ESSAY

Predestined Relationships

by Karolina Pawlik



"en el metro" by Angelica Atzin Garcia

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If someone was watching, they would only see an elderly Chinese man, waving after two foreign women as they disappear into the distance. One of the women suddenly turns back, and the man points two fingers at his eyes to indicate that he is seeing them off.

My parents taught me that if you are seeing someone off at the airport or railway station, you should stand still until that person, or their vehicle, disappears entirely from sight. This ensures a smooth journey for the traveler. I don't remember anyone ever seeing me off so tenderly in Shanghai.

In September 2020, my father stood at the platform of Katowice Railway Station until the last lights of the train, on which I began my long-awaited return to Shanghai after an eight-month Covid exile, disappeared around the corner. I have no doubt that he stood there quietly, not knowing when he would see me again. Perhaps he was thinking of how his own parents had watched him depart from that same platform so many times, back when he left his hometown for Moscow again and again, where he went to study Chinese. Maybe he was also fondly thinking of his Aunt Hyjdla, whose house on the outskirts of Szopienice sat next to the railroad tracks, who would stand in her garden each time he rode the train through Warsaw to Moscow between 1975 and 1985. Standing there, with her little dog called Mi? (Teddy Bear) in her arms, she would wave to my father and he would lean out of the train window to wave back with both hands.

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If someone was watching, they would not see the end of a world. Even the tiny tear on the elderly man's eyelashes would likely go unnoticed — just like the entire ritual of urban mourning conducted in that laneway with care and patience earlier in the afternoon.

The man is already outside his doorway. He intends to walk away with the last plant he is rescuing from his vanishing home but, upon seeing us, he initiates a conversation. He then takes out his key and invites my friend and me inside his soon-to-be former home. "Look, this is an old *shikumen* house," he says, as if simply introducing local architecture to two foreign visitors, but he truly must mean: *Let's honor this home once more, before it perishes.* Or maybe: *Let's pay a quiet tribute to this place, which I sustained and which has nurtured me for all these years.*

We stand in solemn silence. A single deserted room, partly partitioned to add extra storage space above the bed, with a kitchen in the back. A toilet and sink have been recently added, but there is no bath or shower.

He says this must be *yuanfen* that two foreign women would visit on the day of his final departure, the day he is forced to leave the home in which he spent his entire life. He says he

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lived in this house when he went to school and when he became a teacher himself. First, he taught Russian but, after “the friendship with the Soviet Union ended”, he switched to political science.

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Before that friendship ended, my Russian grandmother was given an ornate tin, containing Chun Mee and Keemun tea. It was decorated with flowers and Chinese longevity patterns, two landscape drawings, and a Chinese slogan, calling for the faster construction of the motherland. She taught Russian to international students in Moscow at ???????????, the D. Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology of Russia. Her Chinese exchange students brought her the tea as a gift, to congratulate her on the birth of her daughter.

“She is so beautiful — she looks just like our Great Chairman Mao!” they exclaimed with absolute delight. They knew my grandmother had been hoping for a son after her beloved eldest son had died in a tragic accident, and to comfort her they promised, “Born on August 28th 1958 — with so many eights in her birth date, your daughter will be a very happy woman.” Two students from Shanghai also insisted that having a girl could be seen as a blessing: One day, she could marry a Shanghainese man who would take good care of her and do all the housework.

My mother did not marry a Shanghainese man but she did end up in Shanghai. She married a Polish man whom she met at a Chinese film screening in Moscow, which she attended in place of her best friend. That friend, who studied sinology and grew up for a time near the corner of Huaihai Lu and Donghu Lu in Shanghai, was unable to attend that night and, in order to keep an earlier promise she had made to pass something on to this young Polish man, she asked my mother to go instead of her. In 1995, my father’s job brought the entire family to Shanghai and, by another stroke of *yuanfen*, we spent our first weeks in the Donghu Hotel, near the corner of Huaihai Lu and Donghu Lu.

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I feel myself becoming attached to this man but our conversation is interrupted by a stranger who enters the apartment uninvited, just “to have a look.” My friend nudges me to leave, perhaps foreseeing the trouble that ensues as the two men begin to quarrel. We say goodbye to the kind, elderly man and leave.

We continue down lanes that wander in no strict pattern. A pop-up “antique stand” with treasures rescued from the piles of garbage discarded by evicted residents holds a copy of a journal from 1972 — the Spanish edition of *China Pictorial*. I hold my breath and quickly check the editorial footer to make sure that this is indeed the journal “published monthly in

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Chinese, Korean, Russian, English, German, French, Japanese, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Hindi, Spanish, Arabic, Swedish, Swahili, Italian and Urdu." In other words, I make sure that this is the journal which my mother remembers from her teenage years in Mwanza, where she lived for three years in the early 1970s while her father supervised a UNESCO education project devoted to the elimination of adult illiteracy.

My mother likes to recall a specific memory from that time when, during the long lunch break of the Holy Family School she attended, she would go with her friends to buy small treats. Secretly, she indulged against the will of her mother, who was greatly concerned by the safety of street food. Under the limbs of a mango tree, Indian women sold sweets to children from the three nearby schools. Jalebi, sesame balls, tamarind and mango sprinkled with chili; all wrapped in pages torn out from *China Katika Picha*, the Swahili edition of *China Pictorial*. At their feet, the vendors used more of the pages to cover the ground on which the delicacies were displayed. Pupils also used pages from the journals to cover their school books and notebooks — some were quite creative and selected photographs to match the subject: a beautiful landscape for geography, an animal for biology, a photo of a scientific experiment for chemistry.

I am desperate to buy the journal but I can't see the vendor. My friend and I decide to take a detour instead, to wander aimlessly for a bit longer, then return in a while for the transaction.

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Before long, with the purchased journal in my backpack, we leave the *lilong* through one of the gates, near the corner of Xingjiaqiao Bei Lu and Hailun Lu.

"This is *yuanfen*!" A cry filled with the greatest joy reaches us. The same elderly man rushes towards us from the opposite side of the street, where he just completed the paperwork required to claim increased financial compensation due to his age, 84. "This really is *yuanfen* ! I was looking for you around the entire *lilong*. I was so sad. I kept asking whether anyone had seen you, but people kept telling me you had already left. And suddenly I see you here again!" He is so moved by our reunion that I also begin to find myself deeply touched, truly grateful that our paths cross once more. "I wanted to find you because I forgot to tell you in Russian, ????????, ?? ????????." Comrades, goodbye.

Under the winter sun, he stands with his hands on his hips, straightening his back against the will of a spine that bends in old age. This is the posture of someone trying to appear strong one more time even though a lifetime of strength has not brought enough reward.

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“This is *yuanfen*. To meet two foreign women, and twice on this day! I will always remember it. It makes me feel a bit better.” Across his body, the strap of a solid leather bag pulls on the slightly worn collar of his checked shirt. He is wearing thick slippers, a kind which elderly Shanghainese people often wear as winter shoes.

I am happy to stand there with him, to extend this moment before this part of his life comes to an end. I watch as he attempts to adjust the balance of this bitter afternoon before returning to his son’s house in Minhang district. Though nobody had bothered to accompany him on such a difficult day, he did not end up alone — we are two witnesses to his melancholy and displacement.

To make sure we know how beautiful Shanyin Lu is and confirm that we have visited Duolun Lu, he mentions how many intellectuals lived in the area, “including Lu Xun *xiansheng*!” We do not reveal that I myself live in Shanyin Lu, a secret that remains as we let him lead us through memories of nearby streets.

“Is there anything you would like to know? Maybe I can tell you.” We are silent for a while, and a gap forms between us. I try to think of a question, any question, to offer him the pleasure of answering but I am losing focus. Instead, we tell him that we have both lived in Shanghai for a long time and that my former *lilong* community in Furui Xiaoqu in Xinzha Lu was displaced as well in January 2021. I still fail to find the right words to talk about that abrupt experience of losing my beloved home and getting separated from people with whom we belonged so organically to the narrow laneways.

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Pointing to the crossroad, the man tells us to cross it and continue for a while before turning left until we reach a newly renovated *lilong*. I am suspicious this may be the preposterous redevelopment with LED neon sloths on the trees at the entrance but we allow him one last chance to provide directions in the district he knows so well.

He speaks and at the same time demonstrates the walk. His movements match the rhythm of the words, *zou yi zou, zou yi zou*, a steady, soft pace. Though he does not move forward, I am sure that if he closed his eyes, he could walk the exact number of steps required to get him to the destination. After all these years, his body surely remembers how long it takes to get to the bridge and then to the crossroad where we will turn left. He traces the name, Wujin Lu, in characters on his open palm — twice, to make sure there is no misunderstanding.

Now it really is time for us to part.

“I hope you can slowly get used to the new place.” I try to sound reassuring, hopeful. His voice breaks in response, “I will not get used to it. I have lived here all my life. How can I

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get used to a new place? For old people, it is so difficult to change habits and places." We have a saying in Polish: Old trees should not be replanted. I do not dare mention it.

"Goodbye then," we say together, turning to follow his directions. "????????, ?? ????????!" he announces. "?? ????????. ????? ????????." Goodbye. All the best.

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