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Hate

Author’s note: Some names in this piece have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Beijing, 1996.

I stood in the hotel room gazing out the sliding glass window at the frenetic activity in the street below.

My mother’s voice rang out from across the room. “Boy, they not do good job cleaning here today. The cup for brush the teeth still the same. They not change that.”

I turned to see her come out from the bathroom in pajamas with a damp blouse and pants draped on hangers. She hung them in the closet.

I said, “You think those will be dry by the time you need to wear them again?”

“Will be. You see.”

Mom walked to her bed. She threw back the thin spread, sat, and inspected the sheet tucked into the mattress. “And you see this?” She pinched at something on the pillow and held it up for me. “See? This my hair. That mean they not change the sheets, you believe that? They just make the bed and go.”

“Maybe they were in a hurry today.”

She shook her head. “In Beijing, hotel, restaurant, everything run by government. Government job, nobody can fire you, so they not do good work.”

“Does that include the tour we’re on?”

“Sure! You see the restaurant they taking us for dinner?” She scrunched her face. “Food lousy. Vegetables cook too long, not the good flavor. And not much meat. We already pay for, so they taking us to cheap restaurant make more money for them.”

My mother leaned toward me as if to convey a secret with national security implications. “I tell you something. The man and the driver, they drop us off at restaurant, then come back pick us up later. Must be they go eat somewhere else.”

I walked over to my bed. “They do this all the time, so they probably get sick of eating the same food. Come to think of it, they must get tired of seeing the same sights over and over again. I know that going to the zoo or Sea World every week would get old real quick.”

“But that the job, so they need do.”

I flung myself on the mattress. It felt like landing on a trampoline. I sat up and looked at the phone on the nightstand. “Hey, you think I can call San Diego from here?”

“Who you call?”

“I was thinking about Quyen.”

“Long distance, another country, you know. Costs lots money for that.”

“It won’t be long. I just want to tell her everything’s okay.”

She scooted toward the phone. “Let me see, I think the tour man say we have to tell worker before make the long-distance call.” She picked up the receiver, listened, and pushed a number.

My mom spoke briefly, hung up, and handed the receiver to me. “Have to push oh, oh, one for English line for long distance.”
I entered it. A recorded female voice, in broken English and barely audible on a static-filled line, told me my call couldn’t be connected. I hung up and tried again.

“What wrong?”
“I don’t know. I’m getting a recording.”
“You use oh, oh, one?”
“Yeah. I did it twice.”
“Let me try.” I passed her the phone. She made an attempt, then looked at me and shrugged. “Not working. You want me go down to lobby, find out what wrong?”
“You’d have to change first. Don’t worry about it.”
“You sure?”
I nodded.
She put the phone on the nightstand. “You must be really like this girl, hah?”
“What, just ’cause I’m trying to make a call?”
“Must be if you try from China.”

In the hotel cafeteria I couldn’t stomach much of the rice soup and cold rolls the hotel always served for breakfast. Instead I amused myself by performing a math “mind reading” trick for a trio of teens from our tour: a hyperexpressive boy with an infectious smile named Hon Hung who spoke some English, his contemplative cousin, Lok Him, and a bookish girl named Yen Liu the two boys had met on the tour.

My magician friend, Henry, from elementary school had shown me the trick. He would have me pick a number in my head and, without my divulging it, run me through a series of arithmetic steps. Then he would hesitate a moment with a set of fingers pressing into his temples and call out the number I had arrived at. The day he revealed the secret, I must’ve gone through a hundred sequences trying to find one that didn’t work. The trick never failed.

Hon Hung begged me to show him the solution, but I just smiled. He kept at me throughout the breakfast, and by the time we boarded the bus, he even attempted to bribe me with money. I reminded him that I lived in America, a land of incalculable wealth. His face was a study in disappointment as we made our way to the back of the coach.

He and Lok Him took seats in front of my mother and me. Yen Liu and her aunt sat across the aisle from them. As we started forward Hon Hung turned and asked me about America.

I said, “How about if you give me your impressions first?”
Hon Hung looked confused.
“Tell me what you think about the U.S..”
He consulted his cousin and both nodded. Hong Hun said, “U.S. rich, many cars.” His eyes grew big, as if to mimic the vastness of our perceived wealth. “Drive fast.”
I laughed. “That’s probably true compared to China. What else?”
He paused, then pointed at me in the manner of a game show contestant with the answer to the million-dollar question. “Many guns. Ah . . . shoot, kill. Ah . . . steal the money.”
I looked at my mom and she shrugged.
I turned to Hon Hung and said, “You think we have a lot of crime?”
“Yes. U.S., many guns.”
“Tell me more.”
“U.S. have much sexy, no clothes.”
It was beginning to sound as if he had taken in too many James Bond flicks.
“How do you know all this about America?”
He paused and spoke Chinese to my mother.
She said, “He watching American movies and listen to music.”
Sylvester Stallone and Madonna were educating other countries about our nation’s culture.

Lok Him spoke and this prompted a question from my mom. Yen Liu responded.
My mother reported, “They say U.S. number one powerful country. They agree about that, but they say we little bit selfish. They say U.S. have big army, many guns and ships, so try to scare everybody. They say we helping Taiwan so that show we selfish.”
“I don’t know the ins and outs about Taiwan. I only know we were trying to help people,” I said.

My mom conveyed this. The youths’ restrained nods indicated they heard, but didn’t necessarily agree.

Lok Him commented.
My mother said, “He think America hate China. He ask if that true.”
Hate? That’s how they thought Americans viewed them? It seemed preposterous. Yet prior to this trip, I equated China with Communism and authoritarianism. Tiananmen Square. A government and people who couldn’t be trusted.

I regarded the three teens and said, “Hate is a really strong word, and I wouldn’t use it to describe the differences between our two countries. Maybe we just don’t know each other very well.”

Our driver let us off at an expansive cement courtyard surrounded by prominent government buildings. At one end, across a busy street, I saw a gigantic marvel of ancient Chinese architecture. An imperial palace crowned with a sloping, two-tiered, golden-tiled roof stood in majestic dominion over the entire area. Below the roof, ten evenly spaced, royal-red pillars framed a series of vertical windows decorated in gold trim. A thirty-foot-high protective wall in front displayed a huge picture of Chairman Mao Zedong between two long banners of white Chinese characters.

The tour leader informed us we were in Tiananmen Square, that Chairman Mao proclaimed the People’s Republic of China here in 1949. My mother translated his presentation: established in 1651 at the transition between the Ming and Qing dynasties, enlarged in 1958 after the formation of the People’s Republic, the literal translation, “Gate of Heavenly Peace.”

The enormous courtyard could hold a million people. Walking across, I pictured it in 1989, an early summer morning filled with young, idealistic, Chinese students protesting in the name of freedom and democracy.
A chill shot through my body, and I shuddered at images of armed soldiers marching toward the square, firing into the surrounding mass of demonstrators, wounding and killing.


A single haunting question knifed into my thoughts: How could they do that to their own people?

The rest of the day dissolved into a blur. My mom told me we visited the Chairman Mao Mausoleum, the Museum of Chinese History, and a military exhibit.

I didn’t remember. The images from Tiananmen Square kept flooding my mind.

That night in the hotel room, I lay on my bed.

My mother said, “Raymond, you okay?”

“What? Yeah . . . Why?”

“You quiet.”

“I was just thinking.” After a silence, I said, “What did you think of today?”

A pause. “We see lot, walking too much. When we go that place for Mao Zedong, how they keeping his body, make me feel strange.”

“They really worship him here.”

“Look like in China, he the great man. Everywhere go, have pictures for him. All I know is my family happy before, have the good life.”

My mom was twelve when the Communists came to power. They ransacked her village, murdered her father, imprisoned her mother, and forced a distraught little girl to flee from her family. Why? For what possible reason?

Lok Him’s question crept into my mind, reverberating with greater and greater force. Did the U.S. hate China? Did the Communists hate my mom’s family?

How could they? They didn’t even know them. Then why? My grandparents had money and property. If one family could possess wealth, wouldn’t others want that too?

And if a band of renegade students was allowed to protest for democracy, wouldn’t others soon follow?

Threat. Fear. That explained how the Communists could rip a family apart, one that had done them no harm. How a country could fire on its own people. How we could lock our own citizens of Japanese descent in internment camps during World War II. How our soldiers could take part in the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. How Nazi Germany could slaughter over six million Jews.

And if people and nations continued to destroy what they were afraid of, that which they didn’t understand, what would become of us?
The bus driver dropped us off at a bustling shopping district in the heart of Beijing. My mom and I walked with Sok Wai and Mui Ying, the woman and her daughter my mother befriended in the hotel line the first day of our tour. Pedestrians packed the sidewalks next to an array of modern department stores boasting shiny glass displays and multiple floors of merchandise.

Sok Wai stopped at a women’s shoe store, while Mui Ying kept tugging at the strap of her mom’s purse. Sok Wai reprimanded her and continued to browse.

My mother and I wandered ahead to the window of a tea shop displaying an assortment of boxed teas from China. We stopped there to wait for Sok Wai and Mui Ying. My mom said, “Sok Wai have the hard time now. She and husband getting divorce soon.”

“Really? Why’s that?”

She shook her head. “Her husband want son really bad. When Mui Ying born, he disappointed about that. In China, only supposed to have one kid, but he have to have son. The husband very successful in business, so they pay lots money for government, let them try again. But they have another girl.”

“You buy the right to have a second child?”

“After first one, have to pay. In China too many people, so government not want you have kids. You see? We in China almost two weeks, not see one woman carry the baby in stomach.”

True. I hadn’t seen a pregnant woman in any of the Chinese cities: Shenzhen, Chashan, Guangzhou, and now, Beijing.

“So what does that have to do with their divorce?”

“Her husband get upset. He say waste the money have another girl. Because he successful, lots women chasing him, say will have son with him. So he have boy with another woman. He supporting the other family now.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No kidding. He leaving Sok Wai to marry the woman with boy.” She shook her head again.

“Sometimes I really not understand Chinese people.”

“She told you all this?”

“Sure.”

“So what’s she going to do?”

“Prob-ly go Hong Kong, marry somebody there.”

“Just like that?”

“That what she say.”

“And the children?”

“She taking the young one go. And husband taking Mui Ying. That why Mui Ying come this trip, so can be with Sok Wai before go with husband. Maybe they not see each other again.”

A final trip between mother and daughter. Did Mui Ying know? It struck me as absolute insanity for the girl to lose her mom just because her father wanted a son.

Sok Wai strolled toward us holding her daughter’s hand. The girl’s little innocent, button eyes gazed about as she followed her mother’s lead. Sok Wai clutched a bag full of shoe boxes in her other hand.
I offered to carry Sok Wai’s package and she smiled, but shook her head. My mom spoke to her and Sok Wai looked at me and nodded. I took the bag and strode behind Sok Wai and her daughter, watching them go down the sidewalk together.

On the last day of our tour my mother and I ate another round of the hard rolls and bland rice soup at the hotel cafeteria for breakfast. The place’s star rating dropped at least two notches in my book with culinary fare that made me long for hospital food.

Neither my mom nor I ate much. We carried our bags out to the bus and took seats when the tour guide rushed aboard and dashed through the aisle to my mother. He communicated in an urgent manner.

She said to me, “We have to go back to hotel. He say something wrong.”
“What do you mean something’s wrong?”
“I not know, but have to go.”

The man led us off the bus, across the lot, and into the lobby. He pointed to a woman at the counter whose face seemed almost too narrow to prop up her wide, black, horned-rimmed eyeglasses. When my mom approached, the woman reported something and handed her an invoice.

My mother disregarded it, shook her head, and responded in a tone of heightened irritation.

An argument ensued, their voices rising with each exchange. The woman kept gesturing at the slip. My mom continued to shake her head and pointed to the elevator.

Then the woman picked up the phone on the counter, punched some numbers, and spoke into the receiver. My mother didn’t let up while this clerk talked on the phone.

I went to the counter and said, “What’s going on?”

My mom looked at me with angry disbelief in her eyes. “She crazy, say we owe money for long-distance phone calls. She try to show me day and time we make.”

“We didn’t make any long-distance calls.”
“That the night you try call your girlfriend.”
“But I didn’t get through.”

“That what I tell her, but she keeping say we make three calls, have to pay. I tell her we not going to pay for that, so she getting the boss.”

“How much are they saying we owe?”

A disgusted sneer formed on her face. “Three hundred dollars Chinese.”
Forty American dollars. “That’s ridiculous!”

“That what I say.” She whirled and launched some seething words at the woman, who issued an icy reply. This sparked another barrage.

A tub of a man with bloated cheeks and a bulging lower lip came down the hall and joined the fracas. My mother paused as he conferred with the desk clerk. The man—his girth taxing a plaid jacket—picked up the invoice from the counter, scanned it quickly, and rendered his decision. My mom shook her head in defiance and the supervisor engaged her in a replay of the earlier confrontation. The gaunt-faced woman appeared relieved to let him assume the battle.
My mother and the new combatant went at it. I watched my mom: eyes riveted, tendons bulging in her neck, head lurching forward with the fury of each verbal volley. I had never seen her this bitter, this intense, even in the worst fights with my stepfather. Sheer unrelenting hatred rained from her words, as if she were attacking someone who had done something heinous and unspeakable to her.

At that moment I realized it wasn’t the money. My mom wasn’t just mad or upset. I heard anger in her voice, but more than that, I could feel her frantic desperation. Her anguish and horror. She was yelling as if her very life depended on it, as if the man in front of her had stolen something treasured and sacred.

Then I saw it in her eyes, the frightened eyes of a twelve-year-old girl, watching, helpless, as soldiers took her mother and father away.

And now she was venting her rage at this man, the supervisor, a person in charge, a symbol of China. Like a child who never had the chance.

I stepped slowly to my mom and put my hand on her shoulder. She turned and I saw the traces of terror on her face. In as calm a voice as I could muster, I said, “Mom, it’s my fault. I’ll pay the money.”

She stared at me a moment before recognition came to her eyes and her face changed, as if her darkest enemy had transformed into her son.

She didn’t say anything. But in that brief instant I caught a glimpse of it, stark and raw. Grief.

She managed a blank nod.

I unzipped my belt pouch, removed two twenty-dollar traveler’s checks, signed them, and put them on the counter.

I went to my mom, placed my hand on her arm, and guided her out to the bus.
Author Notes

Raymond M. Wong’s family is his inspiration. He lives in San Diego with his wife, Quyen, and children, Kevin and Kristie. He earned the Eloise Klein Healy scholarship and the MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles, and his writing has appeared in U.S.A Today, U-T San Diego, LA Daily News, Chicken Soup for the Soul, San Diego Family, Asia: The Journal of Culture and Commerce, City Works 2006, Small Print Magazine, and other publications. Wong has been an assistant editor on Lunch Ticket, Antioch’s online literary journal, and he works as a counselor at San Diego City College. His memoir, I’m Not Chinese: The Journey from Resentment to Reverence, will be published by Apprentice House in October 2014.

About the Work

“Hate” is an excerpt from my upcoming memoir, I’m Not Chinese: The Journey from Resentment to Reverence. In 1996, I was an emotionally empty 33-year-old, an outsider in every aspect of my life. I had disowned my native language and culture. I was disconnected from my family. My mother and I were polar opposites and grated on each other because we were so different. I hadn’t seen my father in twenty-eight years and didn’t get along with my stepfather. I harbored a profound distrust of people; I had few friends and my relationships with women could be summed up as a series of catastrophes.

Then I took a trip to Hong Kong, the city I left at the age of five. I met a father and an extended family in a place so utterly foreign, it could only be categorized as alien. Yet, these virtual strangers welcomed me despite the fact we couldn’t talk to each other—they spoke Cantonese and I spoke English. I discovered an appreciation for my mom, who had witnessed the murder of her father at the hands of Communist soldiers when she was twelve. In mainland China, I learned to be open to a relationship with Quyen, the woman who would eventually become my wife. And on a windswept and rainy morning on a remote rural hillside in my mother’s hometown, I embraced my family’s history and found my purpose at the foot of my grandparents’ headstone. This journey changed my life.

When I returned to America, I began to write about my experience and the words seemed to pour out of me. I completed the first draft of my book in 1997 and initiated countless revisions and an endless stream of submissions to agents and editors in the ensuing years. In 2011, an independent press in Florida finally offered me a contract and planned to release my memoir in 2013. I was ecstatic. Then on July 11, 2012, I received an e-mail from the publisher with the subject line “Unfortunate news.” The owner was closing her business at the end of the year for personal reasons and wouldn’t be able to publish my book after all. I went from euphoric to despondent.

I was working toward my MFA in Creative Writing at Antioch University Los Angeles at the time, so I shared the news with my mentor, Bernadette Murphy. She encouraged me to start submitting again and I did. I endured more rejections before finding Apprentice House, a student-run university press in Baltimore. Their program taught students how to operate a book publishing
business by actually acquiring and producing their own titles. My work would help to educate future industry professionals. It was a perfect match.

My memoir will be out in October 2014. It’s been a long and often daunting road to publication, but as writers, it’s what we do. It’s why we embark on a path of self-discovery by putting pen to paper and fingers to keyboard. I have not regretted a single moment of the process.

Raymond M. Wong on the Web


www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIVT5pLTihA

smallprintmagazine.com/showcase/creative-nonfiction/foreign-by-raymond-wong/

www.raymondmwong.com