

ENGL 120: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay
Professor Kim Shirkhani

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Joanna Zheng

Choice

by Joanna Zheng

Almost every summer, my family and I embark on a pilgrimage of sorts back to our hometown of Shanghai, China. Packing up two adults, an adolescent, and a toddler is no easy feat, but my parents managed to accomplish it fairly regularly and with no more than the occasional moody silence (on my part) or wailing tantrum (on Henry's). The summer of my junior year, however, was different: we hadn't gone back for two years in a row, an almost unbelievable phenomenon. This time, instead of packing Mickey Mouse t-shirts and wide-brimmed pink floppy hats, I stuffed the suitcase allotted to me with chic tank tops, faux designer sunglasses, and the Urban Outfitters sundress that had cost two month's worth of allowance to buy. Impressing my extended family and showing them (in all the right little, *subtle*, ways) how much I had matured suddenly became important.

It always took a little while for me to settle in, to adapt to the unfamiliarity of speaking in my clumsy Mandarin day and night, instead of only when prompted to by my mother. By the end of the first week though, I proudly announced to my grandfather (a seventy-something man who rose at five a.m. each morning to practice tai chi, altogether satisfying my ideal image of a Chinese paternal figure) that I “felt Chinese.” These words, terse and simple in English, translate in Chinese to a more complicated phrase that encompasses the idea of cultural identity. To his credit, my grandfather didn't laugh or brush me aside. Instead, with the utmost seriousness, he offered to take me to the market with him the next morning so I could help purchase that day's

food.

The next morning, chest puffed up with pride, I carefully chose my most stylish outfit, matched to perfection by a pair of strappy purple heels. If my grandfather felt any skepticism or disbelief at the sight of my appearance, he hid it well, donning his tattered brown jacket with his usual unshakeable gravity.

The first cold blast of reality struck me as we made our way down the last flights of stairs, into the entryway where rows of bikes stood neatly in their racks. As I fumbled with the keys, trying to unlock the old-fashioned chain (had modern padlock technology really not reached Shanghai yet?), I realized that I had no idea how to ride a bicycle in heels. Sure, the toe of the shoe rested against the front of the pedal, but what about that stiletto? Did one hook it into the criss-cross pattern of the pedal? Did one simply leave it dangling over the back, like an unwanted, useless tail? I finally settled on the latter option, after contemplating all the horrible possibilities of falling off of a bicycle with my heel stuck in the pedal. The roads were muddy with filth and dirt from the rain of the night before, and my attention was completely focused on simultaneously avoiding potholes, mud puddles, and the other cyclists on the street. The splashes of mud ruining my new skirt, which would normally have been a catastrophe of the first order, paled in comparison to the thought of being run over by a huge garbage truck. I had always prided myself on being a good multitasker, but navigating through the streets of Shanghai was enough to befuddle over the most compartmentalized of thinkers.

Among the hundreds of people milling around the street market in mundane working clothes, my sequined top and conspicuously bright heels identified me as an outsider before I even opened my mouth to speak. Almost immediately, the putrid stench of cold fish and seafood assailed my nostrils, the smell strong enough to make my eyes water. “No fish today,” my

grandfather informed me, pushing through the crowd towards the vegetables. Never had I been more grateful for my little brother's aversion to seafood.

The vendors concealed quiet chuckles behind their hands as I tottered by, occasionally gripping the side of some grimy table for support. Trying to keep up with my grandfather as he walked rapidly from table to table, issuing crisp demands for vegetables in a no-nonsense tone, was already enough of a challenge. Speaking or formulating coherent responses would have been practically impossible, and as for actually helping select--

“What do you think of these melons?” my grandfather's voice interrupted my thoughts. I stared blankly at him for a few seconds before my mind registered the question, at which point an involuntary “Oh!” popped out of my mouth. “They're good,” I mumbled, not even glancing at the fruits on the table. Instead, my eyes settled on the vendor's greasy apron, which bore patches of splattered fruit and clumps of dirt. Almost involuntarily, they traveled up the pudgy arm, over the ill-concealed smirk on his face, up to the dull sheen of his oiled hair, his demeanor expressing his opinion of me better than any words.

“The beautiful girl is right,” Oily Vendor purred, gesturing to the melons. “These are fresh, ripe, and sweet. Why not buy some?” My grandfather nodded his assent, then looked at me. “Why don't you pick out one?”

Panic gripped my mind, not dissimilar to the feeling people get in nightmares when they are about to be crushed to pieces between the jaws of a powerful shark, or face a final written completely in Swahili. At that moment, I would gladly have taken on either the shark or the Swahili rather than pick out a melon in front of my grandfather and the condescending vendor. As I watched warily, Oily Vendor picked up a melon from the side of the table, tapping it with the edge of a dirt-crusted fingernail. “How about this one?”

The thought flashed through my mind that high schools should offer more pragmatic courses such as “AP Fruit Market Transactions.” Bereft of the knowledge of how exactly to choose a melon, I gripped the fruit awkwardly between my two palms and half tapped, half patted the sides in the universal “I don't know what I'm doing” motion. At that moment, my grandfather sidled up to me and whispered, “Tell him it's overripe.” Quaking inwardly, I mustered up a passable native Chinese accent and accused the vendor of trying to cheat me out of my money.

A quick flash of surprise jolted through his face before the mask of confidence slipped back into place, but in that flash, I had gleaned at least one moment of triumph. It was a triumph that had only been achieved through the intermediary of a knowledgeable grandfather, as he and I both knew, but at least it had allowed me to recover some of my dignity and pride. With haughty disdain, I thrust the melon back at the vendor and awkwardly marched away (no easy feat in heels). It was impossible to orchestrate a graceful exit, but I consoled myself with the fact that at least no one laughed.

The moment I arrived back at the apartment, the unfortunate heels were pried from my sore feet and promptly tossed in the garbage can. The sequined top, which still bore the intermingling smells of sweat and fish, followed quickly after. The longing to scrub away the memory of that morning from every inch of my skin nearly overpowered me as I made a mad sprint for the shower. But just as I was about to lock myself inside a steamy cleanse of ignorance and bliss, my grandfather's voice permeated the haze. “Do you want to go again tomorrow?”

Hesitation. “Yes,” I finally replied, and then clicked the door shut.