



XINYUE CHEN

REVIEW-ESSAY

## Where the River Reaches Home

*Three recent books narrate family histories that flow over time and space. But when identities evolve across borders, language holds the memory that carries us back to where we came from.*

YANGYANG CHENG — AUGUST 22, 2024

HISTORY

MEMOIR



In ancient Chinese [mythology](#), there was once a war between a king and a water spirit. The king won. In its fury, the defeated water spirit smashed one of the eight pillars at the edge of the land that connected heaven and earth. The celestial pole tilted. The sky inclined toward the northwest, and the earth sank to the southeast, which is why rivers in China flow in that direction. Descendants of the king established the [Kingdom of Chu](#) in the 8th century B.C. and migrated south from the central plains to the valley of the Yangtze river and its tributaries. The rivers were a source of fear and awe, but they also provided abundance. The kingdom flourished into one of the strongest in the land, and for over 400 years, Jingzhou stood as the capital of Chu.

A port city in present-day Hubei province, Jingzhou is my ancestral hometown. It is where my father grew up, and where his father still lives. In 278 B.C., when the region we now call China was ruled by not one central authority but several warring states, Jingzhou fell to invading troops from the neighboring kingdom of Qin. The news reached Qu Yuan, a Chu nobleman and poet who had been slandered and exiled. Qu Yuan penned an [elegy](#) for his fallen sovereign: “But only grief came for the rich, blest River Kingdom / For its cherished ways, now lost beyond recall.”<sup>1</sup> Then he drowned himself in the Miluo river.

Qin would go on to vanquish all other rival kingdoms and establish the first Chinese empire in 221 B.C., though its reign was short-lived. A little over a decade later, rebels flying the banner of Chu overthrew Qin, fulfilling the prophecy “so long as three households of Chu remain, they will be Qin’s undoing.” Every year, on the fifth day of the fifth month in the lunar calendar, Chinese people celebrate *duanwujie* (端午节), Dragon Boat Festival, in honor of Qu Yuan.



Like millions of children in China, I recited verses from the Chu Kingdom — *chuci* (楚辞) or “songs of the south” — and learned about Qu Yuan at school. Work had brought my parents to neighboring Anhui province, where I was born and raised. On holidays such as *duanwujié*, I would call my grandparents in Jingzhou and they would ask when I might visit again; I had not been back since infancy. My mother insisted schoolwork was the priority and family time could wait. It was the 1990s. For those of us from the provinces, success was measured by how far one could make it away from home.

“ It is both privilege and curse of the diaspora that they can treat their homeland as an academic abstraction and interrogate it without reservation. ”

When I was 10, my always-healthy father went to sleep one night and never woke up. The promised trip to his ancestral home was indefinitely postponed. Our familial bond to Jingzhou was submerged by a sorrow too deep to wade across. Only distance and time could dilute the pain.

I moved to the United States for graduate school in 2009. I was 19. My plane took off from Shanghai, near where the Yangtze meets the sea. It was a one-way flight out of China, but the unspoken assumption was that someday I would cross the ocean again, in the other direction. At that age, time seemed open-ended. Yet part of me already knew that every passage can become a path of no return.

At first, there was always an excuse to delay the trip back. School was busy, and I needed time to heal. When deteriorating political conditions in China prompted me to pick up the pen and critique Beijing’s policies, the prospect of return became more elusive. Fifteen years after my departure, I am the most physically distant from the land of my birth, but I’ve never felt more emotionally connected to it. My longing is not simple nostalgia or homesickness. I had never seriously contemplated what it means to be Chinese before I left China. The state did not welcome curiosity about nationhood and belonging, even as it demanded unwavering allegiance; an honest exploration might expose fissures in the official historical narrative, and upset its claim to power.

In school, all permissible questions about Chinese history and politics had been asked and answered in our textbooks. We were taught that the Qin “unified” China, but whose unity, and at what cost? We memorized descriptions of Qu Yuan as “a great patriotic poet,” but which country was he loyal to and what did such loyalty entail? The pressures of schoolwork and the college entrance exams did not allow for such rogue inquiries. The national map was presented to us as a sacred symbol: every inch was “part of China” since time immemorial. Only after stepping out of those territorial bounds was I able to question them. It is both privilege and curse of the diaspora that they can treat their homeland as an academic abstraction and interrogate it without reservation.



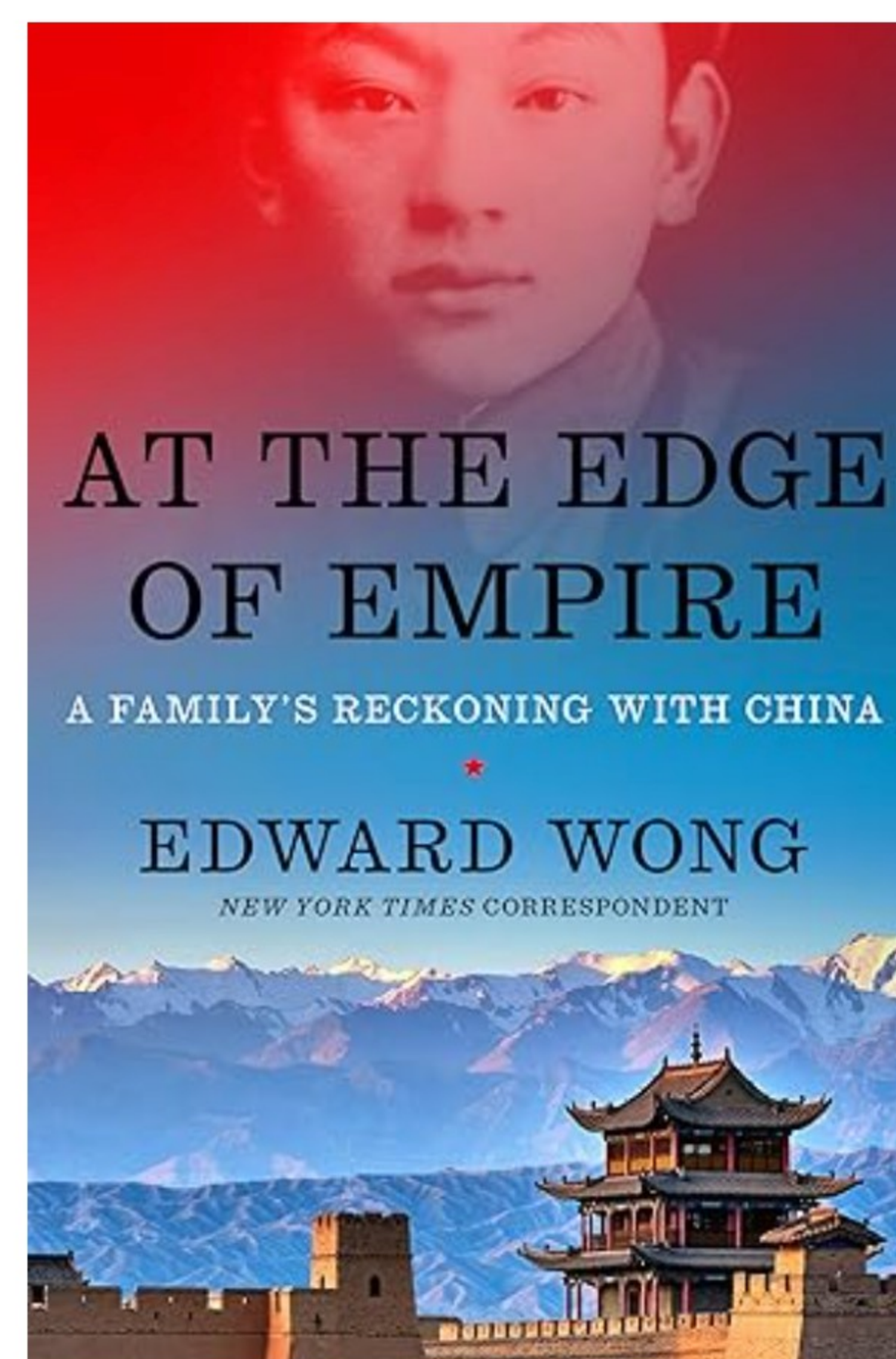
Yangyang Cheng at age 3, with her parents at her father's graduation in China, 1993. (courtesy of Yangyang Cheng)

“ I am the most physically distant from the land of my birth, but I’ve never felt more emotionally connected to it. ”



The same year I left China, Edward Wong was finding his way back. Having moved to Beijing in 2008 as a reporter for *The New York Times*, Wong traveled south Guangdong province, to his father's hometown of Taishan.

In his reported memoir *At the Edge of Empire: A Family's Reckoning with China* (Penguin Random House, 2024), he writes that for second-generation Chinese-Americans like himself, a visit to the ancestral village “was almost a cliché.” It’s a pilgrimage, a lesson about one’s parents, and a reprieve from “the realm of whiteness.” But Wong’s book does not indulge clichéd immigrant narratives, where one escapes an oppressive, poverty-stricken homeland for better shores, and experiences from the old country bolster the new nation’s self-congratulatory myth. A former Iraq War correspondent, Wong holds no illusions about the U.S. empire. Rather, *At the Edge of Empire* is a family epic about a father who could never fully leave China, and a son who has returned to trace his father’s path, the specters of past empires haunting every step.



[Buy the book >](#)

This story begins over two millennia ago in the Kingdom of Wong, whose territory stretched across the plains just south of the Yellow River valley, before it was annexed by Chu in 648 B.C. The Wong clan migrated and, in the 13th century, a branch settled by the Pearl River delta in modern-day Guangdong. Far from the seats of northern imperial powers, the southern coast formed a liminal space, where laws and borders could be traversed. People, goods and ideas flowed across the waters. After its defeat in the First Opium War in 1842, the Qing empire ceded part of its territory on the southern periphery to the British. In 1932, two decades after the Qing were overthrown, Wong’s father was born in Hong Kong.



Yook Kearn Wong (left), around age 3, with his older brother Sam, age 7, in Hong Kong. (courtesy of Edward Wong)

Yook Kearn Wong spent his childhood between the British colony, where the family ran a herbal medicine shop, and their ancestral village in Guangdong. After Japan occupied Hong Kong during WWII, he moved back to Guangdong in 1942, which was still partly under Chinese control and deemed safer. In 1949, disillusioned by the ineptitude of Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government, Yook Kearn embraced the Communist takeover as a liberation and a chance for renewal. Against his family’s wishes — his older brother had moved to the U.S. for school two years before — he boarded a train north to attend university in Beijing. When the Korean War broke out in 1950, eager to serve, he volunteered for the new government’s fledgling air force.

Military service took Yook Kearn further north across the Great Wall to Manchuria, the ancestral homeland of the Manchu

Qing emperors. When Japan occupied the region from 1931 till the end of WWII, Changchun was the capital of the puppet regime Manchukuo. Later, during the Chinese Civil War, Communist troops seized Changchun from the Nationalists by enacting a blockade around the city. An estimated 160,000 civilians [died](#) of starvation and related causes. Two years after the siege, Yook Kearn trained at the air force academy in Changchun, but he never went to the Korean front. Deemed unfit for the air force — most likely due to his family’s merchant status and overseas connections, instead he was transferred to the army and dispatched west to Xinjiang. The western edge of the Qing empire’s expansion to



Central Asia was literally named “the new frontier.”

After six years of spreading communism to Kazakh natives, and setting up agricultural garrisons on nomadic land, Yook Kearn returned to university to study aircraft engineering in 1957, confident that he had proven his devotion to the Party and optimistic for his country’s future. He wrote a letter to his brother in the U.S. The Cold War had forced the siblings onto opposite sides of a geopolitical chasm, and Yook Kearn yearned for his brother’s return: “Remember an old adage: although the Kingdom of Liang may be good, it is not a place to linger because it will never truly be home.”<sup>2</sup>

Yook Kearn’s optimism did not last. The Anti-Rightist Campaign that began in the summer of 1957 soon rippled on his campus. Struggle sessions against a fellow student shook his faith. In 1958, Mao launched the Great Leap Forward which plunged the country into a famine, and malnutrition gave Yook Kearn dropsy. But the final blows came in 1960: His application for Communist Party membership was rejected, and he was prohibited from joining his classmates at the aircraft factory.

“Father finally realized that the party would never trust him, no matter how hard he worked for the cause or what sacrifices he made,” Edward Wong writes. Yet the same overseas connections that had doomed his chances in China paved his way out. With help from his family, Yook Kearn made it back to Hong Kong in 1963 by way of Macau, then a Portuguese colony, and emigrated to the U.S. four years later. Decades later, at their home in Washington D.C., he showed his son a black-and-white photo taken in the 1950s. In it, he wore a plain military uniform and a cap. There was a darkened spot in the photo, at the center of the cap where the red star of communist China should have been. While in Hong Kong, Wong’s grandfather had rubbed out the star in the photo, for fear of retribution from British authorities. The photo held memories from a decade on the northern frontiers; the missing star spoke the broken promise of a revolution.

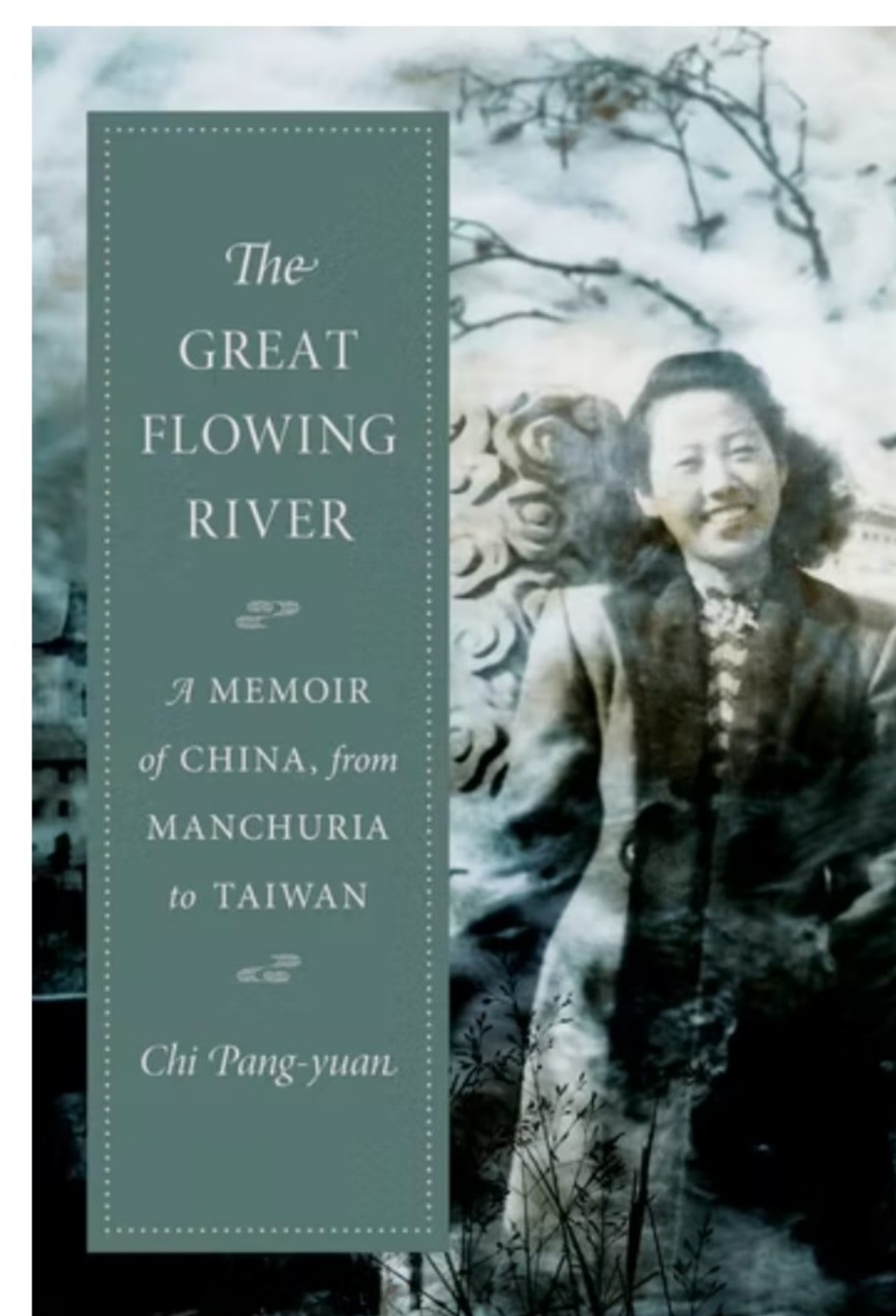


Yook Kearn Wong as a soldier in the People’s Liberation Army, stationed in Yining, Xinjiang, in 1953. (courtesy of Edward Wong)

“ Wong’s book does not indulge clichéd immigrant narratives, where one escapes an oppressive, poverty-stricken homeland for better shores. ”

Every frontier is also a homeland. For Chi Pang-yuan (齐邦媛), her ancestral home was in Manchuria by the banks of the Liao River, also called *juliube* (巨流河), the great flowing river. The publication of her memoir [巨流河](#) in Taiwan in 2009 was a major event in Sinophone literature. Published more recently in English under the title [The Great Flowing River: A Memoir of China, from Manchuria to Taiwan](#) (Columbia University Press, 2018, tr. John Balcom), the heart-wrenching family saga was back in the spotlight this year after Chi passed away in March at the age of 100.

Chi writes in the foreword to the English edition: “The twentieth century is not too long ago. Gigantic human griefs were buried with it.” Composing the volume was a way to unearth the sorrows. With few firsthand accounts of WWII and its aftermath by Chinese authors, the memoir is also an act of



[Buy the book >](#)



remembrance, to preserve “the blood of the martyrs and the tears of the exiled.” Like Wong’s book, *The Great Flowing River* revolves around a father and his child as they bore witness to history. But for Chi, her life unfolded alongside her father’s, like two rivers rushing in parallel. Wong’s father journeyed from the southern coast to the northern borderlands. For Chi and her father, the north was the start of their exile.



Chi Pang-yuan (top right) with her family (from bottom right, anti-clockwise: sister Xingyuan, father Chi Shiying, mother Pei Yuzhen, sister Ningyuan, brother Zhenyi).  
(Columbia University Press)

Born in 1924 to a family of Han, Mongolian and Manchu heritage, Chi was on the run at an early age, after her father took part in a failed coup against the Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin. The rebels were crushed at the Liao River, unable to cross its flowing waters, but her father survived. He fled south and joined the Nationalist Party in Shanghai in 1926, inspired by its “Three Principles of the People”: nationalism, democracy and people’s livelihood. Recognizing the importance of education for national salvation, he convinced the Nationalist government to establish China’s first national middle school in Beijing in 1934, where his children studied.

Forged in the flames of national peril, the school took its motto from a 2000-year-old prophecy: “So long as three households of Chu remain, they will be Qin’s undoing.” The vow of allegiance and revenge had expanded beyond its original association with the ancient Chu kingdom to express a new Chinese national consciousness.

The war with Japan forced millions to flee inland up the Yangtze River, including the Chis. The ships sailed at night to evade Japanese bombs. Refugees swarmed the overcrowded vessels, and many fell overboard. Chi’s infant sister died of illness during the grueling voyage, and her mother barely survived. The family eventually reached Sichuan in the Yangtze River basin, where the Nationalist government had set up its wartime capital in the city of Chongqing. Chi’s school also moved to the area. But the lost territories in the north were never far from their minds, as evinced not just in the school’s motto but also in its anthem: “Learning to know shame so as to know uprightness, only the people of Chu have upright men ... I come from the north and to the north I will return.”

On the eve of Japan’s defeat in 1945, Chi received devastating news: her first love, who left Manchuria to become a fighter pilot for the Nationalists, had perished over the skies of central China. As the Chinese Civil War raged on in the northeast, Chi stayed in the south and studied English literature at Wuhan University. On graduating, a teaching opportunity brought her to Taiwan in 1947. Chi writes: “My father bought a round-trip ticket for me, but I knew I would be buried in Taiwan.”

As literary historian David Der-wei Wang points out in his introduction to Chi’s book, despite the vast distance between Manchuria and Taiwan, “the fate of one is actually the mirror reflection of the other’s.” Historically outside of “China proper,” the two regions were forced into a single country by the Qing conquest of Taiwan in 1683. Both had been “targeted by the imperialist forces in the East as well as the West,” Wang explains, and both endured Japanese colonization in the 20th century. Manchuria was the Nationalists’ first major loss to the Communists in 1948, and after 1949 Taiwan was the banished Nationalists’ last stand.



Like the Liao River, the Taiwan strait became another body of water that could not be crossed. In her new home, Chi married a railway engineer and had three sons. She eschewed politics and dedicated herself to her family and work: teaching, editing, and translating Sinophone literature from Taiwan into English. Yet her refusal to participate in politics was itself a political position, rooted in a disdain for ideological fervor, a commitment to beauty, and a boundless compassion for all of humanity. Seeing Japanese soldiers awaiting repatriation from Taiwan, Chi thought they too had a family and were far from home.



Chi Pang-yuan (right) and her mother, 1950. (Columbia University Press)

After settling in Taiwan, Chi studied and taught in the U.S. through the Fulbright program, first at the University of Michigan in 1956 and then in Indiana in the late 1960s. Family duties compelled her to return to Taiwan in 1969, where she worked on [anthologizing](#) Sinophone literature produced on the island in “a common search for identity.” As she puts it, “we wanted to contribute something out of our feelings for the place, even before ‘Do you love Taiwan or not?’ became a political slogan.”

“I was fortunate (or perhaps unfortunate) to have been born into a household of a revolutionary,” Chi writes. Her father moved to Taiwan in 1949, but was expelled from the Nationalist Party five years later for opposing Chiang Kai-shek’s policies, and risked imprisonment in a failed attempt to organize a new Chinese Democratic Party. He died in 1987, three weeks after martial law was lifted. His resting place is on the slope of Mount Miantian (“facing the heavens”) on Taiwan’s northern coast. Chi chose her burial site to be directly below his. Both graves overlook the Pacific ocean. Chi’s father had said that from the grave, if one looked northeast, “the ocean flowed home toward Bohai Bay,” where the Great Flowing River enters the sea.

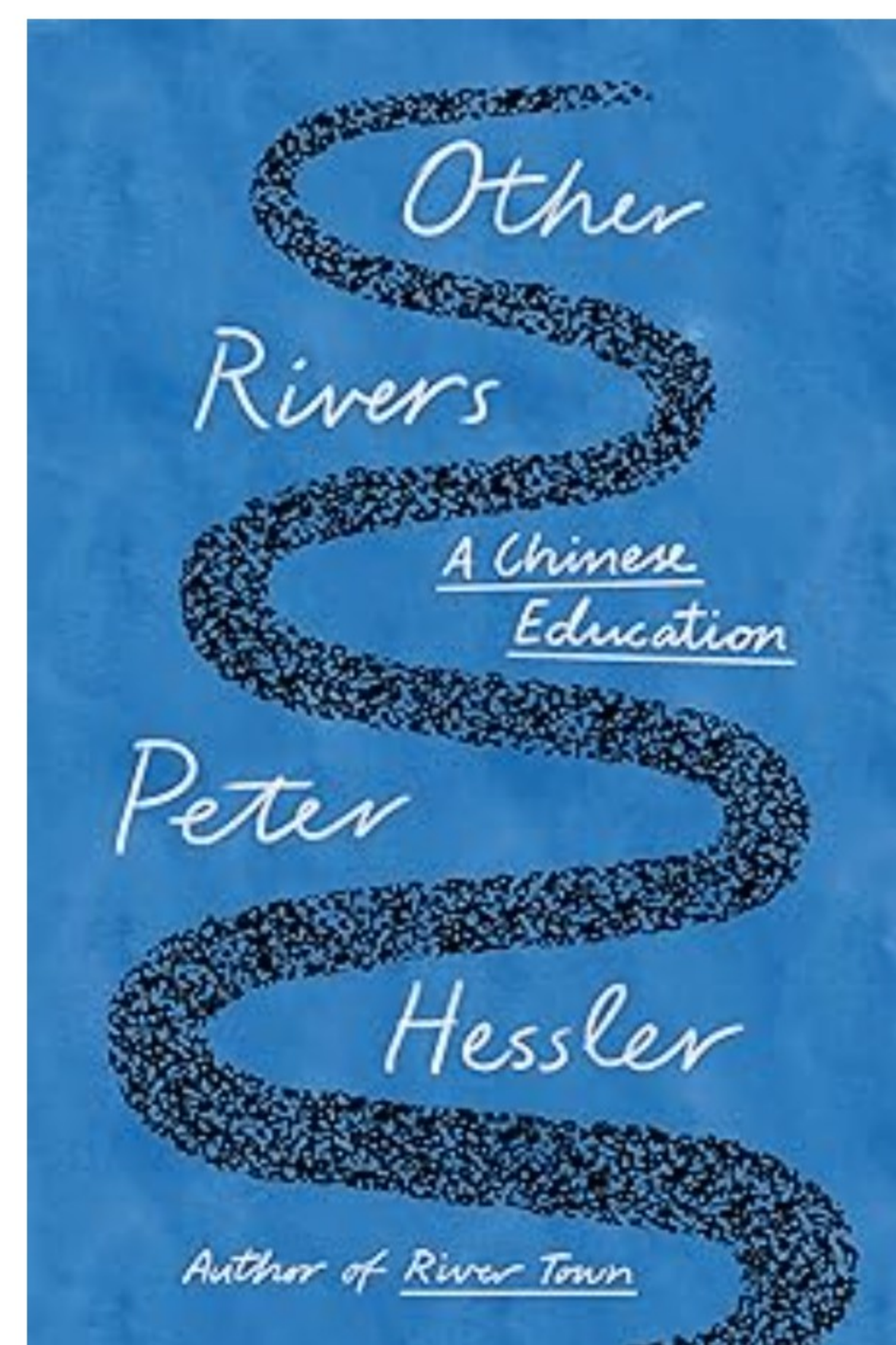
““ Like Wong’s book, *The Great Flowing River* revolves around a father and his child as they bore witness to history. ””

On the other side of the Pacific, another young Chinese scholar from Manchuria studied in the U.S. in the 1930s, switching his major from literature to mining engineering in the hope that the latter would better serve China’s modernization. His name was Zhang Shenfu. After seven years in America, Zhang returned to China and worked in mining for the Nationalist government. In 1946, he was dispatched to Fushun, a Manchurian city near the Liao river which was home to the largest coal mining operation in East Asia during Japanese occupation. There, Zhang was captured and killed by Communist agents. His family also made their way to Taiwan, and one of his sons later emigrated to the U.S.



In 2019, 73 years after Zhang Shenfu's death, his American-born granddaughter Leslie Chang, a journalist, enrolled his great-granddaughters, Ariel and Natasha, at a public elementary school in Chengdu, Sichuan province. The girls' father, Peter Hessler, had returned to China to teach at Sichuan University. The Missouri native had first lived in China as a Peace Corps volunteer in the late 1990s, when he taught English at a teachers' college in Fuling, a small town by the Yangtze River. He documented the experience in his acclaimed 2001 book, *River Town*, to which his latest memoir, *Other Rivers: A Chinese Education* (Penguin Random House, 2024), is a worthy sequel.

With a fluid pen and an eye for detail, in *Other Rivers* Hessler chronicles three generations of Chinese students: his former students from Fuling, who are now middle aged; his current students at Sichuan University; and his daughters' schoolmates. While Chi's and Wong's books personify the seismic shifts of the last century, *Other Rivers* covers the most recent decades, where history unfurls through the quotidian: work, homework, marriage, child-rearing. Yet the underlying transformations are no less profound, as echoed in a refrain of the book: "Everything has changed; nothing has changed."



[Buy the book >](#)



LEFT: Peter Hessler teaching in Fuling, fall of 1996.  
(courtesy of Peter Hessler)

Hessler's former students in Fuling were born at the end of the Mao era. Despite their modest backgrounds, "their luck was historical," Hessler remarks. The economic growth they experienced was embodied in the physical growth of Hessler's current students: in 1997, his 5'9 frame towered over his class; two decades later, it was the reverse. But beneath these new heights, wounds from the collective era were still raw, and market reforms had led to new modes of [precarity](#) and displacement. Capital flowed toward profit; people and places were

left behind. The only way to stay afloat was to swim faster and harder.

"For many citizens," Hessler observes, "the drive to escape poverty was over, but there was still something desperate about how hard people worked and the ways they pushed their children." *Gaokao*, the college entrance exam, was "the most terrifying specter." His students were traumatized by the *gaokao*, but a majority supported keeping the system, because "numbers are incorruptible." (I'm reminded of what my middle school English teacher in Anhui used to say: "Exams are unfair, but they are fairer than life.")

Just like the 2008 Sichuan earthquake that affected many of Hessler's students, the ground is shifting in China. Lives have become unmoored. People wrestle power out of powerlessness and certitude from uncertainty by grabbing onto symbols of permanence and impartiality: textbooks, exams, numbers that are incorruptible. As Hessler observes, the intense competition in Chinese society also sustains political oppression: his students feared being outperformed by their peers more than they feared the state. Scarcity breaks solidarity. Precarity limits the collective imagination. When everyone is racing to beat the competition, few stop to question the rules of the game. It's a lesson that applies not just to China but to capitalism itself, and to international relations.



In 2021, Hessler's time in China came to an abrupt end when his teaching contract was not renewed, likely due to political considerations for the university. He and his family moved back to their home in Colorado, on the western side of the Uncompahgre River. His daughters, pulled out of their class in Chengdu, attended a local public school. Nearly a century ago, their great-grandfather had surveyed mines in the same state, seeking knowledge to power China's future.



Peter Hessler in New York City. (Pan Shiyi)

During his final months in China, Hessler visited Fuling often. He drove through the valleys, searching for places he had been decades before. But that Fuling exists only in memory. After the completion of the Three Gorges Dam in the early aughts, much of the town is now underwater. The world's largest hydroelectric station sits 70 miles upstream of the Yangtze from my ancestral hometown. The dam displaced over a million people and submerged over 150,000 acres of land, including homes, villages, wildlife habitat, and archeological sites dating back to the Neolithic era. Some of the relics were relocated, including the Qu Yuan temple, which was dismantled and rebuilt in a nearby town.

Can history be uprooted, replanted and stay true? By taming water with concrete and steel and flooding over ancient monuments, the Chinese government overwrote former dynasties to inscribe power and victory over the land. But if rivers teach any lesson, it's that political authority is transient. Literature outlives kingdoms and empires.

““ Capital flowed toward profit; people and places were left behind. The only way to stay afloat was to swim faster and harder. ””

Over two thousand years ago, the emperor of Han, successor to the Qin empire, dispatched Su Wu (苏武) as his envoy to the Xiongnu kingdom on the northern steppe. The Xiongnu captured Su Wu and banished him to Lake Baikal in Siberia. Despite decades of exile on foreign soil, Su Wu remained loyal to his emperor. Two thousand years later, Chinese migrants to America, many from Edward Wong's ancestral hometown of Guangdong, were held at Angel Island off the coast of San Francisco under the Chinese Exclusion Act. Some connected their plight to that of Su Wu's and carved poetry onto their cell walls: “Even though Su Wu was detained among the barbarians, he would one day return home.”

As a young child in Manchuria, Chi Pang-yuan heard her mother sing songs about Su Wu herding sheep by Lake Baikal. The ancient tale had become part of the legend of the northern grasslands. Decades later in Taiwan, Chi's mother sang the same songs to Chi's children, as she longed for her homeland in the north. The China of Su Wu's time, if there was a polity called “China,” bore little resemblance to the China we know today, but his story, passed down across millennia, has stayed true to its essence. Each modern teller of the tale has injected it with new meaning, infusing the words with their interpretations of home and national belonging.



Su Wu herding sheep in Siberia. (Wikimedia Commons)

Toni Morrison told us that “water has a perfect memory,” and is forever trying to get back to where it was. What we call



flooding is in fact remembering. So is the work of writers: to remember “where we were, that valley we ran through, . . . and the route back to our original place.” Language, like a river, has an origin and a destination. It also has a body. It can stretch and swell, wound and heal. Each scar becomes a line on the map, remembering the journey.

Language threads through generations and binds one to a place — not necessarily to a physical location but to an idea of home. To suppress a language is to break that bond — as the Chinese government has been doing in Tibet and Xinjiang, where Wong reported from. For those on the margins of empire, to hold onto one’s native tongue is to refuse the center’s hegemonic power.

Having lived nearly half of my life far from my birth country, I describe my Chineseness as a linguistic belonging. It conforms to no authority and requires no authorization. All languages are products of power and bear the markings of empire, but words, like water, can rebel and spill out of bounds. Even when I think and write in English, as in this essay, my native tongue is carried in my body; its cadence and imagery have seeped into my bones and flex through my muscles, leaving its mark on my English, like how a riverbed shapes and is shaped by the waters.

To write about one’s homeland from a foreign land and through a foreign tongue involves an act of translation. In the [words](#) of the English novelist and art critic John Berger:

“

[T]rue translation is not a binary affair between two languages but a triangular affair. The third point of the triangle being what lay behind the words of the original text before it was written. True translation demands a return to the pre-verbal.

”

Language forms rules as well as their transgression. A return to the pre-verbal is a return to a place before the map, before edges were defined and borders were drawn. When the powers of statehood alienate language from the body and ossify words into political monuments, to return to the pre-verbal is to refuse the status quo, forgoing claims of sovereignty and braving a life in exile. To return to the pre-verbal is to go back to the river. Where there is water, one can make a home. ■

1. As translated by David Hawkes in [The Songs of the South](#) (Penguin Classics, 2012). ↩

2. All of Yook Kearn’s letters in the book are translated by Eileen Chengyin Chow. ↩



Yangyang Cheng is a Research Scholar at Yale Law School’s Paul Tsai China Center, where her work focuses on the development of science and technology in China, and U.S.-China relations. Her essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Los Angeles Review of Books* and elsewhere. Born and raised in China, Cheng received her PhD in physics from the University of Chicago.