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To my parents

PREFACE

An immigration holding room is not my usual place for finding creative inspiration, but that October night in 2019, in the Beijing Capital Airport, my mind was racing with ideas: ideas of how to spend the next few months if tonight I were to be barred from re-entering mainland China and prevented from going back to my apartment near the capital's Chaoyang Park. I was trying to come up with ideas for how to continue reporting about China from outside its boundaries, if need be.

For the last few months I had been shuttling from Beijing to Hong Kong to cover the anti-government protests there. Leaving the mainland, however, was getting more difficult. Each time I passed through immigration check at Beijing's main airport, I was stopped by officials for additional questioning. The way back was even more fraught, usually entailing two to three hours of interrogation about my work in Beijing, my activities in Hong Kong, and electronic searches of my phone and work laptop. Failure to submit to these electronic searches would result in deportation, the airport police officer told me that night. Because of my journalism, I was a "person of interest," he explained, and my American passport would be flagged every time I crossed a Chinese border.

Phoneless, and sitting on the cold metal seats of the holding room, I pondered my predicament. I felt battered by the last three months, by the rigors of the relentless news cycle, and also wearied by the increasingly personal attacks on me and my reporting. I was told by officials that I was inherently Chinese, despite being born and raised outside of China, and thus should "tell the China story well" in my reporting for international audiences. In the years to come, I was to be labeled by Chinese state media a

race traitor, accused of being aligned with a "hostile foreign force," and derided as a "banana"—white on the inside, yellow in appearance only—who callously wore my Chinese-ness as a camouflage while gathering information for my malicious reporting. These attacks intensified in both the state-run press and on social media as China shut its borders in 2020 during the start of the global coronavirus pandemic. And yet, I felt an overwhelming desire to stay in China and keep working, even if it meant constant airport delays and state surveillance. Why did I find the country so compelling to report on? And despite its hardships, why did I love living in China?

The answers to these myriad questions returned to themes of identity—not just my own, but how Chinese people saw themselves and perceived what Chinese identity meant to their fellow countrymen. That night in the airport planted the seeds for this book. I was eventually let in to Beijing that night and continued reporting on the ground there. Three years later, my luck finally ran out when, in 2022, China refused to let me return to the country. And so I started writing.

This is a book about identity in China, how the state controls expressions of identity, and who gets to be considered Chinese. This preoccupation with identity is not mine alone. During his twelve years as head of China's ruling Communist Party, Xi Jinping has concerned himself with the project of Chinese rejuvenation, and in the process, redrawn the contours of Chinese identity. He has prescribed a much narrower definition of the ideal Chinese citizen: one who is ethnically Han (and not the other fifty-five officially recognized ethnic groups), speaks Mandarin Chinese (not one of China's hundreds of local dialects and minority languages), is heterosexual, and, ultimately, is loyal to the ruling Communist Party. Strengthening China requires participation from the country's citizens, and forging a uniform

identity among them became a chief priority for authorities during my time reporting in the country.

For readers who are not Chinese, who have never lived in China, or who do not belong to the small circle of "China watchers," you may be wondering: Why should you care about identity in China? I argue that understanding how the Chinese state sees itself and who it wants its citizens to be are foundational to understanding China's policies, which, in turn, are increasingly influential in shaping foreign and economic policy around the world, especially in the United States. This is not a history book, however; it focuses on people living in the present day. When access to China for outsiders is becoming so limited and living there and understanding the texture of everyday life is becoming ever rarer, I wanted to focus on the ordinary people both creating identity and subject to identity-related policy in China.

All nation-states are naturally motivated to foster a joint identity and promote national unity, and China is no exception. What struck me during my time reporting in China, however, was the overwhelming preoccupation with identity beyond broad political values, a preoccupation that drilled down into the minutiae of daily life. This preoccupation is driven by a base fear that the arc of the Communist project in China might ultimately mirror that of the Soviet Union: a long period of internal division, a societal splintering, and a final, sudden collapse. "A big Party was gone just like that," Xi said in an internal speech in 2012. "Proportionally, the Soviet Communist Party had more members than we do, but nobody was man enough to stand up and resist."[1]

Xi intends to resist. His response to this fear of collapse was distilled early on in his tenure as head of the Party in a communiqué later called Document Nine. I was still studying in university when Document Nine leaked. It was the first piece of China news I remember taking note of after reading the papers, and thinking: *Reporting on China could be interesting*. Document Nine heralded a new front for state control: a fight over culture, identity, and thought. The communiqué made it clear that this new front was

a principal concern for Xi and for the Party apparatus he would marshal in an epic battle for the hearts and minds of his 1.3 billion citizens.

For decades, these citizens had been dangerously tempted by Western ideas about universal suffrage and government accountability, according to the communiqué. A robust corps of muckraking Chinese journalists and burgeoning internet platforms had infused the general public with radical ideas incompatible with Communist rule. Now, in Xi's eyes, his job was to allow "absolutely no opportunity or outlets for incorrect thinking or viewpoints to spread." As an ancillary, in negating the universality of ideas like a free press or human rights, Document Nine and its writers were making a bold claim: that there was a uniquely "Chinese" way of running a country, one administered by the Party alone.

The precepts of Document Nine did not accord with my first years in China, where I moved after graduating from university. These were the years when I was falling in love with the country, a place more massive and more diverse than I had ever imagined. China is not a monolith. Just one small example: in the capital of Beijing, I worked on my spoken Mandarin, a semi-artificial collection of organic dialects and accents that is taught as a standard language within China. However, the language my parents spoke with my relatives in the south, belonging to the Wu group of Chinese languages, remained incomprehensible to me and my northern neighbors in Beijing. A short, high-speed train ride farther south and variations of Cantonese dominate, unintelligible to Wu dialect speakers.

In university, I had read in a history class about Chairman Mao's exhortation to "let one hundred flowers bloom; let one hundred schools of thought contend." Mao would later persecute many of the independent thinkers who heeded his call for free expression. After I moved to Beijing, however, I got a small sense of what a Chinese society, intellectually

unleashed, could be capable of. I met Chinese beatniks and writers, activists and models. Most of them had been born and raised outside of Beijing, and from them I learned about the rhythms of life and the local histories of different provinces. They brought me to events on queerness, on the rule of law, on labor organizing. For the first time in my life, I heard new ideas and read essays in the Chinese language that challenged my old patterns of thinking.

I also traveled all the time. On assignment, I crisscrossed the country, visiting everywhere, from mining communities and factory towns to religious sects and Communist pilgrimage sites. On weekends, I took short trips to see the ocean, the mountains, and the mighty rivers that bisect the country. I especially loved the landscapes of the northwest, in provinces like Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai, which looked more like the surface of Mars than the scenes of canals and willow trees I found in the Chinese watercolor paintings I had grown up with.

Begrudgingly, I realized Chinese authorities might be right: my identity was in part Chinese, despite my birth and upbringing in the United States. My love for living in China stemmed from discovering that a kernel of who I was was magnified across an entire country. I just was not Chinese in the way authorities narrowly prescribed. For, falling in love with a country also meant getting to know it better, and I was quickly learning that the diversity I cherished was seen as a liability under Xi Jinping. The online space for discussion became increasingly censored. Surveillance of dissidents was growing, and who could be considered a dissident was expanding. Suppression of religious and ethnic minority communities was magnifying. Riffing off the Mao-era slogan, one source told me the state now would “let only red flowers bloom.”

I preferred the Chinese idiom *baihuiqianpa,* 百卉千葩, meaning a myriad of thousands of plants and flowers, meant to indicate a flourishing diversity. The idiom better reflected what drew me to reporting in China in the first place: the ability to briefly be allowed entry into the lives of people in one nation-state who ate, thought, spoke, and behaved entirely differently

from one another, and, of course, a resilience that kept these people true to themselves even in the face of enormous intimidation and pressure to conform. These became the central themes in my reporting, and their stories are the ones that stayed with me in the years after I left China.

This book is a collection of those stories. I start with people living in China's mainland who encapsulate different political visions for China. The book then proceeds to the border regions once considered the fringes of the Chinese imperial empire, namely the Xinjiang region, and the provinces of Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and Gansu, where language, ethnicity, and religion remain contentious within the state project of Chinese identity. We then depart the Chinese mainland for Hong Kong, the site of multiple rounds of protests revolving around themes of identity and how the city-state should develop within the broader Chinese project. Returning home to the United States, I discovered questions of how to be Chinese percolated the diaspora communities I had grown up with, and the book ends in the American context.

Much of the book was written and edited in Taiwan, the self-ruled, democratic island that China claims control over and has threatened to invade if necessary. I moved to Taiwan at the start of 2023, after Beijing canceled my residence permit and refused to reissue my journalist credentials. Emotionally adrift, wounded by the abrupt amputation of my life in China, I sought comfort in learning the stories of the one million or so residents of China who left their civil-war-torn home for Taiwan, more than seventy years before I retraced their steps. Almost all of these refugees believed their stay in Taiwan would be short, and they pined for their lost home in China. Most of them never returned. I did not want to be like this generation of exiles, lost in nostalgic reveries and blind to the beauty of Taiwan. Over the next two years, I found a new home, and in doing so I

learned ways in which identities existed outside of a nation-state's borders, unmoored to any one political regime.

These thoughts were running through my mind in December 2023, when I sat down with Taiwanese politician Ma Ying-jeou. Our interview was just a handful of weeks before a pivotal presidential election in Taiwan. Like me, Ma had been born to Chinese parents. They fled the mainland after a civil war, bringing him to Taiwan, where he eventually was elected president after the island democratized, though his father taught him to never forget their roots in China. Earlier in 2023, Ma had visited China for the first time, and I asked him about the trip. Ma was ecstatic. Where I perceived political closing off under Xi Jinping, he had felt a burgeoning liberalization among the crowds who enthusiastically greeted him in China. "If you compare China today and China thirty years ago, there are a lot of differences. They understand the importance of democracy, although they don't know the term." He smiled slightly at my incredulous expression. We seemed to be talking past one another, about entirely different countries.

Now, looking back at that conversation, I am more sympathetic. I, too, wanted to be considered Chinese and missed China though I no longer lived there. But I realized—like many of the characters in this book—we were all yearning for different Chinas, and we were all chasing after visions of a China that no longer existed, or perhaps never had.

CHAPTER 1

THE LAWYER

Yang Bin was born wanting more. Her parents had wanted her to be like them: factory workers with a stable income, a guaranteed pension, and state-assigned housing. They both worked at a state-run auto parts factory that never closed even though it almost never turned a profit. But Yang was consumed by a gnawing sense that the purpose of her life could be bigger.

In person, she exudes energy: gregarious, with bright eyes and deep dimples that appear whenever she smiles or laughs (which is frequently), but her easy confidence was learned. As a young girl, she was shy and prone to blushing. She was born in the midst of the Cultural Revolution, a decade of political violence starting in the 1960s that killed at least an estimated half-million people, and she learned to value compliance. Growing up, her parents hinted darkly at previous purges under Chairman Mao Zedong, who ruled the Communist Party until his death in 1976. These tales taught her that standing out made one an easy target in the next political campaign that cropped up. At university, she chose what she thought would be the politically safest major: a now-nonexistent field of study called Building Chinese Socialism, an arcane discipline designed to study Deng Xiaoping's famous phrase of creating a socialism "with Chinese characteristics."

Yang had the good fortune to enter adulthood just after China was looking for a way to redefine itself post-Mao. Economic and political reforms begun in 1978 by Deng, a senior Party leader himself twice purged by Mao, meant people could choose their own jobs, if they dared, at the handful of new private businesses starting up. And so, after graduating in 1990, when

Yang was offered a position to join her parents in the same factory *danwei*, or Communist work unit, she turned the offer down. Two decades ago, her actions would have been unimaginable, but she was of a new generation. “I did not want a life where I could already envision its ending,” she told me. While she didn’t exactly know what she wanted just yet, she did know with certainty that she was not going to find it in a Hunan provincial state company where “it is possible for a person to live and die in a ten-thousand-worker factory, from kindergarten to the mortuary home,” as she described it—the “iron rice bowl” of the socialist safety net.

Her search for adventure landed her in coastal Guangdong province, where her brother had already moved. It was a fortuitous choice. Yang quickly secured a job at a new, private pesticides factory. In the 1990s, in the heady days of China’s opening and reform policy, enormous financial opportunities were up for grabs after nearly four decades of strict ideological controls on the economy. Guangdong was in prime position to benefit given its proximity to the then-British colony of Hong Kong, where wealth and business acumen were plentiful. Guangdong’s massive port also made it an attractive location to place one of the country’s first economic pilot zones, where private businesses could set up and trade internationally, accelerating China’s economic opening.

When she was fired from the factory, which had sponsored her Guangdong residence papers, Yang couldn’t stomach the idea of returning home. One of the factory managers—a man she still calls her guardian angel—stepped in and arranged another job as a copywriter in a county-level prosecutor’s office. The job did not pay well, but it was a position in the civil service, coveted for its benefits and stability.

The job allowed her to reinvent herself. At the prosecutor’s office, it did not matter that she was the daughter of factory workers who had, just a few years earlier, been destined to be one herself; in Guangdong she could learn to be a servant of the law. She knew little then of the challenges ahead of her over the next four decades, and even if she had, she would not have changed her mind. Her career would put her on the front lines of a struggle to define

a nascent Chinese system of law, to determine whose interests it fought for, and to decide what kind of country this system aspired to create. This was the purpose she had been looking for.

Yang started her career when much of China's economic and Party system was up for reinvention, including the legal system. China wanted to build a more cosmopolitan legal system that governed by the rule of law. Controls on private businesses were lifting, and economic growth was booming after three decades of repressed demand. China would need fair courts and transparent laws to guide and contain this economic experiment. It also wanted to project itself as a modern country that was a safe destination for foreign investment. To do that, it needed a body of law to adjudicate disputes and train legal officials like Yang to enforce its rules.

The Party brought in foreign experts and talents and absorbed as much know-how as it could. "A considerable part of our rule of law construction achievements in the past 40 years have been achieved on the basis of absorbing foreign advanced experience," Xiao Yang, a former president of China's supreme court, wrote.[1] In Hong Kong, a British-style common law system was already fairly developed, and Xiao sent more than two hundred Chinese judges to the former British colony to study international law. Several returned to China and became prominent judges. Far and away, however, it was admiration for the American system of constitutional law that dominated legal circles. Throughout the early 2000s, the Party sent dozens of mid-level cadres to Harvard University and Duke University each year, where they took classes with leading professors in political economy and constitutional law. Chinese scholars studied the U.S. system of checks and balances and the dynamics of the American Supreme Court. One member of China's top court, Judge He Fan, went so far as to write an

emotional tribute to conservative American Supreme Court justice Antony Scalia when the justice died.[2]

China's legal overhaul was crucial to making the case that the country was ready to join the global economic order. In 2001, China was granted admission to the World Trade Organization—the result of a years-long campaign to prove it could and would abide by international trade rules of fair competition, at least for a time. Unfortunately, intellectual property theft and counterfeiting were rampant, particularly in Guangdong province, where thousands of Chinese factories continue to manufacture much of the world's consumer goods. Yang's procuratorate office barely made a dent prosecuting trademark cases.

Instead, her office focused on underworld crime. China's economic miracle had created an explosion in lawlessness.[3] Crime was growing exponentially in the 1990s as people moved from their villages to expanding cities. Yang encountered horrific incidents as a state prosecutor. Gang violence had shot up; in coastal Fujian province, twelve young pirates, flashing explosives and knives, terrorized fishing boats until they were caught and executed.[4] Authorities discovered a syndicate that smuggled in about $10 billion in oil and cars over a period of three years. A rising Communist cadre named Xi Jinping was then the province's deputy Party secretary. Thirteen years later, he would be anointed as Party secretary of the entire Communist Party as its top leader. In the midst of this uncertainty and chaos, Yang believed wholeheartedly in maintaining social order through a rigid application of the law, and she attacked her job with an activist's zeal other bureaucrats found abrasive.

She was eager to get started, yet the first tasks assigned to her in the prosecutor's office were deeply boring: filling out reams of court paperwork and writing transcripts. Her fellow officemates were generally unmotivated. They occasionally pulled out a mahjong table in the office during the afternoons and played the popular, tabletop game for the rest of the day. In a fit of pique in 1996, Yang quit and took a short break to pursue her dream of being a journalist, writing for a small, private newspaper before realizing the

owner cared more about advertisement sales than reporting. Chastened, she went back to the procuratorate's office, where she proved herself to be an ambitious prosecutor.

She impressed the right people. In 1997, Yang was promoted to assistant prosecutor, then delegated to the provincial office soon after, responsible for serious felonies and violent crimes. Not a natural public speaker, she was so overcome by nerves during her first case, she couldn't hold her printed statement steady. But she loved the satisfaction of building a case, and she learned to embrace the exhilaration of addressing the court.

Her job gave her the power to change—or end—someone's life. She made it a point to attend every execution in the cases she worked on. Five years into the job, Yang sent her first person to death row. She had been assigned the case of a man who had stabbed another man to death with a fruit knife. She encouraged the defendant to repent for those crimes and seek redemption.

Yang is reticent about when she became a Christian, but religion was undoubtedly a motivation throughout her career. She found the religion's teaching about redemption and forgiveness useful for understanding the senseless violence of the crimes she prosecuted. Religion could also make her a remorseless prosecutor. The man refused to repent. During one meeting, the man knelt to the ground, pulling at Yang's shoes as he begged her to give him a lighter sentence. Her heart filled with hate, she told me, recalling that moment. His groveling disgusted her. "He only feared death. I look down on these sorts of people. His repentance was all a performance," she said. When a judge found him guilty of murder, she asked for the maximum punishment—the death sentence. At his execution, she was the only person as a witness. The condemned fixed her with a glare of pure fury and malice. "I will remember you in hell," he spat at her. "I shall remember you, too," she replied, without breaking eye contact.

Later, the court sent her a photograph of his corpse to include in the case file. Yang looked at the picture, his last words ringing in her ears. She slept badly for days afterward. While rereading the French novel *Les*

Misérables, by Victor Hugo, she was struck by the character of Bishop Myriel, who forgives the book's main character for stealing silver candlesticks from his house. Like Yang, the fictional bishop also accompanies a convict to his execution, but the bishop comes to feel compassion for him. Yang was floored. She regretted her callousness. The man she had condemned had been born unloved, but he deserved her compassion. She had been born bumbling and tongue-tied, but she had transformed herself through strength of will to be a better person. The people she prosecuted deserved the same chance, she thought.

The opening and reform policies that had changed Yang's life were also changing the rhythms of life for rural residents who were now permitted to live and work in places other than where their *hukou*, or household registration, was located. By the 1990s, some 90 million migrant workers were packing up each year and moving from the countryside and small cities to the much bigger urban hubs of Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou, drifting in and out of cities whenever they could find work.[5] Many of them endured harsh working conditions and long stints away from family and friends. They also helped fuel China's boundless economic growth, but their sudden move to only a handful of cities put strains on the social welfare systems there.

One of these migrant workers, a woman named Zhou Moying, would test Yang's capacity for compassion and forgiveness. Zhou worked in Guangzhou, far from her hometown. Life was hard. Zhou and her husband earned barely enough to feed their family of five, including a sickly, eight-month-old daughter. Zhou struggled to cajole her often-absent husband into taking on family responsibilities. One muggy July in 2005, she got out of bed and fed her daughter rice porridge, but the baby would not stop fussing. Her husband barely stirred at his daughter's cries. Feeling abandoned, Zhou impulsively headed for the river that flowed past their house and placed her