

A Wondrous Western Woman from the East

By Teresa Wong © 2005

First Place: Wondrous Western Women Story Contest to Celebrate Alberta's Centennial
Famous 5 Foundation (www.famous5.org) and Light Hearted Concepts (www.lightheartedconcepts.com)

I am sitting at the kitchen table in my aunt's dimly-lit apartment, cracking open ripe lychees one at a time, leaving a litter of brown shells on the table after slurping up the juicy flesh inside. Around the table sits my mother, her two older sisters, my grandmother and me.

We're returning to Calgary tomorrow after a three-week visit to Guangzhou, my mother's hometown. I came on this trip to get to know her better – lured by the promise of stories and context – but I have realized that I will never really know my mother, partly because my Chinese is about as sophisticated as that of a five-year-old, and partly because there are some things she will never let me know.

Tonight, the air is thick with memories, most likely because it's our last night here and the stories demand to be told again or they will be lost for another 30 years. I only wish that I could understand every word. Why did my mom give in when I, at age eight, stubbornly refused to go to Chinese school?

Maybe it's because she had no choices when she was young. Born in 1946, just three years before the Communists took over and declared the People's Republic of China, she grew up in the midst of political upheaval. Her father was declared a capitalist-roader in 1958 and forced to turn over his successful produce business to the government. He managed to buy his way to Hong Kong, in order to make money for his family, just as a huge famine began to sweep across the mainland.

"Your mother was your grandfather's favourite," one aunt tells me. "She was always so quiet and studious... nothing like me!"

Her best subject in school was chemistry, and she had dreams of becoming a doctor, but being the daughter of a capitalist in exile made it impossible for her to go to university.

Instead, she was sent into the Chinese countryside during the Cultural Revolution to be "re-educated" by peasants in 1968. At first, she refused to go because she wanted to stay in the city to care for her mother. But when the revolutionary committee threatened to hold a denunciation meeting against my grandmother, she gave in.

She moved to Zhongshan commune, where she worked in the rice paddies and sugar cane fields. According to Mao, “the more books you read, the more stupid you become,” and manual labour would be the only way my mother could earn redemption from her bourgeois ways.

In 1970, with nothing left to lose, my mother decided to escape. She, her girlfriend Ying and an unnamed boy disappeared for 21 days.

“Wah... you wouldn’t believe how worried we were,” my older aunt tells my mom. “Mother stopped eating when she stopped hearing from you. It was so bad, I had to take her to the hospital and get her put on an IV.”

My mother turns to me and says, “Daughter, why don’t you go shower? It’s getting late, and we’ll have to leave early tomorrow to catch the train.”

I comply because I know that my presence is making her uncomfortable, but I dawdle as I gather my things and make my way to the washroom. I can still hear snippets—the walls are thin, and Cantonese is nothing if it’s not loud.

“...the trek was so tiring...” I wonder if her legs ached terribly when she walked through the rugged terrain. I wonder if she fell. I wonder if she was as scared when she hid in caves.

“... at least I had the basketball to keep me afloat...” They swam for two hours against the strong ocean currents before my mother lost her stamina. “Go on without me,” she told Ying, but her friend wouldn’t leave her. Instead, the boy swam ahead to look for a boat.

They were eventually picked up by Hong Kong authorities, who were willing to bring them to the island if they had relatives there. When they landed in Hong Kong, the police went to bribe my grandfather for my mother’s release: \$3000.

It must seem like another life to her now, living on the flat prairies so far from the sea. I wonder if she thinks her sacrifice was worth it as she dishes out Chinese fast food at the mall every day, just one of many immigrants who arrive in Alberta with untold, sometimes unspeakable, stories.

She does not have much – her escape did not result in the fulfillment of her dreams – but she is free. Is that enough? And would she tell me if it wasn’t?

I have accepted that I will never know my mother, but I hope that, in telling her story, I'll somehow uncover who she really is.