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Artist's Statement

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, also known as the Chinese Cultural Revolution, was initiated by Mao Zedong, the leader of the People's Republic of China, in 1966 (Lary, 146). For ten years, the attempt to create “a great socialist revolution on the cultural front” meant a locking of borders, a loss of education, mass internal migration, and uncontrollable violence and chaos (Guo, 32-33).

My father, Guang Guo, was in fourth grade when the Cultural Revolution started and schools were shut down. The poor education that Guo and many others experienced could be attributed to knowledge being “under attack because it was permeated by nonproletarian culture.” (Guo, 32) Therefore, much of his middle school education was either learning propaganda in school or not attending class at all. In one of the letters, it is mentioned that Guo's mother brought him to Nankai University to read 大字报, or big character posters during the time he would have been in class for fourth grade. These posters would be a way for civilians to share and communicate their viewpoints without as much censorship as other avenues of media controlled by the Chinese government (Guo, 54).

But education was not the only affected sector of life from the Cultural Revolution. Guo was also forced to complete different forms of manual and non-manual labor, sometimes even with forced migration to rural locations. His first experience was after he had been selected as a “Red Guard” from his middle school in 1969. The Red Guards were a mass organization of

armed students who were commanded by Mao Zedong and initially set out to “eradicate vestiges of traditional culture.” (Guo, 36) These students eventually became associated with mass destruction of historical monuments and sites such as cemeteries, texts, and sculptures, and even murder and suicides of people deemed non-working class (36). When he was around 13 years old, Guo himself took part in the digging and creating holes and tunnels that were meant to provide shelter against tensions with the Soviet Union in the 1970s as a Red Guard (Lary, 153).

Later on in 1974, Guo was sent to work as a cook in rural China. This was part of an elaborate policy where youth were sent to the countryside based on certain qualifications such as whether children were the oldest or youngest sibling. The number of children sent to work on farms or other sources of manual labor totaled to be around 17 million by the end of the Cultural Revolution (33).

A month after Mao Zedong died in September of 1976, the Cultural Revolution came to an end (Lary, 31). Following the end of the ten-year movement, Deng Xiaoping rose to power and restored college entrance exams or 高考 as well as reopened borders with the open-door policy. This allowed people like Guo to attend college and begin applying to foreign universities.

Guo finally immigrated to the United States in 1986 in effect of the Open-Door Policy which began in 1979. After the first twenty years of the policy’s establishment, 320,000 Chinese students and scholars went abroad, 160,000 of whom were self-funded like Guo (Deng, 95). This mass emigration was even keyed the term “出国热” or “fever to leave the country” as the desire among young people to leave China had been building up for a decade (Lary, 157). Much of this desire had to do with the poor education many faced during the cultural revolution as well as the feeling of being stuck within the country for so long. But the process of immigrating was difficult: you had to graduate top of your class, receive a scholarship from university, be granted

permission to leave, and be accepted for a VISA in the United States (157). Therefore, many of the students who left the country had been those who enjoyed “superior schooling” and were often from urban areas like Guo (Deng, 395). The complex process of immigrating also emphasizes a loss of many of the already high-performing students from China, and many Chinese authorities labeled it as a brain drain or “a deliberate attempt by foreign states to cream off China’s best intellects.” (Lary, 157) In combination of all these factors, students’ desperation to leave the country resulted in bribes and struggles as Guo had with the first university he attended. Nonetheless, from 1960 to 1994, there was a nearly 900% increase of the Asian American population (Tamura, 58).

Once in the United States, Guo found himself in the position of the model minority in which “Asian Americans [are] to endure contemporary forms of racism without complaint and to provide brave and loyal service above and beyond that required of other Americans.” (Lee, 380) Although constantly being associated with China instead of the United States and being at target of various inequalities, Guo found himself feeling indebted to the U.S. and west as he described the othering he faced as “okay” and “natural”. At the same time, Guo’s narrative fits into an emerging pattern of Asian immigration into Southern America, where Asian Americans are “part of a truly American national landscape and not simply ghettoized into urban Chinatowns and ethnic enclaves.” (222)

The letters are separated into three sections based off of how I address my father: 爸爸, 爸, and dad. This structure is meant to portray my relationship to my father as I have grown up: 爸爸 being the more endearing term I called him when I was little; 爸 as the name I began feeling awkward with as I reached young adulthood; and dad as what I call him now, a more distant and awkward name, one that cuts apart many of me and my father’s ties and erases many

stories. This form of letters is meant to piece together and rewrite those stories together:
providing both me and my father voices in his oral history.

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