice English. Later, I tried other posts, like picking out thread thrum, ironing cloth patches, making head-dress flowers, knitting sweaters, and sewing gloves. During that time, we always worked until four or five in the morning. It was a tough time.

The day I conducted my interview, we had to climb a steep flight of stairs to get to Jennifer's office. The corridor was dark so we stumbled on our way. Jennifer was in front of me, and Ding was behind.

Ding's voice was clear as she said, "Jennifer, I can't imagine how you've built up so many businesses. It must've been so difficult!"

"Woo, Aunt Ding! Nobody knows what I have been through in the U.S. And I believe nobody knows what you've been through here, either. It's a place where you have to fight!" said Jennifer.

"Yes. America is not a place where you can have fun. It is a place where you have to fight! I talked with a lot of Chinese people when I went back to China. They think we got to where we are without difficulty. It is hard to explain to them how much we've suffered," Aunt Ding replied.

Then both Aunt Ding and Jennifer fell into silence. I could hear that Ding was out of breath.

I changed workplaces to a manicure salon. I learned English from my guests. Most of them were from the lower-middle class, and sometimes the bottom class of American society. Our guests were junkies and sometimes prostitutes, but they were kind. I remember one guest told me her five children have five different fathers. She told me she feels she is still attractive.

The most terrifying experience at the nail salon was robbery. Two armed robbers in their early twenties came to our store. A third one rushed into the store later and unplugged the phone line. The three yelled, "Don't move! Put your heads down!" In America, when you encounter a robbery, you better not look at the criminals when they say that. Of course, they wouldn't let us see them either. The three robbers went to our guests and ordered them to take out their purses. I remember vividly that when a robber passed in front of me, he took out a gun! It was like going through a movie scene.

That day I switched off my audio recorder at 12 a.m. It was cold, but my heart was warm; I felt fulfilled. Aunt Ding was sitting in front of a desk, helping me put away my recorder. She unraveled some cable knots and said, "I have never worn a mike before! I look like an anchorwoman now," she said naughtily.

I smiled at her. After two hours of interviewing, I felt closer to her. "*A little bit of craziness and optimism is necessary to let people live through so much suffering,*" I told myself.

I had only lived in the U.S. for several months by the time of our interview. From time to time, it felt hard for me to move forward with my new life. My first

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apartment was expensive, \$1,000 per month, but the living conditions were horrible. I could hear mice scurrying about in the walls, which scared me. When my friend visited my apartment, he was shocked by its shabbiness. "I lived better than this ten years ago!" he burst out. He was a close friend of mine who often came to my home in Beijing and ate dinners prepared by my maid. During my first semester in graduate school in America, I told my building superintendent that I wanted to change to a brighter room when its occupant moved out. But when I came back from a vacation in Beijing, the occupant had moved but my superintendent had rented the room to somebody else. Many tiny incidents like this made me feel unloved and lonely, but there was nobody to whom I could vent my misery.

I know everybody has to go through some tough days like this, but I was not sure then that I would make it. But after I heard Aunt Ding's stories, I started to feel something powerful bloom in my heart.

That night, I watched Ding's tiny figure disappearing into the haze of the cold night air. She was heading against the wind, but her steps were spritely. Her words echoed in my ears, "Even when I was doing the lowest level work, I did not give up fighting. I viewed it as life treasure. When you get used to it, it becomes fun!" After our interview, her stories continued to pop into my head from time to time.

I worked at that nail salon for seven years. Finally, I chose to change my job. Having been a manicurist for so long, I had problems with my hands, and I was sick of the smell of nail polish. During workdays, I couldn't eat on time, which resulted

in me getting stomach ulcers. The worst part was that I couldn't take any days off because the salon was flooded with guests during the weekends.

One day I was flipping through a newspaper and found the Brooklyn Library was recruiting a Chinese teacher. It was a voluntary job, working only once per week. I thought it was a good opportunity. I enjoyed reading books in the library, so I applied.

So I went for an interview. The head of the Voluntary Worker Department of the library interviewed me. I understood some of his English, but not all. So he asked someone who spoke Chinese to talk with me. Several people were applying for the position. After the interview, they asked if I wanted to take a part-time job. I burst out, "Yes, I do! I do!"

After our first interview, I paid a visit to Ding's library to see what she was like during work.

It is one library of the 58 public libraries in Brooklyn. It is in a quiet, older neighborhood with a low-skyline. Red brick houses and stores line both sides of the road. It has a completely different feel than Manhattan.

Walking past a modern glass door with the number 2065 on it, I finally arrived at the right place. The white doorframes gave some sense of modernity. Past the glass door was a spacious, dark-colored reading room, where people sat quietly, reading.

But when I walked up to the second floor to the children's reading room, the atmosphere changed completely. It was a world of color! The furniture was lower, the tables were white, and the chairs were light green. Above the wooden bookshelves, colorful world maps lined the walls. Piling up on top of every

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bookshelf were stuffed animals from smiling monkeys to dairy cows to pink rabbits.

I walked toward the wooden counter, where two staff members sat behind their computers. “Is Ding Lina here?” I asked, directing my question to a middle-aged African-American woman in a gray uniform. She quickly pointed to her right. And there was Ding.

I could hardly recognize her! She had dyed her hair brown and used a long black hairpin to pull it back, revealing her forehead. Her skin looked paler than before, perhaps because of her new hair color. She wore a light yellow sweater, which made her blend perfectly into her environment.

She lifted her tiny head up from a book and said, “I was getting worried that you would get lost!” Her voice was brisk as usual, but not as loud as before. I smiled and thought about what she told me about her work in the library.

I like working in the library, and my spoken English has gotten better and better. One day, I got to know about some openings in the library office. I decided to grab the opportunity. I applied for a full-time job and I got the offer. But in the beginning, I was not a librarian—just a library employee. You know in America, a librarian must have at least a master’s degree. So my boss encouraged me to go back to school to get a degree. I was not sure if I could make it. I didn’t even have any official English training before. But everybody encouraged me and reassured me I could do it.

I was already 38 years old. It was too crazy!

The first class I took was Basic Theory of Library. I was the only Asian in the class. My English then was not good enough to understand academic lessons. I was

afraid of the professor throwing questions at me. I always hid at the back of the classroom in a corner and put my head down.

The hardest part in class was giving presentations. Everybody had to do it in every class. My voice was shivering when it was my turn. My classmates were nice. They said, "Lina, don't be nervous! I can help you hold the presentation slides!" I felt much better when they stood by me.

It took me two and a half years to get my graduate degree. With that, I became an assistant librarian according to the unwritten rules.

Ding's stories reminded me of my experience as the first Chinese student in the oral history master's program at Columbia University. I too was intimidated by the language requirement when I first sat in the classroom. Sometimes I felt like I was in a comedy movie scene: a Chinese woman, surrounded by a group of native speakers, who couldn't make sense of the conversations. I felt both ridiculous and lonely. Only I knew how hard it was. When I gradually acclimated to the environment and could converse easily with my classmates, I finally felt it was a worthwhile journey.

Aunt Ding was in her usual breezy spirit in the library. She showed me around the reading room and told me about her work. However, she spoke softly and tenderly that day, making her normally boisterous voice almost inaudible.

This is such a different Aunt Ding! I thought.

Ding pointed to a tiny shelf and said, "Look, we've picked out all our books about Thanksgiving. Whenever Thanksgiving approaches, we do that.

Sometimes, when kids get some projects from school, they have to dig up stories

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about Thanksgiving history. We put these books at the most obvious place so that the kids don't have to look for them."

That day, some kids were hanging around in the reading room. A girl with a ponytail had her head buried in a book. A little boy with a brown complexion was holding a pencil and writing slowly at a corner desk. There were a significant number of Hispanic and Asian children, leading me to conclusion that there were Hispanic and Asian communities nearby.

A line of lower-than-normal desks lined one side of the room. Several elementary school boys were huddled in front of a computer, laughing and talking. They were absorbed by a computer game playing on the screen. A little boy in a blue baseball cap was pounding the keyboard heavily. The other boys were shouting, "Go! Go! Go!"

Ding walked toward them and raised her voice gently, "Be quiet, boys! There are other kids reading." The boys calmed down a little but continued to stare at the screen, seemingly drawn into the computer. Aunt Ding looked at them with a gentle smile on her face.

Aunt Ding's English is laced with a faint Chinese accent, but she speaks beautifully and with confidence. I sensed hardly any discomfort in her tone or cadence. The library is her arena. It is her fiefdom. And the scene brought her narration about being a manager in a library in my mind.

Once you become a manager, you have less time to take care of the professional business. The library is just like a family, you have to handle a lot of chores. For example, if the toilets are out of toilet paper, you should restock them. If you don't, you get complaints from the readers. If the bulbs are out, you should call

in an electrician. Some chair legs are broken. You should fill out the forms and have the main library send in someone to fix them. You get all kinds of chores, from handling fighting and crying children to managing room rentals for events. The curator is just like a housekeeper, you take care of everything.

It was 5:45 p.m. Ding stood up from her seat and raised her voice, "The library will be closed in 15 minutes! The library will be closed in 15 minutes! Please put back your books or check out your books you want to take with you as soon as possible."

Kids stood up from the white tables and began to gather their things. Some rushed to the computers to check out books. Footsteps could be heard all across the room. The kids were happy, and Ding looked at them with a smile.

Standing back in the reading room, Ding said to me slowly, "You know what? Some people asked me when I feel the happiest! I told them, 'My happiest days were the days after age 50. I don't have to struggle for a living. And I love my job! The hardest part in life has passed!'"

In front of me in the library, Ding was relaxed while firm. And from our interview, I knew that being a curator had endowed her with the qualities of a leader. She told me more in a later interview.

The most difficult issue is coping with those bitchy customers. It's difficult. If you turn aggressive, you will breach the rules or even the law. We have been going through special training, talking properly in different situations and in what situation we can call cops to come. If readers fight with each other, you call 911 instead of getting involved. There are so many homeless people and junkies living near our library because there is a building sponsored by government for them

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nearby. They live there and come to our library. You should observe peoples' acts carefully! Some people would stay in the restroom for a long time and wouldn't come out. At these moments, you should knock on the door. If there's no security guard, you should call the policeman in case if they are doing something wrong or bad. If they are using drugs, you should be cautious.

Night had fallen and the kids were leaving. I asked Aunt Ding if she would like to watch a documentary with me at a teahouse.

She enthusiastically agreed and then said, "We have huge advantages in New York City. There are numerous chances to get ahold of avant-garde arts. We should study whenever we have a chance!"

I smiled. It reminded me of several emails that Ding had sent it to me. Most of them were asking me to attend events. One of them read, "Please join the Asian American Research Institute for a special trilingual program, Chinese, English, Spanish: Writing a Third Literature of the Americas, on Friday. This program is free and open to the general public."

She said in that email, "Haitao. You will definitely learn a lot from it. And remember my girl. You should take every opportunity to learn!" Aunt Ding didn't forget to put a smiley face at the end of the email.

There were quite a few people in the teahouse that day. Aunt Ding sat among a small group of our friends, watching the projector screen with the utmost concentration. The main character's English was very fast, but she nodded from time to time. The film was about the culture clash between America and China. It told the story of an American choreographer that goes to China to

teach Chinese dancers how to improvise during performances. The movie showed how those dancers were puzzled by western education. Ding was excited and couldn't help making comments during the screening, such as "Very good!" and "Beautiful shooting!" Her high-pitched voice had returned.

The light from the projector swept across Ding's face. In the dim light, I could glimpse the orange silk scarf on her neck. When the movie was over, we said good-bye to each other in the night's cold breeze. Aunt Ding suddenly took my hands in hers and said, "Haitao, I think you should get a manicure. You have such a beautiful face and your hands should be taken good care of, too. You know, I was a professional manicurist and I have license... A real license!"

Friends around her laughed. In the cold November night, Aunt Ding's laughter was especially clear and hearty. She was in her usual high spirits.

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It was a warm day in April 2011. My friend Yoyo invited me to the Cherry Blossom Festival, a tradition in New York, which is held in the Brooklyn Botanical Garden. When I entered the garden, a blissful atmosphere engulfed me.

Teenagers wearing Japanese costumes roamed around, with all kinds of wigs on their heads. Their pink, green, or purple wigs had an avant-garde quality. Some teenagers wore long dresses like princesses, others wore clown costumes. As they passed me by I could see they were all in high spirits. There were little kids running around and giggling. Some boys sat on the grass and held Lego blocks in their hands; it seemed there was a Lego competition nearby. Against this backdrop of modernity, the cherry trees were in full blossom. The light pink color gave a quality of pureness to the air. The branches trembled in the chilly spring breeze, which carried the sound of rock music playing softly. Here natural beauty and modernity blended perfectly together.

“You should get used to New York City’s weirdness!” Yoyo told me with a smile. I nodded. Having lived in the city for eight months, I was getting used to its weirdness. It is the most dynamic city in the world, and the weirdness is everywhere. In this city, I’ve participated in an interactive performance in The Living Theater, and have also bought expensive tickets to see traditional performances on Broadway. Every day, while I wait in the subway station, I hear all sorts of music and feel the robust character of this charming city. As time has gone by, it now seems it will be hard to leave.

On this chilly spring afternoon, I was prepared to enjoy the beauty of the city. When I saw Yoyo, I didn’t expect to see Annie Huang with him. Beside them stood a little boy, who stared deeply into the sky.

Annie Huang is tall and slim, and was simply and a bit awkwardly dressed. The casual sweater tied with a belt around her waist didn't fit her well, and even made her appear slightly old. Her hair is long and black, but was messy that day. Her skin is noticeably dark, and her eyes usually were hidden behind a pair of black-rimmed glasses. I didn't see any make-up on her face and she seemed tired. You can tell she is the type of woman who never dresses up. I guessed she was about 40 or older.

Her son Tom wore a beige coat, was bareheaded, and had small, thin-shaped eyes. His fair skin color apparently was not inherited from his mother.

The four of us sat on the grass in a circle, and chatted casually. Near us and all around, people were also sitting and enjoying the sunshine, which beamed down from a perfectly blue sky. We relaxed.

I tapped Tom's bare head and asked him in Chinese, "How old are you?"

Tom didn't look up at me but stared straight into the air, "Eight, I am eight!"

"No, Tom, you are not eight, you are six!" Annie Huang frowned and corrected him. We laughed at him—a cute and mischievous child—but I got a strange feeling that something was wrong. The thought flashed through my mind before disappearing.

Soon, we adults began speaking in our native language and transitioned to talking about how we came to America. Whenever Chinese people gather, coming to this country is always the first topic we bring up.

"Do you know what she studied before?" asked Yoyo. "Physics! She studied physics! Both in China and in United States. High intelligence quotient!"

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Annie Huang smiled and burst out, “No use!”

She spoke at a slow pace. I could sense her genial personality. As she talked, she naturally unfolded a little bit of her personal history. I was surprised that after 17 years in this country, she was not an American citizen and didn’t have a regular job. What happened? She recounted her story in the sunshine.

I was born in 1977 in a small city. My parents were both technicians. I believe marriages in China at that time were generally not happy. My parents’ marriage was unbelievably unhappy. My mom was always trapped in an unfavorable position when she fought with my father. Although she has a bigger voice, she couldn’t win.

I remember one time they were throwing things at each other. They threw and smashed everything in the house. When my father was about to storm out, he threw an enamel mug viscously, and then slammed the door and stormed off. My mom held me in her arms and cried hard.

When I was in sixth grade, when the graduation ceremony was approaching, the Tiananmen Square movement broke out. That day—June 4, 1989—the army marched into the Tiananmen Square. I felt sad in my heart. I felt disappointed at this country (China). I knew that I would leave this land some day.

The conversation was effortless. Annie Huang was speaking slowly, and her tone was calm. When she retold her story of leaving this country at such a young age, listeners around us couldn’t help casting a surprised look.

“Woo!” I exclaimed. Huang smiled, her eyes behind her glasses revealing a crafty look, as if she had fooled us successfully, or was waiting for us to say, “You don’t look like such an untraditional person.”

I was born in 1979, making me two years younger than Annie Huang. When she recounted the fighting in her family, it reminded me of my childhood experiences. I've never told anyone that my earliest memory was of my parents fighting. I was about four, standing on my small wooden bed, crying. My parents were verbally abusing each other, and neither of them wanted to give me a hug. This scene indelibly imprinted on my mind and since then, I became used to all kinds of violence in my family. I know how family violence can overshadow the rest of one's life. I looked at Annie Huang silently, but was grateful that she shared her experience.

When Annie Huang talked, her son quietly sat on the grass. Unlike other kids in the garden, he seemed unexcited by the immediate environment. Tom never asked his mom to take him to games, nor did he want to see the beautiful cherry blossoms. He sat there, looking down and fidgeting. From time to time, he pulled the grass up from the soil. Green stains from the grass appeared on his tiny hands. Occasionally he looked up and stared into the air, murmuring. I could hardly hear what he was saying. He was immersed in his own world.

I did the math in my head to figure out that Huang was 35 years old—an age much younger than she looked. From the looks of her skin, you could tell life had put her through a lot of difficult things. But then again, maybe not, since she recounted everything in such a peaceful way.

"What must have happened?" I asked myself.

Annie Huang continued talking, and left her son to continue sitting on his own in the grass.

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I went to the best university in China, Peking University. I went from a small city to a metropolis. But I didn't like my major at all. Two-thirds of the Physics students in our department believed we would not pursue a career in Physics after we graduated.

I did not put any effort into my studies. I can't even remember how I graduated. My interest at that time was doing business. I think if I had given business a shot, maybe I would have been very successful today. But I didn't do that. I prepared my TOEFL test, trying to go abroad instead. Why did I do that? I don't know! It seemed I had no other way out! I had no specific life goals. I didn't even know how much time it would take to prepare for the TOEFL and GRE tests. Later, I learned that it was incredibly time-consuming, but I couldn't go back anyway.

My friend Jennifer joined us with her two sons. We moved over to give them some space. The two boys were giggling, and their arrival seemed to agitate the atmosphere around us. Jennifer smiled and sat down.

"What wonderful weather!" she said with delight. Her two kids were excited. Each of them had items in their hands. The oldest, who was 13, is slim and had a handful of Legos with him. The five-year-old, who wore a blue hooded sweatshirt with a cute rabbit imprinted on it, was holding some cartoon books in his tiny hands. Their faces were both blushing. Apparently, they had just finished from some kind of game. When the older child sat down, he put a set of instructions on the ground and became immersed in his Lego game. His casually and comfortably lied on the green grass, flipping through a cartoon book, laughing from time to time. They didn't care about the adults and became immersed in their respective worlds.

Little Tom stayed on his own as well. He sat there, with nothing in his hands. He looked down on the ground, didn't say hello to Jennifer, or make eye contact with the boys. When he occasionally looked up, there was no expression on his tiny face.

A breeze wafted the cherry scent towards us and a sweet smell filled our noses. Huang's long black hair flew about in the air. I saw her face more clearly; there were some wrinkles on it. I looked at her in the golden sunshine. The scene was like a beautiful spring-themed painting, with a worn-out woman sitting at its center. I saw Annie Huang giving Jennifer's kids a meaningful look, which contained love, care, and maybe envy. She continued to tell her story.

I was admitted later to the PhD program at the University of Michigan. That was how I came to the U.S. I scratched and crawled my way to pass all the examinations, which took me three years. I ended up graduating with two master's degrees instead of a PhD.

Why? It had to do with my boyfriend! Something happened and it changed my life path. Both my boyfriend and I inherited strong personalities from our respective families. My family, as I mentioned, had too many fights and violence. So, in my mind it was normal to fight in a relationship. It was a vicious circle. He didn't enjoy a happy family life, either. So we fought a lot. Even worse, we were both science major nerds. We didn't have any consciousness to adjust ourselves. When I look back, I think we both should take blame. We had a lot of problems. In the end, I ended up getting caught for fighting by the police and was thrown in jail.

"Jail?" Jennifer and I burst out simultaneously in disbelief. I saw Jennifer's eyes and mouth opened wide, her body still. I couldn't see my own facial

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expression, but I am sure I was not less surprised than Jennifer.

Yoyo patted Annie Huang's back. At that moment, I hadn't known much about their relationship. But I could sense an intimacy between them.

Nobody talked. It seemed that no one knew how to continue the topic anymore. But Huang just smiled faintly.

Bad family relationships seem like a curse. Throughout my time interviewing Chinese Americans, I learned that Annie Huang was not the only one who suffered from a bad relationship between her parents. Sometimes, my interviewees cried when they recounted nightmarish stories from their past. It broke my heart. I knew the feeling all too well. The terrible relationship between my parents overshadowed my adult life for a long time. Quarrels and distrust always showed up in my own relationships until I met my husband. Before, I had craved love outside my family, but got hurt. I believe that Annie Huang is a victim like me. But her experience seemed so much more extreme than mine.

An old lady came by and pulled over an ice cream trolley, on which a cute black bear was imprinted. "Ice cream! Ice cream!" Jennifer's two kids lit up. They jumped from the grass and ran towards the cart without asking for Jennifer's permission. The older brother took out some crumpled dollars and handed it to the old lady. Jennifer sighed, "American kids. They never listen to me!" But there was a subtle smile on her face.

Little Tom looked around, yanked his mom's sleeve and repeated in a low voice, "Ice cream, ice cream..." Huang stood up silently. She bought an ice cream cone and handed it to Tom. Tom raised his tiny hand in the air to reach for it, but his face remained expressionless.

We decided to have dinner together at a hotpot restaurant that evening. I wanted to know Annie Huang's whole story in more detail then.

My boyfriend and I fought violently once. Finally, our neighbors called 911. I remember that when the police came to take me to the police station, I was scared to death. I did not want to be sent to prison! I cried, cried, and cried. Those policemen treated me like a little girl. They said, "Just write down what had happened tonight. We will make a copy and put it into the system and you can go!"

"What if I don't?"

"If you don't write, you'll stay in prison for three months!"

I was terrified. Many years later, I realized it was a lie! Police shouldn't tell lies like that. According to the American legal system, if the police don't have any evidence on hand, they cannot detain the suspects for more than 72 hours.

After writing down all about the fight, I hoped they would release me. But they did not! They sent me to prison (a detention center)! This was the first time I was in prison (detention center). I was so sad and couldn't fall asleep. I kept asking myself, "What is going on? Why have all these things happened to me? How did I sink low to this today?"

Jennifer and I were waiting for Yoyo and Annie Huang in the Brooklyn hotpot restaurant. They had taken a separate car and were on their way. The hotpot smell in the air was authentic, reminding me of hotpot restaurants in China. Spicy red soup boiled in bowls on tables around us, emitting white steam into the air.

I was still silently savoring the stories Huang told me. Some movie-like images unfolded in my mind: a young girl, policemen, horrified looks, crying,

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yanking, dirty beds in the jailhouse... All those scenes used to fill Annie Huang's life. I wondered how a person could reconcile such horrors. But from Huang's tone, it seemed she had.

The clock on the wall kept ticking. Many guests finished their meals and left. Some others were still eating, colorful foods remaining on their tables. I saw Chinese faces and heard Chinese dialects. I looked at the guests individually, imagining the special stories hidden within each of them.

One hour passed. Yoyo, Annie Huang, and Tom didn't show up. The water level in the pot on our table went down considerably.

"What has happened?" I caught an empty look on Jennifer's face.

I took a sip from my teacup and asked, "What's the relationship between Yoyo and Huang? Are they friends?"

"They are a couple, just married for three months."

I fell silent, trying to sort out things in my mind.

The next morning, I was released from the detention center. But I got caught again very soon. My boyfriend and I fought again. I cannot tell you all the details, but I was taken to the police station again. It is incredible? Isn't it? This time, the policemen's attitude was bad because I was not cooperative. They asked me to recount what had happened but I kept silent. I sat in the police car and kept crying. I felt betrayed and hopeless.

Okay, I was sent to the detention center again. People stay there temporarily and wait for their verdicts. But the condition in these cells are the worst among all kinds of prisons. There was a bed made of cement. People slept on it, but it had only two blankets. And there was not enough space for everyone. Some people had to

sleep on the floor.

It seemed I'd become a regular there. The warden of the detention center said, "Woo, you are goanna stop it (domestic violence)!" I saw him and smiled. Yes, I could even smile this time. I did become a kind of regular there.

"Sorry, we are late!" I heard Annie Huang apologizing as I was caught up thinking about her life. Her voice brought me back to reality. Standing in front of me, Huang seemed embarrassed and uncomfortable. She held Tom by one hand and smiled reluctantly. Her belt was almost entirely loose and the tip of it almost dropped to the floor. Part of her black hair had fallen down, covering her cheek.

"Sorry, Tom got lost in the park. We spent an hour looking for him." Annie Huang tried to smooth her hair and retie her belt.

"What?" Jennifer and I exclaimed together.

"Never mind. It is fine. Tom always gets lost!" Huang smiled, seeming strangely at peace about the whole ordeal. She put Tom on a chair and helped him stabilize. "It is fine!" Annie Huang said, "Tom is autistic!"

I remember vividly the day I pleaded guilty. The judge asked me what had happened when I was in conflict with my boyfriend. "What do you do when you were fighting?" "He grabbed my arms!" "Why did he grab your arms?" "To keep me calm!" I recounted as how it happened. Apparently, it was not a good statement of acknowledging you had committed a crime. My lawyer asked me to go out of the court and taught me how to speak "correctly."

I felt so bad. Coming out of the courtroom, I was full of sorrow. I cried. Later on, I decided to call an elderly woman I had met before. She was someone I ran into before at a church. She heard I was crying on the phone and invited me to her

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home. I told her the whole story. I believe she had never suffered a lawsuit in her whole life and had no knowledge about law. She said, "If there was no record, it should be fine. And I will pray for you. God will walk with you!" Then she prayed loudly.

Several days passed, I was still able to stay calm. But I didn't know I could appeal at that time. If I had consulted other lawyers, I probably would not miss the due date. Later on, someone told me this case would definitely have a huge impact on my life. It would block my access to American citizenship. All these things killed my dream to become an American. This is why I am still struggling with getting legal status now.

A young waitress with a black apron served a plate of food on our table. We chatted casually, enjoying the delicious smell of Chinese hotpot. I looked at Annie Huang and Yoyo silently. I knew I was looking at them with a different perspective, taking them in as a couple.

Yoyo, who wore large black-rimmed glasses, seemed to be in his early thirties. He was not talkative, but always had a slight and crafty smile on his face. He wore a cowboy hat, almost like a hippie. As a young independent artist, maybe he needed these props to display his artistic taste.

But Annie Huang, who consistently fished out vegetables from the hotpot and busily put food on her son's plate, seemed like a middle-aged woman. She frequently straightened out her hair and persuaded her son to eat. She seemed like Yoyo's sister instead of his wife.

Tom fidgeted with a pair of chopsticks and swung his legs. Annie Huang held her son's hands and looked at him. "Tell this beautiful lady, where have we

been today?"

Tom stared at his mom and said word-by-word in English, "Brooklyn-Botanical-Park!"

"You are awesome!" Huang said. She turned to me and said, "See, you and Tom have an attachment! He behaved so good today."

Yoyo added with a low, murky voice, "It's impossible for him to learn so fast!"

The lawsuit heavily impacted my life. To me, questions like "How to continue my life?" and "How to be a real person?" popped in and out of my mind now and then. I had no more interest in academia from then on. I finished my second master's degree and decided to work. I felt that I'd stayed at school most of my time and was isolated from society. I didn't want to live like that any more. If I continued living that way, I would never have a life ever.

I had no choice but to work from the bottom. I did all kinds of jobs, like a cashier, and bus conductor. I lived on very low salaries. You cannot possibly imagine a girl going out delivering food, right? But I did it.

I had no choice but to stay illegally in Boston. I rented a very shabby apartment, and met a man there. He became my husband several years later. What could I say about this relationship? He always complained that I bankrupted him. Actually, he was married at that time and had a family in China. He wired all the money he earned to his wife. After lots of dramas, they finally divorced. I don't believe they divorced because of me, but they divorced anyway. But later, he blamed me for making him bankrupt. I felt sad and empty in my heart. I decided to leave him, but I was pregnant at the time.

A Profile of Annie Huang

After the dinner that night, I asked Annie Huang if she would retell me her stories and be a subject in my oral history project on Chinese Americans. She agreed without any hesitation. After she agreed, I looked forward to seeing her living place and hearing how she made it through all those difficult days.

Several days later, I entered a quiet community. Two-story cottages lined up along the road. Yoyo and Huang rented the second floor of a brick-red house. I climbed a long and steep flight of stairs to reach their home.

I stood in front of Huang's place in appreciation. Annie Huang agreed that I could incorporate her story into my project. This was the only way I would come to know the whole picture of her tumultuous life and attempt to approach her scars. Despite my gratitude, I was also aware that I was about to enter the home of a family without legal status in this country.

I entered their home and was struck by the mess inside. The quality of the house's interior was not as good as its appearance. On the right is the master bedroom. There was a thin, narrow desk against the wall. Two laptops were lying on it. On the window side is a sofa, piled with all kinds of clothes, trousers, and socks. Next to the sofa is a bed without a headboard. Quilts piled up on the bed. All the furniture was old and some of the wall paint had peeled off.

Tom's room is next to the master bedroom. It has a twin bed and a white desk. It's messy, too. Stuff was scattered on the desk—examination papers, pens without caps, books which had turned yellow and were almost falling apart. I walked toward the desk, and saw Tom's childish handwriting on one examination paper. It's all in English. The doorknob of Tom's room had fallen off, so the

shabby white door cannot stay closed.

It seemed life here was spread out like a war zone. I continued to interview Huang in the master bedroom.

My mom did not know I had a child until Tom was one year old. I didn't tell her mostly because my boyfriend and I were not married at that time. The worst thing was, he had left our kid and me, dumping us in the middle of a mess. Tom, my child, I sent back to China when he was two, and he came back to New York City when he was five. But even before he was sent back, we felt that something was wrong. Tom behaved very strangely. And he always lifted his clothes up and fidgeted with his belly. When he got older, he picked up cigarette butts from the floor. When he read, he only read one page and didn't know how to turn the page. I should not have sent my son to China. I should have kept him in the U.S. and sent him to language training.

Every time I saw Annie Huang I couldn't help wondering whether her life would be better off if she hadn't gone to jail. After all, she graduated from top schools, both in China and in the United States. Could she go to a well-known multi-national company and marry somebody with a similar background? If she didn't choose to stay in America, would it be good for her life?

To leave or stay? It is a hard choice. The question popped in and out of my own mind from time to time. As graduation from my master's program approaches, people always ask me this question. My mind has changed since I came here. I vowed to go back to China when I first arrived in America for graduate school. And during the first semester, I wanted to flee this country all the time. But things have changed. It is a very complicated feeling, and not only

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because I follow the news about Beijing, either about food safety issues or the heavily polluted air, which told me that Beijing is not a livable city anymore. But also, I feel people express themselves freely in the US and do not feel the need to suppress themselves. People can be free in this country. I feel that I've been released from the past and I don't want to go back. I never expected that one day, leaving the United States would be so hard.

Since I hold my own competing and complicated feelings inside, I know why some of my interviewees stay in the U.S., even though they could have a better life in China. Annie Huang is a case in point.

She continued recounting her story in the master bedroom. I plugged in my recorder to an extension cord hanging in the air. Annie Huang was sitting in front of the long desk with a smile on her face. She looked not as tired as the first day we met, but still had no makeup on her face. She wore a gray turtleneck sweater, and there were bits of fluff on one sleeve.

Her typical slow tone and way of speaking heightened all the craziness, weirdness, desperation, and drama of her story, making it seem even further beyond imagination. But also, I felt that some tensions in the story were compromised by her tender tone. Regardless, her stories were powerful. She stared into the air and tried to tell me her tragic plot. It seemed almost like a movie. Sometimes, she straightened her long hair and paused.

During the interview, suddenly, Huang asked me a question, "Was there a hand of God there? I don't know," Huang answered herself. "But I am very optimistic!"

The most difficult period to me was when Tom just came back from China.

He was five years old then. When you talked to him, he wouldn't give you any response. Even if when you ask him the simplest question like "Do you want to have a pear or an apple?" he couldn't understand. I felt awful. He was a five-year-old kid, but he couldn't talk! You know, I myself could recite an article at once... I tried to imagine what my son's world was like. I guessed he had no words, no thinking, no interesting things, and no books. How miserable it was. I felt awful.

The first year he came back was terrible. I tried everything but saw little progress. I played music for him but saw no reaction. Whenever I wanted to teach him something, he would cry. Once I tried to teach him how to zip his clothes. I held his hands and cupped our hands together on the zipper and tried to zip his clothes. He cried so hard. I didn't stop, but shouted to him, "Don't cry!" One simple move like this I would need to repeat one hundred times! Every single move was a battle.

It was noon. I was invited to have lunch with Yoyo and Annie Huang in their kitchen. Yoyo, a young artist about 35 years old, is bald and always wears a pair of black-rimmed glasses. He is obsessed with art, and he brings his artistic disposition to bear on everything he does, including cooking. When he made a salad for us, he put celery and carrots together to make it look beautiful. And he emphasized the importance of not using salt, saying it destroys the natural flavor of food. For him, everything is about art. In their tiny, greasy kitchen, he pulled up his sleeves and began his "art creation."

Cooking seemed to be a way to bring Yoyo and Annie Huang together. Transporting them to another place. Huang explained to me how to cook a top-grade lamb chop: "Lay the lamb chop on the pan, leave it there for half an hour and then add some cumin... You can't put cumin first, otherwise you destroy the

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natural flavor of the lamb...”

Yoyo and Annie Huang behaved naturally in front of me. Sometimes, they talked about fun activities in New York City. Or, they discussed how to cook a dish. When Tom was not around, it seemed they could temporarily leave their life’s battleground, and in the little old shabby kitchen, they could savor, for a short while, a tepid two-person world.

I felt exhausted after Tom came back. I felt numb and lost my mind all the time. You would not believe I lost five driver licenses in a row shortly after he came back. You know what, the only thing I lost before that was my passport, but I found it later anyway. But I lost five driver licenses in the two months after Tom was back. I couldn’t re-apply for a driver license in New York States due to my ID problem. I went to another state to get a new one each time. Each time I asked my previous neighbor to mail the new driving license to me. But when it came to the third time and the fourth time, I was ashamed of asking him to do it again.

Today, I am trying to find an appropriate private school for Tom. Nowadays, what he is learning is what I am teaching him at home. If he can learn at school as well as he does at home, I would be released from tutoring duties at home. I have time to consider more seriously about my own things. I hope I can get a license to practice law. All these years, what I have suffered were all legal issues. I don’t know what I am gonna do in the future. Maybe become a lawyer. There are so many Chinese people here, if you speak Chinese and also know American law, you can make a living out of it. Even if I don’t become a lawyer, it will do good for my career or business.

The day I finished my interview with Annie Huang, we went together to

pick up Tom from school. When we entered the backyard of the community school, we found many parents waiting there, most of them Mexican or Indian.

“This is not a good school district. This school always gets an ‘underperformance’ evaluation. That’s why I am eager to put Tom in a better private school now,” Annie Huang said. After a short pause, she continued, “I need to give Tom a better education. Special education is so expensive, but I believe we can do better! He is not doing well now.”

Looking at her face, I could tell she was tired but firm. The sentence she spoke sounded as serious as an oath.

The sunshine was bright that day and the air was warm. Little kids trickled out of the school building. They ran around and shouted in excitement. They laughed, thrilled. There were a lot of smiling, jaunty faces all around. Huang looked at them and said slowly, “How cute they are!” She paused for a few seconds and then murmured, “I hope I have a normal child.”

I didn’t know how to reply. I just stood there, watching Annie Huang’s unruly black long hair blowing in the air while her face filled with a gentle sadness.

“Mom!” Tom came out. He rushed towards her. Huang smiled and opened her arms; she eagerly walked toward Tom and gave him a hug. And Tom happily came over and leaned into his mom’s arms.

“Let’s go home!” Huang held Tom’s hand and walked into the warm air of Long Island City.

A profile of Jennifer

“Now, you and your brother just sit there quietly and don’t talk. This lady and I will do some recording. Do not make a sound, OK?”

On September 29, 2011, I conducted my first oral history interview. My interviewee Jennifer was talking to her two sons before the interview started. Jennifer, who was born in 1972, came to the United States when she was 25. Now she is the owner and boss of two popular Chinese restaurants in Brooklyn.

Sitting by a wooden table, Jennifer, who has a round face, black short hair, and vigilant eyes, was smiling. When she smiles, her eyes curve up, but despite her facial expression, I could still sense she was not totally relaxed. She looked through me as if she knew all my secrets.

At the time of the interview, I had been in this country for a little over one month. Before that, I was a seasoned journalist, a respected best-selling author, a newlywed, and a person always surrounded by friends. People felt that I was an amusing companion. After coming to this new country, I was a crying newborn baby, a drowning person, and a lonely middle-aged student who was rapidly adjusting to a new world. Everything was crazy. Everything changed dramatically. I wondered how long it would take for a newcomer to feel completely comfortable in this society—to become like Jennifer. So I posed this question to her.

Jennifer is petite and dainty. During our interview she wore a purple blouse. After I asked this question, she paused, and then answered in a clear melodious voice, “I think it took maybe 15 years. I didn’t feel comfortable until this year.” Then there were a few seconds of silence in the air. She looked far

away as if she were counting. “From the moment I landed in this land, I haven’t slept for more than six hours at night.”

Our interview was conducted in the backyard of one of her Chinese restaurants. That room was actually a huge white tent. The temperature was cold though the light outside was bright. Ten tables and many chairs were around us and all the tables were covered with white cotton tablecloths. Her sons, one six years old, the other 13, sat at another table and entertained themselves. I randomly glanced over at the books on their table, which included a piano exercise book for children. Several famous composers’ names were on the cover, including Chopin and Tchaikovsky.

I felt a bit envious in my heart—about their stable life. I had not slept well for a month and my hair was greasy. I scratched my head and attempted to press the record button on my recorder at 5:30 p.m. that day.

“Let’s test the recorder first,” I suggested.

“Ok, testing, testing!” Jennifer repeated the single word.

“Oh. Testicle! Testicle!” her 13 year old was looking at her and laughing.

“Hey! What? What are you talking about? You are a bad kid!” Jennifer shook her head. “Do you hear that?” she asked me. “American kids—sometimes you don’t know what they are thinking about. They are crazy!”

Jennifer turned her head to me with a merry, ringing laugh. There were some mixed looks on her face; she seemed a little embarrassed, but her expression also revealed fulfillment. She raised her right eyebrow when she laughed.

A profile of Jennifer

I looked at her and the boys with a smile. "Never mind, let's get going!"

And then Jennifer told me:

I was born in Tibet. Shortly after I was born, my parents migrated to Chengdu province in order to give their children a better education. My sister and I were both art lovers and I wanted to be an artist, but my parents were strongly against that. They thought that when the Cultural Revolution happened in China, all artists suffered unfair treatment. Engaging in arts was dangerous and offered no future. I was told I should go to college as an ordinary person.

My family has a lot of relatives from overseas, which is a big trigger for me to come to the United States. From the 1980's, they started to pay visits back to China. Not until then did I realize that I had so many overseas relatives.

One day, a relative who had just come back from the States invited my family to a high-end restaurant, and my mother and I were both shocked at the final bill.

"Seventy Yuan for one meal?" my mother sighed. "That's the life I should have. Why am I living like this now?" Back then, my mom only had a monthly salary of no more than 50 Yuan, and we were always on a budget.

My mom later said to me, "I'm hopeless now; however, you shouldn't follow my path!" "What's that supposed to mean?" I asked. "They came from America, didn't they? If you want to live a life that you can afford 70 Yuan for one meal, you should go to America!"

Jennifer's narration was fascinating, although from the time I first pressed the button on the recorder, her smile evaporated. The black machine apparently intimidated her at first. Her voice faltered a bit, but it didn't last long. And as time

went by, Jennifer became comfortably speaking. Narration brought her into the past; she looked into the air and it was as if for the first time she was viewing her life in a special way. Her voice rose and fell as she repeated dialogue from her life. When Jennifer imitated her mother's tone of speaking, her mother seemed to be standing there with us.

But when she talked about the expensive meal her family could not afford, I could detect that the atmosphere changed. Her eyes dimmed with sorrow, and she spoke in a quieter tone. This narration brought up my memory about the nineties in China. I remember when Kentucky Fried Chicken first opened in Beijing; my parents took my sister and me there to eat. I had pleaded with them for months to take us. The interior design was modern, the high-priced menu hung on the wall. A combo meal cost about 30 RMB, which was quite luxurious at the time. My parents earned a good salary but were always stingy. The four of us only ordered one combo instead of four. I felt humiliated when I saw the cashier's look, which seemed to say, "Four people, one combo?" When my father put the tray with just a little plate of food on the table, I wanted to run away and did not dare to look around. I was filled with shame that burned my cheeks red. I wanted to finish this meal and leave the scene as soon as possible. But the tasty chicken was unforgettable. When I chewed on the chicken nuggets, I began to imagine the western world. As Jennifer recounted her story, I revisited my own past in my mind from time to time.

Soon after, Jennifer recovered from her low morale. And her narration became more intense:

A profile of Jennifer

Before the 1980's, a person in China who has relatives overseas is not a thing you would brag about. From the end of seventies, the central government of China began to adopt new policies and encourage people who stayed in foreign countries to come back. It seemed that things changed overnight.

I forgot from when our overseas relatives began visiting us. One by one, their visits changed me more or less. Our overseas relatives brought back used clothing for us. Seeing me in western-style clothing at school, my teacher gestured me to the front of the classroom and questioned me, "Why do you wear this? Like a butterfly!" "These are just some old clothes given by my mother's relatives," I answered. "From where?" she asked. "The States." I said. Flared trousers and bulky turtlenecks looked weird at the time, the attire being quite different from what ordinary Chinese wore. My life back then was like this: on the one hand, I was exposed to a fancy lifestyle from America; on the other hand, I had readjust to reality of life in China. From that point on, I had a feeling that I should go to the States, just as my mother wished.

As our interview proceeded, the diners flooded in. We were in the backyard, separated from the front hall by a narrow hallway, making it difficult to see all the guests. But I could see young waiters and waitresses busily going back and forth serving dishes. They were in black shirts, looking young and clean. And they all wore black aprons.

A young waitress came in and seemingly needed to ask Jennifer something. I paused the recorder and Jennifer was pulled back from her storytelling journey.

“Can I get off work a little bit earlier? I don’t feel very good today,” the young waitress asked. She spoke with a soft tone.

“Sure! Take good care of yourself!” Jenifer said nicely but firmly. Compared with her exciting and enthusiastic tone in narration, at this moment, Jennifer turned into a boss, who was serious, but understanding. She withdrew her smile, revealing a commanding appearance. She seemed to have the ability to shuttle between the past and present freely. During the narration, she escaped this present world and turned back into a young girl. Coming out of the narration, she was restrained and became the boss in less than a minute.

Doing this interview suspended my sense of reality. I saw my interviewee travel back and forth between memory and reality, actively straddling two different worlds. At that moment, given how little time I’d been in America, I felt that my past and my new life were not cohesive at all. Life between two worlds was difficult. I remember that when I first arrived in America, I felt that this was not a new country, but also a new planet. I wondered what it was like when Jennifer first landed here.

I arrived in the States in 1995 at the age of 23. On the plane that day, I looked down, with confusion, and bounced back! My God! An ocean of flame and light! Manhattan was “on fire”! From Beijing where I took off, I could only see some candle-like lights. But New York—it was an ocean of fire! At that moment, I felt something was waiting for me. This is a wonderland. There and then, I knew I had come to the right place.

But the joy did not last long! I realized I was poor. I came to the States with 200 U.S. dollars and lived in the home of my father’s friend. I had to figure out how

A profile of Jennifer

to put food on my table. I went to an immigration law firm and worked as a translator on the fourth day after I arrived in the States.

The work revealed to me the inside stories of Chinese immigrants. In those years, about 80 percent of the undocumented Chinese immigrants obtained Green Cards through applying for asylum from the one-child policy. They falsified their stories and we translated them into English. I soon became sick of translating those similar stories, like: I was pregnant, but without official birth permission, the local government urged me to have abortion.

But how could I handle my own status? I couldn't earn enough money to pay my tuition. I was desperate. If I could not stay in school, I would lose my legal status. But I needed to stay!

Talking about coming to America, Jennifer's tone changed drastically. Her eyes seemed to pop out with wonder. It seemed that she had gone back to that unforgettable moment and was about to embrace her new life once more. Her face glowed as the night fell around us. One story after another, her monologue attracted me to a separate reality. I could see a young, immature girl standing there, with an innocent look, desperately standing there.

I saw myself as well. Coming alone to America and engulfed by loneliness, dragging two heavy suitcases up to the fifth floor of my building. For the first time, I shared an apartment with three boys who didn't speak the same language as me. They laughed at the TV and I didn't know why. They put empty cans into recycle bins and I learned to as well. I grew upset that they always put their bowls into sinks and didn't wash them for a long time, but I never said anything to them.

Also, things outside my apartment were completely foreign to me. An orange poster called for people to visit polling stations and vote. American senior citizens stood in front of Columbia University's front gate to advocate for the rights of Israeli people. People stood in the middle of streets and shouted political slogans. Everything was fresh to me, but there was no one I could talk to. Under these circumstances, I lost at least half of my previous comforts. In the past, I was annoyed by endless phone calls from friends and family. But now, I hardly heard my phone ring. I was drowning in the middle of an unknown sea. Maybe it is a predicament the first generation will always face. Listening to Jennifer's similar experiences, I felt my heart grow closer to her.

Jennifer's employees were outside the white tent where we sat, busily serving food. Her two cute sons remained sitting nearby. Jennifer was sitting there, carrying two identities at once, a business owner and a mom. It is the stuff of which many Chinese Americans dream.

Staying in the tent for an hour, Jennifer talked about her business. "You know how hard it is to run a business in America? Employees sue you all the time! Unannounced restaurant inspections happen from time to time. If you don't have a strong heart, probably don't dip your toe into business. You will not believe how many ugly situations I have been through!" Jennifer shrugged her shoulders and then smiled naughtily. Her right eyebrow raised a little and her mouth pouted. When she said, "run a business in America," the word "America" carried extra stress.

A profile of Jennifer

How could a woman run so many businesses by herself, I asked myself. And during the conversation, Jennifer barely mentioned her husband. But she did mention how she got married.

How could I deal with my non-immigration status? Illegally stay? Stuck within many problems, I made choices within limited options. I married a U.S. citizen and obtained a temporary status. Although I did not get my permanent green card until the summer of 1997, I was quite relieved by the temporary status.

The man I married is the son of the old man who picked me up at the airport and hosted me. At that time, I had no idea about love. Any glimpse of empathy amounted to love to me. The old man was my father's friend. When I lived at his house, I felt it was my only shelter. The old man's son was the only person who cared for me. We dated shortly and decided to get married. We did not hold a wedding ceremony and just went through the registration procedure. The most urgent issue for me was to change my immigration status. After months of work at the immigrant law firm, I was fairly clear about what I should do next. That day, as soon as I got the marriage certificate, I rushed to the U.S. Immigration services to get my fingerprints. I was familiar with every single procedure! I worked in an immigrant law firm, right?

"I never told my stories to others like this, let alone talking about my marriage, Jennifer told me. "Maybe because I never found such a good listener." Jennifer laughed, as if getting married like this never needs an extra explanation. And this made me pause.

I was contemplating the potential cost of immigrating to this country when Jennifer's younger son, Ruirui, came over to our table. He was the same

height as his seated mom. Circling his tiny fleshy hands on his mom's right ear, he whispered under his breath, "Mom, I want to go home!" This little boy was only six years old with a fat Asian face, slim black eyes and short black hair. He was wearing a simple white T-shirt with a cartoon bear on it. I didn't see any resemblance between the mother and the son. They had completely different eyes. Jennifer caressed his head and said, "Mom is working. I cannot drive you home. Can you wait?" The little one leaned into mom's arms and fell silent.

"Lyon, come here! Take your brother home!" Jennifer gestured to her elder son in a firm voice and he came over. This 13-year-old was slim, with almost the same eyes as his younger brother. Wearing a pair of glasses, he seemed more mature than his age might indicate. When he doesn't talk, his face wears the faint, self-contented smile of a teenager.

"Take your brother home. The bus station is on the corner. You know how to go back, right?"

"Sure!" he replied. The boy did not seem expressive, but calmly crooked his finger in the air. Jennifer smiled with bitterness, and then fished out her purse and took out five dollars. I could tell that it was not the first time they made such a deal.

This scene stunned me. How could you let children go back home by themselves? To my understanding, America cares for children even more than China. Many scenes in American films seem to serve as warnings, telling viewers that small children should not be left alone. In China, parents spoil their children to excess. Under the one-child policy, family members are often putting their

A profile of Jennifer

efforts into caring for one child. I witness how my sister takes care of her son.

She never lets him out of her sight.

Maybe sensing my surprise, Jennifer turned to me and said, "I have two businesses. Being my sons, they have to learn how to be independent!"

I nodded, but stayed silent.

As the interview continued, I learned where her toughness came from.

In order to earn more money, one colleague in the immigration firm and I quit and set up our own company. To set up a company in the U.S. was easy. It only took me one day to go through all the application procedures to get a business license. Very soon, we got our tax number from the government.

A strange feeling popped into my mind. Guess what? To establish a company was so easy! I can open ten companies in a week. But very soon, I found out a lot of headaches followed. You need to pay all types of insurance and taxes, including insurance for the company, insurance for employees, fire insurance, a tax to the municipal government, a tax for the state government, a tax for the federal government, a business tax and so on. But anyway, our company was off and running. And our clients came in gradually.

Through operating my own immigration company, I got to know the life of many undocumented Chinese people. Lots of them came to America illegally and most of them had joined to human traffickers.

I became sick of hearing similar stories like this. How was it possible that a criminal holds his own order for arrest? How was it possible that a living person has his death certificate? But all were realities when Chinese people handled them.

I began to doubt the value of what I was doing. It bothered me so much and became a trigger of giving up my first business.

Dusk had fallen and the lights were on. We were running into the peak hours for dinner: guests were trickling into the restaurant. I stopped the recorder for a break and went through the narrow hallway to have a look in the front hall. All decorations were Chinese style. An old Chinese-style desk sat in the corner, bamboo plaques lined the walls. The smell in the air was a typical Chinese hotspot smell, containing an authentic spicy aroma. At one moment, I almost forgot I was in New York City, in the United States. In this cold weather, the scene created an engulfing sense of warmth and comfort.

A houseful of guests was there, and most of them were Asian. The space between tables was narrow. Sometimes, people could barely sit in front of a table because there was a chair for another table occupying the place. On nearly every table, there was a big hotpot basin with boiling soup. People put all kinds of food, like lamb, mushroom, and vegetables, into the soup. You could see wooden chopsticks everywhere. The white steam mixed with the smell of the food spreading in the air. It was like a symphony of food. The restaurant became more and more crowded.

As the interview carried on, the inside of the white tent grew cold. But apparently Jennifer found storytelling more and more enjoyable. It seemed that her enthusiasm had overcome the coldness of night.

I closed my first company and rested. It was a free time to me! I cut my hair short and went back to China for the first time in five years. During that trip to China, I realized it is not my country anymore. Back in Chengdu, my friends and I

A profile of Jennifer

could no longer strike up conversations. Their topics were all about kids, job titles, buying houses, etc. Everything had changed. Back in the days when we were in college, we had dreams, ambitions, and sharp viewpoints. Now they were talking about what size house they should buy—two bedrooms or three? China became a country I can't understand. The trip lasted for three months, which changed my plan of going back to my home country. Before that, I always thought as soon as I earned enough money, I would return to China. Right there and then, I knew America was my home.

So I started to think about doing something to bridge the gap between China and the U.S. So I helped my brother to hold an exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum. It was a torture. In the States, everything has rules and people go by the rules. In China, everything has loopholes, and people don't usually play by rules. For example, some exhibition items were supposed to arrive in the States on a specific day, but for some reasons, these items failed to arrive. The Chinese side asked the U.S. to share their rescheduling fee. And the Philadelphia Museum refused to write a check to the Chinese side. I understand that it's never an easy thing to bridge the gap between the Chinese and Americans. After all this, I made up my mind to forget about bridging the gaps between the two countries. I took two years off, and had a baby.

The backyard became dark and the coldness was unbearable. Jennifer turned on a light hanging on the wall—a lobe bulb with a cone-shaped hat from which a strong orange beam of light pierced the air.

I could see Jennifer's face again, and she looked simultaneously like a child and a middle-aged Chinese woman. Maybe she looked younger than her

age, but not by much. She has olive-color skin, light and slim eyebrows, slightly swollen eyes, and ripe lips.

You never get bored when you talk to her, and the expression on her face makes her answers even more fascinating. As she continued to relax, more stories sprang forth. It seemed as though my interviewee and I were holding each other's hands and jumping directly into her memories to revisit her life.

The conversation took on a surreal quality. We spoke the same language but in a foreign country. It is a country I had dreamed about as a child and young woman, but never had a chance to visit. Now I was in the U.S., communicating with a woman I had never met before, and she was telling me her innermost thoughts. As a former journalist, interviewing was not foreign to me. But this time was different.

Some images popped into my mind: I was sitting in a group interview, listening to CEOs talking about their success or business strategies. There was always some jargon I didn't really understand but tried to pretend I knew. A boastful quality pervaded tones, and financial numbers were always abundant in our talks. I seldom caught personal feelings during these interviews; to show vulnerability in the business world is a sign of weakness.

Maybe I had gotten so used to such displays of pretentiousness that I didn't even think discovering true feelings was a possibility while reporting. But this time in New York, I heard my interviewee's pains and vulnerabilities. Jennifer showed me the ups and downs in her life. I was so moved. She didn't know how appreciative I was at this moment.

A profile of Jennifer

Jennifer's phone rang, bringing us back to reality. She looked down and then picked up the white iPhone 4s. "Sorry, I have to take it," she said. And then turned her boss voice back on, still nice but authoritative.

"Yes? Oh, it is on the top stack. What? Should I go and check it, right now? Ok!"

She had been brought back to her business world. She hung up and said, "I am so sorry! Tomorrow another restaurant will go through the fire inspection, so I have to get my paper done. It needs half an hour. Please wait!" She stood up and grabbed her coat, then threw a menu on the table. "Order something and warm yourself up!" Then she put on her windbreaker coat, rushed out of the cold tent, and disappeared into the darkness.

I sat there pondering what Jennifer had told me.

Two years later, I started dipping my toes in commercial property as a realtor. I bought an existing Subway store and became a boss. The seller was an Indian. He counted every tiny item including napkins. He took a ruler to measure the thickness of a stack of napkins. Then said, "I purchased this napkin in 8 inches, now it is only 6 inches, so you need to pay me for the 2 inches". He was such a calculating person. He found out some goods amounting to 3,000 U.S. dollars and made me pay. He stood in the room, like picking up gold from the floor! Whatever he picked up, it was money. All of a sudden, I felt that it was the biggest transaction I've ever made in my life. I threw in my money so easily. Everybody was so nice to me. In this material society, once you jump into a business, the relationships between people are emotionless. On the surface, my lawyer was protecting my

interests, but when the deal was done, he calculated every cost clearly and never missed one dime.

After this, I had a store I don't even know how to run. I got a premonition. Later, I felt there was always an evil power whenever I wanted to do something at the store. Why did the equipment break? I was coping with the broken machines one by one. Very desperate!

When Jennifer went to her other store to deal with the fire inspection paper, I went through the hallway again and made a tour to the front hall. There were still guests staying behind and catching up. You could clearly hear Chinese being spoken. A glass counter caught my eye—a rectangle stone table sealed in with glass on three sides. On this stone table, there were many identical metal square boxes, and different squares contained different seasonings. It reminded me of Subway stores I had visited; the long table was similar to the salad bar there. This was the place to make the dip sources for hotpots.

“It is like a Subway salad bar!” I said to an employee.

The young guy, about 25 years old, smiled and answered, “Yes, we enforce standardized management here!”

I took out my camera and snapped a photo of the bar. The young guy smiled.

Back at my table, a waiter served me a bowl of noodles. Just by looking at it, I could tell how authentic it was. The wheat noodles were served with red sauce and topped with green onion and sesame seeds. A hot, spicy smell immediately drifted up to my face.

A profile of Jennifer

The outside was cold and the spicy soup with chewy noodles warmed me. I was impressed by its authenticity. In China, I had grown bored with all kinds of business dinners in the past. But now, a simple bowl of noodle led me to heaven. Since my arrival in this country, I had never felt so nostalgic.

After failing the Subway internal sanitary inspection three times, I was forced to go arbitration and got a 2,000 dollar fine. I know that Subway wanted me to relocate the store because of low profits. I said disappointedly, "I feel we are not cooperating with each other!" He asked, "Who told you we are cooperating with each other?" "Woo, what kind of relationship are we then?" "Franchiser and franchisee," he said. I was furious, but I tried my best to control my anger, "What choice do I have?" The District Agent (DA) said, "You have the right to keep running the store or just close it." I burst out without any thinking, "I have used the right to open the store. So now I'd better close it. Otherwise, I could never have any reasonable right." The DA then said, "Well, you know what to do, it is good." American white males always behaved like this, without emotion.

When the DA asked me to close the store, I burst out, "You want me to close the door, ok, let's do it!" He was stunned. "Why?" "I don't want to be a slave." "Ok, let me check our lease first." But my DA said, "You have to clean up the store. It is the photo of the store when you first rent it. You must restore everything to its old look."

"How is that possible?" I was furious. "There was a hole on the floor, how can I restore the hole."

Isn't it cruel? I said, "What if I cannot restore everything?" "Ok, you have to pay the penalty." I really needed to give up the store. "What is the fastest way to sell the store?" I asked. "Well," the DA said, "You could sell it to me." I was astonished,

*“What, how much would that be?” “One dollar!” “What, are you humiliating me?”
“No, you know what, I put one dollar on it just because I have to put a price on it
according to the lease. Otherwise, I would not even put a price on it!” And we really
signed the one-dollar contract!*

Jennifer came back, and did not look tired at all. It seemed she just came back from the frontline and won a battle; she was in high spirits and full of confidence. She took off her coat and draped it over the back of chair. I glanced at it and saw the trademark logo read “Burberry.”

“Let’s continue!” Jennifer said.

“How popular is the restaurant?” I asked, giving a look through the hallway. “Woo, you have to book a seat for the weekend, otherwise you cannot even find a seat!” she replied.

I hit the recorder again and heard the most dramatic stories about the Subway store. That was the most difficult time in Jennifer’s life. She continued her narrative style, repeating dialogue that took place in the past and imitating peoples’ way of speaking. The vividness brought us both into another space. I saw a young woman clumsily embarking on her business path—a young woman who was hurt badly. But she, like a goalkeeper, blocked every ball in her life.

Jennifer’s iPhone vibrated again. I saw the incoming number showed the name “Ruirui,” her younger son. I could hear Ruirui’s voice through the phone clearly.

The childish and cute voice said from the other end of the phone, “Mama, when would you come home? I’ve finished my homework!”

“I don’t know, baby!”

A profile of Jennifer

“Can I watch the cartoon?”

“No, you should go to sleep now! You are a good kid, right?”

“Ok! Love you.”

Jennifer hung up. I found this scene interesting as well: mom speaks English with an obvious Chinese accent, but her child is a native English speaker.

“Do your kids mock your English?” I asked.

“Woo!” Jennifer sighed. “Always. They correct me from time to time. Sometimes they laugh at my pronunciation. Sometimes, I pronounce a word wrong but I don’t know. When they laugh at my funny pronunciation, I know I have wrongly pronounced it for more than 20 years. When I mispronounced a word, kids laughed so hard and wouldn’t listen to me. American kids, they are so bad!”

Although Jennifer complained, I sensed contentment in her eyes. She continued to share.

Selling Subway for one dollar, I’ve never felt the humiliation like that before. I lost my Subway. It seemed a relief. But I carried a stigma in my heart. It is just like you lost your own baby. I sank into the deepest depression. I did not dare go to the top of high buildings. Whenever I went onto a tall building, I wanted to jump down from it. I felt terrible. What am I busting my butt for? Some stupid contracts made you lose your baby? And I couldn’t find out a place to vent out. At first, I wanted to tell things to my husband. But later he got impatient. He never heard good news from me. All news was bad. And he is always an escapist, just like an ostrich, always burying his head under sand. I got used to handling all hard things by myself. As time goes by, he stops sharing anything with me. “You take care of yourself!” were

his words. I felt unhappy about everything at that time. The only sentence popped in my mind is “What kind of life I am going through?”

I don’t even want to talk about this part of my history. But I have another baby in my life—my own restaurant. I built my own restaurant “Wang Jiang Lou” during the time after I installed the bulletproof glass in Subway. It is a Chinese restaurant.

It was 12:30 a.m. when we finished the first session at the restaurant. I knew I must stop, otherwise we would talk the whole night. Although we’d known each other for only hours, it seemed more like years. I hugged her. She paused, “Don’t hug me now. I will drive you home!” And we laughed.

Hopping into her big Toyota SUV, Jennifer skillfully drove the car in the night of New York City. From Brooklyn to Manhattan, we were still talking. The car is quite new, but on the backseat, items piled up. Blankets scattered here and there, along with some children’s books on the floor.

“It’s a little messy,” Jennifer said. “And I have a whole family here!”

On the Brooklyn Bridge, I looked to our left. Manhattan was ablaze with light. I was thrilled. This was the first time I had seen the skyline of the city at night. The magnificent picture reminded me of what Jennifer had said earlier, “New York is on fire!” I took out my iPhone to take a picture.

“Woo, so beautiful!” I murmured to myself.

Jennifer didn’t respond. She stared at me, smiled, and then sighed, “You know what? I never got used to the new skyline in Manhattan after September 11th. Before the Twin Towers collapsed, the higher skyline was much more

A profile of Jennifer

beautiful. But now... it's never like before... It has been ten years. Ten years..."

There was sorrow in Jennifer's tone. She fell silent. And I was silenced by this confession.

I looked at her while she drove. I understood that we had very different feelings for this city. To me, New York City is a beautiful, striking monster. I love her and I hate her. But to Jennifer, the city is part of her blood.

"Which country do you think is your country now?" I asked.

"Oh, this question" Jennifer sighed and shook her head. "Now, I can't go back. I have to admit, I love this country. As long as you work hard, you can get a fair result. I cannot go back! I cannot go back."

