The Middlestage:

State-Sponsored Overseas Chinese Academics and China's Managed Cultural Globalisation

TIAN Chen

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This thesis is my own unaided work both in concept and execution apart from the normal guidance from my supervisor.

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Abstract

This in-depth ethnographic study focuses on state-sponsored Overseas Chinese Academics (OCAs) and China's managed cultural globalisation based on two years of multi-sited fieldwork in South Africa, Australia, and China. Extending Goffman's (1956) theoretical frameworks of everyday dramatism such as the frontstage and the backstage, I adopt the *middlestage* as the primary conceptual lens of my investigation. The middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation is examined as a fluid and embodied space where state-sponsored OCAs and Chinese state institutions negotiate power in the process of producing performances. I argue that for state-sponsored OCAs, the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation is simultaneously a space of curation, negotiation, and re-imagination.

The research also incorporates an ethnographic fiction titled *The Islanders* and provides a thick description of my state-sponsored OCA participants' life trajectories. *The Islanders* reveals how individual OCAs curate their performances and self-presentations, negotiate their social mobility and identities; and re-imagine their realities whilst seeking conviviality on the middlestage. The thesis discusses and demonstrates how ethnographic fiction can be used as an essential tool for anthropological research.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CI	Confucius Institute
CSSA	Chinese Students and Scholars Association
Hanban	Office of Chinese Language Council International, rebranded as Centre for Language Education and Cooperation in June 2020
HSK	*Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* or Chinese Proficiency Test
KOL	Key Opinion Leader
MoE	Ministry of Education
NICD	National Institute for Communicable Disease
OCA	Overseas Chinese Academic
UCT	University of Cape Town
VPN	Virtual Private Network
WHO	World Health Organisation

Map of China

HEILONGJIANG
INNER MONGOLIA
JILIN
XINJIANG
LIAONING
TIANJIN
HEIBEI
NINGXIA
SHANXI
SHANDONG
QINGHAI
GANSU
SHAANXI
HEINAN
JIANGSU
TIBET
SICHUAN
ANHUI
SHANGHAI
HUBEI
CHONGQING
ZHEJIANG
JIANGXI
HUNAN
GUIZHOU
FUJIAN
YUNNAN
TAIWAN
GUANGXI
GUANGDONG
HONGKONG
MACAU
HAINAN

Chapter One

Introduction

In February 2020, at an initial stage of the global coronavirus outbreak that originated in China, all Chinese students and academics in Western Cape, South Africa received a message from the Overseas Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) through its District President. The CSSA was closely connected to the Chinese embassy and consulate generals. The original message read, in Chinese and English:

> *"It was brought to our attention that some of the Chinese people have reported cases of verbal abuse in public spaces regarding the outbreak of coronavirus in China. We have investigated this and below are the steps that you should take when the situation happens to you: 100% avoid any conflict that could lead to an assault due to illiterate people.*
>
> *You may tell them:*
>
> *1. I am part of South Africa and I reside in this country. No one has the right to demand me to leave this country.*
>
> *2. There is no need to be so abusive in your language and tone.*
>
> *3. It is not my responsibility to explain the coronavirus and if you want to know more, please check WHO (World Health Organization) or NICD (National Institute for Communicable Disease) websites for more information.*
>
> *4. There is no need for me to continue this conversation, I will record this conversation and will submit it to the legal department, or I will call 10111.*
>
> *The other situation is that some friendly local people ask you about the coronavirus, please don't explain more but give the following information:*
>
> *1. Many thanks for your kind concerns. China and the Chinese people are trying their best to fight against this virus. We believe we will contain the virus soon.*
>
> *2. I wear the mask not because I am sick. I am protecting myself and others.*
>
> *3. Please check the WHO or NICD website to find more information about the virus and how to protect yourself.*

4. Please isolate the virus, not the people. Thank you!"

The soaring economic development of China following its market reform and opening-up policy adopted in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping, the then leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), established the party-state[1] as one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. The party-state strategically used globalisation as 'a golden opportunity to realise its ultimate goals of modernisation' (Yan 2007:179). The Chinese leaders sought to balance Confucian values and socialist models of governance by maintaining social stability through limiting civil and political rights, adopting a market economy, attracting foreign investments, and promoting state-endorsed personal qualities as keys to success (Fong & Murphy 2006). In 2010, China secured its place as the world's second-largest economy, and its achievement was celebrated by CCP as a result of 'the successful practice of the path and system of socialism with Chinese characteristics' ("The Modernization of China's System and Capacity For Governance Will Make Greater Contributions to the World" 2019). The Chinese governance system provides a valid new option, conceptualised as the 'Beijing Consensus' (Ramo 2004) and the 'China Model' (Dirlik 2016), to a world dominated by democratic values and neo-liberalism ideologies that made Francis Fukuyama announce 'the end of history' (Fukuyama 1989). The political scientist argued that the great ideological battles between east and west were over and western liberal democracy had triumphed. However, two decades later, Fukuyama declared that the end of history had to be postponed (Menand 2018).

China's rise has significant cultural implications for the world in an era of cultural globalisation. This thesis provides an in-depth ethnographic study on China's managed cultural globalisation focusing on state-sponsored Overseas Chinese Academics (OCAs). This is a diverse group of academics who undertake state-sponsored programmes to conduct teaching, research, study, or academic exchange activities overseas. In this introductory chapter, I provide background information on China's various managed cultural globalisation programmes and highlight state-sponsored OCAs' unique characteristics as an assemblage of highly skilled Chinese professional migrants. Extending Goffman's (1956) conceptual tools of everyday dramatism such as the frontstage and the backstage, I use the *middlestage* as a conceptual lens in this study, which will be clarified in detail. OCAs are performers of China's managed cultural globalisation; at the same time, the stories of China's modernisation are embodied in them. I argue that state-sponsored OCAs must stick to a state-curated performance on the frontstage of China's managed cultural globalisation. Since the OCAs cannot be separated from their performances, there is no real backstage for them. Instead, there

[1] The People's Republic of China is commonly referred to as a party-state because the political system is controlled solely by one political party.

is a *middlestage* where the OCAs' off-frontstage behaviours are displayed to both their overseas audience and the Chinese state institutions. I outline my argument of this middlestage simultaneously being a space of curation, negotiation, and re-imagination for state-sponsored OCAs.

China's managed cultural globalisation

Cultural globalisation is defined by Wise (2008:19) as a process of global cultural 'assemblage-making'. 'Assemblage', as explained by Collier and Ong (2007:12), implies being 'heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated', while 'global' implies being 'broadly encompassing, seamless, and mobile' (Ibid.). Thus 'global assemblage' is a composite concept that suggests inherent tensions (Collier and Ong 2007). The process of global cultural assemblage-making demonstrates 'duality of homogeneity and heterogeneity' (Lebovic 2017:46). Analysing this duality provides a way to grasp the nature of modern global cultures. On the one hand, cultures are constantly shifting yet the transformations are reinforced by 'an increasingly uniform economic structure' (Ibid.). On the other hand, cultures are increasingly interlinked yet the outcome features 'an accelerating proliferation of style and difference' (Ibid.). The complicated and conflicting process of cultural globalisation, as analysed by Pieterse (2009:44), can be viewed from three perspectives. First, a cultural differentialism perspective views cultural globalisation as constant 'clashes of civilisations' (Pieterse 2009:4). Second, a cultural convergence angle to understand cultural globalisation pays attention to cultural standardisation as a result of the 'global sweep of consumerism' (Ibid.). Two examples of such cultural standardisation are McDonaldization and Disneyfication, whose consumerism-driven and standardised models make significant global cultural impacts. Global flows of cultures promoted by international corporations such as McDonald's and Disney are not only capable of manipulating personal tastes, but also pose threats to state authorities who may lose control over the distribution and consumption of goods and services (Watson 2005). Third, a cultural hybridisation perspective of investigating cultural globalisation analyses the travelling and mixing of cultures across locations and identities (Pieterse 2009:44).

The Chinese government adopts a cultural differentialism approach in its participation in cultural globalisation. The entire modern history of China is commonly interpreted by the party-state as a series of attempts to 'meet the challenges of the outside world' and for China to 'regain its status in the global community of nation-states' (Yan 2002:36). Coming from such a perspective, cultural globalisation is spelled out by Chinese scholar He Qing as a neo-liberal ideology that serves the flow of transnational capitals (He 2003). Cultural globalisation is popularly viewed within China as a 'conspiracy' set by the neo-imperial United States to undermine the national consciousness of developing countries (He 2003:98).

In this battle, China has been suffering from a significant 'cultural trade deficit' (Yan 2007:174). In other words, not only is cultural globalisation widely perceived in China as a clash of civilisations, but China is also often viewed as a victim of these clashes. Such narratives call for further strengthening of state power in China as a strategy to fight against the cultural globalisation conspiracy (He 2003).

State power's intervention with the cultural globalisation process is well justified by CCP's economic and political trajectories, visions, and policies. Before China's market reform in 1978, the party-state was the owner, operator, employer, planner, director, and fund-supplier of all its organisations (Child 1996), where a centralised management system was applied to everything (Liu 2003). When Deng Xiaoping introduced pragmatism to China's economic development while opening China to the outside world, he also insisted that the party-state sticks firmly to four basic principles. These guiding principles include the socialist road, dictatorship of the proletariat, leadership of the Communist Party; and Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought. These four principles are upheld by CCP as 'a symbol of Communist rule' (Yan 2002:25). They give legitimacy for the party-state to manage every aspect of Chinese society and take all matters under its control, including the cultural flows and conflicts (Yan 2002). By doing so, China provides an alternative model in its participation in cultural globalisation - 'managed' cultural globalisation (Yan 2002:42). In this thesis, China's managed cultural globalisation is defined as the Chinese state-controlled approach to its participation in the process of global cultural assemblage-making.

The centrality of the state is a key feature in China's model of managed cultural globalisation. Chinese President Xi Jinping confidently remarked at the 18th National Congress of CCP in 2014 that 'We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world' (Xinhua Net 2014). Political scientist Joseph Nye (2004, 2017) argues that the influence emanating from cultural values is a significant boost to 'soft power', which he defines as the ability to 'obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment' (Nye 2017:1). However, there is a difference between Nye's notion of soft power and the case of China. While Nye's conceptualisation of soft power is based on clear distinctions between state and non-state spheres in democratic societies, the Chinese government controls almost all cultural activities (Shambaugh 2015). This top-down approach of China's participation in cultural globalisation is demonstrated when President Xi sets the tone for 'telling a good story of China':

> 'China should be portrayed as a civilised country featuring a rich history, ethnic unity, and cultural diversity, and as an Eastern power with good government, a developed economy, cultural prosperity, national unity, and beautiful scenery' ("China to Promote Cultural Soft Power" 2014).

The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi further elaborates on the strategy for 'telling a good story of China':

> 'China's development will benefit China, and also benefit the whole world and the people around the world. If we can make this clear to the world, China's story will be more convincing and persuasive. I hope that *everyone* will join in to tell *this* story of success. The *more* people start to tell the story, the *better* it will be told' ("Wang Yi: Telling China Story, Spreading China Confidence, Bringing Benefits for the People Around the World" 2014).

Various initiatives are designed to carry out China's managed cultural globalisation, dismiss prejudices about China, and create a positive image of the party-state (Shambaugh 2015). It is estimated that China sets aside an annual budget of $10 billion to implement its managed cultural globalisation (Shambaugh 2015:100). These projects are carried out by state institutions, such as academic institutions under the Ministry of Education (MoE) including the China Scholarship Council, Chinese universities, and state-sponsored research institutes.

An example of China's various initiatives in its managed cultural globalisation is the Confucius Institute (CI), one of China's central mechanisms for the constitution of its soft power (Hubbert 2019). CI is a non-profit organisation established by the Office of Chinese Language Council International, commonly known as *Hanban*, and funded by the Education Ministry of China.[2] The organisation commits to promoting the Chinese language and Chinese culture globally as well as contributing to multiculturalism in a harmonious world (Hanban 2014). Since the first CI was set up in Seoul in 2004, 530 of these language and culture centres opened in 149 countries and special administrative regions (Xinhua Net 2018).

What makes CI different from its counterparts, such as the British Council, Alliance Française and the Goethe Institute is its organisational structure. Rather than operating independently like its counterparts, CI directly exports the Chinese system overseas and implants it into overseas institutions. A CI is established as a partnership between a host educational institution overseas and a prominent Chinese university. The partnership incorporates a CI into an institution of the host country, whilst all CIs are linked directly to their headquarter *Hanban* in Beijing, forming a highly centralised network (Zaharna 2014). *Hanban*, at the centre of the network, oversees CI operations, approves annual plans, and provides funding.[3] *Hanban* also organises and sponsors cultural programmes, study tours, and annual conferences. Participating universities in China oversee the recruitment of the Chinese Director and teaching staff, mostly from a pool of

[2] In June 2020, *Hanban* rebranded itself as Centre for Language Education and Cooperation, but the centre is still commonly referred to as *Hanban*, and the global Confucius Institute brand and network remains unchanged.
[3] *Hanban* funding includes but is not limited to airfare and salaries for staff sent aboard from China, staff training in China, and reference libraries.

academics at the university as well as recent graduates who majored in foreign languages and teaching Chinese as a foreign language. *Hanban* offers overseas host institutions funding support, who are responsible for appointing a local director, supplying teaching facilities, office space, equipment; and arranging staff housing.

The well-funded large-scale cultural globalisation project managed by the party-state was initially positively received by its global partners. However, tensions in these global partnerships intensified in recent years. CI was often criticised for lack of transparency in its governance, proving a one-sided positive view on China, and limiting freedom of speech. CI also triggered a global wave of debates on foreign interference and academic freedom (Jakhar 2019). Although the overall number of CIs increased due to their steady global expansion, many CIs had to close in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, France, Sweden, and Denmark because of the local partner's criticisms.

Any attempt to manage globalisation will result in a reduction of information flows and cultural exchanges; and create misunderstandings, tensions, and conflicts (Yan 2007). China's managed cultural globalisation creates what Tsing observes as 'awkward engagement' (Tsing 2005:xi), where cultural diversity brings 'frictions' to global connections (Ibid.). CI's 'telling a good story of China' creates frictions for some of its international audience. In analysing such frictions, it is important to note that unlike other frictions observed in the globalisation process, China is not a passive receiver of globalising effects but rather an active driving force of a new form of globalisation (Hubbert 2019:7). Thus China must also be considered as 'a site for theorising globalisation' and 'a method of inquiry', rather than as a subject of study (Ibid.).

Several valuable ethnographic studies have been conducted looking into China's managed cultural globalisation and its impacts. Sahlins (2014) is one of the first anthropologists to examine the practices of CIs in the United States and concludes that it is an 'academic malware' that must be suspended. He argues that CIs promote Chinese political ideologies and conflict with the principles of academic freedom and integrity which are the foundation of the US higher education system (Sahlins 2014). While Gil's research (2017) focuses on China's soft power expansion in the world and provides detailed accounts of the strategies of the party-state, Hubbert (2019:1) conducts an 'ethnography on international relations' and explores China's presentation of its entwined paths of modernisation and globalisation and its reception by the US audience. These studies provide significant insights into understanding the unique processes of China's managed cultural globalisation. However, as Robertson (2010) points out, the mobile individuals should be seen as active economic, social, and political agents who interpret and negotiate their social worlds. The perspective of the participants of China's managed cultural globalisation requires equal research attention.

Chinese mobility and Overseas Chinese Academics

China's booming economy in the past three decades has allowed Chinese people to explore the world by travelling abroad and seeking opportunities to study and work on state-sponsored programmes or their own initiatives. Chinese migration, which primarily consisted of male contract labourers, has significantly diversified. Apart from manual labour migrants, Chinese diasporas now consist of students, traders, entrepreneurs, and highly skilled professionals including academics.

Studies on Chinese diasporas in South Africa and Australia, where my fieldwork took place, demonstrate the demographic diversification of Chinese migrants and overseas Chinese communities. They first evolve from labour-intensive migrants to business-oriented migrants, and then a highly diverse population marked with significant internal differences (Collins 2002; Deumert and Mabandla 2013; Inglis 1972; Park 2008; Huynh, Park, and Chen 2010). The Chinese migration patterns can be interpreted as the co-working of a destination country's developmental trajectory and the Chinese migrants' mobility. Park and Huynh (2010), in their analysis of Chinese migration to Africa, explain how the different demands of the receiving states attract different types of Chinese migrants:

> '(I)n African countries that are industrialising, space is created for Chinese construction companies to enter, thus, bringing with them a certain kind of migration/settlement pattern. In countries where agriculture is dominant, a different set of opportunities has opened up to the Chinese, making it possible for a different kind of Chinese capital and group of Chinese people to enter. In countries where neither industry nor agriculture is dominant, other opportunities are available' (Park and Huynh 2010:209).

The Chinese migration pattern in Africa provides an example of the diversity of Chinese global migration. While various groups of Chinese diasporas are often perceived by their overseas host societies as a homogenous group, distinctions and divisions can be observed between them. The intersecting lines include generation, culture, and ethnicity, language, legal status, education, residential space, class, occupation, and identity (Park 2008).

OCAs can be viewed as an assemblage of Chinese knowledge diasporas in the increasingly diverse Chinese international migration. The contemporary globalisation of academic mobility as a form of knowledge diaspora is often seen as a part of the neoliberal free-market movement (Kim 2009). Higher education institutions are recognised as mediums for cross-border connections that initiate global flows of people

(Marginson & Wende 2007). Transnational flows of academic mobility are more often shaped by the intellectual centre-periphery positioning of academic institutions rather than solely driven by pure economic incentives (Kim 2010:588). Although academic centres and peripheries are most likely tied to geographic regions, their cultural capital can usually be dissected into individuals' skills and credentials that are easily portable (Fong 2011). This cultural capital can be easily 'de-contextualised' and 're-contextualised' when academic mobility takes place (Hannerz 1990:246).

China is playing an increasingly significant role in global higher education. Although much scholarly attention is given to overseas Chinese students, limited research has been conducted on OCAs. Cao (2008) explores why many well-established OCAs stay overseas and do not return home. He finds the reasons include financial factors as well as institutional factors such as lack of *guanxi* (network) when having to readapt to a network-based society, the work culture shock to integrate into the Chinese work environment; and uncertainties of China's political environment. Yang and Welch's study (2010) finds that OCAs in Australia are highly motived to support China's development despite personal political views. They are identified as 'potential knowledge bridges' that can help integrate China into the international academic community (Yang and Welch 2010:604). Chen's thesis (2014) on Chinese academics who receive doctoral training in the United States investigates the impacts of their overseas educational experiences. She argues that the group can be regarded as a driving force for positive transformations once they return to China. These studies view OCAs as a homogenised group of well-educated, highly skilled immigrants who undertake 'privileged mobility' and actively engage in knowledge production (Nyamnjoh 2016:32). However, the state-sponsored OCAs' life trajectories often reveal that their mobilities are not necessarily as privileged as it seems. A thick description (Geertz 1973), which requires deep interpretation of individual OCAs' social worlds, is much needed to reveal the diversity and complexity of this group.

My ethnographic study is based on two years of engagements with state-sponsored OCAs, a diverse group of academics who undertake state-sponsored programmes to conduct teaching, research, study, or academic exchange activities overseas. The latest available data provided by the Chinese Ministry of Education and *Hanban* reports that 30,200 candidates sponsored directly by the China Scholarship Council and 30,560 candidates sponsored indirectly by the state through state-owned academic institutions went abroad in 2018 to complete degree programmes, conduct research or academic exchange (MoE 2019). By 2018, *Hanban* sent out 46,200 staff to be stationed in 149 countries in support of the global CI network (Xinhua Net 2018).

State-sponsored OCAs are selected to be stationed overseas based on various criteria. These criteria, among other things, are related to their professional qualifications and special talents to demonstrate Chinese culture. Other selection criteria are based on ambiguous qualities including 'a patriotic spirit' and 'readiness

to sacrifice' (Hanban n.d.). During their time spent overseas, OCAs are required to obey Chinese laws, meet workload requirements, remain under the leadership of state institutions, and submit regular reports. They are also expected to support and help organise events hosted by overseas Chinese state institutions or informal organisations such as the overseas Chinese Students and Scholars Association. These criteria demand OCAs extend their professional selves outside of their workspace and constantly demonstrate their maintenance of standards and their loyalty to the state in their private lives.

The traditional Chinese migrant workers travel overseas mostly because of economic incentives. The new wave of Chinese students chooses to study overseas to earn degrees and seek career opportunities on a wider global platform. State-sponsored OCAs differ from these Chinese migrants because they prosper within the Chinese system. They have to go through numerous competitions to achieve their academic credentials and positions that qualify them to be considered for overseas posts. They go through rigid selection processes which often include written tests and face-to-face interviews. Many of them come from rural China and are transformed from marginalised individuals into seemingly patriotic, well-educated, and self-motivated model citizens of China (Fong & Murphy 2006:7). The party-state relies on the OCAs' qualities to demonstrate China's modernisation on the global stage. State-sponsored OCAs become the 'public embodiment' of the state (Hubbert 2019:120).

State-sponsored OCAs are tasked by Chinese state institutions to 'tell a good story of China' to their overseas audience, and at the same time, the stories of China's rushed modernisation are embodied in the OCAs. To investigate this entangled relationship, I apply a dramatism lens to interpret China's managed cultural globalisation as a fluid and embodied space. Such lens offers a unique methodological perspective by viewing humans - individual state-sponsored OCAs; and 'nonhuman bodies' - their overseas settings and the Chinese state institutions as both 'producers and products of space' (Low 2016:94).

The middlestage lens

Shakespeare's claim that "All the world's a stage; And all the men and women merely players" offers theoretical insights to scholars who make attempts to understand the world from a theatrical perspective. Conceptualised as 'dramatism' by Kenneth Burke (1969), 'social drama' by Victor Turner (1985); and 'dramaturgical' by Erving Goffman (1956), dramatism theories bring forward the notion that drama is the best metaphor for 'describing, analysing, and predicting human action' (Bell 2008:113). Kenneth Burke (1969), in analysing 'dramatism', defines the five key terms for understanding life as: act - what was done; scene - when and where it was done; agent - who did it; agency - how he/she did it; and purpose - why.

Victor Turner (1985) sees the evolution of conflicts as the core of social dramas and identifies breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration as the key elements of conflict development.

In *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1956) uses theatre as a metaphorical lens to look at human behaviours in our daily life. For Goffman, the social performance takes place on the frontstage,

> '[…] that part of the individual's performance that functions regularly in a generic and fixed way in order to define the situation for those who observe the performance […] is the expressive equipment of a standardised type, used intentionally or unconsciously by the individual during his/her performance' (Goffman 1956:34).

Concurrently, there is a backstage, a restricted place connected with a given performance, where the intended impressions created by this performance are 'consciously contradicted in a natural manner' (Goffman 1956:136). The backstage provides a space for the actor to relax, put aside his/her disguise, interrupt the performance, and abandon the character that he/she plays in the respective frame. Frontstage and backstage are closely connected. They have a symbiotic relationship: activities on the backstage allow performers to 'maintain appropriate behaviours' during the frontstage, while frontstage activities 'provide fodder for discussions and activities in the back region' (Cain 2012:669).

Goffman also points out that the boundaries between a frontstage, a backstage, and a performer's behaviours associated with both stages can be fluid. Individuals can transform a frontstage into a backstage by 'invoking a backstage style' (Goffman 1956:78). At the same time, frontstage behaviours may be carried to a backstage, because a performer may become 'habituated' to one's frontstage role and 'handle one's relaxation from it as a performance' (Goffman 1956:82). Meyrowitz (1977) notes this paradox in his analysis on politicians who increasingly perform for unofficial camera settings. He identifies an in-between region where politicians must compromise their privacy, which weakens their ability to play traditional front region roles. I argue that performances produced in-between frontstage and backstage involve complicated processes beyond carrying behaviours across spaces and are under-theorised within Goffman and Meyrowitz's frameworks. I further argue that there is an independent space between the frontstage and the backstage, which I identify as the *middlestage*. This middlestage is different from a frontstage where the performers concentrate fully on their performances and a backstage where performers can take breaks from the frontstage and audience.

The middlestage provides a unique spatial perspective to understanding performances. The spatial perspective requires space to be regarded not as an abstract location where events take place (Keith and Pile 1993) but as a *process* because space itself is socially produced (Lefebvre 1974), and the social

production of spatial structures is done through processes (Harvey 2004). Echoing Low (2016) and Massey (2005), space is perceived in my study as fluid and always under construction, produced by global and local interactions, and constituted by collective and individual experiences. I adopt a person-based approach to explore space as embodied - where emotions and imaginations are lived through (Harvey 2004), and agency and new possibilities arise (Low 2016).

In this thesis, I adopt the middlestage as the primary lens of investigation and engage with ethnographic data from my state-sponsored OCA participants to examine their performances of China's managed cultural globalisation and theorise the middlestage. State-sponsored OCAs' work assigned by state institutions such as their engagements with the overseas counterparts at work, can be viewed as their formal cultural performances on the frontstage. Clear frontstage guidelines are set for the OCAs. They are required to work with state institution-developed project timelines, objectives, schedules, and follow state-set previous examples as well as good practices. OCAs as performers enter the frontstage and find a 'collective representation' that is institutionalised where they must simultaneously perform the assigned tasks and 'maintain the corresponding front' (Goffman 1956:17). This can be understood as a form of what Bryman (2004:103) calls 'performative labour', where the work by management and workers alike are comparable to a theatrical performance, thus the workplace is considered similar to a stage. In *Gambling Life,* Malaby (2003) moves beyond the ethnocentric assumptions and the familiar anthropological argument that risks are culturally defined and evaluated by applying the strategy of working the theory of indeterminacy 'up' from the ethnographic ground. His ethnographic accounts of a community on the Greek island of Crete leads to an in-depth analysis which reveals that indeterminacy often arises from stochastic, performative, and other sources. In his ethnography, gambling was used as a vehicle for establishing a new analytical perspective on broader concerns. A similar approach is adopted in this study to work the performative theory 'up' using on-the-ground ethnographic data focusing on OCAs.

OCAs' work environment is not as straightforward as the frontstage. On the one hand, their after-work space can be considered as off-frontstage to their overseas audience because the target audience is no longer watching them in a theatrical setting. On the other hand, OCAs still interact extensively with their overseas audience outside state-initiated real-life settings. However, this space of their private life must remain open for inspection by a non-present audience - the Chinese state. An individual state-sponsored OCA needs to privately maintain 'standards of behaviour' which he/she does not necessarily believe in. This is because of their fear that an invisible audience is present and will punish individuals whose behaviours do not comply with relevant standards (Goffman 1956). Thus, there is no real backstage to the OCAs' performance. The backstage to the overseas audience remains a frontstage to the Chinese state to a certain degree, where OCAs continue their performances. State-sponsored OCAs need to give parallel performances: they not

only give performances tasked by the state to the overseas audience but also perform their commitments and loyalties to the state in their private lives.

I argue that state-sponsored OCAs live and work at a middlestage in-between the frontstage and the backstage in China's managed cultural globalisation. As much as the state attempts to manage everything in its cultural globalisation processes, OCAs' middlestage cannot be managed as easily as the frontstage. Frontstage performances always take place at a given time and designated place, and all frontstage events are reported back to state institutions. However, each individual OCAs' middlestage cannot be easily tracked. State institutions can only reach out to OCAs' private lives by communicating through their bureaucratic systems. Examples of these communication channels that set up the middlestage include formal and informal events curated by the Chinese embassies/consulates (e.g., Teacher's Day celebration, security lectures, party lessons), activities organised by the Chinese Students and Scholars Association, and other informal organisations closely associated with the state (e.g., community services and online publications).

State institutions and the individual OCAs negotiate power in the process of producing performances on the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation. In *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Victor Turner argues that social dynamics are more than a set programme, thus human behaviours can never be designed and driven simply by a grand system (Turner 1987). The middlestage leaves room for the performers to re-imagine their performances and negotiate identities by seeking individuality in their roles. A dialectical process between 'being made' and 'self-making' can be expected: OCAs resist some aspects of state discourses while using others to their advantage (Ong 1999, 2003). Their performances at the middlestage may also become active agents that reinforce transformations (Turner 1987).

The middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation is therefore viewed in this study as a fluid and embodied space where state-sponsored OCAs bring their life trajectories into a unique space co-constructed by an overseas setting and the Chinese state institutions. The middlestage encounters of OCAs are informed by complex interconnecting local and global hierarchies (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). Meanwhile, through their participation, the embodied spaces of individuals and collectives take on 'social, ritual, cultural, and political dimensions'(Low 2016:107). This thesis brings these hierarchies and dimensions into conversation with the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation and draws dramatism theories to analyse ethnographic data on state-sponsored OCAs' life trajectories and overseas experiences. I argue that the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation is a space where state-sponsored OCAs' curations, negotiations, and re-imaginations take place.

Thesis outline

This thesis consists of two parts. Part I provides a theoretical analysis of the state-sponsored OCAs and China's managed cultural globalisation and engages with ethnographic data collected from South Africa, Australia, and China. This introductory chapter outlines the background of China's participation in cultural globalisation as well as the mobilities of Overseas Chinese Academics and establishes a dramatical perspective of the *middlestage* as a conceptual lens to investigate China's managed cultural globalisation.

Chapter Two discusses the methodologies adopted in this thesis. Data from multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork informs my theoretical exploration: South Africa is my main fieldwork site and provides key information to the study, and data from Australia and China are used for comparison purposes to sharpen the research perspectives. A fictional composite identity of *The Question Person* is created in the data collection process to protect my research participants' identities and provide a comprehensive exploration of the middlestage. In addition, the chapter illustrates, by analysing the production of an ethnographic fiction titled *The Islanders*, how ethnographic fiction can be used as an essential tool for anthropological research.

Chapter Three explores the various *curations* on the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation. While state-sponsored OCAs are tasked by Chinese state institutions to perform state-curated aspects of Chinese culture, they also curate their own understanding of Chinese culture to the overseas audience. Meanwhile, state-sponsored OCAs are required to curate presentations of themselves to Chinese state institutions. Although OCAs are restrained by state institutions' complex censorship mechanisms, they apply self-censorship strategically to deny the state institutions' access to the middlestage. In addition, I introduce the concept of *institutional patriotism* to interpret OCAs' curations for and co-curations with state institutions on the middlestage.

Chapter Four analyses *negotiations* on the middlestage. I explore the embodied aspects of China's managed cultural globalisation by investigating state-sponsored OCAs' identity negotiation processes. Using Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice framework for understanding identity, I analyse the developments of OCAs' fields, capitals, and habitus in their negotiations at three levels: first, state-home and origin-home; second, internal and international mobilities; and third, Chinese modernisation and individualisation. I argue that the middlestage provides a space of *recovery* to OCAs which enables them to negotiate with China's rushed modernisation.

Chapter Five examines state-sponsored OCAs' *re-imaginations*. Through their middlestage engagements with the world outside China, OCAs re-imagine their realities as cosmopolitan and engage their re-imagined identities with conviviality. I highlight *deep conviviality* as a critical agent that balances the OCAs' dividing identity forces in their re-imagined identities. These re-imaginations become the OCAs' habitus and capitals and are carried into various fields to shape the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation as well as individual OCAs' future life trajectories.

Part II of the thesis is the ethnographic fiction *The Islanders.* It is a thick description of the life stories of five central fictional characters who represent my state-sponsored OCA participants' various backgrounds. Their life stories reveal how individual OCAs curate their performances and self-presentations, negotiate their social mobility and identities; and re-imagine their realities whilst seeking conviviality on the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation.

The thesis concludes with a reflective epilogue where I examine my investigation of the state-sponsored OCAs and the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation from a middlestage lens. I summarise the main arguments of the thesis, explore the thesis production process from a middlestage perspective, and propose recommendations for future research on China's managed cultural globalisation as well as the middlestage.

Chapter Two

From 'The Question Person' to 'The Islanders': Researching the Middlestage

"I am shocked how much ethics is emphasised in a research project here! In China, we don't have to do ethical clearance in our research design. I didn't mention any ethical issues in my research proposal and there was no question or concern at my proposal hearing back in China," an OCA told me after attending a PhD proposal hearing session at the Anthropology Department at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in March 2017.

"What do you think about the ethical clearance at UCT?" I asked the OCA, a young female researcher in Anthropology who was on a one-year academic exchange programme at the university's Centre for African Studies. Her research project was on the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student protests in South Africa and was fully funded by the China Scholarship Council, a state institution under the Education Ministry of China.

"I don't like it." The OCA anthropologist said, "If you emphasise this much on ethics, you can never get any real work done."

In Hubbert's (2019) ethnography of international relations focusing on the global impacts of Chinese soft power, the investigator argues that ethnographic investigations on China should give equal methodological attention to both Anthropology and China (Hubbert 2019:263). While I agree with Hubbert that China's unique path of modernisation and globalisation requires methodological considerations, it is important to avoid an approach of methodological nationalism that perceives the state as the natural setting for all social life (Wimmer and Schiller 2002; Xiang 2016). Methodological approaches adopted in studies on China's participation in globalisation and Chinese migrants are often pre-conditioned by methodological nationalism. These studies focus mainly on factors that push and pull Chinese migrants between China and their respective migrant-receiving destinations from economic and policy-related perspectives. Such methodological approaches often fail to examine mobility within individual and situated contexts (Kenway and Fahey 2006; Cantwell 2011). However, treating the nation as merely the assemblage of individuals should also be avoided, as this leads to a methodological path of reverse essentialism that Herzfeld (2016:15) notes as 'methodological individualism'.

In this chapter, I present the methodological considerations of the study. I argue that the middlestage lens can be effectively used to explore China's managed cultural globalisation as a fluid and embodied space because it offers a methodological approach that views individual OCAs, their overseas settings, and the Chinese state equally as both producers and products of space. I outline in detail the backgrounds of my multi-sited fieldwork and shifting positionalities. I demonstrate how a fictional composite identity named *The Question Person* is utilised in the data collection process to protect my research participants' identities while providing a comprehensive exploration of the middlestage. I introduce background information on an ethnographic fiction titled *The Islanders* and demonstrate that the genre can be used as an essential tool for anthropological research. I argue that ethical considerations not only ensure the safety of participants but also give the researcher inspiration for establishing alternative platforms of communications and expressions.

Multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork: South Africa, Australia, and China

To investigate the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation as a fluid and embodied space, I extend my research beyond the limits of classical single-sited ethnography. As opposed to understanding anthropology as an 'old tool' that views cultures as firmly grounded within bounded spaces and unable to move across spaces (Tsing 2000:339), I use multi-sited ethnography to explore the global interconnections and mobilities.

My multi-sited fieldwork first took place in South Africa from February 2017 to July 2018. Thereafter, I carried out a comparative study in Australia from August 2018 to November 2018 to gain an understanding of different groups of OCAs. I also conducted follow-up fieldwork in China with OCAs in December 2018 and November 2019. These OCAs were my research participants in South Africa who returned to China at the end of their programmes. South Africa remained as the main site of investigation, but a 'loose comparison' (Nader 2013:5) from the Australian and Chinese sites was used to compare and connect distinct factors that came up in the research process and to sharpen the research perspectives.

My 27 research participants were all born in China where they received foundation and tertiary education. This diverse group included Chinese academic staff who were sent out by Chinese universities through *Hanban* to work at overseas Confucius Institutes under the titles of Directors, State-Sponsored Teachers,

and Volunteer Teachers.[4] Participants also included Chinese academics employed by Chinese universities and sponsored by the China Scholarship Council to be sent overseas to complete a degree, a research project, or an academic exchange programme. In addition, the group included Chinese academics who first went overseas on Chinese state-sponsored programmes but stayed to work at overseas institutions. Out of the 27 state-sponsored OCA participants in my study, 13 were male and 14 were female; 13 were under the age of 30; 10 were aged between 31 to 60; and four were above the age of 60. Among them, five held permanent academic positions at Chinese universities and 13 were on one or two-year contracts with state-sponsored programmes administered by Chinese state institutions. Nine OCA participants did not return to China after they completed their state-sponsored programmes and took up positions at overseas universities, among them two recently retired. Eighteen state-sponsored OCAs returned to China, resumed their original duties at state institutions, or looked for new career opportunities in China. To protect my state-sponsored OCA participants' identities and avoid any individual from being identified, no detailed data or profile of the participants is revealed in the thesis. The participants' trajectories are engaged in the form of fictional characters from the Question Person to The Islanders, a method to be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

As two overseas destinations targeted by China's managed cultural globalisation, South Africa and Australia share many similarities, yet the two fields are perceived differently by state-sponsored OCAs. Both countries are former British colonies and members of the Commonwealth of Nations in the southern hemisphere. They share similar cultures in terms of sports and language. However, Australia's GDP per capita is almost nine times that of South Africa.[5] Both sites are closely connected to China: while Australia fully embraces neo-liberalism where the higher education sector is particularly influenced by Chinese investments, South Africa's apparent good relationship with China is under the spotlight for the accusation of China's neo-imperialism agenda in Africa. What distinguished the two sites in my study was the different perceptions state-sponsored OCAs had of them. Australia was the desired site of destination for OCAs as it was considered a wealthy country where they could experience a safe environment, free lifestyle, and seek opportunities. South Africa was considered by OCAs as a nation with poverty, considerable security risks, and uncertainties. On the other side of the token, South Africa provides an alternative and easier path to having an overseas experience as it is more affordable;[6] and there is also less competition in the OCA selection processes. All OCAs selected to be sent overseas had to go through rigid processes of written tests

[4] Directors are usually senior academic staff from universities in China who are seconded to the CI programme to work overseas for 2 to 4 years. State-Sponsored Teachers usually hold permanent positions at universities in China and are seconded to the CI programme for 2 years. Volunteer Teachers are usually fresh graduates from Chinese universities and are sent overseas for 1 to 2 years.

[5] Data from International Monetary Fund reveals that in 2018, the GDP per capita of South Africa and Australia are USD 6,354 and USD 56,420 respectively.

[6] State-sponsored OCAs are offered similar amount of allowance in US dollars regardless of their stationed location.

and interviews conducted by their home universities, *Hanban*, or China Scholarship Council. Those who were sent to Australia had to make significant efforts by demonstrating high competence in their English language and establishing *guanxi* (connections) with overseas institutions. The competition for going to South Africa was significantly lower. Many OCAs who were sent to South Africa shared that they came to the country primarily because their applications to state-sponsored overseas programmes in other countries were not successful. They were assigned by Chinese state institutions to be stationed in South Africa. A few OCAs also told me that they chose South Africa as their preferred destination because of the low competition in the selection processes.

The China site was a special field where state-sponsored OCAs' life trajectories were drawn as important data to understand their frontstage and middlestage behaviours that took place overseas. As I will elaborate in the next chapters, many OCAs viewed their international mobilities simply as an extension of their internal migration within China. During their time overseas, they interacted with China in multiple ways as they reported work progress to state institutions, stayed connected with their families, reflected on their past experiences in China, and planned for a future of going back to work in China. Many OCAs also shared their hindsight on their overseas experiences which they were only able to develop upon their return to China when they were able to compare their current life in China with earlier overseas experiences. These reflections are important data for developing a comprehensive understanding of the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation.

My OCA participants' life trajectories turn the combinations of the three sites of my fieldwork - South Africa, Australia, and China - into translocalities of coherent fields (Appadurai 1996). The three sites are connected, and the relationships between them and within them are equally important (Hannerz 2003). My multi-sited ethnography across three fieldwork sites allows these complex relationships to be studied and adds an important comparative dimension to understanding China's managed cultural globalisation.

Shifting positionality at fieldwork

Serendipity is an important ingredient in my ethnography on the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation. The research is guided by serendipitous discoveries as they can be effectively applied in ethnographic studies to not only inform the ethnographic exploration of events, cases, and culture; but also guide concept formation and therefore has decisive impacts on the research topics (Pieke 2000). My informal contacts with state-sponsored OCAs in South Africa were formed in February 2017 after an interaction with a South Africa-based Chinese lecturer. I was warmly welcomed and invited to the lecturer's

residence for tea, where five other OCAs lived in. By using this snowball sampling approach, I met all my research participants in South Africa within a short period.

After my research proposal on the study of OCAs received ethical clearance from the Anthropology Department at UCT in October 2017, I informed all my research participants of my research project and presented to them a consent form explaining the nature of my study and research methods. To protect individual OCAs' identities, only verbal consents were sought to avoid any signed documents being obtained by Chinese state institutions. With my participants' consent, most of the ethnographic interviews in South Africa took place at the participants' residences, where we had informal conversations over tea and late-night dinners. We also went on excursions to mountains, beaches, farms, and vineyards. At these informal gatherings, my OCA participants led the flows of our conversations. The most popular topics included exchanges of their observations and reflections on teaching in South Africa, comparing South Africa's education system and lifestyle to China, their childhood experiences, their career aspirations, and their explorations in South Africa. At a later stage, I was invited to formally participate in state institutions' cultural activities organised by OCAs. Considering my experience in teaching at secondary and tertiary levels and translation work, I was invited to be one of three judges for a teaching competition.[7] I also attended several official events and dinner parties with state-sponsored OCAs for liaison with their local colleagues and visitors from China. I was invited to formal festive celebrations and farewells of OCAs who completed their terms of service. I also participated in several meetings for academic exchange between Chinese visitors from state institutions and the local academic communities and was sometimes given ad hoc translation duties or was invited to share my personal experiences. I attended numerous state institution-sponsored reception events and excursions to show guests from China around. I was often consulted for English language inputs in email communications between OCAs and their South African colleagues and helped with drafting and translating official documents. I also attended several embassy/consulate general events with OCAs including a Teacher's Day celebration, a safety talk, and a party lesson where my attendance was requested by senior OCAs to add on to their headcount. I occasionally played an advisory role when being consulted for classroom management and lesson planning, and when some young OCAs sought advice on the PhD application process at overseas institutions. Aside from one official cultural event (where I conducted a two-hour translation service and was paid a salary directly by the event's commercial sponsors), I participated in formal and informal events voluntarily. I took field notes of all formal and informal interactions with state-sponsored OCAs at the events or at the end of each day's observations. I

[7] The teaching competition was an internal event organised by senior state-sponsored OCAs, where young OCAs presented their lesson plans and conducted 10 minutes of micro teaching to the judges.

conducted a semi-structured interview with each OCA participant before their end-of-service departure.[8] The relationship I developed with my participants not only provided me with detailed data for research but also valuable friendships for life.

My fieldwork in Australia was for loose comparison purposes and was scheduled for a short period of two months. Therefore, most of my data collected from Australia-based state-sponsored OCA participants were through semi-structured interviews. I obtained my initial contacts with OCAs through my network and used snowball sampling to engage with more participants. I also participated in activities and meetings organised by the Chinese Professionals Club of Australia, where I was able to make informal connections with a group of OCAs. I conducted several two-to-three-hour interviews and observations at my participants' residences or offices at their university campuses.

The last leg of my research took place in China, where I spent a week in both December 2018 and November 2019 to conduct follow-up research on OCAs who returned from South Africa after the completion of their overseas programmes. My participants became hospitable hosts who showed me around their homes and new workplaces in China. The group gathered daily and engaged in meaningful conversations on their life and work transitions, where I proposed questions and shared my experiences.

During semi-structured interviews, I avoided leading the conversation and encouraged OCAs to 'carve out space of their own' (Scheurich 1997:71). Allowing the free flow of conversations enabled me to understand what was important to the participants. However, at the end of the interviews, I posed questions to address and clarify issues raised during the sessions.

Serendipitous ethnographic discoveries require anthropologists to be aware of their specific positionalities, as the ethnographer co-constructs the research field with participants (Pieke 2000). My shifting positionality during the research process should not go unnoticed. It defined my relationships with participants and therefore played a decisive role in how and what data was collected. Before trust was established, I was treated as an audience sitting in the front row of OCAs' performances and a guest who was occasionally invited to the middlestage for visits. As the fieldwork progressed, many informal relationships were established between the participants and me apart from formal researcher-participant relationships. I occasionally became a standby volunteer to help out at events and provide an outsider perspective. These roles granted me an entrance to the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation and provided opportunities to engage with my participants at a deeper level. I was received by my participants not only

[8] These interviews were approximately 2 hours long and were recorded for analysis.

as a researcher but also as a member of their community who occasionally performed on stage together with them.

Although my 'Chineseness' - my upbringing in China - enabled initial connections with my state-sponsored OCA participants and helped me better understand their behaviours, I am reluctant to identify myself as a 'native ethnographer' who discloses the intimate aspects of one's native culture in a global discourse (Kraidy 1999:461). I had a linguistic advantage as a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese, which made communications with my participants easier. However, individual state-sponsored OCAs' middlestages and the specific discourse of China's managed cultural globalisation were foreign to me. In addition, it was not my nativeness but my differences from the OCAs that enabled me to develop relationships with the participants. State-sponsored OCAs engaged with me on the middlestage because of the skills and experiences I acquired outside China that made me a unique character and a useful resource to them.

To ensure fluidity, I needed to switch my roles between being a *participant observer* and an *observing participant* during fieldwork. Brewer (2000) notes that participant observation requires the researcher to acquire a new role, while in observing participation the researcher uses his or her existing role. During my fieldwork, I was constantly invited into new roles and I responded by adapting to every new role. I needed to shift between being a participant observer and an observing participant. This betwixt-and-between status was not a flaw but provided me with a 'commanding vantage point' (Wang 2010:109) from where I switched between different perspectives on understanding the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation.

Moreover, with time passing by, I found my participants not only more open in sharing their experiences and thoughts but also more reflective and critical in their contemplations on cultural differences. An OCA shared with me in an interview before he left South Africa that "Chinese people work hard, but in some ways, *they* cannot think as hard as *they* work. Maybe sometimes you are not allowed to, or you have to do it [the thinking] secretly. But here, you can do it openly and freely". In his reflection, the OCA stepped out from the description of his everyday life and made a comparison of people's behaviours across different cultures. I realised that many OCA participants became more of an ethnographer in active discovery than a voice in passivity.

'The Question Person': a conceptual tool for collecting sensitive data[9]

As a researcher, I was honoured to work with participants who opened their hearts and shared their life stories, reflections, and dreams with me. On the one hand, I benefited greatly from many experienced OCAs' sharing of their life wisdom. On the other hand, I joined a reflective journey with young OCAs who left home for the first time. Naturally, many topics considered to be 'sensitive' by Chinese state institutions' standards came up in our open discussions. These sensitive topics included but were not limited to criticisms of the Chinese government's educational policies and reflections on censorship. From the very outset of the research, I foresaw the importance of protecting my participants' identities and took measures to address this matter. All organisations remained anonymous in my data collection process to avoid any individual being identified. The names of individual participants were changed. My original research notes were kept in a safe. The recorded interview audio files and backup notes were stored in a password-protected laptop. These measures would generally be sufficient for the protection of participants' identities. However, due to my small sample size and a narrow OCA circle, I had to look for more creative ways to protect the identities of my participants. My training at the Anthropology Department at UCT required a comprehensive evaluation of research ethics which led to some important ethical considerations at the outset of my research project: how would the research influence my participants; who would my readers be and how would they be influenced?

As discussed earlier, the challenge of protecting individual OCA participants' identities came up at the very early stage of my fieldwork. While most of the communications with my participants were open, discussions involving sensitive issues such as political and social circumstances in China triggered a communication shutdown. When some participants were asked a question that would be censored in China, "I don't know", "I disagree…let's talk about something else" were common answers. An OCA once half-joked that "China has lost its soul", and the statement was immediately followed by a question - "That was not recorded, right?". From these experiences I realised that my participants needed a safe space to share their thoughts, a 'dialogue tent' where speaking freely could lead to self-discovery and self-recovery (Shalhoub-Kevorkianicago 2001:145). Therefore, I needed to look for conceptual tools to overcome a culture of censorship and self-censorship.

[9] In an interview with a South Africa-based OCA, the participant, who was 'born a crime' as the third child in his family under China's One Child Policy, shared his experience of reflecting on cultural differences since his arrival in South Africa: "People call me 'the question boy', because I would like to think, I would like to reflect on what happened around me. In China I dealt with people who shared the same thoughts with me, and now I work with people with differences every day… I ask a lot of questions and have a lot of reflections after coming to South Africa."

One unique method I applied during fieldwork was the creation of a fictional character - *the Question Person*, whose name is inspired by an OCA participant of the study. This method involves using a fictional character that combines the identities of multiple participants. It was adopted by Jonathan Stillo (2019) in his research on the Romanian public health system. The approach was necessary to protect his participants who could be easily identified and possibly punished for their activities and opinions. In Stillo's study, a fictional character was created after relevant data was collected. The character was used to present data at his final writing-up stage for the protection of individual participants' identities.[10] Different from his approach, the Question Person was given as a resource for my participants to draw upon during fieldwork. Participants were introduced to the fictional identity from the outset of the study and were allowed to use it when commenting on any sensitive issues. While participants spoke as individuals in most situations, all sensitive statements made by participants were articulated through the single voice of the Question Person from data collection to thesis writing.

The below scenario demonstrates how the Question Person played an important role in an interview:

> *Interviewer: "So we just talked about your relationships with local people. How about your experience with the Chinese here? For example, your colleagues, the director…"*
>
> *Participant: (Laughs) "The director…"*
>
> *Interviewer: "Would you like us to turn on the Question Person mode?"*
>
> *Participant: (Laughs) "Definitely, I would like to invite the Question Person out for this particular topic."*
>
> *Interviewer: "Okay let me turn the recorder off."*

I turned the recorder off and used a separate notebook marked as 'the Question Person' for note-taking. The OCA's comments were kept in my Question Person journal as below:

> *"My colleagues didn't tell me anything about the Director when I came here but every time we had a meeting, I could sense some strange vibe. I guess I was new, and my colleagues did not know me enough to tell me the things they knew about him. When I learned about his corruption cases, I was*

[10] All research participants in Stillo's research were identified by pseudonyms with the exception of 'Dr. Florea', a composite of several doctors who treated tuberculosis M/XDR-TB (Stillo 2019:42).

shocked. I didn't hear anything about his corruption before I came here and then I realised that every Chinese in this city knew about his corruption. I must be the very last person to know this!"

The Question Person provided my participants with a conceptual tool to safely share their thoughts when it came to sensitive topics. It was frequently used when OCAs shared their opinions on their superiors and criticisms of the Chinese education and social system. A young OCA pointed out that the Chinese education system taught him to be obedient but did not encourage him to think critically or express disagreements. He said, "For my entire life I learn to take orders and obey rules. We just don't know how to raise concerns over issues. It's a very depressing reality."

As more data was collected through the Question Person, I became increasingly aware that the safe space in my fieldwork was a 'brave space' (O'Donnell-Allen 2004). The unsafety experienced by state-sponsored OCAs reflected an often-overlooked aspect of China's managed cultural globalisation: the negotiations between the performers and the performances. It was the unsafety on the middlestage that revealed the power dynamics between individual OCAs and Chinese state institutions. The production of an unsettling social space to make the marginalised voice heard is noted by Macdonald (2014) as 'make space', a process to create a new kind of safety. I will investigate this negotiation process and analyse data collected in the Question Person mode in detail in a later chapter on censorship and self-censorship on the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation.

'The Islanders': an ethnographic fiction of strategic recomposition

The Question Person later transformed into fictional characters in *The Islanders*, an ethnographic fiction developed to present my research findings on the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation. Ethnographic fiction is the detailed description of other ways of life by adding characters and plots to an ordinary ethnography (Langnes and Frank 1978). It can be understood as a form of thick description (Geertz 1973) that explores the deep meanings beyond surface descriptions. Since ethnography by its very nature draws on fiction (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Nyamnjoh 2011), it can ally with fiction as they share similar contexts and structures. Richardson & Lockridge (1998) argue that both ethnography and fiction emphasise the importance of initial and final encounters between human beings and that these encounters have many levels of meaning and interpretation. Ethnography and fiction also both acknowledge that minor events can reflect larger issues, thus their alliance can effectively reveal the truth (Ibid.). The thickness of an ethnographic fiction is supported by the ethnographic details that help readers understand the specific

circumstances of its characters (Langnes and Frank 1978). At the same time, fictional accounts provide a suitable format for personal aspects of the ethnographic fieldwork to be presented (Tedlock 1991).

Ethnographic fiction provides me with the necessary conceptual tools to strategically recomposite my ethnographic data. There are four reasons why the format of an ethnographic fiction is adopted in telling the state-sponsored OCAs' middlestage stories of China's managed cultural globalisation in my study. First, for ethical considerations and the protection of participants' identities. Second, to present participants beyond a set of research data as holistic individuals with complex backgrounds and specific life trajectories whilst ensuring no individual participant can be identified from the detailed narration. Third, to use ethnographic fiction as a channel to communicate directly to a wider readership. Fourth, to offer an alternative approach to theoretical exploration and engagement. These four reasons are elaborated below.

First, *The Islanders* offers a safe space where my research findings on the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation can be presented without exposing my participants. As the ethics review committee of the Anthropology Department at UCT met to discuss my research proposal in October 2017, an important ethical question was raised: should my thesis be made available at the UCT online library or developed into publications? Most of my state-sponsored OCA participants were planning to return to China and many would resume work at state institutions, where freedom of speech was limited. An individual who expressed disagreements with or criticisms of state institutions could be punished. Since I worked closely with a small circle of OCAs in my South African part of fieldwork, there was the probability that individual OCAs could be identified and punished. The repercussions include intensified surveillance of their professional and private life and reduced future promotion opportunities. To avoid any repercussions, the ethics review committee offered me the option of keeping my thesis confidential. It was at this moment that I asked myself what the point of the study would be if I were to produce a thesis that only a handful of academics, namely my supervisor and the examiners, would read to qualify me with an academic title, while my work could not create any impact?

After discussing this and other options with senior anthropologists at the ethics review committee, I decided to commit to a creative approach of developing an ethnographic fiction for presenting my data. Apart from using the Question Person during the data collection process, a fictional setting with fictional characters would need to be created. All data, especially sensitive data collected through the voice of the Question Person, would be re-organised to be presented using composite fictional characters and their experiences instead of the participants' original identities. This approach would work particularly well with the Question Person method, as data collected anonymously from various participants could be redistributed to several fictional composite characters to avoid any individual OCA from being identified. Although all settings and

characters had to be fictionalised, the plot of the ethnographic fiction would allow any real event to be presented in detail, and only information regarding the specific time, place, and name would be amended. This would allow my research participants plausible deniability, thus ensure their safety when returning to China.

Second, through ethnographic fiction, I can go beyond presenting research data as empirical findings and communicate the life trajectories and emotional complexities of OCAs to readers whilst ensuring the anonymity of individual participants. Presenting my research findings in the form of ethnographic fiction allows important data to be revealed through life stories of five central fictional characters: Director Yao Xinsheng (Male), Senior Teacher Lu Shi (Female), Junior Teacher Wang Shuai (Male), Junior Teacher Li Linlin (Female) and Retired Professor He Ping (Female). The five characters represent the various backgrounds of my OCA participants in terms of gender, age, family backgrounds, and academic trajectories. Their life stories reveal in detail that they are shaped by different policies of the Chinese state during different eras and that they participated in China's managed cultural globalisation with different aims under different circumstances.

The setting of the ethnographic fiction is at a fictional space on the African continent called the Tulbagh Island, where my OCA participants become islanders working for a fictional Chinese government-sponsored Chinese Culture School. The idea of an island was inspired by one of my OCA participants. At a Chinese supermarket in South Africa, the young female OCA who taught Chinese for a year shared with me that: "I love my life here, but I feel like living on an isolated island now. Everything here feels surreal. I know China is my reality and I will need to return home one day and take up my realities." I named the fictional island "Tulbagh" because it was an OCA's favourite town in South Africa, who commented that it is a multicultural town of many monuments and contains "all African cultures".

Storytelling prioritises experience over information and allows individuals' experiences to be articulated in detail (Benjamin 1969). When telling OCAs' stories in *The Islanders*, I aim to not only present what state-sponsored OCAs do but also reveal who they are, where they come from, and how they arrive at where they are. Using ethnographic fiction to present research findings is an effective way to avoid research participants being 'de-humanised' to become individuals represented as abstract subjects and knowledge objects (Langnes and Frank 1978). I aim to present fully-rounded characters, accompanied by the account of their personal narratives through direct speech and dialogue which allows for the expression of multiple voices (Ibid.).

Writing an ethnographic fiction requires strategic recomposition of ethnographic data, a process which requires the writer to develop a strategy to balance single-authored fictional writing and empirical data gathered through fieldwork. To tackle this challenge, I adopt a data analysis process which involves two layers of coding: first, according to broad themes of discussion such as mobilities and censorship, and under each theme, to categorise the data into thematic groups according to similar experiences or thoughts expressed. Second, to trace each point to the specific participant who expressed the view or shared the experience and add additional personal context to the data. Each sub-themed point is therefore comprehensively understood from various participants' perspectives. These views and experiences are then composited into one of the five characters whose age, voice, life trajectories aligned with the relevant ethnographic data.

For example, when coding data on what motivated the OCAs to embark on their journeys of teaching Chinese overseas, I noted that a few participants mentioned the opportunity to explore different education systems for their children as a reason. Three of my South Africa-based OCA participants and two of my Australia-based OCA participants shared that their primary motivation for taking up the overseas position was to pave the way for their children to have exposure to the English language and an alternative education system. As the participants cared deeply about their children's educational paths, this topic came up often in our daily conversations during my fieldwork and formed an important aspect of my data. The five participants shared with me their dilemmas of wanting a happy childhood for their children whilst feeling the burden from their responsibilities of ensuring their children's competitiveness. I created a sub-theme titled 'children's education' on NVivo for coding purposes and organised all related empirical data into this category. For this sub-theme, I considered the backgrounds of the five participants and made specific references to their age, gender, position, and drafted the character Lu Shi, a middle-aged female tertiary educator who left her ten-year-old son Keke behind in China to teach Chinese overseas and explore her son's alternative educational possibilities. I used specific ethnographic data from three participants who invited me to join video calls with their children for the purpose of showcasing me as an example of a 'hardworking' student whose efforts 'paid off' as I was studying towards a PhD degree; one participant shared several messages that she wrote to her son and sought my advice on finetuning her writing. In *The Islanders*, I gave a detailed account of Lu Shi's video calls with Keke and restructured the conversations I participated during fieldwork into one recombinant conversation and brought the specific topics and word choices into the recomposited account. With the participants' permission, I also included the translated original mother-to-son letter that I helped to finetune in the Island Archives section of the ethnographic fiction. Meanwhile, the character Lu Shi is not restricted to one single sub-theme. Under other sub-themes, I used the character Lu Shi to represent other participants who shared similar backgrounds in terms of age,

education, position, style of communication to recomposite other important ethnographic encounters such as interactions with colleagues and state institutions.

Third, *The Islanders*, in its ethnographic fiction form, will allow me to speak to a wider readership. One aim of the study is to communicate directly with the Chinese diasporic community and engage individuals on a journey of reflection. As Mills (2000) states, an individual can understand his/her own experiences and life choices only by locating him/herself within his/her period and becoming aware of other individuals in his/her circumstances. This is also why Nyamnjoh (2011:702) argues that fiction can be used as an effective tool to take the discussion of research beyond academia to the people and communities at the heart of an academic study. Ethnographic fiction serves as a practical platform for such reflections to take place. The reader will find it easier to comprehend the theoretical arguments when presented with engaging stories involving characters that reflect real-life individuals (Laterza 2007). As Le Guin (1979) argues, what other people do, think, and feel is an essential guide to our understanding of what we are and may become. Those who experience similar or different paths with the OCAs in *The Islanders* may provoke personal connections with the stories and deep reflections of their life trajectories.

Fourth, writing ethnographic fiction offers an alternative approach to theoretical exploration and engagement. In ethnographic fiction, storytelling serves as more than a means to knowledge production; storytelling is knowledge production (McGranahan 2015). Ethnographic fiction plays an important role in the epistemological dimension where knowledge production is fulfilled through character construction. This process allows a particular view of subjectivity and its specific contextual inter-subjectivity to be elaborated (Langnes and Frank 1978). The five OCA islander characters are introduced using their unique subjective and inter-subjective perspectives to utilise this function. The characters push the development of the storyline forward and make their voices heard. This process allows each character's knowledge about and attitude towards life to be presented in descriptions, explanations, and reflections (Geertz 1973:89). Using character construction for knowledge production also provides the researcher with an opportunity to apply a creative method of embodied engagement with ethnographic data (Behar 2007:150). Writing *The Islanders* requires me as the researcher to embody myself into the OCA characters and insert my participating and observing self into the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation. It is an approach the great Indian philosopher Krishnamurti (1969) notes as a method of deep observation - the observer becomes the observed.

Another challenge ethnographic fiction brings to an anthropologist is that fiction itself does not self-explain how ethnographic data is reorganised, thus a reader cannot easily distinguish fictional elements from the ethnographic data. It also poses difficulty for an anthropologist to communicate the demographic

composition of the research participants to the reader and discourages direct and explicit analysis of issues revealed within the ethnographic fiction. For example, in *The Islanders*, there are detailed descriptions of the characters' psychological activities. Participants' sensitive comments on their superiors were recomposited into the thoughts of Lu Shi. Although the data was collected through verbal communications with my research participants during fieldwork, the fictional output of 'thoughts' was particularly chosen to reconstruct participants' accounts and prevent them from being identified due to specific comments made. However, these strategies cannot be directly mentioned in the ethnographic fiction, and the narration flow does not allow me to analyse the relationships between characters explicitly. These disadvantages posed by ethnographic fiction are noted by Langnes and Frank (1978:20) who emphasises on the importance of attaching a report outside of the ethnographic fiction to demonstrate that the reality presented in the ethnographic fiction is 'substantial'. As demonstrated by this thesis, the backdrops of the ethnographic fiction can be overcome with a methodology and analysis-focused prologue/epilogue, which provides readers who require methodological inputs and explicit analysis with sufficient background information and in-depth interpretation.

Another epistemological challenge that must be considered methodologically is the fact that the production and consumption of knowledge of contemporary China are politically motivated both inside and outside China. The process is often driven by state and inter-state interests, which may conflict with each other (Gao 2018). Presenting my research findings in the form of an ethnographic fiction allows me to be less constrained by these epistemological tensions. At the same time, I can attempt to deconstruct these tensions by telling the middlestage stories of state-sponsored OCAs who are situated at the centre of the knowledge production of China.

The OCA anthropologist's claim at the opening dialogue of the chapter that "[i]f you emphasise this much on ethics, you can never get any real work done" illustrates her view that ethical considerations are burdens. However, it is argued that ethical considerations not only ensure the safety of participants but also give the researcher inspiration for establishing alternative platforms of communications and expressions.

Chapter Three

Curations on the Middlestage

One day in June 2020, when most parts of the world were under Covid-19 lockdown, I opened my Facebook page and was surprised to find my feed suddenly flooded with social media content promoting Chinese tourist attractions, Chinese foods, and Chinese state-sponsored international educational programmes. They were shared by my state-sponsored OCA friends. Since international social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are banned in China, OCAs usually do not bother building up their profiles on these platforms while being overseas. The feeds about China seemed to be a coordinated operation and were all posted within a few days.

I contacted one of the OCAs who had been teaching Chinese in South Africa for two years and asked her what happened. She explained that all state-sponsored OCAs received instructions from their superiors to participate in a campaign to "promote a positive image of China" on international social media platforms "during this challenging time for China".

The OCA further explained that as the Coronavirus situation worsened, China was under increasing attack by the United States and some European countries for its public health management of the virus at the beginning of its spread and for possibly providing inaccurate information to the World Health Organisation. All state-sponsored OCAs in South Africa received instructions from their superiors to support the state's coordinated public relations. This included the requirement that every state-sponsored OCA registers a Facebook account and disseminates at least two positive posts about China every week, one of which had to be originally written. These promotional content included personal stories of their teaching and life experiences in South Africa and forwarded content from People's Daily, Global Times - China's major state-owned media outlets. The OCAs were also required to submit screenshots of their Facebook updates to be checked by their superiors and bureaucrats at state institutions.

Many OCAs were reluctant to be involved in this social media campaign. One OCA said: "We don't want to do this. I worry that my local friends will misunderstand me for being some kind of state agent, which I am not. But I have to do what I am asked to do."

The above scenario demonstrates two kinds of performances state-sponsored OCAs carry out: performances to their overseas audience and performances to Chinese state institutions. Both performances require careful curations. In this chapter, I explore, through analysing the ethnographic details of state-sponsored OCAs,

how they curate parallel performances on the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation. I argue that while state-sponsored OCAs are tasked to perform selective aspects of Chinese culture curated by state institutions, they also actively curate their own understanding of Chinese culture to the overseas audience. In addition, state-sponsored OCAs are required to curate self-presentations to Chinese state institutions.

State-sponsored OCAs' curations on the middlestage

China's participation in cultural globalisation is under strict management by the party-state. Chinese state institutions view the behaviours of Chinese citizens overseas as an important space to be managed. For example, in January 2019, China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism called on Chinese tourists to behave properly when travelling abroad during the upcoming Spring Festival holiday, because 'when abroad, every tourist represents their home country' (Xinhua Net 2019). Chinese tourists were urged to abide by the destination state's laws and regulations, respect local traditions, and avoid inappropriate behaviours such as talking loudly in public areas (Ibid.). Although the state urges its citizens to imagine their behaviours as a part of a bigger picture of China's global image, it is unrealistic for the party-state to monitor each Chinese tourist. However, this top-down approach can be effectively applied to manage state-sponsored OCAs through the state institutions' overseas bureaucratic networks. State institutions can reach out to each OCA through a centralised network, to whom state-sponsored OCAs are required to report back. State-sponsored OCAs are tasked by state institutions to perform and promote an official version of Chinese culture on the frontstage. Meanwhile, OCAs' middlestage behaviours such as off-stage interactions with overseas audiences, participation in social events, and sharing of social media content must also follow guidelines set by Chinese state institutions. In other words, state-sponsored OCAs are required to be disciplined performers of China's managed cultural globalisation at all times.

Goffman (1956) argues that dramatically speaking, a disciplined performer is an individual who remembers his/her part, sticks to a specific role, and avoids misunderstanding or embarrassments in their performance. The performer is required to move from private and informal spaces to public spaces of performance with varying degrees of formality and must adapt to different settings and transitions (Ibid.). In reality, even one of the top officials at *Hanban*, then director-general Madam Xu Lin, was not able to always remain disciplined. She was confused when being questioned by a BBC reporter about her instruction to *Hanban* staff to tear pages of a Taiwanese sponsor's promotional content in programme booklets at a conference in Portugal in 2014 (Sudworth 2014). After failing to give a reasonable explanation of what happened, she accused the reporter of not following the interview guidelines. She said to the reporter, in English:

> "I don't want to talk [in] detail to you already…according to your guidelines…if you said that you would ask this issue, I would refuse you… I don't want you to publish it [footage on the Portugal incident] … you agree with me or not?"

After the reporter refused to delete any footage from the interview and argued that he asked a fair question, Madam Xu Lin further explained that:

> "I don't talk about the Portugal issue because I want to protect the Confucius Institute. I don't want the media to always focus on one small question [issue]."

Xu Lin, along with her deputy and her press officers, kept the BBC crew for over an hour after the interview ended. She insisted that she had been misled into agreeing to the interview and demanded that the reporter erase the section about Portugal on the spot. The request was rejected by the crew and the full interview was broadcasted.

Madam Xu Lin accused the interviewer of not following the proposed questions and misleading her during the interview; however, she broke the principles of a disciplined performer by taking the interviewer to the middlestage and explaining to him why she was unable to answer a specific question. Her concerns were two-fold: first, she did not want to feed the overseas audience with negative publicity about China; and second, she did not want the Chinese state institutions to see her feeding negative publicity to any overseas media. In other words, she was attempting to 'curate' an image of China to the foreign press and an image of herself to the Chinese audience.

Curation is defined by Davis (2017:771) as 'the discriminate selection of materials for display', a process to pick out the most relevant materials and marginalise those that are less so (Ibid.). People curate their identity performances by revealing and concealing parts of themselves in different scenarios of social interaction (Goffman 1956). Each scenario requires particular identity meanings, which must be maintained through performances and interactions (Burke and Stets 2009). Compared to the frontstage performances of China's managed cultural globalisation curated by the state institutions, state-sponsored OCAs' middlestage curations are more complicated. This is because, as demonstrated in the Xu Lin interview, the middlestage curations are unscripted and spontaneous, and may lead to conflicts. In this case, Madam Xu Lin was well prepared for a frontstage performance, yet the reporter did not stick to his script and asked questions outside the frontstage parameters and pushed her into a middlestage.

A middlestage can be clearly distinguished from a frontstage in three ways. First, a frontstage is space-bound (Goffman 1956:70), but a middlestage requires performers to perform across different spaces. Second, a frontstage performance is time-bound (Goffman 1956:66), but a middlestage demands performers

to perform at all times. Third, because a frontstage is space and time-bound, the audience can be split into different audience groups and performers can prepare diversified performances for each audience group (Goffman 1956:83). However, since the middlestage is not space and time-bound, splitting the audience into different groups and preparing diversified performances is challenging. The middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation requires state-sponsored OCAs to carefully curate their performances across space, time, and identities.

Hochschild (2012) draws a clear distinction between surface and deep performance in her discussion on the commercialisation of human feelings. Surface performance allows the performers to be emotionally detached when performing actions, while deep performance requires the actor to feel the emotions being performed (Ibid.). According to Hochschild (2012), frontline workers in the service industry are required to carry out deep performances, which often involve 'deceiving oneself as much as deceiving others' to truly engage and convince their audience (Hochschild 2012:33). For example, Disneyland workers are requested to perform deep acting by using their emotions realistically to engage visitors on the frontstage; yet the workers are offered offices as backstage where they can leave this performed role (Bryman 2004; Choi 2012). State-sponsored OCAs and Disneyland workers both need to carry out frontstage performances. However, state-sponsored OCAs are only requested to perform surface acting instead of deep acting, which must be maintained at all times, as they remain on the middlestage after the end of their frontstage performances. With a focus on state-sponsored OCAs' curations of China and their self-presentations to China, the middlestage lens in this study avoids treating the nation-state and essentialism as isolated conceptions by allowing them to be studied as integral aspects of everyday life (Herzfeld 2016:5).

Curating Chinese Culture, Inc.

The word 'culture', according to Raymond Williams (1981), originates from 'cultivation' in the process of growing crops. Cultivation is also highlighted by Fanon (1967:13) in his discussion on culture, where he sees an important aspect of culture as self-cultivation and cultivating others. These anthropological interpretations of culture are in line with the Chinese characters for the word culture - *wen hua* (文化), which indicates the cultivation of literacy. *Wen* (文) can be directly translated as literacy, and *hua* (化) refers to cultivation. The two Chinese characters carry positive connotations. They can be understood with a meritocratic-elitist definition of culture interpreted by Matthew Arnold (1960:6) as 'the best that has been thought and said in the world'. Chinese scholar Yu Qiuyu (2012:27) emphasises the 'spiritual value' of culture, and education as the process to pursue it. It is common for a Chinese person to comment on a person

or an object as *you wen hua* - cultured/educated/cultivated, or *mei wen hua* - uncultured/uneducated/uncultivated.

In contrast to Fanon and Arnold's meritocratic-elitist conceptualisation of culture, Williams (1989:4) emphasises that culture is ordinary and 'a whole way of life' that has two aspects: the established meanings that people are trained to follow, and the renewed meanings with which people experiment. Hall also gives a similar explanation, arguing that culture depends on people's meaningful interpretations of what happens around them (Hall 1997:2). These definitions emphasise the interactions between people and their situated cultural meaning and are often applied when discussing a specific aspect of culture or a subculture. For example, *zhuang zu wen hua* - Zhuang culture, refers to the Chinese ethnic minority group Zhuang people's traditions and the cultural practices in their interactions with the Chinese south-west mountain region. *Ma la huo guo wen hua* refers to a particular culture in Chinese cuisine - spicy hotpot culture, which originates in Sichuan and Chongqing region of China. *Mei guo wen hua* - American culture, from a Chinese perspective, is represented by blockbuster movies, fast food restaurants, and high-tech gadgets. Although the definition of culture as 'a whole way of life' does not require a focus on origins and locations, it is often used to interpret cultures within certain boundaries.

Globalisation has blurred the boundaries between cultures and made understanding culture as a whole way of life increasingly problematic. Culture has broken national borders and becomes 'a matter of personal taste' in a globalised world that Gordon Mathews (2000:5) defines as 'the global cultural supermarket'. Individuals make personal choices in culture, all of them conditioned by one's 'age, class, gender, and level of affluence and by the national culture to which one belongs to' (Ibid.). Mathews further argues that as much as these choices seem free, they are not free: some choices are 'heavily advertised' in the global cultural supermarket and others are suppressed (Mathews 2000:15). Individuals are influenced by all these complicated factors as they choose products in the global cultural supermarket for themselves 'in negotiation with and performance for others' (Ibid.).

Another non-essentialist way of looking at culture is proposed by Bhabha (1994:1) in his conceptualisation of a *third space*. The third space originates in colonial discourse and responds to mimicry, a dynamic process that transforms both the colonizer and the colonized, resulting in a third space of hybridity. The third space provides a unique perspective to understand globalisation, where cultures are viewed as hybridised products of interactions across spaces. Therefore, cultures, under Bhabha's theoretical framework, are not pure, authentic, and locally bounded (Ibid.).

Meanwhile, cultures are also used as sources for essentialist projects (Devan 2007:143), and the increasing rigidity of 'national cultures' is a product of global forces such as the United Nations. In *Ethnicity, Inc*,

John and Jean Comaroff (2009) investigate the characteristics and implications of a global transition from the capitalism of selling labour to the capitalism of selling culture. Extending Anderson's (1991) argument that it is print capitalism that bound a group together into an imagined community such as a nation, the Comaroffs suggest that culture capitalism serves increasingly as origins of ethnicities and nation-states. It is also important to note that culture is constructed, authorised, and institutionalised (Chun 1996:114). Just as myths draw on and feed on dramas simultaneously (Turner 1974), cultures are validated by ethnic traditions and at the same time reinforce the collective perceptions of these traditions (Geertz 1963:105).

In carrying out their duties as 'native performers' of Chinese culture, state-sponsored OCAs have to work closely with the state institutions such as *Hanban*, the Chinese embassies and consulates, and the China Scholarship Council to perform state-curated Chinese culture. OCAs must follow the party-state's strategies and requirements. However, this does not mean that individual OCAs fully embrace state-curated performances.

In February 2018, I attended a Chinese New Year celebration event organised by a South Africa-based Chinese state institution. I observed a large group of over 300 audience members being offered a gala-style performance put together by state-sponsored OCAs and their local students. This type of 'culturetainment' (Sahlins 2014) often took place during my fieldwork in South Africa and Australia on special Chinese festive days. When the Masters of Ceremony announced that the next programme would be a solo performance of "Horse Racing" by an OCA using *erhu*, a traditional music instrument, an OCA sitting next to me whispered, "Not again!" In fact, it was the fifth time that I watched this same song being performed by the same OCA. The OCA who whispered to me during the performance later explained in detail,

> "We all went through the same training programmes before we left China. Our trainers in China taught us some tricks about how to play one or two Chinese songs on traditional musical instruments like *erhu*. Our training on traditional Chinese culture was quite comprehensive and included *Tai Chi*,[11] tea ceremony, calligraphy among other things. Everything was very superficial of course. We can do different shallow traditional Chinese culture performances but very often we don't know what we are doing."

The Chinese culture performances demonstrate the complex and mobile boundaries of performer and audience identities on the middlestage. There are three audiences to the performances: the overseas audience, the state institutions, and the OCAs themselves. From a frontstage perspective, Chinese state institutions and the OCAs are the co-curators of the cultural performances and the OCAs are the performers. Concurrently, a middlestage lens reveals the nature of the performances: since the performance is curated

[11] *Tai Chi* is a form of Chinese martial arts. It is practiced for self-defence, health benefits, and meditation.

by OCAs to demonstrate their work to Chinese state institutions, the state is the real audience of the cultural performances. The OCAs and overseas audiences are cooperating to complete a performance curated *by* and *for* the state. In other words, the state is both the curator and audience of the cultural performances.

OCAs often expressed doubts about the traditional Chinese cultural programmes that they were requested to promote after receiving short training from state institutions. At an informal *braai* (South African barbeque) organised by OCAs at their residence, two OCAs who attended a regional conference organised by a Chinese state institution expressed their disagreements about issues raised at the conference. They criticised the state institution for providing short training on Chinese medicine and the demand that the OCAs promote it to the global audience. One of the OCAs said,

> "It is ridiculous what they asked us to do. I remember last time our training was about promoting *Tai Chi* but it didn't work. You cannot possibly train people to understand and perform *Tai Chi* that fast. It turned out to be a disaster. I see that they [the state institutions] already destroyed the reputation of *Tai Chi* and this time it's Chinese medicine that they will destroy."

In expressing their disagreements with state institutions' promotion of traditional Chinese cultural elements, the OCAs asserted that they could not promote deeply-rooted cultural traditions after receiving a few hours of training. They worried that their performances could harm the reputation of Chinese culture.

When ethnic traditions are used for consumption, the marketability of culture is prioritised (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). Culture loses its original value and it becomes a mediated commodity (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:130). In the above examples, Chinese ethnic traditions such as *erhu* performance, *Tai Chi*, and Chinese medicine were taken out of their ascetical, ceremonial, and social contexts. They became cultural commodities and were curated to *tell a good story of China*. This 'using old models for new purposes' approach is highlighted by Hobsbawm (1983:5) as a key factor in the *invention* of traditions. The invention process draws cultural distinctions embodied in traditions as important resources to resist what is perceived as a threat to the 'integrity, prosperity, and survival of the transmission of identities and values' (Anheier and Isar 2007:23). The old traditions are specific and strongly binding social practices, but the newly curated traditions tend to be vague and do not interrogate these traditions' original contexts (Hobsbawm, 1983:10).

The state-curated Chinese culture demonstrates a dialectic that 'culture and commodification constitute each other' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009:141). It reinforces what Schulte (2004:311) calls 'reversed orientalism', which stresses the incompatibility of 'East' and 'West', and promotes Western-perceived 'Eastern characteristics' instead of the true 'East'. In China's managed cultural globalisation, the global audience is presented with reinvented traditional Chinese cultural elements to understand the Western-

perceived Eastern characteristics of China instead of the true China. Meanwhile, performing the state-curated Chinese culture allows OCAs to see Chinese culture from the overseas audience's perspective, contemplate the curation mechanism, and enrich the understanding of their performances. This process of self-realisation allows for the 'insurgent possibility' of new identities (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009:139).

For example, besides having mixed feelings about promoting the state-curated Chinese culture, state-sponsored OCAs also expressed their disagreements with content in the state-curated Chinese language textbooks. An OCA who lectured undergraduate students at a university in South Africa found the content in the Beijing-published textbooks incompatible with South African students' daily lives. She explained that the textbooks covered complicated Chinese social issues such as the rise of women's status in China but did not include enough practical content such as how to introduce the women in one's family. However, state-sponsored OCAs had to stick to the textbooks as requested by the state institutions, who also administered *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* (HSK), a standard Chinese language proficiency test that students take to certify their language proficiency. Thus, the state institution textbooks were preferred as the official learning materials. Another reason for using these textbooks was that they were often sponsored by Chinese state institutions.

State-sponsored OCAs realised the limitations of the state institution-curated Chinese culture and made attempts to modify its content and curate their understanding of Chinese culture. A South Africa-based OCA teaching tertiary level Chinese shared that she made attempts to bridge the textbook content with the students' local realities by designing classroom discussions and assignments that engage in South African contexts. State-sponsored OCAs who taught younger students at primary and secondary levels through the local universities' extended language programmes in South Africa had more flexibility as they were not obliged to take the HSK. Many OCAs were able to develop their learning content that was more suitable for their classroom scenarios. State-sponsored OCAs often made use of Chinese popular culture. For example, a young OCA used songs from *TF Boys*, a popular boy band in China to teach vocabulary. He explained, "my African students are great at catching rhythms and sounds in music. Even before they could grasp the meanings of all the words in a Chinese song, they were able to sing the lyrics." The OCA shared that since his students enjoyed his Chinese popular culture content in class, he used more self-developed teaching resources based on Chinese popular culture. He further argued that Chinese popular culture was better suited to the students' interests, because "one needs to have enough life experiences to understand traditional Chinese culture." While state-sponsored OCAs adopted different strategies to develop what they believed was more suitable teaching content for their local South African students, their choices of teaching content reflected their different perceptions of Chinese culture from that of state institutions. State institutions curated a standard framework of reinvented Chinese traditions to be used as resources for

promoting Chinese culture. However, state-sponsored OCAs also participated in this curation process by making attempts to engage their overseas audience using resources beyond the standard framework provided by state institutions.

Every cultural community is dynamic and mobile within itself (Nyamnjoh 2016:32). Chinese culture is a fluid conception and its transformations take place at a significant speed and scale. It is commonly believed that before the Chinese Nationalist Revolution of 1911, China as a nation was not tied to an ethnic group, and Chinese culture was never clearly defined (Chun 1996:113). Since China's imperial power came to its end in 1911, the two thousand years of Confucian teachings were challenged by waves of cultural movements. The New Culture Movement was a wave led by Chinese intellectuals in the 1910s to abandon the 'old culture' and to call for vernacular literature, democracy, and learning science and technology from the West. As Fanon (1967:43) argues, fighting for national culture goes hand in hand with fighting for the liberation of the nation. The New Culture Movement of China brought the concept of individual liberty, equality, and inquiry for science from the West to China, which created profound impacts on Chinese individuals and institutions. Almost two decades after the People's Republic of China was established, another wave of cultural movement, China's Cultural Revolution, took place on the Chinese mainland in 1966. It was a movement initiated by Mao Zedong who intended to continue the country's communist revolution by punishing party officials and other individuals who showed bourgeois tendencies. The movement that intended to prevent capitalist ideas caused brutal violence, and Marxist-Leninist ideology was firmly established as the new social order. The most recent cultural mobility took place when China integrated itself into the global economy and the international community. Consequently, a new consensus that defended and promoted a Chinese national identity emerged (Yan 2007:172). In the era of cultural globalisation, a tendency to reify and essentialise culture is observed worldwide (Anheier and Isar 2007:19). Culture is increasingly viewed as a security issue in China, as demonstrated in China's 'managed' approach in its participation in cultural globalisation to defend Chinese culture's position in the world.

From these cultural movements, one can observe the shifted meanings of Chinese culture as the Chinese state went through transformations. Cultural meanings were created and denied during these transformations (Keesing 1987:161-162). In China's managed cultural globalisation, state-sponsored OCAs are tasked by state institutions to reify state-curated meanings of Chinese culture and perform them to a global audience. Meanwhile, individual OCAs' understandings and practices of Chinese culture are also embodied in their performances and presented to the world.

For example, many South Africa-based OCAs shared their frustrations in the interactions with their students beyond basic classroom interactions. One young OCA teaching at a South African university's extended Chinese language programme at a local secondary school shared:

> "I once asked a student to stand outside the classroom because he was making trouble. His class teacher told me that what I did was not acceptable, because even the naughty kids had the right to stay in the classroom. I was very confused. In China, the teacher would use whatever punishments to keep the students on track; and the kids, the parents, and the administrators would understand that. But I was not able to use any of the Chinese strategies here in South Africa."

In this case, the state-sponsored OCA made attempts to curate an aspect of Chinese classroom culture - the authoritarian culture where the teacher's authority is usually unchallenged, and the students' obedience is required unconditionally. The OCA drew from her own classroom experiences in China and made attempts to apply Chinese classroom management strategies in a South African classroom. This bottom-up approach of curation drawing on individual OCAs' life experiences was fundamentally different from the state institution's top-down approach of curations.

When interacting informally with the students of state-sponsored OCAs at a local university in South Africa, some students openly shared that they chose to learn the Chinese language because it was easier to get a high GPA. Some native Chinese speakers took Chinese language classes at South African and Australian universities where I conducted fieldwork. The OCAs readily involved the Chinese students as an additional teaching resource and assigned them with teaching assistant duties. State-sponsored OCAs understood the Chinese students' intentions of raising their GPAs by taking language courses in their mother tongue. When I asked my state-sponsored OCA participants about this, they explained that they indeed kept the marks high to attract more students to learn Chinese. As one of them shared, "If we fail a student in the first year, the student will not be able to come back for the second year, and we lose a student. What's the point?".

These everyday practices carried out by state-sponsored OCAs and their Chinese students demonstrated another aspect of Chinese culture - the Chinese pragmatism. When China embraced the market economy, the then CCP pragmatist Deng Xiaoping urged the Chinese people to put ideological debates aside and act boldly to pursue economic growth by adopting all feasible methods.[12] This Chinese pragmatism has a significant impact on Chinese society and is deeply rooted in people's everyday behaviours. The Chinese students' participation in Chinese language courses in pursuit of high GPAs and OCAs' embracing them as additional teaching resources demonstrated this pragmatism.

Outside their formal work environments, state-sponsored OCAs also enjoyed hosting private events to curate authentic Chinese cultural experiences for their South African counterparts on their initiatives. At an informal end-of-the-semester celebration hosted by state-sponsored OCAs based in South Africa, a group of students who were mostly professionals taking Chinese language lessons for interest was invited to the

[12] Deng Xiaoping famously claimed that "It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice".

OCAs' residence for dumpling-making. The OCAs prepared all the materials, showed the basic steps of dumpling-making, and cooked a Chinese dinner together with the local students. Although the event was informal and not sponsored by the state institutions, the OCAs took the opportunity to collect feedback from the students about their courses. They also introduced authentic Chinese foods to the students and learned more about their South African lifestyles.

Chinese food was observed as an important element in state-sponsored OCAs' middlestage curations that connected OCAs with their local counterparts. For example, when a state-sponsored OCA asked me to help recruit a few local people to be interviewed for his research project, he proposed that he would cook dinner and had the interview conducted over dinner. On the day of the interview, I was amazed by the eight authentic dishes carefully prepared by the OCA which both the local interviewees and I appreciated. The interview was a success, and the OCA was able to collect data for his project and build friendships with his participants.

During my South African fieldwork, I attended many informal farewell dinners for state-sponsored OCAs. The OCAs either cooked a table of Chinese dishes or ordered food at a Chinese restaurant as a treat to express a token of thanks to their local counterparts. At these informal dinners, the OCAs were eager to teach their local counterparts how to use chopsticks, what the ingredients in the dishes were and how the dishes were prepared, which led to discussions on everyday life in China. I observed that at these informal settings, many state-sponsored OCAs shared personal stories that were not in line with the state's positive narrative of China, and helped locals gain a more balanced view of China. OCAs often shared experiences from their stressful childhoods and the academic pressures shouldered on them to the local students and local colleagues. When a local teacher praised China for "lifting people out of poverty at an unimaginable speed", an OCA pointed out that it was also at a great cost: "Our air is polluted, and our people are not happy because everyone lives under pressure." The OCA further explained the differences between urban and rural China, told personal stories of growing up in an underdeveloped Chinese town and shared observations on individuals from rural China who were neglected from economic developments.

The above discussion reveals state-sponsored OCAs' performances to their overseas audience on the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation. This middlestage provides a space where OCAs distant themselves from the state-curated Chinese culture and curate their performances according to their own experiences and understandings of Chinese culture. Different from state-curated Chinese culture that draws on reinvented traditions, OCAs' middlestage performances draw on their *habitus* - the thoughts, tastes, beliefs, interests, and understanding of the world formed through life trajectories and interactions with social structure (Bourdieu 1986). These middlestage performances are a part of China's managed cultural globalisation that Chinese state institutions commit to managing. As a result, state-sponsored OCAs

need to curate their self-presentations to Chinese state institutions. This complicated process will be analysed in the next section.

Curating the self to China

Besides carrying out office job duties such as teaching and research, many state-sponsored OCAs found themselves spending their evenings and weekends on various curation projects tasked by Chinese state institutions. They were required to write reports, social media content, and press releases to curate their individual and collective portfolios of achievements and showcase their accomplishments to Chinese state institutions. State-sponsored OCAs' individual and collective portfolios, not their on-the-ground realities which sometimes differed from their curated accomplishments, were used to evaluate OCAs' work performances. Accordingly, state-sponsored OCAs made online public relations their top priority, and carefully curated the achievements they accomplished to be presented to Chinese state institution headquarters.

One important platform for such curation is the WeChat *gongzhonghao* (public accounts)[13] of state-sponsored institution headquarters. The headquarters tasked state-sponsored OCAs based all over the world to contribute to their WeChat public accounts and select content to showcase the organisation's achievements. Since the state institution headquarters' WeChat public accounts could only publish a limited number of posts, it became a platform where overseas-based Chinese state institutions and OCAs competed to make their accomplishments visible.

Senior OCA administrators stationed in South Africa understood that the WeChat public accounts were a direct channel to make themselves visible to the headquarters which would lead to future promotional opportunities, thus urged all OCAs to contribute to the curation project. Each week, the senior OCA administrators discussed the content to be submitted to their headquarters and assigned writing and editing duties to other OCAs to cover all events that took place during the week. The senior OCA administrators also conducted final editing work on all curated content and picked the appropriate time to submit them to the headquarters. This was, as a senior OCA administrator based in South Africa explained, a complicated process that required careful curation. He pointed out that well-written narrations of their outstanding achievements with accompanying photos would have the potential for a successful publicity post to be selected and made visible by the state institution headquarters. The OCA further highlighted picking a good

[13] WeChat or *Weixin* is a multi-function messaging, social media, and e-payment app with over 1 billion monthly active users. Public account or *gongzhonghao* is a function that allows individuals and organisations to attract subscribers and push feeds to them.

time for submitting a post as a crucial technical factor. He studied the publication patterns and summarised a set of timing rules for submitting content to the state institution headquarters' WeChat public accounts:

> "You have to follow updates from the headquarters' public accounts closely and submit your content at the right time. If the platforms have just published similar stories to yours, you have no chance. When they have covered many stories from developed countries, you know that they will soon want something from Africa to balance the perspectives. This is good timing for submission."

Junior OCAs were not as eager to publish content on the WeChat public accounts and usually completed whatever collective curation tasks their senior OCA administrators assigned to them without self-motivation. As a young OCA explained: "Nobody actually reads these stories. The stories are all *yi ge muzi ke chulai*, printed using the same model. They are just the social media version of work reports."

State-sponsored OCAs were required to curate their work achievements to China through their professional networks. They were also often tasked by overseas Chinese embassies and consulates to assemble for ad hoc meetings and write reflection reports on designated topics. For example, in January 2018, after Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the Moscow University and gave a speech to the Chinese students, the Chinese embassy in South Africa required all state-sponsored OCAs to reflect on President Xi's speech. Since state-sponsored OCAs were under direct management by state institutions, each of them needed to submit a reflection report to their senior OCA administrators. The OCAs' reflections were collected by the embassy and consulates and were edited and published on various state institution websites as well as social media platforms. This special curation demonstrated the state institutions' efforts to curate all South Africa-based OCAs' collective political reflections.

The Chinese embassy and consulates also reached out to OCAs and engaged them in theme-based political study activities. In May 2018, a consulate in South Africa organised a safety talk at a local university for OCAs and Chinese students. A team of Chinese bureaucrats gave several presentations on the security threats in South Africa and self-protection strategies. One presenter from the Chinese consulate explained that the upcoming 2019 South African election would bring political uncertainties and "cause many turbulences in the society". All OCAs and Chinese students were requested to stay away from protests and political discussions to avoid unnecessary harm. Another presenter from the consulate pointed out that using Uber to travel was an extremely risky action security-wise and asked all OCAs and Chinese students to share each other's locations and the driver's information when taking Uber rides.

At the event, I sat next to two reporters from a Chinese state-sponsored media. After a Chinese consulate's presentation, he approached the reporters and quickly pointed out the key points to be highlighted in the media coverage: first, the consulate's services and influences extended to local campuses as they made

efforts to establish relationships with the OCAs and Chinese students; second, the content covered in the talk was useful and practical to the OCAs and Chinese students. During the buffet lunch after the safety talk, I asked the OCAs what they thought of the talk. Their reactions were uniform: "The talk? We are *qunzhong yanyuan* - the background actors. We don't care about the talk. We are here for the buffet lunch." A report on the safety talk was later published on the consulate's website and the event was heavily covered by Chinese state-sponsored media including their TV channels, websites, and WeChat public accounts. Media footage of the OCAs and Chinese students participating in these events were highlighted in the reports. To the OCAs, the event was about them supporting the consulate's curations to China, and they were compensated with free lunch. The content of the talk did not matter to them.

Although the safety talk appeared to be all about ensuring the safety of the OCAs and Chinese students, it also served its curation purposes in two ways. First, the safety talk aimed to protect the 'family name' of China by managing Chinese students' and OCAs' behaviours and safety risks. It was part of the Chinese state institutions' efforts to curate a collective image of China to the global audience. Second, Chinese students and OCAs were required to curate their self-presentations to demonstrate that they were also part of the state institutions' curations. The state institution headquarters, not the OCAs or the Chinese students, were the audience of this performance.

Once during a winter academic break, I was urgently invited by a senior state-sponsored OCA administrator at a South Africa university to attend a party lesson held at a Chinese consulate. It was a time when many OCAs went back to China for holidays and there were not enough people in his team, thus my role was to make up the headcount. At the party lesson organised for state-sponsored OCAs and Chinese staff from state-owned enterprises, the Consul General presented a two-hour speech on *haiwai dangjian*, overseas party-building. After giving a formal introduction on the significance of overseas party-building, a new campaign initiated by President Xi, the Consul General shared his analysis on trends of international events in an informal way through the use of humorous and foul language in his speech. The Consul General adopted a unique perspective to interpret current affairs and supplemented his speech with data to illustrate the strength of the Chinese economy. For example, he claimed during a passionate speech that "the amounts of money Chinese people spent on eating out was three times the GDP of Finland, Sweden, and Norway combined". The comment provoked laughter from the audience and promoted a sense of pride in China's economic achievements.

State-sponsored OCAs' presence was frequently requested by the Chinese embassy and consulates, and their events were usually not as entertaining. An OCA who returned from a party lesson held at a consulate shared that he often fell asleep at these events. He shared that "the speaker was doing his best to *dajixue* (inject chicken blood, a term in Chinese that describes the action of making someone excited) but the talk

was too long. I couldn't do it for three hours. I did my best to stay awake, but I always failed." After attending these political study sessions, state-sponsored OCAs were often asked to submit reflection reports to be exhibited on the websites and WeChat public accounts of the state institutions. These interactions can be viewed as ritualised communications of empty official discourse to demonstrate one's political correctness, a scenario also noted by Wu (2020) in his analysis on Chinese migrant workers' communication practices when dealing with everyday diplomatic dilemmas in a Zambia-based Chinese state-owned enterprise.

State-sponsored OCAs' interactions with Chinese state institutions reflect what Venessa Fong notes as 'filial nationalism' (Fong 2004:632). Filial nationalism describes the Chinese youth's unconditional patriotic loyalty to their 'motherland' despite their dissatisfaction with its underdevelopment. It compares this loyalty to one's filial devotion to a parent who deserves to be respected despite flaws (Ibid.). This kinship-based metaphor is comparable to state-sponsored OCAs' seemingly intimate ties with and unconditional support to Chinese state institutions. However, the OCAs' recount of their roles at the state-curated events revealed that instead of embracing the state institution curations wholeheartedly, they only curated state-required patriotic self-presentations. These patriotic curations were coordinated using a top-down approach. State institutions assigned various tasks to state-sponsored OCAs and required them to curate their patriotic performances according to their institutional roles. The state and individuals' co-curation of patriotic performances to fulfil institutional patriotic responsibilities is what I am calling *institutional patriotism*.

Patriotism is defined by Gries et al. (2011:2) as the 'love of' or 'attachment' to a country. It is identified as a fundamental 'unifying force' of Chinese national identity (Gustafsson 2016:134). This is a result of the downplay of communist ideology and class struggle since the party-state's opening-up, and patriotism is prioritised to play a leading role in unifying China as a national community (Gustafsson 2016:140). Meanwhile, when Chinese students and scholars move to a new country, their salience of national identity can increase and convert to a form of long-distance patriotism, what Hail (2015:311) calls 'patriotism aboard'. However, how patriotism is expressed does not fit into one singular model. What it means to be a 'patriot' can be defined in multiple ways and is usually determined by a patriotic norm that sets standards for appropriate conduct.

On the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation, state-sponsored OCAs were required to perform various patriotic norms. These patriotic norms were expected from different OCAs according to their various institutional roles. In other words, one's position determined one's patriotic responsibilities. For example, at many Chinese state institution-curated events that I observed in South Africa and Australia, senior OCA administers were in charge of working closely with senior state institution officials and state

institution headquarters to plan events, design strategies, set examples of good conducts while supervising their subordinates' conduct. Lower-ranking OCAs were tasked to submit regular reflection reports, attend state institution events for headcounts, and curate ad hoc patriotic performances when required. The middlestage required state-sponsored OCAs to be aware of their institutional patriotic responsibilities at all times and curate their appropriate patriotic performances accordingly. A South Africa-based senior OCA administrator explained to me why he always stuck to state preferred perspectives when discussing Chinese social issues with his local counterparts in formal and informal engagements:

> "I am an open-minded person, but my role [as a senior OCA administer] requires me to present the [Chinese] state's perspective. I have my own opinions from other perspectives too, but I feel the urge to present the state's perspective. The locals [South Africans] already have a lot of exposure to the western perspectives of China. They need a different perspective – the state's side of the story. That's why I am here, and I need the state institutions to see that I am doing my job."

In *institutional patriotism*, all participants are requested by the state to play their designated roles according to an institutional patriotic mechanism. This mechanism functions according to the collective awareness that all participants perform patriotic responsibilities according to state curations. The participants are fully aware of the performative nature of their assigned tasks and cooperate with state institutions to complete their individual and collective curations. This awareness transforms the meanings of the performances, as OCAs understand that the state is the real audience of the performances and adjust the performances according to the state's preferences.

The transformed meaning of patriotic curations can be interpreted as a result of what Herzfeld (2016) calls 'cultural intimacy'. Cultural intimacy is 'the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality' (Herzfeld 2016:7). Through cultural intimacy, state ideologies create intimate engagements with people's everyday lives through interactions with cultural elements, and their interpretations often change the meaning of these cultural elements (Herzfeld 2016:36). This is because cultural elements are interpreted according to the interests, resources, and desires of individuals, and their interpretations add new meanings to the cultural elements (Mbembe 1992:8). On the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation, the meanings of the state institution-curated patriotic performances are changed when state-sponsored OCAs form a collective awareness that their patriotism is only institutional and performative. This collective awareness is an external embarrassment to OCAs as they are aware that their performances are only for the state and are empty at the core; at the same time, sharing this secret understanding provides an internal source of unity for the OCAs. It transforms the essence of the state institutions' patriotic curations and defines institutional patriotism.

As observed from the above discussions, curations on the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation involve complicated processes. Censorship and self-censorship are applied in these processes to ensure that state-sponsored OCAs maintain appropriate conduct. The censorship and self-censorship in state-sponsored OCAs' interactions with Chinese state institutions will be further elaborated through a detailed analysis of their middlestage experiences.

Censorship and self-censorship on the middlestage

In *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser (1971) stresses the important role state institutions play in the maintenance of ideology. He provides in-depth analyses on how, in authoritarian regimes, ideological state institutions (e.g., educational institutions and media outlets) work closely with repressive state institutions (e.g., the police, the prison system) to operate regulatory censorship practices. Foucault, however, argues that censorship can be an internalised force in one's mind that actively regulates the production of their conduct. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1978) analyses Jeremy Bentham's architectural design of a panoptical prison and identifies 'panopticism' as a key approach to understanding censorship. A panopticon is a prison building with a surveillance tower at the centre from which each cell of the building can be observed. Prisoners in their isolated cells can always see the tower but cannot know when exactly they are being observed. This permanent but unverifiable surveillance creates powerful disciplinary control on the prisoners' production of conduct. Without knowing when they are being watched, prisoners must regulate their behaviours at all times. Foucault compares a panopticon to a seemingly free society and points out that regimes exercise power based on internalised and normalised censorship similar to the way a panopticon disciplines its prisoners. State institutions manage individuals by using permanent but unverifiable surveillance to regulate the production of their behaviours. In other words, state institutions' panopticism depends on individuals' internalised censorship. This internalised censorship is more dangerous than any explicit forms of censorship because it is highly effective in enforcing a limit of speakability and nearly impossible to challenge due to its invisibility (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Butler 1997).

When challenged by the foreign press about increased censorship on the Chinese Internet, Lu Wei, the former Director of State Internet Information Office, points out that 'censorship is not the correct word choice' to describe the state's legitimate 'management' of information (Song and Li 2015). His comments highlight the party-state's strategy to manage information both inside and outside China (Shambaugh 2015:101). Chinese state institutions regularly issue press statements rebutting foreign media characterisations of China, publish full-page pro-China advertisements in foreign newspapers, and

intimidate universities and non-governmental organisations that sponsor events identified by state institutions as unfriendly to China (Shambaugh 2015:103-104). My state-sponsored OCA participants in South Africa and Australia were at the frontline of this coordination.

In 2018, Lobsang Sangay, Prime Minister of the Tibetan government in exile[14] was invited by a South African university to give a guest lecture. The Chinese embassy and consulates, who denied that Tibet was independent of China, worried that the university's invitation would give voice and legitimacy to the Tibetan government in exile, and the lecture would promote anti-Chinese sentiments. They mobilised local Chinese students and members of the Chinese business community to disrupt the guest lecture. Chinese Students and Scholars Associations received an urgent request through a series of WeChat messages from the embassy and consulates to prioritise this important operation and "send at least five people to the site to protest". Coaches were provided by state institutions to transport protesters to the university. The protesters finally occupied the lecture hall, and the university was forced to cancel the lecture.

In this incident, state-sponsored OCA administrators were instructed by the Chinese consulates to keep all senior and junior OCAs away from the coordinated protest to avoid internal conflicts with the South African partner-university. There were different requirements for state-sponsored OCAs. At their weekly meeting, all OCAs were requested by their senior OCA administrators to avoid talking about the Tibetan issue to anyone at the university. The administrator reminded all OCAs that their South African partner university "[…] embraces the same values shared by Western universities. They can be hostile to us when it comes to territorial issues. You should remember that and avoid any discussion about the Tibetan problem".

The Tibet incident is an example of censorship being imposed on state-sponsored OCAs; it also demonstrates institutional patriotism being curated at different levels of OCA and state institution. In this case, the senior OCA administrators' duty was to liaise with the embassy and consulate to plan strategies. They disseminated specific patriotic duties to junior OCAs and asked them to follow instructions strictly. What needed to be censored, in the Tibet case, was clearly defined. In many other cases, state-sponsored OCAs found that censorship was imposed on them without clear requirements and guidelines.

For example, a young female OCA with the pseudonym of 'Banana' started her personal WeChat public account to introduce South African cultures and her everyday life experiences in South Africa to the Chinese audience. In her draft introduction for the channel, the OCA wrote:

[14] The territory of Tibet is administered by the People's Republic of China, a political scenario that the Tibetan government in exile regards as an illegal military occupation. The Tibetan government in exile holds the position that Tibet has always been an independent nation. The People's Republic of China holds the position that China's central government of various administrations has consistently exercised sovereignty over Tibet for the past 700 years.

> "South Africa is a special rainbow nation, the only nation in the world that has three capital cities and eleven official languages. Here you will find highways with breath-taking views, European-style houses sitting on the beach, cute penguins, star-filling night-skies, and the 'private meeting' of the Pacific and the Indian Oceans. At the same time, you will also find shacks in townships, social issues like lack of water and electricity, the spread of AIDS, and a high crime rate. My channel, Banana's Adventures will take you to South Africa, where Heaven and Hell meet at the end of the world."

When the OCA tried to publish the introduction on WeChat, she found that it could not pass WeChat's censorship screening and the draft introduction could not be posted. She was confused and angry, and took a screenshot of the rejected introduction and posted it as a photo on her WeChat Moments[15] with a comment:

> "I humbly ask all WeChat gurus: what did I do wrong with this introduction I wrote for my WeChat public channel? The system didn't allow me to publish it for reasons unknown to me. I am serious."

Her questions triggered comments from other OCAs, who made guesses about what could be considered 'sensitive' according to state standards. The first comment suggested: "I think it is because of the 'private' meeting. Perhaps nothing 'private' can be allowed? You should delete the sensitive words and try to publish again."

Other OCAs made their guesses on which specific words triggered the censorship: "Township?" "crime?" "AIDS?" "rainbow?" "Heaven and Hell?" A senior OCA concluded towards the end of this discussion in the comment box that there were too many sensitive words in this one short paragraph, and the potential content on South Africa might harm the China-South Africa relationship. After consolidating her friends' comments on the post, Banana changed her public account introduction to a much simpler version: "Banana is wandering around the world and will share stories with you". This time it passed the censorship.

Another example from my Australian fieldwork demonstrated how Chinese state institutions used funding restriction as a tool for censorship. A senior OCA who was employed by an Australian university to coordinate the university's Chinese language programme in collaboration with Chinese state institutions was disappointed to learn that his funding application for an open lecture on the Great Leap Forward[16] was rejected by Chinese state institutions. The OCA shared that he was viewed as a Leftist in Chinese academia. He held the view that although the Cultural Revolution and Great Leap Forward did not realise what they

[15] Moments or *pengyouquan* is an interactive social feed platform that allows WeChat users to post images, text, and short videos.

[16] The Great Leap Forward was an economic and social campaign from 1958 to 1962 to quickly reconstruct the country to be a communist society before the Cultural Revolution took place. It is estimated that the two movements resulted in tens of millions of deaths in China.

were supposed to accomplish and brought harm to the society, the movements did raise rural Chinese peasants' status in the Chinese society. He planned to invite Leftist scholars from China to present this side of history to the local Australian audience and applied for funding from a Chinese state institution that he worked closely with. However, the application was rejected by the state institution, which insisted that these sensitive topics must be avoided altogether. The OCA was confused:

> "I explained that the nature of the event was not to criticise the government's policies. On the contrary, I was inviting speakers who would be able to layout the benefits of the Great Leap Forward movement. In my opinion, the movement is misinterpreted using a Western discourse. I believe it is beneficial if the West can engage with the Chinese Leftist perspective to form a balanced view of China. But the Chinese state institutions did not want these topics to be discussed at all."

Although the Australia-based OCA understood that certain perspectives in political discussions were censored in China, he could not accept that the entire topic must be censored. The disagreement demonstrated the state institution and the OCAs' different understandings of what should be curated and what should be censored. The OCA shared that he was not planning to resubmit his application or run similar programmes because the application process would be time-consuming.

My state-sponsored OCA participants in South Africa and Australia compromised with state institutions' censorship as they understood and accepted these censorship mechanisms. Their South African and Australian local counterparts who did not follow the censorship rules had to learn the consequences. For example, an outspoken South African historian who wrote critically about Chinese territorial issues and the Chinese cultural revolution was denied entry when he applied for a Chinese visa. He was informed that he focused too much on the "old China", and his application would only be reconsidered if he could commit to writing about the "new China". The South Africa-based OCAs who knew the outspoken local historian spoke about the visa rejection case in fear, as it demonstrated the Chinese state institutions' power over individuals which could also be exercised on state-sponsored OCAs.

The above ethnographic scenarios demonstrate that censorship can be tailored for different OCAs in different situations. The Chinese censorship system has evolved from a model of micromanagement and manipulation on individuals' consumption and production of information to a new model of customised censorship (Roberts 2018:18). Roberts (2018) summarises the mechanism of customised censorship as fear, friction, and flooding, all of which are observed in my fieldwork with state-sponsored OCAs in South Africa and Australia. State institutions imposed controls over state-sponsored OCAs by creating fear that they would be punished if they did not follow instructions from the state. Some of the controls were clear-cut

while others were ambiguous, which maximised the effects of fear. Meanwhile, frictions were created to make free speech as difficult as possible. This included the censorship of certain topics and keywords on social media platforms, funding restrictions, and a complicated bureaucratic system to promote certain events and repress others. Finally, state institutions tasked OCAs to create state-preferred social media content to not only exhibit state institutions' achievements but also generate information flooding. The fact that the majority of the population is affected by friction and flooding allows state institutions the flexibility to impose fear and target selective individuals for their speech and actions (Ibid.).

These state-imposed censorship mechanisms further reinforce individual OCAs' self-imposed censorship. Since state institution requirements cannot reach every aspect of OCAs' everyday life, self-censorship is required for OCAs to regulate their behaviours. However, individual OCAs' standards of self-censorship vary and cannot be easily managed.

For example, a young female OCA said in her speech to colleagues at her farewell gathering at a South African university: "We Chinese people don't believe in God, but I do believe that fate brought us together and will bring us together again." A senior OCA administrator at the farewell gathering was disturbed by the junior OCA's comment. As soon as the farewell gathering ended, the administrator criticised the young OCA in Chinese so no local South African colleagues were able to understand their conversation: "Why did you mention religion? Religion is a sensitive topic and we are not supposed to talk about it!" The junior OCA kept quiet. The administrator later complained to other OCA colleagues why he was upset: "To say that we Chinese have no religion is to present ourselves as monsters in front of the local people. How come she doesn't have any common sense to not bring up religion!"

To the senior OCA administrator, what should be self-censored was simply a matter of common sense. However, unlike in the Tibetan protest incident where a clear boundary of censorship was drawn and specific instructions were given, what should be self-censored according to 'common sense' could be largely ambiguous. Individual state-sponsored OCAs had different standards and interpretations of self-censorship.

Just like state-sponsored OCAs' performances that worked in parallel ways – the curation of China to the overseas audience as well the curation of themselves to the Chinese state institutions, OCAs' self-censorship also functioned both ways. On the one hand, state-sponsored OCAs were required to interpret sometimes clearly defined but more often ambiguous censorship requirements set by state institutions in their interactions with overseas audiences. On the other hand, individual OCAs imposed self-censorship when curating themselves to state institutions to demonstrate their achievements and avoid criticisms.

A senior OCA administrator based in South Africa once invited me to a catch-up chat and asked me to pick a place to meet. I chose a Chinese tearoom ran by a Taiwanese owner, who I knew from previous visits. As the owner came to greet us, the OCA, to our surprise, said that he was very impressed by the tearoom that brought the real spirit of Chinese culture from Taiwan[17] to South African people's daily lives. The OCA further shared that he was doing meaningless work promoting Chinese culture through the Chinese state institutions because "China has lost its soul". The statement was immediately followed by a question to me, in a half-joking tone - "That was not recorded, right? I should never have said that. I am a veteran party member!"

During my fieldwork in South Africa, the senior OCA administrator often contacted me and initiated catch-up meetings. One of the most important reasons, I suspected, was because I was a PhD candidate working outside the Chinese bureaucratic system and had no conflict of interests with him and the state institutions. Therefore, the OCA administrator did not have to self-censor himself with me as much as he did with his colleagues. Our catch-up meetings provided opportunities for him to reveal his true self to a certain degree, but he was always fully aware of all state censorship and self-censorship requirements and remained on the middlestage where performances were required. His work for China's managed cultural globalisation and his duties of institutional patriotism created tensions between his true self and his self-presentations curated for state institutions on the middlestage.

These middlestage tensions coincide with the Chinese Nobel Literature Prize winner Mo Yan's analysis that for anyone working within the Chinese state institution system, there are two sets of languages one must learn to speak and two sets of self-presentations that one must carefully curate: one in public and one in private (Mo 2013). State-sponsored OCAs make efforts to separate their private language and self-presentations from their public ones, but they often find that the boundary between the public and the private blurs. On the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation, Chinese state institutions' public curations are embodied in and expressed through OCAs' private lives. At the same time, individual OCAs' private language and self-presentations shape the substance and meaning of the Chinese state institutions' public curations. The middlestage demonstrates that one cannot solely embrace publicity or privacy, as they interact in a dialectic relationship (Jurgenson and Rey 2013).

The tensions between state-sponsored OCAs' true selves and their curated self-presentations intensified on WeChat Moments, where app users posted photos, videos, and everyday life status feeds to share with their WeChat contacts. Since OCAs' communications with state institutions were on WeChat, they had to self-

[17] When the Chinese Civil War ended in 1949, China subsequently split into the two self-governing entities: the People's Republic of China, commonly referred to as "China", and the Republic of China, commonly referred to as "Taiwan".

censor their WeChat Moments and transformed it into a space of curating self-presentations to state institutions.

For example, although all OCAs enjoyed their leisure life in South Africa and spent time hiking, visiting tourist attractions, attending, and organising *braais*, many OCAs avoided displaying photos and stories from these experiences on their personal WeChat Moments. A young OCA who spent two years teaching Chinese in South Africa explained to me at a *braai* that he had to be very careful about what was presented to his *danwei* (work unit): [18]

> "I don't want my *danwei* to see that I am enjoying my life too much here in South Africa. The narrative was supposed to be that I sacrificed two years of my youth and dedicated it to teaching Chinese in Africa. It needs to be presented as a challenging process with many difficulties to overcome. Enjoying *braais* and hikes doesn't fit into that storyline."

I was once invited to a day trip by a senior OCA administrator based in South Africa and was joined by a couple visiting him from China who was his personal friends. The OCA invited me along to express his appreciation for my support in several state-sponsored cultural events he organised where I assisted as a translator. During our trip to several vineyards, the couple took many photos. At lunch, while the four of us waited for the food to arrive, the OCA checked his WeChat and found that the couple posted photos taken earlier on their WeChat Moments. In one of these photos, the senior OCA administrator could be clearly identified. He strongly requested that the photo be deleted immediately as it could be collected by state institutions as evidence against him for living a luxurious lifestyle in South Africa. He explained explicitly that "my presence in the vineyard is against my image as a state-sponsored staff member". The couple understood the OCA's request and immediately deleted the relevant posts.

Every year, South Africa-based state-sponsored OCAs received many different delegates from China for cultural exchanges and academic visits. I was often invited to their meetings as a representative of Chinese PhD candidates studying in South Africa. Many of these meetings were scheduled towards the end of the day and lasted for half an hour. A senior OCA administrator explained these meetings were only for photo-taking purposes. The photos were meant to demonstrate the work the delegates did for the state because their trips were funded by state institutions. The senior OCA administrator understood the delegates' intentions. As he explained, "we need to support each other - it is always good to show to our headquarters that we actively engage with visitors from China, and one day we will also need help from these visitors". Both the senior OCA administrator and his visitors self-censored the details of the short academic visits

[18] *Danwei*, or work unit, refers to one's workplace. It comes from the pre-market economy era when all workers worked for state institutions or state-owned enterprises where individuals were assigned by the state to work at a unit.

and created publicity content based on the photos taken at the meetings to curate a narrative preferred by Chinese state institutions.

In these accounts, state-sponsored OCAs were fully aware that the Chinese state institutions were an invisible audience and understood the vertical control from the state. They were also able to collaborate horizontally with their colleagues to ensure successful curations. Instead of regulating their behaviours, OCAs managed their curations by setting up middlestage access control, through which OCAs were able to use their self-censorship strategically and curate a state-preferred narrative to state institutions. By filtering their curations to Chinese state institutions, OCAs could meet state institution requirements and meanwhile enjoy a certain degree of privacy and freedom on the middlestage. This required individual OCAs to use their self-censorships strategically as access controls to the middlestage, and as a result, state institutions could only access OCAs' curated self-presentations.

However, there were also scenarios where state-sponsored OCAs were controlled and confused by their self-censorships. Self-censorship can also be deeply rooted in OCAs' mentality and prevent them from speaking and behaving in particular ways such as challenging state institutions' authorities. When one of the senior OCA administrators based in South Africa was investigated by his local partner-university and Chinese state institutions for corruption, the junior OCAs who were interviewed for the investigation felt helpless as they did not know what censorship and self-censorship standards to follow. The junior OCAs were aware of the senior OCAs' misuse of funds and discussed the corruption case among themselves in private. However, they chose not to raise the case to either the South African partner-university or their Chinese state institution headquarters. When approached by the investigators from the university and Chinese state institution headquarters, they all decided to lie and said that they did not know about the senior OCA administrator's corruption. One of the junior OCAs explained that,

> "We could never be the whistle-blowers. We made a lot of complaints [about the senior OCAs' corruption] among ourselves, but when we were formally given a platform to raise issues, we all went silent. It is not only about fear. We actually didn't know how to do it."

Another junior OCA further explained that "the Chinese education only taught us to absorb, to accept, but it didn't teach us how to reject. Even if we were given poison and instructions to drink it, we would still drink it." Both junior OCAs shared that this incident made them aware of their inability to resist their deeply rooted self-censorship, which they never noticed in the past.

In this chapter, the state-sponsored OCAs' curations on the middlestage were examined. While OCAs co-curate Chinese culture with state institutions, they also curate self-presentations to state institutions. OCAs experience censorship and self-censorship and develop self-awareness to apply self-censorship strategically

to deny state institutions' access to the middlestage. This self-awareness that state-sponsored OCAs cultivate through their interactions with state institutions' censorship mechanisms enables them to gain a better understanding of the middlestage. It reinforces OCAs' strategic use of self-censorship to protect themselves and curate state-preferred self-presentations. Their reflections lead them to negotiate their identities and re-imagine their realities. The processes involving negotiations and re-imaginations will be further investigated in the next chapters.

Chapter Four

Negotiations on the Middlestage

"I had a bad dream last night. It was about my National College Entrance Exam in China, but in my dream, it somehow took place here in South Africa. The exam site was a South African poor village school situated in a mountainous area. I got off a truck with my colleague Ni, and we tried to find our exam room which was nowhere to be found. I was extremely nervous and anxious. We asked people for help around but got no answer. We tried to phone our teachers, but the calls just couldn't get through. We were completely lost and didn't know what to do. Sometime later, a middle-aged South African invigilator told us that he knew where our exam room was and kindly took us there. We were told that the exam would finish in ten minutes. It was a shock to us, and we begged the invigilator for another chance. Luckily, the invigilator agreed. However, our hope to pass the exam died out quickly because we soon realised that there were endless questions on the exam paper, and we could never finish. We kept writing and writing but all our efforts were in vain. It just never ended. The whole world collapsed before me. I had no memory of what happened afterward, and I woke up. It was an awful dream. I am physically far away from China, but I am still haunted by my traumatic experiences with Chinese exams."

A WeChat message shared by a South Africa-based state-sponsored OCA.

The above dream reveals that state-sponsored OCAs carry an embodied China to their overseas destinations and negotiate identities with their life trajectories and overseas scenarios. In this chapter, I explore the embodied aspects of China's managed cultural globalisation on the middlestage by investigating the state-sponsored OCAs' identity negotiation processes. I argue that state-sponsored OCAs negotiate with state-home and origin-home; internal and international mobilities; China's rushed modernisation and their individualities. They develop their fields, capitals, and habitus on the middlestage through this process.

Negotiating identities on the middlestage

Identity, according to Hogg and Abrams (1988:2), refers to people's conceptions of 'who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others'. A similar definition is given by Weedon (1997:32), who views identity as one's conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions as well as one's perception of oneself and relations to the world. Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004:19) emphasise specific times and

places and argue that identities are 'social, discursive, and narrative options offered by a particular society at a specific time and place' to which individuals and groups of individuals categorise and claim social spaces. Anderson's (1991) conceptual framework of an 'imagined community' is an example of claimed social spaces. It regards a nation-state as a community united by socially constructed collective imaginations as a result of the development of print capitalism. Bauder (2011) further argues that the perception of a nation-state as an imagined community creates a dialectical relationship between an individual's identity formation processes and a nation's domestic and foreign policies. These views of identity emphasise an individual's relationship with the external environment and regard identity as dynamic, multiple, and fluid. It is constructed through complex and recurrent interactions between an individual and a social environment.

Plurality and fluidity have been stressed by scholars as key qualities of identity in the global age. Hall (1996) points out that no single identity can act as an overarching organising identity, and people are constituted by fractured multiple identities. Hobsbawm (1996:1067) emphasises that 'identities are not like shoes, of which we can only wear one pair at a time' and states that any initiative to perceive identity as single and static is 'brainwashing'. Sanderson (2004:14) argues that it is important to actively internationalise ourselves and reject biased and instrumental identities. This is because interculturality leads people to rethink over-simplified categorisations of identity and to challenge attempts to essentialise identity (Gilroy 2004). Nyamnjoh (2016:33) looks into how identity has been approached from an anthropological perspective. He critiques the discipline for reproducing radical alterity - representation of other cultures with exaggerated cultural differences (Keesing 1990) and urges anthropologists to contribute to the scholarly understanding of identities as flexible and fluid. Gupta and Ferguson (1992:16) call upon anthropologists to explore the construction of cultural differences in historical processes and refrain from using cultural differences to romanticise and essentialise identities. It can be proposed from the above arguments that by gaining a greater understanding of an Other, an individual is better able to understand him/herself, deconstruct and reconstruct his/her identity, and avoid retreating into a singular and essentialised identity.

Bourdieu (1986) extends the understanding of identity through his theory of practice by developing an interconnected set of conceptual tools of field, capital, and habitus to analyse identities concerning people's daily interactions. A field is defined as a distinct social space consisting of interrelated and vertically differentiated positions, a 'network, or configuration of objective relations between positions' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:97). Bourdieu (1986) expands Marx's concept of capital by identifying four forms of capital central to one's identity: cultural, social, economic, and symbolic; and points out that the first three can be converted into symbolic capital when a given field is entered.

Cultural capital is further categorised by Bourdieu (1986) into institutional, objectified, and embodied. He argues that each form of cultural capital plays a significant role in the process of developing a person's identities, especially during one's education. Institutional cultural capital refers to achievements awarded or recognised by institutions such as academic qualifications. Objectified cultural capital refers to the material objects used for learning such as books. Embodied cultural capital refers to habits of the mind and body that lead to success. The embodied cultural capital creates a desire for institutional cultural capital and encourages the use of objective cultural capital. All three forms of cultural capital are inter-dependent and closely linked to habitus (Bourdieu 1986).

Habitus can be understood as the physical embodiment of cultural capital that functions as an 'organising principle' for actions (Bourdieu 1977:18). While individuals live in and interact with their social worlds, their social worlds are embedded in them (Ibid.). Habitus is 'a system of dispositions' deeply ingrained in one's habits, skills, tastes, beliefs, and interests (Bourdieu 1984:6). Experience and awareness occur during the formation of habitus and are constitutive of habitus (Sayer 2005). Since habitus is created by an individual's life experiences as well as 'an interplay between social structures' (Bourdieu 1984:170), it has the duality of being both individualised and collective (Reay 2004).

The 'field, capital, and habitus' framework provides a method for simultaneously analysing 'the experience of social agents' and 'the objective structures which make this experience possible' (Bourdieu 1988:782). This set of conceptual tools ensure that a broader perspective is considered beyond a specific issue under study (Reay 2004). It is important to view individuals as actively engaged in creating their social worlds, and the 'field, capital, and habitus' framework as a means of 'examining structure as occurring within small-scale interactions and activity within large-scale settings' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:144).

China's managed cultural globalisation provides state-sponsored OCAs with a unique opportunity to divert their life trajectories and switch fields from China to their overseas destinations. This sudden shift of fields also transforms OCAs' capitals and habitus, leading to complex processes of identity negotiations. These identity negotiation processes are performed on the middlestage, where the performers' identities may overlap (e.g., simultaneously playing one role on the frontstage and another role on the middlestage) or be hidden (e.g., not revealing a role to an audience). This requires performers on the middlestage to be flexible with their identity boundaries. The middlestage performers' blurred identity boundaries make them significantly different from Goffman's frontstage performers who stick to their roles on a frontstage and transform their personalities completely when entering a backstage (Goffman 1956:78). Since the state-sponsored OCAs' everyday interactions with their overseas environments are part of the middlestage performances, they bring more than a state-curated China and their self-curated presentations to the performance of China's managed cultural globalisation. The OCAs' identity negotiation processes take

place on the middlestage, where Chinese culture and Chinese modernisation are embodied in the state-sponsored OCAs' habitus and capitals, and taken into new fields at their overseas destinations.

Negotiations with state-home and origin-home

The identity of a person is strongly influenced by the environment one grows up in and interacts with. The interventions that the society imposes on an individual are described by Althusser (1971:86) as 'interpellation', which compares an abstract authority's controls of individuals to 'hailings' (e.g., police hailings) that are used to regulate people's behaviours. Giddens (1991) argues that in the late modern era, interpellation is revoked and individuals' freedom of choice becomes compulsory, as he famously claims that 'we have no choice but to choose' (Giddens 1991:81). The emphasis on individuals' freedom of choice is observed in the global rise of neoliberalism, where 'a person's utmost responsibility and loyalty is directed toward him/herself' (Ehala 2017:11-12). However, since the Chinese party-state manages every aspect of society, interpellation is observed as a strong force in Chinese individuals' identity formation processes.

'Home' stands out as an important source of interpellation in the Chinese scenario. Traditionally, the concept of home is the lived experience of locality, the place where one usually lives and steady relationships are kept (Rapport and Dawson 1998). The fixity of home, however, has become increasingly problematic in the era of globalisation, when movement is constant, boundaries are crossed, and spaces are stretched. Home undergoes a conceptual shift and can be reinterpreted as located in a routine of practices that can be taken along wherever one decamps (Rapport and Dawson 1998:27). Home, like a nation-state, is increasingly understood as a fictional construct of mythic narratives (Bammer 1992). Its fluid nature allows home to be approached as an 'unfixed, multiple, contested' concept (Ngan 2008:75).

'Home' is an important conception that sits at the centre of state-sponsored OCAs' identity negotiations. First, it incorporates interpellations from Chinese state institutions. Second, it provides OCAs with both fields and capitals and forms the core of their habitus. Finally, it is embodied in OCAs and feeds to their middlestage performances of China's managed cultural globalisation. To state-sponsored OCAs, home is a plural notion and the two most significant concepts in home are *guojia* (state-home) and *laojia* (origin-home).

Guojia, or state-home, plays an important role in state-sponsored OCAs' lives. The term *guojia* means 'state' followed by 'home'. It is commonly interpreted as 'the state must be prioritised before home' or 'only when you have a state can you have a home'. *Guojia* also includes the implication of a patrilineal defined entity. While the ideal of filial piety extends from fathers to officials and emperors in Confucianism,

the CCP further intensifies the emotional links to the party-state via implicit family metaphors (Steinmüller 2015). In Chinese official as well as vernacular expressions, the concept of *guojia* 'simultaneously means the state, nation, country, government and even the Party' (Xiang 2010:117). State-home not only provides OCAs with a sense of belonging in terms of national identity but also plays an active role in shaping their lives through its policies throughout state-sponsored OCAs' upbringings. The Chinese party-state is not only a major provider of symbolic capital that facilitates the convertibility of different forms of capital (Xiang and Shen 2009:514), it also plays a critical role in 'initiating or causing changes' in various ways and for diverse purposes (Yan 2003:235). The significant impacts the party-state has on Chinese individuals is largely stressed by Davis and Harrell, to the extent that they conclude that in China, 'state power and policies have been the creators, not the creations, of a transformed society' (Davis and Harrell 1993:5). OCAs' life trajectories reflect various state-imposed policies and their influences on state-sponsored OCAs' identities.

In *Signs of Identity*, Ehala (2017) highlights two important aims of identity negotiation: first, to carve out viable collective identities that are distinct from other identities of the same level; and second, to develop emotional attachment in people who have these identities. In the service of the modern Chinese nation-state, the collective aspect of identity is especially stressed in Chinese shared values and common lifestyles, routinised with 'the full force of dissemination through the media, education, and other public domains' (Chun 1996:128). Without a culture of democracy that promotes equality and liberal individualism or a solid welfare mechanism that protects and supports the individual, the Chinese party-state emphasises collective identities and keeps the society and the individuals under its management (Yan 2011:69-70).

A variety of different policies imposed by the Chinese party-state during different eras influenced the lives of my state-sponsored OCA participants, whose backgrounds varied. Some of my senior OCA participants experienced Cultural Revolution and participated in *shangshan xiaxiang*, 'up to the mountains and down to the villages' movement.[19] They did not receive formal secondary education and were only able to attend universities when the policies allowed them to do so in 1977, a decade after universities suspended student in-take. The state-sponsored OCAs who experienced this era expressed regrets towards their lost years but admitted that they were all willing and motivated to be engaged in the state-initiatives during China's transformative years. The senior OCAs often shared their experiences from the Cultural Revolutionary years and their passion for building a socialist China with young OCAs during social gatherings and

[19] From 1968 to 1978, millions of Chinese educated urban youth, mostly secondary school graduates and students, were sent to work in rural villages. They were requested to help build up the underdeveloped areas and be re-educated by peasants.

reminded the young OCAs how lucky they were to live in an open and global era and to have the state-support to travel and work overseas.

A majority of my state-sponsored OCA participants in South Africa and Australia were fresh graduates in their mid-twenties, and most of them were born in the early 1990s under China's One Child Policy.[20] The policy was enforced using a top-down approach through various levels of state institutions. As a result, its implementation was more successful in urban areas where the population mostly worked for state-sponsored institutions than it was in rural areas where peasants worked independently from the state. As many OCAs came from rural backgrounds, they were not an only child in their families and their parents did not follow the policy. They shared that their parents had to go into hiding to have a second child. As a young female South Africa-based OCA participant explained, when visiting relatives in her rural Chinese hometown, she was often told that "We hosted you while you were still in your mother's belly when she came here and hid". The state-sponsored OCAs often used the One Child Policy as an example to explain Chinese people's sacrifice behind China's economic achievements when having in-depth discussions with South Africans at informal occasions. They often explained why the policy was implemented from the state perspective but also expressed disagreements with its enforcement and their admiration for freer societies where freedom of personal choices was upheld.

China's adoption of the market economy and its opening-up to the world were other important policies that had significant impacts on my OCA participants' life trajectories. These policies increased ordinary Chinese people's opportunities to interact with the global community through imported cultural products and travelling overseas. China's managed cultural globalisation programmes, as a result of these policies, also played an important role in many OCAs' lives. The state-sponsored programmes, founded by the Education Ministry of China, provided salaries and living allowances to OCAs and made travelling overseas possible.

It becomes obvious that the Chinese *guojia* (state-home) plays a critical role in shaping the fields and habitus of different generations of Chinese individuals. All OCAs must plan their lives around different state policies and adapt to changes when necessary. These different state policies reflect the party-state's urge to become modern in different eras. To achieve modernisation, Chinese state policies emphasise practicality and swiftly transform China from a planned to a market economy. The shifting policies push organisations and individuals to adapt to changes and leave them with little time and space to comprehend their realities. This modernisation process does not necessarily bring out the best outcomes and creates anxieties among Chinese individuals, and is commonly viewed by my OCA participants as 'rushed'. An

[20] One Child Policy was introduced in the late 1970s by the CCP to limit the great majority of family units in China to have one child in order to reduce the then high growth rate of China's population. The policy was put to an end in early 2016 due to the state's low birth-rate.

OCA who returned to China after teaching Chinese for two years in South Africa explained that she witnessed how her university's Human Resources policies changed rapidly as the university was pushed by state institutions' new requirements to achieve "Double First-Class":[21]

> "When I returned from South Africa to my old job in China, I realised that many of my colleagues were removed from their teaching positions and were assigned administrative duties instead. The university's HR policies changed while I was overseas. Those who don't have a master's degree are no longer allowed to teach. The university has recruited new lecturers with new requirements: they must have a doctorate, and they must have a good track record of publications. It does not matter that the lecturers that are removed are capable and experienced instructors. These new instructors don't know how to teach at all but hiring them is the only way to meet the policy requirements of a Double First-Class university. I'm glad that I completed my master's and I am safe for now, but I've heard that I could be among the next batch of people removed from teaching - those without publications. The policies can change overnight and we must adapt to them. These changes create anxieties among teaching staff. The university will rush into this Double First-Class status soon, but I don't know where I will be."

China's rushed modernisation is best demonstrated in waves of rural labour forces flooding into urban spaces in support of China's rapid urbanisation. This process is witnessed and experienced by all my OCA participants, as they and their families participate in China's rushed modernisation and are involved in various forms of mobility.

Another important notion of home to be highlighted in the OCAs' mobilities is *laojia*, origin-home. It is a fixed physical space where state-sponsored OCAs originate from, and also an imagined space that they carry with them in their minds wherever they go. Many of my OCA participants came from a rural Chinese background and experienced internal migrations from rural to urban regions in China. Origin-home, to most state-sponsored OCAs, was a rural Chinese town where they were born and spent their childhoods before they became internal migrants moving to urban Chinese cities for economic or educational prosperities. For most Chinese people, birth is closely linked to land as well as family, as *chushengdi*, the place of birth as well as *zuji*, ancestry town (where one's grandfather was born) are both documented in *hukou*, China's household registration system.[22] Different from these two places, origin-home usually refers to the place

[21] "Double First-Class" refers to first-class university-building and first-class academic discipline construction. It is a tertiary education initiative developed by Chinese state institutions in 2015 that aims to transform Chinese universities into world-class institutions by 2050.

[22] *Hukou*, or the household registration system, categorises the Chinese population into agricultural and non-agricultural residents, and gives preferential treatments to urban populations in education, housing and health care while limiting the mobilities of rural residents by restricting their benefits when they move to cities.

where one is raised. Origin-home is a relatively fixed space where many OCAs occasionally return to visit their family and relatives.

Origin-home often indicates a certain degree of rurality in the Chinese context, and China's urbanisation is witnessed in the internal mobilities of state-sponsored OCAs and their families. In Steinmüller's (2013:220) research on Chinese rural villages, the anthropologist notes that modernisation projects in rural China are often 'face projects' and observes the local formations of 'communities of complicity' where traditionalist self-knowledge prevails beneath modernist representations. I interviewed an OCA with a rural Chinese background who researched contemporary Chinese societies at an Australian university. The OCA emphasised that when conducting any research on China, one must understand that there are two Chinas: rural China and urban China. To most of my state-sponsored OCA participants, origin-home was understood as a rural place left-behind by China's fast developments and rushed modernisation. Although China went through dramatic transformations in the past three decades, the most significant developments took place in urban China, especially in the megacities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. A male OCA in his late twenties, who occasionally returned to his rural origin-home to assist his family members and make financial contributions, shared that "*Laojia* seems to be a left-behind place where things haven't changed much".

'Left-behind' is a common phenomenon in China. Since the start of the party-state's market reform and opening-up, China has witnessed a significant increase in internal migration from rural to urban China as well as international migration to various overseas destinations to seek work opportunities. The migrants often leave their parents and children behind at their rural origin-homes. This is because Chinese social welfare systems (i.e., the *hukou* mechanism, education system, and labour protection system) discourage rural residents from taking their families to the cities. Migrant workers seek labour opportunities in Chinese cities and overseas, and send money to origin-home where their parents and children are left behind.

Many OCA participants shared that they were born in rural China, left behind with their grandparents at origin-home, and received education in the rural areas. They were financially supported by their parents who left to take up long-term employment in urban Chinese cities. The OCAs were later able to relocate to urban cities where they were admitted to universities, and they also had to leave their origin-homes in pursuit of academic qualifications and career opportunities. My state-sponsored OCA participants from a rural Chinese background shared that their rural upbringings were carried into their internal and international mobilities and were an important source for their identity negotiations.

Internal and international mobilities as social mobility strategies

Xiang (2005)'s study on Chinese migrant workers reveals that Chinese internal and international migrations cannot be fundamentally distinct from each other. Xiang (2016:669) argues that Chinese migrants' internal and international mobilities are interlinked as 'constituted and constitutive assemblages'. Internal and international mobilities are constituted by social systems and processes such as state policies and globalisation; at the same time, internal and international mobilities constitute these social systems and processes in return. Since international mobilities cannot be fully comprehended without examining internal mobilities, understanding state-sponsored OCAs' international mobilities require a close examination of their internal mobilities at their state-home and origin-homes.

State-sponsored OCAs' internal mobilities were driven by a lack of educational resources. My OCA participants collectively shared that the more they climbed the educational ladder, the further away they migrated from their rural origin-homes to urban cities. A young female OCA in her mid-twenties from a Chinese south-west less-developed rural region shared that she first studied at a village primary school but in her higher form at primary school, she had to move to a boarding school in a bigger village far from home, and then to a town further away for secondary school education. She later moved to her provincial capital to study towards an undergraduate degree and eventually moved to a major city in southern China to study towards her master's degree.

State-sponsored OCAs' interactions with their state-home and origin-homes in their mobilities demonstrated that different forms of mobilities could transform into capital. Due to a lack of economic, social, and cultural capital, OCAs with rural upbringings had to focus on accumulating their academic capital (Li 2013). Academic capital was among the few forms of capital that Chinese academics with rural backgrounds could accumulate, and academic achievements were the only path to change their disadvantaged position and rural identity (Li 2013:842). Since other forms of capital were inaccessible, state-sponsored OCAs self-generated cultural capital such as diligence and self-discipline to empower themselves. These self-generated resources shaped by their rural upbringings became a new form of 'start-up capital' (Ong 1999:95) which enabled people at a grassroots level to succeed. This start-up capital became their embodied cultural capital and led them to a desire for institutional cultural capital and encouraged them to make full use of objectified cultural capital available to them. As a result, state-sponsored OCAs further accumulated a combination of embodied, objectified, and institutionalised cultural capitals which qualified them to participate in China's managed cultural globalisation and experience international mobilities.

Chuguo or 'going overseas' has long been considered as a form of privileged mobility admired by most Chinese people since China's market reform and opening-up. To many Chinese people, going overseas is not only a physical journey but also a radical personal transformation (Pieke et al. 2004). People from certain provinces in China often view going overseas as an honour and it is a tradition for young men to leave China as soon as they have an opportunity to do so.

A young male South Africa-based state-sponsored OCA explained to me that mythical stories about going overseas as a metamorphosis process were popular in his home province Fujian. The province is situated on China's well-developed south-east coastline and is represented by the Chinese character 闽 *min*, a 虫 *chong* (insect) under a 门 *men* (gate). People in Fujian believe that for those who choose to always shelter themselves under the gate, they would remain an insect. For those who go out of the gate, in this context, go overseas, there is a chance of the insect's transformation into a dragon or a phoenix. The story demonstrates a popular view that a decision to go overseas is associated with positive connotations.

This popular view that the overseas world is a land of opportunities neglects the differences between various overseas destinations. Although Chinese migrants prefer moving to developed countries and welfare states over developing countries and conflict zones, most people see *guowai* (the world outside of China) as prosperous in general. Chinese migrants' tendency to neglect differences between overseas countries is a result of insufficient knowledge about the world outside China (Fong 2011). For example, a young female OCA shared that neither she nor her family knew much about South Africa when she chose it as her overseas destination for teaching Chinese:

> "I just wanted to go overseas, anywhere overseas, and explore what the outside world was like. All I knew about South Africa was from *Animal Worlds*, a TV programme that I watched as a child. I remembered about the lions and the penguins and was curious about what it would be like to live in that part of the world. When I told my family that I was planning to go to South Africa, they said, 'You can go wherever you'd like to go. You are the most educated person in the family, and we don't have much knowledge to advise you otherwise'. My family didn't have the money to support me to study overseas, but I was able to get into the state-sponsored programmes to teach Chinese overseas and my family supported my decision to go anywhere I would like to go."

Another young male state-sponsored OCA explained his decision-making process for picking his overseas work destination and how he ended up being stationed in South Africa to teach Chinese:

> "I applied to the *Hanban*'s Australian programmes and was shortlisted after passing the written tests and interviews. However, an officer at *Hanban* later informed me that I didn't get into the Australian programme, but I could consider job openings in Eritrea. I had never heard of the country.

> The officer simply explained that it was a Muslim country in Africa and the programme would only send male staff. The officer urged me to consider this offer in Eritrea. I told *Hanban* my honest thoughts: I didn't mind being sent wherever they would like me to go, because I knew they wouldn't station me anywhere dangerous. I didn't care much about the living conditions. What could be worse than my village in rural *Guangxi* province back at home? Then I heard from some returnees from Africa that *Hanban* was also recruiting people for the South African programme, so I called the *Hanban* officer and asked if I could be stationed in South Africa instead because I had a bachelor's degree in English before I received my Master's in Teaching Chinese as an International Language. I convinced him that I would be better able to perform work in an English-speaking country. After a day or two, the officer called back and confirmed that my request was approved. So not Australia, not Eritrea, I ended up being sent to South Africa."

The preference for choosing English-speaking countries as their overseas work destinations was shared by my state-sponsored OCA participants. A middle-aged female state-sponsored OCA stationed in South Africa explained that she chose South Africa over Hungary because of English. She considered giving her child an English-speaking educational experience:

> "I wanted to keep the option of bringing my daughter with me open and I would like her to go to an English-speaking school and live in an English-speaking environment so that she would be able to speak good English. I know that Hungary is in Europe and the lifestyle there would be great, but since *Hanban* gave me a choice, I would rather go to an English-speaking country, so I came to South Africa."

Chinese students who study abroad often perceive their overseas experience as a form of investment to ensure their future prosperities and view study abroad destinations as their chosen investment products. Different from the Chinese students who can afford to study overseas and consider their choice of destination carefully, OCAs' choices are limited. My state-sponsored OCA participants were eager to take advantage of any international mobility opportunity. The OCAs explained that they were determined to go overseas but chose their destinations serendipitously for reasons such as they "happened to see a scholarship poster to do a postgraduate degree in Australia", or "listened to a talk by an inspiring state-sponsored OCA who returned from South Africa". Their primary aim was to secure a state-sponsored opportunity overseas, regardless of the destination.

Another important reason why a specific overseas destination was not of high importance to state-sponsored OCAs was that going overseas, to the OCAs, was a strategy to *dujin* - get gold-plated. The overseas exposure from anywhere in the world would wrap their all-around excellence, which was already

recognised by the Chinese state, with a layer of gold-plating. OCAs' overseas experiences would further enhance their competitiveness and state-endorsed symbolic capital, thus accelerate their social mobilities.

State-sponsored OCAs' internal and international mobilities demonstrate their desire for social mobility from a peripheral to a central position - be it a bigger town far from home, a provincial capital in China, or an overseas destination. Individual OCAs' pursuits of social mobility also reveal a hierarchical global narrative that they imagine. This global narrative highlights how regions and nation-states interact in a centre-periphery structure (Wallerstein 2004). OCAs' determinations of social mobility towards the centre of the society coincide with China's strategy to move towards a central position in the global economic-political structure. Since the global centre-periphery hierarchy is flexible and changeable (Wallerstein 2004:29), China actively pushes for a 'reversal of centre and periphery' to achieve 'global rebalancing' (Raghuram, Noxolo and Madge 2014:127). At the same time, China's rushed modernisation and mobility towards a central position in the global structure is fulfilled by Chinese individuals' pursuits of social mobility towards a central position in the society to remake their lives. State-sponsored OCAs' participation in China's managed cultural globalisation can be precisely understood as their ambitious mobilities towards a central position at both national/international and personal levels. At a national/international level, state-sponsored OCAs' performances move China towards a central position in the world; at a personal level, gaining valuable overseas experiences provides OCAs with opportunities for further social mobility. However, China's decisive attempts to move away from peripheral status cannot escape from what Herzfeld (2004) conceptualises as a global hierarchy of value. The OCAs are caught up in dilemmas created by their mobilities towards a central position while recognising that this dynamic is itself rooted in China's past subaltern relations with the Western colonial powers.

Recovery from China's rushed modernisation

China's rushed modernisation is embodied in state-sponsored OCAs and performed on the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation. China's mobility towards the global centre and individual OCAs' quests for social mobility collectively constitute what Ortner (1973, 1989) defines as 'key scenarios'. Key scenarios are culturally defined 'models': models of social conceptions and models for social actions (Ortner 1989). They are used for 'the staging and playing out of standard social interactions in a particular culture' (Ortner 1989:60). Every culture has its own 'vision of success', and key scenarios are 'the best ways of achieving it' (Ortner 1973:1341).

China's key scenarios are expressed in the party-state's dramatic transformations of state policies to achieve rushed modernisation and Chinese individuals' subsequent responses to these policies in pursuit of social

mobility. The state policies change at a rapid speed, so do individuals' social mobility strategies. The changed state policies force Chinese individuals' fields to change. Individuals are left with limited time and space to reflect on their positionalities and are urged to adjust their capitals and habitus to meet the demands of their new state-endorsed fields.

The Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami observes that, because of Asia's overall compressed development, there is often no clear boundary between people's subjective and objective worlds in Asian societies (Murakami 2017). In the Chinese case of rushed modernisation, the line between what is personal within the self and what is 'an intrusion of the authoritarian state into speech and behaviour' blurs (Kleinman et al. 2011:288). Murakami encourages individuals to pursue their individualities by gaining conceptual spaces where systems, hierarchy, and efficiency are kept ashore (Murakami 2017). To state-sponsored OCAs, their overseas work experience provides a conceptual space of *recovery* which enables them to negotiate with China's rushed modernisation.

The concept of recovery is often used in health research, especially mental health research, as a conceptual model for healing (Jacobson and Greenley 2001; Walsh, Stevenson, and Zinck 2008). Recovery is a process experienced by individuals and facilitated by systems, yet the specifics of the experiences and facilitations are often complex (Jacobson and Greenley 2001). Recovery provides a unique 'discourse of resistance', as it views individuals as having equal competence as institutional disciplinary power (Walsh, Stevenson, and Zinck 2008:255). For example, individuals who experience mental illness need to be consulted and respected as key informers on their own mental conditions in the recovery process. This approach rejects the hierarchy between psychiatric systems and individual patients, as the recovery process is not dictated solely by psychiatric systems but is co-created by the 'combined expertise' of psychiatric systems and individual patients (Walsh, Stevenson, and Zinck 2008:252). In essence, the conception of recovery empowers and gives a voice to individuals.

Recovery from China's rushed modernisation requires the empowerment of Chinese individuals. As the Chinese government manages all aspects of society, the Chinese individualisation process is also under the party-state's control. This individualisation process is driven by state institution-initiated market reform, and its outcomes include increased individual productivity, responsibilities, and consumerism (Yan 2010). Before the market reform, all productions were planned by the state and all jobs were assigned to individuals by the state. After the market reform, individuals were encouraged to increase their productivity and take more responsibilities. In return, they were rewarded with better capacities for consumption.

However, the free market logic in fostering private ownership and self-enterprise does not revoke state controls. Instead, as observed by anthropologists such as Ong and Zhang (2008) from their fieldwork on

the development of Chinese free markets, private property and individuals' private pursuits, the state's permission to pursue self-interest freely is aligned with socialist controls over designated areas of national interest. Since China's market reform is initiated and administered by the state, Chinese people's individualities can hardly escape from state-engineered key scenarios. These key scenarios rarely emanate directly from the individuals but are articulated by state institutions who claim to speak on behalf of society (Chun 1996:115). This is clearly explained by Miranda Priestly, the fashion editor in the film *The Devil Wears Prada*, on how one's individualistic actions such as fashion choices can be the result of carefully planned work of centralised power:

> "You think this has nothing to do with you. You go to your closet and you select… I don't know… that lumpy blue sweater… because you're trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back… However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs and it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing the sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room" (Frankel 2006).

To achieve the aim of rushed modernisation, the Chinese party-state has prioritised China's key scenarios as the realisation of three Chinese dreams as first, a strong state; second, a wealthy nation; and third, a prosperous individual (Yan 2010:507). In other words, the individual must remain 'a means to the end of modernisation' in the Chinese model, and the model determines that the freedom of the individual has to be sacrificed for the benefit of the nation-state (Yan 2010:509). Comaroff and Comaroff (2009:128) argue in *Ethnicity Inc.* that state governments, as a corporate entity, view individuals as the state's entrepreneurial and 'ethno-preneurial' subjects and create conditions to help them achieve their aspirations by treating them as stakeholders in the corporate. While this is partly true in the Chinese case, individualism in China has been interpreted as egotism, and liberal ideas of individual rights have long been considered dangerous and are therefore suppressed by the party-state. In pursuit of China's rushed modernisation, there is a strong ideological call for the submission of 'the small self' that acts in the interests of the individual, to 'the great self' that acts in the interests of the nation-state (Yan 2017:69).

In addition to their pursuits of social mobility, state-sponsored OCAs search for recovery from China's rushed modernisation at a personal level in their participation in China's managed cultural globalisation. Many of my young state-sponsored OCA participants explained that their disadvantaged backgrounds made them feel less confident when living in China, where they were overwhelmed by material pursuits and worship of wealth. When the OCAs went overseas and changed their fields, their rurality was no longer a deficit. They started to experience and express a sense of pride, distinction, and individuality from their rurality and developed the habitus and the competence for further capital accumulation.

For many of my young OCA participants based in South Africa and Australia, going overseas was viewed as an opportunity to further enhance their competitiveness and explore opportunities; at the same time, they also used it as a personal project that helped them to temporarily avoid a reality at home where immense pressure was shouldered by them. The OCAs' work overseas delayed their responsibilities in China of looking for a stable job, saving money to purchase a property, getting married, starting a family, and making financial contributions to their families, all of which was expected according to the key scenarios of China's rush modernisation. Many state-sponsored OCAs' after-dinner discussions in South Africa were about their successful "escape" from China's highly pressured social environment. As an OCA explained,

> "In China, people are fed with rags-to-riches stories that motivate but overwhelm you every day. The flow of success is too strong, and it carries you away easily. It's so nice to keep a distance from these success stories."

The state-sponsored overseas experience provided OCAs with an opportunity to retreat from a competitive field and recover from their habitus shaped by China's rushed modernisation. At the same time, they were able to gain more symbolic capital by having the state-sponsored overseas work experience on their resume, which would be beneficial to their social mobilities once they return to China. As a young female OCA who spent two years teaching Chinese in South Africa shared,

> "I haven't figured out what I want to do with my life, so it's nice to spend two years here to slow down and think about it before committing to anything serious. The overseas experience will open a lot of doors as I will stand out from other applicants when looking for a job."

For OCAs with established careers and permanent job positions in China, going on a state-sponsored overseas programme was a time-out from their busy life in China. An Australia-based OCA in her 40s shared that her being overseas was a break from a life she described as "boring and repetitive". She was frustrated by "the typically complicated relationships among Chinese colleagues" and was happy to take a break from her work in China. A South Africa-based OCA shared that he was sick of "the Chinese style of always cheering for leaders" at work and thus joined the overseas programme to escape from his work temporarily.

In addition, state-sponsored overseas programmes offered OCAs an opportunity to explore alternative education paths for their children. In both South Africa and Australia, several senior OCAs brought their children and families with them, as the Chinese state institutions provided financial supports and allowances for OCAs' families to be temporarily relocated to their overseas destinations. Several OCA parents honestly shared that they were not able to afford to send their children to study overseas but found the state-sponsored overseas programmes as a good alternative since all accommodation and travel costs would be covered by

the state. As an Australia-based female OCA who brought her 5-year-old daughter and her mother-in-law to Australia shared:

> "My coming to Australia is all about my daughter. My mother-in-law is here to help me take care of the child when I go to work. My husband and father-in-law have to stay in China due to their work and health conditions. I sometimes joke that my job has split our families: mine and my in-laws. What's important is that my daughter can now attend pre-school in Australia and get a taste of the best education. It's all worth it."

In these cases, the OCAs' participation in the state-sponsored programmes was less about their experiences but more about exploring how their children would benefit from life overseas and a different educational path.

State-sponsored OCAs also gained a sense of recovery in social trust. Social trust refers to the trust among individuals and their trust in institutions (Kwon 2019:20). After China's market reform, Chinese individuals experienced a sudden change from 'ethics of responsibilities towards others' to 'ethics of rights and self', which resulted in a lack of social trust among individuals and in institutions (Bruckermann and Feuchtwang 2016:33). My OCA participants in South Africa and Australia collectively shared that they experienced more social trust when they moved overseas. A group of state-sponsored OCAs based in South Africa, while cooking dinner together, used food safety as an example to elaborate on why social trust was important to them. An OCA who bought fish from a street vendor shared that he did not trust products in China: "I wouldn't dare buy food from just any street vendor in China. But here in South Africa, I am confident that people are honest." Together with other OCAs, we watched a few videos online about the production of fake cabbages and fake eggs in China. The OCAs pointed out that the high level of social trust that they experienced overseas could only be observed at their origin-homes, where strong trust was established in an everyone-knew-everyone environment. Outside of their personal network at their origin-homes was a rushing-to-be-modern Chinese society without much social trust. An Australia-based senior OCA shared his insights on the role of social trust in an intercultural conflict that he observed:

> "In China, there is a lack of social trust and you have to cultivate your *guanxi* (network) to get things done. This applies to Chinese politicians too. When I heard the Australian media criticising overseas Chinese businessmen for financing Australian politicians' political campaigns, arguing that it was indirect funding from the CCP, I laughed with disbelief. I don't think the Chinese businessmen wanted to take control of Australian politics for China. They just did what they always did in China - to build *guanxi* with the politicians and make profits from it. They didn't realise that things work differently here in Australia - you can trust the institutions even without *guanxi*."

Although state-sponsored OCAs enjoyed living and working overseas, this space of recovery was temporary for most of them. All my OCA participants in South Africa and most of my OCA participants in Australia returned to China at the end of their overseas services. There were several reasons for their decision to return. First, measures imposed by state institutions prevented them from staying. These measures included holding OCAs' degrees or a portion of their salaries. Practically, many OCAs had to return to China to fulfil relevant requirements set by the state institutions. An Australia-based OCA shared that her work-unit-university kept RMB 90,000 (approximate USD13,700) from her salaries as a guarantee of her return. The OCA explained, "If I don't return, I will lose that money. The amount is reasonable. Other universities that I know asked for an annual guarantee on top of the initial guarantee." Second, the OCAs were top of the cream and prospered in the Chinese system. They performed well in the National College Entrance Exams, successfully completed their degrees, and would be able to secure promising jobs in China. Leaving the system and staying overseas would result in a significant opportunity cost. Lastly, the family background was also an important factor to be considered. One important fact was that state-sponsored OCAs had many responsibilities that they owed to their families and origin-homes, thus it was important to be physically close to home. As an OCA explained before her "back to reality" mobility when leaving South Africa:

> "I won't extend my contract here. Life here is too good to be true, and this is not my life. If I get comfortable with this life, I will lose my competitiveness back in China. China is my real life - it has been a wonderful dream of living in South Africa, but I must go back to reality."

Despite multiple strings attached to China including work, promotional opportunities, and family ties as discussed above, nine of my Australia-based OCA participants decided to leave the state-sponsored programmes for study and work opportunities overseas. While being stationed overseas by China's managed cultural globalisation programmes, these OCAs actively looked for overseas opportunities independent from Chinese state funding, such as PhD programmes funded by overseas universities. The decision required the OCAs to quit their job positions in China or negotiate with their work units for an agreement. For example, an OCA who was first supported by a state-sponsored programme to complete a certificate in Australia successfully applied for the Australian university's PhD programme and a full scholarship provided by the university. Instead of quitting his job, he decided to negotiate with his work unit in China. His work unit agreed to release the OCA for the duration of his PhD studies but asked him to pay 10% of his scholarship to his work unit in China as a guarantee of his return. The OCA agreed and did so to keep the option of returning to this stable job in China open. However, as soon as he completed his PhD, he looked for opportunities in Australia, found a job, and quit his position in China.

The OCAs who decided to stay in Australia all expressed that it was the relaxed lifestyle that attracted them to live in Australia. They not only experienced recovery from China's rushed modernisation but also developed new capitals and habitus that allowed them to switch their fields from China to Australia. One of the OCAs shared that when she decided to take the state-sponsored opportunity to come to Australia, she was prepared to jump from "a slow train" of China onto "a faster train" of Australia. The metaphor was used to describe her understanding of the two countries' economic growths and social developments, and she assumed that Australia as a developed country would require people to live at a faster pace to cope with its developments. She later realised that the "Australian train" was not as fast as she thought and was even slower than the "Chinese train". The slower "Australian train" experience allowed her to recover from her intense "Chinese train" experience, which she recalled as being "always pushed for a faster speed with little room to breathe". Another OCA who stayed in Australia shared that her communications with China-based colleagues reminded her that she would not return to China. She elaborated her colleagues' lives in China as "burdened with harsh administrative duties at work and heavy family responsibilities at home". This was distinct from her life in Australia, which she described as "simple": "At work, I have a lot of freedom in teaching and research. At home I take the Australian parenting approach of non-intervention. It's a very simple life."

From the above discussions, it can be observed that the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation offers state-sponsored OCAs a unique space of negotiations. OCAs negotiate their identities with state-home and origin-home; internal and international mobilities; China's rushed modernisation and their individualities. Their fields, capitals, and habitus are transformed by these negotiations, as individual OCAs recover from China's rushed modernisation. Meanwhile, OCAs' transformed assemblage of fields, capitals, and habitus reshape their negotiations. These transformation processes are expressed through OCAs' re-imaginations of their realities and identities, a topic to be further investigated in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

Re-imaginations on the Middlestage

"When I was a small child living in underdeveloped rural Sichuan province in China, I was sent to a faraway village to study in a boarding primary school. I was sometimes called out by my teachers to go to a vendor at the school for phone calls from my dad who was a migrant worker working in a big Chinese city. He said that you must youchuxi - *accomplish great achievements, you must* zuobangyang - *set a good example for your siblings, and you must one day* zouchuqu - *go out of the village and explore a wider world. I felt the spirit to fight. This spirit stayed with me and I was a fighter all along. I fought to have the best academic results wherever I went. I wanted to be in the same city as my dad so I studied so hard to get into a master's programme at the best university in the city where he worked. My life was all about fighting then. In the short two years that I spent in South Africa, I became softer and more relaxed, and learned to enjoy life. Somehow, I lost my fighting spirit, and I am saying this from the bottom of my heart - I don't want to fight anymore."*

Shared by a young female state-sponsored OCA at the end of her two-year service of teaching Chinese in South Africa.

The above scenario demonstrates the re-imaginations of an OCA's realities and identities that take place in the process of participating in China's managed cultural globalisation. In this chapter, I draw on ethnographic data from South Africa and Australia to analyse the formation of state-sponsored OCAs' re-imaginations of their realities and identities. I argue that OCAs are producers as well as receivers of global imaginations. While promoting China and Chinese culture to their overseas destinations, individual OCAs make use of the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation to engage with cultural differences at their overseas destinations and re-imagine their realities and identities. I further argue that OCAs use their re-imaginations to push for a temporary backstage on the middlestage. State-sponsored OCAs re-imagine their realities as cosmopolitan through a shallow, middle, and deep level of cultural shaping; they also re-imagine their identities by seeking conviviality.

State-sponsored OCAs' re-imaginations on the middlestage

Imagination is defined by sociologist Charles Wright Mills (2000:7) as 'the capacity to shift from one perspective to another' and 'the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self'. It can be interpreted from Mills' definition that imagination, like culture, home, and identity, is also a fluid conception. People imagine their realities, and in return, their imaginations shape them. As the world becomes increasingly globalised and interconnected, people's imaginations of the world and themselves constantly transform, and these re-imaginations reshape their perceptions of realities and identities in return.

In Arjun Appadurai's influential globalisation studies, imagination is identified as a key component of the global order and a determining factor of all forms of agency (Appadurai 1990). In *Modernity at Large*, the anthropologist pinpoints 'global cultural flows' as essential forces of global imagination (Appadurai 1996:33). Global cultural flows, according to Appadurai (Ibid.), consists of five dimensions: ethnoscapes (human migrations), technoscapes (technology configurations), financescapes (monetary systems), ideoscapes (collections of images and ideologies), and mediascapes (information distribution networks). The mobilities, interactions, and clashes of these different 'scapes' constitute the global cultural flows. Appadurai further argues that global cultural flows have broken down national boundaries, causing people worldwide to imagine themselves as compromised individuals of what the world can offer (Ibid.). The global imagination has become a collective social fact (Appadurai 1996:5).

Imaginations are effectively used by nation-states to create global impacts beyond their physical national borders. An example of this is what Appadurai calls 'diasporic public spheres', where nation-states use global imaginations to unite their diasporic communities and produce imagined localities (Appadurai 1996:10). Global imaginations also shape individuals' identities and ways of life (Appadurai 2000:6). In a study on urban Chinese youth's global imaginations, Fong (2011) points out that since China's market reform and opening-up, Chinese youth actively engages with global cultural flows through channels such as media and education. Their global imaginations inspire them to belong to an imagined developed community of wealth and success, and motivate them to study abroad and pursue opportunities globally. Global imaginations' duality is therefore revealed: they are an important tool for state institutions to manage individuals; at the same time, they empower individuals to re-imagine their realities and identities.

China's managed cultural globalisation can be understood as a state-initiated project that promotes positive imaginations of China by *telling a good story of China* to the world. At the same time, global imaginations create impacts on individual state-sponsored OCAs. Through their participation in state-sponsored programmes, OCAs experience life overseas and engage with cultural differences. These engagements

reshape their perception of their realities as well as identities. The middlestage, where the process of re-imagination takes place, can be interpreted as Foucault's (1986) conception of 'heterotopia'. Heterotopia is a space that encompasses multiple layers of realities and meanings. It is capable of composing in a single space several spaces that are in themselves incompatible (Foucault 1986). Like a mirror that functions more than a real object when it becomes a virtual point for reflecting its surroundings, heterotopia allows different realities to be perceived in a single space and new meanings to be created. By engaging with imageries in the heterotopia mirror, individuals re-imagine their realities and identities. This process can be understood in Lacan's 'mirror phase', which describes the critical transformations that take place in infants when they start to comprehend their realities and themselves by engaging with a mirror (Lacan 1953:13). Similar to the Lacanian mirror, the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation provides state-sponsored OCAs with a unique space of heterotopia that brings state-curated and OCAs' embodied China and Chinese culture as well as OCAs' interactions with their overseas realities together into a space of re-imagination. It is by connecting the incompatible details in their experiences and imaginations of China and overseas on the middlestage that OCAs re-imagine their realities and identities.

State-sponsored OCAs' re-imaginations of their realities and identities can be understood as their efforts to push for a backstage. A backstage is different from a middlestage in three ways. First, a backstage has a clear boundary with its frontstage, be it a curtain, a corridor, or a door (Goffman 1956:66). The boundary is obvious enough for any audience or outsider to keep distant from the backstage. This clear boundary is missing on the middlestage. Second, on the backstage, a performer can completely relax and reveal a separate identity. When an audience or an outsider enters the backstage, a warning is expected, be it a message, a knock, or a cough, to remind the performer to adjust their behaviours (Goffman 1956:147). This warning is missing on the middlestage and the performers must be on alert at all times because an invisible audience may be constantly observing the middlestage. Third, the backstage provides a private space for the performers to rehearse and alter a performance behind-the-scenes (Goffman 1956:77), while any rehearsal and alteration on the middlestage are performed to a visible or invisible audience.

However, pushing a temporary backstage into a frontstage and middlestage is possible. Goffman (1956:78) observes that performers sometimes push their backstage into their frontstage by making use of corner spaces on the frontstage to create a temporary backstage within the frontstage where backstage behaviours can be allowed. For example, flight attendants, when flying long-haul flights, makes use of the last rows of seats in the passenger cabin as a space for taking naps; restaurant waiters make use of the quiet corners of customer dining areas to take their tea/lunch breaks (Ibid.). In this way, an area of a frontstage is temporarily transformed into a backstage. State-sponsored OCAs make similar efforts on the middlestage by pushing for a temporary backstage. This is revealed when they re-imagine their realities beyond a state-endorsed

framework and seek conviviality with dividing identity forces. However, since the invisible audience may always be present, the OCAs, like the flight attendants and restaurant waiters, are only able to borrow space from the middlestage to form a temporary backstage. State-sponsored OCAs must return to the middlestage for their required performances.

Re-imagine a cosmopolitan reality through cultural shaping

'Cosmopolitanism' sits at the centre of state-sponsored OCAs re-imaginations of global realities. In Ulf Hannerz's (1990:239) foundational definition, cosmopolitanism is interpreted as openness to other cultures, 'a state of mind' with 'a willingness to engage with the Other' as well as 'a state of readiness … to make one's way into other cultures'. Just as individuality arises through overlapping and conflicting with other identities, cosmopolitanism is achieved through a process of 'overturning categories' in engagements with cultural differences (Beck 2006:76). This process demonstrates that cosmopolitanism can be understood as a form of cultural capital (Igarashi and Saito 2014). As state-sponsored OCAs engage with their overseas fields, they gain habitus and capital which lead them to re-imagine their realities as cosmopolitan.

Chinese individuals can connect with the world outside China since the party-state's market reform and opening-up. Through waves of global cultural flows supported by technological revolutions in communication, global cultural products are available to Chinese individuals who have the 'purchasing power' to access them (Kleinman et al., 2011:18). However, my state-sponsored OCA participants collectively shared that before they left China, their interactions with global cultures were limited. This was due to three main reasons. First, many state-sponsored OCAs' rural upbringings limited their access to overseas cultural products. Although global cultural flows following China's opening-up made significant cultural impacts on Chinese urban cities, limited overseas cultural products reached China's underdeveloped rural regions. Second, the party-state managed the import of overseas products and place tight censorship on cultural content. As a result, OCAs' imaginations of the world outside China were based on state-curated information. Third, state-sponsored OCAs' access to global cultural products was limited by their economic capital. For example, although individuals in China were permitted to travel overseas on their initiatives, most of my state-sponsored OCA participants were not able to afford privileged international mobilities such as international tourism and studying abroad. It was when OCAs were sent overseas by state-sponsored programmes that they started to experience intense engagements with the world outside China.

When state-sponsored OCAs participate in China's managed cultural globalisation programmes and experience international mobilities, they gain increased exposure to global cultural flows. These cultural

shaping processes take place on the middlestage, where OCAs are required to stick to their performances of a state-curated China and Chinese culture in their informal interactions overseas. Since it is difficult for state institutions to monitor these informal interactions, OCAs make attempts to push for a temporary backstage within the middlestage, where they relax, share their authentic thoughts, and re-imagine their realities and identities. However, OCAs need to constantly observe the mobile boundaries between the stages, as they must return to their middlestage performances instantly once the temporary backstage is interrupted. OCAs shape the middlestage with their performances, meanwhile, they are shaped by the overseas cultural flows on the middlestage as well as their temporary backstage.

According to Mathews (2000), cultural shaping of an individual take place at three levels: 'deep-level shaping' beyond the self's control and direct comprehension; 'middle-level shaping' beyond the self's full control but within its comprehension; 'shallow-level shaping' that the self understands and takes full control and comprehension (Mathews 2000:15). Mathews (2000:16) argues that each of these levels shapes the level above it. However, my observations of the state-sponsored OCAs' interactions with global cultural flows on the middlestage suggest a cultural shaping process from shallow and middle to the deep level. State-sponsored OCA's cultural shaping started when OCAs made personal choices on cultural products at the shallow level. Through interactions with their overseas counterparts, OCAs experienced cultural differences and conflicts which shaped them at the middle level. State-sponsored OCAs also reflected on their engagements with different cultural perspectives, which shaped them at the deep level. These processes eventually led OCAs to re-imagine their realities as cosmopolitan.

State-sponsored OCAs' cultural shaping started at a shallow level, where they found a wider range of cultural products and practices available to them when they were stationed overseas. One example that demonstrated my South Africa-based OCA participants being shaped by diverse cultural choices in their overseas daily life was the OCAs' dining-out events. One evening, a junior OCA called on all her OCA colleagues to vote for where to dine-out. Three choices were pre-selected for voting: a Mexican, Japanese, or Italian restaurant. Chinese food was not listed as an option since the OCAs felt that they could cook Chinese food at home, thus would rather use the opportunity to experience new cuisine. Later that evening, at an Italian restaurant, everyone took out their phones and looked up unfamiliar vocabulary from the menu. When they realised that many of the vocabularies were Italian words describing different kinds of pasta and were hard to understand, the OCAs quickly adopted new strategies. They called the waiter for help and asked him to explain the Italian terms, and everyone made their food choices carefully. When the food finally arrived, the OCAs decided to share different kinds of pasta by passing plates around, so that everyone could try something new. This example illustrates state-sponsored OCAs' collective eagerness to engage

with the cultural differences in their overseas fields and the strategic usage of their habitus and capitals to form various strategies in these engagements.

The middlestage of China's cultural globalisation also allowed OCAs to mingle with their overseas audience to understand different lifestyles and adopt new habits and routines. For example, state-sponsored OCAs in South Africa participated in many activities organised by local friends, such as hiking, beach walking, social drinking, and *braaing*. They adopted the new lifestyle as soon as they moved overseas and also became organisers of similar events. I participated in many *braais* organised by South Africa-based OCAs where every guest contributed food and drinks, hung out, and caught up informally with each other. This was very different from a traditional Chinese dinner gathering, where the host would be obliged to prepare all food and drinks for the guests, and even the sitting plan would have to be carefully considered according to a formal or informal hierarchy of guests. OCAs explained that the *braai* style of dinner gatherings avoided a difficult preparation process by the hosts, skipped all unnecessary ceremonial burdens on the guests, thus made social gatherings easy to host and more relaxing to attend.

Individual OCAs in South Africa and Australia made personal choices to engage with cultural products and practises they often did not experience in China. Some OCAs developed an interest in nature and went on hikes and camping trips; some applied for gym memberships and became regular gym-goers; some focused on reading for pleasure and academic purposes; some made attempts to apply for continuous studies overseas; some found local language buddies to practise their English language skills; some developed new skills in video editing and produced videos of their lives overseas to share on social media.

State-sponsored OCAs' experience of being shaped by their overseas destinations at a shallow level not only demonstrates their pursuits to explore the world outside China but also showcases China's modernisation and its openness to embrace cosmopolitan cultures. This is an important storyline to be presented on the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation, thus OCAs' successful adaptations to their overseas destinations and overseas lifestyles are occasionally published on state institutions' WeChat public accounts.

Cultural shaping is not necessarily a smooth process. State-sponsored OCAs' experiences with middle and deep levels of cultural shaping often reveal what Tsing notes as 'friction': discontinuity and awkward connections in global connections (Tsing 2005:5). Tsing argues that it is these 'heterogeneous and unequal encounters' that lead to new arrangements of culture and power and shape the global realities (Ibid.). I observed frictions in my state-sponsored OCA participants' daily interactions with their South African and Australian local counterparts. State-sponsored OCAs' middle-level cultural shaping took place as they experienced these frictions.

All state-sponsored OCAs based in South Africa expressed that their first cultural shock took place when they received warm greetings between colleagues, acquaintances, and even strangers on the street, and did not know how to react. As a young female OCA based in South Africa shared:

> "The locals always greet you with so much passion. They always ask: how are you? I couldn't get used to it at first, but after observing local people's greetings between each other, I understood that it was a matter of formality and there was a standard answer to the question: fine, thank you and yourself? I realised that it was not about asking how you are, but a way of greeting, and I picked it up quickly myself."

Many South Africa-based state-sponsored OCAs also shared experiences about the local's warmness when they first got excited about a colleague's comment that "we must have dinner sometime" and became confused when there was no follow-up action from the potential host. One OCA mentioned that a local colleague talked about gathering together every week for two years, the entire period that he spent in South Africa, and the event never took place. The OCAs explained that they had to learn to accept the local warm communication style but not take casual invitations seriously.

State-sponsored OCAs based in South Africa shared that they had to adopt new ways of communications when they worked overseas. For example, a senior OCA administrator who worked closely with various South African local counterparts had to adjust to their administrative communication style and spent most of his time at work writing emails. He half-joked, "My friends in China ask me what I do in South Africa. I tell them the brutal truth: I sit in my office, read and write hundreds of emails every day."

For most organisations in China, especially state-sponsored institutions, work communications usually take place on WeChat or telephone, and people have little knowledge of email etiquette. Many junior OCAs found using emails for work communications refreshing because a clearer boundary between life and work could be distinguished in email communications. As a junior OCA shared:

> "When working with my local colleagues, we use emails, not social media. This is so much better. When dealing with work-related issues, we should keep them on the work platforms. But when working with our Chinese colleagues, everyone has to use WeChat because our bosses prefer it. I hate using WeChat for work. The communication is never coherent, and it is very difficult to trace back to important information. Another problem with WeChat is that our senior officials don't respect our personal time. They often send us questions at 9 p.m. and expect an immediate answer."

Senior OCA administrators, on the contrary, expressed frustrations with younger colleagues' ignorance of email etiquette. They complained that the younger OCA colleagues kept replying to the same email when

talking about different matters, left the subject line unchanged, and caused confusion in communications. They were not confident that the communications on email would be as efficient and effective as their WeChat instant messaging. The senior OCAs also explained that because a lot of communications with their headquarters in China took place on WeChat, it was easier to forward information to their OCAs colleagues on the same platform, thus they preferred to keep work communications on WeChat.

Communications at work became more complicated when state-sponsored OCAs had to act as middlemen between the Chinese state institutions and their local counterparts. There were a few times when I was called in for urgent support and was tasked by senior OCA administrators based in South Africa to help revise important emails. For example, one of the emails was about a Chinese state institution's contract renewal with a local education institution and an invitation to the president of the local institution to attend a conference in China. The South Africa-based senior state-sponsored OCA administrator was pushed by his seniors in China to have the contract renewed and the president's itinerary confirmed as soon as possible. The senior OCA administrator raised these issues in his email to the president and received a polite and personal answer from him. In his response, the president asked the OCA to be patient about the contract renewal and asked him to further confirm the details about the forthcoming conference trip to China. The president also forwarded the OCAs' inquiry on the contract renewal to his subordinate and blamed the subordinate for not keeping him updated about the matter, and copied the OCA administrator in. The OCA administrator showed me his draft reply to the president's questions about the conference in China, in which he wrote: "According to my experience, you are expected to arrive at the conference on … I think you can leave the city on … as the local official will invite you for a courtesy call on…"

I honestly pointed that although all information was presented clearly, the tone of the email could be further finetuned to show more politeness, and commanding language devices like "you are expected to" should be avoided. The OCA administrator agreed with my comments and revised the draft email accordingly. He shared that when he sent his last email, he did not expect the president to respond himself, because, in China, these communications would be handled by a team of secretaries. The OCA administrator was under heavy pressure when he realised that he had to communicate directly with the president.

While we were revising the OCA administrator's email reply, another email came in. It was from the president's subordinate who was blamed for not keeping the president updated on the matter of contract renewal. The OCA administrator and I read the message, which started with:

> "I sincerely apologise for not keeping you updated on the on-going contract, which I now recall having mentioned to you during our last meeting…"

The OCA administrator was amazed by how the local staff member was able to ensure politeness and clear communication in his response. This kind of training was missing from his education and career experience and it would take time for him to catch up. The OCA shared that he frequently reported the conflicts and challenges he faced overseas to his seniors at state institution headquarters in China. This was because emphasising complications at work allowed the OCA to demonstrate his diligence and competence. He further shared that liaisons with his superiors and colleagues in China and his South African counterparts made him realise the significant differences in leadership, communication styles, as well as information dissemination processes at Chinese and overseas institutions. It was hard to, in his words, "serve two masters".

The middle level of cultural shaping experienced by state-sponsored OCAs provided them with opportunities to observe, carry out, and reflect on different cultural practices. OCAs comprehended cultural differences embedded in their everyday practices and conflicts and made relevant adjustments where necessary. These experiences were used by OCAs to curate their self-presentations to state institutions. By demonstrating the challenges that they faced at their overseas destinations, OCAs were able to highlight the difficulties of their work thus demonstrate their capabilities. Meanwhile, these middle-level cultural shaping experiences further enhanced OCAs' re-imaginations of their realities as cosmopolitan.

The deep level of cultural shaping, as argued by Mathews (2000:12), usually take place 'below the level of consciousness'. He explains that because we think in language, we can't easily comprehend how a particular language shapes our thinking; because we live through taken-for-granted social practices embedded in our habitus, how they lead us to live our lives cannot be easily comprehended. However, the cultural shaping deeply rooted in language and social practices became detectable in the state-sponsored OCAs' middlestage scenarios, where their habitus formed in China went through transformations in their overseas interactions. These interactions led OCAs into deep reflections that took them below consciousness to reflect on their cultural shaping processes.

State-sponsored OCAs' participation in political discussions was an entry point to their deep level cultural shaping. For many South Africans, political discussions were an everyday matter. During Jacob Zuma's presidency, there were many open debates on and criticisms of his alleged corruption and his administration's incapability to move South Africa forward socially and economically. When engaging in these political discussions with their South African counterparts, state-sponsored OCAs were eager to learn how the political systems worked in South Africa but found themselves uncomfortable when the spotlight

was put on China. A state-sponsored OCA described her reactions to her colleagues when they mentioned any of the three Ts of China - Taiwan, Tibet, and Tiananmen: [23]

> "I felt a stream of anger rising inside and I felt personally attacked when my local colleagues asked me about any sensitive political issues about China. But this awareness of my own anger was exactly the source that kept me calm. I mean, my South African friends joked about their president every day in such disrespectful ways, and I had fun in those discussions too. Why do I feel attacked when they talk negatively about China?"

Similar incidents led state-sponsored OCAs to reflect further on the differences in the deep cultural shaping of Chinese and South African political environments. Many OCAs shared that they realised that they lacked the language to conceptualise these political discussions, that even coming up with the proper language to discuss politics was often difficult. Similar experiences also happened to me as the researcher quite often. Once during a conversation with an OCA participant in the Chinese language, neither the OCA nor I could immediately come up with a proper word for the Chinese translation of 'constitutional rights'. State-sponsored OCAs and I found that we lacked sufficient linguistic support for a discussion on topics that would be either censored or rarely discussed in China.

Not every OCA is as tolerant of different opinions when it comes to the discussion of Chinese territorial issues. A recently retired female OCA living in Australia shared that she could not accept any "disrespectful attitude" towards China's territorial issues. This was because, as she explained, "many Chinese people sacrificed their lives to fight for the homeland". She shared that she became more open to different perspectives on interpreting China when living overseas, but her awareness of the different perspectives made her a firm defender of the Chinese path and the government's policies. In our casual discussions on various political issues related to China, the OCA shared her observations from living overseas that the West often imposed a foreign discourse on Chinese issues, forcing people to look at Chinese social and political realities with a Western perspective, thus their opinions were often biased. She urged young OCAs to engage with multiple perspectives equally when understanding social issues.

When interacting with their students, colleagues, and friends, state-sponsored OCAs experienced a deeply embedded mentality of equality in their local counterparts which influenced them in return. For example, a young female OCA who taught at a South African university's extension programmes in a local secondary school shared that she was first not comfortable with how her students casually addressed her in their after-

[23] Tiananmen incident refers to the 1989 student protest on Tiananmen square, a symbol of Chinese political power. On 4th June 1989, the Chinese army forced student-protesters out of the square by opening fire, and the estimates of the death toll vary from several hundreds to several thousands.

class interactions. The OCA gave examples from her students' comments like "Ma'am, I love your dress today!", "Ma'am, your hair looks beautiful". At first, the OCA was not used to the informal tone of communication. This was because in China, commenting on a superior's dress and hair was usually considered disrespectful. The OCA shared that she quickly understood that the equality spirit behind these behaviours and tried to adapt to the culture by interacting with her local students, colleagues, and superiors in similar ways.

Authenticity in self-expression was also highlighted as an important aspect of deep-level cultural shaping by my state-sponsored OCA participants who reflected on their interactions with their overseas counterparts. A state-sponsored OCA teaching Chinese at a local university in South Africa shared that she was often shocked by her students' brutal honesty in class as they always made efforts to express their true selves:

> "In an assignment on relationships and family, a student shared in her writing her frustration of being a bisexual person. It was just an assignment, but she put so much authenticity in it. I was shocked and didn't know how to react!"

Another OCA recalled a similar experience that her students always compromised showcasing their language skills by expressing their true feelings in language exams. She said,

> "If the students just talked anything using the vocabularies and sentence structures we taught in class, they would get wonderful grades, but the students here never did that. They didn't follow the textbook scripts and always made attempts to describe their real lives in their Chinese speech. In a time-constraint and resource-limited exam situation, this was very difficult. As a language instructor, I didn't care about what happened in their homes. It's just an exam question, but the students always took it so seriously and gave every answer honestly. I am stunned and somehow touched by their authenticity. I never did that as a student, and I feel ashamed of myself for being way too sophisticated as a student… and as an instructor."

In both cases the OCAs expected their South African students to participate in learning activities and exams in ways similar to scripted performances, where everyone was required to produce their own lines within the textbook framework. The students' authenticity in their participation in the performance made state-sponsored OCAs question their authenticity on the middlestage.

The cultural diversity in South Africa also challenged the state-sponsored OCAs' deeply grounded aesthetic tastes. A young female state-sponsored OCA analysed the different standards for beauty in China and South Africa:

> "In China, there is one set of standards for looking beautiful - you need to have white skin and a slim body shape. Here in South Africa, there are so many different ethnicities and the standards for 'beauty' vary for each ethnicity. There are so many different types of beauty that are special in their own ways. Despite the differences in some specific beauty standards in South Africa, there are some criteria at the core: you must be healthy, and you must be confident. That made me rethink what being beautiful is about - you really must go beyond the surface and shine from inside."

South Africa-based state-sponsored OCAs observed the diversity of people's skin colours in the rainbow nation, which challenged them to reflect on their own perceptions of beauty and what beauty means. As Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992) note in their analysis on the politics of skin colours among African Americans, the colour white is often correlated with purity, righteousness, decency and auspiciousness, while black is associated with wickedness, villainy, menace, and illegality. Traditional Chinese aesthetics coincide with these connotations and endorse the implicit meaning of purity in whiteness. This is evidenced in Chinese metaphors of using snow or ice to describe beautiful skin colours. Modern Chinese aesthetics is strongly influenced by the mass media and advertising, which features celebrities with pale skin colours (Mak 2007; Zhang 2012). The Chinese mass' preference towards pale skin is also deeply rooted in people's class consciousness. Skin tone is a signifier of class in China, with white skin dominating the top of the hierarchy. Chinese mass' preference over pale skin is influenced by how people differentiate the elite class from the farming and working class. Since farmers and physical labourers must devote long hours to outdoor labour, they experience heavy exposure to the sun, resulting in darker skin tones. The elite are not required to take up similar outdoor manual labour. As a result, individuals in the upper social classes have fair-coloured skin (Mak 2007; Zhang 2012). When South Africa-based OCAs met with local people from the rainbow nation, the diverse skin tones that they observed could not be brought into the Chinese context for the assessment of beauty. OCAs were surprised to find beauty outside their aesthetic standards, which did not correlate to their existing aesthetic tastes and triggered them to reflect on these standards. They developed a more cosmopolitan understanding of beauty and adjusted their aesthetic standards to include 'healthy' and 'confident' as two important elements.

Many OCAs took the opportunity of being stationed overseas to gain access to cultural resources that were particularly censored in China. For example, a young male OCA started an e-subscription of an international magazine that was inaccessible in China and used the reading experience as a strategy to gain knowledge about the world from a non-Chinese perspective and improve his English at the same time. A senior OCA administrator bought and read books banned by the party-state, including *Mao: The Unknown Story* written by an outspoken overseas Chinese writer Jung Chang who was critical of the Chinese government, and *The Barefoot Lawyer* written by Chen Guangcheng, a blind human right activist who was imprisoned in China

before fleeing to the US for political asylum. These behaviours can be understood as OCAs' efforts to push for a temporary backstage, where they are eager to gain cultural capital beyond state institutions' restrictions. However, they need to be on alert at all times while on the temporary backstage and ensure that state institutions do not learn these behaviours. They must return to the middlestage and perform their duties such as institutional patriotism.

OCAs' experiences with their overseas deep level cultural shaping urged them to engage with different deeply-rooted cultural perspectives and reflect on the Chinese cultural shaping deeply embedded in their habitus. Their newly-shaped perceptions of realities are not always in line with the state institutions' *good story of China*. For example, a senior OCA in South Africa shared that when negotiating contracts with local institutions, he realised that he was "speaking a completely different language" to his local counterparts:

> "Yes, we (China) have a lot of achievements. We have wonderful GDP figures, we have built tall buildings, and we have done a fabulous job in trade and everything. We have the money. But people here don't care about that. They don't look at these figures. Instead, they ask: what about freedom, equality, and human rights? Our success stories are not relevant to their values."

This kind of reflective comparison was common among state-sponsored OCAs. An OCA stationed in South Africa reflected on the now rainbow nation's apartheid history[24] and compared it to China's *hukou* system and acquired a new perspective on understanding mobility restrictions. Since most of my state-sponsored OCA participants came from rural backgrounds and had rural *hukou*, they were the victims of the mobility restrictions in China. What they accepted as the unshakable reality in China, when compared to South Africa's apartheid past, revealed a new perspective on understanding mobility restrictions. A young male OCA explained to his local South African colleague who expressed admiration for China's developments that the inequalities and on-the-ground realities for ordinary Chinese people were distant from its abstract economic figures:

> "China's development is indeed very fast, but the cost is huge. Thinking back on the lack of educational resources that I experienced and being forced to study day and night as a child because of my rural background, I feel angry. China as an abstract concept is doing great; but for Chinese individuals, there is a lot of inequalities. People's mobilities are still restricted, and there are many tragic life stories about families being separated because of the *hukou* system."

[24] Apartheid: a system of institutionalised racial segregation from 1948 to the early 1990s which ensured that South Africa was dominated politically, socially, and economically by the nation's minority white population.

When reflecting on her observations of South African university students' #FeesMustFall movements,[25] an OCA recalled her experience of feeling helpless when her university in China doubled the tuition fees without consulting the students. She observed that "the students here protest but there is no such option in China. I had to accept whatever terms that came". She concluded that South African students were more expressive of themselves and knew better about how to protect their rights, and this realisation empowered her to have more confidence in facing future challenges.

When state-sponsored OCAs went through layers of cultural shaping at shallow, middle, and deep levels in their interactions with the overseas destinations, they went through a process of re-imaging their realities as cosmopolitan. These re-imaginations created a strong influence on OCAs at a personal level as they re-imagine their identities. This transformation process will be investigated in the next section.

Re-imagined identities with conviviality

In *Deep China*, Kleinman et al. (2011) analyse the dynamics of Chinese identities and point out that China's rushed modernisation has created a special cultural version of the Chinese divided self. This divided self has, as they put metaphorically, 'one eye open' and 'one eye closed' (Kleinman et al. 2011:23). The open eye looks to 'technical, financial, and political realities' (Ibid.). However, the eye that encourages 'care of the self and concern for others', creates 'self-reflective criticism', and 'sees things as they might or should be' is closed (Kleinman et al. 2011:24). When state-sponsored OCAs were stationed overseas, they experienced cultural shaping at shallow, middle, and deep levels, and re-imagined their realities as cosmopolitan. Through this process, OCAs gained a deeper understanding of equality, rights, and individuality; and developed the habitus and capitals to reflect on their life trajectories and re-imagine their realities as well as identities. This was, in many ways, the opening of the closed eye. I argue that state-sponsored OCAs' re-imaginations of their identities take place on the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation and involve processes of seeking conviviality.

Conviviality is defined by Nyamnjoh (2017:10) as the 'recognition and provision for the fact or reality of being incomplete'. It recognises the power of imagination and the importance of interconnections and 'sees the local in the global and the global in the local by bringing them into informed conversations' (Nyamnjoh 2017:16). Similar to cosmopolitanism, conviviality engages with cultural differences. Cosmopolitanism and conviviality can be seen as complementing each other, the former emphasises 'the diversity between

[25] #FeesMustFall: FeesMustFall was a South African student-led protest movement that began in mid-October 2015 in response to increases in student fees. It demanded free education for students and the increase of government funding to South African universities.

people of different ethnic and religious origins', the latter focuses on 'practices of everyday interactions by people regardless of their origin' (Freitag 2014:375). In addition, cosmopolitanism often adopts a meritocratic-elitist outlook whereas conviviality provides an angle from on-the-ground everyday life (Heil 2015:319).

In past and current debates, conviviality is often interpreted as the process of adapting to 'living with differences' in a community or society (Gilroy 2004:xi). Discussions of conviviality usually focus on people's everyday encounters (Heil 2015). Conviviality is considered a conceptual tool to empower marginalised individuals and groups by providing them with spaces for expressions while imposing necessary restraints on individuals to ensure the collective's overall togetherness (Nyamnjoh 2017:11).

Convivial reflections were observed among my state-sponsored OCA participants when they were stationed overseas. An Australia-based OCA shared with me that, once at a gathering of the Chinese Professionals Club of Australia, one of the OCAs raised a question: "Have we entered the Australian mainstream society?" The question triggered a discussion among the Chinese crowd. The discussion started with a question on how to define the Australian mainstream. "Does it mean that we should hang out with the locals, drink beer, and watch rugby?" asked one member of the club. Later that evening, the crowd concluded that the Australian mainstream was "not one but many", and it could be defined in multiple terms and expressed in multiple practices. Since the OCAs were in a comfortable space as none of them felt marginalised in the Australian society, the question regarding whether they were part of the Australian mainstream was not important. The OCA concluded that the discussion about the Australian mainstream was provoked by a centre-periphery scheme of interpreting realities deeply embedded in OCAs' identities. The OCAs, through their collective reflections, abandoned the centre-periphery perspective in the discussion.

A young male state-sponsored OCA, who spent two years teaching Chinese in South Africa, shared with me towards the end of his two years of overseas service that he gained a new understanding of how to "fit in" a cosmopolitan environment:

> "At first I tried to fit in by acting like the locals. I observed what they did and tried to imitate their behaviours. That's what I always had to do to survive in China: to fit in by being like others. But soon I realised that I didn't need to do that. People in South Africa are much more willing to accept me being different and comfortable than me being similar to them but uncomfortable. I simply tried to be myself, and by doing so, I fitted in a lot better."

It is demonstrated from the above examples that during the process of pursuing conviviality in inter-group and inter-personal relations, individuals also need to seek conviviality within their own identities. I direct my attention to the conviviality of different dividing forces within individuals' identities.

State-sponsored OCAs' re-imaginations of their realities as cosmopolitan required them to be content with various identity forces shaped by different fields, capitals, and habitus in their life trajectories. On the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation, state-sponsored OCAs must stick to their performance of an essentialist Chinese identity. Meanwhile, their cosmopolitan re-imaginations on the middlestage allowed them to pursue other aspects of identities such as individuality. These dividing identity forces do not simply replace each other; rather, they coexist and negotiate with each other during the process of seeking conviviality.

When analysing state-sponsored OCAs' interactions with state institutions, an unusual kind of conviviality was observed: *thin* conviviality, defined by Nowicka (2014:21) as 'silence as a result of education'. As mentioned in my earlier discussion on censorship and self-censorship, state-sponsored OCAs self-censored themselves about a senior OCA's corruption. The young OCAs shared that they simply did not know how to handle the situation thus kept silent. Their reactions were influenced by the Chinese censorship mechanism that imposes fear on individuals as discussed earlier, but more importantly, it reflected OCAs' thin conviviality. This thin conviviality was a result of their educational experiences which taught them to respect authorities and be obedient, and it was deeply rooted in OCAs' identities and could not be easily abandoned.

The young OCAs used their senior OCA's corruption incident and their thin conviviality as a resource to develop a deeper understanding of their identities. One of them shared that the senior OCA's corruption case and their silence made them think about what kind of people they would like to become:

> "It becomes apparent that in the Chinese system one must be able to climb the social ladder to earn one's authority and voice before one can make any change to the system. You have to speak with enough authority first and there will be a chance that society might change because of your voice. Thus, to push for any change, I have to first gain my authority and voice from within the institutional system. Before that, I must keep silent. Will I become part of the corrupted system during this long process? I don't know, but I will need to get to the top first."

The state-sponsored OCA had to adopt thin conviviality in the corruption investigation and was prepared to use thin conviviality strategically in his future work. To be able to use thin conviviality strategically, OCAs must engage with conviviality at a deeper level. It requires OCAs to comprehend the implicit circumstances and complex power dynamics embedded in a situation, assess their positionalities in it, and draw resources from their habitus as well as capitals to curate appropriate frontstage and middlestage behaviours. This deep level of conviviality, what I identify as *deep conviviality* as opposed to thin conviviality, challenges oversimplified perceptions of realities and requires individuals to engage with their

fields, capitals, and habitus to balance their dividing identity forces. As another young OCA shared about the senior OCAs' corruption case:

> "One important reflection for me was the realisation that, when I return to China soon, I would have to work with people like my corrupt boss. Since my boss was able to move up to his senior position, there must be a lot of people just like him in the system… I feel sorry for him. He was also nurtured by the state institutions and was shaped to be what he became… he had the evil seeds planted in him when he was in China, and these evil seeds grew wildly when he went overseas. Everything in him was twisted, but he was a victim of the system too."

The OCA's reflection reveals that seeking deep conviviality involves a complicated process of re-imagination that explores 'the hierarchies and power relations at play at both the micro and macro levels of being and becoming' (Nyamnjoh 2017:16). At the micro-level, OCAs re-imagine their specific middlestage situations and curate appropriate behaviours; at the macro level, OCAs project their re-imaginations of the middlestage to its larger social context to comprehend their positionalities and individualities. These processes of deep conviviality drive OCAs to re-imagine their identities.

Both thin and deep conviviality are required when performers are on the middlestage. Goffman's notion of front and backstage spaces are bounded by barriers, perceptions, as well as time (Goffman 1956:66). However, these boundaries are unstable and blur on the middlestage, where performances take place across different spaces at all times. By referring to Gluckman (1958), Barth (1969) and Okamura's (1981) observation that ethnicity is situational and ethnic identity can be asserted or obscured by individuals in response to a particular social situation, I argue that thin and deep conviviality, like ethnic identity, are applied situationally in specific settings on the middlestage, especially when individual performers push for a temporary backstage.

State-sponsored OCAs use thin and deep conviviality in response to different scenarios on the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation. To fulfil state institutions' requirements, OCAs must apply thin conviviality to perform state-curated China and Chinese culture, and comply with relevant censorship and self-censorship requirements. Meanwhile, OCAs experience various levels of cultural shaping on the middlestage and push for a temporary backstage when they re-imagine their realities and identities. This process requires them to draw resources from various fields, habitus, and capitals to achieve deep conviviality, which allows them to embrace 'interdependence and interconnectedness among competing world views' (Nyamnjoh 2017:10).

The young female state-sponsored OCA, who emotionally stated in the opening dialogue that she abandoned her 'fighter' identity, further shared:

> "Since I fought through my upbringing and education, I thought fighting was the only way to live. My life in South Africa made me realise that I was wrong. I do have a choice. There are many ways to live, and there is no right or wrong in that. I will not fight but accept, and I hope I will always happily accept whatever comes in my life."

The OCA is shaped by her experience of conviviality, and her re-imagined identity allows her to further seek conviviality. She not only accepts the incompleteness of her past and present but also embraces an open-end future. This process, similar to all pursuits of conviviality, leads to no final answer but rather 'permanent questions and questioning' (Nyamnjoh 2017:16).

It is concluded from the above discussions that multiple re-imaginations are produced by China's managed cultural globalisation. Chinese state institutions curate performances of China, Chinese culture, and Chinese modernisation that urge the world to re-imagine China. Meanwhile, state-sponsored OCAs, through their middlestage engagements with the world outside China, re-imagine their realities as cosmopolitan and engage their re-imagined identities with conviviality. These re-imaginations become OCAs' habitus and capitals and are carried into various fields to shape the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation as well as the individual OCAs' future life trajectories. It is important to also note that many OCAs' reflections on their shallow, middle and deep levels of cultural shaping and their re-imagined identities with conviviality take place on a temporary backstage, a space they borrow from the middlestage by pushing backstage boundaries into the middlestage. During the research process, I as the researcher and the OCAs as research participants needed to push for this temporary backstage to communicate their reflections and re-imaginations. Meanwhile, we had to stay alert for the unstable and blur middlestage boundaries because of interruptions from another invisible audience, the Chinese state, as we discussed sensitive issues on the temporary backstage. These dynamics in the research process will be investigated in the epilogue of the thesis.

The Islanders:

An Ethnographic Fiction

"A fire can be any shape it wants to be. It's free. It can look like anything at all, depending on what's inside the person looking at it. If you get this deep, quiet kind of feeling when you look at a fire, that's because it's showing you the deep, quiet kind of feeling you have inside yourself… But it doesn't happen with just any fire. For something like this to happen, the fire itself has to be free. It won't happen with a gas stove or a cigarette lighter. It won't even happen with an ordinary bonfire. For the fire to be free, you've got to make it in the right kind of place. Which isn't easy. Not just anybody can do it."

- Haruki Murakami, *After the Quake*

Chapter I

A New Chapter

"There is no sign of a lighthouse on the other side. I'm still searching."

- Flower on the Other Side
A song by Chinese artist Faye Wong

Li Linlin

Linlin doesn't have any expectations for her life on the Tulbagh island, nor any imagination of what the place is like. She just wants to see the outside world. It is a surprise to her that the first foreign country she gets to visit is this African island that she only learned about from *Animal World*, a television show that talked about penguins that she watched as a kid. When the Education Ministry of China informed her that she was selected to be sent overseas to teach Chinese at the Tulbagh Chinese Culture School, she didn't feel much excitement at all. She has become used to being carried away by the stream of life, not sticking to any of her own plans. The fifteen-hour flight is simply an extension of the hard-seater thirty-hour train journey from her hometown Guangxi to Xingang, the 'New Port City' where she goes to university, although the passengers sitting next to her have darker skin and whiter teeth this time.

Linlin's family supported her decision to go overseas. "After you finish your master's degree, you are officially the most educated person in our family. We don't know much about anything as we are uneducated. We will support you with whatever that you want to do. Just be aware of your safety wherever life leads you," mom told her before she set out for Tulbagh.

Linlin drags her luggage out of Customs of Tulbagh. In the busy and crowded airport arrival hall full of people with different skin colours speaking different languages, a Chinese woman wearing a red coat stands out. One can even tell from her standing posture that she is a teacher. That must be Miss Lu Shi who has been in touch with her and advising her on emails. She walks towards her as if they've met before.

"Did you get some sleep on the way? Did you eat? Did you watch some movies?" Miss Lu asks one question after another. "You must be very hungry! Wang Shuai is cooking for us at home. We are very lucky to be trying some of his fried rice noodles today."

At that moment Linlin drops a home pin on the map of Tulbagh. She looks out from the car window and sees waves and waves of shacks, small colourful houses, and then luxury residences with private gardens along the roads. The mountain in a distance looks quite similar to the ones at home, although they are not cultivated as farmlands like back home. Since going to university at Xingang, she was too occupied to visit home because of various exams, competitions, and time wasted on filling in forms. Her father left home when she was a child to work in the factories in Guangdong. Her mother moved to Shanghai a few years ago to work as a caretaker at a hospital. Her family has been separated and her family members live in different parts of the country. Perhaps this is why she doesn't mind traveling further. The mountain reminds Linlin of her grandparents who finally gave up farming because of their old age. It also reminds her of the guard dog at home, the noisy chickens, and the energetic frogs in the streams that she walked past every day on her way to school.

Linlin laughs. After she moved to Xingang, she seldom had time to think about her rural hometown; now that she has travelled this far, she suddenly feels closer to home. Is it the magic of the mountain?

"This Mountain is called the Cradle Mountain. Our school and home are both at its feet. You will fall in love with this place. People say Tulbagh is a place that nobody wants to come to, but once they come, nobody wants to leave," Miss Lu says to Linlin.

Linlin nods. She loves the excitement of facing uncertainties and an unpredictable future, but she also reminds herself to not ask for too much from life. She decides that seeing penguins would be enough to make her happy.

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"Welcome home," Miss Lu said. "I will call Wang Shuai to help you with your luggage."

Miss Lu parks her car under an avocado tree in front of their home, and it just so happens that a fruit drops to the ground. Lu picks it up and realises that half of it has been eaten by birds and throws it away. She turns around and finds Linlin at the back of the car with her big suitcases on the ground.

"No, I don't need help. I always take care of my luggage," Linlin says.

During her university years, Linlin mastered her Kungfu with luggage. She learned that once she was outside her village, she would not be able to find a helping hand, even at the train station in a nearby town. The elevator at that train station platform had not functioned for over a century. She used both her hands and weight to balance the luggage, took them upstairs and downstairs one step at a time, and crossed the platform bridge. All the men pretended that they didn't see her. Even the staff at the station stood there like trees, and comfortably watched her using her last bit of strength dragging her bags onto the train. Some girls would use their charm to seek men's help in such situations, but Linlin didn't want to waste her time doing that, so she just did everything herself.

"What a tough girl you are!" Miss Lu seems impressed. "Let me open the gate for you."

Linlin looks up at the house. It is painted dark red with white doors and windows. Such colour co-ordination should look unusual, but with this huge avocado tree adding a lot of green to the front of the house, everything looks perfect.

"Here comes Linlin," Miss Lu shouts towards the house.

"Perfect, dinner will be ready soon." From far away, Linlin hears a man's voice as well as noises from the kitchen extractor and the cookery, a sound Linlin is familiar with. She puts down her bags and follows a pungent smell into the kitchen.

"Thank you," she says.

"Oh hello," a young man wearing an apron turns back, "I am Wang Shuai."

Linlin has never been socially awkward, but every time she meets a new person, she doesn't know where to put her hands. Before she was sent overseas, she received training in cross-cultural communication, where the professor stressed the key technique for shaking hands with people you meet for the first time, "be proactive and be strong". Linlin has practiced the handshake many times in her cross-cultural training, but now when she meets a Chinese man and doesn't need to cross-culture, she doesn't know what to do. For two young Chinese people meeting for the first time, a handshake feels a bit too formal; but it's also strange to not have any physical contact. The embarrassment is avoided as Wang Shuai's both hands are occupied with ingredients. "You must be so tired, go unpack and take a shower. I'll get the food ready," he says.

Miss Lu has already moved the luggage into Linlin's room. Linlin looks at the beautiful wooden floor in its original teak colour. As she walks across it, the floor-board creaks and the sound reminds her of the old bamboo floor at her rural home in China. Sunshine comes into the room through a big window. A double bed sits in the middle of the room and the beddings are neatly made. A small desk with a cactus plant on it sits quietly at the corner. Linlin is surprised to find that the room has an en-suite bathroom. She's confident that this would make a perfect four-star hotel room, although she's never stayed in one before. Compared to her six people dorm room and shared toilets at her university residence, this is heaven.

"Thank you for setting up my room beautifully," she says to Miss Lu with a smile.

"It wasn't me. Nomalanga did all the work. She is our cleaning lady who comes every week and takes care of all the housework for us."

Linlin opens her mouth to respond but cannot find anything to say. She wonders, is this really my new life?

Wang Shuai

The birds' singing wakes Wang Shuai up as the morning glory sheds into his room through the blue curtains. He reaches out for his phone and realises it's only five minutes to seven. He is used to getting up early for teaching his 8.30 a.m. classes at the Tulbagh Chinse Culture School, but today is Sunday, a day without any teaching duty. and his only plan is to cook some dinner for the new colleague arriving soon. He decides to sleep in for a bit.

He logs into his WeChat, the most popular Chinese social media app, and finds a message from Miss Lu at one am, "Shuai, I'm picking up Linlin from the airport at four this afternoon. Shall we eat out tonight?"

"Let's just eat at home. I will cook something casual," Shuai types these words as he lies in bed. "Linlin will be so tired after her long flight. We can just stay at home."

Miss Lu replies within a few seconds, "All good, thanks, see you in a bit." Shuai wonders if Miss Lu sleeps at all.

Shuai opens his WeChat Moments to check his social media feeds and a storm of friends' photos pop up. He finds that, apart from the fact that Tulbagh is six hours behind China, his lifestyle pace is also way slower than the Chinese speed. Other people's lives always look so amazing in photos: they travel, they go to the gym, they get married, they have kids, they take selfies, and they read up self-help books. Some people share photos of everything they do, some do everything to share photos. Shuai doesn't desire to showcase his life. He only plans to cook a simple meal today.

At home in China Shuai never enters the kitchen, but since coming to Tulbagh he seldom eats out. It is the first time that he owns a kitchen, and he finds cooking to be the best way to kill time as well as a much healthier activity than scanning through social media. To him, buying ingredients is an adventure, chopping vegetables a meditative experience, and cooking with a big wok a way of therapy.

Shuai comes from a family where love is not expressed through words but rather by actions. His parents usually don't have much to say to him, but they get very excited when teaching him how to cook, "Can you get some proper cooking wine on the island? Make sure you get vinegar produced in Fu Jian, not Shan Xi; they taste completely different. Would you like us to send ingredients to you from home?" Shuai's parents are migrant workers who don't understand much about Shuai's academic world. They show their love by keeping track of his daily three meals wherever he goes. He feels the warmth in his belly and his heart.

He can get any Chinese ingredients, snacks, or drinks from the Chinese supermarket on the Tulbagh island. The price is doubled compared to China, and its location is far from where he stays. Shuai is not fussy about what he eats, thus he only visits the Chinese supermarket when he gets a ride. Most of the time he simply visits the local supermarket close to home and buys whatever other locals buy: potatoes, onions, eggplants, peppers, tomatoes, cabbages; and pork, chicken, lamb, beef packed in small boxes. He has mastered combining these ingredients for his own style of cooking.

The fried rice noodles is Shuai's signature dish. The rice noodles must be soaked in water before cooking to be softened, and the pork, carrots, and cabbages need to be cut into small pieces. You must be skilful with your knife, but the true success of the fried rice noodles lies in its sauce. Shuai learned to prepare the sauce from his mother who trained him hand by hand. He never uses a measuring cup. He holds up the soya sauce bottle, the cooking wine bottle, and the oyster sauce bottle and gives each of them a shake above the wok. His special sauce is ready and tastes just like his mom's. Shuai doesn't talk about love with his family, but in his sauce, he finds all the love from home.

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“Dinner is ready!” Shuai dishes out the steaming hot crispy noodles, puts the slightly burned bit at the bottom of the wok into his mouth, and brings a plate of shining fried rice noodles onto the table.

“It smells very good! Thanks for the hard work,” Lu puts down her phone, drags a chair, and sits down at the large dinner table. “Linlin, come join us, you can unpack later.”

Linlin has unpacked everything, put all her stuff on her bed and the empty luggage into her closet. She walks out of her room and is surprised by what is on the table.

“Wow,” Linlin exclaims. “I didn’t expect such authentic Chinese food!”

“I’m not sure if it’s authentic, but it can’t be worse than the airline meals,” Shuai says, “How are you dealing with the jet-lag?”

“I was feeling a bit sleepy in the car just now. I wake up whenever I see food! I’m only feeling hungry now,” Linlin admits.

“You’ll get used to these long flights,” Lu says as she distributes the chopsticks to everyone. “Every time we come in and out of Tulbagh, it’s at least fifteen hours of flying. That’s why we can live a peaceful life here: we are too far away from China, and they have kind of forgotten us.”

“If I can fly further away in exchange for a bit more Zen, I will take the offer and be completely happy,” Shuai says.

To Shuai, the fifteen hours of flight is like a religious ceremony. There are procedures to follow: you go into the cabin, turn off your phone, eat three unbearable packed meals, watch four movies in frequent turbulences, drink countless half cups of orange juice, and struggle to walk over your neighbours’ legs to use the toilet, and just when you cannot take it any longer, you finally get to the secret garden, Tulbagh.

Lu’s phone rings, “Oh, it’s the Director, Shhh…” Shuai and Linlin stop moving their chopsticks.

“Yes, I picked her up, and we are at home now. What? At the gate? Now?”

The three turn their eyes to the door. Lu puts down her chopsticks and takes a deep breath. She stands up, walks towards the door, and reaches out nervously for the lock on the door.

Director Yao walks into the room. Even on a Sunday, he wears a formal suit. All they can hear is his leather shoes making noises on the old wooden floor.

"Good day, Director Yao," Shuai stands up. He senses that his face has turned pale. He was only thinking about cooking dinner this morning and forgot to send an invitation to his boss Yao Xinsheng, Director of the Chinese Culture School in Tulbagh. Although he doesn't really want him to join the dinner, he should have at least asked him out of politeness.

"You must be Li Linlin," no handshake, no smile, the Director talks straight to the point, "I see that you guys are having your own welcoming party."

"Please sit down and join us!" Lu quickly turns around and grabs another chair.

"That's not necessary. Nine o'clock tomorrow morning, I will see you all at the meeting room," Director Yao says.

Before anyone can think of anything to say, Director Yao walks out of the door towards his car, starts the engine, and disappears.

Yao Xinsheng

It's three o'clock in the morning. Director Yao Xinsheng just finishes going through work emails from China because of the time difference. He lies on his bed and cannot fall asleep. He is thinking about an important question: Director? Doctor? Associate Professor? Which title sounds more important? Since he is the Director at the Chinese Culture School on the island, everyone has been calling him Director Yao. How can they forget his other titles, Doctor Yao and Associate Professor Yao?

There are reasons why Director Yao doesn't like the Director title. Everyone understands that the so-called Chinese Culture School is a big show put up and paid for by the Education Ministry of China. Counting Li Linlin who just reports to duty, he only has three teachers working under him. It's such a waste of his ability.

He believes that he can easily manage an organisation with over two hundred people. These are not the most important reasons for his confusion. The truth is, “Director of the Tulbagh Chinese Culture School” sounds too rural. “Director” of the Peking University or “Director” of the Hong Kong University sounds a lot more prestigious.

Dr. Yao takes his doctorate title seriously. Compared to many of his colleagues in China who acquired their doctorate degrees through their *guanxi* (personal networks), he earned the degree himself. To get promoted to Associate Professor, he explored all possible pathways to get a doctorate title. His hard work was not wasted. He found a professor at the education department who was from his hometown at the Xingang Arts and Science University to take him as a student. The two of them were a great match; the professor needed a doctorate student to apply for special allowances, and Yao needed a doctorate to get his promotion.

Dr. Yao doesn’t remember much about his doctorate thesis. He only recalls his professor telling him that “task-based teaching” was the most popular topic in education. Thus, he designed a questionnaire to explore the impact of task-based teaching on students. The data he collected was not ideal, so he manipulated them to draw his conclusions. He felt very proud that over fifty percent of his data was authentic. He is still very sure that in his academic environment, he is ahead of everyone in terms of academic standards. It only took him four years to graduate and he collaborated with the professor and Department Head of Education to publish two articles in an academic journal where the two professors were editors. As soon as he graduated, he joined his professor and the department head at the Xingang University of Arts and Science, as an Associate Professor in Education.

The main reason why Associate Professor Yao came to Tulbagh was because of this Associate Professor title. ‘Associate Professor Yao’ sounds very clumsy, thus many students just call him Teacher Yao, making him feel that he doesn’t get the respect that he deserves. He feels pleased every time people call him ‘Professor Yao’, but he doesn’t want the upgraded title to be heard by his other colleagues who are full professors. Associate Professor Yao has been carrying this ‘embarrassing’ title for over ten years and decides to make an effort to fight for his professorship.

Compared to the other twenty associate professor colleagues in his department waiting to be promoted, Yao doesn’t have anything special quality to stand out. He doesn’t have a degree from an overseas university, but only this PhD from the same university where he works, an academic path being looked down upon by everyone. None of the associate professors at the education department of the Xingang Arts and Sciences University put their hearts into teaching. In terms of research, he has long lost his aspirations, including the

capacity to make up some random data. He admires his own professor who can rely on his doctorate students for publications, but according to the university regulations, Yao has not yet reached the level to supervise doctorate students. He once asked his supervisor if he could publish with him as a third author; the professor said very clearly: the third author has always been reserved for the Department Head, thus "you must find your way out". Having learned that, Yao spent a week studying the CVs of the seven professors in the department carefully and finally found his killer card to a successful promotion: in response to the state's call to promote Chinese culture overseas, he will sacrifice himself and travel far away to Africa to demonstrate his hard work and loyalty. Tulbagh is the 'special quality' that Associate Professor Yao needs to start his new life chapter as a full Professor.

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The meeting room of the Tulbagh Chinese Culture School was decorated by Director Yao himself. It is a compressed space of fifteen square meters, but the space is filled with infinite ambition. A framed map of China and the world are hung side by side, as well as a photo of the inauguration of the school. In the photo, Director Yao stands next to a few powerful politicians on the island, making the photo the highlight of the room and his life.

He hears Lu Shi, Li Linlin, and Wang Shuai chatting and laughing. Lu looks into the meeting room and her eyes meet with Yao's. "Good morning Director," she says.

The chats and laughter stop immediately. The three walk quietly into the meeting room. Yao looks at them and feels something is wrong somewhere. He enhances all his senses for a second and frowns, landing his eyes on Li Linlin.

"Are you going to wear sportswear to work every day?" Director Yao asks.

Linlin is stunned. She's wearing a Xingang University hoody. She doesn't have any teaching duties today. Does she need to dress up for a teachers' meeting?

To Yao, what one wears is one's name card. He always feels that he belongs to the upper-class, thus on all occasions, he tries to demonstrate his upper-classness. His one and only Hermès belt and his two pairs of Prada leather shoes were purchased with such philosophy. He always makes sure people see the brand. Yao doesn't have much knowledge of the luxury brands, but he feels that Hermès and Prada are expensive

enough to match his status. He was going to buy a Louis Vuitton leather shoulder bag too, but he realised that powerful leaders don't carry bags at all, so he bought an LV wallet instead.

Fragrance is an area Yao is quite unfamiliar with, but a friend recommended Burberry. He sprays more than he should when he goes out and realises that a bottle can still be used for a long time. If he knew that, he would have gone for a more expensive brand.

Yao is someone with principles; he never buys fake brands even though his income doesn't match with the way he presents himself. He feels that, since he is establishing a prestigious image for himself and the school, everyone around him needs to at least catch up by dressing up a bit.

"Linlin just arrived. She hasn't settled in yet. She will do better," Lu tries to soften the air. Linlin nods quietly.

"In today's meeting, we have a few important points to discuss," Yao starts talking. "First, as I will stress in every meeting, we are now working and living outside of our country, thus we must remember to present ourselves respectfully because we represent our country." Yao doesn't need a draft to speak these words, and both he and the teachers can recite the exact words from the political lessons they have been through from primary school to university. Whenever one starts the topic, these propaganda words just fill up their minds and hearts.

"Second, we must remember to always be united. We need a strong united team, and we need to help each other in teaching and daily life. When we are challenged, we must fight together."

"Third, we must work hard and keep our spirits high. The local people are very lazy. You must draw the line with them and not be polluted by their bad habits. When working overseas, we do not just work from nine to five. We need to be on standby 24/7. You must accept this reality."

Director Yao further elaborates these three important points. He sees Shuai holding a pen and wanting to write something but struggles to write anything. Yao also feels that he hasn't actually spoken much about anything specific, but since the new semester is still a week away and the workload has not been distributed, there are not many specifics to be talked about. So, Yao decides to not leave any time for questions. He decides to speak for the whole hour so that he can establish his authority. He decides to buy a Parker pen after the meeting.

He Ping

He Ping is pondering on a sentence that she tries to read twice and still doesn't understand when the phone rings. She draws a question mark next to the sentence with a pencil, turns her body to reach out to the receiver. "Hello, Oh Lu Shi, I'm in my shop now. Not busy, not busy. You can just come, see you in a bit."

He Ping has a coffee shop called T Cafe at the doorstep of Tulbagh University. She is not a businesswoman at all. Everyone calls her Teacher He because she retired from her teaching position at Tulbagh University, and she also taught in Australia and America before moving to the island. She was among an early generation of academics who were sent overseas by the Chinese government. He Ping completed her English Language Teaching programme in Australia, but instead of returning to China, she decided to quit her stable job in China, pursue a PhD in Cultural Studies, and start her career anew in Australia.

He Ping seldom talks about work and family and focuses her life very much on the coffee shop. The idea of the coffee shop came up out of the blue right before she retired. She needed to give her office back to the university, but there was nowhere to put her books at home. She thought, "let me open a coffee shop and put all my books there." Yes, Teacher He is such a person who dares and does. The living cost in Tulbagh is not too high, thus the project is not too crazy.

He Ping likes her coffee shop lifestyle very much because she can chat with her guests every day. This morning, she had a heated discussion with a local guy, Michael, on the Taiwan territorial issue. Michael believes that Taiwan has every right to become an independent country, but Teacher He disagrees.

"When it comes to territorial issues, you can't just make comments based on your imaginations. Many Chinese people lost their lives in this conflict. We won't allow the Western world to boss us around!" Teacher He argues.

Teacher He takes three books off her bookshelf. The books are all about Taiwan: one published in China, one published in Taiwan, and the other in America. On the first page of each book, she has listed out her reading outline and points of interest in the book, what she agrees and disagrees with the author, so that she can always quickly identify issues discussed in the book. Michael is fascinated with books. He used to own a bookstore on the island but retired a few years ago. Michael listens carefully to Teacher He's arguments

and feels that she is probably right, but he is so obsessed with the Chinese territorial issue and is born to be critical, so he moves on to the topic of Tibet.

“I cannot make any comment on the Tibetan issue yet,” Teacher He answers seriously. “I have not read any book about Tibet and know very little about it. I need some time to do my research and let’s chat about it next time we meet.”

After Michael leaves, Teacher He goes back to the bookshelf and finds a book about Tibet. She goes through the contents page quickly and tries to recall what she has been hearing about Tibet on the news. She must sit down, read up, and think more about Tibet.

There is a commercial coffee machine in the shop, but whenever a friend comes to visit, she grinds her private collection of special coffee beans and uses her filter coffee pot to make excellent coffee. She patiently grinds the beans into powder and puts two teaspoons of ground coffee into the warm pot. She pours the water of ninety-five-degree temperature with a forty-five-degree angle into the pot. After three minutes, she will be able to press the filter down. She uses this time to warm up the milk.

Teacher He has been told by many people to stop drinking too much coffee, but her theory is that, as an old lady who doesn’t smoke or drink, addiction to coffee really shouldn’t matter. When she lived in Australia, her ninety-one-year-old landlord drank no water, just coffee every day. The old lady proved to be not only healthy but also energetic. There was a big board hanging in her kitchen saying, “I have no problem with caffeine, I have problems without it.” He Ping admires her landlord for expressing her true self and feels sorry for those who only tried bad instant coffee and then gave up on trying more. At the age of sixty-two, she has understood that life is both short and long. It’s a good idea to never draw your conclusions too early.

Teacher He brings the coffee, milk, sugar, and cups to the table and puts a few cookies on a plate. She sits down and watches the sunset, making a shape on the table through the window. This is her favourite moment: to sit quietly, smell the coffee, and wait for a friend to arrive.

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“Sorry, I’m late,” Lu Shi rushes into the coffee shop, puts her scarf down, and sits down next to He Ping.

“Director Yao doesn’t like it when I leave work on time. I grabbed my bag at five o’clock and was walking towards the door when he jumped out, caught me, and asked, ‘Did you translate the letter I gave you in the afternoon?’ I wanted to tell him that I would translate it the first thing tomorrow morning, but when I saw his very, very long face, I just went back to my desk and sat there for a bit more.”

Teacher He just smiles. “Have some coffee. It wouldn’t be as nice if it gets cold.”

“You didn’t see him bullying our new teacher. They just met, and he told the little girl ‘you need to dress up to see me’.” Lu doesn’t seem to have time for coffee and keeps on talking. “He sees himself as a real emperor.”

“Haha, your boss doesn’t understand that Tulbagh is just a small swimming pool. You just can’t pee in the pool because if you do, you will be drinking your pee one day.”

“Wow, classic lines from Teacher He. Very philosophical!” Lu Shi says. “This coffee is good by the way.”

“Oh, it wasn’t me who said that! The old guy Michael said so this morning. What do I know! Just some serious and boring theories. I can never say anything so down-to-earth but profound.” They both laugh.

He Ping and Lu Shi first met in a supermarket when they were picking oranges. Lu was busy putting the biggest oranges into her basket when a god-like voice hit her ears. “Lady, you got the wrong ones. When it comes to oranges, you can’t just pick the giant ones. You should rather look at its belly button: the bigger, the sweeter.”

Lu Shi turned around and didn’t know how to respond to this aunty she never met before. It’s rather exciting to meet another Chinese on the island, but this particular scenario was a bit strange. She struggled to find words to say. She couldn’t ask “are you Chinese?” because the answer was quite obvious. She didn’t want to say “thank you” either as it would sound too formal.

She simply followed her feelings, picked an orange, and passed it to Teacher He, and asked, “What do you think about this orange?”

“What do you think about…?” naturally becomes the way Lu Shi communicates with Teacher He. Whatever the matter, Lu Shi wants to know what Teacher He thinks. She wants to view everything in a bigger picture, and Teacher He always gives her that bigger picture.

“What do you think about our Director Yao?” Lu Shi wants to know Teacher He’s opinion.

“I don’t know him enough, so I can’t comment. I only met him once at an event,” Teacher He tries hard to recall what happened, “But having heard what you said, I sense that he is very spoiled by the island and he will keep peeing around for a while. Well, I guess I will not go swimming in your pool. You need to be careful. Try your best not to drink from the pool by accident.”

They hold up their coffee cups and gaze deeply into each other’s eyes, both still thinking about the pool water. This sip of coffee tastes extremely interesting.

Lu Shi

The setting sun spreads rays of light onto everything. On her way home, Lu Shi decides to pass through the Botanic Garden.

The lotus pond in the Botanic Garden is Lu’s favourite place on Tulbagh island. No matter how heavy the burden she carries to the pond, the quietness of the garden washes it away, and she leaves the garden with a sense of tranquillity.

Lu sits quietly next to the lotus pond and watches water drops line up under the sun on the lotus leaves as if they are getting ready for a race. The fading pink colour of the lotus flower looks delicate. She looks at the bright pink flowers and the green leaves and listens to the birds singing and water flowing. Lu wonders: what can a garden do for us? In a city, a garden brings a miniature version of nature to busy city people and allows them to escape from noises and craziness. A garden means something else at Tulbagh, an island full of nature. Here, a garden is the choreography of nature. This kind of structure gives her a sense of order and security. Lu once thought that she could fully embrace wild nature, but now she realises that she prefers the delicate arrangement of a garden.

She recalls those years when she was young as a blooming flower when she was reading poetry and novels and had a passion for everything. Studies and work did not change anything, romance and travels did not

change anything, and even the beginning and end of her marriage did not change anything in her, but from the moment she had her child, she felt that everything was different. It was the first time she felt strongly that she was not in individual existence anymore. Her emotional sensitivity evolved, and she is not as sensitive as she used to be. She only hopes that the world can become a better place for her son Keke, and she understands that she needs to be a stronger person for him too.

Lu Shi decides to leave her past behind and explore the world. She misses and thinks about Keke back in China every minute, but she understands that if she offers only a small greenhouse, her child can never grow to be a big tree. She doesn't mind the long flights; she's ready to accept any challenges in her career; she's willing to give up everything for a wide, smooth, and beautiful road for Keke's future.

Lu Shi stands up and waves goodbye to the lotus.

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Five-thirty in the morning, Lu Shi sits in the living room by herself and watches the green tea leaves open one by one in her glass. This is a special tea Wang Shuai brought from his hometown, and each tea leaf was handpicked, skilfully pan-fried and sun-dried, and hand packed into delicate tea bags by his family members. A wonderful smell is generated when the green leaves and boiling water meet, and the first sip of the tea always tastes sweet.

She used to love coffee. When Lu Shi first came to Tulbagh, she went to every coffee shop that she saw out of curiosity and tasted all the coffee on the island; but recently she realises that she likes tea better because only tea can relax her. On a lucky day, she can even achieve tranquillity with a cup of tea. Now she only drinks coffee in Teacher He's coffee shop because her coffee is excellent, but more importantly, to catch the depths and widths of Teacher He's conversations, she needs caffeine.

Lu Shi didn't plan to get up early today, but every Friday morning she gets very excited and can't stay in bed for long. Friday is the day when she has a scheduled video call with Keke, and also the date when the city comes to collect garbage early in the morning. The city gives each house a giant bin and sends a truck to collect a week's garbage every Friday morning at seven-thirty. In the past, some homeless people looked for thrown away food in the bins, thus the neighbourhood association requested every household to only take their bins out at 7 a.m. on Fridays. It's a time when the 'kids' are still sleeping, thus Lu takes up this honourable task.

Although Lu is only ten plus years older than the other teachers, she feels that Shuai and Linlin are just like her kids. Her motherly nature is shown when she tries to wash everyone's dishes and hang everyone's clothes to dry. She can't help herself but finish all the chores at the house. The kids are very grateful to her, but to Lu Shi, this is just one of her automatic functions. Her mom used to do the same and taught her to perform her 'womanly duties'.

Lu Shi sits quietly and sips the tea. She watches the sun rising and washing the sky's dark blue away. It becomes lighter and lighter until the video call time comes. She will have a very good chat with her son about the past week: her new colleague Linlin, Wang Shuai's delicious fried noodle, the difficult translation tasks at work, and the interesting books from Teacher He. She will share with him a thought she had at the lotus pond, and let him know that,

"Although mom lives very far away, my heart is very close to you."

Chapter II

Home

"What is the one dream in your heart?
Are you imprisoned by your freedom,
or can you be set free by life's tenderness?"

- *Home*
A song by Taiwanese singer Cheer Chen

Wang Shuai

On the first day of the new academic year, traffic on the entire Tulbagh island slows down because of the students and parents. Afraid of being late, Wang Shuai's driver drops him off at the gate of La Motte College early in the morning and drives away to do his other jobs. It sounds grand to have a driver, but the reality is that public transport is terrible on the island, thus all the teachers have to rely on a driver hired by the Chinese Culture School to get to their different teaching locations.

"Ni Hao (Hello), Mr. Wang!" Wearing a spotless white robe, the principal, Father Shepherd, stands at the school gate and greets Wang Shuai in perfect Chinese. The principal is originally from Australia, but he looks like an ancient Chinese poet in his robe. He even learned a few Chinese words from Wang Shuai last semester.

"Ni Hao!" Shuai greets back to Father Shepherd eagerly and then moves on to test him a bit with a question in Chinese. "Ni Hao ma (How are you)?"

"Ni Hao, Ni Hao," the principal repeats the only Chinese greeting he knows and switches back to English, "Welcome back to La Motte."

La Motte College is one of the partner institutes of the Chinese Culture School on Tulbagh island. Apart from forming a strategic alliance with Tulbagh University, the Chinese Culture School has contracts with the most prestigious institutes, including La Motte College, a Catholic boys' school, and sends teachers to teach Chinese at grade seven and ten to promote Chinese culture at the expense of the Chinese government.

Shuai has been teaching at La Motte College for a year now. Although the students' Chinese proficiency has not progressed significantly, everyone enjoys taking Chinese lessons, especially singing Chinese songs and playing Chinese games with Wang Shuai. Since Chinese is not a core subject in the curriculum and Wang Shuai is not a full-time staff member at the school, establishing his authority in the classroom was a challenge. In fact, before adopting the fun-teaching pedagogy, Shuai's classroom was a disaster, where nothing close to discipline could be observed. He soon realised that not all the kids in the world could focus on a lesson for long in the classroom as he did as a kid. In fact, the teacher-talks-students-listen pedagogy doesn't work at Tulbagh at all.

Students on the island cannot sit still. After listening to ten minutes of Shuai's monologue, they become restless. There were moments during the second half of his lesson when Shuai felt that he was chasing after a chicken in a busy morning market, so he put an effort into restructuring his lessons. He wrote a few Chinese songs in *pinyin*, the Chinese phonetic system; designed some games about Chinese strokes and characters; and he adopted an entertaining approach to teaching. This pedagogy doesn't exactly reflect his training or his aspirations, but it is well received by all the local students.

Shuai stands next to Father Shepherd and observes him greeting every student. He is surprised to see that a principal can recall every student's name. "Welcome back Kenneth, please fix your tie, and tuck in your shirt before entering the classroom"; "You have brought your violin with you, Don! I can finally hear you play today!"; "Come, Johnson, you have learned Chinese for a year now, please give Mr. Wang a proper greeting!"

"Ni Hao ma?" Shuai finally asks his question.

"Wo hen hao, ni ne (I'm good, and yourself)?" Johnson answers fluently.

"Wo ye hen hao, xie xie (I'm also good, thanks)," Shuai follows the Chinese textbooks and answers earnestly.

This set of standard questions-and-answers sound boring, but it can help the students remember some Chinese, and at least do the basic greetings. Shuai also learned English this way, and the same script was imprinted deeply in his head. Last year, when he was getting out of the car at the school gate, he tripped and fell. Two kind-hearted students ran towards him to help. They asked him, "Are you okay?" Shuai wasn't

even sure if he was conscious, but he answered with his deeply rooted script, “I’m fine, thank you, and you?”

Shuai would be really happy if all his students can answer his questions quickly in Chinese without any struggle, but his expectation is not high. During his teaching last year, he was surprised to discover that the Tulbagh kids didn’t know how to answer questions properly, neither did they know how to cope with exams. In last semester’s oral exam, there was a question on the student’s favourite colour. Many students could not come up with an answer. They could all say a few colours that they didn’t like, but they were not able to lie that those were their favourites.

“We have learned how to say red, yellow, and green.” Even in an exam scenario, Shuai tried to give some hints to students in English. “I don’t like any of these colours. I like silver,” The student answers in English, “but I don’t know how to say silver in Chinese.”

Growing up, Shuai always considered himself a very simple kid, but at that moment, he realised that he was way too sophisticated.

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“Did you go back home this holiday?” Father Shepherd asks Wang Shuai.

“No,” Shuai shakes his head. “Home is too far away. I’ll wait for a longer holiday and fly to China.”

“Good, it’s good to travel around the island too,” says Father Shepherd.

In fact, Shuai didn’t visit any tourist sites on the island during the holidays. He finds teaching too overwhelming. He wants to explore life at large. Although he teaches Chinese, he always wants to improve his English too, so he reads English newspapers every day and takes every opportunity to chat with locals. Shuai is curious about everyone and everything on the island. He always has one question after another, and he is brave enough to raise questions even when he’s unsure about asking.

“Did you visit home?” Shuai understands that the principal comes from Australia, but he’s not sure if he still considers Australia as ‘home’.

“Home?” Father Shepherd smiles. He gives Wang Shuai a brief picture of his life story.

He was born in Melbourne, Australia, but he grew up in a pure Irish family culture. As a kid, he was surprised to discover that the culture at home and school was completely different. His family watched soccer, but all his classmates talked about rugby. His mom cooked all kinds of stews at home, which could not be found anywhere else, as his classmates ate fried and grilled food. These observations made him feel that he was living as a foreigner in his home country. Father Shepherd went to Catholic schools, and when he graduated from university, he was asked by his former teachers to come back to his school and be a teaching assistant for Geography. Soon after that, he started his teaching as a substitute teacher for Geography. One semester after another, he felt the call by God and joined the La Motte Priests. This meant that he gave up all his wealth and chose a life of celibacy and committed his entire life to Education. He was teaching and managing schools in Australia and on many Pacific islands. This time, he has been sent to Tulbagh to take up the post of principal.

“I am like a monk, you know. Home is wherever God sends me to.”

Shuai didn’t have much contact with any religion. For the first time, he realises that a person can feel some kind of calling from up above to pursue certain missions. He contemplates his own life: he doesn’t feel anything calling him from above; he only feels his past pushing him forward into uncertainties.

Wang Shuai watches the students walking happily into the campus and recalls his academic journey. It isn’t an experience that he enjoys recalling. Although in every important and unimportant exam he was always ranked as the number one in his class, he was always nervous about not being able to make it into the top three of the whole year group. Every time he took an exam, he was so nervous that his hands were sweating, and even until now he still has bad dreams about not being able to answer a question in an exam.

The happiest moments in Wang Shuai’s student life took place on his walks between home and school when he was still at primary level. To ensure safety, his school grouped all the students into teams of six to eight to walk together between school and their homes. The kids lined up, and like a train, they were hooked to each other and always headed in the same direction at the same pace. Sometimes they would stop by the river and rest for a bit; they would chat about things that happened at school using their dialect instead of the standard Mandarin that the teachers always used. They also switched to English occasionally and tested each other on their vocabulary and spelling. Now, at La Motte College, Shuai sees the wild grass outside

the school gate and students coming in one by one. He recalls the waving reeds along the stream in his hometown and feels as if he is back on his childhood walk between school and home.

“Do you miss home?” Shuai realises that Father Shepherd is still chatting with him.

“Life here is so colourful that I don’t miss home much,” Shuai answers honestly. “But this conversation has made me miss home a bit.” He wants to ask if the principal misses home too, but recalling his previous answers, Shuai feels there is no need to ask that question anymore. Perhaps to Father Shepherd, home means nothing but his commitment to Education.

The two gentlemen, brought to the island by destiny, smile at each other. They stand at the gate for a bit more and greet the students. Seeing Father Shepherd and Mr. Wang Shuai, the students fasten their ties and come to shake hands or just wave at them from a distance. This morning, Shuai feels as if he suddenly understands something spiritual that he cannot quite explain yet, but he will always remember this bright and inspiring moment.

Li Linlin

Li Linlin has been staring outside her bedroom window and daydreaming for ten minutes now. She reminds herself to prepare for her upcoming lessons, but she always gets distracted by the birds outside.

Flying around the garden are two birds commonly found on the island. The colours of their bodies are mostly plain, but the dark orange feathers towards their tails give them an elegant touch. Their black sharp crests stand out as they skilfully dive from one branch of the tree to another. The two birds are enjoying their worlds and singing happily, turning the whole garden into a natural opera stage. Linlin is enamoured with these two little creatures.

During her four years of bachelor’s and two years of master’s studies at Xingang, Linlin adapted to all kinds of noises. There was no privacy in her dormitory shared by six girls: phone messages and phones ringing, public toilet flushes, classmates from the next door laughing, cars speeding through the highway, and the occasional engine sound from passing aircraft that made the rest of the noises trivial… It felt like a huge headphone being glued to her ears, and the busyness of the city was being poured into her head. When Linlin first came to Xingang from her hometown, she learned to live with these noises, but it only took her

two weeks to ignore them. Right now, sitting at her desk in front of the window, she has to adapt to the sounds of nature.

Linlin's family owes a piece of farming land in the mountains back in China. She grew up with a lot of different animals and always loved observing them. Her dog at home was not treated as a pet by the family and didn't have a name. He was just called 'dog' and was chained to the gate to look after the house. Linlin loved 'Dog' and patted him whenever she passed by the gate. Sometimes she gave him some leftover bones. As a kid, she was considered to be very adventurous - she enjoyed playing with ants, worms, spiders, and frogs. In the female dormitory at her university, she naturally got her 'superwoman' title: whenever an unknown insect was passing through the building, she took care of it. She was particularly good at getting rid of cockroaches and flies and was highly praised by all the residents of the dormitory for her courage and techniques.

These compliments did not bring a sense of accomplishment to Linlin. "What kind of talent is that?" She always sighed.

When she was studying at a boarding primary school, her teachers asked her to answer phone calls from her father at the school vendor every week. It was the same old talk from her dad, "You must remember that you are the eldest in the family, and you must study hard, do your best in everything, and set a good example for your sisters." What her father said stayed in her head and became a source of guilt whenever she was not giving her best effort. Right now, she's experiencing this deep feeling of guilt for not concentrating on her lesson preparation.

Linlin has been busy with her lesson plans the entire afternoon. Neither the Chinese Culture School nor the primary school she is currently working at requires her to write any lesson plan, but after years of teacher training, she has to put ideas onto paper before going into the classroom. From her teaching practice, she learns that one can never plan enough for a lesson thus a lesson plan doesn't mean much, but she just feels anxious without one.

She hears the front door open and shouts, "Who is it?"

"It's me," Lu Shi's voice comes from downstairs.

"Shall we have some tea?" Linlin asks.

“No, thank you. I need to call my son first,” Lu shouts back.

Linlin is a bit disappointed. It seems that everyone is so busy, and she’s the only person who has nothing to do and cannot help daydreaming in front of her lesson plan. She knocks on her head hard and pushes herself to work harder. She must prepare for this lesson well, as well as all the other lessons because Li Linlin must set a good example for everyone.

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Linlin comes back to reality from daydreaming when Nomalanga, the cleaning lady appears at her bedroom door. “May I come in and clean your room?”

Linlin feels flattered. She looks around and feels that she has done a good job cleaning the room herself. When she sees that Nomalanga has carried all kinds of cleaning tools upstairs including a vacuum cleaner, she decides to find out how cleaning is supposed to be done professionally. All her life, she has only used a broom and mop. Vacuum cleaner, to her, is a flashy and classy tool that she has never touched before.

Nomalanga carries all the tools into the room in a bucket; inside there are all kinds of colourful detergents for cleaning the floor, the window, the toilet, and even one specifically for timber furniture.

“You look very professional,” Linlin is impressed. “Have you been cleaning for a long time?”

“Three years,” Hearing the compliment, Nomalanga’s face lightens up. “I work at a few houses nearby.”

“How I should pronounce your name? I heard Miss Lu calling you but I want to say it right,” Linlin asks.

“Oh, it’s Noma - Langa,” She says slowly, “Just break it down and it’s easy. It means Sunny.”

“Noma - Langa,” Linlin repeats, “What a lovely name!”

This is the first time Linlin has a real conversation with a local islander if the routine and structured chats with staff at the supermarket do not count. Linlin observes Nomalanga as if she is a figure in a science textbook: although she’s wearing a dustcoat now, Linlin can tell that Nomalanga has a very good sense of

aesthetics. Her smooth dark skin is complemented by the white shirt that she's wearing underneath. She is a full-figured woman with even a bit of baby fat. A simple pink necklace and two small button-shaped pink earrings are the final touches that make her beauty truly stand out.

Linlin suddenly realises that there are different standards of beauty. She never cares much about her presentation, but as a student living in a girl's dormitory, she felt pressured by the other students who always talked about losing weight and whitening their skins. Her roommates' 'diet movements' and their habits of shading themselves under umbrellas forced her to accept slim and white as the only standard for beauty. Before she left China, the fashion trend on campus turned even stranger. The girls were wearing heavy white powder on their faces and were applying bright red lipstick. Many were also wearing golden colour framed glasses as accessories. Linlin hated the trend and felt relieved that she was going to spend time with penguins on the island. Now looking at Nomalanga, she can finally give up all the beauty standards that she was forced to accept and appreciate Nomalanga's inner beauty and confidence.

Nomalanga quickly moves into the bathroom, takes out a few of her detergents, and starts working. Linlin leans against the wall and feels a bit strange watching another person clean for her. She wonders, doesn't such a beautiful lady mind getting her hands dirty?

"Is this a tough job?" Linlin asks.

"Not really, I get home after work at four o'clock every day and then just watch TV, thinking about nothing. I don't understand those people who sit in front of computers all day! They all look like crazy workaholics to me."

Linlin sighs as she looks at the unfinished lesson plan on her screen. Her teaching career has just started, but she already sees that it's never going to be an easy job. Linlin discovers that a teacher can never really escape from her working hours. Preparing for lessons and marking assignments takes forever and a passionate teacher will always be looking for inspiration.

"I hope one day I can start my own business. Maybe I will have an online shop and sell clothes and accessories that I like," Nomalanga smiles happily as if all these dreams have been realised. "Lucky that I am not a man and have no responsibility to buy or build a big house. My one true duty is to make myself happy!"

The bathroom is filled up with smells from different detergents and the two ladies keep chatting and laughing. They talk about where to buy colourful hair scrunches near the university, what local snacks at the supermarket taste the best, and their favourite actors in movies. For the first time, Linlin discovers that the world is huge but also tiny. People are very different but also very similar. She is determined to pursue the inner voice she always failed to express, and she decides to start the journey by making herself happier.

Yao Xinsheng

The lights in Yao Xinsheng's office are still on at 2.30 a.m. Yao is too excited to go home and sleep because of a phone call from the embassy a few hours earlier. The voice of Miss Zhang, the Education Counsel at the embassy, is still vivid in his mind:

"Director Yao, the Education Ministry of China is planning on sending a delegation to visit Africa in two months. Tulbagh is going to be an important site on their tour. We thank you in advance for your cooperation to ensure their visit is a smooth and successful one."

"Thank you very much, Miss Zhang. I will definitely do my very best. It is my duty, after all, to entertain our leaders from China. By the way, do you know which leaders are going to visit?"

"I have not received any confirmation that specifies who is in the delegation, but I heard from the Secretary's Office at the Education Ministry that this is a Minister-level delegation and a very important one."

In fact, it is a dream for Director Yao to entertain anyone from the Education Ministry of China. He once heard the story of another Director's promotion: once a high-level delegation visited a Chinese Culture School in Ireland; the delegates were so happy about their visit that they pushed for the Director's promotion to become the Vice-Chancellor of a university in China once he finished his service overseas. This inspirational story gives Yao high hopes for all the doors that the Education Ministry delegation will be able to open for him. Thus, this delegation will be very different from all the other delegations in the past, mostly led by some small potatoes that he looks down on.

"Would you please stop reading aloud information from Wikipedia!" Once Director Yao couldn't bear the speech of a party leader from the education bureau of a small town in China. It was an official meeting organised by Yao between the delegate and a local principal from the island. Director Yao was the translator.

There were only three people in the meeting, but the delegate insisted on reading aloud word by word from his prepared speech, and the introduction was about the origin of the friendship between China and Africa. The local principal was not used to starting small-scale meetings with such a grand overview but did his best to show interest and agreement. Yao simply ran out of patience - every delegation starts their speeches with such nonsense; he just can't take it anymore.

Director Yao understands crystal clear that the so-called delegation visits are business trips for high officials, paid by public funds, to explore the Tulbagh island and see penguins. Since he is based at Tulbagh, all his relatives and friends try to find reasons and funds to visit. If they could find a valid reason to come to the island for work, or simply get an invitation letter from Director Yao to make an official visit to the Chinese Culture School, they would have a chance to secure funding from the Chinese government to go overseas.

This is a deal that Director Yao is ready to make because, at the moment, making friends is a high priority for him career-wise. He does his best to fulfil as many requests as possible from different departments in China. Sometimes, while drafting itineraries and issuing invitation letters, he feels like he is running a travel agency more than a school. At some point, he seriously thought about some tourism-related business opportunities, but due to time constraints, this would have to be his future endeavour.

In the past year, Director Yao received all kinds of people carrying all kinds of titles. He was naturally more attracted to the important leaders in politics and academia, thus he was more willing to spend time with them. He learned a lot from these big guys in terms of leadership style and management skills.

"Who arranged all these meetings for me?" Once Yao witnessed a leader scolding his secretary, "We should have just met two groups, and take enough photos to be sent home so that all the department's requirements are met. We need time to go out and have fun!"

Some secretaries understood their leaders much better, and when they communicated with the Chinese Culture School, they all wanted to schedule a meeting to take place at 4.30 p.m.

"Our office closes at five. Would it be too rushed?" Yao asked.

"No, the meeting will be very short. So sorry to disturb you late in the afternoon, but we have more important activities that day, and would really appreciate your cooperation."

Other important activities? Yao thought. Don't be ridiculous! What important activities can one possibly have on this island?

The delegation from the Education Ministry will be completely different from all these nonsense visitors. Not everyone can meet with a leader from the Education Ministry at a national level. If Yao was still at Xingang carrying his title as an Associate Professor, his level would still be far from receiving Ministry-level leaders. On the island, however, in the field of education, "the Director" is the top guy that the embassy could possibly find to entertain the delegation.

This is exactly the shortcut from nobody to somebody Yao planned for his career: to move from Xingang, where he was at the periphery, to Tulbagh, where he is now at the centre.

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"Minister-level leaders," Yao Xinsheng keeps repeating these words to himself, with increasing excitement, "minister-level."

Director Yao understands perfectly well that the journey to becoming a Minister in China is long and complicated. To arrive at the title Minister, one has to go through every administrative level along the way: from Deputy-Section-Head to Section-Head, from Deputy-Division-Head to Division-Head, from Deputy-Bureau-Director to Bureau-Director, from Sub-Ministerial level to finally Ministerial level. People who can make it to the end are not only top of the cream in their areas, but also experts in networking. Their titles are complicated and sometimes misleading: Provincial-level Ministers cannot be compared to National-level Ministers. A Bureau-Director title in Xingang weighs much less than a Deputy-Bureau-Director title in Beijing. Yao's title as an Associate Professor cannot be strictly matched with these administrative categories, but he feels certain that his status can be benchmarked as at least a Division-Head.

The most important task for Director Yao now is to work out a plan on how to make a very good impression on the Ministers within their limited visiting time. He carefully thinks through all the possibilities and types up some preliminary strategic plans on his smartphone:

Get a copy of the delegates' itinerary and schedule quality communication time with the Ministers;
Build personal networks with the delegates;
Emphasise the difficulties of working on the island;

Present work outcomes.

Yao continues to carefully plan how these strategies should be tasked into his 'to-dos'. He will need to learn more about the local people and culture and acquire some basic knowledge about penguins as his conversation starters. He will print business cards with his private email address and seek opportunities to connect as WeChat friends with the delegates so that he will be able to keep in touch with these VIPs. In casual conversations, he needs to highlight the challenges of his job by emphasising how unreliable the local transport system is and presenting cases where his local counterparts do not cooperate with his work. The most important question, however, is how best to present his achievements on the island?

In his latest report submitted to Beijing, Director Yao has made broad ambitious statements about his achievements. With some necessary creativity, the four partner schools on the Tulbagh island became ten; the number of people who participated in one of their activities was elevated from one hundred to one thousand; as for an exhibition that the actual number of viewers could not be tracked, he simply put down the whole population of the island as participants. Director Yao's theory is simple: BIG figures are the only way to get BIG money. He needs to first secure funding by using his imagination and creativity, and only when the money is in his pocket, can he turn these dream figures into reality. One must think BIG before taking BIG steps.

An idea suddenly strikes him. This is how Director Yao will present his achievements: he will host a partnership celebration ceremony at a local school. He will invite the delegation, the Ambassador, the Education Counsel, local government officials as well as local principals to attend the event. Students from other schools who have learned enough Chinese to show off their talents must come and give Chinese cultural performances. In this way, the nature of the presentation will be transformed. Yao's achievements are not to be reviewed but celebrated. More importantly, Director Yao will be able to further enhance his networks with high-level people from local and Chinese communities, pushing his career to the next summit.

Yao Xinsheng smiles as he sings along to the Olympics theme songs playing on his computer: "*You are a winner for a lifetime if you seize that one moment in time*…"

He Ping

The sky has turned dark when He Ping enters the Tai Chi classroom where she has been learning the martial arts form for years. She nods to her classmates. A local boy, Ludwe, always greets He Ping with excitement.

They become friends after a few good chats and sometimes have fish and chips together after the class at a small shop nearby. The 'boy' is in his early 20s, but he always seems as energetic as a kid. He Ping loves calling him "Little Reed."

"Teacher He!" Little Reed greets her with his usual passion, "How are you?"

"Not bad," He Ping answers. "The week just flies by. And yourself?"

"Just so so," Ludwe gives a subtle smile. "I'll tell you about it later."

The Tai Chi teacher, Andy, just finished working with another group of students and looks towards them. He gives eye contact to everyone, lowers his body to the Tai Chi sink position, and the lesson starts.

He Ping found Andy's Tai Chi class online when she first came to the island for the last chapter of her teaching career. Her time was completely occupied by matters big and small, but she always felt that something was missing in her life. One day, at breakfast, she suddenly realised that Tai Chi was the missing piece in her new life on the island. He Ping had not yet entered the interactive learning phase of 'Pushing Hands', but she loved doing the 'Forms' with a small group so that they could learn from each other and be pushed to practice more. She was afraid of signing up for a group that would perform in parks and practise Tai Chi like gymnastics.

He Ping carefully searched the internet for different Tai Chi classes on the island, and she found Andy's extremely interesting. This forty-year-old man of Netherlands descent was a student of a Master from Taiwan. Andy not only picked up Tai Chi but also learned acupuncture and made a living from his acupuncture clinic on the island. He Ping joined Andy's Tai Chi class and never missed a lesson. She is impressed by Andy's teaching philosophy. To promote Tai Chi, he doesn't charge a structured class fee but invites people to donate what they feel comfortable with to share the rent for the classroom. Seeing him promoting Tai Chi so passionately, He Ping naturally considers Andy a fluent Chinese speaker. She was surprised when she learned that, although Andy could recite all the acupuncture points in perfect Chinese, he didn't know how to carry a daily conversation in the language.

"Breath out…hold up…breath in…" Andy leads the group with his gentle instructions.

Tai Chi always brings a special kind of serenity to He Ping. The art requires coordination from hands to toes; the body has to form exact angles when shifting weight from one leg to another. More importantly, one's full concertation on 'Dantian', one's physical energy centre, is always required. This concentration is perhaps a path to serenity. The busy daily life keeps He Ping's heart turbulent but, in the 'sink' and 'float' of Tai Chi movements, she has to be fully attentive.

When practicing Tai Chi, He Ping finds it difficult to stop her mind from wandering, and sometimes she loses her balance when she focuses on particular details of her movements. He Ping understands that, although every detail of the body movement is important, it is only when her full attention is on the 'Dantian' that her body can relax, thus perfection in detail can be achieved. It is like doing her academic work: although every paragraph is important in her writing process, it is only when her full attention is on the pursuit of the truth, can she find meaning in what she writes.

He Ping syncs her body and reminds herself one more time to hold her attention. Slowly she feels her body relaxed, and that is when her inner peace arrives.

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After the Tai Chi lesson, He Ping and Ludwe follow their usual routine and sit down at the fish and chip shop for a chat. It is more of a takeaway place, but a huge table and some chairs are arranged in the centre of the room, comfortable enough for them to have an after-class meal. It is rather interesting that although Tai Chi is probably the only thing that connects the two, they can always start from there and extend their discussions to many other topics.

"I don't understand this *achieving relaxation through 'Dantian'* thing," Ludwe holds a piece of fish and says. "I just want to complete the full sets of movements, but every time I think about the next movement, my whole body is frozen."

"Even if you do understand perfectly the 'how's, it's still very difficult to do it," He Ping responds honestly. "'Dantian' is located three fingers below one's belly button. It is the control centre for 'qi', which in the context of Tai Chi, is the invisible energy rising from our body. That's why 'Dantian' is considered as the source of energy for our bodies in Tai Chi. I cannot explain how relaxation works and I am not good at it myself, but my first Tai Chi teacher from the US once wrote me something that helped me understand the whole thing a lot better. Let me read it to you."

He Ping grabs a piece of tissue paper, cleans her fingers one by one, and reaches out to her phone.

“Tai Chi is an art where the soft defeats the hard. The only way to make progress is to give up one’s egotistical desire for victory and to humbly accept repeated defeat over a long period of study. One must learn to ‘eat bitter’ and ‘eat loss’ and let go of the pursuit of success. To achieve a high level of accomplishment in the art, one must have faith in the principles of ‘sink’, relax the body and mind totally and trust in the flowing ‘qi’. One must also maintain faith in the idea that at the limit of softness and relaxation another different kind of strength can be revealed.”

“Very profound…” Ludwe nods and ponders on the last sentence.

“This is why I love Tai Chi. It almost exists out of time and space. Wherever I am, I can bring my body to a different status through Tai Chi.”

“What status?”

“It’s difficult to explain…It feels like…arriving at home. Tai Chi can take me home whenever I want.”

He Ping realises that she has been talking too much and has left the fish untouched, “your turn, how have you been?”

“Nothing special.” Ludwe’s world is simple: his faithful Christian family, his friends whom he has known for a lifetime and are working in different industries, his uninteresting Quantity Surveyor colleagues. “Work is just boring! I hope the company can spend some money on proper software so that I don’t have to measure everything by hand using a ruler.”

“Is the software very expensive?” He Ping frowns. “It certainly isn’t cheap to hire you guys to do the work manually.”

“The economy is not doing well, and I sense that my company will be broke soon,” Ludwe sighs. “Small companies like us are fighting for survival every day, so we can’t ask for too much.”

“But you managed to find time for Tai Chi?”

Ludwe laughs. “I thought it would be cool to learn some Chinese Kungfu. I didn’t expect to be hanging out with the elderly…” He pauses for a second, “I am not talking about *you*.”

Since retirement, He Ping has accepted the reality that she is categorised into the elderly group. She is not surprised that the average age of participants in the Tai Chi class is over fifty: the life pace is so fast nowadays and there is no surprise that young people are looking for excitement in running, hiking, and cycling.

What she doesn’t understand is that besides Ludwe, the rest of the class are all old ladies of diverse grounds, who only give her a nod-hello from a distance. He Ping wants to ask a lot more questions about the participants’ composition of the Tai Chi class, but she feels that their conversation has long diverted the track of Tai Chi and is heading towards a serious discussion on social issues on the island. Such a complicated topic cannot be paired with fish and chips, so she just laughs as a response to Ludwe’s comment on the “elderly”. She decides to find a date and a more appropriate place to have a serious chat with Ludwe about her observations.

Although seen as an old lady, He Ping still has endless curiosity. At her age, she has learned to treasure every person, every book, every cup of coffee, and every moment in her life.

Lu Shi

Lu Shi is getting ready for her sacred video chat with her son: she adjusts the position of her phone, closes the door and the curtains, turns on the lamp, pours a cup of green tea for herself, and puts a pot of hot water next to it.

“Are you ready?” She types the words, and like a kid waiting for a magic show to start, she stares at the screen, waiting impatiently for her son’s name Keke to appear. Keke’s profile photo is a selfie of him in front of his school gate. Dressed in a similar uniform style to Lu Shi’s as a kid, Keke wears a bright yellow hat that is supposed to ‘ensure safety’. The red scarf he wears shows that he is a proud member of the China Young Pioneers, as the bright red triangle scarf represents a corner of the national flag. It is obvious that Keke has not yet entered the age of pursuing individuality, but Lu Shi understands that her good boy, the excellent student, might soon become rebellious and challenge the norm with his unique taste in fashion and music.

“Just a moment,” Keke replies. Lu Shi cannot remember how her life was for the thirty-plus years without a smartphone. Living overseas now, her smartphone is her life. She scanned all the classic photos from Keke’s childhood into her phone and looks at them whenever she has a chance. She pays close attention to whatever is on the news in China that relates to her son’s present and future. Sometimes she feels that the world in social media is more real than the world right in front of her.

Lu Shi considered a few factors carefully before she allowed Keke to have his own phone. She understood the possible bad influence smartphones could have on children but worried that Keke would feel isolated as most of his classmates had their own cell phones. What is more important now is that Keke has his own WeChat account on his phone, making *their* communication easier.

“Mama!” The video call is connected, “Are you at home?”

“Yes, remember I showed you my room?” Lu Shi moves her phone around for Keke to see the room.

“I received the photo you sent. Are those people in the photo your students?”

“Yes, they are my students. They study Chinese at Tulbagh University.”

“Wow, they look strange.”

Lu Shi laughs. She shared the same feeling about people’s diversity when she first came to the island.

“They are not strange; they are just different from us, with darker skin or lighter skin.”

“But why do people here at home look the same?”

“This is a very complicated question. Well, it is because of the colonial history of Tulbagh.”

“Colonial? What is that, Mama?”

Lu Shi is no doubt a wonderful teacher. No matter how complicated the issues are, she can always explain things in the simplest logic and words.

“Colonialization is when a country occupies another country and takes its resources away and… manages it. They also send their own people to that occupied country. For example, there were only black people who lived on the Tulbagh island. Later on, some white people from Holland and Britain came and occupied the island, and many people from these countries moved here too. Colonialization ended here a long time ago, but people with different skin colours learned to live in peace with each other.”

Lu Shi understands that her fairy-tale explanation on colonization neglects all the pain and bloodshed in history, but under the principle of not lying, she wants to present a kind version of the world to her twelve-year-old son.

“Why did *you* move there, Mama? Is it because of colonization?”

“No no no,” Lu Shi is surprised to hear the question, “Mom is here to teach Chinese and promote Chinese culture, not to occupy…”

“But why do they want to learn Chinese? Are there a lot of Chinese people?”

“They learn Chinese for the same reason that you learn English. You don’t have anyone speaking English around you at the moment, but you will need the language to communicate with people from around the world in the future. The same thing here: my students will be using Chinese when they travel and work in the future, speaking of which…” Lu Shi naturally switches her language to English and her topic to schoolwork, so that Keke can practise his English, “What did you learn at school last week?”

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Lu Shi does not have the desire to force her child to achieve all-around excellence, but she does want him to learn English well and get ready for all the possibilities and opportunities in the world. She doesn’t want to be a mom who only greets her kid out of responsibility. She wants to make good use of every opportunity of communication to foster a positive impact on her son.

Lu Shi feels fulfilment and love during these video calls. The noise of the vacuum cleaner from upstairs does not matter; the broom that gets blown away by the wind in the yard does not matter; the endless work assigned by Director Yao does not matter, and the colonial past of the Tulbagh island does not matter.

Nothing else matters to her at this moment. This is a moment shared by Lu Shi and Keke, and the rest of the world pauses.

Keke's entrance to secondary school is the most important thing on Lu Shi's mind. She learned years ago that choosing the right kindergarten would give the kid a chance to go to a good primary school which would open doors to prominent secondary schools, where there would be a better chance of getting excellent exam results to enter the best universities.

Lu Shi often asks herself if it is really necessary to put so much pressure on Keke and herself, but the reality is cruel. Nowadays, even graduates from the top universities are not guaranteed good jobs, and the future will only be more competitive and unpredictable. It is very unlikely that one will be able to survive without a degree from a good university.

"Did you do well in the last exam?" Lu Shi is disturbed that this is what concerns her the most at the moment, but she can't help asking. "Were you ranked in the top five in class?"

The world has become so *quantifiable*: marks and rankings seem to be much more important than knowledge. Lu Shi remembers that when she was a kid, it was still possible to have a lot of free time and pass all exams easily, but at some point, the world has become obsessed with numbers. Now everything is decided by ranking: where your school ranks among all the schools, and where your kid ranks in his/her class become significant.

"I didn't do well," Keke tries to avoid looking into the camera. "I ranked the tenth in class."

Lu Shi feels hurt. When Keke was born, she had all those dreams that she would be a parent who could protect this unique child from all the harm and pressures of the world and give him a happy childhood. She panicked when she saw all the mom-friends busy taking their kids to the early childhood learning centres and their kids developing all kinds of skills at early stages in life. "Does a happy childhood come at a cost?" Lu Shi kept asking herself. "Can I let my son have this kind of freedom in these critical years?"

She heard all kinds of stories: someone's kid learned to play the piano from an early age and was able to secure a full scholarship from a music school in the US; another kid had all the fun without going to any class but was not able to pass the entrance exams to primary schools. These common plots created a sense

of anxiety that made Lu Shi feel helpless. It didn't take long for her to decide to change her parenting strategy of 'a happy childhood' and accept the fact that she has to be a tiger-mom too.

She also considered the possibility of putting her son in a primary school on the Tulbagh island. Pressure on the students is minimum on the island and there are a lot of opportunities for the students to develop their interests and spend time with nature. What worries Lu Shi is that such relaxed life on the island would kill Keke's competitiveness. If he manages to survive on the island, he will be able to make a living here, but if he can survive China, he will be tough enough to go anywhere.

"Why did your ranking drop?" She feels the responsibility to investigate further. "Did you have trouble with a particular subject?"

"Mathematics," Keke answers. "The last few problems in the test were too difficult."

Mathematics was a subject that Lu Shi never liked as a student, so she understands Keke's struggles with it; but whether one likes or dislikes a subject is irrelevant to the exam. She read through Keke's mathematics textbooks once and found the problems to be extremely boring. There were problems with measuring the water level in a swimming pool when the water was being pumped in and out at the same time. There was another question about two trains crossing a tunnel and the students had to measure when the trains would meet and when they would leave. These hypothetical problems were all decorated to look realistic, no matter how dull they were. As a mother, the only practical thing for Lu Shi to do is to be on the same side with the teachers and provide positive guidance to her child.

"But how were other students able to get the answers right?" She asked.

After a short discussion, Keke's reason for being behind becomes crystal clear: compared to the other parents in the class, Lu Shi's supervision and support were not enough. She decides to hire a private tutor for her son, who will take two hours every weekend to revise mathematics with him.

What comforts her but also disturbs her is the fact that Keke longs for success and is eager to be at the top. She was once an ambitious person herself, but she had to reprioritise everything when Keke was born. Her happiness and success were no longer important. Her son became the centre of her universe. She *hopes* that he can be happy but, she *needs* him to be successful. Lu Shi understands that one cannot possibly have everything in life, but she certainly wishes her son will have it all.

Chapter III

Tulbagh Life

"Don't ask from where I come from
My home is far, far away
Why do I wander so far?
Far, far away
For the olive tree of my dream"

- *Olive Tree*
A song by Taiwanese artist Chyi Yu

Li Linlin

Linlin keeps surprising herself since her arrival in Tulbagh two months ago. First, she has committed to going to the gym. Second, she has become more outgoing and sometimes even finds herself talkative. Third, to her astonishment, she is in a relationship.

Growing up, Linlin never showed any interest in sports. The reasons were simple: her energy could be used for helping out at the family farm, so why would she waste all her energy on sports equipment? The curious soul decides to try the gym at Tulbagh University because it is included in a welfare package, and because she now has the time for it.

Out of curiosity, she climbs onto what she calls a "fake bicycle" and tries to find out how it works. "Beep", the panel lights up and she tries to manage it by pressing some random buttons. She is required to put in her height and weight. Not knowing what exactly she needs to do, she decides to go with the recommended setting of twenty minutes of mountain biking.

The vibration sound of the bike sounds as authentic as the wind in nature. Linlin pedals hard and keeps her eyes on the panel monitoring her track, heartbeat, and calorie consumption. The loud music in the gym pushes her to ride faster and faster. She looks around and observes the youthful university students working very hard to achieve their goals. Many of them wear their headphones and follow their own rhythms. She suddenly understands why people are so fascinated by the gym: it gives you a moment to yourself. It is a small and unique space where people leave each other alone and focus on achieving their goals and

challenging their limits physically. This motivation is something Linlin has never experienced before. It simply makes her feel good about herself.

Linlin always considers herself to be a shy person, and to some degree weird and anti-social. At the end of her first two months on the island, however, she is surprised to find that the English-speaking Linlin is an outgoing one. Although she is always in a hurry to get to her classes, she loves chatting with her colleagues, the local teachers. At home, she and Nomalanga share endless topics to chat about. At the university, Linlin naturally gets along well with everyone. She even chats with the receptionist lady at the gym for a few minutes every time she goes there.

Linlin's English is fluent enough to engage in social chats, but she finds communication at a deeper level challenging since she doesn't have a degree in English and this is her first experience living overseas. People on the island seem to love hearing her opinions, and they ask her all kinds of questions: Why is everything *Made in China*? Why does Chinese writing look like drawings? Do Chinese people *really* eat snakes and dogs? She answers all these questions confidently, although she feels a bit offended by them. She shoots back her own questions: Why is the gap between the rich and the poor so wide on the island? Why is security a problem? Why is the public transport system not functioning?

Being limited by her language capacity, Linlin has to use the simplest way of expression to explain everything: After China's opening-up, the new market attracted a lot of foreign investments because of the low cost of labour, thus the manufacturing industry took off and China became the world's factory. Chinese writings are based on characters transformed from images, so they naturally look more complicated than Latin letters. There are places in China where people eat snakes and dogs, but these animals are definitely not people's everyday food source.

She always finds a strong sense of satisfaction every time she successfully gets her ideas across. She tries hard to digest answers given by her island friends too: the island's past of colonization created a significant income gap between the rich and the poor. Although the island has been liberated for over twenty years, the income gap has grown wider under the current neoliberal economic system driven by the free market. The official unemployment rate of the island is twenty-five percent, and the social system offers neither sufficient welfare support nor alternative pathways for social mobilities, which explains the high crime rate. The politicians and the rich all drive fancy cars, and tourists' money goes straight to the big private bus companies, so nobody cares about fixing the public transport problem for poor people.

Linlin once felt that the world was too big and too complicated, and she would never understand it; but since her arrival on the island, she has been pushed to understand and explain a lot of issues. She feels excited: maybe the world is not as complicated as she imagined, and maybe she can handle it.

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It is a mystery how Linlin and Ning Jin's relationship started. Even Linlin doesn't know *how* exactly it happened, but she recalls vividly *what* happened.

On her way to the gym, a Chinese guy wearing thick glasses runs up and starts talking to her. "Hello Linlin… we met…last week at an event at the university," the guy says.

"Hello hello," Linlin stares at his face, trying to recall the people she met at all the events she attended the previous week and suddenly remembers him. "You are from Tulbagh University…"

"Ning Jin… That's my name…" He answers. "Where are you going?"

"Oh, I am heading to the gym."

"I am heading…towards that direction too… Let's walk together."

Ning Jin is a familiar name to Linlin. She received a WeChat friend request from this name after attending a safety talk at Tulbagh University organised by the Chinese Embassy. The safety talk was about the security risks on the island and guidance was given on how to take precautions to ensure personal safety. For example, students were advised to send a taxi's plate number to their friends before starting a ride. They were also advised to avoid participating in any political debate as it would get them in trouble. All the Chinese students showed up to the talk for the free buffet lunch afterward. The content of the talk was not quite relevant to her life and Linlin felt bored, so she studied every audience's back while half-listening to the talk.

Ning Jin must be one of the backs that she stared at that afternoon, and he must have found her contact through the group chat of the Chinese students and academics at the university. She was busy preparing for the lessons and simply replied a few sentences to this stranger.

As they walk to the gym, Ning Jin takes the opportunity to introduce himself. He is one of the master's students at the Computer Science department and has been living on the island for seven years since moving to the island with his mother. Almost all the Chinese students at Tulbagh University are doing promising majors like accounting, finance, and computer science. Most of the Chinese students moved to Tulbagh with their families who were looking for local business opportunities.

"Where are you heading now?" Linlin asks him as they arrive at the gym.

"I will just take a walk," Ning Jin answers.

That night, Linlin's cell phone explodes. Ning Jin bombards her with a hundred different emojis and tells her about his past relationships and how he breaks up with his ex-girlfriend in detail.

"Why are you telling me all this?" Linlin types these words. She just doesn't like having a conversation like this when she hasn't finished preparing for her lessons.

After a pause, the words on the screen read, "I like you."

Linlin feels her heart beating faster. "Oh! I see," She writes.

Linlin understands that she should at least give some kind of response to what just happened, but she knows almost nothing about this person and cannot come up with what to say, so the conversation just ends here. The following week, Linlin receives some vegetables and drinks from Ning Jin every afternoon, special deliveries from the Chinese supermarket. She continues to be bombarded by his emojis in their evening conversations.

"Will you be my…girlfriend?" Finally, after a week of battling, Ning Jin gathers his courage and invites Linlin to come over for dinner at his dormitory, where he takes the opportunity to ask the question. This is a very special dinner: he has to ask his friend to drive him to two Chinese supermarkets to get all the ingredients and the menu includes onion with beef, Chinese cabbage with pork, and deep-fried chicken. There is also a bottle of red wine although it turns out that neither of them is a fan of wine.

"Okay," Linlin continues to eat her dinner after giving a quick answer.

She doesn't listen to the promises that Ning Jin starts to make after a glass of wine and quietly keeps eating her dinner. She shocks herself by being so rational. It doesn't matter what men say, it only matters what they do, she thinks. Linlin decides to observe Ning Jin's actions to find out if he is the one that she can trust and spend her life with. Life is short, and everything needs a start. Her fate has led her here, and she will go with the flow.

Wang Shuai

Wang Shuai often participates in the African BBQs organised by the locals and he loves the African name for BBQ - *braai*. He knows exactly what to do at a *braai*. Nobody ever arrives at the *braai* on time, so he has learned to deliberately arrive half an hour late to avoid the embarrassment of arriving as the first guest. He always brings some fruits and juice. As a custom, everyone coming to the *braai* must contribute. Most people bring meat and alcohol, so Shuai decides to balance the nutrition with his own selection of fruits and juices. He is ready to chat late into the night. Plates of meat will keep coming one after another, and people will be holding their beer and keep on chatting way after midnight.

The most important lesson that Shuai has learned from participating in hundreds of these *braais* is: simply to be yourself. When he first came to the island, he always felt that to mingle well into the community, doing what other people did was very important, so he observed and tried his best to follow 'the local way'. Although he didn't like beer, he kept one at hand while chatting with everyone. When expressing his opinions, he tried not to go against what others were saying and just kept quiet when he disagreed. It didn't take long for him to realise that people on the island were so different that there was not a single way of life to follow. By now Wang Shuai has learned that it doesn't really matter whether he drinks juice or beer and that people actually like his opinion when it is different from theirs. He understands now that there are different ways to mingle into a community, and he can mingle well by being himself, an identity that seems to be much more interesting to the locals.

On the matter of alcohol, Shuai still doesn't understand why people on the island are addicted to it. Very different from his tea-drinking custom at home, many people on the island have a strong passion for playing loud music and drinking late into the night, making noise with their broken voices and empty glass bottles. One day, a local friend's explanation helped Shuai see the picture: the alcohol culture among the European descendants is obvious. During the era of colonization, many European wine farm owners gave wine to local workers as their salaries and destroyed a generation of them. The young people on the island don't share that story today. They would rather like to live in the fantasy world of alcohol.

Shuai doesn't have much contact with alcohol himself and he doesn't like its taste. To him, alcohol is a compulsory element in his family for celebrating Chinese festive events. Its symbolic meaning weighs more than its practical use. In his rural hometown, people never had any concept of legal age for drinking, so as a kid he drank with the adults, taking small sips of wine to impress the adults. He learned from family members who were in business that expensive wines were often gifts for opening doors of opportunities; one's sincerity in doing business sometimes had to be proved by drinking till drunk, a key strategy to reach business agreements. At university, a roommate of his who played computer games day and night got completely drunk and slept in a public toilet for the whole night after failing in all his exams. As a result, Shuai never had any good feelings about alcohol and considered it to be dangerous ground.

Although some of the most immature behaviours come from drinking, alcohol is still a symbol of maturity and plays an important role in rituals at Shuai's hometown. "For men heading out of our town, it is important that they must be able to drink so that they can have the courage to make a difference in the world," his family told him. When Shuai was ready to leave his rural home for Tulbagh, his extended family members brought wine for his farewell. He followed all the traditions and toasted to every elder to show his respect.

Now at the Tulbagh *braai*, Shuai drinks his juice and listens attentively to the conversations, ready to give a response anytime. He feels happy to be himself.

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The well-cooked sausages and chicken wings are brought to the table. Shuai puts some chicken wings on his plate. There are no chopsticks so Shuai decides to ignore the knife and fork and simply uses his hands to eat. This is not considered to be rude as Tulbagh is culturally diverse and tolerant, and many traditional African cuisines are eaten by hand.

Although La Motte College is a catholic school, many of its teaching staff are not Catholic followers. People seldom talk about religion but often discuss naughty students at school.

"Did you guys watch the video of a teacher and student fighting with each other in class?" The P.E. teacher asks.

Shuai watched the popular video. A local female teacher and a female student started a rough fight after the teacher caught the student using her cell phone secretly in the classroom. They were shouting and hitting each other and the whole process was recorded by another student. The video went viral online, causing waves of disbelief among educators on the island.

“Our young people on the island are under such bad influence,” a junior high school English teacher expresses her concern. “I’ve heard that the gangsters are now having a stronger influence on our young people. There are a lot of kids who cannot find love at home. They find the brotherly and sisterly connections that they long for in gangs to be the best substitute for family relationships. If this continues, normal teaching will be impossible.”

“Just look at how many students grow up in broken families. They can hardly be immune to bad influence,” the P.E teacher responds.

Shuai understands this. He knows that the so-called broken families do not mean families where the parents are divorced but very often families where the mom does not even know who the father of her child is. The very loose relationships people live with on the island pose a huge contrast to the very tight and restricted Chinese traditional family values, where members of a family are unconditionally bound to each other.

“Whatever happens, a teacher should never hit a student,” the P.E teacher continues. “Students will always be students; teachers are adults and must take professional responsibilities.”

“Can you picture this happening in China?” the English teacher asks Shuai.

What happens in China is a topic that Shuai tirelessly thinks about. It is only when he travels overseas to the island that he understands for the first time that everything he knows, although he knows a lot, comes from a Chinese perspective, and outside of this perspective lies a huge world with endless possibilities.

“Chinese teachers are very responsible for sure, but no teacher would hit a student,” Shuai answers. “It is impossible for a Chinese student to hit a teacher either. That’s just unimaginable.”

But really? Shuai asks himself as he explains. He was always a good student and didn’t get to know the stories of the naughty ones. He also recalls that during China’s Cultural Revolution there were cases of the Red Guards, mostly consisting of students, hitting their teachers, some even to death. Every time he answers

anything about China, he loses his confidence in what he says and what he knows: China is gigantic and its history is so rich. Can my answer represent everyone, anyone?

"Teaching sounds like a safe job in China at least. Why did you choose to become a teacher by the way?" the P.E. teacher asks.

For this specific question or any questions about life, Shuai has two sets of answers. Set A is completely politically correct and is used for interviews and formal discussions. Set B consists of his immature and confused thoughts that are changing all the time, but they are closer to the truth. Perhaps it is the alcohol around him that pushes him to share his Set B answer with everyone.

"I don't know. I was just…pushed by life. It was probably destiny, although I don't believe in destiny… but it wasn't a choice," he answers.

Shuai cannot say that teaching is his dream career. He enjoys teaching because he likes the freedom on his small stage in the classroom at La Motte College, and he loves learning about different cultures from his students and colleagues and growing together with them. However, he likely enjoys Tulbagh more than teaching, and it is certain that he is still traumatised by his own high-pressured school life in China. His contract with the Chinese Culture school will end in a few months and it is then that he will make his real-life choices. He will face the pressure of surviving in a big city like Xingang, the competition from his peers, and expectations from his family. His parents who did everything they could to send him away from the countryside to the city for opportunities, want him to find what they called an "iron rice bowl" job that is stable.

The Tulbagh teachers who look serious on school days are now completely relaxed at this weekend *braai*. Everyone has had many beers and keep chatting. Looking at them, Shuai wonders if they are free to make their own choices in life. He wants to avoid all the unnecessary worries and take every opportunity to enrich himself and enjoy every moment he has on the island.

Yao Xinsheng

It's such bad luck to have to work with a group of subordinates who are completely incapable, Yao wonders to himself as he organises his thoughts about the itinerary for the Education Ministry's delegation. Yao is

conflicted. He is naturally lazy and doesn't want to get his hands dirty with hard work, but he is never happy with the quality of his subordinates' work, so he has to get involved with everything himself.

He always feels that his subordinates, the three teachers, can never think thoroughly about anything; their plans are full of loopholes, and he has to be the one to get everything organised in the end, "…am I here to be your nanny?" This question has become Yao's slogan at work.

Take the summer camp organised by the Chinese Culture School as an example. There was enough funding from the Chinese government to send twenty students to travel in China for free. The students only needed to pay for their air tickets, but the teachers only managed to recruit ten students.

"You are useless! The number looks so ugly - it's only half of the quota!" Director Yao complained.

The teachers explained that an air ticket fare was a huge amount for an ordinary family at Tulbagh.

"But how did other teachers recruit twenty students in the past? You are very good at finding excuses!"

Yao can always say things that make the teachers stunned. As a matter of fact, what worries him is that he has already submitted beautifully made-up numbers to apply for funding from China. When it comes to assessable matters like the actual number of students attending the summer camp, if the numbers do not match with his report, his superiors in China will be suspicious, especially at this critical moment when the Education Ministry delegates are visiting soon. No mistake is allowed.

Yao Xinsheng has long understood that the primary duty of his directorship is simply risk management. He can live a comfortable life on the island by doing nothing, and he is proud to have taken an alternative path towards his ambitious goals. To Yao, keeping a stable job is wasting life. He reminds himself that to take the short cut to success, he must dream big and take risks.

It's midnight now. Yao is the only one in the office. The China Central Television news broadcast fills the empty air of the room and serves as the background noise for Yao's careful choreography of events. He is busy reviewing the programme for the partnership celebration ceremony of the Chinese culture classroom. There is the ambassador's speech, his speech, and a local principal's speech at the beginning of the programme. There will be a student performance of the song *I Love You China* and a poetry reading of *My Motherland* - that's all perfect. Yao spots a few potential problems in the ceremony as well. First, for such

an important event, the Masters of Ceremony should not be students. It would be ideal to have a teacher from the Chinese Culture School partner with a local teacher, one male, and one female, to host the programme. Second, the performances should cover not only simple singing and poetry reciting; there must be some real entertainment to highlight the event. Talent shows from the students are not enough; the teachers must perform as well, and make the delegates feel proud of Chinese culture being promoted overseas. There must be either a Tai Chi, a traditional Chinese dance, or musical instrument performance. Third, the venue must be filled to full capacity. Whether it's students from local schools or guests from outside, a lively atmosphere must be created.

Director Yao writes the three points on the Chinese Culture School WeChat group, "… please overcome all difficulties and tackle the three challenges." He hates sending out messages to teachers at midnight because it gives them excuses to not reply on time, but he won't be able to sleep without disseminating these tasks.

"As for the division of labour, you guys decide among yourselves. Just get the work done. I don't want to be the nanny."

He concludes his message with his slogan and presses "send".

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The quietness of the late-night Tulbagh is interrupted by the noise from a garage sliding gate opening. Yao drives his SUV back home. He checks if there is any car or anyone following him, and after making sure that all is fine, he unlocks the car doors. Yao takes out his keys and goes upstairs. Tulbagh University, a partner institution to the Chinese Culture School, rents a three-bedroom apartment for Yao at a location ten-minute walking distance from work. Since Yao's schedule is unpredictable and he usually finishes work after midnight, he drives everywhere.

Although he had dinner, Yao's stomach is growling again. He looks at his watch and realises that it's 2 a.m. It's time for some late-night snacks. He opens the fridge and takes out a block of cheese, cuts it into small pieces, and pairs it with a few olives. He then picks up a bottle of wine and pours a glass for himself. Yao believes that compared to all the Chinese bureaucrats that he knows, he stands out as the one that has seen the world the most and understands the West the best. Most of the Chinese people working overseas request to eat Chinese food every day but he is fine with Western food, from pasta, pizza, burger, to steak.

According to his understanding of the difference between Chinese and Western food, there is a cultural spectrum - on the side of "the most Chinese" there is rice and steamed bread, and on the other side of "the most Western", it is cheese and olives that he has already mastered.

What Yao likes about cheese and olives is not their taste, but rather the overall elegant feeling when eating them. Somehow it feels different to be using a knife and a fork. Of course, he likes Chinese food too, especially the warmth of people sitting around the table sharing all the dishes and chatting late into the night, but this rarely happens at Tulbagh. In reality, eating a Chinese dish by himself with a bowl of rice seems depressing, but a meal with a knife and fork is completely different - it feels elegant.

Yao wants to pick a book and sit down. It has been difficult to find reading time. Since he was a small boy, he loved reading and read all the classics in Chinese and Western literature. He particularly likes the modern writers with their stream of consciousness. He cannot recall when his passion for reading paused; his life has been filled with academic nonsense, government documents, work emails, and endless WeChat messages. It's only when he comes to the Tulbagh island that he remembers the luxury of reading.

Most of the books on Yao's bookshelf in his bedroom are forbidden in China. Some of them are about histories that cannot be talked about, others are about controversial people and incidents. Coming back to Yao's spectrum theory, the more he works for the propaganda machine, the more he is interested in what's happening on the opposite end. At his office, there is a display of all the theories and policies of the Chinese Communist Party, but at home, he keeps his private collection of all the forbidden books that he can get on the island. He finally picks a book about a blind Chinese human rights lawyer who fled to the US and successfully applied for political asylum. Yao feels funny about destiny and life in general. He works for and to an extent represents the state apparatus, but somehow, he can imagine a parallel self, pursuing freedom and living a successful life as a 'freedom fighter'. He can go far on both paths, but destiny has chosen for him.

He takes a sip of wine and feels the chemistry between cheese and wine in his mouth. At a moment like this, he's simply lost, not knowing why he's on the island and what everything is for. To look for answers, or to escape reality, he opens the book and starts reading.

Lu Shi

The smell of ink coming from the printers in the Chinese Culture School office becomes unbearable to Lu Shi at five o'clock on Friday afternoon. She feels that she can't breathe. She grabs her teacup and rushes out of the room. She needs to sit outside under the setting sun and be left alone for a little while. For the whole day, she feels an intense sense of anxiety surrounding her and she can't hold it any longer. Outside the fence, she sees people rushing home in their speeding cars, and she feels sorry for herself - she still has a lot of work to finish.

Lu Shi is a senior teacher at the Chinese Culture School, and she earns a state subsidy that is twice as much as the young teachers. Naturally, she has more responsibilities. Yao doesn't trust the young teachers and relies mostly on her. That is why for the Education Ministry's visit, she is the one handling the itinerary and all the relevant documents. She also deals with every little detail of their visit. Lu Shi understands that a lot of work should have been done by Director Yao who simply sits there thinking wildly but does not lift a finger when it comes to real work in the real world. However, Lu Shi is still grateful to him for picking her from all the candidates and approving her application to the Tulbagh Chinese Culture School, so she will just keep quiet and do what she is told.

Lu Shi is so used to compromising. She has compromised her passion for dance for a stable teaching job; she has compromised waiting for her true love for getting married at the expected age; she has compromised everything for her child and would give up everything she has for him. She has got so used to compromising that dealing with Director Yao's daily dramas at the Chinese Culture School is nothing compared to her other concessions in life.

For the whole day, Lu Shi has been preparing invitation letters and translating official documents for the Education Ministry's delegation visit. Compared to her crazy workload when she was teaching in China, all these trivial matters should be nothing, but there is a sense of anxiety that just does not go away.

Maybe it's all because of her son's absence from her daily life that she has become so fragile. Her life in China was busy but simple: she had to prepare breakfast and dinner for Keke and take him to different places on weekends for various classes, so the days just flew by. Being taken away from that life, Lu Shi has to learn to spend time on her own again, something that she is rather unused to after all those years of raising her son. She sometimes does some quiet reading or walks around the lotus pond, but there are also times like now when she feels overwhelmed by uncertainty.

At a moment like this, she doubts everything. She understands that the future is always unpredictable, but she just cannot handle the potential risks in her son's future. Was coming to Tulbagh a good decision? She hopes to pave paths to a bright future for Keke and herself, but the more she looks at her life, the more she feels like she is just filling in holes from the past, and there are still endless holes to be filled.

This sip of Pu'er tea is helping her pick up her breath. She watches the tea leaves open up, listens to the water flowing down her body, feels her lips absorbing the steam, and her entire body warming up. At this particular moment, she doesn't miss home or her son. She only feels the strong Pu'er that has accompanied her to where she is in life now. She thinks about nothing and senses the sweetness of the tea at the end of the sip.

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The living room of the red house is dark and cold at night, yet both Lu Shi and Shuai are in the mood for working overtime. Lu Shi holds a hot water bottle and leans towards the computer to proofread the invitation letters one more time. Shuai has printed out some lyrics and is cutting them into pieces so that he can distribute them to students and train them for the cultural performance at the ceremony. On the table, there is a bag of biltong, a local speciality beef snack, and the two of them both reach out to the bag with a rhythm.

Lu Shi and Shuai are both busy with the final preparations for the Education Ministry's delegation visit. Their WeChat workgroup notifications keep coming aggressively since morning with Yao's instructions and reminders. The teachers are not afraid of Yao on WeChat but running into the Director in person this week would be bad luck. He would ask about everything and if anything were not answered clearly, there would be humiliation.

"Have you seen Linlin today?" Lu Shi asks while her eyes are still on the screen.

"No, maybe she's going on a date. It's Friday today and there is a special offer at the cinema in the mall," Shuai answers while cutting the papers.

"Cute. A girl in love!" Lu Shi allows both her hands to leave the keyboard for a second, reaches out to a big piece of biltong, tears a small part, and puts it in her mouth. "To be honest, Shuai, I always thought that you and Linlin would be together."

“Don’t make fun of me,” Shuai gives a shy and embarrassing smile. “I’m only planning to date and get married when I am thirty.”

“How the times have changed,” Lu Shi sighs. “When I was young, everyone got married at around twenty-something. People wondered what was wrong with you if you didn’t. The young people nowadays are so lucky and can do whatever they want.”

“Well, in my hometown it is still more or less the same as what you described, and most of my classmates from the village are married. I am here, I escaped, so I became a free bird,” Shuai answers. “I just don’t feel my clock ticking yet. I guess when I get to thirty, a radar will start running to find someone to get married to and have kids with.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Lu Shi smiles. “Don’t be like me. I didn’t know what I wanted. I just followed the crowd. When I began to see the bigger picture, it was already too late,”

Lu Shi means it. For anyone living in a third-tier city in China ten years ago, the major storyline was already written for an individual’s life. Arranged marriages by parents were only two generations away from this modern crowd, and the so-called ‘free dating’ simply evolved from family and friends introducing unmarried men and women to each other aiming for successful pair-ups. The one thing that did not change was the rushed timeline. When your time was up and you would have to make a choice, it was either marriage or taking pressures from families and society until you got married.

“Don’t be so pessimistic! You look so happy when chatting to Keke.”

“Oh yes, once you have your own kid, nothing else is more important. Even you are not as important.” Lu Shi is most sincere about this. When filling in her application for teaching overseas at the Chinese Culture School, she only ticked the UK, USA, and Australia as her three intended destinations. Lu Shi planned to take her son with her to start a better life overseas. She was shocked when the Chinese Culture School headquarters informed her that her only option was Tulbagh. Lu Shi had the right to say no, but she looked at her life and thought about her future in China that was so predictable: a noisy and impetuous society, an overwhelming and intensely competitive environment. She told herself: life led me here and I must try to make it work.

“Maybe one day, when I have my own kids, I will truly understand that,” Shuai says with a smile. “It’s still early for me.”

Lu Shi and Shuai carry on chatting. Lu Shi is so happy to share the home space with two young teachers who make her feel a lot younger herself. She loves sharing her life stories and she enjoys learning from the two young teachers: Shuai’s excellent cooking and endless curiosity; Linlin’s kindness and explorer spirit. Lu Shi looks up to these wonderful qualities. She realises that after graduating from university and leaving her shared dormitory, she was never able to spend time to develop such intimate personal relationships with people that were once strangers to her. At work and home in China, it was always too busy, and among colleagues or even families, there wasn’t much time to communicate. Now, in Tulbagh, she can dig deep into any topic, pick up any of her stories to share, admire any dreams of the younger generation and express her concerns for any uncertainties in life.

This special little family at the red house is like the hot water bottle in her hands, keeping her warm through the cold Tulbagh nights.

He Ping

He Ping feels a wave of nervousness hitting her when she sees Yao Xinsheng walk into her coffee shop. They have not formally met each other, but Lu Shi has painted a vivid monster image of Director Yao in He Ping’s head. Seeing the real Yao in flesh and blood makes He Ping surprisingly uncomfortable.

“Come on!” He Ping tells herself, “You are an old lady who has nothing but experience with people. Meeting anyone should be easy.”

She notices that Yao’s attention has landed on the bookshelf in the coffee shop. His eyes are locked on the two piles of Chinese books hidden in the corner.

“Zhong guo ren (Chinese)?” Yao gives He Ping a suspicious look.

“Dui, zhong guo ren (Yes, Chinese),” He Ping answers quietly.

“A cappuccino then.”

Yao's quick jump into ordering coffee makes He Ping at ease. She feels much more comfortable going through her routine customer procedures.

"What coffee bean would you like to taste? We have beans from Ethiopia, Peru, and the small ones from Yunnan, China."

"What beans? It sounds complicated," Yao answers, "…not Yunnan, it's funny to drink Chinese coffee here. African coffee is not anything special either. Let me taste the beans from Peru."

"The Peru beans are full-bodied coffee and have a stronger aroma; they taste a bit like fried almond, and they carry the fruity acidity too. You made a good choice," He Ping explains.

While He Ping grinds the coffee beans, she notices that Yao is carefully going through all the books on her bookshelf. The books are of course all very interesting, and among the Chinese ones, half of them discuss international issues and are banned in China.

"You are very counter-revolutionary," Yao turns his head and stares straight into He Ping's eyes.

He Ping cannot help but laugh. This cultural revolution-style vocabulary has not come into her ear for a long time. "I don't think I am! I just like listening to different voices from overseas."

"How long have you been here?" Yao asks.

"Ten years."

"I have never seen you before. How may I address you?" He continues with his inquiry.

"He Ping. I don't like going out, and now I have this little shop to look after, I can never go out." He Ping has the milk foam blended and pours the freshly made coffee into the foamy milk. "But I have been to events at the Chinese Culture School, so I know who you are, Director Yao, right?"

He Ping senses Yao Xinsheng's tremendous satisfaction that he is recognised. He smiles and says nothing more, picks a book, and sits down. He Ping sees that the very book picked by Yao is the English version of *Age of Ambition,* a book written by an American journalist who documents his observations of Chinese

people's pursuit of fame and money in contemporary Chinese society. Unfortunately, this book is banned in China since it touches on many sensitive topics. He Ping finds the book truthful and thought-provoking. Now she is impressed by Yao's intellectual taste.

He Ping brings Yao a beautiful cup of cappuccino. She puts the coffee on his table quietly, sits down at the counter, and reads her book. It is a book about the history of Tibet as she is getting ready for her debate with Michael, her most frequent and knowledgeable customer. She looks at Yao who seems completely immersed in the world of words and his world of thoughts. She suddenly wonders if Lu Shi misread this person. What if he is one of those misunderstood visionaries who are always hated by their staff?

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The forest at Tulbagh turns to life at sunset. It crosses the botanic garden and extends to Cradle Mountain. It is He Ping's favourite place for taking a walk. Men and women, old and young, are doing exercises; some jogging, some mountain biking, some walking their dogs, and some picking tree leaves with their kids, probably for art projects.

He Ping loves looking at the trees in the forest. She always walks through the oaks and heads to the tall pines that appear to cover the sky. He Ping learned some interesting facts about oaks when she visited some nearby vineyards. Although a lot of oaks are produced in Africa, the oak barrels used for wine fermentation have to be imported from Northern Europe and Canada. The reason is simple: the African oak receives much sunshine and water and grows too fast with a low-density trunk, making it an unsuitable material for making barrels. What the trees give back to the African soil are the hard oak fruits under He Ping's feet. He Ping likes pines too. Although they are tall, they are not as old as they look. She heard from friends at the Geography department that only bush plants are indigenous to Tulbagh and all tall trees are foreign species. Perhaps the oaks and pines are as happy and comfortable as she is on this foreign land.

He Ping walks towards a stump and sits on it for a break. She notices the annual rings on the stump, and the unbalanced cracks crossing the rings. She wonders how many stories must be embedded in these rings. He Ping remembers her friend from the Geography department explaining to her that one can easily tell a tree's lifespan by counting the rings and gather rainfall data from the gap of the rings. She ponders if her life stories are embedded in her growing wrinkles.

It’s a cold winter day, but He Ping wants an ice cream all of a sudden. She walks towards the ice cream shop at the parking lot.

“Good morning!” The local shopkeeper greets her with a sincere smile, “How are you?”

“Good, and you?” He Ping knows her time well because she has just closed the coffee shop. “Is it still morning?”

The girl laughs, “Sorry, sorry, good afternoon!”

He Ping envies those who live outside a sense of time and without any worries. She laughs together with the girl.

“What flavour would you like to have today? You are most welcomed to do a tasting first,” The girl asks.

“What is the best flavour for a cold winter day like this?” He Ping is not sure if this is a proper question to ask but she senses the girl’s confidence and knows that she will give a very good answer.

“Try our malva pudding flavour,” The girl digs a bit out with a spoon and passes it to He Ping. “It is iced, but it feels warm.”

He Ping puts the ice cream into her mouth. Strangely, it does feel warm, like a piece of pudding melting in her mouth. It’s perfect.

He Ping then tastes the black sesame flavour (too sweet), lemon flavour (too sour), and then chooses a scoop of orange chocolate flavour to go with another scoop of malva pudding flavour. She pays the bill and gets two stamps on her loyalty card, and she notices that she is only three scoops away from getting a free one. She randomly picks a seat at the corner of the shop.

The setting sun draws a silver line on the Cradle Mountain, marking the day to be over soon. At the ice cream shop, a mom has taken her son to taste all the ice cream flavours. He Ping overhears that there is a banana flavour, which she decides to try next time. At the opposite corner of the shop, two girls are gossiping about trivial matters in their lives and licking their ice cream cones happily. This is happiness,

He Ping sighs. She comes from a bitter and sour world of coffee and simply enjoys a different atmosphere at the sweet ice cream side of the world.

To He Ping, Tulbagh is a dessert in her life. From the political struggles during the Cultural Revolution, re-education in the countryside, studying overseas with little financial aid to a busy academic life of teaching, researching, and administrative work… there is enough bitterness and sourness in her life. She deserves an ice cream, a sweet moment to herself.

Chapter IV

On Stage

"People say that the prosperity of this land will redefine all meanings in life
But all you can do is to protect yourself while rushing through your lives"

- *Sunset*
A song by Chinese artists Li Zhi and Shao Yibei

Li Linlin

It's nine o'clock on the night before the Education Ministry delegation arrives in Tulbagh. Everyone at the red house residence is busy doing last-minute preparation work. The itinerary of the delegates keeps changing and this drives Lu Shi crazy. She has to check WeChat, emails, and phone messages to confirm the seventh draft - the latest version of the delegates' itinerary. Wang Shuai is busy confirming with the hotel about guest check-in details; he also has to remind the driver of the pick-up time at the airport.

Linlin has not been given any special task because she has not yet earned Yao's trust. Having nothing to do during such a busy time makes her feel a bit nervous. She hopes to provide as much support as possible to other teachers.

"Is there anything I can help with?" Linlin asks Lu Shi.

"My brain is about to explode! It's just a simple itinerary but Director Yao keeps changing it and now it's already so late at night… I have to go to the hotel to arrange their check-ins and distribute these itineraries tomorrow morning. I am afraid I will have to get up before sunrise to print them out at the office," Lu Shi stares at the ceiling hopelessly and sighs, "Oh please!"

"How terrible. Let me go to the office now and help you print out the itineraries so that you can at least go to bed without thinking about it tonight," Linlin is serious.

"Now?" Lu Shi looks at her watch. "It's too late. It's dark outside and it's not safe to go out."

“It’s not a problem, I’ll ask Ning Jin to come over and walk with me. I’ve been busy teaching all day and have not seen him. It’s nice to take a walk together anyways,” Linlin gives her usual sweet smile.

A walk at nine o’clock in the evening sounds romantic, but the truth is, she is really worried about Lu Shi and wants to do something for her from the bottom of her heart.

Ning Jin shows up at the gate of the red house ten minutes later. Linlin walks out, locks the security gate. The two of them greet each other with a smile and start to walk towards the Chinese Culture School hand in hand.

It’s only a short walk and the two of them catch up on their day as they walk along the dark streets. They are happy to spend time together, and even the lights flashing from the electric fences outside the buildings and neighbourhood dogs’ defensive barking seem rather romantic to them. They walk past a small forest and the office is right in front.

“Wait for a second, let me check if the Director is here,” Linlin suddenly pauses.

Not only does Linlin not tell Director Yao about her relationship with Ning Jin, but she also deliberately asks Shuai and Lu to hide it from him. The Chinese Culture School does not have any regulations about campus dating and this is certainly not an embarrassment for Linlin but she worries - she knows that she has not made a good impression on Director Yao and her relationship will not do her any good in improving her image. These risks are real. She recalls vividly that the Director once complained to the teachers at a meeting that many female directors of Chinese Culture Schools worldwide ended up marrying local men and stayed overseas with their husbands. “It’s shameful for China!” Yao shouted with anger.

Linlin never understands why marrying a local man is shameful, but she can imagine herself being teased by the Director about her relationship. It would be a very difficult life that she must avoid at all costs. It is better to just hide her relationship completely.

The lights are on in the Chinese Culture School’s office, but Linlin knows that they are often left on for security reasons. To check whether the Director is there or not, she must walk to the backyard and peek into the parking lot. Director Yao cannot be here without his car.

“All clear.” Showing off the English slang she just learned from American movies, Linlin invites Ning Jin into the office of the Chinese Culture School. Without grabbing a seat, she quickly takes a USB from her backpack, plugs it into the computer, identifies the folder and document, and starts printing. Ning Jin picks an office chair, sits down, and uses his body weight to spin on it for fun as if he had never sat on those chairs. He takes out his phone and starts watching some news commentaries on YouTube. It’s mostly overseas Chinese Youtubers analysing current affairs taking place in mainland China and most of these videos are banned in China for their anti-government nature.

“Why do you watch those videos?” Linlin asks Ning Jin as she organises the newly printed documents that are still warm from the printer. “Sounds like many made-up stories. I doubt there is any truth in them.”

“I don’t watch them often. I only watch them when I feel bored, like when I wash dishes or wait for people.”

“Turn the volume up. I want to listen too,” Linlin asks.

Ning Jin does so. Compared to news commentaries from state media, the YouTube programme sounds more like a stand-up comedy show. Today’s programme presents an American Chinese scholar who analyses why China’s *Belt and Road Initiative* is a debt trap for African countries. Linlin stands at Ning Jin’s back and stares into the phone screen curiously.

“Belt and Road Initiative…Oh yes, I was asked about it in my interview for this job. I expected this question so I memorised its official definition,” Linlin says, “Belt and Road Initiative connects China with the rest of Asia, Africa, and Europe via land and maritime networks to improve regional integration, increasing trade, and stimulating economic growth.”

“Impressive…” Ning Jin’s attention is still on the video that he is watching.

“It looks like this guy is broadcasting from his living room?” Linlin asks.

“Exactly. Nowadays anyone can do live streams from home. You can be popular when you get followers.”

“You are very political compared to other computer scientists,” Linlin says.

“I don’t care about politics; I am just not as ‘red’ as you are. You are a proud member of the Chinese Communist Party, right?”

“I am a party member, but it doesn’t mean anything. During freshmen year at university, my academic results stood out and the tutors invited me to join the party, so I just did what they asked,” Linlin recalls.

“So, you are a teacher’s pet!”

“More or less so. I was always a good student. I went to a teacher training college and it wasn’t famous. Most of my classmates ended up coming to the college because they had no better choice. No one really wanted to be a teacher for life. In many ways, my college was a bit like a high school. People worked very hard when they got into college to prepare for admission exams into master’s programmes, hoping to get a higher degree from a more prestigious university.”

“So, you worked very hard and ended up at a prestigious university for your master’s degree?” Ning Jin asks.

“I guess yes, but I wasn’t interested in prestigious universities,” Linlin answers calmly. “I just wanted to go to Xingang. My dad left home when I was very small to work at a factory in Xingang and could only come home during important festivals, so Xingang was a city that I always wanted to go to. It’s simply my dad’s city.”

“Did your parents divorce?”

“No. Dad had to leave home to make money. It was a very common scenario in our town. In the past people farmed, but it didn’t get us anywhere financially. Going to big cities and finding a job there makes much more sense and we just rent out our farmland at home. Didn’t you come to Tulbagh for a family reunion with your mom too?”

“To be honest I didn’t want to come,” Ning Jin answers. “My parents divorced when I was little, and I stayed in China with my dad. Mom came to Tulbagh to make a living and I was not in her plan, but I didn’t do well in my college entrance exam and could not get into a good university in China. Mom submitted my exam results to Tulbagh University and used her connections to get me two good reference letters. I was lucky to get into an undergraduate programme here.”

“I’ve not heard you talk much about your mom.”

“She lives on the other side of the island and is very busy working on imports and exports at the port. She cannot leave the port for even one day. She hasn’t been able to visit me at the university since I came here.”

“Okay,” Linlin doesn’t know what to say. While she is searching for words, she sees lights coming into the room through the curtains. It is car headlights.

“The Director!” Linlin suddenly tenses up.

The room is filled with silence as neither Ning Jin nor Linlin says anything. They hear the car door opened, closed, and locked. They can hear the steps getting closer.

“Hide under the desk! Now!” Linlin breaks the silence. Her tone is so commanding that it leaves Ning Jin with no room to respond otherwise. He bends down his body and quickly moves under the desk.

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Yao is singing while walking into the office. He is shocked to see Linlin, and his singing voice freezes.

“What are you doing here at this time?”

“Yes…” Linlin tries to hide her nervousness. “I’m helping Lu Shi to print out the itineraries for tomorrow.”

“Did you walk here?”

“Yes,” she wonders if this is the right answer.

“And Lu Shi didn’t give you a ride?”

“Oh…I insisted on walking. Lu Shi has a lot to do…she’s very busy.”

“Brave, but stupid as you are… I don’t even dare to walk at night, and you are a girl!” Yao walks into his office. As a matter of fact, he doesn’t dare to walk on the streets during the daytime either.

“I’ll send you home once you finish printing,” Yao’s firm voice comes out from his office.

Linlin sits down and looks under the desk. She gives an embarrassing smile to Ning Jin. What to do now? She tries hard to imagine all the possibilities on her mind. It doesn’t take long since there aren’t that many choices.

“You go first,” Linlin whispers and gives him a hopeless look. “I must leave with the Director.”

Ning Jin nods quietly. He sticks his head outside the desk and swiftly observes the geography of the office. The door to the director’s office is half-closed. Yao must be watching some videos attentively as Ning Jin can hear sounds coming from the programme. As Ning Jin listens closely, he is surprised to find that the Director is listening to the same anti-government news channel that he listens to; but it’s not the right time for his brain to process these details.

“Let me know when you get home,” Ning Jin moves towards the corridor quietly and rushes out of the gate.

Linlin finds her hands shaking; she feels as if her heart has stopped beating.

The sound from the video suddenly stops and the Director walks out of his office.

“I thought you just left,” Yao says.

“No. But I am almost done here,” Linlin moves her body closer to the printer as she speaks. Director Yao seems to want to say something. Instead, he walks back to his office with a frowning face.

Linlin sighs with relief. She tries to pretend that nothing has happened. Performing is not her strength but she must do well today. She manages to perform printing out documents alone and organising the files; and her performance of sitting quietly in Yao’s car, listening to his music is not bad; she can even perform saying goodbye with her usual politeness.

“Good night, Director Yao,” Linlin says as she gets out of the car.

“I know there was someone else in the office,” Yao doesn’t turn his head towards Linlin as he speaks with his usual stern voice. “Tomorrow is an important day, so I will just drop this for now. Watch out for yourself.” He doesn’t give Linlin any chance to explain and drives away.

Standing alone in front of the red house, Linlin finds tears on her cheeks.

Wang Shuai

Wang Shuai doesn’t have the energy to give a proper greeting to the owner, Mr. Yan when he rushes into the Friendship Chinese Restaurant; but they know each other very well so skipping the formality is acceptable here. He orders food straight away, “Just give me something to eat please, whatever doesn’t take too long. And a glass of hot water too.”

“You’re in such a rush,” Mr. Yan speaks as he dries his hands with his apron. “The private room that you have reserved for ten people is ready. They are still coming, right?”

“Yes, they are on their way. The delegates have already landed, they will come here after hotel check-in is all sorted. I have been sent here to double-check on the food and the dining room, but I am so hungry now - let me first eat something.”

“Teaching is such a difficult profession these days,” Mr. Yan half-jokes while putting a piece of lemon into a cup of hot water and passes it to Shuai. “You sound more like a tour guide.”

“Don’t even mention it!” Shuai holds the cup and takes a sip. “I was busy at the hotel the whole morning. The Director requested that we must cater for the delegate’s needs in detail and we had to buy sleepers, toothbrushes, as well as tubes of toothpaste and put these toiletries into each delegate’s room before they check-in, plus some souvenirs.”

“Not easy, not easy,” Yan sighs. “Let me get some sushi for you, they are almost ready. It will only take a few seconds.”

“Anything that fills my stomach will be perfect,” Shuai notes. “Sushi in a Chinese restaurant!”

“Well, the locals can’t tell the difference between China, Japan, and Korea. It doesn’t bother me as long as I make money from the food. To be honest, there is more profit in sushi,” Yan explains.

“Where did you learn the sushi-making techniques?” Shuai asks with curiosity while watching Mr. Yan skilfully cutting the raw fish into small pieces. “I heard that, in Japan, one has to be trained for a few years before becoming a sushi chef.”

“A few years?” Yan laughs. “I learned it on YouTube, and it took me only a few days.”

Shuai recalls what he read about the Japanese sushi chefs. The article mentions that it takes a sushi chef two years to learn about different species of fish, another two years to practice cutting the raw fish and folding sushi rice, plus a final two years to study how to chat with guests to become an accredited chef who can stand behind the sushi bar and serve customers in a restaurant.

“Look at my work - it’s nothing less than the Japanese,” Yan puts a plate of beautifully decorated sushi in front of Shuai. “This one is on the house; you better hurry and eat up. Later when the delegates arrive, you might not even have time to eat.”

“Delicious!” Shuai doesn’t even reach for the chopsticks, not to mention the soya sauce and wasabi. He picks a piece of sushi with his hand and puts it in his mouth.

“You are really hungry,” Mr. Yan laughs.

While swallowing the sushi, Shuai looks around the restaurant and finds himself to be the only customer. “How come there is no one else?” He asks.

“It’s a difficult time. The winter season is always like this on the island. There aren’t many tourists and there aren’t any first-timers who come in and try us. Even the locals do not come out so often. I am just glad that the winter will be over soon.”

“But this restaurant has been running forever, right? I remember you said that you’ve been on the island for twenty years.”

“Yes, I have been living here for almost twenty years, but the restaurant is only two years old. I had a luggage factory before opening the restaurant.”

“Really?” Shuai is surprised, “Factory? How could you switch industries like that, from a factory to a restaurant?”

“I was in the luggage business before I left China, and it was a good job at a state-owned company. My English was relatively good compared to my other colleagues, so I was sent out for sales jobs to explore the market in Africa. I fell in love with Tulbagh when I came here, and I didn’t see a future working at my work unit in China, so I decided to jump out of the Chinese boat and make a path for myself here. I wasn’t working on anything complicated - I simply imported luggage parts from China and had them assembled here. The production was easy, the business was smooth, and money came quite quickly.”

Shuai listens carefully as he enjoys his sushi.

“But to everyone’s surprise, the value of the Chinese currency went up quickly, so did the prices of everything made in China, including my imported luggage parts. As a result, my cost of production went up a lot. But I could not raise the prices of my products so much. Everything worked well at the factory, but it just didn’t work out financially anymore. I assumed that the import-export businesses were probably more or less in the same bad situation, so I decided to open a restaurant instead. People still have to eat, right?”

“You are very brave! You seriously act on whatever comes to your mind - going overseas, starting a factory, opening a restaurant.”

“Yes, I admit that I am brave, but I might not be making the right decisions. Working at a state-owned company in China back then felt like sitting on an extremely slow train, like the slowest one in China, the old-fashioned green trains. It was boring and unchallenging, and I would rather leave the country to see the world for a bit. Who would have expected that soon after I left, this Chinese train would pick up its speed and catch up with the world’s leading economies? My family and friends in China still ask, …what are you doing on that island? Come back now. There are a lot of opportunities at home.”

“I understand.” Shuai means it. Compared to the rush to leave China and the trend of looking for opportunities outside of China two decades ago, Chinese people now acknowledge that in recent years, China has transformed itself into a land of opportunities.

“The restaurant is another example. It sounds so good to be a boss and even I, who knew nothing about catering, was able to start this business. But then I realised that running a restaurant requires so much hard work. One has to get up before sunrise and finish off close to midnight. But how do I put it... it depends on what you want in life. Tulbagh can never give me excessive wealth, but life here is relaxed and I am happy. Especially after I opened the restaurant, I’ve been meeting people from all walks of life. Yes, making money is difficult, but I also earn a sense of satisfaction that money cannot buy. My two kids are growing up happy and healthy, that’s all I want for them and myself.”

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Shuai’s cell phone rings, “Lu Shi,” he picks up the phone. “Okay, no problem. I am at the restaurant, see you soon.”

“They will be here in half an hour,” Shuai tells Yan. Yan turns around and passes a piece of paper to Shuai with ten dishes listed on it. “Just double-check if there is any problem. There are pork, beef, lamb, chicken, fish, and vegetables. There is also rice and noodles, of course. It’s going to be equivalent to a Chinese New Year celebration.”

“Perfect,” Shuai goes through the list quickly and nods.

“Can they eat spicy food?” Yan asks.

“They are from Xingang, so they are from everywhere.” The city has attracted migrants from all over China with different cultures and a variety of preferences in food. “Just in case people like it, please add a separate plate of spicy paste.”

“No problem! Let me get busy in the kitchen. Excuse me for a few minutes.”

Sitting by himself at the restaurant bar and holding his cup of hot lemon water in his hands, Shuai falls into his thoughts. If he decides to stay in Tulbagh, what would his life be like? If he proposes the idea to his

family, how would they react? If he stays here, what would his profession be? If he returns to China, what opportunities would he be able to seize?

Life has left him with so many 'if's, but Shuai is neither nervous nor excited about the endless possibilities in his life. His WeChat workgroup keeps buzzing, reminding him that he must first concentrate on the lunch reception and the opening ceremony in the afternoon.

He Ping

He Ping drives into the La Motte College parking lot. She sees two students wearing suits and ties walking towards her as she stops the engine.

"Nin hao! Huan ying (Hello, welcome)!" One student greets her in excellent Mandarin Chinese.

"Zhe bian qing (This way please)," the other student's pronunciation is also perfect. He Ping is impressed.

"Xie xie ni men (Thank you)," He Ping greets back happily. "Xue zhong wen duo jiu le (How long have you been learning Chinese?"

"Zhong wen…Zhong wen… (Chinese)" The two students look at each other with embarrassment and struggle to understand what the question means.

"Oh, we have been learning Chinese for less than a year," the students answer after hearing the question again in English.

The students are obviously learning the language within the parameters set by the textbooks and one small step out of the boundary is too challenging for them at this stage. He Ping remembers how she learned English and faced similar problems in her approach back then.

He Ping recalls her learning experience during the Cultural Revolution years in China. When He Ping entered high school, a movement that required all students to pause learning at school and go to rural regions to learn from farmers and workers began. He Ping was allocated to a tractor factory outside the city. Learning from the workers on the front production line was a challenge mentally and physically. Like everyone else, He Ping felt proud to follow Chairman Mao's call and wholeheartedly embraced the socialist

path to learn from farmers and workers, to build a modern China through everyone's hard work. The only thing she was disappointed with was having to drop her favourite subject, English, which she only started to pick up at school. Fortunately, He Ping already had a copy of the textbook as well as a dictionary, so she decided to learn the language on her own. During breaks at work and free time in the evenings, she was holding the textbook and the dictionary. When the college entrance exam was reintroduced in 1977 at the end of the Cultural Revolution, He Ping, who never stopped learning during what some people call the 'lost years', successfully made her way to the Beijing Normal University as an English student. After completing her degree, He Ping taught at her department for a year. She later stood out in an English competency exam and was selected by the state to be sent to Flinders University in Australia to do a master's degree in teaching English as a foreign language. That was the first time she used the language in real life.

The naive tone of the two La Motte students' spoken Chinese reminds He Ping of her many awkward moments when she first arrived in Australia. Once, she wanted to buy a freshly-made open sandwich. She needed to tell the vendor what she would like to put in the sandwich and had a difficult time recalling the correct pronunciation of the vegetables: tomato, cucumber, onion…. Strangely enough, she was very confident teaching this vocabulary in the classroom with a textbook, but she struggled to use the language in real life.

He Ping follows the two students and enters the school hall. In front of her are a lot of people dressed in suits chatting over wine. Yes, He Ping has accepted Director Yao's invitation to join the crowd in celebrating Chinese language teaching in the school. He Ping attends public lectures at Tulbagh University often and participates in community activities too, but she is a little excited for this particular event. She has not put on her formal dress and high heel shoes to attend any important function for a while. She feels the obligation to say hello to Director Yao first upon her arrival, but when she sees him chatting with some obvious important people, she decides to not disturb him and finds familiar faces in the crowd.

"Teacher He!" She is quickly spotted by Lu Shi, "You look so beautiful today."

"I am an old lady; beauty doesn't have anything to do with me," He Ping smiles. "You must have been really busy these days."

"Don't even mention it," Lu Shi sighs. "I must have lost two kilograms of weight…speaking of which… let's go grab some snacks and wine before the ceremony - we will need the strength to clap our hands later."

They both laugh. He Ping finds a sense of purity in Lu Shi's selfless commitment to her work, a feeling she rarely experiences since working at the tractor factory decades ago.

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The ceremony opens in rounds of applauses. He Ping notices the familiar faces of four lion dancers. Every time there is a Chinese-themed event, these young men carry the two ceremonial lions decorated with bright red and gold colours to open the celebration. It was at the Chinese New Year's celebration half a year ago that she last saw them. He Ping cannot wait for the lions to start dancing because she is not looking forward to the speeches before the actual programme.

There are many speeches today. On the China side, there are four from the Ambassador, a delegate from the Education Ministry, a delegate from Xingang University, and of course, Director Yao. On the Tulbagh side, there are also four speakers: a representative from the Education Bureau, Vice-Chancellor of International Affairs at Tulbagh University, the principal of La Motte College, and a student representative. He Ping has experienced many similar occasions where she must listen to speeches and clap her hands at the end of each one, but many students in the audience struggle to sit still and are pressed by the teachers and parents not to make trouble. The applauses simply become shorter speech by speech.

Finally, the show starts. The celebrative lion dance wakes everyone up, followed by a student dance performance: *My Country Is A Garden*. The young students from the lower form participating in the performance give their best in showcasing their Chinese dance moves, and the audience laughs and loves it. The next performer, a Chinese girl who plays the traditional Chinese music instrument 'erhu' looks familiar to He Ping as well. She seems to work closely with the lion dancers and goes to wherever she is needed to promote Chinese culture. She only plays one song: *Horse Racing*. He Ping finds the song rather unpleasant to listen to: it doesn't make her visualise the grass fields where the horses run freely, but rather imagines a factory where they are all slaughtered. She recalls what Lu Shi once mentioned to her about teachers being trained to speedily master a Chinese art. Every teacher sent out by the Chinese Culture School must have an artistic skill they can show off to promote Chinese culture overseas. Perhaps for this event, the teachers are overwhelmed with too much work and the school has to call for support from other organisations to back the show.

The recitation of poetry *My Homeland* is not particularly well-received; the local audience doesn't understand a word and the Chinese audience senses the students' struggle to follow the pinyin and fine-

tune the pronunciation. Then there is a Tai Chi performance. He Ping learns from Lu Shi that the young performer is a martial arts teacher working at another Chinese Culture School in Africa and has been invited by Director Yao for this specific performance. He Ping has conflicting views about these Tai Chi performances. On the one hand, she is very excited to watch highly skilled martial artists; on the other hand, she feels strongly that Tai Chi is a way to achieve inner self-improvement and should be used as meditation more than cultural performance. The young martial artist applies a lot of strength in his movements and he gets a 'wow' every time he punches into the air. Perhaps this is the only way for Tai Chi to be accepted in the world, He Ping wonders. If she were the one to demonstrate Tai Chi and show only gentle movements, nobody would be interested in the art.

The ceremony comes to its climax when the song, *I Love You China* is sung. The student singer gives a perfect ending to the ceremony with a unique artistic high note, making the local audience, who do not understand the lyrics, impressed by her skilful singing and touched by her intense emotion. He Ping pays special attention to the delegates sitting in the first row who are still clapping their hands. They look pleased about such a politically engaging ending. She feels truly happy for Director Yao. There are different opportunities and challenges on different paths, and it seems that Yao knows the rules of the game well and is walking towards a bright future on his chosen path. The endless rounds of applauses also remind He Ping why she didn't choose this path herself. It is the same reason why she loves a quieter and reflective style of Tai Chi - she is just not a big fan of performances and would rather leave room for herself.

Yao Xingsheng

The late-night sky is filled with twinkling stars when the welcome dinner banquet for the Education Ministry's delegates ends. Yao Xinsheng accompanies his guests back to the hotel for a drink in the lobby bar and shares a bottle of famous local red wine with them. Yao is now ready to go home, but he suddenly remembers an important task that he must complete today as he starts the engine of his car: to take the Chinese national flag hanging outside the Chinese Cultural School back into the office.

There is a reason for doing that urgently. Before the ceremony, the Chinese Ambassador has a brief conversation with Yao about the unsettling political trend towards China on the island. The Ambassador informs Yao that the "so-called Prime Minister of the Tibetan government in exile," Mr. Sanbuu, will be giving a speech at Tulbagh University next week. Yao is reminded to pay attention to the uncertain political environment on campus.

“How come I didn’t hear anything about it?” Yao is truly shocked. It would have been great for him to have obtained such information and report it to the Ambassador himself, which would have definitely added value to his political capital. “Is the information accurate?”

“We were informed about this by our colleagues in India earlier today. We immediately sent a request to the Immigration Office of the local government to stop him from entering Tulbagh, but he holds an American passport and enjoys visa-free entry so our request to the Immigration Office might not be effective. We have to work something out at the university side.” The Ambassador says calmly.

Director Yao can tell that in the Ambassadors’ career, such an incident can hardly count as a crisis, but Yao himself is completely tensed up. Usually, when it comes to sensitive issues like this one, any problem would grow into crisis rather quickly, thus there is no room for making mistakes.

“Tonight, we are going to formally raise our concern and objection to Tulbagh University, but as far as we know, the invitation does not come from the university officially, but from two professors at the Law Faculty. According to our experience, even if we put pressure on the university, the professors would still be free to do whatever they like without approval from the university Chancellor,” the Ambassador explains.

“Is there anything I can do now?” Yao asks for some guidance. “I am meeting with the Vice-Chancellor at the university tomorrow because of the delegate’s visit.”

“There is nothing for you to do now. The Chinese Culture School is not supposed to be a government agency so your involvement will probably not help the situation, which is not looking good for us already. The measures we are taking with the Immigration Office and the university might be covered by the media in a rather negative way and may lead to anti-China sentiments. This is only hypothetical at this stage, but you need to follow up on the issue closely.”

This is why Director Yao has to drive to the Chinese Culture School and take the Chinese national flag into his office at close to midnight. He doesn’t know much about protests, but he has watched them on TV news: protesters burning national flags and portraits of leaders. As much as he loves media coverage, Yao knows that this is a huge risk that he must avoid.

Yao knows very clearly from the first day of taking up this job that administrative leadership is all about risk management, a principle that he keeps reminding himself. Everything has risks and is connected to

rewards or punishment. Some Directors of Chinese Culture Schools in other African countries order their staff not to leave the school on their own. This is such an easy way of management and it surely minimises any security risks, but to Yao this is unnecessary. He considers himself a freedom-lover at heart and he enjoys exploring the island himself. Why would he lock all the teachers up, just to lower risk? It's not necessary.

Thinking of the teachers, Yao decides to send them an urgent reminder based on the escalating situation caused by the Tibetan visitor. He takes out his phone and writes a WeChat message, "I have been informed by the Ambassador that some inharmonious voice of anti-Chinese nature is likely to appear on campus. Please be reminded that Tulbagh University might share a similar political stance with the West. Please do not accept any interview from the local media or share your political opinions on any public platforms. We will discuss the details of the situation in our next meeting."

He clicks "send" and remembers that it's been a long day for the teachers, so he adds an extra comment. "Thank you for the hard work today, let's do our best tomorrow to make sure everything goes well for the delegates."

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Director Yao is quite content with the flow of today's reception programme. From welcoming the delegates at the airport, assisting with their hotel check-in, organising lunch, hosting the ceremony, keeping everyone entertained at the dinner banquet, to the casual evening chat over wine, everything has been going according to plan.

During the day, Yao tries to gain some personal insights into the professional lives of the delegates, and finally, after a glass of wine, the head of the delegation, Deputy Minister Mr. Xiao Kanghong, reveals an important piece of information to Yao: Xiao is to retire next year. Yao also observes that among the delegates, most of the important figures are positioned at organisations affiliated with the Education Ministry. Strange enough, they are not in any way connected to the Chinese Culture School headquarters.

Is this trip a reward to the Deputy Minister before his retirement, a leisure trip disguised in the form of official state business fully funded by the ministry? Is Mr. Xiao taking the opportunity to reward his subordinates and strengthen his networks for the last time as he exits the stage, Yao wonders? In that case,

at least Mr. Xiao is a strategic bureaucrat worth knowing, who might still influence his subordinates even after he retires.

Director Yao realises that besides making the delegates happy, he must use them to attract media attention in China to further promote his agenda. Compared to the programmes happening on the island for the delegates, the media coverage on these programmes that are presented to the Education Ministry and the Chinese Cultural School headquarters in China is much more important.

Yao opens his notebook and finds two important meetings lined up tomorrow. The first meeting is between the delegates and the Vice-Chancellor of International Affairs at Tulbagh University. It will be a meeting of formality, to enhance academic exchange between universities in mainland China and Tulbagh University. However, the first meeting cannot lead to any signed document, thus there won't be any outcome for Yao to show off.

The second meeting will take place at the Chinese Culture School and Director Yao will formally report his work to the delegates. Yao is very familiar with formal reporting as he submits a written one to the Education Ministry every year. He also knows all his figures by heart as he makes them up himself. The face-to-face reporting is simply putting old wine into a new bottle, but Yao must impress the delegates, and astound his superior in China through media coverage. He will show off his accomplishments, but more importantly, he wants to highlight the hurdles he faces as the Director of the Chinese Culture School. What he just heard about the uncertain political environment on campus can be an eye-catching talking point. His rushing back to the office to safeguard the national flag can be used as an excellent example to demonstrate his commitment to the missions of the Chinese Culture School. What else should be included in his report, he wonders?

Director Yao smiles as he is lost in his deep thoughts. He is determined to seize this unique opportunity and make the most out of it to climb up a step in his career.

Lu Shi

Lu Shi has spent her entire day accompanying the Education Ministry delegates, and she still can't relax in the evening. She must write the media release for today's events while her mind is still clear and memory fresh. The media release must reach the Chinese Culture School headquarters and the Education Ministry as soon as possible. Director Yao made it very clear to Lu Shi that media releases are the most important

channel for the Chinese Culture School to disseminate information. What happens in the media release is much more important than the on-the-ground realities because the headquarters and the Education Ministry evaluate the Chinese Cultural School from a distance by assessing the achievements it displays.

Lu Shi is good at writing media releases. She has a lot of experience from being a propaganda officer since middle school. Her job duties as a student propaganda officer included decorating two promotional boards in the classroom. The school always informed each propaganda officer of a theme to be promoted each month, and then all the officers would curate an exhibition to promote the core ideas purported by the school to be exhibited in the classrooms. Lu Shi loves drawing and calligraphy and enjoys doing creative work, so writing media releases is not only a piece of cake but also reminds her of the sweet memories of her middle school days. Writing in the evening after attending two meetings is a different issue as the tasks now become more physically challenging.

Lu Shi is content with her written report on last night's ceremony and has sent her draft to Director Yao for review. She knows exactly what Yao needs: it is not about what Yao wants to read, but what Yao wants his seniors to read. Whether a media release can be posted on the headquarters' website or social media platform depends on the importance of the people appearing in the article, the attractiveness of the event being reported on, plus a little bit of luck. For this particular media release that Lu Shi is about to write now, she feels a bit pressured because she has to cover specifically what the senior officials from the Education Ministry say accurately and comprehensively, and there is a high chance that the article will be published. Lu Shi opens her meeting notebook: so much was covered in the meetings, where do I start? She asks herself.

Lu Shi decides to identify what must be left out from her writing first, and the delegates' late arrival is one of them. Director Yao, formally dressed up in his suit, was extremely unhappy about this. While he was waiting with representatives from Tulbagh University, his anger was written all over his face. Poor Shuai, who went to pick up the delegates from the hotel, had to politely push the delegates to move faster and at the same time keep taking continuous phone calls from Yao. Shuai was scolded as soon as he arrived at the school. Director Yao knew, even without listening to Shuai's explanation, that the delegates' late arrival was not because of Shuai. Since Shuai was the only person that he could blame, he blamed him hard, "…you failed such a small task…useless!" This was how Yao greeted Shuai this morning. Shuai and the other teachers were used to Yao's dramas and just took it as a joke.

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Hurry up! Lu Shi reminds herself to concentrate as she hopes to write up the draft at one go without being disturbed. She refers to her notebook and quickly runs her fingers through the keyboard.

This morning, a delegation group led by the Deputy Minister of the Education Ministry, Mr. Xiao Kanghong inspected the Tulbagh Chinese Culture School, and 'weiwen' (paid a visit with intense care) overseas Chinese educators. Mr. Yao Xinsheng, the Director of the Chinese Culture School reported to Xiao and gave a presentation on the achievements of the school as well as the opportunities and challenges in promoting Chinese language and Chinese culture in Africa.

Accurate choice of vocabulary is crucial for media releases. From "inspect" to "visit with intense care" (weiwen), the vocabulary must demonstrate the goals of the delegation. Lu Shi is not going to elaborate in detail what Yao presents in the meeting because the content is either too unrealistic (it's not a good idea to cover Yao's made-up data in detail), or too sensitive (the challenges posed by the Tibetan issue must not appear in the media release). However, the article has to cover what the Deputy Minister said point by point.

Xiao Kanghong inspected the campus of the Chinese Culture School and learned about the school's strategic local partner, Tulbagh University. He also inquired in detail about the co-operation between the school, the university, and local primary and secondary schools where Chinese is currently being taught. He points out that a good co-operative relationship in education is a bridge of communication between generations of young people and will help the youths from both countries learn about the cultures and philosophies of the two countries and further enhance the friendship between China and Tulbagh.

Mentioning the friendship between the two countries has brought the delegate's visit to a higher level, but if the article ends here, it lacks the modern political language of the day. Lu Shi recalls carefully: the important leaders always speak with the most modern political language. What vocabulary did the Deputy Minister use? Yes, he mentioned "Belt and Road" and the "Chinese Dream", perfect for the ending of the media release. Lu Shi continues to write.

Xiao Kanghong commends the work of the Tulbagh Chinese Culture School in promoting Chinese language and Chinese culture on the international stage. He stresses that the Chinese Culture School should respond to the nation's initiative of Belt and Road and work tirelessly to transform the Chinese Dreams into realities on the African continent.

This is a good ending and the job is almost done. Lu Shi sighs, takes her teacup into the garden for a break as she will soon have to re-read the draft before sending it off to Director Yao for the final approval. If the Chinese Culture School headquarters acts fast, her media release will be published on the headquarters' social media platform and even the website front page. Director Yao and the teachers will repost the article on their social media platforms and each of the posts will receive many "likes". Lu Shi knows very well, however, that she is and will be the only person who reads the article word by word, and not even Director Yao would read it carefully. Very soon the article will disappear deep into the cold dark cyberspace. After finishing the tea, she will go drop this shooting star.

Chapter V

Self

"I like what I am
May the rose blossom into what it desires to be
Blossom with no reservation
In a lonely desert"

- I am what I am
A song by Hong Kong artist Leslie Cheung

Li Linlin

"What are we doing here?" Linlin puts her ice cream down and poses her question.

Sitting opposite her, Ning Jin does not realise the seriousness of Linlin's question. At this moment, Ning Jin is whole-heartedly committed to *Battleground*, a mobile game he recently discovered and became addicted to. He is in an intense battle, and he responds to Linlin with his attention still fixed on the game. "Are you done with your ice cream? Just give me a few more minutes. I am going to win this."

On this sunny Tulbagh afternoon, the couple, like any other couple, is killing time wandering through Festival Walk, a grand shopping complex on the island; but Linlin is not happy and doesn't feel like herself. Nothing seems right as she takes a deep breath and thinks things through: the overpriced ice cream is too sweet, the air-conditioning of the mall is too strong, the music is too loud, and the space is too crowded; even her relationship seems too trivial and boring.

"Let's go to the mall today. There are special sales and deals today," Ning Jin proposed their activities for the day earlier that morning.

Linlin regrets agreeing to Ning Jin's plan to go shopping. For the entire day, the couple has been going in and out of shops hand in hand, holding their newly purchased clothes and shoes, and planning for their next spending. She doesn't enjoy any of these experiences.

“Don’t you like the feeling of holding these big shopping bags and walking through the shops?” Ning Jin asks her.

Linlin truly doesn’t like it. She gets physically sick from spending time in shopping malls: the artificial lights in enclosed spaces hurt her eyes and make her feel dizzy.

“You are just tired, let’s take a break and go for a movie, Ning Jin suggests.

The Hollywood blockbuster Ning Jin picks worsens Linlin’s headache. The high-tech audio and visual effects only make her see through the emptiness of the movie’s content. She feels anxious when she realises how much Ning Jin enjoys the film.

This is Linlin’s first relationship. Of course, she would like to enjoy the relationship as much as she can, but she reminds herself to not let go of her serious life attitude. Her life is not boring, and she doesn’t need anyone’s company. She hopes that she and her partner can be mirrors for each other, understand each other, and shape each other into better human beings. She does not expect her love to be especially soulful, but she wishes to at least avoid being shallow.

“I want us to be more connected in here,” she points at Ning Jin’s head.

Although Ning Jin is the pro-active one who pursues Linlin in the first place, he has completely different ideas of what a relationship is. He wants company; he wants the hand-in-hand in shopping malls; he wants the side-by-side in the cinemas (and the movie better be more entertaining than artistic). Of course, there is one more thing he also wants as he has been implying to Linlin: sex.

Ning Jin has drafted many grand pictures of their future life together for Linlin: pictures about living together, getting married and having kids. In each of these pictures, the sexual implication is clear, but every time Linlin just pretends that she doesn’t understand and gets away with it. To Linlin, any sexual relationship before marriage is out of her picture. It’s not a matter of morally right or wrong, and she whole-heartedly respects other people’s personal choices. As for herself, with the education she received and the family environment she grew up in, she just cannot do it.

When Linlin told her father about her boyfriend for the first time, her father was silent for a few seconds and outlined three specific principles to her: one, set clear boundaries (which Linlin understands as soon as

she hears it); two, respect and learn from each other; three, don't spend the boy's money. Linlin agreed and embraced the three principles and made them the constitutional foundation of her relationship with Ning Jin. Ning Jin laughed at how old-fashioned she was and made jokes about the third point every time they split the bill: "Don't you feel happy that I am willing to spend money on you?"

"You haven't made any money yet, how can you spend so much? Besides, I don't want our relationship to become materialistic." Linlin tried to remind Ning Jin every time the topic came up.

Linlin finds herself, once again, in a position of compromise. She feels her heart going cold while the shopping mall gets busier. "Let's leave now. No more shopping." Linlin finally makes it clear.

"Oh…okay," Ning Jin answers with all his attention still on the phone screen. "One more minute, just one more minute."

Linlin says nothing more. She stands up and walks towards the exit of the mall. She is not angry at all. She just doesn't want to spend another minute in the mall. She wants to stand under the blue sky and white clouds; she wants to hear the spring breeze whispering and birds singing; she wants to smell the grass and the ocean. She wants her home-cooked potato stir-fry and steamed rice, not having to order from a complicated menu and acting like a couple in happiness in a restaurant. She wants to go home.

Wang Shuai

Wang Shuai learned from his education in China that all religions are human inventions that function as drugs to delude the mind. When he started teaching at La Motte College and worked closely with his colleagues, especially Father Shepherd, all his previous perceptions about religion crumbled. He saw the Catholic priest and teachers work selflessly and felt the love and care in everything they did. Shuai sensed an energy and character beyond ordinary human capacity.

"I am not special at all. I am a monk with hair, although I am losing mine every day." The principal touched his head and joked with Wang Shuai.

Tonight, Shuai and Mr. Patrick from the mathematics department are invited to join Father Shepherd for dinner at his residence. It is a regular social gathering that the principal hosts to better communicate with the teaching staff. Apart from lesson observations and formal appraisals, Father Shepherd invites the

teachers to have dinner with him so that he can learn from everyone's view about the school's critical issues and future developments. It is also a chance to simply chat and develop friendships. Strictly speaking, Shuai is not a staff member at La Motte College, as he is affiliated with the Chinese Culture School and only teaches part-time at the college. Nonetheless, Father Shepherd always sends invitations to Shuai and his teacher friends whenever the school hosts an event. During weekdays, everyone is extremely busy and Shuai has limited time at the school, but he slowly gets to know his colleagues through the *braais*, excursions, and out-of-school activities.

"China is such a wonderful country!" Mr. Patrick starts sharing his view with passion. "It's unbelievable what China has achieved. Look at its economic growth, look at the wealth of the people, it's just unbelievable!"

Wang Shuai smiles as he listens to the local teacher who is also a faithful catholic. It is not the first time that he meets someone who is overwhelmingly positive about China. When walking on the streets, he often hears friendly greetings, sometimes even "Ni Hao" (Hello). He believes that those are the people who love China because of the martial arts movies or the competitive price of Chinese products. He did not expect anyone at the school to love China to this degree. Among intellectuals on the Tulbagh island, the most controversial topics concerning China are freedom of speech and human rights, and since bad news always travels fast, Shuai is always asked about these negative media coverages: "Is it true that there is a personal credit system in China based on surveillance which is connected to facial recognition technology? Is the government really brutal towards the Tibetans and the Uyghurs (Chinese Muslims in Xinjiang province) who seek independence?"

A sense of anxiety and even anger always rise whenever Wang Shuai hears these questions. It feels like being humiliated personally but having no clue how to argue back. As Shuai spends more time reading the local news, he realises that the media on the island is even more aggressive in criticising their own government and he can hardly find any praise in the newspaper for any government official or department. This is completely different from the singular voice of all Chinese media who always support and praise the government. He realises that he has to learn to put away his emotions and extract information from the news objectively and find truth by putting different perspectives together.

"You have a good government, not like ours. Our government officials just drink tea in the office and chat all day. They do nothing," after a glass of wine, Patrick sounds emotional.

Having heard such positive comments about the Chinese government, Shuai feels obliged to present a different perspective to balance the picture, “Yes, people in China went through incredible transformations, but we have our problems too. Compared to Tulbagh, we have limited freedom for example,” he explains.

“Freedom? We do have a lot of freedom, but we have no money. So here comes the problem: you cannot have much actual freedom when you have no money at all. Who paid for your trip to come here? Your government, right? Your government paid for your freedom! Sometimes at the end of the school day students come to me to borrow money - how can you have freedom when you cannot even afford public transport to go home?”

Father Shepherd joins the discussion with his usual calm voice, “China does provide the world with a unique path of development, but it is a path that people struggle to understand as it is not exactly transparent. The Chinese path has not won the world’s trust yet.”

Father Shepherd takes a sip of wine and continues, “I had a chat with some other priests, and a colleague raised a very interesting point: he suspected that the Chinese ruling party, the Communist Party, learned everything from the Catholic system and set up their own accordingly. There is the same secretive core leadership, mysterious ways of producing the high-ranking leaders, the top-down approach of power dissemination, a wide support base of the people, but at the same time there is the tendency of losing touch with its people and restricting freedom of speech…”

The three of them laugh. They are having simple pasta but at the same time, they are enjoying this luxury intellectual banquet of views from different backgrounds. They go on to chat about the differences between schools in China and those in Tulbagh.

“When I was a student in China, the pressure to do well academically was huge. I was not as free as the Tulbagh kids are. Every student at La Motte College seems to have a sport as a hobby, and everyone simply joins a sports team after school. In China, our PE lessons were often taken over by teachers of other subjects,” Shuai continues to explain, “…I also find the Chinese students much more obedient. It seems that the students here are very energetic and difficult to discipline, or maybe the world has changed and this generation of students is just more difficult to manage. When I was a student, the teachers were allowed to hit the students to push them for achievements, but not anymore, not even in China.”

Mr. Patrick nods and says, “We just went through the darkest time of colonialism, when educational resources such as good schools like La Motte College were only available to a small, privileged group of people. Society went through dramatic changes as teachers and students were all adapting to these transformations. I do not expect all the students to learn how to behave in this new social order and be obedient and hardworking because many of the problems they experience go way beyond school. Many students grow up in single-parent households where none of the parents have the time to care for the kids. It takes time for the parents and the students to see the importance of education and understand the possibility of social mobility it provides.”

“This is very different from China; the Chinese parents are obsessed with good schools and good education, and they are willing to starve themselves to send their kids to the best schools,” Shuai turns to Father Shepherd and asks, “What is your opinion on the most pressing issue of education on the island?”

“I agree with all the problems that you raised,” The principal takes another sip of wine and shares, “but what I worry most about is that we have not done enough to decolonize our education system. We have done a lot of superficial modifications and it’s all about how many local teachers we have and how many students from low-income families we enrol each year, and we have good numbers to tell good stories. Real decolonization is not just about numbers; it is about how each student positions and develops themselves in the context of the African continent and the globalised world. Our current education system is not very different from how it was in the colonial era, and many of the so-called decolonizing projects are only about opening up more spaces for the elite. How much impact can it create for Africans? There is a lot to be done and it is a very long path. I fear as we deal with numbers every day and survive by the numbers, we tend to forget about the actual students behind these numbers.”

The three of them continue chatting. Shuai realises that what he observes is still at a superficial level and he has not engaged deeply with the conflicts behind any of these issues. At the same time, he feels the love and care coming from the hearts of the two catholic educators. Whether God exists or not, Shuai is never certain, but at this moment, he knows that God’s love does exist through the people who believe in Him.

He Ping

He Ping pours herself a third cup of coffee while listening carefully to Michael’s passionate speech about the Tibetan issue. She is aware that the overdose of caffeine is going to affect her quality of sleep tonight,

but she just wants to follow Michael's wild trend of thoughts and coffee is a necessity to help her keep up with the multiple directions of the discussion.

"I do not understand why in the twenty-first century people are still holding on to old ideas of countries and borders!" Michael has been talking so much that he doesn't notice that his coffee is getting cold. "We surely have a lot of different cultures and people have a right to practise them at home behind closed doors and when they go out, they should see and acknowledge that all human beings are more or less the same!"

He Ping takes a sip of coffee and shares her view, "Let's talk about borders then. The fact is, the definition of a nation-state and the concept of borders both rose from the West and made an influence on China in recent decades. Tibet has always been a part of China in a blurred sense since the Tang dynasty, without a clear definition of the nature of its affiliation, or a clearly defined boundary. It was the modern politics, the new ideas from the West that required accurate definitions and clearly-defined borders which led to the current conflicts."

"Time has changed, so have people's perspectives," Michael says with a smile. "Isn't it normal that the Tibetans make their political demands now?"

"Those who still support the Dalai Lama must have forgotten that there was slavery in Tibet before this land was liberated from him…" He Ping chooses her words carefully as she shares her thoughts with Michael. "…without the Chinese central government's support, there would never have been a Tibet with good infrastructure including a railway road that connects the land to the outside world. How can the Tibetan people live such good lives as they do now?"

"I believe what you said is all true, but there is another important truth: Tibetan people are Buddhist. Improved material life is of course good for anyone, but it's not what Tibetan people care about because they only care about the next life. And this life, no matter how good it is, is all about suffering," Michael says.

"One more point…" He Ping carries on with her argument, "China is not the only country that firmly safeguards its borders. Regimes like the USA bully other countries under broad daylight - how can China do nothing to defend itself? Our president talks about the shared destiny of mankind, but I think it's a long-term vision. We must first stand strong and make sure that we don't get bullied."

He Ping notices that her identity as a Chinese did not decrease as she has been living overseas for the past few decades. Rather, in recent years, her sense of personal identification towards China has become much stronger. The China that she left back then was a poor country. When she was studying in Australia, nobody knew anything about China and many couldn't even tell the difference between Beijing and Tokyo. Coming from such an underdeveloped country, the overseas Chinese were given very little respect. Since the 2008 Beijing Olympic games, China has been more involved in global issues and has more presence on the global stage. She feels proud of it from the bottom of her heart. More and more people in the world are talking about China, a country that has made a strong influence on the world.

He Ping feels confused, and even a bit angry whenever she reads about negative media reports from the West that attack China or hears her friends criticising the Chinese government. The days of falling behind and being beaten up are over; the days of poverty and hunger are over, the days of being a slave to others are over; why can't we be a bit more positive, a bit more tolerant, and tell a *good* story of China?

Fallen leaves return to the roots, He Ping recalls this ancient Chinese saying and wonders maybe as she has grown older, her heart travels home?

Lu Shi

Lu Shi's heart has been trembling since she received a phone call from the Chinese Cultural School headquarters this morning. It felt like a surprise attack, but it was not completely unexpected. On the phone call, the staff from the headquarters wanted to ask questions about Director Yao's management in general and the Tulbagh Chinese Culture School's finances specifically. Lu Shi knew that these were serious issues and felt strongly that she was not psychologically prepared to address them, so she lied that she had to start teaching soon for the whole morning and quickly hung up the phone.

Lu Shi's options are crystal clear:

Option A: Tell the headquarters all the facts that she knows: Director Yao is a dictator who doesn't care much about the details of any work at the school. Regarding finances, nothing is transparent or clear, and she would be able to point out a few specific expenses that clearly ended up in the wrong place and were manually fine-tuned on the balance sheet.

Option B: Tell partial truths to the headquarters, send some signals and point out the direction; let the headquarters do their own investigation.

Option C: Tell the headquarters nothing.

Under normal circumstances, Lu Shi is very certain that she is a woman of honesty and integrity, but under special circumstances like these, she doesn't need to think too much to make her choice: Option C. The reason is simple: Director Yao was the person who selected her out of all the candidates and gave her the opportunity to work at Tulbagh. She feels strongly that she owes him. At such a critical moment, option A is a brutal betrayal that she cannot bring herself to consider. Option B is not radical, but Lu Shi certainly would not be able to sleep in peace with that. She feels that choosing option C is far from enough, and she must do more to help Director Yao. Although Lu Shi's appraisal report will be written by Director Yao, it is unlikely that the two of them will have many opportunities to work together or even meet in the future. Lu Shi understands that she wants nothing from the Director, but loyalty-loyalty-loyalty… the bell that keeps ringing from the bottom of her heart is now knocking her head, causing it to explode. Yao Xinsheng cannot even be counted as a distant friend, but she cannot sit back and watch him lose everything.

Lu Shi quickly finds Yao's number in her phone and presses hard on the dial button. She briefly explains the previous phone call from the headquarters.

"Someone must have reported me," Director Yao pauses for a long while, "…who did it?"

"Let's first think about how we should handle the next phone call from the headquarters. They are definitely going to call back." Lu Shi sounds worried.

"Ahh!" Yao sighs and starts speaking again slowly. "I am a leader that can accomplish big things and you know that. I must have offended a lot of people as we set our pace too fast."

Lu Shi feels sorry for him, and maybe this feeling is the true reason why she is still loyal to the Director. On the surface, Director Yao has it all: a high position and a lot of power, but Lu Shi has no envy. She only feels sympathy for him. In Lu Shi's eyes, Director Yao is an airplane that has lost its balance, and moving forward at full speed might only make him crash into the ground. Telling nothing to the headquarters is as far as Lu Shi can go, the rest must be taken care of by him.

“I see the picture now,” Director Yao says. “Let me talk to the other teachers first and I will come back to you with a strategy.”

The line is cut off before Lu Shi can think of what to say. Lu Shi reminds herself that this is exactly why she is not going to push her career forward. Just as the Chinese saying goes, “the big trees attract strong winds”, being aggressive at work will land her on dangerous grounds, where one can hardly protect oneself even when no mistake is made. Director Yao was way too aggressive; his mistakes were critical and the loopholes were obvious. Trouble would come to him sooner or later.

Lu Shi pours a cup of tea and quietly tells herself that she doesn’t need success. She only needs to create the conditions for her son to achieve success.

Yao Xinsheng

It seems late at night. Yao Xinsheng, sitting by himself in his office, no longer bothers to find out what time it is. He feels that the darkness has eaten up his heart. The later it gets into the night, the more unsettling he feels, and now he finds himself struggling to breathe. He opens the drawer, takes out a small medical box, slides a small white pill into his mouth, and swallows it with a sip of water: this is the anti-depressant pill that his doctor prescribes for him. He saw the doctor for a sick note that could justify his disappearance from work for a few days, but since then, he has been surrounded by negative publicity. There has been so much thinking that he has to do late at night to the extent that sleep has been completely forced out of his life. He now seeks refuge in these beautiful little pills.

The unbearable difficulties have brought him to the lowest point in his life, and the fundamental cause of this bleak chapter is obvious to him: bad luck. “Why is the universe on the enemy’s side?” He asks himself. The so-called Prime Minister of the Tibetan government arrived at Tulbagh University campus at a critical time when the Chinese Culture School was seeking to renew its contract with the university. The anti-Tibetan protest organised by the embassy created so much trouble for him and the Chinese Culture School. To demonstrate the firmness of the Chinese people on the country’s sovereignty and territorial issues, the embassy organised Chinese students and business organisations to participate in a protest on the day that the Tibetan Prime Minister was scheduled to speak. The Chinese businessmen who relied on the embassy’s support to expand their opportunities saw it as a chance to demonstrate their loyalty to their motherland. One of the progressive Chinese businessmen wanted local people to join the protest to showcase their solidarity, so he paused production at his garment factory and arranged for a bus to transport his fifty

employees to the university campus and even prepared banners for the workers which read, “One China”. The workers, however, misunderstood the meaning of the slogan and shouted, “China number one” outside the lecture theatre hall. Inside the hall, the Chinese students and businessmen occupied the entire space, forcing the speech to be cancelled. The embassy certainly had an outstanding report to write, but Yao Xinsheng was the one left to clear up the mess. Professors at the law department who invited the speaker condemned the Chinese government for violating the spirit of the constitution by limiting freedom of speech and they pointed the gun directly at the Chinese Culture School, stressing that such an organisation, fully funded by the Chinese government, posed threats to the university’s academic freedom and should never exist on the campus of Tulbagh University. To make it all worse, a complaint letter about the Chinese Culture School’s finances was exposed. Not only is the headquarters of the Chinese Culture School trying to find out what happened, but Tulbagh University is also planning to launch a private investigation.

What Yao Xinsheng can do is to explain by telling stories, and he has prepared different versions of stories for different audiences. To the headquarters, the explanation is that the recent anti-China sentiments have been intense on campus. Whoever accused him of mismanaging the finances of the school was only trying to find an excuse to blacklist China, damage the friendship between the two countries, and prevent the renewal of the school’s contract. To Tulbagh University, he explains that the anti-Tibet protests were initiated by local people. The Chinese government and the Chinese Culture School had no connection to such an event. Precisely because the Chinese Culture School is funded by the Chinese government and Tulbagh University provides only office space and administrative support, the university is not authorised to supervise the finances of the independent school.

Yao Xinsheng tries to recall if he ever thought about the possible consequences when he was spending public money like a gift card. What was he thinking when he bought all the business class tickets, paid for the fancy banquets, and bought the antique decorations for his house all in the name of promoting Chinese culture? To Director Yao, the one person that has ultimate power at the Chinese Culture School, the word “consequence” feels too far away from reality, and all along the way, he tells himself good reasons to keep doing it: “I have made significant contributions and this is what I truly deserve.” Looking back now, these small incentives cannot be compared to the big prize he is aiming for in the near future - his promotion! It makes him nervous that what he did created a dangerous ground for himself, and now he cannot see how he is going to walk out of it to arrive at his prize.

All Yao can hear is the clock ticking. Late at night in his office, he reminds himself that heroes are always born in chaotic times, thus he must organise himself and swim firmly against the current to his goal, no

matter what the circumstances are. He is confident that his little pill will start working and he will soon be back on track.

Chapter VI

Ubuntu

(Unity in Diversity)

"Eventually everyone gathers at the rice field
Just as all leaves return to the soil
It's light. It's beauty. It's a celebration."

- Immense Beauty
A song by Singaporean artist Stephanie Sun

The Red House

Today is Wang Shuai's birthday and everyone at the Red House is excited.

"I remember seeing your passport and the stated birthdate is not today. Don't fool us around and use it as an excuse to get free food and gifts," Linlin jokes.

"I celebrate my birthday on the lunar calendar, so it differs every year," Shuai explains. "Sometimes I get confused about when my birthday is."

"How would you like to celebrate your birthday? I'll organise it for you," Lu Shi says.

"Let's make dumplings! I want everyone to get busy," Shuai shouts.

Making dumplings is a northern Chinese festive tradition. Shuai has a simple reason for making this special request: every Chinese New Year, many families in China gather together to watch the Chinese New Year Gala on the national broadcaster and make dumplings together. Creating such a sense of festive family celebration is exactly what Shuai would like to do for his birthday. Shuai, Linlin, and Lu Shi are all from southern China, thus no one is good at making dumplings. Dumpling making is a complicated and technical process, but since there is no time pressure, why not have some fun?

“You know the Chinese saying, ‘we have not eaten pork, but we have seen the pig running’! We can do this!” Lu Shi speaks with confidence.

Lu Shi soon realises that among the three teachers at the Red House, she is the least capable one in the kitchen. Since Shuai and Linlin’s parents left home to work in bigger towns when they were little, they learned to help out at home and do housework at a very young age.

“I remember when I was attending primary school, I was cooking already. I was wearing an apron and standing on a chair to reach the stove,” Linlin shares her story while swiftly chopping the cabbage. “I wasn’t just cooking for myself; I was cooking for my younger sisters as well.”

“That sounds like my childhood,” Shuai says as he sets the table. “Grandma used to cook for a big family, and I loved being her kitchen hand.”

Among the three teachers, Lu Shi has an obvious motherly instinct, but she has no interest or talent in cooking. Before Keke was born, she had no experience in the kitchen at all. In fact, she eats very little; and the tea she drinks gives her enough energy for the day. At this moment, Lu Shi takes the huge responsibility to roll the dough and her arms have gone numb.

Tonight’s guests also include Ning Jin, Linlin’s boyfriend; Patrick, Shuai’s colleague, and Yan, the restaurant owner. Ning Jin is still having a lecture. According to the local custom, Patrick will arrive half an hour after the agreed time. Yan is busy with the restaurant and will only be able to join the group when the restaurant quietens.

The doorbell rings, Patrick and Ning Jin happen to have arrived at the same time, and they both brought a bottle of local wine.

“Birthday boy!” Patrick shouts and hugs Shuai.

“I’m one year older; you won’t be able to call me a boy for long.”

Ning Jin goes straight to Linlin and asks, “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“You can come help with making dumplings in a bit,” Linlin answers.

It takes a while to have the ingredients for the dumpling fillings chopped and mixed, and by the time everyone sits down to make dumplings it is already 7.30 p.m., dinner time. The most challenging job - making the dumpling skin falls on Lu Shi’s shoulders. Although there are many talented chefs in the house, she is the only one who knows how to roll the dumpling skin. Now she has to act quick enough to meet the speed of the production line.

The production team is busy making dumplings at only an average speed. Patrick is an amateur and has slowed the whole team down. Linlin patiently teaches Patrick how to make the edge of each dumpling look fancy.

“Oh, my word!” Patrick sighs. “Chinese people care too much about eating, and cooking Chinese food is such a painful process.”

“Everyone must be hungry. Let me grab some chips for you guys!” Wang Shuai stands up, washes his hands, opens a bag of chips, and goes around literately putting the chips into everyone’s mouth. Now it feels like a family.

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It is 9.30 p.m. when the dumplings finally go into boiling water. The doorbell rings again and Yan is here, carrying a big plate of sushi. “Happy birthday!” he says. For the restaurant business, finishing at this time is a luxury.

The warm dumplings are now out of the boiling pot and everyone sits around the large table for the special celebration. People dip the dumplings into a special vinegar sauce bought from the Chinese supermarket which enhances the taste and the Chineseness of the dumplings to a large degree. People eat and chat, and Linlin takes care of Patrick by taking up the translation job.

“It is my birthday and I will use my special privileges to ask everyone a question,” Shuai says.

“I’m so nervous. Shuai is going to start an interrogation!” Lu Shi says. “We’ve been cooking the whole night. Can’t you just leave us alone?”

“Of course not!” Shuai answers firmly. There is a reason why Shuai gets his nickname, *The Question Boy,* He is always so curious, and at this moment, he’s looking deeply into everyone’s soul.

“Linlin, let’s start with you. I want to hear you tell us about your transformations in the past year.”

“Wow, such a deep question,” Linlin seems unprepared. “How should I put it; I feel that I have become a bit more confident. What do you think?”

“Totally agree, I also feel that you are more open,” Shuai answers.

“I don’t know how to explain. I am just a weird person and I always see things from a strange perspective and that comes naturally. When I was in China, I always felt that I was an ‘abnormal’ person. When I’m here, I feel that my perspective is appreciated. I can’t say my opinions are always fabulous, but now I know that I am a *special* person, not a *strange* person,” Linlin says.

“Of course, you are not strange. You are cute!” Lu Shi quietly gives Linlin a side hug.

“Teacher Lu, your turn.”

“I’m so nervous.”

“In your opinion, what’s the difference in life between your twenties, thirties, and forties?”

“Oh, the difference is huge,” Lu Shi doesn’t need to think much to answer this question. “I feel physically weaker. I used to go out and have fun a lot when I was younger, and I used to go for karaoke and sing till midnight and I could get up early the next day just fine. But if I go to bed late one night these days, I struggle for many days.”

“You still look very energetic,” Shuai says.

“What energy are you talking about? I am becoming an old lady!” Lu Shi answers. “I’ve also learned over the decades to compromise with realities. I used to expect so much from life and aimed at achieving so much, now I feel that if something belongs to you, it will come your way one day; but if it doesn’t, don’t

force it. I was never an ambitious person and now I just see being happy as my priority in life. After Keke was born, having anything to myself was no longer important."

Everyone is quiet. "Look," Shuai says. "You are the only mother in this group. None of us have the opportunity to experience such feelings and maybe many of us are not sure whether we want to experience that."

Ning Jin laughs and catches Shuai's attention.

"Ning Jin," Shuai turns to him. "Tell me about your idol."

"My idol? That's a random question… My favourite star is… José Mourinho, a Portuguese football coach that you might not even know. He is very intelligent and has a charming personality… Why do you ask?"

"Well, I remember you once said that you have no goals in life, so I was wondering whether you had an idol. He can be your role model and help you set goals - isn't that right?"

"That's so true. Thank you." Ning Jin puts his palms together and sends his gratitude to Shuai.

"Patrick, what is your dream life like?"

"Dream? This word sounds too unrealistic to me - I woke up to reality a long time ago. Although I don't have kids myself, I kind of share the feelings that Lu Shi just shared about the next generation. I have long passed those years of pursuing a materialistic lifestyle and I don't see success as an important goal in my life, but there are two goals I want to achieve. My first goal is, to help accumulate some family wealth for the next generation and to give them a good starting point in life. My second goal is to drive my caravan and travel around the world. Maybe I will drive it to China one day."

"We will be welcoming you in China then," Linlin says, "That will be so cool!"

"Thank you!" Patrick continues saying, "So, I have a dream life and it's quite distant from my everyday teaching life. Right now, I don't feel like I'm doing a lot of *teaching*, rather, I feel like a *social worker*. There are so many challenges in Tulbagh and we teachers have to deal with more social issues than

academic challenges. I believe the next generation will find a way out for themselves. Life is so short, and I want to see more of the world while I'm still...alive."

"Still alive?" Shuai laughs. "You still have a lot of time."

"You can never be sure about that, my friend," Patrick responds. "I already had serious heart surgery and now I am living with five heart stents. It won't be too long before I see God, and that's it."

"It won't be your turn yet. I would have to be kicked out first." Yan taps on Patrick's shoulder as he says this. He turns to Shuai and asks, "Shoot your question!"

"Do you believe in God?"

Ning Jin was certainly not prepared to hear this question and the coke in his mouth almost burst out. The question indeed surprised everyone but looking closely, Yan is wearing a necklace with a cross. Shuai has good reasons to ask about religion.

"Thank you for the question," Yan answers, "I believe in God and I praise God. Whatever I earn from this life are all gifts from God, and I am grateful to Him."

The crowd becomes silent as if Yan is speaking a different language. All people can hear is Linlin translating for Patrick.

Patrick breaks the silence, "I guess my journey of growing up is very different from everyone sitting here and I work at this Catholic school. My Principal, Father Shepherd is a Catholic missionary….so, in China, not so many people believe in God?"

Shuai realises that he has led the discussion into a sensitive zone. He remembers what Director Yao told him when he first arrived at Tulbagh, "Don't talk about religion with the locals; they will think that you are a monster if you tell them that you don't believe in God."

"There are some Chinese people who go to church although I can't tell whether they are Catholics or Protestants," Lu Shi answers, "There are also many Buddhists, but most people don't belong to a religion."

“Isn’t Communism a faith too?” Patrick continues to ask.

“Faith! This word sounds so grand,” Lu Shi answers. “I am not sure if true Communism will ever be realised. Linlin, you are a party member, what do you think?”

“Me?” Linlin is shocked. “Does it matter whether one is a party member or not? I never thought much about Communism. All I can say is that I am Earthiest. I hope I don’t offend anyone here by saying that.”

“We have a long journey ahead of us in life, let’s all think about this and reflect on it,” Yan says, “and I think it’s time that we throw some questions to Shuai too.”

“Yes, yes.” Lu Shi forms her fingers into the shape of a gun and points to Shuai. “I am the gossiping aunty who wants to know when you are going to find a wife?”

Everyone’s ears widen, as they seem to be excited by this particular question.

“I haven’t touched this string yet,” Shuai seems shy in answering this question, “but I plan to get married when I am… thirty. By then I will just pay attention to the girls around me and find one to settle down with.”

“Are all Chinese people like that?” Patrick is certainly confused. “It sounds like you have a switch on you and when you become thirty, the antenna will start to search for reception, find a match, and you will live happily ever after.”

“Oh, for sure it’s not every Chinese. Look at Ning Jin! He is in a hurry!” Lu Shi laughs.

“Teacher Lu! I’ve always respected you. Please don’t torture me.” Ning Jin points his finger to Shuai. “We should keep firing at him.”

“I want to ask if you will stay in the education field for your career?” Linlin asks.

“I’m not sure. I do like teaching here, but the education scene here is very different from what it is at home in China. My family wants me to get a doctorate, but I think that gaining some experience and earning some money should be my priority,” Shuai says.

“Wouldn’t you like to stay in Tulbagh?” Patrick asks.

“For now, I do need to go back. After all, all my family is in China and my grandma’s health has been going through some ups and downs. I have been wandering around Tulbagh for two years now and it is time to go back home and help out. One day, I will look for another opportunity to go out again.” Shuai answers honestly.

“You are so mature,” Patrick sighs. “It’s impressive that you think about family when you are still in your twenties. When I was in my twenties, I only thought about alcohol and women. I didn’t think about a family at all.”

“You are meeting the elites of China,” Yan pats Patrick’s shoulder again. “If you had met me when I was twenty, we would have been great friends because we were after the same things.” Yan and Patrick give each other a natural passionate hug, making everyone laugh.

It is time to turn down the lights and everyone starts singing happy birthday. The candles light up a cake Linlin baked in the afternoon and hid in the oven. It looks very amateur compared to those sold at the supermarket, but it has a unique sense of beauty because it is homemade. To a certain degree, this is the unique kind of beauty that Tulbagh has: it is not luxury and it is not fancy, but you find dignity and comfort in it, making you feel relaxed and happy. The light from the candles shines strongly in the darkness; it travels towards Shuai and projects his shadow onto the clock hanging on the wall of the Red House. There is only the sound of the clock ticking when Shuai makes his wish and everyone is in love with this beautiful image frozen in time.

Having made his wish, Shuai slowly opens his eyes. This familiar but strange world becomes clearer than ever in the darkness at this moment: it is time to celebrate Tulbagh, where everyone belongs.

The Coffee Shop

Yao Xinsheng walks into He Ping’s coffee shop and is surprised to see an old man holding an English copy of the *Book of Change*. He Ping greets Yao and invites him to sit down, “This is my friend Michael, and Michael, this is Yao, the Director of the Chinese Culture School.”

“Oh, Director Yao,” Michael reaches out both of his hands to shake Yao’s. “You were tortured by the Tibetans; I was following the media reports on the protests.”

“Don’t even mention it. The whole thing had nothing to do with the Chinese Culture School.” Yao tries to sound innocent.

“You must have been so busy!” He Ping says, “…it even looks like you have lost some weight.”

“Oh, yes. I have been feeling terrible for a long time. I wasn’t able to sleep for a few weeks and I’m now taking anti-depressant tablets,” Yao says.

“You? It can’t be you who’s depressed!” He Ping is truly shocked.

“Nobody gets depression in Tulbagh; we have such beautiful mountains and sea. Whatever problems you have can be cured by a walk under the sun,” Michael says seriously.

“It’s a long story. I have been wrongly accused of mismanaging public funds and now everyone is investigating me. Tulbagh University, Xingang University, the Chinese Cultural School headquarters; none of them trust me,” Yao sighs.

“What is there to investigate?” Michael asks. “They should start a corruption investigation with our President first.”

He Ping keeps quiet because she has already heard many stories about Yao and the problems at the Chinese Culture School from Lu Shi. She wants to hear Yao’s side of the story.

“The Chinese Cultural School headquarters called our teachers directly to ask about me. They didn’t even bother contacting me first. It was so political. Since I have always treated my teachers very well, and we have good relationships, they told me about the investigation.”

“What do you plan to do then?” He Ping asks.

“I don’t want this job anymore. I work so hard and at the end of the day, I am the one to be suspected and accused! There is no point in building a career like this!”

“You are in a high position; would the headquarters allow you to quit in the middle of the contract?” He Ping asks.

“It looks like the Director has a lot of power, but it’s only superficial. I’m just going to say that I’m sick. What can they do? I *am* sick because of *them*,” Yao says.

Yao Xinsheng doesn’t want to tell his audience that it is not him who asks to resign; it is the headquarters that recalls him.

“What is your prospect like for going back?”

“Ahh!” Yao sighs. “I came here hoping that I would be able to climb the career ladder a bit when I return, but because of this drama, it looks like a dangerous road is ahead of me now. I just don’t want to leave Tulbagh feeling defeated.”

“I don’t know if China is a country that appoints people by their talents,” Michael shares, “I don’t think that’s how it works in Tulbagh. How should I put it? The political parties and companies seem to view people’s loyalty as the most important quality and their talents come next.”

“China cares so much more about loyalty. Tulbagh cannot even compare,” He Ping says.

Yao Xingsheng only wants to direct the topic back to himself. He can no longer bear the psychological pressure from all recent events and he needs to talk to people, but the reality is that there aren’t many people he can talk to and there is only so little content he is willing to share. After careful consideration, he decides to chat to He Ping who seems to have lost all connections with China. Unfortunately, Michael is sitting here today, and he seems determined to divert the topic from Yao.

“I don’t understand how China can become competitive in the future when it comes to talents,” Michael continues to talk, “you guys do not accept immigrants, right? Even if I have lived in China for my whole life, I can never become a Chinese citizen. How can such a conservative country attract the best talents in the world?”

Yao Xingsheng has nothing to say. At this moment he cannot care less about the future of China; he only cares about his own future.

"What exactly are your plans for the next step then?" He Ping spots Yao's thoughts and confusion and helps him drag the topic back.

"I have no plan." Yao shakes his head. "The Chinese Culture School is an organisation that destroys your humanity. They sent me to this place where the birds don't even shit! And they don't give me the basic trust. Ahh! I sacrificed so many years for this administrative work and I didn't have time to do my own research. They ruined my academic career too!"

"Is Tulbagh that bad? How come I see people and birds eat and shit happily every day?" Michael is determined to divert the topic once again. "I feel that life is quite free here and the quality of life is much better than Europe and America. I guess the academic path is a lonely one, no matter where you go." Michael puts his hands on the *Book of Change*, and says, "Like what your ancestors said, the only thing that doesn't change is change itself."

He Ping knows that Yao Xingsheng cannot be counted as a real academic. He is more of a bureaucrat. She doesn't want to say that, but rather asks, "It must be different to work as a director, compared to doing academic work."

"It is not easy to do academic work of course, but it is so damn hard to be a director. It's just so hard to be a human being, especially if you are Chinese," Yao answers.

"Well, I just know that I won't be able to survive if I return to China." He Ping turns her head to Michael to involve him in the conversation. "A young colleague I met in the US went to teach in China. She told me that at first, she didn't understand why no one gave comments after her Department Head invited people to share their thoughts, and she was the only one talking. Then her Chinese colleagues told her the truth: in a Chinese work meeting such as this one, talking should not be viewed as a way of communication, but rather a ritual. When it is your turn, you just say what you are supposed to say which has nothing to do with your emotions and thoughts."

Michael almost drops his jaw. He pats Yao's shoulders and says, in a dramatic low voice, "I would have gone mad way earlier if I was born in China."

“To be honest, I truly admire you - you live freely.” This sentence comes from the bottom of Yao’s heart.

“People just can’t ask for everything in life,” Michael shouts. “If you want freedom, then don’t desire money. I did absolutely nothing after I retired from my bookstore job. There is a lot of advantages of not having any income at all. I registered myself as an underprivileged individual, then I don’t need to pay tax for my property!”

“You always teach people the wrong things!” He Ping sighs, “Yao is young and he has a bright future ahead of him… I’ve been talking too much… what coffee would you like to drink?”

“Whatever, whatever.”

For the whole afternoon, Yao sits mindlessly in front of his latte and listens to Michael’s speeches inattentively. He Ping tries to involve Yao in the discussion a few times but finally gives up. However, Yao Xinsheng doesn’t want to be involved in any discussion; he just cannot bear loneliness anymore and he fears being alone. All the late nights of working in the Tulbagh Chinese Culture School office have long emptied his soul. Now he only finds that he belongs nowhere and loves nothing. He has become an empty shell that walks between meetings, one who hears nothing but the steps of his enemy.

Chapter VII

Island Archives

"Does the sky remember the lights that pass by?
Those as bright as a flower in summer
Those as quiet as a leaf in autumn
Those that remind us of where the journey begins."

- Let There Be Light
A song by Hong Kong artist Karen Mok

He Ping

Article published on the online journal of the Tulbagh Chinese Students and Scholar Association

Response to President Xi Jinping's New Year message to overseas Chinese students

By He Ping, retired professor, Tulbagh

I was filled with emotion after reading President Xi's New Year remarks to all overseas Chinese students on his state visit to Moscow. Over 50 years ago, one of Chairman Mao's great teachings - "Young people are like the sun at eight or nine in the morning; our hope is placed on you" - put our generation on the learning path. However, the Cultural Revolution did not allow us to experience the sunlight; instead, a political storm came, and our youth was filled with confusion. Being forced to go and work in the fields every day - with our faces to the land and our backs to the sky - were wasted years that shattered our dreams.

The country's "reform and opening-up" policy brought us hope, and university doors opened to ordinary people once again. We finally had the opportunity to enrich ourselves and to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to serve the motherland, and our hope of rejuvenating the Chinese nation was rekindled.

After 40 years of reform and opening-up, China has undergone earth-shaking changes. Our generation has risen from the turbulent ruins of the Cultural Revolution, licked our wounds, and equipped ourselves with newfound knowledge to make whatever contribution we can to the rejuvenation of our country. Now we are at a new starting point, a starting point where everyone is trying to make contributions to the Chinese

dream. Revisiting what Chairman Mao said to young people in Moscow 60 years ago and what President Xi said to young overseas Chinese students today is such a special moment.

Today, China's national strength has been greatly enhanced, and our nation's policy of letting people get rich has made studying abroad no longer as difficult a task as travelling to the moon. Young people must treasure every opportunity to learn from the world, learn from each other, contribute to the great renaissance of China and make the Chinese dream come true.

Let's take a look at the world today. The Cold War has ended in theory but seen from a broader perspective, the conflicts are still ongoing. Some western countries continue to adopt Hitler's ideology for global hegemony, playing a zero-sum game to promote a western standard of democracy and a free-market economy. This is on a different track from China's strategy of peaceful development, a strategy that takes the strengths of mankind and the shared destiny of mankind on board and creates a vision for the Chinese dream.

Although the goal of Communism - to free mankind all over the world - sounds very distant from current reality (and may even carry the smell of gunpowder), the Chinese people share a belief that we must work towards the common good of mankind's shared destiny. Some intellectuals and western media look down upon us, saying that Chinese people "have no faith". Whether you believe in God or people, with or without religion, people can judge good from evil. Therefore, we must cultivate ourselves and always have a grand goal in mind, and work hard to contribute our youthful years to the betterment of mankind's destiny. It is every Chinese countryman's responsibility.

At this special moment when China's Belt and Road Initiative is being implemented, let us join hands and pass our spirit from generation to generation, and show the world Chinese people's sincerity and kindness. In another 60 years, China will be different from now. We will achieve common prosperity, and live good lives in peace and harmony. Students, let's work hard together!

Yao Xinsheng

A message posted on the Tulbagh Chinese Culture School WeChat staff group chat.

Good Evening Colleagues,

You might have heard the news that my appointment as the Director of the Tulbagh Chinese Culture School will be terminated. I regret to confirm that this is indeed true, and I plan to return to China at the end of this month.

I will be very frank with you. My end of service is an outcome of complicated political struggles between the Chinese Culture School headquarters and Tulbagh University, and in many ways, a result of the internal power struggles within Tulbagh University. As for the accusations of corruption, they are all false accusations, and I do not need to explain further.

I have worked tirelessly to build up this school, and you have witnessed the challenging process and how hard I work. Recently, the stress from work has pushed me to seek counselling services and take anti-depression pills. I am disappointed that my contribution to the school is not recognised at all, and I urge every one of you to be careful in your future collaborations with Tulbagh University. These people are not as friendly as they appear to be. They are truly wolves wearing sheep's clothing, and they will eat you alive one day if you don't stay alert. You must always defend yourselves and your country.

I thank you for your loyalty and support over the years. We will discuss the detailed handover issues at next week's meeting.

Director Yao

Lu Shi

An email sent to her son Keke.

My Dearest Keke,

Do you remember Uncle Yan that I mentioned to you once, who runs a restaurant near my office on the Tulbagh island? All the teachers had dinner at his place yesterday, and he shared with us a letter he wrote to his son. I was deeply touched by his sincere words, and I asked him for a copy of the letter. I would like you to read it too.

Like what Uncle Yan is doing for his son, I also hope to build a solid "runway" for you to take off. I hope you will always remember that and work very hard to achieve great things. I miss you so much.

Love,
Mom

Here comes the section of Uncle Yan's letter that I would like to share with you:

As a father, I only hope that you don't get lost where I got lost and that you don't make the same mistakes that I did. Because of my limited language skills, I couldn't understand a lot of issues in this English-speaking country and therefore ran into many problems and even cases of fraud. I want to go back to school too, but I don't have the time because I need to make money and feed my family! I can only work at the lowest level of society because I don't have a university degree or good English. It was only because of my fearlessness that I gained myself a place. I only hope that everything will get better in the years to come. You have seen my situation here – with my hard work, things can only get better, and I should be able to provide for you and fulfil my duty to my family.

You were born in the year 2000, into a different world. If you don't work hard, you won't be able to feed yourself. Have you seen on the news how advanced technology is today, and that some ports in China have become completely automated, and that one can even order food from a machine in a noodle restaurant! All one needs to do is to swipe a credit card and wait for one minute before one gets a bowl of hot noodles. Don't they need professionals to design the programmes, and adjust the machines? Don't they need people with knowledge to do the tech work? With the knowledge and skills that you have now, will anyone hire you? I don't think so.

I believe that by now you also understand the importance of knowledge and see that, at this stage, your duty is to study. Without knowledge, you won't be able to change your destiny at all, and it will be impossible to turn knowledge into financial potential. The studying years are the time to 'eat bitterness' (endure hardships), but I only see you enjoying life. Perhaps when it's time to enjoy life, you will have to work hard in extremely hard conditions to earn your three meals. I don't want to see that day.

All I hope is that you will use what I have offered you as a runway from which to take off, but you have to prepare yourself first. At this stage, all you need to do is to study and charge your body and mind. If you fail to do so, you will only be a trivial man for the rest of your life – so trivial that you won't even be able to feed yourself, not to mention supporting your family.

I sincerely hope that one day, when you have developed your talents, you will make some meaningful contributions to society. But, if that's too much to ask, you must at least be able to make a living. Your grandparents are very proud of you, and I am very proud of you. We expect great things from you.

Time is cruel – it doesn't wait for anyone.

Li Linlin

A note given to Ningjin at the Tulbagh International Airport as Linlin left Tulbagh for China at the end of her contract.

NJ,

We have talked so much over the past year, and there is not much left to say now as I am leaving Tulbagh.

I never expected myself to be in a relationship here in Tulbagh at all, but I am glad that I was brave enough to go with your flow. I have no regrets. I am fully aware that the future ahead of us as a couple is as uncertain as life itself. You will not want to live in China, I know that. But for me, I cannot stay too far away from home since I already spent an entire year here and there are responsibilities that I must take up at home. I don't know how this will work out for us, but I believe that if we keep our hearts pure, our paths will cross again. I am grateful to you for the wonderful moments we shared on the island. I will cherish them forever. I will miss you, my lovely red house, and the beautiful Cradle Mountain.

I hope you can find time to read more books and go to the gym more often after I am gone. Keep your mind and body exercised and take very good care of yourself.

Until we meet again.

LL

Wang Shuai

Poems written in his journal.

The Seed of Curiosity

I don't know when and how
The urge to leave breaks out from the here and now
The eagerness to truly experience the globe
Is among my many hopes.

Family and friends try to stop me; they argue:
"It's too far."
"It's too dangerous."
"It's too unrealistic."

Now I plant this seed of curiosity into the African soil
Where a flower of discovery is about to grow
Let me watch this special blooming
Without touching it, without naming it; just simply embracing it.

Dearest Forest

Along Cypress, we walked into the Newlands woods
Passing Apple, Orange, and Strawberry Roads
The doors turn colourful and the fences go low
Our spirit high and the air smells pine.

In textbooks, I once learned about many trees
Putting my hands on them I set these names free
They are rough but they are strong
Rooting deeply into mother ground.

His extroversive hands full of rosin
She proudly waves her distorted stick
He squats leisurely on an ancient stump
She alertly watches every dog checking us out.

In our own ways, we interact with this unfamiliar world
What is it that connects us all?
Not as intellectuals or Chinese nationals
But simply as humans, the very fundamentals.

Without an answer, to the woods we sing
For we know she has a key to everything
A mystery life will always be
Thank you, dearest forest, for giving us peace.

A Better Place

An invisible island is where I arrive
Isolated from space and time
This is a journey
That opens many new beginnings
Never say goodbye:
A better you,
And a better me,
Will meet again at a better place.

*** End of *The Islanders* ***

Epilogue

One day, over a casual dinner, I explained the idea of a middlestage to a new cohort of South Africa-based OCA friends and gave examples from my thesis to demonstrate the concept. An OCA immediately recalled an experience of Ms. Orange (pseudonym), one of the young OCAs who was also at the dinner:

"Last month, a student at the university approached Ms. Orange and asked if she could provide private lessons to him outside office hours, and he's happy to pay her. I'm sure Ms. Orange was aware of the conflict of interests involved. Instead of explaining the conflict of interests, she said to the student, 'You don't have to pay me. I am here to help South African people. I hope that one day, you will go to China and help the Chinese children too.' I was shocked to hear that. That was just so jia, *fake."*

As she told the story half-jokingly, all the OCAs laughed. Ms. Orange explained, "I totally agree. It was just too much, but those words were the first ones that came to my mind. I was indeed so fake, and it became a good laugh," She turned to me and continued, "It was… what you just told us… a performance on the middlestage?"

In this concluding chapter, I provide a summary of key points discussed in this thesis and engage *The Islanders* in the theoretical summary of the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation. I also analyse the middlestage of the thesis and recommend future research directions on China's managed cultural globalisation as well as the middlestage.

Thesis summary

In this thesis, I investigate the middlestage of China's managed cultural globalisation and argue that for state-sponsored OCAs, this middlestage is a space of curations, negotiations, and re-imaginations. The OCAs' life trajectories and interactions with the middlestage are revealed in the theoretical explorations as well a thick description of their lives in an ethnographic fiction, *The Islanders*. This summary revisits the arguments of the thesis and engages key characters and plots from the ethnographic fiction in the theoretical discussions of the middlestage.

When Director Yao Xinsheng announces to his OCA staff members that they represent their country when working overseas, it is clear that China's managed cultural globalisation is embodied in the individual OCAs, and their performances are not restricted to a frontstage during set office hours. The OCAs are

involved in co-curating official frontstage performances, such as everyday classroom teaching and a series of reception events for the Ministry of Education delegation. Meanwhile, the five OCA characters all need to curate their self-presentations to the Chinese Culture School headquarters and the Chinese Embassy at Tulbagh. This explains why submitting regular reports and media releases are crucial to the OCAs, as it is through these curations of self-presentations that their work becomes visible to an invisible audience of their performance - the Chinese state. Censorship and self-censorship are imposed on OCAs in the case of the Tibetan visitor and each OCA's careful curations of their self-images to the Chinese Culture School. Institutional patriotism is observed in these curations. Director Yao is in charge of liaising with state institutions to plan strategies, and other OCAs are instructed to carry out planned actions such as organising student performances for celebration ceremonies, showing up as head-counts at embassy events, and submitting regular reflection reports and media releases.

At the same time, state-sponsored OCAs negotiate their identities when interacting with their overseas local counterparts such as their students and colleagues, and reflect on their past and present life trajectories. Li Linlin's journey from a rural town in China to Tulbagh in Africa reveals her identity negotiation processes during her internal and international mobilities. She constantly negotiates her identities with state-home and origin-home as her interactions with an overseas environment lead her to reflect on her past and present life. During these interactions and reflections, Li Linlin makes attempts to recover from China's rushed modernisation by exploring her individuality on the middlestage: she seeks her own understanding of a relationship and pursues her love for nature. Lu Shi also goes through similar identity negotiation processes on the middlestage as she makes use of the state-sponsored overseas experience to recover from her busy life in China and explore alternative paths for herself and her son.

The OCAs on the Tulbagh island re-imagine their realities as cosmopolitan and re-imagine their identities while seeking thin and deep conviviality. For example, as an intellectually-curious person, Wang Shuai constantly engages with his overseas counterparts on the middlestage. He experiences a process of being shaped by Tulbagh's diverse cultures at shallow, middle, and deep levels. As he understands multiple perspectives from other ways of life, he re-imagines his realities as cosmopolitan and engages his identities with thin and deep conviviality when interacting across different scenarios. He Ping as a character who has lived and worked in different cultures also adapts well to her re-imagined realities and identities, as she seeks thin and deep conviviality confidently when engaging with different characters in various scenarios.

The middlestage boundaries are unstable and blur across space, time, and identity for the OCAs on the Tulbagh Island. They often need to collaborate to conduct multiple performances to multiple audiences at the same time. For example, on the frontstage of the Chinese Culture School partnership celebration, Chinese cultural performances are given to the local audience. However, the middlestage lens of the

scenario reveals that the Chinese delegates are the real audience of the performances, as the real purpose of the ceremony is to demonstrate Director Yao's achievements to the Chinese state. While Director Yao engages with other OCAs to produce performances for Chinese state institutions, his staff members also produce performances for Yao on the middlestage. In addition, the OCAs make attempts to borrow space from the middlestage to push for a temporary backstage. This is evidenced when Yao read books that are banned in China at home and He Ping's coffee shop. He limits his backstage behaviours to these specific spaces and displays books that are in line with Chinese state ideologies in his office. Since He Ping is not connected to state institutions, both Director Yao and Lu Shi are willing to reveal to her a temporary backstage, where the OCAs share their authentic thoughts. However, this backstage is only temporary, and the OCAs must return to their middlestage and resume their performances.

The middlestage of this thesis

To further elaborate on the dynamics of the middlestage, I shift the discussion focus to the middlestage of this thesis and explore the curations, negotiations, and re-imaginations involved in the production of the thesis. A thesis is itself a curation of ideas, and its production process requires various curations on the middlestage. First, during ethnographic research, I must curate my self-presentation to my OCA participants and balance my roles as a friend, volunteer staff, and researcher. Second, at state-sponsored events where I conduct participative observations, I must also follow state institutions' censorship and self-censorship guidance to ensure that my participation meets relevant state requirements so that I can be allowed in the research field. As a result, I also conform to institutional patriotism by complying with state institution curations during fieldwork. Third, although I am in charge of this specific thesis curation project, this academic curation is restricted by many external factors. For example, I must work under the general rules of academic writing, such as thesis structure and referencing style, as well as specific rules set by UCT, such as research ethics and submission processes. These middlestage curations, which can be easily overlooked, form an important aspect of the thesis.

I negotiate between theory and practice on the middlestage of the thesis production process. From data collection to write-up, I am aware of Geertz's (1973) caution that an anthropologist should *speak to* rather than *speak for* the subjects of ethnographic research. After the completion of my fieldwork, I was fortunate to engage with a new cohort of OCAs who came to South Africa to teach Chinese and showed interest in my research because of the study's practical value to them. Through a process of discussing my research ideas with the OCAs and using them to interpret realities, I made attempts to test concepts and theories in my thesis, such as *institutional patriotism*, *space of recovery*, and *deep conviviality*. Through these theory-

practice engagements, I affirm that theory does not exist outside or above practice. Theory as a formal system feeds on practice, the details of everyday social life (Herzfeld 1988).

The research experience also leads me through a process of re-imagination, particularly the re-imagination of knowledge and knowledge production. During my foundation education in China, knowledge was taught as absolute truth to be memorised, comprehended, and applied in exam scenarios to meet curriculum requirements. These deeply embedded habitus created conflicts with my serendipitous ethnographic research process. I became aware of my deeply-embedded obedience to authority in the knowledge production process as I was unable to challenge existing knowledge and struggled to contribute my original voice to my engagements with established theories. Through learning new methods of knowledge production by observing and participating in academic discussions and seminars at UCT, I re-imagined knowledge production as a personal journey and made attempts to take a personal approach to knowledge production. For example, as advised by my supervisor, I went through many imagined "theory tea parties", in which I imagined hosting discussions between key theorists and had my research participants as the imagined audience who participated in discussions and raised questions. Adopting personalised research methods such as using ethnographic fiction to engage with data allowed me to re-imagine knowledge production as a process of pursuing questions and questioning instead of seeking final answers.

During fieldwork, I worked across frontstage and middlestage with my state-sponsored OCA participants to observe and comprehend their performances, whilst pushing for a backstage together with them. As I was frequently invited to and involved with OCAs' frontstage performances, I needed to meet frontstage requirements set by state institutions when conducting participative observations. During formal and informal interactions with my OCA participants, I needed to be mindful of the present and invisible audience of the middlestage. In these situations, I became a performer on the middlestage who performed together with the OCAs. However, my OCA participants and I pushed for a backstage during the research process. We made use of *The Question Person* to create a safe space where backstage behaviours such as criticising state-sponsored institutions for certain policies or a superior for certain behaviours. This space, like all backstage spaces for OCAs, is borrowed from the middlestage and is only temporary. With the temporary backstage, my OCA participants and I had to be aware of the sensitivity of each topic that we engaged with and the risks involved. This explained why some senior OCAs were more vigilant about what they revealed to me and occasionally requested that certain information they shared with me be excluded from the thesis, as the information may put them at risk. The backstage-within-middlestage for this thesis is not only temporary but also fragile.

The thesis writing process also required that I negotiate with my mother tongue Mandarin Chinese and my working language English, and re-imagine translation as a productive force in conceptual thinking. After I

finished the first draft of the thesis, I was eager to communicate with the OCAs about my conceptual findings. I translated the key ideas of my thesis verbally into Chinese and discussed them with the OCAs. This process, in return, helped me clarify my conceptual thinking and writing. This method is also adopted by anthropologist Xiang Biao (Xiang and Wu 2020:176-177) who uses the Chinese translation of concepts developed in English to test the originality of his ideas; he also uses English translations of theoretical discussions developed in Chinese to test the precision of the logic of his arguments.

Translation also plays an important role in my writing process of *The Islanders*. I first wrote a draft of the ethnographic fiction in Chinese as I needed to frequently refer to quotes from my OCA participants, most of which were recorded in Chinese. However, I found myself restricted by narrating the stories in Chinese, as I tended to use difficult words and decorative language devices. This was a habit I formed from my foundation education in China, as I was trained to produce essays that demonstrate my Chinese language ability in exams by using complicated sentence structures, difficult vocabularies, and advanced language devices. I was able to shed these elements away when I translated the Chinese draft into English, through which process I placed my focus on the conceptual framework behind the characters and plots. This translation-as-writing process is also adopted by Japanese novelist Murakami who first writes in English and translates his English drafts into Japanese. He argues that by adopting the translation method, his ideas can be better clarified and expressed to his readers (Murakami 2017).

As I wrote *The Islanders* from 2018 to 2020, I translated sections of the ethnographic fiction and posted them periodically on my blog as a serial story.[26] A new cohort of state-sponsored OCAs who started working in South Africa became my loyal readers. In our casual conversations, the OCAs discussed with me the characters and plots in *The Islanders*. They used the five main characters' stories as references in their lives. For example, one day, when we were casually having a conversation about OCAs' dating, an OCA said, "Ms. Banana is just like Linlin. She would ask her boyfriend to hide under the office desk if the director showed up." Another OCA shared that *The Islanders* was a mirror to her life, "it's like reading about myself, although it's not exactly myself". I realised that the OCAs not only read *The Islanders* for pleasure but also used the plot and characters as references to interpret their realities and identities.

Examining the middlestage of this thesis allows me to explore the knowledge produced in the thesis as well as the knowledge production process. In the final section of the thesis, I suggest future research directions for China's managed cultural globalisation and the middlestage.

[26] See http://blog.sina.com.cn/tianhere for the Chinese translation of *The Islanders* posted as a serial story between 2018 November 14 and 2020 January 18.

Future research directions

This ethnographic study on state-sponsored OCAs and China's managed cultural globalisation demonstrates how individual OCAs and Chinese state institutions negotiate power through producing performances on the middlestage. Future research on China's managed cultural globalisation can focus on Chinese state institutions' changing cultural globalisation strategies and their impacts on Chinese individuals, especially state-sponsored OCAs. Chinese state institutions frequently revise the programmes and policies of China's managed cultural globalisation. For example, in response to criticisms on Confucius Institutes' political agenda as a result of its close connections to the CCP, *Hanban* went through a sudden rebranding from the Office of Chinese Language Council International to the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation in June 2020. The organisation transformed from a department under the Ministry of Education (MoE) to a Non-Government Organisation network of universities and organisations, although most of them are still under the MoE. The new organisation disseminates some resources and responsibilities to its participating universities in China by allocating resources such as staff salaries to participating universities and allowing them to execute relevant administrative processes, although essential aspects of the CI programmes such as staff training, textbook resources, HSK assessments are still managed by the centralised office. As Chinese state-owned media claims, *Hanban*'s reform is to "disperse the Western misinterpretation that the organisation served as China's ideological marketing machine" and will better facilitate the promotion of Chinese culture and language overseas (Xi 2020). While China's managed cultural globalisation programmes adapt to the global trends, it is important to understand Chinese individuals' response to and interactions with these changing policies, especially state-sponsored OCAs who work on the frontline of the initiatives.

Meanwhile, cultural globalisation is also taking place at home in China under the state institutions' management. Since Chinese universities are given resources and pushed to achieve state institutions' required standards such as "Double First-Class", they actively recruit OCAs to meet internationalisation requirements. These OCAs' interactions with state institutions and their life trajectories in China provide insights on understanding cultural globalisation's impact within China. As global cultural shaping is embodied in the OCAs who return to China, they bring cultural globalisation back to China. For example, returned OCAs bring their overseas work and communication styles into Chinese universities and state institutions. At the same time, they must meet behaviour standards set by these state institutions. The middlestage can thus be observed. For example, while the OCAs who return to China must demonstrate their loyalty to state institutions, many of them rely on Virtual Private Network (VPN)[27] to obtain

[27] Virtual Private Network (VPN) is an online technology that creates a private network connection across a public network connection to encrypt a user's internet traffic.

information from overseas. The OCAs need to use both thin and deep conviviality to negotiate with their realities and identities. It is expected that the OCAs who return to China will shape China's participation in cultural globalisation in the long run, thus their middlestage in China must be carefully investigated.

Under China's managed cultural globalisation, many global frontstage performances are reinterpreted to curate diverted meanings. For example, Joseph Nye, the political scientist who introduced the concept of 'soft power', shared an awkward experience he had in China:

> "One of the most intriguing occasions was an invitation to address the School of Marxism at Peking University in Beijing. I was treated royally. When it came time for my lecture to some 1500 students, I was seated alone at a table on a podium covered with gorgeous flowers with a large screen on the wall behind me with an enlarged video of my performance. In the course of my speech, I addressed the question of how China could increase its soft power and I mentioned the harassment of the great Chinese artist Ai Weiwei as an example of too tight control over civil society. There was a slight titter in the crowd, but at the end of my lecture, the dean of the School of Marxism took the stage and gave a long flowery thanks that the author of the concept of soft power had come to address the school. As he went on, however, I noted that my translator was skipping much of what he said. I later asked a Mandarin-speaking Canadian friend who was present in the front row what the dean had said. In summary: "We are flattered to have Professor Nye here, but you students must realise that his use of the concept is overly political and we prefer to restrict it to cultural issues." (Nye 2017:3)

In Joseph Nye's case, a different performance is imposed on the original performance, and the performer is pushed off the frontstage to a middlestage space, thus the meanings of the original performance are reinterpreted. Although the performer remains on the frontstage, he is no longer allowed to participate in the frontstage performances, and his performances are diverted to generate new meanings. On a new frontstage, the dean becomes the performer-in-charge, and 1500 students are the audience. However, the middlestage lens reveals that the state is the real audience to the added performance, as the dean takes control of the stage to ensure the political correctness of the performances and demonstrates his institutional patriotism. These middlestages created by re-interpretations of global cultural performances should be further investigated.

I also suggest that the research scope for the middlestage be expanded. In the case of China's managed cultural globalisation, the curations, negotiations, and re-imaginations on the middlestage are co-produced by individual state-sponsored OCAs and state institutions. The middlestage lens can be used to examine beyond state-individual interactions and provide insights into various aspects of our everyday life.

The middlestage plays an important role in the cultural industry. For example, professional performers (e.g., singers, actors) who give frontstage performances must also give middlestage performances in interviews where they reveal a certain degree of their true selves to curate self-presentations to promote their work (e.g., a concert, a movie). On this middlestage, the performers can no longer stick to a script but need to share opinions and stories from their real lives, according to the key scenarios set by the cultural industry. This middlestage is also observed on social media, where the performers post status updates to keep their followers engaged with their front and middlestage performances. The middlestage allows performers to express their authentic selves to a certain degree, yet their images are managed by professional agencies in the cultural industry who handle the performers' contracts and publicity and regulate their middlestage behaviours. The performers are shaped by the cultural industry; meanwhile, their performances shape the cultural industry in return. In other words, the performers negotiate power with the cultural industry while producing middlestage performances.

Another example of the middlestage is the general work environment where an employee negotiates power with an employer. A middlestage is observed when employees curate their self-presentations of who they are at work and outside work situations to an employer. An example shared by several OCA participants who sought employment opportunities in China after they completed their overseas programmes indicated that Chinese female job seekers usually give false information on their relationship status to their potential employers to create an impression that their employment will not be disturbed by maternity leave in the near future. The employer often considers these middlestage performances when hiring staff, assigning work, permitting leaves, and giving promotions. The employees are shaped by the employer's company culture, while the employees' middlestage behaviours actively shape the company culture in return. The employees negotiate power with their employers through these middlestage performances.

The middlestage is becoming increasingly visible in today's postmodern world where people constantly curate their self-presentations in a world of reality-TV shows and social media feeds. The audience often consumes professional performers' middlestage performances more than their frontstage performances by following news and feeds about their private lives. An employer can use social media accounts to conduct pre-screening on their potential employees and also interact with an employee in their private life through emails, instant messaging, and social media platforms. Future research on the middlestage can explore ethnographic data from diverse fields focusing on various scenarios and groups of people. Meanwhile, it is important to be reminded that when analysing a performance, the researcher should stick to the reference point of this particular performance (Goffman 1956:77). This is especially important for understanding performances on the middlestage, where stage boundaries are unstable and blur.

The thesis concludes with a snapshot of a pioneer middlestage performer, Truman, a fellow who was born into *The Truman Show* and lived his entire life in front of cameras in a reality TV programme watched by audiences worldwide. Truman later realised the set-up realities that he was living in and was determined to leave the stage. The director of the reality TV programme in the film explained,

> "Truman could leave at any time. If his was more than just a vague ambition, if he was absolutely determined to discover the truth, there is no way we could prevent him" (Weir 1998).

The Truman Show reflects our everyday life constructed with multi-layered performances on the frontstage, the backstage, and the middlestage. Truman successfully left the show in the movie, but in reality, the middlestage might not be easily escapable. Understanding the middlestage provides a path for individual performers to comprehend the world as a stage and seek meanings during their performances. As a South Africa-based OCA shared,

> "I feel empowered by my overseas experience. Chinese culture teaches me to be restricted, which I appreciate, but being restricted doesn't mean that you lose yourself," he paused, pondered, and concluded, "life is short and the stage is yours. Take control or someone else will."

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Appendix: Informed Consent Form for Participants

An Investigation of Overseas Chinese Academics

Informed Consent Form for Participants

My name is TIAN Chen, and I am a PhD candidate in Anthropology at the University of Cape Town (UCT). I am currently conducting an investigation of Overseas Chinese Academics, and I would like to invite you to be a participant in the project.

The research data will be collected through participant observations, formal and informal interviews, and will also include any additional data (e.g., online/offline writing) that you are willing to share. By becoming a research participant:

- *I agree to participate in the captioned research project.*
- *I have read this consent form and the information it contains and was given the opportunity to ask questions about them.*
- *I agree with my responses being used for educational and research purposes. I understand that my name and organisation will remain anonymous for confidentiality, but my occupation and position may be included in the published research.*
- *I understand that I can share experiences and express opinions using a fictional identity **'the question person'**, and no record of my identity will be revealed in any interview notes or research data.*
- *I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in the project and I have the right to withdraw from it at any stage.*
- *I understand that this research might be published in a research journal or book. In the case of thesis publication, the thesis will be available to readers at the UCT Library in printed form, and possibly in electronic form with online access.*