Soft Burial: An Exploration of History, Memory, and Trauma in Contemporary Chinese Literature

Megan Elizabeth Halm
Bard College, mh4947@bard.edu

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Soft Burial: An Exploration of History, Memory, and Trauma in Contemporary Chinese Literature

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Megan Halm

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To anyone who struggles with their trauma and their past, may you find peace, and not remain “soft buried” for long.
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Pronunciation Guide

The romanization of Chinese characters’ names and place names are spelled according to the current official romanization system, Pinyin, with the exception of some words, such as “Mahjong”, where alternative spellings are more commonly used in the West. Below is a list of consonants which are pronounced very differently from in English.

q = ch (Thus, the name “Qinglin” is pronounced like “chinglin”)

x = sh (Thus, “Xiao Cha” is pronounced like “shiao cha”)

z = ds (Thus, the “Zi” in “Zitao” is pronounced like “dsuh,” “ding dsuh-tao”)

zh = j (Thus, “Long Zhongyong” is pronounced like “long jongyong”)

The author’s name, Fang Fang, is not pronounced like the English word for “fang” as in the tooth, but the a has a longer sound, like “ah,” “fahng fahng.”
Introduction

Fang Fang’s *Soft Burial* is a significant work of Chinese literature because it shows different perspectives on trauma and history in China. The term “soft burial” means to be buried without a coffin or a funeral, forgoing traditional burial practices. It is believed that without a proper burial, the souls of the dead will wander on Earth without being put to rest properly. There is a Chinese idiom which shows the importance of a proper burial, 盖棺定论. This idiom means don’t pass judgement on someone’s life until the lid is on the coffin and their life reaches a conclusion. If there is no coffin in a burial, then there is no definitive conclusion to a person’s life.

The main struggle in the book is with the main character coming to terms with his mother’s traumatic past, figuring out how much of it he should know, and the impact of this information on him. This book is important because it was banned in China, thus being “soft buried” like the title. This book first achieved great success in China, and won the Lu Yao literature award in 2016. However, it was criticized by extreme Maoists who claimed that the novel was offensive because it was perceived as being sympathetic to the landlord class. It was banned by the Chinese government in May 2017. This book was originally published by People’s Literature Publishing House, which to give an idea of its impact, is the same company that published Harry Potter in China. A PDF copy of the book was circulated online, although the government is still censoring it. Chinese social media users have seen their comments on the book’s contents deleted, in a way being “soft buried.” This book deals with many different themes, including trauma, memory and amnesia (both national and personal), individual
reactions to traumatic historical events, and finding the truth. Fang Fang withholds judgement on these reactions to trauma and lets the reader come to their own conclusions. This book also provides a gendered perspective into these themes and gives background on life as a woman in a landlord family’s household and then becoming a working-class woman. All this is written by a female author and much of the book centers around a female character and her struggle with her past.

Fang Fang’s story focuses on the main character Ding Zitao who is originally from a landlord family and survives the Land Reform movement. She is pulled from a river and has total amnesia. Throughout the rest of her life, she refuses to try and remember, but her memories show through. Her son, Qinglin, learns more about her past and has to grapple with her trauma. The most important theme of this book is how the individual deals with traumatic memories. From the beginning of the novel, the reader knows that Ding Zitao has amnesia, and it is clear that she has suffered some form of trauma. Then, the author slowly lets us into what that trauma is. As we learn about her trauma, her son, Qinglin, is also learning about her past through his father’s diaries, and eventually in her marital village. The written structure of the book mirrors the way in which an individual deals with memories of trauma. After Ding Zitao’s memories get triggered in Qinglin’s new house, she starts remembering her past before her amnesia. The way the memories appear is non-sequential, coming forth one episode at a time. These memories are triggered not by her husband telling her to try remembering, but by experiencing the luxurious home that Qinglin built that reminds her of her past landlord life. The reader begins to make sense of who she is by reading an episode at a time and finally they see the full picture. But in
the end, the full picture leaves out some details, and the reader is left wanting to know more about what Ding Zitao went through.

The way Ding Zitao deals with her memories is to refrain from trying to remember and acknowledge them. This is like Qinglin’s attitude when he is looking into her past. To the individual, learning about your trauma or your family’s trauma is an extremely painful and personal thing. It is much different than learning about a past historical event that you yourself did not live through. Ding Zitao’s amnesia is similar to a sort of national amnesia which is the way the government deals with certain historical events. For example, the Chinese government will not allow conversation about the horrors that occurred in the Cultural Revolution, including the Land Reform Movement. This repressing of trauma and individual struggles comes with consequences. But what if the individual’s trauma is too personal and devastating to face? What if they cannot live as normal when they remember their trauma?

This leads into the concept of a “soft burial,” what it means both literally and in terms of memory. A “soft burial” in the literal sense is a burial that is not done properly, that is done without coffins or ceremony. It is believed that in this sort of burial, the individual’s soul is not put to rest and does not move on to the afterlife, and their souls haunt the mortal realm. A similar thing happens when traumatic memories are not processed properly. They will not be fully buried and they will come back to haunt you. At first, the reader does not know what a “soft burial” refers to. Ding Zitao shouts it at the scene of Dr. Wu’s death, but she doesn’t even remember what it means. Over time, through Ding Zitao’s flashbacks and Qinglin’s interviews with the locals, it is revealed to the reader what a “soft burial” is. The way that this reveals itself to the
reader is a good choice on the author’s part because it keeps the reader engaged, and this way of slowly revealing the truth is like what happens when traumatic memories resurface.

The structure of this book is somewhat complex, with lots of jumps between time and changing from the perspectives of different characters. The story begins with present-day Ding Zitao. The story goes through her memories from after her amnesia to the point where she starts remembering again. The story then turns to present-day Liu Jinyuan, a veteran of the bandit-squashing efforts of Eastern Sichuan, and his connections to Ding Zitao’s life. Then, the story focuses more on Ding Zitao’s son, Qinglin, and the search for his mother’s past. Throughout this, we are given glimpses into Ding Zitao’s past through her perspective as she begins a Dantesian descent into Hell as her past self, Hu Daiyun. When Qinglin discovers his father’s diaries, he is given a look into his father’s past, and sees his mother’s life from his perspective. Then Qinglin goes to visit his mother’s marital home. Then there is a brief moment where the elderly villagers are telling their side of the story. The story ends from Qinglin’s perspective after his mother’s death as he comes to terms with her past. The way the story presents itself is interesting because as Qinglin is finding things out about his mother’s past, the reader knows more than he does, but in the end it is frustrating how he does not follow through and learn her whole story. The story is told through many different perspectives which leaves the reader to put the pieces together. This structure shows how Fang Fang sees history, which is that history is really many fragmented episodes put together and many different perspectives used to tell a story.
Historical Context

Before reading, it might be helpful to explain some historical context. The Chinese Land Reform Movement was a movement led by Mao Zedong and the Communist Party to redistribute wealth. The peasant class killed landlords and redistributed their land. This campaign started in the late stages of the Chinese Civil War. The death count ranged from hundreds of thousands to millions. The landlord class was largely eliminated in Mainland China. Peasants would carry out “struggle sessions” where they would criticize landlords and others who did not adhere to the party teachings. Their land and belongings were confiscated and redistributed. Then after their wealth was redistributed, communes were established. In the official discourse of the Land Reform Movement, the peasant class was able to achieve justice and destroy the landlord class with the help of Communist Party leaders. It seems like this was a very positive movement and the official history glosses over the extreme indiscriminate violence and suffering that it caused in the name of justice. The official discourse contrasts with what Fang Fang is writing about in her novel, which offers a new perspective on the senseless violence and suffering the Land Reform Movement caused.

Near the end of the Chinese Civil War, there were bandits and guerrilla fighters that were left over from the Nationalist Party. The civil war was between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party. The Communist Party started a campaign to suppress the bandits. This is the campaign that Liu Jinyuan was a part of. The Communists eventually prevailed. It was difficult fighting the bandits because they hid in the mountains and this was challenging terrain for the Communists to fight in. The local landlords would help the Communist party fight the bandits, which is why later in the story, the Lu family is at first pardoned from being targeted in the Land
Reform. But later on, as things got more and more violent with Jindian seeking revenge, they were persecuted. Jindian had left his hometown and joined the Communist Party. He became a party representative when he came back to his hometown and was able to exact his revenge on those who had mistreated him. The peasants originally had no basis on which to persecute the Lu family but with Jindian’s orders, they had to eliminate them.

It is known that the Chinese government controls narratives about its history and events that were devastating, such as the Great Leap Forward, are not portrayed accurately. This could be why Long Zhongyong hadn’t heard of the Land Reform before, and furthermore, the book he is trying to write about it might not even be accepted by the government. This reminds me of the numerous interviews and records of Holocaust survivors, enslaved people of the US, and other survivors of human rights transgressions. Historians have put so much effort into preserving these histories and making sure they are remembered so future generations can learn from the past. This seems like a healthier, more secure way of telling history. But some governments want to suppress these tragedies rather than own up to them or face them. When this happens, we may lose important information about these histories. However, like with personal memory and trauma, these traumatic events will not stay repressed forever and will show through in some way or another. I think back to the elderly villagers that Qinglin and Long Zhongyong asked about the Lu family. Witnesses to the land reform and Cultural Revolution aren’t getting any younger. Should their experiences be recorded even though it is painful?
Plot Summary

The story first introduces us to the character Ding Zitao who cannot remember anything before the spring of 1952. She was rescued from a river in Eastern Sichuan by Dr. Wu and after she was rescued she was screaming “Tingzi.” After recovering, Ding Zitao went to work as a housekeeper for Commissar Liu and his wife Mrs. Peng and their children. One of the children in this family will later be revealed to be Ding Zitao’s son’s boss. She met Dr. Wu again at Commissar Liu’s house and heard that his wife had died, and then Ding Zitao married Dr. Wu. They have a son, Qinglin. A few years later, Dr. Wu is killed in a traffic accident. When Ding Zitao arrives at the scene of the crash, she says she doesn’t want a “soft burial,” but she doesn’t know what this means. Her son has a successful career and one day, he takes her to her new home which is a sprawling villa. She asks if they are in Ju Tolerance Hut or Three Knowledge Hall. Some of Ding Zitao’s memories of her previous life come back, triggered by the villa. Qinglin leaves for a short business trip before she goes to bed. As she falls asleep, she feels herself spiraling into a black abyss and calls out for someone named Lu Zhongwen. After this she lives in a catatonic state, but in her mind she is climbing the stairs into Hell and remembering more about her past life.

We are introduced to Liu Jinyuan, a veteran from Sichuan whose son, Liu Xiaochuan, is actually Qinglin’s boss. This is the same Commissar Liu that Ding Zitao worked for earlier. The story then switches to Qinglin’s perspective. He returns home from his trip and finds that Ding Zitao is unable to speak. In moving Ding Zitao’s belongings over to her new house, Qinglin discovers a suitcase full of his father’s old diaries from 1948 to 1966, but he is too scared to read them.
We then go back to Ding Zitao’s perspective as she is reliving certain episodes in her past as a daughter of a landlord family named Hu Daiyun. Her husband was Lu Zhongwen and her son was Tingzi. Her memories start with her on a boat with her son and Futong, a servant from her in-laws’ family. Futong is in love with Xiaocha, Daiyun’s personal servant from her natal home. Futong was an orphan who was raised by the Lu family, as was another orphan named Jindian. The Lu family is dead at this point, and Daiyun tells Futong that Xiaocha is dead, too. Futong leaps into the water and the boat capsizes, and all Daiyun can think about is her son, Tingzi. Then, her memory jumps back to running towards the water to meet Futong on the boat. She starts remembering things from her natal home. Her father was a member of the elite and the name of her natal home was called the Hut of Tolerance.

Back in the present, Qinglin is in Jiangxia because his company bought land to develop there. He meets up with his old friend, Long Zhongyong, who is a teacher in the area. They see an old landlord house and Qinglin sees the name of the Hut of Tolerance. Because of a last minute change of plans, Qinglin has to look after Liu Jinyuan, his boss’s father. They meet up in Wanzhou. Liu Jinyuan talks a lot about the war and how he fought bandits. Liu Jinyuan visits an old friend he fought bandits with so he can help prove to the Communist Party that his friend fought for them and was not a bandit. The men share stories about a man named Hu Lingyun, who is the brother of Hu Daiyun, or Ding Zitao. He was killed on his way home after finding out his parents were being struggled. Qinglin also finds out that the books belonging to the Hu family were stamped with “the Hut of Tolerance,” the name of their estate.

Shifting back to Ding Zitao’s memory, she recalls burying her in-laws. After burying the family, she takes Tingzi and meets Futong on the boat. Then we learn that the Lu family had
planned the burial, poisoned themselves, and dug their own graves because they would rather die than face ridicule from the peasants. They were buried without any coffins, which is the definition of a soft burial. Daiyun and Tingzi are chosen to live to continue the family line and after that they will meet Lu Zhongwen who is in Shanghai.

Going back further into her memory, we learn that the servant Jindian is the reason the Lu family faced ridicule. Jindian was raised by the Lu family, but their families have a complicated background. The Lu family wanted to build an ancestral hall on Jindian’s father’s property, but his father wouldn’t sell his land. Jindian’s mother was in labor and needed one of the Lu family wagons to get to the hospital. Jindian’s father was forced to sign over the land to use the wagon but his wife died in childbirth. A few years later, a boy came to the Lu family with a note saying that he was the son of the man whose property they bought and that his father had died and that the Lu family should raise him to settle the feud. This boy was Jindian.

Back in the present, Liu Jinyuan returns home and is injured while meeting up with his friend Lao Qi. Lao Qi brings him home and learns that Liu Jinyuan’s Dr. Wu is actually Lao Qi’s cousin, who Lao Qi knew as Dr. Dong. Liu Jinyuan dies without learning about Dr. Wu’s past. Then, back to Ding Zitao’s memory, she is making plans for the family suicide and is upset since she will be the only one left living. Her brother was beaten to death on the road and her mother attempted suicide and her natal family was set to be at a struggle session.

During the Spring New Year festival, Qinglin reads his father’s diaries which start from July of 1948. Dr. Wu’s family were all killed for being landlords and Qinglin is shocked to hear about his father’s past life. His father ends up being rescued in the woods by a man with the last name Wu, and he takes his name. He eventually joins the army. When his father mentions Liu
Jinyuan, Qinglin starts realizing who he is and puts it together. Dr. Wu started working for the women’s battalion and writes about Liu Jinyuan and Mrs. Peng, who will become the couple Ding Zitao worked for. Mrs. Peng’s best friend is Xiao Yan, who became Dr. Wu’s first wife. Dr. Wu then writes about rescuing Ding Zitao from the river and her amnesia. In the hospital it was immediately assumed she was a laborer, but Dr. Wu knew by the smoothness of her hands that she was not a member of the working class. If her true identity as a member of the landlord class was revealed, this would put her in trouble. Dr. Wu’s wife fell ill and died, and Dr. Wu later meets Ding Zitao at Commissar Liu’s house and they get married. She gave birth to a son, and Dr. Wu doesn’t want his son to look into his family’s past and he just wants him to have a calm and comfortable life. Dr. Wu also writes about telling Ding Zitao about Our Lady of Lourdes and how Mary was untouched by sin.

Then, Dr. Wu writes about how the revolution is getting more and more violent and he has to put his diaries away because it is too risky. Later, in 1968, Dr. Wu wrote directly to Qinglin. He tells him that he does not have any family on his father’s side, but that he should look for the family on his mother’s side. He also encourages him to not start his search until after his mother’s death. Lastly, Dr. Wu writes that if he finds out events that are too terrible, he can give up his search. He just wants Qinglin to live a calm and comfortable life, and that forgetting can allow you to move on and have a peaceful life. Qinglin decides to look into his mother’s past and makes a plan for how to do so.

Back in Ding Zitao’s memory, she recalls her family’s struggle session. At the struggle session, Daiyun denounced her parents and was accepted by the revolutionaries. On her way home from the struggle session, she was beaten with a gun by Jindian. Going back further in
time, Daiyun’s parents came up with a plan for the struggle session. Daiyun would denounce them and then find her brother in the city.

Back in the present day, Qinglin meets up with the Liu brothers and tells them about his father’s diaries. He wants to look into his mother’s past and mentions how she was educated and probably a member of the landlord class. Qinglin meets up with his old friend Long Zhongyong and they travel to Eastern Sichuan. Long Zhongyong was actually working on a book about how the manors and estates of the South suddenly became empty. They don’t have any luck finding the Hut of Tolerance or the river Ding Zitao was rescued from, but they get a tip to visit a ghost mansion. This ghost mansion is the Hall of Three Wisoms where the Lu family is buried. They find the village head named Lu Huanxi. Lu Huanxi says that in the mansion there are ghosts that say “soft burial” at night. He mentions that the old people in the village say that they are “soft buried” which means that they didn’t have a proper burial with a coffin and are unable to move into the afterlife. Qinglin remembers when his father died, his mother said she didn’t want him to be soft buried, and this makes him curious.

They visit the mansion and hear that a crazy old man lives there who is actually Futong. Lu Huanxi says the Lu family killed themselves before a struggle session and they were buried in their home, but the peasants didn’t want to live there after that. Qinglin wonders who buried them. There were only one entrance to the mansion, the main gate, so nobody would have been able to leave the mansion through the main gate after the burial and close the gate behind them. Lu Huanxi tells them that when Futong returned, he was able to save Xiaocha from the ground, but she didn’t want to be with him anymore and ran off to become a nun. Qinglin asks Futong if he recognizes his mother, but he doesn’t say anything and runs away, although it is clear from his
expression that he knew her. They leave and go to Huanxi’s house where members of the village are there to answer their questions.

The villagers tell them how two Lu brothers came from America to sacrifice to their ancestors. They tell how the villagers didn’t want to target the Lu family, but because of Jindian’s grudge, he convinced them that the Lu family’s land needed to be redistributed. The villagers then say that when the Lu brothers returned to their hometown, they didn’t want to re-bury their family because it was their decision to die like this. As they left, they said they wanted to cut themselves off from the village completely.

Back in Ding Zitao’s memory, the villagers signed an agreement to not redistribute the Lu family’s wealth. Daiyun doesn’t understand why the villagers in her natal home can’t do the same to her family, but her family was not as respected by the villagers. At the final step towards Hell, Daiyun is riding in a wagon with Jindian and Xiaocha. She had just come from the hospital and learned she is pregnant. Daiyun told Jindian about his family’s past with the Lus and the next day he ran away.

The next day, Qinglin and Long Zhongyong are back at the Lu mansion. They find a hidden passage that opens up to the back of the house near the river where Ding Zitao was rescued. Long Zhongyong is curious about it, but Qinglin doesn’t want to go any further into it. Qinglin decides to leave the village and not pursue his mother’s history any further. Qinglin gets a call that his mother is speaking again and when he comes home, she just says “I don’t want a soft burial.” Qinglin knows this means that she is dying. After she dies, Qinglin has her cremated, but he buys a coffin to put her in before she is cremated to honor his mother’s wishes. A few months later, Qinglin is going to Hubei to work on another project with his company and
asks Long Zhongyong to join him. Long Zhongyong tells him that he is back in Eastern Sichuan working on his book and he talked to Futong who told him the temple where Xiaocha was. This could have helped Qinglin find out his mother’s past but he chose not to follow the lead.

**Analysis**

One of the interesting points in the story is the relationship between Ding Zitao and her husband, Dr. Wu. At the beginning of the story, Dr. Wu invites suspicion from the reader. The way he tells Ding Zitao to not remember her traumatic past and just move on is troubling. Ding Zitao was in a very vulnerable place because she had no memory of life before being rescued and she had no family. She had no one to rely on but Dr. Wu. Dr. Wu saved her and he was in a position of power over her, especially once they got married. At first it seemed to me that Dr. Wu was manipulating and controlling her. If she had been encouraged to think back and work through her memories, maybe she would have started to recover. But Dr. Wu chose to protect her instead and she never got better. This shows how Dr. Wu deals with his trauma by forgetting and not looking back, and he enforced this with Ding Zitao. In a way, her memories were “soft buried.” There are signs of her past life such as her literacy and her embroidery skill, but at this time these things could be dangerous since they show that she isn’t a member of the working class; in fact, she was a member of the landlord class.

It isn’t until her son becomes successful and they move into a villa that her memories are triggered. She can recite poetry and recognize paintings which proves that she had an educated background. Finally, she starts saying the names of her natal home, marital home, and the name of her former servant. She also feels pain from being hit with a gun after the struggle session.
Then, her condition worsens and she doesn’t speak again until her death. If she had tried to think back and dealt with her trauma before, would she have had a better chance at recovery? She would have had to deal with the uncomfortableness of remembering her trauma, but she would have led a healthier life. However, Dr. Wu wanted to protect her and make her life calm and comfortable, so he didn't encourage her.

Later on, when Qinglin reads his father’s diaries, he learns about how his father knew his mother was of the landlord class and tried to protect her from her past. At this time, the upper classes were being criticized and their wealth redistributed. We learn from his diaries that Dr. Wu’s family were landlords and they were all killed. Dr. Wu doesn’t have a family anymore and ends up being rescued himself by a man named Mr. Wu who lives in the mountains and practices herbal medicine. This Mr. Wu must have had suspicions about Dr. Wu’s background, but he treated him like a son in order to save him. Dr. Wu and Mr. Wu also rescue Liu Jinyuan who is in the army working against the bandits. In the area of Eastern Sichuan, the bandits were left over Nationalist troops from the civil war between Communists and Nationalists who did not flee to Taiwan. Liu Jinyuan isn’t getting better with Mr. Wu so he is sent to the city hospital. Dr. Wu chooses to go with him and changes his name to Wu Jiaming. This new name is interesting because in Mandarin Chinese, the surname “Wu” is a homonym for “without,” “Jia” means home, and “Ming” means name. In this way, Dr. Wu is saying that he is without a home or a name. By doing this, he consciously sheds all ties with his previous life.

One part that was initially confusing was how Dr. Wu told Ding Zitao about how the Virgin Mary was free from “original sin.” He tells her this in front of a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, which is a vision of Mary in Lourdes, France. At first it makes no sense to the reader
why he is telling her this, but it makes sense once Qinglin reads Dr. Wu’s diary and learns about his past. He was trying to protect her by saying this. In Christianity, the “Virgin” in the name “Virgin Mary” does not refer to her abstaining from sex and being impregnated with the son of God, but it actually refers to the fact that she was born without being affected by the original sin. The original sin refers to the story in Genesis of Adam and Eve betraying God in the Garden of Eden when they ate a fruit after being tempted by the Devil. This is where the belief in Christianity comes from that humans are naturally sinful, but can have their sins forgiven by God and they can live again in Heaven after they die.

What Dr. Wu is trying to explain to Ding Zitao is that they are free from the “sins” of their past, of being from the landlord class, and they can move on with their lives. Ding Zitao doesn’t remember her past, but she is afraid because she thinks Dr. Wu is insinuating that terrible things happened in her past. She and Dr. Wu were both ostracized by the peasants during the land reform, but now they have closed the door on that aspect of their past and are starting fresh, untouched by their sins. When first reading this story from Ding Zitao’s point of view without any background it is confusing, but after learning about Dr. Wu’s past and his way of protecting Ding Zitao, it makes sense what he is trying to tell her. Dr. Wu deals with his traumatic past by forgetting it and he wants Ding Zitao to do the same.

Dr. Wu and Ding Zitao have similar backgrounds and faced similar struggles. They both lost their entire families and have no identity and no sense of self. It makes the most sense to them to start over fresh and leave the past behind. However, from an outsider’s perspective, forcing yourself to forget your trauma is not the healthy way to deal with it. Dr. Wu’s motivation was to protect Ding Zitao and while his intentions were good, he may have not made the right
choice for her. Later in his diary, while he did encourage Qinglin to look into his mother’s past, he said that the most important thing was to have a calm and comfortable life. But what about the bigger picture? Should Qinglin have given up his calm and comfortable life to look into his mother’s past? If he could claim a connection to the Lu family, could he relocate their graves and finally put their souls to rest? Is hiding from the truth to protect yourself from painful trauma a good idea? With Qinglin’s decision to keep his mother’s history buried, Fang Fang leaves the rest of the story undiscovered to the reader. Because as long as people try to hide the past, future generations will never know it, and we cannot learn from it. But as long as they are “soft buried,” parts of it still will come through.

This dilemma reminds me of the part of the movie The Matrix, where the main character has to choose between a “blue pill” that keeps you ignorant or a “red pill” that exposes you to the truth no matter how harsh it is and you have to deal with the consequences. Some people may be tempted to live in ignorance, never finding out what could possibly hurt them. But other people are willing to get hurt by the truth and don’t want to be living a lie. Qinglin chose the easier path by choosing to remain ignorant and this is disappointing to the reader. Long Zhongyong chose to seek out the truth and approached the past from an academic perspective, however this trauma does not directly hurt him.

There is a common theme in the novel about people turning their backs on their pasts. The decision of the Lu brothers to cut off their roots is very similar to what Qinglin chooses to do at the end of the novel. They both choose to turn their backs on their pasts. Lu Zhongwen wanted to respect his father’s decision to die by suicide and be soft buried, so he didn’t want to re-bury them. However, if he had at least re-buried his family, in keeping with the traditions of
this region, their souls would finally be put to rest. Even after all the mourning he did he would not even let his family have a proper burial, which seems unfilial and disrespectful. The grief and shock was too overwhelming for him and he decided to turn his back on his family to live a more comfortable life. But did he owe it to his family to put them to rest before leaving his past behind?

Lu Zhongwen denouncing hometown was similar to what Dr. Wu had written in his diaries about his hometown. After his family is killed by the revolutionaries, he decides he no longer wants anything to do with his family or hometown ever again. This is his way of dealing with the past and his way of surviving. He knows that being a member of the landlord class, if his true identity is discovered, he could be in danger of ridicule from the peasants. He even joined the army which was fighting against Nationalist bandits. This means he was fighting for the Communist Party, the same people that wanted to eliminate the landlord class. We know that early on in the novel he was saying how people at his work had written a “big-character poster” about him, so maybe his true identity was coming through. If he hadn’t helped save Ding Zitao, she probably would have been exposed as a member of the landlord class, but he was the only one there who could recognize who she was.

But why did he insist Qinglin not look into his past? If his method of disassociating with his family was about survival, surely in the present day it was safe to be related to the landlord class? Perhaps this is part of the trauma of being associated with an ostracized class. He was trying to protect Qinglin from the horrors his family faced, just like he tried to protect Ding Zitao from her past. However, we know that closing off your past entirely isn’t a healthy way to deal
with the trauma. If Qinglin even knew the name of his father’s hometown, he may have been able to visit it and pay respects to his ancestors.

Ding Zitao’s way of closing off her past was not her choice. She suffered from amnesia after the boat capsized, but we know she must have gone through a traumatic event from the beginning of the novel. Even though she can’t remember the event at all, it still shows through. There are some moments of dissociation and fear that are telltale signs of trauma. Earlier in the novel, she compares her past to “demons” that she will always carry with her which makes it sound like terrible trauma. She can’t even try to remember her past because it is too painful for her. When Dr. Wu tries to get help for her fear, the psychiatrist encourages her to try and think about her past. However, Dr. Wu doesn’t force her to remember. When she does finally remember her past life, her memories put her in a catatonic state because she is processing them all at once. This way of remembering is triggered by Qinglin’s villa, and since it is unplanned, it is more difficult to manage the emotions she has when she is remembering.

The relationship between Qinglin and Long Zhongyong is an interesting one. In a way, they represent two ways of dealing with history. Long Zhongyong sees the horrible events of the past and is curious about them and wants to learn more. He sees history through the eyes of a historian, removed from the traumas of the past and looking at it through an academic lens. Qinglin, on the other hand, has parents that were directly affected by the trauma that occurred in the history Long Zhongyong is studying. Qinglin saw what the trauma did to his mother growing up and finally when her memories were triggered, she was unable to speak. This history is too personal to him and he cannot just look at it through an academic lens; this is history that had a direct impact on him and it hurts him to think about it. This is why his final decision is to not
discover the full truth about his mother’s past and listen to what his father told him through the
diaries. He just wanted to live a calm and comfortable life. Long Zhongyong is the kind of
person who wants to look into the history and wants to record it. However, he is far removed
from the history; he didn’t even know what the Land Reform Movement was. He probably didn’t
have any family that were affected by it. Qinglin’s mother was directly involved in it so he is too
close to the history to know all of it.

This book has an unsatisfying ending, and the reader is left wanting to know more. What
exactly happened to Tingzi? Was he killed in the river? Did Daiyun fall into the river or jump in
there willingly? What happened to Daiyun’s natal village and home? Why did Xiaocha choose to
reject Futong after he saved her, and become a nun? What ever happened to Long Zhongyong
and his book? However, this unsatisfying ending was the author’s intention. By leaving the
reader with so many questions, this highlights how ignoring the painful past and not recording
history leaves many things unknown.

The way Fang Fang wrote this story gradually exposed the reader to information about
Ding Zitao’s past. At the beginning of the story, the reader had many questions about Ding
Zitao’s past. As the story progressed, we were revealed more about her past. Qinglin met people
that were involved in his parents’ pasts such as Liu Jinyuan, Futong, and nearly Lao Qi, his
father’s cousin. As Qinglin gets closer and closer to discovering the truth about his mother’s past,
the reader is on edge seeing if he will put the pieces together. The reader wants to know the full
truth about Ding Zitao and they want Qinglin to see it, too. However in the end, Qinglin decides
that he cannot face the terrible events his mother was a part of and does not go searching for
more answers. Even when Long Zhongyong contacts him with information about Xiaocha’s whereabouts, he declines the opportunity to hear from his mother’s personal servant. This is a frustrating ending for the reader, but this is a more effective way to encourage the reader to face history straight on and not try and bury it. This ending gives the reader enough information to be curious about Ding Zitao’s past, but it doesn’t answer all of our questions. Even though Qinglin’s decision is disappointing, this is the best possible ending for this kind of story.

This book is written by a female author and is told primarily from a woman’s point of view. The story deals with many female characters and the problems they face. When the Lu family is planning their suicide, Daiyun is chosen to live to take Tingzi because she will continue on the family line. This case shows the importance of continuing the family line and the power that women held because of it. Daiyun was saved by her natal family and her in-laws. First, her parents were going to be in a struggle session and they convinced her to denounce them so she could live. In her in-law’s case, they all wanted to escape the humiliation of the struggle session, so they committed suicide. However, since they wanted to continue the family line, they had Daiyun escape with her baby and meet her husband. Even though Daiyun was married into the family and didn’t have much power, she had the power of producing the next generation of the Lu family, which enabled her to continue living.

It is interesting to learn about the women in the Lu family, especially the servants. There was one servant in particular named Ziping who died with the family. The servants did not have to kill themselves with the rest of the family because they would be emancipated in the revolution. Ziping was arranged to marry Lu Huanxi’s grandfather. Her sister was married to his
brother and she saw how bad that arrangement was, so she would rather have died than marry. When Lu Huanxi tells Qinglin about how Ziping chose to die with the family, he doesn’t understand why she would do that because she would have been accepted by the revolutionaries. However, Ziping saw this as an opportunity to escape what would have been a torturesome marriage, and she did not necessarily commit suicide to show her loyalty to the family.

Daiyun’s personal servant, Xiaocha, committed suicide out of loyalty to the family. It is confusing at first why she would have killed herself. Xiaocha and Futong were in love and Futong was staying alive in order to help Daiyun escape. Xiaocha and Futong could have had a happy life together. Xiaocha survives the suicide and Futong helps her escape from the grave. But when Xiaocha is rescued, she doesn’t want to be with him. She goes and joins a nunnery. The official discourse of the Communist Party was that servants were being abused by their masters and all servants yearned for freedom. However, Xiaocha grew up with Daiyun and they had a very close relationship. Even though Daiyun and Xiaocha were separated by class, they were like family, which goes against the view that servants hate their masters and shows how real life isn’t so black-and-white. The women in this story are interesting characters and it is always great to see women writing about women and it is especially empowering to see a woman author that writes so openly about sensitive issues.

Reason for Translating

I wanted to translate this book for my senior project at Bard College because it was censored in China. The book deals with interesting topics of forgetting and covering up history. I think it is an interesting topic that an American audience can relate to. It shows different
perspectives of how contemporary Chinese people view their history and their relationship with it and asks questions about the consequences of burying it. In US history, there have been many terrible, shameful events that would be easier to forget. The genocide of Native Americans and the American slave trade are just two of the major trespasses on human rights in our history. In recent years, there has been much conversation about how civil rights history has been portrayed to American students. One notable example is how in the Southeast, the Civil War is referred to as “The War of Northern Aggression.” Young children throughout the country are taught to celebrate Christopher Columbus, even though he and his crew raped and murdered many indigenous people.

This brings in the problem of revisionist history. As an American student, when I was younger, I was raised to see Christopher Columbus as a hero who “discovered” America. I was also raised to believe that the pilgrims came to America in search of religious freedom and coexisted with the Native Americans. Somewhere along the line, through discussions with friends and the spread of information on social media, I learned that this was not the case. In my high school history classes, we further learned about the nuances of the colonization of the Americas. While I don’t think elementary schoolers should have to learn the specifics of the consequences of colonization, at the very least the colonizers should not be portrayed as heroes in the classroom. Revisionist history is clearly a problem in the United States that is still being addressed today.

However in China, the problem is more serious than in the US. Many Westerners may have heard before that Chinese people do not learn about the Tiananmen Square massacre. This was the first example of Chinese censorship I remember learning about in school. While many
foreign nations condemned the massacre, the Chinese government wrote it out of their history. This has an impact on those who were born after the event, as they will not learn about the government killing student protestors. If you don’t learn about horrible historical events, your life may continue on as normal, and you will feel calm and happy. Ignorance is bliss. However, some people are in search of the truth, no matter how painful it is, and being lied to is a terrible thing. If an event is erased from history, this has an impact on the future generations who cannot learn from it.

Most recently, there is the case of the coronavirus which originated in Wuhan. While this is a terrible human rights crisis and we should abstain from politicizing the violence, it is clear that some governments are responding to the situation better than others. There has been speculation about the Chinese government underreporting the severity of the virus. Posts criticizing the government’s response to the virus have flooded social media, but they have been censored. In Western media, there are many questions raised about how the Chinese government has reported the number of cases and their motives for doing so. We know now that in the US it is difficult to get an exact count because there has been lack of access to testing kits, but some people propose that the Chinese government may have had other reasons for underreporting. The Chinese government silencing internet commenters has been especially troubling and is linked to the censorship of traumatic historical events. By erasing their comments, the government could be intending to erase this virus from their country’s history, or at least control the country’s narrative of it.

Fang Fang lives in the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak, but that hasn’t stopped her from writing. Fang Fang kept an online diary recording events that happened in her personal life
as well as general commentary on the situation at hand. Her work has faced a lot of criticism and has been censored at times. In the diary, there are moments where she criticizes the government’s handling of the virus which has drawn numerous online commenters to attack her. She calls for officials to resign and apologize. But despite the censorship, she has continued to find avenues to share her writing. It is important for her to record her experiences living in the closed-off city so people outside of the city and in the future can understand what is going on. Her writing makes observations and also raises questions, and her account will be important for historians in years to come.

While many Americans may be shocked by the Chinese censorship of history, it is naive to think that it does not happen in the US to some extent. Perhaps this book could encourage English-speakers to look closer at the way their history is presented to them, and question who is writing it, and why. This can be done differently in the US than in China, because Americans have certain rights protected such as freedom of speech and the ability to protest. Americans can openly criticize their government without legal repercussions. The issues of censorship in literature in the US deal with books being banned from certain schools or libraries in conservative areas, not the government outright banning the book in the entire country. And even when certain books are censored, there is much criticism about that decision.

More importantly, this book forces the reader to question their own relationship with history. As I was reading and hoping Qinglin would choose to find the full truth about his mother’s past, I thought about what I would do if I were in his situation. If my parents suffered horrible trauma in their pasts, would I want to find out about it? I know that the answer should be
yes, I will look into their history and trauma to find the truth even if it hurts me, but I don’t know exactly how I would feel in that situation.

This story has forced me to face my own views of history on a personal scale as well as a national one. It made me think about the way governments view history and what positive and negative impacts it can have in society. It has made me think about traumas my parents and ancestors went through and how I would react if I were to know exactly what they went through. It has made me think about the way we deal with trauma, how we deal with it in a healthy versus unhealthy way, and why we choose to hide from our pasts. It has made me question how far we should go to protect those we love in Dr. Wu’s relationship with Ding Zitao. It has made me think about how we should choose to save face when staring down the barrel of a gun. This story is impactful and is a work of literature that deserves to be carried over to many different languages and cultures.

Soft Burial by Fang Fang is a compelling, suspenseful, thought-provoking read. It is a significant work that has cultural and political impact in China and, I hope soon, internationally. After reading this book in Chinese, I was left with a lot of questions that I keep turning in my head, and I hope this translation will do the same to the English reader.
Soft Burial

by Fang Fang

Translated by Megan Halm
Ding Zitao climbs to the sixth floor. Walking is hard for her. Now she feels she deserves to fall into Hell. Why didn’t she dig a hole for herself in the garden? Why did she bury each and every one of the bodies with her own hands?
Chapter 1

1. Struggle with herself

   This woman always had a struggle with herself.

   She was already old. All of her skin softly sagged and was not even firm enough to form a wrinkle. Her face and neck were covered in thin marks. Because her skin was fair, these cuts did not seem to be randomly marked by the knife of time; instead they seemed to be drawn by a fine pen, one line after another gradually appearing. Her eyes were also extremely cloudy yet when they suddenly opened wide, you could see radiance shine out of them.

   She often stared into space as if thinking about something, as if she was bored in every possible way. It was because of this that sometimes passersby would curiously ask, “Miss, what are you thinking about?”

   When this happened she would stare blankly, look over at the passerby, and mutter a few unintelligible sentences. She didn’t know what she was saying. As a matter of fact, she didn’t even know what she was thinking. She only felt many strange things were desperately jumping out as if teasing her memory, yet she didn’t want to touch on those things for her entire life. She hopelessly resisted. Her resistance was like a huge airtight net holding a crowd of wild raging demons that might break through and come out at any time. Throughout her entire life she was always carrying these nets and wrestling with them.

   When her husband was alive, he once suggested that there was no harm in thinking. Perhaps if she could think up something it would make her feel at ease. She wanted to listen to him and really forced herself to calm down, exerting herself trying to remember. But almost
instantly, her whole body became fidgety as if countless sharp needles were pricking her ferociously and it seemed like her organs had split open. At moments like this, her pain, along with fatigue, made her almost unable to catch her breath.

She said to her husband despairingly, “Don’t force me. I can’t think. I feel like if I think, I’d deserve to die.” Her husband was scared. He was silent for a bit and then said to her, “In that case, just don’t think then. Try as hard as you can to give yourself something to do. Being busy can divert your train of thought.”

She trusted her husband’s words and was busy every day. Actually, she didn’t have a job. Her job was to do household chores. Every day she was busy cleaning until the house was spotless. Everyone that came over would say, “Your house is so clean.” Her husband was a doctor, and he was proud of her for this, too.

So, in this way, her life gradually became normal.

She was like this for many years. Each year was like another fine, tight membrane covering the things in the back of her memory layer by layer. One membrane each year, layer upon layer from thin to thick, they coagulated into a solid block and those few demons hidden deeply in her consciousness were completely sealed in.

But what were they? She had no idea.

Her amnesia began from the spring of 1952.

One day a long time after that, her husband came home from the hospital looking solemn. The “Cultural Revolution” has started, he said, and the hospital held meetings every day. Some people wrote a big-character poster criticizing him. They said that his history was problematic.

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1 Big-character posters were used during the Cultural Revolution as a tool of propaganda to expose people as class enemies using large written characters.
She was very nervous and didn’t know the implications of what her husband told her. But her husband suddenly said, “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you. You don’t need to recall your past as long as you live. Your biggest enemy isn’t someone from the outside. I’m afraid it’s the things you can’t remember. If people ask you about it, just say you don’t know anything, that’s all.”

She didn’t understand that this was her husband’s way of consoling her, but on the contrary, in her heart was a violent fit of palpitations. It was as if these mortal enemies that had hidden away and almost disappeared were under the control of her husband. What were they really? How can he know the things that I don’t even know? When she was thinking like this, she felt a breath assaulting her senses that made her feel afraid. This kind of fear accompanied her every second, day and night.

So she understood, in these many years, that this person she loved dearly was also someone she feared deeply.

Why? Why did she develop these feelings? She was perplexed and alarmed. She didn’t understand. But those feelings were there.

2. The sound of the river

When they had pulled her out from the rapid river, she was stark naked. From head to toe, her whole body was full of injuries. These injuries were the result of her colliding with the rocks in the rapids. The people who rescued her said that the water made her entire spongy body turn white and only her hair was black. At first glance you couldn’t tell where the injuries were. Luckily some army medics were making house visits in the nearby villages and they immediately
pulled her from the river. After treating her with first aid, those medics took her directly to the hospital.

She was at the hospital for little over half a month before she regained consciousness. When she came to, she tried to answer their questions, but she was at a loss for words.

“Who are you? What village are you from? How old are you? Who’s in your family? How did you fall into the river? Did a boat capsize or did a bad person throw you over? Were you the only one that fell into the water…” They took turns asking questions, and even though their voices were gentle, they were like sharp thorns pricking her, and she instantly felt intense pain. She curled up into a ball on the bed. She thought, Yeah, who am I? Where do I live? What is my name? How did I fall into the river? She didn’t have a clue. How can I not remember? How can I not even remember myself? So she began to cry. “I don’t remember,” she said.

She really didn’t remember.

“So,” they said, “try to think, think carefully. People dragged you out of the river. Start thinking from when you were in the water. Maybe you can remember.”

Following their requests, she really earnestly tried to think back. As soon as her train of thought arrived at the riverside, the sound of the crashing water was like the roar of thunder. She felt indescribable fear along with the sound of the turbulent water. In the waves there seemed to be demons hiding and although she could not see and feel them, they ruthlessly attacked her body and mind. She was suddenly out of control and she cried with all her strength.

A person named Dr. Wu sternly put a stop to these curious people. He said she could be emotionally disturbed. “Don’t make her think again. Let her recuperate.”
Therefore, she wasn’t intensely questioned again, and they only used a pitiful tone to discuss her in public and private.

That was a beautiful spring.

The peach trees outside the window were filled with pink flowers. The apricot flowers along the courtyard walls had also turned into a row of white, and together with the white background of the wall, you were unable to see the color of the flowers from a distance. Even further away, a few old gingko trees with dark green leaves were swaying in the wind. Their sturdy tree trunks so thick it was impossible to know when they were planted. Even further away were the mountains’ gently rolling hills, their shadow’s silhouette like a flower petal. The forsythia in the corner of the courtyard was in full bloom and about to wither, yet that bright yellow flower was still glistening. All sorts of colors suddenly entered her eyes. Birds were now returning for the spring as if roused and enlivened. Even though the wind still had a chill, they still sang. In this kind of scenery and this kind of sound, she slowly calmed down.

From here she started making new life memories. “Here” was a small city in Eastern Sichuan.

Later on, the hospital nurses were all talking over each other telling her about the process of treating her. They said that when Dr. Wu and others brought her back, everyone thought she would not live. They also said that one day at least three doctors had their minds set that she had already taken her last breath, and there were already people outside the hospital doors to take her body away. Luckily, Dr. Wu was attentive and saw her middle finger move a little bit. So, he persisted and required that she stayed in the hospital under observation. Because of this, she
woke up a few days later. With this account, she kept her own brush with death stored in her memory.

There was an additional person in this experience who was Dr. Wu, her savior. This trip from death to life and this person were enough to make her slowly savor it. Although it was a very short process, it seemed as if it contained all of life’s ups and downs. She thought it was enough for her to take this as the start of her life.

In this way, she thoroughly abandoned the things she could not remember and the past that made her entire body feel stabbing pain. This is the way she had lived up until now.

Forgetting was not necessarily a betrayal; forgetting was often for the sake of living. This is what Dr. Wu had told her.

3. Accustomed to being alone

Compared with the old people who danced in the park and went on walks every day, time seemed to have attacked her viciously. The age on her housing registration showed that she was currently a little over 70 — this was based on the age that Dr. Wu estimated from her external appearance. Her birthday was the day that they rescued her. This was also the number that Dr. Wu had absentmindedly filled in. Since then, that age and birthday stayed with her for the rest of her life.

She actually appeared like she was much older than women of her age. When she looked in the mirror, she felt her appearance was caused by hard work. She neither wanted to dance nor associate with people from outside of her family. She was accustomed to being alone. Even when
she was lonely and had nothing to do, she would rather be on her own. She didn’t have any relatives or friends. Occasionally, there was a neighboring old woman who tried to approach her. This woman took the initiative of dropping by and arranging to go out walking together, asserting that it would be good for health and longevity. She didn’t go.

It’s not that she didn’t want longevity, but something in her mind was weighing her down. It was so heavy that she didn’t want to get up and she preferred to sit quietly by herself. So whenever it was a sunny day, she would sit on the steps opposite the Catholic Church at Huayuan mountain. When she looked up and gazed into the distance, the gray building stood tall in front of her eyes. The two giant words “Catholic Church” were illuminated by the sun, though she couldn’t see its brightness. Interestingly, she felt like she looked at the building every day and saw it crumble, then be rebuilt, and then crumble again. Before, her husband liked to drag her out to go for a walk. They often walked on this road, and from here made a turn towards Tanhua woods.

When they were walking, her husband often told her some bizarre stories. One story was related to this “Catholic Church.” His story went like this: In the days of the Great Qing dynasty, the royal court did not want to see churches being built, but the foreigners were eager to do so because after all, building churches was exactly their goal after traveling from afar. When the foreigners ran out of ideas and were getting desperate, a Chinese civilian gave them a solution. He said, when you fill out the application, you should write you wanted to build a “Great King Hall,” but after approval, you should add a line to the character “Great” to change it into “Heavenly,” and add a dot to the character for “King” to change it to “Lord,” thus changing “Great King Hall” to “Heavenly Lord Hall,” or “Catholic Church.” When the foreigners heard
this, they thought this was a good idea, so they submitted the applications. At first glance, the
court didn’t see that they actually wanted to build churches, so they immediately approved.
When the approval notice was issued, the foreigners added a line to the character “Great”
changing it to “Heavenly,” and added a dot to the character for “King” changing it to “Lord,”
thus changing “Great King Hall” to “Heavenly Lord Hall,” or “Catholic Church.” When the local
officials came to see, the application had “Catholic Church” written on it, and it had the seal of
approval. The officials didn’t know how to deal with the matter, so they just let go. In any case,
they were swindled so many times that they didn’t care that they were swindled again.

This story had such a deep impression on her that she smiled when she heard it.

Only now, she was not sitting here because of this story. Rather, she liked looking at the
Virgin Mary mound which was encircled by a grove of trees in the courtyard. Standing in the dip
of the mound was Our Lady of Lourdes\(^2\) with a serene smile perpetually on her face. Every time
they went for a walk, they would always come to see her and they would stand in front of her for
a bit. The first time they came she asked, “Who is she?” Her husband said that in those days,
when people asked the Virgin Mary, “Who are you?” and she would answer, “I am someone that
has not been touched by the original sin.” She didn’t understand what this meant. Her husband
then wrote these words in the palm of her hand. She asked “What does it mean?” Her husband
said, “It means no original sin.”

She did not understand, but her heart beat faster. After they left the church and walked
down the road slowly, her husband continued and said, “This is what the two of us want to keep
in mind: in this world, we are both uncontaminated by the original sin, and that is all. You and I.”

\(^2\) Our Lady of Lourdes is an apparition of the Virgin Mary that appeared in Lourdes, France.
She still didn’t understand. Finally her husband said, “Just remember that she is Our Lady of Lourdes. She can put you at peace.”

She didn’t understand what her husband meant, not even now. But from then on, whenever she saw the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, she felt a bit of peace as expected, and even her whole body was all the more comfortable. *But,* she thought, *what is someone without original sin?*

On the side of the road was a brownish cat with a mischievous expression on its face. When she sat there, it would often sit by her feet without even making a sound. It liked to open its big eyes at her and sometimes it reached out a paw and gently nudged her, giving her a glance that she seemed to be familiar with. She often would extend her hand, stroke its back a few times, and make it quiet. One day, it wasn’t there. She searched everywhere, and without thinking blurted out, “Sparrow! Sparrow! Where are you?” The brownish cat unexpectedly ran over. She sat down and thought to herself, *Why am I calling it Sparrow?*

Now, she sat in the sunlight on the side of the road. By her feet there was a rattan basket with some shoe insoles inside which were embroidered with either mandarin ducks or lotuses. These were embroidered with her own hands. She didn’t even know why she was able to embroider these things herself and had no impression of where she learned how to. But as soon as she picked up a shoe insole, she knew how to do it. She once worked as a housekeeper at Professor Ma’s house. One winter, Professor Ma’s wife gave her a pair of old cotton-padded shoes. She felt they were too big and wanted to make herself a pair of insoles. As if without thinking and also without tracing a pattern, she easily embroidered a crabapple onto the shoe
insoles. Professor Ma’s wife took the insoles, looked them up and down and then said, “You have a skilled hand. Did you learn this before? It’s very artistic.”

Professor Ma’s wife’s words definitely did not make her happy. On the contrary, they were like stones being thrown at her, disturbing her mind. She felt fear, a type of fear that didn’t come with a reason. She felt as if all the places she couldn’t see were dangerous. Every unfamiliar face or voice made her shudder. This lasted as long as several months. After this, she didn’t pick up needlework again. She had worked as a housekeeper at Professor Ma’s house for many years, up until Professor Ma’s wife passed away. After Professor Ma remarried a young wife, she went home with her son.

Her son’s name is Qinglin.

4. Some things cannot leave or abandon her

She and Qinglin used to live in a narrow alley of Tan Hualin in Wuchang district. This was public housing and it was assigned to her husband when he was alive. They had already lived here for many years. Her husband was indeed the Dr. Wu that rescued her while making house visits in the country. She really loved him because he was not only her husband, but even more her savior. When she was rescued and regained consciousness, the first person she saw after she opened her eyes was Dr. Wu. He was also the first person stored in her new memories.

She often thought, when did she fall in love with him? At first glance, or that time when she went to his office? She already forgot why she went to his office. She only remembered that on the desk was a copy of *Dream of the Red Chamber* and she absentmindedly picked it up and
flipped through it. Her mouth couldn’t help softly reading aloud the name “Daiyu”, and those
two characters made her feel a spell of panic. At this moment, Dr. Wu came through the door and
saw her flipping through the book. There was a look of surprise on his face. He took the book
from her hands and stared at her as if hesitating for a few seconds, then said, “Don’t let people
know you can read. Maybe this is better for you.” She looked ignorantly at him. He then said, “I
don’t mean anything else. I’m only worried some people will be suspicious. Your background
isn’t clear and it’s easy to make people speculate. Do you understand?”

She didn’t quite understand but she kept his words in her mind because when she heard
them, the fear immediately vanished from her heart and was replaced by a little bit of warmth.

A few days later, Dr. Wu introduced her to the military district commissar Liu’s
household to be a housekeeper. Commissar Liu was a veteran of the revolution and his wife was
also a cadre. He saw her off at the intersection and said to her as if with deep meaning, “I feel
that going to their house to work will make your life a bit simpler and it could benefit you for the
rest of your life.” Again, she felt warmth in her heart, and she suddenly somewhat understood
and felt that Dr. Wu’s words were crucial. However, in this sense of importance there was
something that made her afraid.

Back then, they still hadn’t fallen in love.

Many years later, she always remembered this person and his voice. Along with
Commissar Liu being promoted and transferred, she followed the whole family to Wuhan.
Everyone called Commissar Liu’s wife Mrs. Peng, and so did she. Mrs. Peng treated her well and
said she was the best housekeeper to ever work for their family. She raised the children, cooked
food, and cleaned for the Liu family. She led a life of peace and tranquility, like still water. She
never thought of changing her job, moving, or even getting married. Wherever they went, she went, too. For her, this should be enough for the rest of her life.

One year, when Dr. Wu left the military and took a job outside the government, he made a special trip to visit his old leader, Commissar Liu. He was pleasantly surprised to see her and couldn’t help blurting out and asking, “Have you been here all along? Are you getting along well?”

She was very excited and didn’t know what the reason for the excitement was. Her voice was shaking and she said, “Good. Because of you, it has always been good.” He looked at her deeply. From this look she saw that there was a secret between the two of them that nobody else knew. She didn't know what this secret was; she only knew that her heart suddenly jumped.

That day Dr. Wu ate at Commissar Liu’s house, and on the table was the food she had prepared with special care. It was only when they were chatting over dinner that she realized Dr. Wu’s wife had already died of an illness. His wife, Xiaoyan, and Mrs. Peng had had a very special relationship and in the old days they vowed they would live together, die together. Mrs. Peng put down her chopsticks and started wiping her tears. Standing there upon hearing this, she felt her heart thump.

Commissar Liu gave a long sigh and then said, “How about you, now? Is it just you?”

He said, “Yes, it’s just me.”

“You’re not looking for someone again?”

“I was introduced to some people, but it didn’t work out.”
Commissar Liu said, “How can you be a grown man and all by yourself?” As he spoke, his gaze settled on her, and he couldn't help pointing at her and said, “How about I serve as your matchmaker? You guys are both old friends and you’re about the same age.”

Dr. Wu’s gaze followed Commissar Liu’s finger to her. Panicking, she didn’t know how she should react, but he looked at her and smiled. From that smile she could see that he was happy.

So she left Commissar Liu’s house that year. She had raised the three children of the Liu family herself and they were standing together at the gate. They gazed at her back not wanting her to leave and the smallest was wiping away tears.

She didn’t turn her head. She held onto Dr. Wu’s arm and walked into his house. After entering the first thing she said was, “Why do you want to marry me?”

He smiled and said, “If you marry someone else, I wouldn’t be at ease.”

It was as if she understood beyond what he was saying and she also didn’t quite understand. She thought to herself for a bit and answered baffled, “Yes, my heart also wouldn’t be at ease if I married someone else.”

After she said this, she began to feel indescribable fear. When night fell, the daylight turned from grey to black. Her fear became more and more dense with the darkness. She didn’t even know what her fear was, just that she was afraid. When Dr. Wu held her and pressed his body against hers, nearly her whole body trembled. Dr. Wu calmed her and whispered to her, “I know, I know. I understand, I understand. Don’t be scared. It’s ok.”

In his arms, she asked herself, What does this mean? What does he know? What does he understand? What doesn’t matter?
That night, she had a nightmare. It was so frightening that she scared herself awake. When she got up in the morning Dr. Wu looked at her and said, “Don’t be too nervous. Don’t think too much. I will protect you. The reason I married you and took you home was because I know how you were rescued. I am the only person in the world who can know your feelings. You don’t need to be afraid of anything.”

When these words were said they made hot tears fall and she couldn’t help but throw herself into his arms. But at the same time, she realized it was as if she had hidden a very thin thorn in her back which was sharp and filled with poison. It was always following closely behind her and she subconsciously guarded her heart, lest that sharp thorn would one day prick her.

Since then, she had her own house. The life after marriage was warm and happy, although a sense of uneasiness always accompanied her. Still, after all, she was never a servant again, but was now a man’s proper wife. This new role made her feel content.

In this kind of state, she maintained her daily routine. Every day she woke up early to make her husband’s breakfast and see him off to work. When he came home at noon, the food was already on the table. When he went back to work after his afternoon break, she again began to cook dinner and then waited for him to come home. She attentively waited on him, doing every little thing for him. She gradually became happy and this happiness tried with great effort to repel her disturbed feelings. She thought: *Maybe the rest of my life is just like this.*

She got pregnant very quickly. Dr. Wu was elated. She also felt excited. But whenever she was by herself, a fear beyond description would come back. It would come back every now and then and attack her, just like the demons that were in the water back then, now lurking here and waiting for the opportune moment to give her one fatal blow. In those days, her fear had
almost reached the condition where she was unable to resist it. She saw a wall and she felt there were things behind the wall. She saw clouds and she felt there were things above the clouds. She saw trees and she felt there were things hidden in the leaves. She saw lights and she felt once the lights were turned off, things would appear. A sudden voice startled her. Bright color and contrast startled her. Strange people had come to her house and startled her. The silence all around her and absence of voices startled her. She didn’t know where this panic came from. But she understood this: Some things cannot leave or abandon her from beginning to end, as if she was born with them.

Every day Dr. Wu brought her to the Catholic Church, stood her in front of the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes and said to her, “Look into The Virgin Mary’s eyes, she’s telling you: Don’t be afraid. Don’t be worried. You don’t have anything to be worried about.”

She was affected by The Virgin Mary’s gaze and felt a little calm. But as soon as she got home, everything went back to the way it was before. Having no choice under these conditions, Dr. Wu had to take her to see a psychiatrist and told the doctor about her amnesia. The psychiatrist inferred that her past had had a traumatic influence on her. Whoever started the trouble should end it and by having her try to think back, they may be able to solve the problem thoroughly.

But her instinct, however, resisted recollection. Because once she started to think back, it came with indescribable pain that wrapped up her entire body, making her unable to tolerate it. Dr. Wu advised her and said, “Grit your teeth and carry on. If you think of something, maybe you will feel at ease.” She reflexively answered back, “If I think something up, won’t I feel even less at ease? And then what should be done?”
Hearing what she said, Dr. Wu was relatively silent the rest of the night. She knew he didn’t get any sleep that night. On the morning of the second day, Dr. Wu said, “Why don’t we forget it? Maybe your best choice is to thoroughly forget everything.”

So it was like this, in the continual assaulting fear, that she gave birth to a son. The day her son came into the world, she felt that the hidden demon was about to emerge. Its eyes stared at her firmly causing her to shake nonstop. The consoling nurses were all upset and called for Dr. Wu to come. When she lied on the obstetric table, Dr. Wu was permitted to sit at her side. In a trance, she suddenly felt the demons were precisely in Dr. Wu’s person, and the fear became even heavier. She screamed at Dr. Wu, “Leave! Go away!” Dr. Wu said loudly, “Don’t be scared. I can take it all, because you are the only one in my family. I love you.” She seemed not to have heard a word he had said, as if already controlled by the demon’s gaze. She screamed hysterically, her voice reverberating through the whole hospital building. The senior delivery doctor and delivery nurses were confused. A nurse said, “What’s wrong with you? Other wives are always eager to have their husbands sit by their side.” She was gasping for breath, not paying any attention to them.

The moment Dr. Wu stepped out of the doors, their son was born safe and sound.

When he came back into the hospital room, Dr. Wu was very excited and both his eyes filled with tears. He stroked her face and said, “Our son is very pretty, thank you. Thank you for giving our family another generation. You shouldn’t be afraid. Whatever happens, you shouldn’t have fear.”
She already lacked strength to answer. Dr. Wu again said, “You should understand what’s in my heart. I married you to put your heart at ease for your entire life. As long as I’m here, you don’t need to be afraid.”

Maybe this comfort was especially effective and those demons she thought would come out at any moment never came. And yet, her son grew day by day. His bright eyes and innocent laugh put her heart the most at ease. She thought she would give birth again to a daughter but unfortunately after over two months, she had a miscarriage. As before, Dr. Wu said to comfort her, “It doesn’t matter, having one son is enough. As long as he grows up healthy that would satisfy everything.”

Time moved slowly, and the things that made her panic that were forever with her never appeared. That demon also seemed to slowly wither away.

5. The poisonous thorn was plucked out

But what happened is another unforeseen event that surprised her. Her Dr. Wu didn’t accompany her through the end of her life. He died on his way to work.

One year, a public bus that crossed the city in Hankou collided with a train that also crossed the city. For a moment, the flow of blood in the intersection turned into a river. Her Dr. Wu was unfortunately in the bus. Having heard the news, she dragged her son Qinglin out. After transferring many public buses, they ran towards the scene of the accident. In the middle of the disorderly wails, she saw a mess of corpses and fresh blood was everywhere. Her head rang for a bit and suddenly the same scene floated before her eyes. That old demon now seemingly
crouched its body and wanted to pounce on her. Her whole body shook and her two legs were weak and soft. She threw herself kneeling onto the ground.

Qinglin started to cry and pulled at her with all of his strength: “Mama! Stand up! Stand up!”

She stood up in a panic and shouted at the first-aid staff, “I don’t want a soft burial! I don’t want him to be soft buried!” After shouting, she felt something wasn’t right about this world.

Qinglin tightly pulled on her hand. He didn’t understand what she was crying about. After the funeral arrangements were sorted out he carefully asked her, “Mama, what is ‘soft burial’?” She didn’t understand and replied, “‘Soft burial?’ What is ‘soft burial?’” she was lost.

These two words seemed to be floating in the sky. In their faintness it was like they were closely following her but at the same time very far apart from her. In the distance was a person speaking with a loud voice which somber and old. As soon as that sound appeared next to her ears, her whole body suddenly felt a stab of pain so intense that she could not muster the energy to answer Qinglin.

In only a few days her Dr. Wu, Qinglin’s father, a living person, was now burnt to ashes, packed into a porcelain jar, and buried on the mountain. From that moment on, the only thing that kept them company was just a picture on the wall. He was smiling and looking at them dearly, appearing just the same as when he was alive. When Qinglin wasn’t at home she would often wipe the picture, stroke his face with her hand, and mumble to herself.

One day when she was wiping it, she suddenly realized that the fear that was always in her heart had already disappeared. That demon that was hiding and aging was also taken away by
the man who always comforted her and at the same time, that poisonous thorn was also plucked out. Dr. Wu’s death was like a windstorm that swept away all the things that made her afraid and the surface of the sea was as calm as a mirror. From this moment on, her life faced this broad and tranquil scene.

She was obviously confused. She didn’t understand why she became a lot more calm and peaceful after the person that she loved and who loved her back was gone.

6. Her mind was so empty that only time remained

After her husband died, she slept deeply for three days. She slept very comfortably, as if she hadn’t had this type of sleep for a very long time. When she woke up it was nearly noon already. She opened the curtains and the sun was rightly resplendent. The bright light came in through the window and nestled into her heart. Suddenly out of nowhere there was an explosion and her heart instantly brightened. She suddenly felt that her life would be smooth and steady from here on out. This stability made her feel more relaxed than when Dr. Wu stood by her side protecting her.

Qinglin was still small and they still needed to get by. But it was also from this year on that she left the doors to be a housekeeper; for this life, this was all she could do. She went to the hospital where Dr. Wu worked to be a caregiver and she looked after the hospitalized patients. The first person she took care of was Professor Ma’s wife. Back then, Professor Ma was not yet a professor. Mrs. Ma gave birth in the hospital. The way she took care of Mrs. Ma was like the way she cared for Dr. Wu. Mrs. Ma liked her quietness and modesty very much. When she left
the hospital, Mrs. Ma said that her health wasn’t good and she didn't know how to take care of
the baby. Mrs. Ma hoped that she could go to the Ma house and work as a live-in housekeeper.
She agreed. She didn’t like having to deal with a lot of people and the chaos of the hospital. Like
this, once she started, she continued working for this family for several years. She brought up the
child in Professor Ma’s house and also raised Qinglin.

Qinglin got into college in Shanghai. He studied architecture. Her income wasn’t enough
to give Qinglin a good education so she rented out her place. She used her own wages and rent
money to make Qinglin’s college life not so impoverished. Qinglin knew his mother’s intentions
and worked very hard. He said in letters to his mother that in the future he must get rich to buy
her a big house. She was very happy that Qinglin thought this way, but she felt it didn’t matter if
she had a big place or not, for just Qinglin to live well would make her satisfied.

After graduation, Qinglin didn’t return to his mother’s side. Their place was demolished
so Qinglin didn’t have a home to return to. Also, he had his mind set on making money, so he
chose to go to the South, as there were more opportunities there. To her, every sentence Qinglin
said was very important. She always told him, “Don’t be concerned about me. I’m sorry I can’t
take care of you. It’s important that you have a nice life out there.”

Qinglin was working hard and busy all day long and rarely came home. He changed
companies non-stop. When he changed to the fourth one, his boss was from Wuhan and he
appreciated Qinglin who was also from Wuhan. He gave Qinglin a lot of opportunities and his
days suddenly got better. Soon, he bought a place in the South and got married. They didn’t have
a wedding, so instead they traveled abroad. Before they went abroad, he brought his wife to meet
her mother-in-law. Here they didn’t have a home, so they had a banquet in a hotel and the Ma
couple was also invited. The daughter-in-law was pretty and was warm toward the Ma couple and was very polite to her mother-in-law. She thought, *I am only a housekeeper, what can I expect from a daughter-in-law?*

Professor Ma’s wife passed away from cancer. She accompanied Mrs. Ma through her most difficult times, then saw her off to the end of her life. When Mrs. Ma was buried, Qinglin hurried back. He rented a cabin on Huayuan mountain and said, “Mom, you don’t need to work again. I have money to support you. You only need to be inconvenienced for a few years since my money is still too tight for a place, so just live here for now. Once I’m rich, I will definitely buy you a perfect house.”

She didn’t mind whether Qinglin got rich or not, she only saw Qinglin as tan and thin with a few wrinkles floating on his forehead. His expression also started to look more like his father’s. All of this together made her sad, too.

Qinglin left again very quickly. Reality turned him into a pragmatic person.

She was the only person that stayed in the house. When the wind blew, the windows made a clanging sound. At night, she could hear the sound of snoring and sleep-talking on the other side of the wall. In the morning the sun came up, its light mopping up the still room. When she ate, the sound of her chewing was like the rumbling sound of a car driving. It was all so lonely and the dullness was doubled. She would often go a whole day without speaking one sentence. This world was as quiet as if she was the only person left. Her mind was so empty that only time remained.
7. I don’t need to remember

One day while buying food, she ran into a speeding bicycle. Her body fell down and her head hit a telephone pole and blood immediately flowed from her forehead. Through the blood, she saw a clump of Canna flower on the side of the road. Next to the Canna was a small street stall and a pair of hand-embroidered baby shoes was on the tip of it. On the face of the red shoes were two gold fish. Her heart suddenly tightened.

Luckily, her injury was not serious. Her forehead had three stitches and after she was bandaged, she was taken home. Qinglin was seriously frightened and hurried back from the South that evening after getting the landlord’s call. Those two fish were still floating in her head. Her mouth was muttering, “Those fish, those fish.” Qinglin thought she wanted to eat fish, so the next morning he went out to the market to buy some live carp.

By then, she was already better. When she saw her son like this, her head didn’t hurt anymore; she even cooked Qinglin a dish of fish with black bean sauce. This was Qinglin’s favorite.

After Qinglin told her some basic safety measures, he hurried back to the South. Looking at Qinglin’s back, the two gold fish unexpectedly appeared in front of her eyes. She didn’t understand why but she only felt some kind of impulse. So, never minding that her head was still wrapped in white gauze, she immediately went out and bought needle, thread, and scraps of cloth. She remembered she once embroidered shoe insoles at Professor Ma’s house, so she used her own foot as a guide, and quickly and effortlessly took cloth and scissors and created the shape of shoe insoles.
The day still had bright sunlight. She sat in front of the window, took up the cloth, and threaded the first needle. It seemed as if she really needed a pair of shoe insoles herself or she just did it to alleviate boredom. In any case, in only a few days, she had finished embroidering a pair of insoles with two little gold fish. When she did this, she felt a sense of calmness that she had never experienced before. This peace was like happiness that had fallen down from the sky and it seemed as if she was born just to do this. When she finished one pair, she started the second pair, and then she couldn’t stop.

She embroidered peonies, mandarin ducks, and kylins. Time passed by the tip of her embroidery needle. She didn’t know how many pairs she embroidered. On the side of her bed against the wall, there was already piled up layer upon layer of embroidery. Shoe insoles were spread on her low, flat pillow, and the layers of shoe insoles eventually made it higher. In the end she felt she didn’t have any places left to put them in her house, so she bought a rattan basket. She thought she should be able to sell off a few.

So it was like this, she walked out of the house and sat across from the Catholic Church selling shoe insoles. She definitely didn’t lack spending money. She saved a little while working as a housekeeper. But every year, Qinglin sent money to her for the holidays. Whenever he sent money, it was a large sum. She took this money and saved it all in the bank. She thought, *Qinglin must need this in the future when he buys a place.*

Every day she sold off one or two pairs of insoles, and this rhythm suited her. She also only went out when it was sunny and sat in the warm sunlight and she occasionally gazed towards the cluster of trees around Our Lady of Lourdes. She felt that her gaze was really looking at her, so she felt a bit content.
It was only that whenever these satisfied feelings grew, a few other things wouldn’t leave her alone, faintly encircling her body. Especially when Canna flowers blossomed, those few things pursued her from behind. She desperately tried to escape, but they were forever on her tail. She could feel them float and move, even tease and seduce her to turn around and grasp them. She was reminded of the fear she once had, and said to herself with her eyes closed, *I won’t turn around. I won’t be fooled. I won’t grab you. I won’t remember. I don’t need to know where I came from and I don’t need to know my name, even more, I don’t need to know who was in my family. I don’t need any of it. It’s fine that my memory only needs to start from Dr. Wu. Having my son Qinglin in my life is enough. Forgetting has it’s own reasoning, this is what Dr. Wu said.*

When Dr. Wu said this, he was still very young.

8. “Ding Zi” these two words

It was like this that the woman pleasantly passed her days for many years. She knew very few people and very few people knew her. Her name was Ding Zitao.

This name was also given to her by Dr. Wu. He said when she was unconscious, she would run a high fever. Once in a while she would shout out “Ding Zi!” Nobody knew what this meant. When she regained consciousness, Dr. Wu filled out her medical records and asked for her name. She shook her head and said she didn’t remember anything.

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3 The “Ding Zi” here means “nail,” and Dr. Wu makes “Ding” her surname or family name and adds the “Zi” to her first name.
At that time it was spring and the first flowers on the peach trees had blossomed outside the hospital. Therefore, Dr. Wu wrote “Díng Zǐ” down on her medical records. When he was about to write the third character, he raised his head to look at her, meanwhile also seeing the peach blossoms outside the window. So he wrote down the word for “peach”, Tao. He said “You have to remember ‘Díng Zǐ’ these two words that you recall, perhaps one day they will help you remember the past.”

Díng Zítão thought: You are my past now. As for everything else, do I still need it?
Chapter 2

9. I’m taking you home

It was a cloudy day. Qinglin excitedly hurried home. He wanted to give his mother a huge surprise.

He asked the taxi driver to stop at a supermarket not far from home. He went in to buy his mother some fruit. He knew that if he didn’t buy things like fruit for his mother, she would never eat.

When Qinglin came home, his mother wasn’t there. Qinglin thought it was very unexpected. His mother’s nature was calm and she rarely left the house, this he knew from childhood. At the entrance were a few neighbors playing Mahjong. “Go to the Catholic Church and look around,” they told Qinglin eagerly, “Your mother is there all day selling shoe insoles.”

Qinglin was even more surprised. He thought to himself that the money must have been enough. He hurried off with this in mind. He gave a few glances there and as expected, he saw his mother across from the Catholic Church. At the same time he saw a rattan basket by her feet with shoe insoles inside of it. His mood was immediately agitated, and almost threw himself at his mother and with some roughness he said, “Mom, how is it that you’re running a stall? Y-y-you…should have told me if you were low on money.”

Ding Zitao was startled and stared blankly but when she saw it was her son Qinglin, she immediately felt like everywhere was sunny and clear-skied. Qinglin was the sun to her, he can illuminate her heart at any time or place. She hurriedly said, “It’s not that I don’t have money. It’s
just that I was idle and had nothing to do and needed to pass time. I can bask in the sun while having fun. You don’t need to be angry. Look, I made all of these myself. I am truly doing it for fun.”

Qinglin picked up an insole and carefully looked at the pattern and workmanship. He was a bit surprised and his bad mood had quickly scattered. Qinglin said, “Mom, you know how to do this? You made this yourself? Wow, it looks so good. How come I’ve never seen you make these before?”

Ding Zitao was happy and said, “I also made a lot for you, but I was afraid you would think they were unrefined, so I didn’t dare give them to you.”

Qinglin said: “How? From now on I’ll buy every pair of shoes in a size bigger, then I can use the shoe insoles you made.”

Ding Zitao laughed, and said, “You’re making fun of me again.”

Qinglin picked up the rattan basket and said, “Mom, let’s call it a day. Let’s go home.”

Qinglin walked forward with Ding Zitao for a few steps where there was a black sedan parked. The driver saw Qinglin and hurried out of the sedan to open the door for them. Qinglin pointed to the inside of the car and said to Ding Zitao, “Get in, Mom!”

Ding Zitao didn’t quite understand. She said, “It’s just steps away, I don’t need to ride in this car. Whose car is it?”

Qinglin proudly answered, “It’s our car! Just go with it, Mom.”

Ding Zitao got in the car. A few minutes later, they were driving in an endless river of cars. Ding Zitao felt a bit dizzy and she said, “Where is this going? To a restaurant again?”
Every time Qinglin came back, he always took his mother out to eat at a restaurant because he said that he wanted his mom’s appetite to be in keeping with the times. But this time Qinglin said, “We’re going home. I’m taking you home.”

Ding Zitao felt strange. “Home where?”

Qinglin laughed and said, “Our home, the home where, starting today, you will enjoy a lifetime of comfort and happiness. As for the small home at Huayuan Mountain, we’re not renting it anymore.”

Ding Zitao was shocked and said, “What about my clothes? And my shoe insoles. Our contract with the landlord was until the end of the year.”

Qinglin laughed. “Mom, don’t worry. I’ll handle it. Your things will all be safely brought over tomorrow, even the dust, all of it will be moved. Oh, also the leftovers in your fridge and the brooms and cleaning cloths in the kitchen. We won’t leave a single thing behind.”

Ding Zitao grinned. She thought, this son is indeed her son, everything he says to her is interesting. No matter what he says, she listens.

The small car turned onto a small road that circled a lake. On the vast face of the lake hovered some water birds. In the distance were perfectly straight trees which were like a row of opened curtains. As Ding Zitao was looking, in her head appeared another body of water. It also had water birds. The side of the lake was densely covered in reeds. Small rowboats were rowing in front of her eyes. On the rowboats stood fish hawks. She steadied her nerves. She couldn’t see the reeds or the rowboats. On the lake in front of her eyes, the water birds were hovering as before. Ding Zitao’s heart thumped. It was as if there were things churning which made her feel nauseous. The things that entangled her before now came back and encircled her.
The small car quickly left the lakeside and went onto a main road again. In front of her eyes was the same endless stream of traffic.

Ding Zitao tossed her head as if tossing off those old things that went with her. She said, “Where are we going?”

Qinglin said, “We’re going to Jiangxia. The Southern Lake. It’s beautiful there, the air is good, and you will enjoy your old age.”

“If you’re not at home, it doesn’t matter where I enjoy my old age, it’s all the same.”

Qinglin said, “Our company is going to develop a new housing district at Jiangxia. I was transferred here and took charge of this project. From this day on I will come back to live with you.”

Ding Zitao said with pleasant surprise, “Really? Is Baobao's mom also on board?”

“She also agreed. However, she wants to wait until after Baobao gets into college to move over here.”

“Oh, I see. Well, that’s wonderful! I really miss our Baobao.”

“This young kid is very naughty. Don’t be annoyed after you have to be grandma all the time.”

Ding Zitao chuckled. “I won’t be annoyed at all, I won’t be annoyed. I will never be annoyed with my treasured grandson as long as I live.”

Qinglin laughed loudly and said, “One more thing, please don’t be too bothered. From now on, I will come home every day and eat Mom’s food. You need to cook meat one day and fish the next, ok?”
Ding Zitao also started laughing loudly. When Qinglin was little he craved good food and every day he wanted to eat fish and meat. One time in school the teacher asked the class, “What is a happy life?” Qinglin raised his hand and answered, “Eating meat one day and fish the next.” This provoked endless laughter in the entire class. Afterwards, the teacher found Ding Zitao and asked, “Don’t save too much. If your son wants to eat something, let him eat it.” Back then, Ding Zitao earned money as a housekeeper and they didn’t have the means to eat very well. She could only say to Qinglin, “In the future when you grow up and make money, I guarantee you, I will cook you meat one day and fish the next.”

When they finished laughing, Ding Zitao said, “But of course. I will cook you meat every day and fish every day.”

Qinglin chuckled. “Now I know you’re happiest like this.”

10. Is it the Hut of Tolerance or the Hall of Three Wisdoms?

The small car finally entered a gated community that was thickly landscaped with colorful flowers. Through the car window, Qinglin pointed out and explained everything that Ding Zitao saw. He said, “This is the housing development’s garden. You can take a walk there later.” He then said, “There is the clubhouse where you can read books, play chess, play cards, and also exercise.” The car bypassed a manmade lake which had a pavilion on it. Qinglin continued to explain things. “This water pavilion is very nice. The wooden walkway is outstanding and if you like water you can walk there, but it’s best during the daytime. It’s not safe in the evening when it gets dark.”
Then the car stopped in front of a garden with flowers in full bloom. Qinglin got out of
the car, jogged to the other side of it, and reached out his hand to open Ding Zitao’s car door. He
bent his waist, reached out his right hand and said, “Your Highness, please.”

Ding Zitao got out of the car, patted him and said laughing, “You’re all grown up, yet still
so naughty.”

Either she had been sitting for too long or she was not used to sitting in small cars, but
Ding Zitao became even more hazy. After patting Qinglin, she suddenly stumbled. He was so
terrified that he immediately held her and said with urgency, “Mom, don’t scare me. Good days
are coming. You have to make sure you can walk steady for them.”

Ding Zitao calmed her spirits, steadied her feet, and said with a smile, “Sitting in the car
made me dizzy.”

Qinglin supported her through the garden. He walked to the front of a red-pillared two-
story building, stretched out his hand and said, “Look, how about this place?”

Ding Zitao said, “Not bad. The dormitory is built rather short, how many people can live
here? Other companies all build tall buildings.”

Qinglin laughed. “This is a single-family home, it’s our house. It’s yours!”

Ding Zitao nearly blurted out “My house? Is it the Hut of Tolerance or Hall of Three
Wisdoms?

Qinglin said, “What? What hut what hall?”

Ding Zitao stared blankly. She repeated, “What hut what hall? This main gate is not the
same as the Hut of Tolerance and it is even more unlike the Hall of Three Wisdoms.”

Qinglin uneasily answered, “Hut of Tolerance? What hall? Where?”
Ding Zitao didn’t answer him and only said, “Isn’t this like a landlord house? Aren’t you afraid they’ll divide up your belongings? They will come to your house and find you.”

Qinglin started to laugh until he couldn’t control himself. Even the driver carrying Qinglin’s luggage was delighted and said, “Lady, Mr. Wu is basically a landlord capitalist.”

Qinglin also laughed, and when he was done he said, “Mom, never mind landlords and capitalists. Starting today, you are just the owner of this villa and you are only responsible for enjoying a life of leisure here. In 2003, you, Ms. Ding Zitao, have your own villa. This is a brand new era and nobody dares to cause trouble. I, Wu Qinglin, will give you the world’s happiest, most comfortable life, Mama.”

Qinglin’s manner came alive and his words made Ding Zitao comfortable but she still didn’t smile. She wasn’t too happy either; on the other hand, she felt a little bit timid. Her gaze fell on the clump of bamboo growing against the wall on the right side of the door. This thicket of bamboo was just sprouting new branches. The leaves on these new branches were a pale green. Suddenly a voice appeared in her head: “In front of the window is a grove of bamboo, its fresh green is unique and extraordinary.” This was a man’s voice that seemed to have a kind of face that indistinctly floated out. Ding Zitao blurted out, “It’s Xie Tiao."4

Qinglin said, “Mom, what did you say?”

Ding Zitao was at a loss and said, “I didn’t say anything.” After she said this, she also thought she said something, but what was it?

Qinglin said, “You said Xie…something, I didn’t hear clearly.”

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4 Xie Tiao was a poet who lived during the Southern Dynasties period who is an obscure literary figure that only highly educated elites might have heard of.
Ding Zitao said: “It was the bamboo that I thought it was unusually pretty. Suddenly I thought of a line from a poem: ‘In front of the window is a grove of bamboo, its fresh green is unique and extraordinary.’”

Qinglin had never heard his mother recite poetry and he couldn’t help being shocked. He said, “Mom, you really are something. Who wrote it?”

Ding Zitao was at a loss for words, and she couldn’t answer. She thought, *Who wrote it? When did I read it before?*

11. What I remember is red

The room was quite big. In the middle of it was a brown leather sofa and the back of it was made of dark brown wood. There were patterns carved into its arms which curved and zigzagged like the waists of beauties. This arc was like a zither’s string and with a *boom* a string was also plucked in Ding Zitao’s heart. “This is our living room,” said Qinglin.

In the east corner of the room stood a small tree. Ding Zitao recognized this as a money tree. Professor Ma’s house also had one before. In the western corner was a porcelain vase that was as tall as a person with a pattern drawn on it. Qinglin said, “This was given to us by a friend from Taiwan. They like Chinese antiques over there.”

The patterns on the vase were very refined. Ding Zitao’s heart thumped again but this time it was like she was being beaten with heavy fists. She said, “Isn’t this a picture of Guiguzi coming down from the mountain?” When she spoke, her voice trembled. She didn’t know why she felt frightened.
Qinglin was astonished. “You even know about this?”

Ding Zitao said without thought, “Of course I know it, my father used to paint all the time.”

Qinglin had never heard about his grandfather and he was full of curiosity. He said, “Is it my maternal grandfather? What did he do? I’ve never heard you talk about this before.”

Ding Zitao was at a loss for words. Yeah, what did her father do? Where did he go? With this thought emerging, she suddenly felt her heart hurt like it was stung by bundle of needles and her whole body began to sweat.

Qinglin immediately felt that something was off about Ding Zitao. He waited a few seconds and then said, “Mom, are you tired? Let’s discuss Grandpa again later. Let’s go to the second floor. You can go have a rest in your room and after you’ve eaten, I’ll show you around to get familiar with the house. Otherwise, mom will get lost in her own room.” After he said this, he roared with laughter.

Qinglin was not easily amused. In this moment he was so conscious of his laughter that it felt deliberate and even he wasn’t certain why he was laughing like this.

Ding Zitao’s room was up one floor. It was the best place in the entire villa. The south facing windows went all the way down to the floor. On the two sides of the windows were gold velvet curtains with a faint gray pattern. In the winter, the sunlight could spread through most of the room. Using Qinglin’s words, light brightens people, and she won’t need to wear glasses to thread needles.

Standing at the window, one can overlook the entire garden. In the garden were many trees. The tall ones were Camphor trees, Yulan Magnolia, and two Ginkgo trees. The short ones
were Camellia, China rose, and Cape jasmine. There was still some empty land which Qinglin said was saved for mom to use for herself. If she wanted to grow flowers, then she could grow flowers. If she wanted to grow vegetables, she could grow vegetables. She could exercise as well as rest. Qinglin stood at the window and pointed out things for Ding Zitao to see. When he was finished, Ding Zitao felt dizzy.

In the room was a bed and a six-drawer dresser. The bed was very big and spread on top of it was a soft satin quilt stitched with long stitches. Qinglin knew his mother didn’t like using a quilt cover. She would rather make a new quilt every month and she wanted to use traditional bedding. The satin quilt on the bed was light purple and had peonies of the same color in full bloom on it. It was very extravagant. Ding Zitao couldn’t help but reach out her hand and stroke it. Suddenly she said, “Very good, peonies are my favorite. But why purple? What I remember is red.”

Qinglin grinned and said, “When did our house have this kind of quilt? I bought this brand new. I bought it just for you.” When he was done saying this, he felt that Ding Zitao was shocked again.

Ding Zitao muttered, “The quilt will be taken away, the one my mother gave me was also taken away. They will come. They want to come to distribute our property. It has to be done, there’s no way out.”

Qinglin started to laugh. “Hu Hansan is never going to come back! It’s my fault. I was just thinking of giving you a pleasant surprise, but I never thought you were used to being poor. It’s scary.” He also said, “Don’t worry mom, this is all money that I earned through honest

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5 Hu Hansan is the tyrannical landlord character of the Chinese propaganda film Sparkling Red Star. Qinglin references his tagline here.
business. I bought the villa as a present for you, to make you happy in your later years. You really don’t need to be scared. This is your own home, it’s our own home. You and I, we own this house.”

Ding Zitao nodded absent-mindedly. She completely didn’t know what she had said. But she started to understand: the house that she walked into would be hers from this day on.

Since then, she had a home again. This house was given to her by her son Qinglin. How filial her son was! For this reason, she was a happy mother.

12. I was hit by the butt of a gun

That night, Qinglin prepared a few good dishes and also poured liquor. While preparing this meal, he didn’t let Ding Zitao move a hand. He had already hired a housekeeper. The food was made by the housekeeper, but Qinglin chose the menu. Qinglin pointed the housekeeper to Ding Zitao and said, “Her name is Dong Hong and she will be taking care of you, Mom.” He also turned to the housekeeper, “Dong Hong, in the coming days Mom is your leader so you should ask her about everything.”

Ding Zitao smiled and said, “What kind of leader am I supposed to be, you’re making no sense.”

Qinglin said, “Mom, before you managed one person—me. Now it’s two people, adding Dong Hong.” Then he smiled and said, “If you don’t want to do anything, then don’t do anything. If you want to do something, by all means, do it. It’s up to the leader anyway.”

Ding Zitao and the housekeeper Dong Hong laughed at Qinglin’s jokes.
That night, mother and son were eating a good meal together. The bowls and plates were all light yellow and had a heart-warming pleasantness. Ding Zitao had been looking forward to this kind of living her entire life, quietly eating with her son in their own home.

Qinglin took out a bottle of liquor from the cupboard and said, “Luzhou Laojiao. When Dad was alive, he liked drinking this liquor. Today I’m using the liquor Dad likes, with a toast to Mom. It’s as if dad is drinking with us. Mom, do you want a cup?”

Ding Zitao was fond of her son’s sensibility and said with a smile, “When your dad drank, I never, ever had a sip. At the time, liquor was expensive and your dad drank the liquor he had begrudgingly. It was only on the New Year and other festivals that he would take a little sip.”

Qinglin sighed and said, “If only dad was alive, then our family would be too blessed. How about I prepare a bowl and chopsticks for Dad. This is our own house and we need a seat for him.”

Dr. Wu’s face was floating in front of Ding Zitao’s eyes and at the same time, a lot of corpses appeared. Suddenly, she felt these corpses were definitely not on the side of the railroad but they were under a few trees. Next to those trees were a few pits and piles of soil next to each other. She was very familiar with the posture and clothes of the corpses, but Qinglin’s father was not among them. She swung her head a bit, and for a moment she was lost in her thoughts.

Qinglin poured liquor and said, “Mom, how is it? Have a small cup. Why don’t we drink until we’re both drunk? You haven’t gotten drunk in your entire life, why don’t you get drunk tonight? We didn’t have a house for decades until today. We finally have our own house and it is indeed worthy of celebration.”
Qinglin chuckled while pouring liquor for Ding Zitao. Ding Zitao awakened her spirits and took Qinglin’s glass. She felt the cup was very small so she said, “All right. I’ll drink a little with my son today.”

Qinglin clapped his hands and smiling said, “Mom, if you drink with me, I’ll come over every day to have dinner with you. That way, I will increase mom’s alcohol tolerance.”

Ding Zitao laughed and said, “Am I going to become alcoholic in my old age?”

Thus, mother and son laughed and started to eat and drink. Qinglin served a glass of liquor to Ding Zitao and said, “This glass of liquor is for you, mom. Thank you for raising me in your laborious life. I know your entire life was almost all lived for me. So I, Qinglin, my life’s greatest goal is to give you a happy old age. From now, I am almost reaching my goal. Only until your daughter-in-law and grandson live here so you can enjoy domestic bliss, then I can complete my mission.”

Ding Zitao accepted the liquor her son served her as she smiled, squinting. Qinglin first drank all the liquor and then said, “Mom, do you want to have a taste too?”

Ding Zitao took up the glass of liquor and she brought the glass under her nose. Suddenly, a strong and familiar scent leaped from her nostrils into her heart. It felt like a flame set the straw in her heart alight with a bang. A stern voice said, “Drink! Drink it down. Drink three cups. After you’re done drinking, you’ll have strength, then you’ll have guts.” Behind the voice, a face appeared. It was a man. His hoary countenance was brimming with dignity.

Ding Zitao’s hands couldn’t help but tremble. Qinglin didn’t notice and answered in high spirits as before, “Mom, take a sip. Alcohol is a wonderful thing. It’s a great loss if you never drink in your life. Drinking with mom is happier than drinking with anybody else.”
Ding Zitao steadied her nerves and she looked at Qinglin. His excitement and happiness rendered his happy face to flash with radiance. Qinglin’s happiness was indeed Ding Zitao’s happiness. So she took the liquor down her mouth in one gulp.

Qinglin said loudly, “Mom, you’re too bold. Slow down a bit, don’t drink so recklessly. This definitely isn’t tap water.”

How familiar the smell was! In addition to being mixed with plants and soil, there was also the odor of sweat and the pungent smell of blood. Sobbing and wailing accompanied it. Ding Zitao’s back started to hurt violently.

Qinglin saw she looked a bit strange and nervously asked, “Mom, how are you?”

Ding Zitao said, “My back hurts. I was hit by the butt of a gun. He hit me very hard and I’m in so much pain.”

“What did you say? Somebody hit you? With the butt of a gun? Mom, are you ok?”

Ding Zitao muttered, “My back hurts so much.”

Qinglin stood behind his mother without delay and gently massaged her back. He said, “Maybe you drank too fast just now. It’s my fault. You shouldn’t drink anymore. Just have some food. I’m already blessed when I can sit quietly in my own home and eat dinner with you.”

Yes, Ding Zitao also felt blessed. She didn’t drink anymore and she wanted to get rid of the flavors that the liquor brought as soon as possible. She wanted to happily eat dinner with her son and talk about her grandson and daughter-in-law and the new project that Qinglin was about to start.

In this casual chatting, the pain in her back gradually disappeared.
13. This is indeed the black abyss

In the evening, accompanied by Qinglin, Ding Zitao returned to her own bedroom. Everything in the bathroom was strange. Dong Hong filled the bathtub with water. The water wasn’t too cold or too hot. She took off her clothes and stepped in the tub. She almost couldn’t recall that she had ever bathed like this; she didn’t even know how to turn on hot and cold water. Dong Hong carefully waited on her and helped her put on soft pajamas. She was a bit dizzy and she felt this was already unlike her own life. Even the slippers under her feet were so soft that she didn’t want to step on them or put her feet on the ground. Dong Hong laughed and said, “Mr. Wu is a boss. All bosses’ home life is like this.”

Dong Hong helped her walk to the bed and lie onto the new bed and pulled the new quilt up over her body. The purple quilt covered her body and she began to feel that something wasn’t quite right.

Qinglin came in and said that he would leave tomorrow in the early morning to hurry back to the South and come back again once the procedures were settled, which he estimated would take a few days, and that Dong Hong would always be here to look after her. The driver Mr. Zhang would also be staying here and would bring the things from the rented room over here. Besides the house being bigger and having more company, life should be the same as before. She could do whatever she wanted.

Ding Zitao nodded her head. She knew her son’s work was of upmost importance. Qinglin said goodnight and then left the room.
Ding Zitao really felt somewhat tired. Dong Hong set a cup of water next to the head of her bed and said to her smiling, “Rest well, miss.”

Ding Zitao said, “Did you add some honey? Xiao Cha.”

Dong Hong smiled and said, “Do you want to drink honey water or tea\textsuperscript{6}? I’ll buy some tomorrow. Miss, my name is Dong Hong, you should remember.”

“Your name isn’t Xiao Cha? I brought you over from my natal home. You’ve been with me since I was little.”

Dong Hong laughed and said, “Xiao Cha? Miss, you drank a lot. I only came into the Wu household today.”

Ding Zitao was a bit dizzy and she didn’t answer again. This indeed wasn’t Xiao Cha. But where was Xiao Cha? She lied down on the bed and felt deeply tired and didn’t open her eyes.

The new bed was very spacious and comfortable. The quilt gave out a pleasant scent and the softness made her body very relaxed. Then it felt like she wanted to flutter like an immortal flying into the sky. As luck would have it, clouds moved over and piled up layer by layer under her feet. She couldn’t help stepping up on them. The extensive clouds piled higher and higher and she climbed up step by step and it was if she was stepping on levels and levels of stairs. Her mind was full of curiosity. There was no limit to what was above and she did not stop and come down. While she was walking, the sky suddenly turned very blue and she was unable to stop her body from running towards that blue colored sky and in a trance she returned to being young.

Back then, she liked running and jumping onto stairs like this. The stairs were made of slate and

\textsuperscript{6} The word “Cha” in Xiao Cha’s name also means “tea” which is why Dong Hong thought Ding Zitao was talking about tea.
the teal color reflected the light. In front of her, there was often someone beckoning to her. All of a sudden, she also saw that pair of hands from many years earlier that were raised towards her a lot of the time. He called out to her and also reached out his hands to her. How familiar this scene was. She began to laugh and rushed towards him faster. This feeling was really so good.

Suddenly, the steps disappeared. It was too late to catch her footing and she stepped on nothing. Her body started to fall. She was falling much faster than she was just flying. She couldn’t help but scream, “Lu Zhongwen, pull me! Lu Zhongwen…”

But she couldn’t see those hands and she couldn’t even see her own hands reaching out. All of it was wrapped in dense clouds, a vast expanse of whiteness, unable to see anything. She reached out her hands and didn’t stop grabbing. She tried alternating grabbing with her two hands but got nothing. In an instant, a sentence appeared in her mind: *Falling through the vast whiteness, the earth looks barren!* She thought the “vast whiteness” in *Dream of the Red Chamber* should be like this. So she didn’t struggle anymore thinking she would see where she would fall. There was only one feeling left, which was falling and falling.

Like this, from above the bright clouds she fell and fell. In front of her eyes was vast whiteness which gradually turned gray, and then more dim, and finally dark black. This black was boundless.

Suddenly someone’s face floated on the bottom of the pitch black. She covered her face and opened her mouth and spoke loudly. She said, “You’re going to Hell! The King of Hell will deal with you!”
This face was in the darkness and appeared completely distinct. She recognized it. This was her Aunt, her father’s concubine. She couldn’t help but shout out, “Aunt! It’s not like this, it isn’t!”

Nobody heard her voice.

But she already knew. This was the black abyss. She was already trapped in it.
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