

Cultural Evolution

I don't know much about the person I'm meeting today, and what little I've learned places her so far from my experience that I don't know what to expect. From emails and phone conversations, I know that Meihua is forty-five and came here from mainland China twenty years ago. One of the earliest permitted Chinese students, she's now putting her US doctorate in chemistry to work designing processes for a large pharmaceutical company while raising two teenagers. Despite growing up under what I'd assume was extreme censorship, she's well-versed in English literature, beginning with one of her favorites, *Jane Eyre*, the romantic who, I remember, didn't take shit from anyone, especially not lordly Mr. Rochester.

Meihua is yet another woman from outside my cultural frame of reference. But something I pick up about her—intelligence and sophistication, with childish whimsy—captivates me. Probably another bad gamble reflecting my inability to learn from experience. Nonetheless I'm taking a chance.

I feel like I'm channeling the attitude of the handyman helping me renovate my Montauk house with whom I'm spending a lot of time not

getting things done. A two-hundred-seventy-pound, seventy-three-year-old jack-of-all-trades, Joe's entire life is left to chance. His current marriage is day-to-day, and seems to have been that way for all of its sixteen years. He works when, and to the extent it moves him. He day-trades away the few bucks he accumulates. And he scavenges for most of his needs, from the twenty-five-foot municipal light pole he found at the dump now illuminating the driveway behind his self-built dome house, to meals made out of what's discarded at the docks after the boat hands carve off the easy fillets. A high priest in the "come what may" faith, he lives a chancy life surrounded by financial threats as if he doesn't have a care.

I'm sitting in the appointed coffee shop in Nyack when an Asian woman with small features and good posture enters wearing a sequined multicolor vest and a wool hat. Her hippie clothing surprises me. I guess I expected my first Communist date to be in a Mao jacket carrying a little red book.

"Hi, I'm Meihua," she says, shaking my hand, sitting, her voice a bit wispy nervous, her pace self-contained, composed. "Hope you haven't been waiting long."

“I just came in,” I say, wanting to hear more of her perfect, accent-free English. “Did you study English in China or learn here?”

“When I was selected to take the exam to come here for my doctorate, I began studying, mainly because the exam was in English. They sent students coming here to a place called Guangzhou for six months to improve. The rest I learned here.”

“In classes?”

“More like working in McDonald’s. The Chinese government gave us five hundred dollars to start that we had to pay back right away. So I had to find work almost immediately.”

“And you got to stay here because . . .”

“Back then the Chinese and US governments had an agreement that we all had to go back, no matter what. By the time I got my degree, I was married to an American graduate student, and we’d just had a son, but it didn’t matter. I was being deported.”

“And?”

“Tiananmen Square. 1989. After the massacre of the demonstrators, the US government stopped deporting Chinese students. That saved me.”

I'm trying to contain my curiosity, not sound like I'm doing a *60 Minutes* interview, though this woman's life is so interesting I can't stop asking questions.

"What was growing up like?" I ask lamely, following up on her telling me that she was a child of the Cultural Revolution during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time when China was completely insane, schools closed, Mao encouraging everyone to assault one another, her family, due to some relative having owned some land before the revolution, branded "landlords," a "black family." Her parents were beaten at work, paraded as spectacles through the streets, often pulled out of the house at night to be beaten and shamed. Meihua was sent to live in a small village in the relative safety of her grandmother's house.

She remembers the ancient house fondly, its wood stove, stone walls, red-tiled roof, ornate carvings and open courtyard where she'd sit for hours reading, the big tub where she often bathed with her grandmother. She also has vivid memories of hunger, fishing little eels out of drainage ditches to eat. "But then, four years later, I had to go back to live with my family because my grandmother died."

She faced a lot of death as a young child. One uncle hung himself rather than endure more beatings. Another almost was murdered for collaborating because, though he'd done so only under coercion, he had translated for the Japanese during World War II. Ironically, years later, the Communist government paid Meihua's family compensation for having wrongly abused him; secret files established that, while translating for the Japanese, he'd been spying for Mao.

“And your other grandparents?”

“Died during the Great Leap Forward. 1950s. Mao collectivized agriculture causing widespread famine. No food. My father's mother, I was told, was found in a field dead from starvation with grass and weeds in her mouth. She'd been starving herself so her children could have a bit more to eat.”

The elementary and middle schools she should have attended were closed by the Red Guards when she was school age. When the worst of the Cultural Revolution was over, in the mid-1970s, and schools began reopening, she won admission to Shanghai's prestigious technical high school and then Beijing University, China's Harvard.

Sitting for a couple of hours, then driving around, I learn about intense platonic love, the only kind permitted in the China of her youth. Her boyfriend took twelve-hour train rides standing up, bathrooms unusable because they were packed with passengers, just to hand her his latest heartrending poetic love note.

“Want to see what’s playing?” I ask, referring to an art cinema that we’ve passed several times, hoping she wants to extend the date. She says yes and my heart lifts. I steal little glimpses of her as we watch Noah Baumbach’s *Margot at the Wedding*.