
7 Continents

9 Lives

Fay Chiang

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CHINATOWN

- I mahjong and dice on the tables upstairs
confusion of trucks and cars
children, cats and dogs
people falling off the mountain gold:
eddie died yesterday
a street kid shot his fucking brains out
and eddie's in heaven upstream east river
did you know
mrs. tong jumped off her building
looking for peace six stories above mott
and hey, old louey
just passed away in his sleep
the fool, sleeping with the gas pipes
on, again
did you hear about lee
that he couldn't take his henpecking wife and
screaming babies and rotten kids and waiter
job and promises that couldn't be
bought with pennies
that he split before his head did?
- II december, 1956 from boston to new york
I saw a sunrise on empty streets
with old buildings and dark fire escapes
people running
to make a dime in factories, restaurants
trying to beat time
and make their american dream come true
I ran
in restaurants aged 10
standing on milk cartons washing dishes
folding papers for the china times
stringing beads for the old lady
and trying to be good
and trying to be bad
worrying about brothers and sisters being beat
in the school yard
being tough when I wanted to run

being smartass when I wanted to cry
trying to be big when I was really small

III all the time
walking on the poverty line
all the time
feeling the deprivation
the wishing and the wanting;

american tv sold mickey mouse and donald ducks
to little dick and janes and run spot run
in the suburbias of white picket fences
and automobiles
and american society sold cheap labor and self hatred
to little chins and wongs and run dog run
in the ghettos of railroad flats
and dead end streets

I studied asians in america
demonstrated against the war in indochina
shouted *chilai! kaiho! amakibaka!*
wrote newsletters, flyers,
many times we leafleted and petitioned
for community issues

I struggled to learn to say and to believe:
right on
to people's struggle
all power to the people

there is a spirit and movement
growing and pushing
rearranging the order of things
that nothing can hold back

IMAGES

image 1: Jesus Light My Fire

friday after the fundraiser event we were walking the three of us down second avenue to buy some ice cream on st. mark's place and this old woman in raggedy coat and kerchief tied round her face with grayish wisps of hair (it was a cool night, but spring enough to go walking) followed us pleading for us to sing to her, to play the guitar to her, to speak to her, we walked a little faster, she walked a little faster and said as we approached the bodega at the corner:

I say, see the man in the corner sitting with his hands folded to his chest (indeed he was wearing a purple shirt and had a mustache and a terribly disinterested look on his face). well, that louse wouldn't give a starving grandmother or a starving nun, which I am, and I will let you know, I am an artist, but I do not want to go on with this, but he wouldn't give me a dollar's credit and you know what I'm gonna do, I'm gonna go up to his window and stick my nose at his face and give it to him, the bastard. (which she did, which I thought was terrific and told her so. We quickly developed a rapport, the other two had quickened their paces).

I'm an artist nun, dear. and you know that lesbian bar on bleecker. (I think so, murmuring politely. My friend who lives three doors away has mentioned it to me). Well, do you know that rock song, it was on the radio a few years ago...come on baby light my fire? do you know that I went into that bar and sang: come on jesus light my fire? which the both of us thought was hilarious: a starving nun on a dollar's credit singing jesus light my fire in a lesbian bar. we parted.

image 2: Let It Be Known

april 1970. antiwar scene, washington, d.c.

bring the boys home. a naked man dances in the reflecting pool with a red, white and blue ribbon bow on his penis. a circus carnival atmosphere prevails. a contingent marches here and another there through the monuments and graves, the promenades of our country's vitals: socialists vs. trots, vs. commies vs.....

FATHER

his long tapered fingers
guide my young hand curved around
a bamboo brush pen
to form my name in chinese:

family name: *chiang*: from northern china
we came south on tamed wild horses
and became farmers

middle name: *wei*: shared by you
and your sisters, meaning wisdom

and your own *ping*: for peace
or plains of green field

bits of characters:
grass, heart, three dots of water, woods, home

write again and again, your name,
that you may never forget it



Father, I learned to
iron and starch
to package and wrap,
work 12 to 14 hour days
to help the family;
slowly Ma healed

Then when I thought
it was getting better
and I could carry on
with my life
Peter got sick;
it was hospitals
and emergency rooms again
On a bed he sat up
with blood pouring
from his mouth, his nose
onto his chest, on white sheets,
onto the nurses, doctors,
Ma and me
Peter saying he was all right;
Ma saying Peter was all right,
when it wasn't all right

I didn't feel anything
for the next two years

I was scared
but I thought of you
working in America at 10
you must have been scared
somehow you did it

I would too
I had two hands
and I thought I would try
very hard to build a life
I wanted you to be proud
of me, made believe
you were still here

You became Papa-in-the-Sky
when things went wrong
I would have conversations
with you in my head
and things would clear up

I was going to build a life
my writing to share
this pain, the ache
yes, joy in memories
and the hope that someday
I would understand all of this
I think I've begun to
Papa-in-the Sky

The Father speaks:

*That afternoon in the hospital
the autumn light pouring in
you sitting
at the foot of my bed
with your school books
and drawing pads
dozing till the room
was gray in dusk
my eyes closed
I thought of other autumns
September, the month
I was born in China
seems so long ago.*

*Father took me walking
with him in the mountains
looking for his burial plot
to rest his bones, he said.
He was 65 when I was born
still a strong man
he was rich now
having worked the gambling houses
in Victoria's Chinatown*

DAVID

I knew him for 3 weeks, 2 days. Nine days face to face. When he was moved to the hospice his family asked me to return for his last days in this life.

When we first meet, he picks us up from San Diego airport, his stomach, ankles and calves swollen, face flinching in pain. In a codeine haze he insists on driving us to his sister's family's home, where he and his elderly mother live.

The prior two weeks he has lain in bed in the dark in great pain, not moving, not eating. His family asks him what would give him ease in this situation. He wants his boyhood friend, John, in New York City to visit him. John and his wife Jamie ask me to accompany John to California to help his friend.

I feel inept. What did I know about San Diego? Who were these people? How did I get myself into this? I don't even drive!

I had to trust the love that John and Jamie had for this friend and their trust in me to be able to help him. He and John had grown up together on the Street of Embassies in Rangoon, across from the University, where as young men they played music in the warm evenings catching the attention of young women students locked up for the night in their dorms.

"We shared everything: food, drugs and needles. Thirty of us. Bored. We had nothing to do, no jobs, no where to go. Every night five bands played rock and roll until the sun rose. We had good times! And now everyone is dead. AIDS. Only the two of us survived. Now the only friend, who can share my memories, is sick."

We get to the house late on Monday, Presidents Day. Everything is closed. No information. I call John Manzon, the executive director of API Wellness Program in San Francisco for a contact. He refers me to the Asian Pacific Islander Community AIDS Project or APICAP, promising to call Jess San Roque, the executive director, to help us.

What can I do to turn this situation around in four days? We are scheduled to fly back to New York on Saturday at 6 AM. How can we bring

Fay Chiang is a writer, artist and community/cultural activist living and working in Chinatown and the Lower East Side of New York City for the past four decades. Raised in the backroom of a laundry in Queens by immigrant parents from Guandong, China, she writes from her experiences as a woman of color from the working class. She believes culture is a psychological weapon to reclaim our past, define our present and to envision possibilities for our future; that the development of culture is an integral part of progressive social change and social justice movements. Currently working at Project Reach, a youth and community center for young people at risk in Chinatown/Lower East Side, she lives in the East Village with her daughter, Xian.

Ding Kong is a young educator/artist/activist teaching 7th grade math/science in Downtown Los Angeles. Born and raised in China for 8 years, emigrated to Germany for 2 years; he then immigrated to Los Angeles with his family. His artistic and pedagogical practices are heavily influenced by Paolo Freire, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldua, and Vijay Prashad; and by his work experience at Project Reach in New York City.