

STARS OVER PROMONTORY

Written by

Paul Thomas Condon

121 Meadow Road
Syracuse, NY 13219 USA
(315) 415-6511 Mobile/Text
paulcondon1957@yahoo.com

EXT. HONG KONG HARBOR, PIER 19, SOUTHERN CHINA - MORNING

The *SS Senator* arrives in Hong Kong Harbor from San Francisco on the morning of November 8, 1870. As weary Pacific Mail Steamship Company passengers stream down the gangway, dockworkers begin to unload cargo from the hold. An enormous pallet soon emerges and is swung around on a yardarm and lowered to the ground. All of the action suddenly comes to a stop as Chinese dockworkers reverently pay their respects while in the presence of such precious freight.

HARBOR MASTER

Good morning, Captain.

(eying the pallet)

That's the largest shipment yet!

CAPTAIN SCOWCROFT

There are three more below deck
just like it.

HARBOR MASTER

They'll be done paying their
respects in a moment. Until then,
we should lower our voices.

CAPTAIN SCOWCROFT

Indeed.

HARBOR MASTER

Let's walk over to my office. I've
made some coffee.

CAPTAIN SCOWCROFT

Ah, wonderful!

As they make their short walk to the Harbor Master's Office, the dockyard soon returns to life, as workers gingerly remove batch after batch of *Zhaohun xiang*, or Spirit Boxes, and place them gently into pull carts.

I've transported many Spirit Boxes
before, but never in such numbers.

HARBOR MASTER

'Tis an odd custom they practice,
collecting the spirit of the
missing worker in a metal container
and shipping it home.

CAPTAIN SCOWCROFT

I'm told that failing to do so will
cause their ancestors a great deal
of distress.

HARBOR MASTER

Well, there should be plenty of content souls in Guangdong Province tonight. These particular boxes are headed to Taishan.

CAPTAIN SCOWCROFT

All of them?
(surprised)

HARBOR MASTER

Yes. A great many young men left Taishan in search of work on the Central Pacific Railway, and now they're returning home, if not bodily, then spiritually, if you will...

CAPTAIN SCOWCROFT

The stories I hear about the way these men died in the High Sierras are enough to make one take stock in the lucky lives we've been able to lead.

The Harbor Master nods, taking a draw on his clay pipe while Chinese dock workers continue their delicate work.

HARBOR MASTER

Yes indeed.
(pointing his pipe stem)
Yes, siree...

Now filled, the hand cart is gently rolled away, only to be replaced by another.

EXT. BANKS OF THE PEARL RIVER DELTA, GUANGDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - LATER

From the banks of a misty Pearl River Delta, young Xingxing relives the extraordinary story of her search for her missing husband along the newly built Central Pacific Railroad in the states of California, Nevada, and Utah. Her incredible quest ends at Promontory Point, site of the completed Transcontinental Railroad. Coming up empty-handed, she plans to return to Taishan with her young son, but not before collecting the spirit of her beloved Zhi Peng, near the site where she believes he perished.

XINGXING

The hallowed names of our brave young men who toiled for the Central Pacific Railroad ride the wind through the towns and villages of the Pearl River Delta, here in Guangdong Province.

My name is Xingxing, which means Star in Chinese. My family's home is set in an ordinary *feng shui* neighborhood, protected on the north side by a thickly forested bamboo grove. A tower serves to protect us from bandits, eager to rob us of our modest belongings. While somewhat prosperous, empty rice bowls and freezing temperatures within our humble, thatch-roofed *siheyuans* have caused us to send many a young man to make his fortune in America, and send the proceeds home to us, however plentiful or meager.

All to build a mighty roadbed in California for their fire-eating machines, winding 7,000 feet high up into the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Once arriving at the summit in 1867, in the bitter cold of winter, our Railroad Chinese dug and blasted their way through fifteen tunnels, comprising over a mile thick of solid granite.

The stories of these young emigres are as numerous as the stars in the sky. Some are tragic, while others served to provide villages, such as mine, with much-needed *Qian*. As for my husband, Zhi Peng, who left Taishan at the age of sixteen, his story was complicated to say the least, forcing my young son and me to travel to America in search of the very stuff deserving of a great story. A story of love and loss, and the realization that bonds so tightly drawn, simply cannot be conquered by tragedy.

EXT. RICE PADDY NEAR TAISHAN VILLAGE, GUANGDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - MORNING

On a late Spring day ten years earlier, Xingxing and Zhi Peng take a break from weeding her family's rice paddy to sit along the edge with their feet in the water. Zhi Peng stops to notice Xingxing's feet as they gently stir the surface, while he removes a stem of rice from his mouth.

ZHI PENG

I wonder why your parents never bound your feet. I hear that Chinese men find women with tiny feet attractive.

XINGXING

They tried, but I kept unwrapping them every chance I got. So, they finally gave up.

(shrugging)

Besides, I don't need tiny feet, I'm already attractive! Don't you think?

ZHI PENG

Well, yes, I mean, uhm....

XINGXING

You'll see someday when I'm older.
(teasingly)

Swinging her jet black hair back and forth.

ZHI PENG

I guess... And what about me? Do you find me-

XINGXING

Attractive?

ZHI PENG

Oh, no! Men aren't attractive, they're good looking, handsome...

XINGXING

I know that! Where do you think I grew up, on a farm?

Both look at each other and laugh. They soon rise and continue to weed the paddy.

Hey, after I feed the pigs, would you like to climb Mount Taishan with me? I've already scaled it once in a little over three hours!

ZHI PENG
You don't say....?

Sloshing through the water before stopping.
Sure, if you want me to.

XINGXING
I do. Oh, the view from the top is
simply spectacular. You can see an
entire province from up there.

ZHI PENG
I'd like nothing better!

Squinting up at the sun.

XINGXING
We'd better get back to work. Do
you know that my father actually
weighs the weeds I pull out of here
to measure my productivity? We use
them to start our stove.

They return to work, bending under the blazing sun to pull
weeds together in the shallow paddy.

EXT. MOUNT TAISHAN, SHANDONG PROVINCE, SOUTHERN CHINA - LATER
That afternoon, Xingxing leads Zhi Peng up six thousand steps
to the top of Mount Taishan. On the way, they stop to rest on
Immortal Bridge.

XINGXING
Come on, just one more rock.
(extending her hand)
Easy does it!

Zhi Peng and Xingxing now sit upon the third and final rock
making up this natural bridge, to catch sight of the valley
below.

ZHI PENG
Why is this called Immortal Bridge?
(leaning back)

XINGXING
Because it's said to have been
built by immortals, giving it its
name.
(reclining)

ZHI PENG
Xingxing?

XINGXING

Yes?

ZHI PENG

Do you consider us immortal?

XINGXING

(turning on her side)

Heavens no! We're going to die
someday, just like our ancestors.

ZHI PENG

No, I mean us...together. Do you
consider our...our friendship to be
immortal?

XINGXING

I honestly never thought of it that
way.

ZHI PENG

Well, I certainly have.

(facing her)

I'd like to think that our
relationship transcends friendship.

XINGXING

I have to agree. We've known each
other forever.

Fixing her eyes on the swiftly passing clouds.

ZHI PENG

Almost immortal-like.

XINGXING

Yes, immortal like.

(pleased)

She clasps his hand as moments pass.

I have one more place to show you.

ZHI PENG

Oh, where to?

XINGXING

The Temple of Azure Clouds.

Causing Zhi Peng to smile, as he too begins to sky gaze.

ZHI PENG

But Xingxing...I believe we're
already there.

They rise and take the short walk to the Temple of Azure Clouds.

INT. HOUSE OF JIETANG, TAISHAN VILLAGE, GUANGDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - SAME TIME

Inside an affluent *siheyuan*, a young Jietang sits down in the courtyard with his father, Liwei, the village magistrate.

JIETANG

Father, will I be able to choose a wife for myself someday?

LIWEI

(laughing)

Do you have anyone in mind?

JIETANG

Actually, I do!

LIWEI

Go on, go on. Who is she?

(amusingly)

JIETANG

A girl named Xingxing, a classmate of mine. Her family lives where the bamboo ends, on the other side of town.

LIWEI

(nodding)

I'm familiar with the place. My son, her father, is a simple farmer!

JIETANG

But his daughter is most beautiful!

LIWEI

I believe you, I believe you.

(openly laughing)

I can hear it in your voice! But, as my eldest son, your marital responsibility is to increase the family wealth, not deduct from it. Surely you know that...

A couple of younger siblings enter the courtyard and begin to play quietly in a far-off corner.

JIETANG

But, Father...!

A determined Liwei now raises his hand to halt his son.

LIWEI

I was young once, Jietang! I know how a pretty girl can play on your emotions. But, you have a duty to this family, and, as your father, I will someday insist that you select a girl of means.

Pounding his fist into his hand.

JIETANG

But...

LIWEI

Enough!

Leveling his eyes at Jietang.

Do you think your mother was the finest-looking maiden I could have married? No! But her family was rich...far richer than mine. While she's not the most beautiful woman in the world, her wealth has more than made up for her shortcomings in that department. And I love her all the more for it!

JIETANG

(hanging his head)

This is so hard... I'm not going to give up easily, Father.

LIWEI

I understand, but unless the financial situation changes regarding Xingxing's family, I will compel! Do you understand, Jietang?

JIETANG

Yes, Father.

A judicious Liwei now leaves the courtyard, leaving a dejected Jietang to be alone with his thoughts.

INT. McDOWELL FARM, GRAY'S STATION, CALIFORNIA - THE NEXT DAY

Ellen McDowell enters her three-story farmhouse with a basket full of vegetables she purchased today off a produce truck in town.

ELLEN

Bill, have you seen our large
cleaver?

Bill enters the kitchen.

BILL

The last time I saw it, it was in
the root cellar. I'll get it for
you.

Ellen begins to pump water into the sink to begin scrubbing
the vegetables. Bill soon emerges from the root cellar.

You never use this one!

ELLEN

Well, I do now. Take a look at
these vegetables I bought from a
Chinese farmer in town.

Bill peers into the basket as Ellen removes the items one by
one.

We have eggplant, Chinese cabbage-

BILL

Wait! What's the matter with good
old California cabbage?

ELLEN

I don't know.
(admiring the small heads)
Somehow, these looked fresher.
Anyways, I thought we'd try them
out, that's all. Here we have what
the farmer calls *Gai Lan*. It's the
Chinese version of broccoli.

BILL

What's broccoli?

ELLEN

It's in the cauliflower family.
According to the farmer, it's best
grown in cool conditions.

BILL

Well, he's got the right place!
(amusingly)

ELLEN

I've read about it before, but
never actually had it. Do you know
who introduced broccoli to the
United States? Hmm...?

BILL

Who?

ELLEN

Why, Thomas Jefferson himself. And get this, it has more vitamin C than the common orange.

BILL

You don't say? Well, I'll be. What else do you got there?

(inquisitively)

ELLEN

Let's see...silk squash, bok choy, that's another kind of Chinese cabbage, uh, snow pea shoots, and lookie here!

BILL

What are those?

ELLEN

(holding them)

A pair of Chinese white radishes!

BILL

Why, Ellen, they're huge!

ELLEN

Um-hum. What's more, you can eat the roots. Go on, take a bite. I did it myself in town this morning.

Bill tears one of the roots off and cautiously begins to chew.

What do you think?

BILL

It's peppery. Well, what do you know?

Admiring the other half of the root between his fingers.

ELLEN

There now...

Wiping her hands with a dish towel.
Time to chop!

BILL

Then what...?

ELLEN
I don't rightly know.

As Bill departs, Ellen pauses in front of the stove to imagine an entirely new breed of meal.

INT. FARMHOUSE OF WEI NONGMIN, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - DUSK

Xingxing kneels in front of two adjoining cooking hearths located in her family's living room. She now places an ample amount of rice husks into each of them to light fires for the evening meal. Xingxing slowly begins to feed the hearths with wood. Her father, Wei Nongmin, stands ready with a pot full of water and a large wok.

WEI NONGMIN
Ah, good fire, Xingxing. Good fire.

XINGXING
What are you making tonight,
Father?

WEI NONGMIN
You should be asking, What are we making tonight! Your Mother's inflammation has returned, and she is unable to get out of bed.

XINGXING
I hope we're not making anything too difficult.

WEI NONGMIN
No, not very. Just dried oysters with lo mein and fresh vegetables...

XINGXING
Sounds pretty straightforward.
(nervously)

WEI NONGMIN
Once our water begins to boil for the lo mein, I want you to cook these soaked oysters in the wok, and, eventually, stir in the vegetables. Get the oil ready for the wok.

XINGXING
Where does this oil come from?

Holding the bottle up to the light.

WEI NONGMIN
From sesame seeds, of course.

XINGXING
But sesame seeds are so small...

WEI NONGMIN
Yes, but ground in large number,
their yield is great. Not to
mention the flavor. Now remove the
top of the bottle, and, using a
circular motion, add some oil
starting at the top of the wok. Not
too much, Xingxing, just a drizzle.

Xingxing capably performs the task.
Let me draw the water off these
oysters.

Dumping the excess water into the side of the hearth.
Alright, start stirring these in
the wok.

Spooning the oysters into the hot metal bowl.

XINGXING
Like this?

WEI NONGMIN
Good, good!

Wei Nongmin now drops the lo mein noodles into the steaming
pot of water.

XINGXING
Shall I dump the chopped vegetables
into the wok now?

WEI NONGMIN
(looking over her
shoulder)
Not yet...

Minutes pass.
You can drop the vegetables in now,
Xingxing!

The sizzling vegetables send steam wafting about the room. At
the same time, Wei Nongmin is seen straining his thoroughly
cooked lo mein.

Time for lo mein.

Adding it into the wok, causing even more steam.
 Grab those tongs and toss
 everything together.

XINGXING
 This looks delicious, Father!

WEI NONGMIN
 Just two more things to add.

XINGXING
 Oh?

WEI NONGMIN
 Special sauce...

XINGXING
 What kind of sauce?

WEI NONGMIN
 Why, oyster sauce, daughter.

XINGXING
 What else?

Wei Nongmin reaches over to the spice rack, finding the very object he has in mind.

WEI NONGMIN
 Star anise!

Tossing two stars into the steeping dish.
 Mix, mix, mix...
 (motioning with his arms)

XINGXING
 Why star anise?

WEI NONGMIN
 Star anise adds great flavor to
 this recipe and has many
 astonishing medicinal properties.
 I'll explain them to you someday.
 As for now, let's eat this while
 it's hot. Get the bowls and call
 your brothers and sister. I'll feed
 your Mother later.

XINGXING
 Yes, Father!

With their bowls filled and everyone seated, Xingxing's family enjoys the maiden meal she so diligently helped prepare.

INT. McDOWELL FARM, GRAY'S STATION, CALIFORNIA - EVENING

Bill McDowell picks over the Chinese vegetables arranged on his plate before pushing them away.

ELLEN
Not to your liking?

BILL
Not entirely. Pass the rolls!

INT. FARMHOUSE OF WEI NONGMIN, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE, SOUTHERN CHINA - NIGHT

WEI NONGMIN
Come on, Aihan. I'll help you sit up. I've brought you some lo mein and hot tea. Here we go...

Wei Nongmin gently gets his wife into a sitting position.
That's it!... Let's start with some tea.

AIHAN
(barely audible)
Did you remember the star anise,
Wei?

WEI NONGMIN
Yes, yes. It's in the lo mein that I'm about to feed you.

Aihan breathes a sigh of relief. Wei Nongmin tucks a napkin under her chin.

AIHAN
I was in the garden only yesterday.
My, this inflammation came on so strong this morning...

WEI NONGMIN
I know. This will help.

Bringing the bowl closer to her mouth.
I've chopped everything up to make it easier for you to swallow.

AIHAN
You're a good man.

WEI NONGMIN
There now. Here we go...

Wei Nongmin takes a small portion of lo mein with his chopsticks and places it into her half-opened mouth.
Good?

Aihan, forcing a smile, nods her head in approval.

I'll have you know that Xingxing
ably assisted me tonight with the
meal. She was so attentive! You
should have seen her. So
inquisitive.

(laughing quietly)

Aihan merely acknowledges his words and soon allows another helping into her mouth.

AIHAN
We're raising a mighty fine girl,
Wei.
(coughing)

WEI NONGMIN
Yes, we are. More tea?

AIHAN
Yes.
(taking a sip)
That's better. She's growing up
before our very eyes.
(weeping quietly)

WEI NONGMIN
No time for that.

Patting her hand.

A little more lo mein now...

Aihan complies.

There, let that get into you.
More tea?

AIHAN
(shaking her head)
No... You know, somehow I feel
better. I think I'll get out of
bed...

Removing her sheet and blanket.

WEI NONGMIN
Not so fast. You get some rest, and
we'll see how you are in the
morning.

Aihan takes her husband's hand, gripping it tightly.

AIHAN

You're right, Wei. I'll see you in
the morning.

WEI NONGMIN

I'll look in on you in a little
while to see if you need anything.
Get some rest.

AIHAN

Alright, and tell Xingxing I'm
grateful...

WEI NONGMIN

I will.

Wei Nongmin, gathering the bowl and teacup, tiptoes out of
the room, sliding the curtain shut behind him.

EXT. WEI NONGMIN FARMYARD, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - THE NEXT DAY

The next morning, a rejuvenated Aihan returns to the garden
to work her particular brand of cultivation, just as the
family rooster extols the break of day.

INT. McDOWELL FARMHOUSE, GRAY'S STATION, CALIFORNIA -
AFTERNOON

Bill McDowell has just returned from town with a leaflet
being handed out in Gray's Station.

ELLEN

What's that you're holding in your
hand?

BILL

A new law, passed by Congress,
signed by President Lincoln,
creating a transcontinental
railroad connecting the Atlantic
and Pacific oceans. They were
passing copies out in town.

ELLEN

But how exactly does this involve
Gray's Station?

BILL

Well, if I read the Sierra Nevada mountain range correctly, the Donner Pass would be the most likely place to construct the tracks. And that would place Gray's Station smack dab in its path.

ELLEN

I see, but-

BILL

Let me skim through this paper, and maybe we'll understand this news a little better.

He now spreads the document out on the kitchen table.
Ellen, can you get me my glasses?

Ellen retrieves her husband's glasses, then proceeds to sit across from him at the table.

Let's see here.

Thirty Seventh Congress of the United States
At the Second Session
Begun and Held at the City of Washington in the District of Columbia on Monday the second day of December one thousand eight hundred and sixty one
An Act To aid in the construction of a railroad and telegraph line from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean, and to secure to the Government the use of the same for postal, military, and other purposes.

Looking over the rims of his glasses.

Told you!

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,
Blah, blah, blah. Uhm...

A few minutes pass before Bill finds something pertinent to Gray's Station.

Here we go!
Section 8.

(MORE)

BILL (CONT'D)

And be it further enacted, That the line of said railroad and telegraph shall commence at a point on the one hundredth meridian of a longitude west from Greenwich, between the south margin of the valley of the Republican River and the north margin of the valley of the Platte River, in the Territory of Nebraska, at a point to be fixed by the President of the United States, after actual surveys; thence running westerly upon the most direct, central, and practicable route, through the territories of the United States, the western boundary of the Territory of Nevada, there to meet and connect with the line of the Central Pacific Railroad Company of California.

Here's where we come in...

Section 9. The Central Pacific Railroad Company of California, a corporation existing under the laws of the State of California, are hereby authorized to construct a railroad and telegraph line from the Pacific coast, at or near San Francisco, or the navigable waters of the Sacramento River, to the eastern boundary of California, upon the same terms and conditions, in all respects, as are contained in this act for the construction of said railroad and telegraph line first mentioned, and to meet and connect with the first mentioned railroad and telegraph line on the eastern boundary of California.

That's us, Ellen. In Gray's Station, by God!

Raising his knee and slapping it.

Each of said companies shall file their acceptance of the conditions of this act in the Department of the Interior within six months after the passage of this act.

APPROVED, July 1, 1862.
Boomtown!

Pounding his fist on the table.

Gray's Station will become a
boomtown. Can you believe this?
Why, this is wonderful, Ellen!

ELLEN
To be sure, but what changes will
it bring?

EXT. ON A VILLAGE PATHWAY, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - DAY

School has let out, and Xingxing is walking home. Following
behind her is a determined Jietang.

JIETANG
Xingxing, wait up!

Xingxing turns around and, realizing it's Jietang, continues
to walk. This causes Jietang to quicken his pace.

Xingxing, I mean to have a word
with you.

XINGXING
I'm simply not interested in
anything you have to say!

JIETANG
Please. Slow down, Xingxing!

Xingxing stops and slowly turns around.

XINGXING
Very well.

Allowing her pursuer to catch up, an out-of-breath Jietang
soon appears and stands directly in front of her.

What is it, Jietang?

JIETANG
(catching his breath)
I just want to talk.

XINGXING
I haven't time. I have to get home.
There are chores to do. Have you
ever heard of chores?

JIETANG
Well, yes, but...

XINGXING
Oh, I forgot. You're the son of the
village magistrate.

JIETANG
That's right!

XINGXING
So what would you know about work?

JIETANG
Can we just talk? I need to speak
to you.

XINGXING
About what?
(impatiently)
Alright, let's talk.

JIETANG
Thank you... I've spoken to my
father about you.

XINGXING
Oh really? Concerning what
precisely?

JIETANG
Our future.

Meeting her blank glance.

XINGXING
Our future?! I don't know what you
and your father have in mind, but
as far as you and I together, that
will never happen.

JIETANG
But why? My family has means far
and above what your family has,
surely-

XINGXING
Surely, that doesn't mean anything
to me, if you want to know the
truth!

Turning to resume her walk.

JIETANG
But I could provide you with
everything you could ever want.

XINGXING
I know, but I don't love you,
Jietang.

JIETANG
 (taken aback)
 Maybe not right now, but...

XINGXING
 Jietang, please!

JIETANG
 But, in time, surely you could
 learn to love me.

Taking her hand into his.

Free from want, I could provide you
 a life filled with comfort and
 ease, safe from the world outside.

Withdrawing her hand.

XINGXING
 Never!

JIETANG
 We'll see what your father has to
 say about that.

Seizing her by the arm.

XINGXING
 What exactly are you talking about?

JIETANG
 Look, I've tried to reason with you
 as politely as possible, but you
 leave me no other choice.

Xingxing stands mute before this very determined boy.

I propose that my father meet with
 your father to discuss the terms of
 our marriage. And money, of course!

XINGXING
 Jietang, I've listened to you as
 politely as possible, but you leave
 me no other choice. I'm in love
 with another boy.

JIETANG
 Who?

Now seizing hold of both arms.
 Who!

Shaking her violently.

XINGXING
His name is known to me alone.

JIETANG
Does he live here in Taishan?

Shaking her yet again.

XINGXING
You'll find out someday! Now get
your hands off me! Ouch, you're
hurting me, Jietang!

Xingxing tears herself away from Jietang's commanding grip and swiftly departs the scene.

JIETANG
(shouting defiantly)
You'll be mine, Xingxing. I will
command it! You'll never be rid of
me.

Jietang stops on the pathway and soon turns around, heading to his side of the village.

XINGXING
(shouting back)
Goodbye, Jietang!

Quickening her pace, she soon reaches her family's farm, closes the gate behind her, and, doubling over, gasps wildly for air.

EXT. IMMORTAL BRIDGE, MOUNT TAISHAN, SHANDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - THE NEXT DAY

Once again, Xingxing and Zhi Peng sit atop Immortal Bridge to take in the sun and observe the swiftly passing cloud formations. A shaken Xingxing soon confides in her partner.

XINGXING
Zhi Peng?

ZHI PENG
Hmm?

XINGXING
Something came up yesterday, and I
need to talk to you about it. It
concerns Jietang!

ZHI PENG
Jietang? What about him?

XINGXING

He wants to marry me. And his father, Judge Liwei, is likely to meet with my father...

ZHI PENG

When?

XINGXING

Soon, I'm afraid. Very soon!

They continue their intimate discussion, high above coastal Shandong Province, hoping to resolve this urgent dilemma currently facing them.

INT. OFFICE OF CHARLES CROCKER, CENTRAL PACIFIC RAILROAD, SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA - DAY

A knock is heard on the office door of Charles Crocker, co-director of the Central Pacific Railroad.

CHARLES

Come in, Mr. Strobridge. Sit down.

James sits down facing his boss's enormous desk.

As my construction manager, it's your responsibility to maintain a steady stream of laborers. The numbers I'm looking at here appear to be woefully inadequate!

Pointing to the report in his hand.

JAMES

Sir, if I may.

Getting up to pace the floor of Charles's enormous office.

The workforce here in the Central Valley has proven to be either unwilling or unable to perform the strenuous and often arduous day-to-day work necessary to build the roadbed beyond the foothills, where the incline begins to rise in earnest.

CHARLES

(standing up)

You simply need to work them harder, James! Bring in more Irish!

JAMES

Believe you me, I have. And one
sloven bunch of Micks replaces yet
another. They drink all night and
sweat it off all day, which is no
way to muster the strength needed
for a ten-hour day, let alone half
that shift. Mondays are the
absolute worst!

CHARLES

That comes as a surprise!

Firmly placing his hands on his hips.

JAMES

Well, come along and see for
yourself!

Walking over to slam his pipe on his boss's desk.

I have crews working in Auburn
today. Most, if not all, include
the Irish you so foolishly covet.
My handcar is down the street.
You'll have to pump...

CHARLES

I'm fit enough to handle it! Let's
go.

A determined Charles gathers his coat and leaves the offices
of the Central Pacific Railroad, eagerly heading off to
Auburn, California, with his cantankerous construction
manager.

INT. HEAVENLY GATE TEMPLE, MOUNT TAISHAN, SHANDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - LATER

Xingxing appears with Zhi Peng at the main entrance of the
Heavenly Gate Temple, a Taoist community of priests located
high at the peak of Mount Taishan. She knocks, and a Taoshih
soon opens the door to greet her.

TAOSHIH

May I help you, daughter?

XINGXING

Taoshih.

(bowing reverently)

My partner and I are in trouble and
in need of help.

TAOSHIH
Are you injured, child?

XINGXING
Oh, no. We're in need of spiritual
guidance, Taoshih.

TAOSHIH
I see...

Eying Zhi Peng closely.
Come in. I have a prayer room in
the temple. We can talk there.
Follow me.

Xingxing and Zhi Peng follow the Taoshih into a tiny temple, crammed with alters, shrines, and statues of all sizes, each heavily adorned. The young couple tiptoes past row after row of votive candles emitting vast, celestial points of light. The Taoshih soon shows them into his sparsely furnished prayer room. They all proceed to sit around a crude woven rug, while a diminutive Jade Buddha looks on.

XINGXING
Taoshih, we are most grateful to
meet with you.

TAOSHIH
Please call me Yee.

XINGXING
Very well, Yee.
(embarrassed)
Zhi Peng and I are from the village
of Taishan, and we're very much in
love.

Zhi Peng looks across the rug at the Taoshih, nodding his head.

TAOSHIH
Love can be a wonderful thing. Life-
changing, in fact.

XINGXING
Why, yes, it can.

TAOSHIH
Tell me, how long have you known
each other?

Prompting Zhi Peng to speak.

ZHI PENG

We've known each other our entire lives, Taoshih Yee.

TAOSHIH

Well then, what seems to be the problem?

XINGXING

There's a boy in our village, his name is Jietang.

Choosing her words carefully.

He is from a wealthy, well-connected family, and wants my hand in marriage. I do not love this boy, Yee. Nothing about him appeals to me. In fact, I find him entirely...incompatible.

TAOSHIH

Have you shared this with him?

ZHI PENG

She has, rather poignantly...!

TAOSHIH

What was his response?

XINGXING

He said he will not rest until he takes me as his bride. He is wealthy, mind you, and his father is the village magistrate.

TAOSHIH

I see...

Stroking his long whiskers.

ZHI PENG

Jietang insists that his father meet with Xingxing's father to discuss the terms of marriage. And money!

Xingxing begins to growl at the thought of it.

TAOSHIH

An arranged marriage! This is very serious.

XINGXING

Oh, it is, and,

Yee signals for Xingxing to stop talking and listen.

TAOSHIH
What do you suggest, my daughter?

Xingxing reaches across the rug, taking Zhi Peng's hand.

XINGXING
That Zhi Peng and I be married as soon as possible. Can you assist us by hearing our vows, as a Taoshih, that is?

TAOSHIH
Certainly.
(nodding)
But I want you both to understand the Taoist rationale behind my rather ardent decision. Only then will I agree to marry you at a suitable place and time. Agreed?

XINGXING
Yes, Taoshih Yee!

TAOSHIH
Zhi Peng?

Zhi Peng bows his head in solemn agreement.
Then we are agreed!

Xingxing and Zhi Peng, pleased with this arrangement, await Yee's spiritual justification for marrying them so rapidly.

We Taoists believe that natural marriage is the most fruitful kind of matrimony. As such, it mustn't be coerced in any way.

Zhi Peng stands up to join Xingxing on the other side of the rug.

Natural marriage is the only way a marital union can be truly happy. Mutual attraction, which you two obviously share, leads to balance, and balance leads to harmony, and harmony results in happiness. In the case of natural marriage, double happiness.

Zhi Peng takes Xingxing's hand.
Taoist belief is firmly based on this conjecture. And another thing...

(MORE)

TAOSHIH (CONT'D)
 Both of you have undoubtedly heard
 of the terms Yin and Yang in your
 studies.

Looking directly into Xingxing's eyes.
 Xingxing, you are the Yin, the
 feminine in nature.

XINGXING
 Yes, Taoshih Yee.

TAOSHIH
 And you, Zhi Peng, you are the
 Yang, masculine in nature...

ZHI PENG
 Yes, Taoshih Yee.

TAOSHIH
 Since the beginning of time, the
 concept of Yin and Yang has formed
 a spiritual dynamic, wherein the
 whole is greater than its parts,
 and its parts, an indivisible body
 of the whole.

Moved by the spirit, Yee rises.
 Thus, as the Yin, you, Xingxing,
 are in a strict sense the darkness,
 whereas Zhi Peng, as the Yang, is
 the light. Together, you'll
 complement each other in the
 timeless cycle of night and day.

Yee now bows before the couple.
 Do either of you have any
 questions?

Xingxing and Zhi Peng swing their heads, indicating no.
 Very well. I'm free tomorrow. Name
 the time and place.

ZHI PENG
 I thought we'd...

TAOSHIH
 Ah, ah, ah! This is the bride's
 prerogative.

Shifting his attention to Xingxing.

XINGXING

Very well then...! I would like to
be married on the banks of the
Taicheng River in Taishan... At
night!

TAOSHIH

(laughing)
How fitting, child!

XINGXING

Say, at dusk, along the great bend.
We will both be holding lanterns.
Do we need to wear anything
special?

TAOSHIH

No. Come as you are.

Taoshih Yee leads the pair out of the room, across the temple floor, and out the door to the main gate. From there, the couple descends Mount Taishan and returns home, crossing over many a fertile field in the Pearl River Delta.

EXT. CENTRAL PACIFIC RAILROAD, AUBURN, CALIFORNIA - AFTERNOON

Charles and James's handcar reaches the end of the tracks in Auburn, California, where laborers, mostly Irish, continue to build the Central Pacific roadbed. Many look tired and worn as they advance their way east, albeit slowly. Witnessing the scene, a frustrated Charles eventually shakes his head while fixing both hands to his hips. A diminutive Chinaman soon emerges and slowly makes his way over to the two Central Pacific officials. There, a discussion takes place, causing James to shake hands with the foreigner, who bows in agreement.

EXT. CENTRAL PACIFIC RAIL LINE, OUTSIDE AUBURN, CALIFORNIA -
MOMENTS LATER

While returning with his boss to Sacramento, James discusses the hiring of Central Pacific workers from China.

CHARLES

You don't have to convince me,
James. I'm sold. It's Leland we'll
have to convince.

JAMES

I know, I know..

Continuing to pump the bar.

And that won't be easy. Nor will it be with the other Central Pacific bigwigs! Especially Huntington back in New York!

CHARLES

Hmm. I say we approach Leland with the facts and convince him to bring in an initial contingent of Chinese workers to see how they measure up. Where did this...

JAMES

Haibo?

CHARLES

This Haibo, say he's from?

JAMES

Kaiping, west of Hong Kong. He said his province is full of young, reliable, able-bodied workers.

CHARLES

But are they willing to cross the Pacific and come here?

JAMES

Haibo did, by God! Besides, you heard what he promised - one hundred and fifty workers!

Attempting to light his pipe.

I sure could use them, boss. If they prove to be as unproductive as the Irish why, we'll ship them back to China. Simple as that! But...if they surpass the Micks in output, well, we bring in more and more Chinese to replace the entire sloven bunch.

Pounding on the handpump.

Fire 'em all, I say!

Charles nods in agreement, as James's pipe sends large puffs of smoke curling high above the vehicle.

EXT. BANKS OF THE TAICHENG RIVER, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE, SOUTHERN CHINA - DUSK

XINGXING

(in voiceover)

And so, Zhi Peng and I were married on the other side of the Taicheng River. In secret! After our vows were completed, we thanked Taoshih Yee for his unwavering support and generosity, and sent him on his way with as many coins as we could muster, as alms for the Heavenly Gate community.

As for our honeymoon, my husband and I spent the night sleeping among the laurels, next to my family's rice paddy, alone together, under the stars.

EXT. FARMHOUSE OF WEI NONGMIN, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE, SOUTHERN CHINA - EVENING

Some weeks later, Jietang and his father, Liwei, enter the courtyard of Wei Nongmin's *feng shui*, where a lantern burns well into the night. Wei Nongmin welcomes the pair and soon offers them tea and sweet cakes.

WEI NONGMIN

Welcome, Your Honor, this is indeed a privilege.

Bowing deeply before taking Liwei's hand.

LIWEI

Likewise...

Looking about the slight *feng shui*.
This is my son, Jietang.

Wei Nongmin bows solemnly in Jietang's direction, while Jietang returns a less-than-honorable bow.

WEI NONGMIN

Shall we sit?

They now sit in a semicircle with Jietang occupying the center chair.

Tea?

LIWEI

No, thank you...

JIETANG
None for me!
(waiving him off)

WEI NONGMIN
Can I ask you the purpose of your
visit, Judge Liwei?

LIWEI
Certainly. My son desires
Xingxing's hand in marriage.

WEI NONGMIN
I see...

Stroking his wispy beard.

LIWEI
She's eligible, isn't she?

WEI NONGMIN
Yes, yes.

LIWEI
And she's certainly of age.

WEI NONGMIN
(nodding)
But, of course. She's my eldest
child...

LIWEI
I wonder, what are her prospects?

Jietang leans forward, interested in hearing about Xingxing's attributes.

WEI NONGMIN
Well, to be honest with you...she
is wise beyond her years, and well-
read. Let's see, she's creative,
keeps a good house, and is a
wonderful cook.

(grinning broadly)
In fact, she's learned many savory
recipes from me over the past few
years.

(whispering)
You see, my wife, Aihan, suffers
from arthritis and isn't always
able to assist me with dinner.

LIWEI
Anything else?

WEI NONGMIN
Concerning my wife, Aihan?

LIWEI
No, Xingxing, man!

Considering the question for a moment before finally pointing up to the sky.

WEI NONGMIN
She sings like a nightingale!

LIWEI
Truly?

WEI NONGMIN
Oh, yes. She would make any man happy with her many gifts, particularly that one!

Jietang, amazed at this news, suddenly grows more impatient.

JIETANG
Get on with it, Father! I can't stand it any longer!

Wei Nongmin witnesses Jietang's mercurial temper.

LIWEI
Sit down, Jietang, and know your place!

JIETANG
But, Father...

WEI NONGMIN
Shall I leave you two alone?

Liwei holds his hand up and soon comes nose to nose with his son.

LIWEI
No. Silence, Jietang!

JIETANG
(embarrassed)
Yes, Father.

LIWEI
Maybe I should get to the point.
(standing up)
I'm willing to shower your family with many valuables in return for Xingxing's hand in marriage.
(MORE)

LIWEI (CONT'D)
 My son, as you can see, desires
 your daughter very, very much, and
 I would be pleased to arrange this
 marriage for Jietang as soon as
 events permit.

WEI NONGMIN
 I see...
 (stroking his beard)
 What kind of valuables?

Liwei confidently sits back down, gesturing with his right hand.

LIWEI
 Name it! Gold, precious Jade, an
 abundance of money, and land along
 the coast! Do you like to fish?

WEI NONGMIN
 Well, I would like a small place
 near the ocean to harvest oysters
 and other kinds of sea life, then
 dry them onshore to use in the many
 dishes I prepare here.
 (suddenly convinced)
 Yes, I would like that...

LIWEI
 So, we're agreed?

WEI NONGMIN
 Well, I must first consult with my
 wife, and Xingxing, of course...

JIETANG
 (uneasy)
 But, surely, you, as Xingxing's
 father, are able to speak for her!
 Think of the bounty you're
 forfeiting should either of them
 refuse to accept Father's more than
 generous offer!

Pounding his fist into his hand, Liwei now stands and proceeds to treat the courtyard like it was his own personal parade ground. Jietang, for his part, joins him.

Wei, my patience, as well as that
 of Jietang's, is wearing very thin.

Running over to come face-to-face with Wei Nongmin.
 Will you, or will you not, agree to
 override any adverse response on
 the part of your wife and daughter?

WEI NONGMIN
Why, that would be unconscionable.

With that, Liwei storms out of the compound, reluctantly followed by his baffled son.

LIWEI
Come, Jietang, we're going home!
(under his breath)
One should never argue with a fool...

WEI NONGMIN
You'll have my answer in the morning!

Sitting quietly under the stars, Wei Nongmin ponders his next move regarding his only daughter, while at the same time sizing up the insufferable fools who just stomped their way out of his humble *feng shui*.

EXT. FARMYARD OF WEI NONGMIN, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE, SOUTHERN CHINA - THE NEXT DAY

Wei Nongmin makes his way out of the *feng shui* and into the garden, where Aihan is busy tilling.

AIHAN
And how was your meeting with Judge Liwei?

WEI NONGMIN
It was not what I expected, I'll grant you that.

Aihan stops to wipe her brow.

AIHAN
I heard your voices last night, but it was muffled, so I couldn't make out exactly what was being said.

WEI NONGMIN
And it's a good thing you didn't!

AIHAN
What did he want?

WEI NONGMIN
He and his son, Jietang, came to ask for Xingxing's hand in marriage.

AIHAN
You don't say!

WEI NONGMIN
Oh, yeah, and get this, Judge Liwei offered the sun and moon to get me to agree.

AIHAN
I'll bet he did.

Wei sits down on the edge of the waste cart, next to Aihan's pile of weeds.

WEI NONGMIN
No, no.
(waiving her off)
His terms were most generous. It included gold, Jade, plenty of money, and a piece of oceanside property.
(laughing)

AIHAN
No!
(shocked)

WEI NONGMIN
Oh, yes! When pressed to agree to his terms, I informed them both that I would have to consult with you and Xingxing...

AIHAN
Rightly so!

WEI NONGMIN
With that, young Jietang became most unpleasant and disrespectful. You know, he was actually seething, Aihan. His father tried to control him the entire evening. I simply can't imagine that boy left to his own desires. He's an arrogant colt, I tell you.

AIHAN
What happened then?

WEI NONGMIN
Well, like I said, I had to talk to you and Xingxing.
(MORE)

WEI NONGMIN (CONT'D)
Then Judge Liwei looked me right in
the eye and said...will you, or
will you not, agree to disregard
any contrary decision made by your
wife or daughter.

AIHAN
What did you say?

WEI NONGMIN
I said...why that would be
unconscionable!

AIHAN
You said that?

WEI NONGMIN
I did.
(grinning)
Then, they promptly stomped off and
returned home. The arrogant
snots...! You know...the more I
thought about it last night, after
they left, the more I want to
shield Xingxing from this whole
affair. She's happy and content
right here, with no commitments to
anyone but us. I believe it should
remain that way, for the near
future...

AIHAN
I tend to agree. Let's keep her out
of it.

WEI NONGMIN
(resolved)
I'll inform Liwei this morning.

Aihan sits down next to her husband, taking his hand into her
dirty fingers.

AIHAN
Xingxing will marry the right boy
someday. It's every parent's dream,
isn't it?

WEI NONGMIN
Indeed, it is.

Squeezing her hand.

EXT. ALONG A VILLAGE PATH, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - AFTERNOON

Six weeks later, Xingxing once again leaves school. On her way home, an angry Jietang confronts her as he steps out of the tall grass.

JIETANG
You look different, Xingxing.

Circling around her.
I wonder why?

XINGXING
Leave me alone, Jietang.

Trying to get around him.

JIETANG
Or what? You'll sic
your...boyfriend on me?

XINGXING
Stop it, Jietang!
(pointing her finger)

Jietang grabs it, thrusting her hand aside.

JIETANG
Don't be threatening me, farmgirl!

XINGXING
If you don't stop, I'll yell for
help. Then we'll see how tough you
are!

Jietang soon backs down.

JIETANG
Look, my Father and I met with your
father-

XINGXING
When?
(moving closer)
When!

JIETANG
Over a month ago... My Father
offered your father many valuables
for your hand in marriage.
(boldly)

XINGXING
I don't believe you!

JIETANG
Your father was ready to agree, but at the last moment, he insisted that he consult you and your mother first before finalizing the terms. So, I confronted him then and there, and said, Surely, you, as Xingxing's father, are able to speak for her! Think of the bounty you'll be forfeiting should your wife or daughter somehow refuse to accept my family's more than generous offer! Well, the next day, your father gets up and turns my father down. A magistrate, mind you! In hopes of a more deserving beau for you someday!

Driving his fist violently into his palm.
The indignant pig farmer!

XINGXING
I have no idea what you're talking about, Jietang! My Father never said one word to me about your...your-

JIETANG
What?
(impatiently)

XINGXING
Your proposal!

JIETANG
So, you didn't turn down our being married! What about your mother?

XINGXING
She didn't share this information with me either.

Xingxing turns her head to peer down the narrow pathway, hoping to escape.

I told you once before, Jietang.
I'm in love with someone else.

Taking her eyes off of Jietang, he delivers a crashing blow to the side of Xingxing's head, spilling her books, and sending her tumbling into the tall grass.

There, an enraged Jietang forces himself upon the unconscious girl, whose face is marred with dirt and debris. Xingxing immediately comes to, just as Jietang discovers something unusual about Xingxing.

JIETANG
(rolling off of her)
Why, you're, you're...pregnant!

A ravaged Xingxing now gets up and stands directly over a stunned Jietang.

XINGXING
(shouting forcefully)
You'll be sorry you ever did that!
Don't ever touch me again, or
you'll regret it! Do you hear me?

Trembling intensely.

JIETANG
(distraught)
You're pregnant. My beautiful,
precious Xingxing is pregnant! This
is bad. Oh, this is very bad. How
could you? I'm in...I'm in love
with you.

Given his delirious state, Xingxing now stumbles home,
leaving her precious books behind.

My Father would have paid anything
for you! Anything...

His words, suppressed by the hands covering his face.

A completely rattled Xingxing now enters her family's
farmyard, securing the gate at once behind her.

EXT. IMMORTAL BRIDGE, MOUNT TAISHAN, SHANDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - DUSK

Xingxing and Zhi Peng once again sit atop Immortal Bridge on Mount Taishan. They appear to be exchanging words of a substantive nature before suddenly standing up to embrace. Zhi Peng now gets down on both knees and proceeds to feel about Xingxing's midsection, before gently laying his head upon her abdomen. With that, an impassioned Xingxing runs her hands through Zhi Peng's jet-black hair, as the endless clouds waft by.

INT. FARMHOUSE OF WEI NONGMIN, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - LATER

That night, Xingxing stands in front of her parents' bedroom curtain.

XINGXING

Mother, Father, may I come in? I
have something rather important to
tell you...

EXT. HONG KONG HARBOR, SOUTHERN CHINA - THE NEXT DAY

The *SS Senator* is once again moored in Hong Kong Harbor. An exhausted Zhi Peng soon enters the Harbor Master's office.

HARBOR MASTER

Can I help you, boy?

Looking up from his rolltop desk.

ZHI PENG

Yes, sir, I'm wondering where the
ship they call the Senator is
headed?

HARBOR MASTER

She's tied up just outside the
door, at Pier 20. She's bound for
San Francisco, after making a brief
stop in Yokohama. Are you trying to
find someone, or are you interested
in purchasing a passage?

ZHI PENG

Well...

Zhi Peng scuffs at the plank floor with his *xie*, somehow
unable to give a reply.

HARBOR MASTER

How old are you, boy?

ZHI PENG

(looking back up)
I'm seventeen.

HARBOR MASTER

Are you in need of a job?
(shifting papers around)
If so, I'll find you one! Why, you
look strong enough to do most
anything...

ZHI PENG
I must leave China!
(nervously)

HARBOR MASTER
Do you...? You're not in trouble,
are you?

Glancing out the front window for a constable.

ZHI PENG
Oh, no. Nothing like that! It's
about a girl...

HARBOR MASTER
Oh, I see!

Leaning back in his captain's chair.
I understand, I really do.
(making sport)
Hey, I know! There's a man outside
named Haibo. He's looking to hire
one more person to conduct railroad
work in Northern California. He was
just in here.
(peering outside again)
Quick, you better get out there
before he hires someone else!

The Harbor Master stands up just as Haibo reenters the office.

Here he is now! Haibo, this is...
I didn't catch your name, boy.

ZHI PENG
Zhi Peng.

HARBOR MASTER
This is Zhi Peng. Zhi Peng, meet
Haibo!

Zhi Peng turns to face Haibo, bowing deeply.
This boy is meaning to leave China
(grinning)
and...may be interested in joining
your crew in California.

HAIBO
You don't say. How old are you?

HARBOR MASTER
He says he's seventeen...

HAIBO
Is that right?

ZHI PENG
Yes, *xiansheng*!

HAIBO
Well, he looks fit enough.

The Harbor Master nods in agreement.
Would you like to go to California?

ZHI PENG
And do what, might I ask?

HAIBO
To work for me on the Central
Pacific Railroad.

ZHI PENG
Railroad...?
(puzzled)

HAIBO
Get your things, boy. You'll find
out soon enough!

Bowing to the Harbor Master.
That makes it an even fifty. Good
day, Oliver...

Zhi Peng follows Haibo out of the Harbor Master's office and soon scales the steep wooden gangway of the *SS Senator*, with a peasant sack swung over his shoulder.

EXT. ABOARD THE SS SENATOR, SOUTH CHINA SEA - LATER

Haibo comes up on deck, fresh from the hold below, where the bulk of the other Chinese volunteers are currently being quartered. He soon spots Zhi Peng leaning over the gunwale.

HAIBO
Ah, I used to get seasick on board,
too! Believe me, you're smart to
stay on deck.

Zhi Peng studies the horizon.
That's right! Keep your eyes on the
horizon, boy. It helps calm the
stomach!

Slapping Zhi Peng on the back.
Where you from, Zhi Peng?

ZHI PENG
The village of Taishan, in
Guangdong Province.

Holding his gaze steady.

HAIBO
Oh, yes... The people of the
banyan!
(chuckling)
Many of my workers below come from
the Siyi region. You'll meet them
all soon. I myself hail from
Kaiping. Are you familiar with
Kaiping, Zhi Peng?

ZHI PENG
Yes, it is said to have many
diaolous...

HAIBO
That's right! Hundreds of them, in
fact. Does the village of Taishan
have such diaolous?

ZHI PENG
Only one, I'm afraid. It's
effective, however, standing some
twenty feet high, where we're able
to spot bandits and marauders many
miles away.

Zhi Peng studies a lone frigatebird following the ship.

HAIBO
You know, the frigatebird is an
amazing creature.

ZHI PENG
How so?

HAIBO
Well, nature equipped them with
webbed feet, but their feathers
fail to repel water. As such, once
this bird, say, left China, he
cannot stop flying until he touches
down on land. Otherwise, he will
sink into the ocean and perish.

ZHI PENG
I see...
(pondering)

They watch as this ocean-faring bird glides away on the tropical breeze. Haibo suddenly breaks the silence.

HAIBO

This ship is laden with gunpowder specially made in the city of Taiping, for excavating tunnels high in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

ZHI PENG

My Father and I have experimented with black powder.

HAIBO

Go on...

ZHI PENG

We would make bombs to clear out dead, stubborn bamboo trees behind our village.

HAIBO

Did they do the job?

ZHI PENG

Oh yes.

Turning to Haibo for the first time on deck. They were most effective, but dangerous. Highly dangerous! My Father is an expert on black powder, teaching me many things, particularly with regard to evacuating the area safely before lighting the fuses... You see, it all has to do with timing.

HAIBO

And exactly how long have you worked with him, conducting such demolition?

ZHI PENG

Since I was seven!

HAIBO

(looking sideways)
You don't say! Well, if what you're saying is true,

ZHI PENG

It's true, alright...!

HAIBO

You might just have found yourself
a job once the Central Pacific
roadbed reaches high into the
mountains of Northern California.

ZHI PENG

And exactly how high is that?

HAIBO

Only seven thousand feet!

ZHI PENG

That's all?
(sarcastically)

HAIBO

(laughing uncontrollably)
I think you're going to work out!
Do you know what the name Zhi Peng
means? Hmm?

ZHI PENG

I do. It means *self-doing*.

HAIBO

That's right. And my name?

ZHI PENG

Haibo...means *ocean wave*.

HAIBO

Very good!

Haibo is suddenly summoned by a Chinese worker to come below.

WORKER

Xiansheng, there's a fight going on
below. You must come now!

HAIBO

No doubt caused by a spirited game
of *Tien Gow*. Heaven and Nine. Stay
away from Chinese dice, boy.

ZHI PENG

Yes, *xiansheng*!

Haibo raps the gunwale directly next to Zhi Peng and departs
the deck.

HAIBO
I'm coming!

Zhi Peng soon leaves the Starboard side, crossing over to Port, where he shifts his gaze lovingly back to China.

INT. ABOARD THE SS SENATOR, SOUTH CHINA SEA - NIGHT

Finding his way below deck to escape the chilly weather outside, Zhi Peng locates the Chinese workers' quarters in the hold and finds a vacant mat to lie down on.

HUAN
He's been looking for you.

ZHI PENG
(rolling onto his side)
Who?

HUAN
(whispering)
Haibo, that's who!

ZHI PENG
Oh, him...

HUAN
He's a very powerful man who will
punish you at the drop of a hat.

Zhi Peng rolls over onto his back and stares at the deck beams above.

ZHI PENG
Not to worry! He and I are on good
terms. We had a rather chummy
discussion today on deck.

HUAN
About what, exactly?

Sleepy workers around them begin to grumble.

ZHI PENG
(whispering)
All kinds of things...

HUAN
Like what?

ZHI PENG
Explosives, for example. I told him about my experiences using gunpowder to help clear out dead bamboo trees behind my village. Lighting fuses, that kind of stuff...

HUAN
How did you ever come to learn about explosives, of all things?

WORKER
Shut up, or I'll get up and make you!

Huan and Zhi Peng remain quiet for a few minutes.

ZHI PENG
(quieter still)
I learned about them from my Father back in Taishan.

HUAN
(equally quiet)
You're from Taishan?

ZHI PENG
Yes, and you?

HUAN
I'm from Kaiping, where Haibo calls home. That's how I got hired, along with dozens of others from the Pearl River Delta. Why is Haibo interested in explosives?

ZHI PENG
He said that this ship is carrying gunpowder bound for California, to use in the Sierra Nevada Mountains to help blast tunnels for the railroad.

HUAN
I know about the railroad, but why dig in the mountains? Wouldn't flat land be better?

ZHI PENG
One would think, but high mountains divide California from the rest of the proposed rail line.

HUAN
Are they taller than Mount Taishan?

ZHI PENG
Yes, much higher. We should
probably get some sleep.

HUAN
I'm Huan. What's your name?

ZHI PENG
Zhi Peng. Goodnight.

HUAN
(muttering to himself)
Self doing...

Turning once again onto his back, Huan has a keener understanding of the job awaiting him in America. He now studies the same wooden beams as his newfound friend, sleeping on the mat beside him.

EXT. OUTDOOR FARMER'S MARKET, GRAY'S STATION, CALIFORNIA - MORNING

It's morning, and Ellen has headed into town to patronize the same Chinese farmer she met a few weeks ago. Soon, locating his truck stand, parked along Gray Station's only thoroughfare, Ellen once again admires the novel-looking vegetables and begins to strike up another conversation with this foreigner.

ELLEN
Hello, again!
(eagerly)

She approaches the farmer.

SHEN NUNG
Ellen McDowell.

Removing his conical hat and bowing.

ELLEN
You remembered my name!

SHEN NUNG
Why, yes. And how was the *Gai Lan* I sold you?

Continuing to arrange his vegetable cart.

ELLEN

It was wonderful, just as you promised.

SHEN NUNG

Why, thank you, Ellen. Tell me, did your husband enjoy it?

ELLEN

Well, not exactly...

SHEN NUNG

Bill, is it?

ELLEN

Yes, yes.

Shen Nung moves over to the other side of the cart.

SHEN NUNG

Perhaps he would prefer something sweeter, like these *loquats* over here. They're the equivalent of a Chinese plum.

Ellen walks over to the other side of the truck to inspect them.

I eat them skins and all. As for the pits, I spit them out!

(laughing at himself)

They're wonderful and rich in *guo jiao*.

ELLEN

And what is *guo jiao*?

SHEN NUNG

Well, it's a fiber that has many medicinal uses, from treating a sore throat to inflammation of the joints...

ELLEN

You don't say?

Selecting one from the bushel and closely inspecting it.
What else?

SHEN NUNG

Well, it helps with aging...

ELLEN

We could all use some help in that department.

Shen Nung finally catches her drift.

SHEN NUNG
True...! And, it makes for great
jelly!

ELLEN
I'm sold. Give me two dozen,
please. You select them.

Shen Nung proceeds to place the loquats into a bag.

SHEN NUNG
Anything else today?

Ellen removes a written list from her dress.

ELLEN
I'll take a couple of eggplants...,
three silk squashes, uh, some bok
choy, uh, and some Chinese cabbage,
I simply loved that!

Continuing with her list.

A bundle of snow pea shoots and two
bunches of white radishes over
there.

Pointing to the far side of the truck bed. While Shen Nung is
bundling up the produce, Ellen notices a basket filled with
little cotton bags complete with drawstrings.

What are these?

SHEN NUNG
Those are caches made up of herbs
and spices for different kinds of
medicinal tea.

Ellen picks one up, admiring its simplicity.

ELLEN
Medicinal tea?

Shen Nung walks over to Ellen to read the bag she's holding.

SHEN NUNG
Let me see... Ah, yes, this tea is
used to treat stomach ailments.

ELLEN
I see... And this one?

Holding up the bag.

SHEN NUNG
This one is for curing impotence.

Suddenly stopping himself.
Oh... So sorry.

ELLEN
Don't be! This is fascinating,
really. And this one?

Passing the cache over to Shen Nung.

SHEN NUNG
Oh, this helps cure rheumatism.

Ellen gently pulls the bag back.

ELLEN
Well, what do you know! I think
I'll buy this one. Farm work is
hard on the back as well as the
limbs!

SHEN NUNG
You don't have to tell me!
(laughing)

ELLEN
Does it work?

SHEN NUNG
It sure does!

ELLEN
But, how do you know?

Cocking her head sideways.

SHEN NUNG
I have rheumatism, and it helps me,
that's how!
(excitedly)

ELLEN
I'll take a bag. How do you make
the tea?

SHEN NUNG
Well, you remove all the herbs and
spices from the cache and put them
in a spice box. Then, drop a few
generous pinches back into the bag,
and draw the strings, like this.

Showing her how.

Now, after steeping it in a boiling hot teapot for about fifteen minutes, simply pour and enjoy the brew.

ELLEN

That's it?

SHEN NUNG

That's it. Once the tea is done, remove the bag, dump out the contents, rinse out the cache, and reuse it anytime after it dries...

ELLEN

Thanks. How much do I owe you?

SHEN NUNG

Let's see.

Going over the items in the bag.

Eighty-five cents.

Ellen hands him a silver dollar.

ELLEN

No change necessary.

SHEN NUNG

I insist, Ellen!

Handing her back the change.

ELLEN

Well, thank you. See you next week.
I'll let you know how that tea worked!

(winking)

Rubbing her elbow, Ellen picks up her bag and returns to her wagon.

INT. VILLAGE SCHOOL, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE, CHINA - THE NEXT DAY

Another school day begins in the Village of Taishan. Its teacher, Changming, is taking attendance. He stops at the last name- Zhi Peng.

CHANGMING

Zhi Peng?

Looking down at his attendance slate.

This is the seventh school day in a row that he's missed classes. Does anyone know what's happened to him?

STUDENT
(raising his hand)
I know, *Laoshi*.

CHANGMING
Stand up and tell me.

STUDENT
My cousin in Hong Kong said he saw him getting on a ship leaving for America.

CHANGMING
When?

STUDENT
Why, just last week, *Laoshi*!

CHANGMING
America... You may sit down now.

Finished with attendance, the teacher moves on to today's science lesson.

EXT. VILLAGE SCHOOL, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE, CHINA -
LATER

Jietang meets up during recess with the student having direct knowledge of Zhi Peng's whereabouts. They stand out back, behind the school, away from the others.

JIETANG
What's your name again?

STUDENT
Lei.

JIETANG
How would your cousin come to recognize Zhi Peng, in Hong Kong of all places? Does he know him?

STUDENT
Yes, he does.

JIETANG
How? How does he know him?

STUDENT

My Cousin's father owns a black powder business in Hong Kong, which Zhi Peng and his father have patronized many, many times over the years.

JIETANG

But why that particular establishment?

STUDENT

Because Jietang it produces and sells the finest black powder in all of China! In fact, my Cousin and Uncle were there in Hong Kong Harbor to supervise the loading of barrels and barrels of black powder onto the very ship that Zhi Peng boarded for California! Now I really have to go.

Trying to get away from Jietang

JIETANG

Not so fast!

Grabbing hold of the much taller Lei.
What else did your cousin say?

Coming up close and personal to his classmate.

STUDENT

If you insist...

JIETANG

I do!
(aggressively)

Giving Lei a shake.

STUDENT

He said he saw Zhi Peng come out of the Harbor Master's office with an older man. So my cousin, recognizing Zhi Peng, walked over to him.

JIETANG

Alright. What did they talk about?

STUDENT

Very well, after greeting each other, my cousin asked where Zhi Peng was going. Zhi Peng replied that he was going to California to work for the Central Pacific Railroad. He was hired earlier that day by a Kaiping native named Haibo.

JIETANG

Haibo...

Repeating the name to himself, committing it to memory.

Alright, Lei! Other than work, did Zhi Peng provide any other explanation for going to America?
(inquisitively)

Lei looks at the ground and proceeds to kick stones around, embarrassed.

STUDENT

You have to understand that my cousin and Zhi Peng became very close friends. They communicate with each other often.

Jietang backs Lei up against the schoolhouse wall, with his fist clenched, ready to explode.

JIETANG

Spit it out, Lei, or I'll...

STUDENT

Alright! Alright.

(straightening up)

Zhi Peng disclosed to my cousin, in strictest confidence, I might add, that he married his Taishan sweetheart in a secret religious ceremony a few months ago, and she's pregnant. Fearing the wrath of her father, he made haste for America.

Backing away from his nemesis.

You didn't hear it from me,
Jietang!

JIETANG

Hold on. Did he actually see Zhi Peng board the ship?

STUDENT

Why, yes... My cousin said he waited for the ship to pull out, and he and Zhi Peng exchanged goodbyes with each other! May I go now?

Successfully freeing himself of Jietang's grip.

Jietang soon waives Lei off, taking his place against the wall, where he proceeds to slowly slide his way down the surface before hitting the ground. There, a broken Jietang weeps bitterly at the notion that his dearest Xingxing is married.

EXT. SS SENATOR, YOKOHAMA DOCKYARDS, YOKOHAMA, JAPAN

Borrowing a pencil and writing paper from his boss, Haibo, Zhi Peng writes a letter to his wife while in the port city of Yokohama, Japan. He writes this letter, seated on an empty crate on the deck of the *SS Senator*, under a chalk-like daytime moon.

ZHI PENG

(in voiceover)

May 21, 1865

Dearest Xingxing,

This is the first opportunity I've had to write you! I am in the port city of Yokohama, Japan. Can you believe it? I'm aboard the *SS Senator*, a triple-masted ship bound for San Francisco.

I am meeting many new acquaintances on board this ship, both young and old. My boss, Haibo, who, interestingly enough, is from nearby Kaiping, has been most helpful and promises me a handsome position with the Central Pacific Railroad, using the demolition skills I learned from my Father.

I hope you are well, cherished one. By now, you should be into your fourth month. That would place our baby's birth sometime in October, by my estimation. I kiss your sweet face, over and over again, at the very thought of it!

I hope your father is treating you with the dignity and respect you so richly deserve.

Just then, back in Taishan, Xingxing is being carried high on a heavily adorned bridal chair by four men, as she's showered with endless handfuls of rice, a symbol of fertility, of all things, while chickens in the farmyard feast upon this unexpected windfall.

I love and miss you dearly, and
will write again as soon as I
arrive in San Francisco.

Gazing up at the barely conspicuous moon.
Until then, please know that we are
lucky enough to abide under the
same moon.
Your loving husband,
Zhi Peng 志鹏

Zhi Peng folds the letter in quarters to deliver it to the ship's purser.

EXT. FARMYARD OF WEI NONGMIN, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - MOMENTS LATER

A celebration now takes place on the grounds of Wei Nongmin's farm. Insisting on providing his daughter with a proper wedding, he has invited the local Taoshih to officiate the marriage ceremony in the presence of family and friends. Aihan soon walks out of the *feng shui* with their two boys to join the others.

Without a husband by her side, Xingxing holds the family rooster to serve as a surrogate for Zhi Peng, in keeping with ancient Chinese tradition. Later on, the guests are treated to over fifty savory delights prepared by an overjoyed Wei Nongmin. This delectable feast continues well into the night under a canopy of stars.

INT. ABOARD THE SS SENATOR, SOUTH CHINA SEA - MORNING

Haibo knocks on the door to Captain Scowcroft's quarters after one of his workers died during the night. A cabin boy soon appears.

WORKER
Yes, what is it?

HAIBO
I need to see the Captain.

WORKER
Regarding?

HAIBO

One of my men died of typhus during the night, and the ship's surgeon is strongly encouraging Captain Scowcroft to stop any possible spread of the disease by immediately burying my worker at sea.

WORKER

Wait one minute...

The Captain's steward now appears at the door.

STEWARD

The Captain will see you now. Right this way.

They pass into Captain Scowcroft's spacious cabin overlooking the stern. Haibo removes his hat and stands before a large desk.

CAPTAIN SCOWCROFT

That will be all, Lewis.

STEWARD

Yes sir.

CAPTAIN SCOWCROFT

And close the door behind you.

Lewis leaves the cabin as ordered, leaving Captain Scowcroft and Hiabo alone. Haibo remains standing, hat in hand.

I heard about your man.

(glancing up)

You must understand that any passenger who dies of a serious disease while on board is to be buried at sea immediately!

HAIBO

I understand. However, by tradition, Chinese individuals who die while away from China are to be eventually repatriated, lest their deceased ancestors suffer never-ending unrest. We refer to it as *gui guo*. In English, it relates to the Chinese belief that fallen leaves must return to their roots. Sir, if *Meilin*, that's his name...

Hesitating to stare vacantly out the stern windows.

(MORE)

HAIBO (CONT'D)
If *Meilin* is buried at sea, his
spirit will forever wander,
beckoning far from Chinese shores.

Captain Scowcroft stops to consider Haibo's plight. He soon peers up at the foreigner.

CAPTAIN SCOWCROFT
If my surgeon insists that the body
of your man be sent overboard, I'm
compelled, as captain of this ship,
to adhere to his medical advice. I
must consider the health and well-
being of the other passengers!

(now backing off)
Were we closer to land, I might
reconsider your request. But we're
not, so I must act now.

A disappointed Haibo hangs his head on hearing Captain Scowcroft's executive decision, unwilling to challenge his authority.

HAIBO
If I may ask, Sir...

CAPTAIN SCOWCROFT
Yes?

HAIBO
May I be present when *Meilin's* body
goes over?

CAPTAIN SCOWCROFT
I can't see why not. I'll inform
the Surgeon. Is there anything
else?

Haibo shakes his head and turns to leave.

A word of advice, Haibo. There's no
need for your men to remain below
deck all day. Fresh air is the best
disinfectant! I suggest your men
refrain from their incessant
gambling and come up on board as
often as possible, to take in the
elements, whatever the conditions.
You'll notice a difference, I can
assure you. Sorry about your man!

Haibo exits the Captain's quarters, now considering a
possible remedy for *Meilin's* expected fate in the afterlife.

EXT. ABOARD THE SS SENATOR, SOUTH CHINA SEA - LATER

On the deck of the *SS Senator*, along the starboard side, the Ship Surgeon stands next to *Meilin's* wrapped body, together with two boson's mates. Haibo stands close by holding onto a simple metal container. The burial party soon lifts the corpse over the gunwale and drops it into the sea, just about the time the deceased's worried mother, four thousand miles away, prays on her wooden Mala beads for his continued safety on the high Pacific.

SURGEON

You best go right to the head boys
and wash your hands before resuming
your duties.

Turning Haibo's way.

You there, what exactly are you
holding?

HAIBO

(coming forward)

It's called a *zhaohun xiang*.

SURGEON

(sarcastically)

In English, if you please!

HAIBO

Very well...it's a spirit box, used
to collect the essence of the
deceased. Boxes like these are used
to return the souls of Chinese
people back to China, when their
mortal bodies cannot be had.

Now peering far over the ship's side.

Tradition teaches us that unless
the bodies of Chinese dead...or, in
this case, a Chinese spirit, are
repatriated home, their departed
ancestors live a tortured
existence.

SURGEON

Interesting customs you Chinese
have! Then I suppose we're bound to
see many, many more of
these...spirit boxes before the
Transcontinental Railroad is
finished. Sorry about your
countryman.

HAIBO
Thank you, Doctor. You're most
kind.

The Surgeon leaves the deck and goes below, leaving Haibo alone at the site. He proceeds to open the metal box, gently bends over the gunwale, and collects Meilin's spirit, uttering these parting words.

Fallen leaves shall return to their
roots.

With the spirit box properly secured, Haibo scans the blue Pacific, calculating the remaining distance to San Francisco.

EXT. IMMORTAL BRIDGE, MOUNT TAISHAN, SHANDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - AFTERNOON

Free at last of morning sickness, a reslient Xingxing scales Mount Taishan to once again meditate on Immortal Bridge. While approaching the site, she notices that someone is already occupying the bridge. Surprisingly, that someone is Taoshih Yee. Moving ever closer to the bridge, Xingxing proceeds to hide behind a cypress tree growing out of a steep crag nearby. Praying, Yee is soon interrupted by the sound of a snapping twig. He now turns in the direction of the noise.

TAOSHIH
Who's there? Please, it's alright!
Come forward.

Xingxing comes out from behind the cypress.

XINGXING
(shyly)
It's Xingxing, Taoshih Yee.

TAOSHIH
Is Zhi Peng with you?

XINGXING
No. He's on his way to California.

TAOSHIH
Come here and sit next to me.

XINGXING
I don't want there to be any talk,
Yee.

TAOSHIH
(standing up)
Never mind that, my reputation on
this mountain is beyond reproach.
(MORE)

TAOSHIH (CONT'D)
 You're entirely safe with me,
 daughter.

As Xingxing steps over onto the bridge, she is assisted by Taoshih Yee. They soon sit down together.

So, California? Why, I married you only a few months ago. Is everything alright between you two?

XINGXING

Oh, yes, our love is as strong as ever. You see...

(bashfully)

I am with child, and Zhi Peng didn't want to endure the wrath of my father.

TAOSHIH

I see.

XINGXING

I'll have you know that, while pressed, I never identified you as the Taoshih who secretly married us.

TAOSHIH

I am most grateful.

XINGXING

No need. Zhi Peng and I will treasure your help always...

Xingxing strikes her ken on the not-so-distant South China Sea.

It's just that.

(swallowing hard)

I'm so worried about my husband, Taoshih.

(tearfully)

Yee reaches deeply into his pocket.

TAOSHIH

Here, take these *mala* beads.

Placing them into her hand.

XINGXING

Oh, I couldn't. These are solid jade!

TAOSHIH

Then, at least, let me loan them to you...

XINGXING

(reluctantly)

Well, alright. But...how do I pray for Zhi Peng on these beads?

TAOSHIH

Pray what's in your heart.

XINGXING

Hmm. I'm still confused.

Yee removes the mala beads from her hand.

TAOSHIH

This bracelet has 27 beads, one-quarter of a full set of malas. On each bead, I suggest you...meditate on one of Zhi Peng's attributes; your marriage; or both. After a while, these meditations will become second nature to you, like a mantra...

XINGXING

(nodding)

I see.

TAOSHIH

Alright. Let us begin. What is Zhi Peng's greatest attribute?

XINGXING

(pondering)

Well, his name means self-doing.

TAOSHIH

Then pray that Zhi Peng, as a self-doer, will prosper in California and provide you and your child with many fine effects when he arrives home. What else?

XINGXING

Well, he's strong, just like our marriage!

TAOSHIH

Good. Then I-

XINGXING

(interrupting)

Then I will pray that...our love
remains strong, and that our flame
is never extinguished.

TAOSHIH

See how easy that was?

XINGXING

Yes, but now that I know what to
pray for, who exactly do I pray to?

TAOSHIH

Oh, there are many, many deities to
choose from! Might I suggest...the
female goddess, Tianfei, protector
of merchants and seafarers.

Xingxing quickly retrieves her beads from Yee.

XINGXING

Tell me more about this Tianfei, so
I can pray more fervently to her.

TAOSHIH

Very well, but then I must go. I
have a temple service for young
students to officiate.

Clearing his throat.

Tianfei travels high above the
seas, protecting sailors and
passengers alike by performing
miraculous deeds. Legend has it
that while roaming over the South
China Sea, she spotted a ship in
great distress. Tianfei touched
down on the ship, raised her hand,
and calmed the waters, allowing the
vessel to safely proceed to port.
She is regarded by those who pray
to her as the benevolent Queen of
Heaven.

Yee gets up, leaving Xingxing behind.

Goodbye. I hope this talk was
beneficial for you.

XINGXING

It was. You helped me get my,
my...my Yin back, Taoshih. I am,
again, most grateful to you.

TAOSHIH
Go in peace, my child. And
Xingxing...

XINGXING
Yes?

TAOSHIH
(prophetically)
Sitting by your side just now, I'm
confident that you will give birth
to a healthy, beautiful boy, with
little to no pain.

XINGXING
Thank you, Taoshih Yee. I hope you
can meet him soon.

TAOSHIH
I would like that. Goodbye!

Xingxing now gets up and stretches amid the stiff winds of Immortal Bridge, while holding her flapping dress tightly to her belly.

EXT. ABOARD THE SS SENATOR, EASTERN PACIFIC OCEAN - MORNING

Three weeks later, the *SS Senator* glides its way through the Golden Gate Strait, with its towering palisades visible on both sides of the ship. She eventually makes her way around Sea Bird Island and is soon guided by marine pilots to moor at an awaiting dock located at the base of Brannan Street, under the goddess Tianfei's watchful eye.

INT. McDOWELL FARMHOUSE, GRAY'S STATION, CALIFORNIA - DAWN

Ellen McDowell experiences one of her recurring dreams about her time at the Donner Party Starvation Camp during the winter of 1846-1847.

BILL
Another bad dream?

ELLEN
Yes.

Getting out of bed.
I'll start the coffee.

Ellen walks into the kitchen to light the stove. Bill soon makes his way out of the bedroom.

There's not enough coffee in the grounds drawer. Can you grind us some more beans?

Bill moves over to the coffee drum, scoops out enough beans to fill the hopper, and begins to turn the handle of the grinding box.

BILL

My, these beans smell good! Now that'll wake you up in the morning...

ELLEN

Oh, yes.

Wiping her forehead with a hand towel.
When you're done, can you stoke the fire?

BILL

Sure. There, that should be enough!

Pulling out the catcher drawer and handing it to his wife.

ELLEN

The coffee should be ready soon.
What would you like for breakfast?

BILL

Oh, the usual...

Sitting down at the farm table.
And you?

ELLEN

(chuckling)

Me? The usual.

BILL

Ellen, I simply don't know how you stomach that food! Really.

ELLEN

What!

Beginning to cook her husband's breakfast.
Why, congee is good for you.

Retrieving a saucepan and pumping in some water.

BILL

If you say so.

ELLEN
I think I'll go with sweet today.

Flipping over Bill's potatoes.
How many eggs, dear?

BILL
Three is fine.

With the coffee done, Ellen pours Bill a cup and brings it over to the table.

Thank you.
(looking up)
You look tired, dear. Maybe you should take a nap this morning.

ELLEN
I will, once I clean up. You know, it's odd, I never have those dreams in the daytime, only at night.

Cracking eggs into the pan.
It must have something to do with the darkness.

BILL
To be sure.

Ellen cuts two slices off a loaf of bread she baked yesterday to toast them on the hotplate.

ELLEN
Almost ready. Do you need a refill?

BILL
Sure. Was your dream about Jay again?

Now plating her husband's breakfast.

ELLEN
I'm afraid so...

BILL
Tell me once again why his death on the mountain impacted you so greatly?

ELLEN
I will, but let's enjoy our breakfast first. Alright?

BILL
Alright.

Ellen sets Bill's plate down in front of him.

ELLEN
Eat it while it's hot! Oh, my water
is boiling!

Getting up to add the rice. She now takes the time to assemble her ingredients, including sliced ginger, rock sugar, fresh muscat raisins, and dates. Moments pass before Ellen sits down with her steaming bowl of Congee.

Oh, Bill, this is so silky. You
simply have to try this.

Pointing with her spoon.

BILL
I'll pass, dear!

ELLEN
Another cup?
(finishing her own)

BILL
No, thank you.

Pushing himself back from the table. With breakfast now cleared and the dishes washed and dried, Ellen and Bill soon retire in front of the fireplace. Minutes pass.

Now, about that dream last night...

ELLEN
(sighing deeply)
Very well. As you know, Jay was my brother-in-law. He married my sister, Sarah, in Illinois, the day before he and my family headed west.

BILL
What was his last name again?
Forbes?

ELLEN
Fosdick.

BILL
Yes, yes, that's right. Now I remember!

Getting up to put more logs on the fire.

ELLEN

Jay and my sister, Sarah, joined a search party to find help at Sutter's Fort, or anywhere in between, to rescue the rest of us who were trapped at Donner Lake. We had been living in deep snow for over a month, and some of us had to strike out and get help. Their climb, through heavy snow, would take them up some one-thousand feet. After about three weeks, they reached Donner Summit.

Bill sits back down, this time on the edge of his chair.

There, they experienced a storm so powerful that it blew out the only fire they had, causing them to immediately hit the ground and form a semi-circle, with their feet in the middle, and collectively cover themselves with large blankets to conserve their body heat.

Meanwhile, pounding wind and newly fallen snow continued to pile on top of their make-shift tent.

After the storm, they made their way down the western slope of the Sierras. Reaching the bottom, they followed the banks of the American River, heading west until it turned south, making it necessary to climb their way out of the river valley by grabbing onto shrubs growing in the rocky crevices of the steep hillside.

Then, over the ridge, the Forlorn Hope party - that's what they called themselves - tumbled down the hill and out of the snowpack.

Suddenly hoarse.

Bill, this fire has got me plum dried out. Can you get me a glass of water?

BILL

Of course.

Bill gets up and heads to the kitchen. He soon returns with a glass of water. Seen stirring the fire with a nearby poker, he now returns to his chair.

Maybe this is too taxing for you.

ELLEN
(waiving him off)
No, No! Besides, I'm almost done
with the story.

BILL
And, you're sure?

Bill leans forward, looking deeply into her eyes.

ELLEN
I'm sure, Bill.

Smoothing out her housedress.

Soon after they reached the lower foothills, William Eddy and my sister, Mary, left the party, determined to find meat. They eventually spotted an emaciated deer, which was surprisingly close by, killing it with a flintlock. They consumed some of the meat and returned to the group the next day with their spoils. But, not before,

She picks up the glass to drink some water. But, not before the others began cutting into Jay, who had died from exposure the night before, to roast his flesh and eat him!

BILL
Ellen, please stop! You must stop now!
(visibly upset)

ELLEN
I won't!
(shaking her head)
I must get to the heart of the matter.

BILL
We all know what the heart of the matter is! It's clearly the thought of Jay...being, being consumed by the others!

ELLEN
But, that's not it!
(raising her voice)
However dreadful that was, I was too young to fully understand the gravity of the situation.

Taking another sip.

No, it was the wall of snow all around us. The unrelenting snow...

BILL
(surprised)
That's it?

ELLEN
I'm sure of it!
(unmistakably)
The snow just kept on a comin', unabated, piling higher and higher, often reaching ten, sometimes twenty feet or more. Ever present, all around us, never stopping! Surrounding and imprisoning us, with no possible escape, and certain...
(suddenly fixated)
Certain death.

BILL
Unbelievable!

Sitting back and gazing into the fireplace.

ELLEN
My sister, Sarah, survived, as you know.

BILL
I know, I know...

ELLEN
If only I were able to recreate those same conditions, up there in the Sierras, save for starving, I then might be able to get past these horrible dreams and finally be able to live my life free of fear.

Bill remains silent, then speaks.

BILL
Well, I really don't think you going up there again is possible, particularly in the winter...

ELLEN
Nothing is impossible! Who knows what the future will bring?
(pondering)
(MORE)

ELLEN (CONT'D)
Gray's Station will change, like
you said. Maybe the railroad will
somehow change me too...

Bill stands up to place fresh wood on the slowly dying
embers.

EXT. CHINATOWN, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA - MORNING

Later, after disembarking the gangway of the *SS Senator* and stepping onto American soil, albeit a sturdy wooden dock, Zhi Peng joins the crowd of Chinese workers gathered around Haibo, who is busy fast-tracking their passage through immigration. Huan soon locates Zhi Peng, and the two, along with the other workers, soon climb up the sides of wagons specially consigned to transport Haibo's fifty-member crew to the Embarcadero, across town. But not until they pass through the teeming streets of Chinatown. There, the wagons take on hundreds of bamboo *dim sum* containers, or *zhenglong*, and tankards of hot tea for the hungry riders, courtesy of the inhabitants of this densely populated enclave.

HUAN
Aren't you going to open your
steamer?

Receiving his *zhenglong* and chopsticks.

ZHI PENG
Not until I get some tea, which I
see is already making its way
around the wagon.

HUAN
You had to put us in the back, of
all places.

ZHI PENG
Sorry.

Zhi Peng studies the many market stalls and merchant shops that line the street, amazed at the bustle on both sides of him, and for the first time sees young Chinese women in fine checkered hats trailing silently behind their masters.

Ah, tea at last!

Taking the cup into his hands and drinking deeply.
How is the *dim sum*, Huan?

HUAN
I can't tell. I've been deprived of
decent Chinese food for so long,
I'd eat my sandals at this point!

ZHI PENG

I agree...

Opening up his *zhenglong*.

HUAN

Though I must say, the *cha siu bao*
is quite good. Try it!

ZHI PENG

Oh, the sesame sauce is spicy!
(surprised)

Pointing with his chopstick.

Hey, and there's *shaokao* pork
inside, what do you know!

They pause their conversation and eat vigorously.

HUAN

Delicious.

(satisfied)

Hanging around that group of
workers on the dock back there, I
overheard that our pay will be
twenty-six dollars a month!

ZHI PENG

So I understand...

HUAN

But, out of our pay, we Chinese
must purchase our own food,
individually.

ZHI PENG

That's not entirely true.

HUAN

Then what exactly?

ZHI PENG

I heard that we will be pooling our
money to purchase food, mess tent
by mess tent.

Stabbing into one of the egg tarts.

But the Irish and the other workers
will be supplied their food for
free.

HUAN

Why, that doesn't seem quite
fair...

ZHI PENG

Well, the higher-ups within the
Central Pacific organization must
believe that we Chinese know best
when it comes to what kind of food
will nourish us most. Besides, they
wouldn't know a Chinese cucumber
from a wonton! Would you rather
chew on boiled beef and potatoes
like the Micks, day in and day out?
(amusingly)

HUAN

Oh no, not me!

ZHI PENG

Same here.

Closing up his *zhenglong*.

HUAN

But who will cook for us? Some of
the slop prepared on board the
Senator by so-called Chinese cooks
was atrocious.

ZHI PENG

I tend to agree. If they were to
cook for us in camp, they might not
make it through the night in one
piece!

(grinning)

Huan and Zhi Peng laugh as their wagon slowly crosses into the other side of town, for the twenty-five-minute ride to the Embarcadero. There, to board the Steamboat *Mint* to take the workers across San Francisco Bay, then up the San Joaquin and Sacramento Rivers to Sacramento.

HUAN

Can you believe this congestion, so
many drays! They simply stop in the
middle of the busy street and drop
their deliveries off.

As the wagons stop, Haibo stands up on the first transport.

ZHI PENG

Shush! Haibo is announcing
something.

Tapping the shoulder of the person in front of him.
What's he saying?

WORKER
Something about the building coming
up on the left. The Embarcadero?

HUAN
What's an Embarcadero?

ZHI PENG
I'm guessing it's that large
building up there, possibly a boat
terminal.

WORKER
Alright, he's saying we all get out
here.

Quickly grabbing their effects, the workers pour over the sides and immediately follow the man in front of them, single file, through the humming traffic, leaving five empty transports behind.

INT. FARMYARD OF WEI NONGMIN, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - AFTERNOON

Standing in the middle of the family's rice paddy, Xingxing yells to her brother to get help.

XINGXING
Guang, quick, run into the house
and get mother! My baby is coming.

Grabbing the bottom of her work dress.

GUANG
But, Xingxing...
(looking both ways)

XINGXING
Go!

Guang makes a run for it, tripping over the corner of the pig trough, before opening the back door of the *feng shui* and entering. Aihan soon runs into the paddy with an armful of towels, linen, string, and ointment. She now directs Xingxing to sit down in the shallow water.

AIHAN
That's better.

Stroking her hair.
Water is very good for birthing.

XINGXING
But, mother...

AIHAN
Relax. Let the pulsations of the
paddy ripple against you...

Wei Nongmin, hearing all the commotion in the field, runs out of the barn towards the scene. Aihan, looking over the swaying culms, calls out to her husband.

Wei, unchain the metal pan from the
produce scale and bring it here!

Within minutes, Wei Nongmin comes splashing into the rice paddy with the metal pan.

Hand it over to me...

Aihan proceeds to place the pan directly beneath Xingxing's half-naked body, while attempting to reassure her, over and over, that she's safe in her mother's expert hands. As for Wei Nongmin, he sets his gaze on the lush banyan trees populating the nearby hillside.

Now push, Xingxing, push!

Doubling her up by the back of the neck.

XINGXING
Mother, mother!

AIHAN
I'm here, Xingxing. Push again.
Here we go...!

The baby soon appears and slides into the metal pan. After tying the umbilical cord with a silk string, wrapping it in linen, and biting it in half, Aihan wraps the baby in towels.

Oh, Xingxing, it's a boy!

XINGXING
Really?

AIHAN
Sit up and see for yourself!
(laughing)

Xingxing sits up in the water to hold her son.
Here you go.

Handing the tiny bundle over to her. Xingxing now pulls back the edge of the towel to view his face.

XINGXING

Why, he's beautiful! Oh, if Zhi Peng were only here, Momma...

AIHAN

I know.

(softly)

I know.

Pausing to give Xingxing more time with her son.

Alright, time's up! You must rest awhile.

Retrieving the child from his mother's arms.

XINGXING

Here?

AIHAN

Yes, here. You lie back down and soak, while I wash him off. Rice water purifies the body. For you as well as your son.

XINGXING

He was born just as the Taoshih predicted...

AIHAN

Taoshih?

XINGXING

I shall name him Pooyi - for one who goes everywhere.

Aihan steps out of the rice paddy holding her grandson tightly to her chest, only to pass her speechless husband, who stands idly by. Xingxing, heeding her mother's advice, soaks alone in the purifying water, interrupted only by an errant turtle stirring by her side.

EXT. ABOARD THE STEAMER MINT, SACRAMENTO-SAN JOAQUIN DELTA, CALIFORNIA - DUSK

The steamboat *Mint* slowly makes its way through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, leaving many islands and tidal sloughs in its wake. Many of the Chinese workers, Zhi Peng and Huan among them, cling to the railings on deck to view these all too familiar sights, reminding everyone of a similar delta back home in Guangdong Province.

EXT. CENTRAL PACIFIC RAIL LINE, SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA -
MORNING

Now arriving in Sacramento, Haibo meets with a group of railroad supervisors in the presence of his men. He soon returns to his workers, ordering them to form five work details comprised of ten laborers.

HAIBO

Alright, celestials, your groups will be deposited above Camp 20, fifty miles northeast of here.

Pointing further up the line with his hat.

There, you will be provided with the necessary tools to begin clearing away or filling in the ground in front of you, making way for a solid roadbed to receive the Central Pacific's ties, tracks, and fishplates. This afternoon and tonight, you will be provided with ample food and tea in mess tents pre-positioned along the way. With regard to your relief needs, hang it out the side. There is plenty of straw covering the floor of each car.

The workers break out in laughter while shuffling their feet.
Zhi Peng, select your best man and see me.

Zhi Peng takes Huan by the arm to approach Haibo, while the remaining workers begin boarding boxcars bound for Colfax.
Zhi Peng.

ZHI PENG
Yes, *Xiansheng*!

HAIBO
I want you to get off the train in Auburn.

ZHI PENG
Auburn, got it.

HAIBO
There, you will meet a man named Boqin working in a nearby mine off to the left. Is this your coworker?

Turning Huan's way.

ZHI PENG

Yes.

HAIBO

What's your name?

HUAN

Huan, Laoban.

HAIBO

Are you experienced in explosives
like your friend here?

HUAN

Well, uh.

Looking Zhi Peng's way.

HAIBO

Never mind! Five days should give
you plenty of experience working
with Boqin in the art of tunnel
excavation. Everything has been
arranged. Get off at Auburn and see
him immediately. Now board the
train.

ZHI PENG

Yes, Haibo.
(smiling)

HAIBO

And take your friend with you.
(winking)
I'll be counting on both of you
when we reach the construction site
on an escarpment known as the Cape
of Good Hope. Now run, the train is
about to pull out.

The duo runs for the train, while Haibo boards a supervisor's carriage parked just behind the boxcars.

EXT. CAPE OF GOOD HOPE ESCARPMENT, CAMP 20, CENTRAL PACIFIC RAILROAD, CALIFORNIA - DUSK

After a day of igniting precision-placed explosives on a ledge halfway around the Cape of Good Hope, Zhi Peng sits on the edge of the escarpment to write another letter to his wife back home.

ZHI PENG
 (in voiceover)
 October 23, 1865
 Dearest Xingxing,
 I write you while seated on a ledge
 high above the American River...

I/E. FARMHOUSE OF WEI NONGMIN, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE,
 SOUTHERN CHINA - MORNING

A muleteer carrying a worn leather pouch makes his way around the village of Taishan, delivering personal letters. His last stop, the *feng shui* of Wei Nongmin. Rapping on the back door, Aihan soon answers and accepts the delivery from the muleteer. Upon his departure, she closely examines both sides of the envelope while entering the living room.

AIHAN
 (widening her eyes)
 Xingxing, you have mail...

Xingxing removes Pooyi from her breast, wipes his tiny mouth with a burping cloth, and carries him into the living room, where Aihan holds up the letter.

Speaking in festive voice.
 It's from America!

XINGXING
 Oh, Mother, can you take Pooyi?

AIHAN
 Why, sure.

Accepting the baby into her arms.
 Come to me, baby. There now, you're just a hungry little boy, aren't you?

Now nose to nose with her grandson.
 He's steadily gaining weight,
 Xingxing...I can feel it!

Meanwhile, Xingxing's eyes dart back and forth as she runs her fingers along the worn edges of the envelope.

XINGXING
 It's from California.

AIHAN
 Aren't you going to open it?

XINGXING
I'm afraid what I might discover.
(lowering her chin)

AIHAN
Would you prefer that I read it?
I'll stop if there's anything
amiss.

XINGXING
Very well.

Exchanging Pooyi for the envelope. Aihan pries it open, unfolds the letter, and reads the contents. But not before some gravel spills out onto the floor.

AIHAN
Look here, a little bit of
California in our *feng shui*!
(pleased)

Xingxing gently places Pooyi aside and immediately gets down on the floor to scoop up the precious stones, securing them safely in her hand. She soon gets up and assumes a sitting position with her son.

XINGXING
Go ahead, Mother. I think I'll
listen sitting down.

AIHAN
Let's see...
October 23, 1865
Dearest Xingxing,
I write you while seated on a ledge
high above the American River
outside Camp 20, having a
spectacular vantage point not
unlike Immortal Bridge. By now, you
should have already given birth.
Hopefully, the results were bright.
Be it a boy or girl, I care not, as
long as our dear child is healthy
and safe. *Yunxiao nushen's* will be
done!
I've made a new friend here. His
name is Huan. He comes from
Kaiping, like my boss. As soon as
we arrived in Sacramento, Haibo
ordered both of us to learn about
tunnel excavation for five days in
Auburn, before sending us up to the
place where I'm sitting now.

(MORE)

AIHAN (CONT'D)

Here, we are applying techniques taught to us by Boqin, a wise Chinese miner below the mountain, who is an expert in the field of explosives, specifically the use of black powder. Do you remember accompanying me when I would thin out stubborn bamboo trees behind my family's property using explosives? Xingxing!

With eyebrows raised, she is waved on by her daughter.

XINGXING

Go on, Mother. Go on...

AIHAN

Well, I'm proud to report that I've moved on to clearing solid rock! Can you believe it! Right now, we're constructing a ledge we call the Cape of Good Hope to make way for a single track to wind around this long, rocky bluff, here in the high Sierras.

Coming to California with no experience, Huan has come a long way in the use of explosives. He need only master how to better compose himself while waiting for a fuse to make contact with the powder. I keep reminding him that the most important thing isn't the blast itself, but the act of waiting patiently, out of harm's way, for the detonation to occur. And, if such a detonation fails to occur, to wait an ample amount of time before safely approaching the scene. But Huan continues to disregard this important advice. Someday, he may regret his risky impulses. Better to be a turtle than a dead hare, I say! I have good news for you. You may now write to me at the following address:

Central Pacific Railroad
Care Of Haibo
Sacramento, California
United States

I long for word from you, and will
count the days until-

XINGXING

Uh, that's enough, Mother. I'll
read the rest myself.

AIHAN

I understand. I was young once,
too, you know.
(laughing)

Later that night, Aihan picks up the letter her daughter
carefully set atop the stone mantle. She now picks up where
she left off earlier today.

ZHI PENG

(voiceover)

I long for word from you, and will
count the days until I receive your
letter. The light is quickly
dwindling, so I must leave this
spot. Before I do, I press these
pages close to my heart with all
the love welling up in me tonight.
Your loving husband,

Zhi Peng

Aihan sits down to ponder the parting lines of this letter,
written by a boy she's never met.

INT. FARMHOUSE OF WEI NONGMIN, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - LATER

By the light of burning tapers, Xingxing sits in the corner
of her family's courtyard to reply to Zhi Peng's latest
letter.

XINGXING

December 30, 1865

I received your letter, Zhi Peng!
I was crazy with joy, hearing from
you again. This time from America!
I prayed so hard for your
protection on the high seas that I
almost ground my mala beads into
sand! Now that you're safely on
land, I'll have to ask Taoshih Yee
to select another deity for me to
pray to. I wonder if there's one
who protects people who set off
explosives for a living?

(MORE)

XINGXING (CONT'D)

We have a baby boy, Zhi Peng! He was born in early October and is growing with each passing day. His name is Pooyi, and he's as handsome as his Father.

Oh, you'll never guess where I had him - in my family's rice paddy of all places! Yes, I know! I was in the water weeding, and, well, you can imagine my fright at the notion of dropping my baby right then and there! I sent Guang in to get my Mother, who, by the way, handled the birth perfectly. I was so blessed she was there to deliver Pooyi. Someday, when we meet again, I'll explain the entire event to you in greater detail.

When will you begin sending money home? While content living with Mother and Father, I long to make a home of our own someday. To that end, I plan on setting aside a portion of your surplus wages to vouchsafe this dream.

By the way, I saw Jietang last week while carrying Pooyi in my *beidai*. As we passed each other, he had the fiercest look in his eyes. I have since learned from relatives that he has left China altogether.

Exactly where, I do not know.

Well, it's almost dawn and I have to check on Pooyi, so I'll leave off here. I love you and miss you. I'd kiss your every feature where you here with me. Until then, know that I, your Dearest Xingxing, patiently waits for you. Make your destiny, Zhi Peng, and return to me with handfuls of gold.

With all our love,
Xingxing and Pooyi xoxoxo

Awakened by the family rooster, she diligently folds the letter and returns back into the house.

I/E. FARMHOUSE OF WEI NONGMIN, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE,
SOUTHERN CHINA - CONTINUOUS

Over the course of the next year, a crude water clock located on the property, consisting of a stack of three copper pots, continues to overflow its brims, ending drip by drip into the measuring basin. During this time, Xingxing continues to receive correspondence from her husband. In addition to the letters, a trustworthy Hong Kong broker routinely hand delivers silver dollars to Xingxing on a monthly basis, to great household celebration. Out of these hard-earned dollars, she drops a surplus of these large coins into a wooden jewelry box she keeps along with her husband's cherished letters.

EXT. ABOARD THE SS SENATOR, SOUTH CHINA SEA - AFTERNOON

A determined Jietang tightly grips the starboard gunwale of the *SS Senator*, bound for San Francisco. So adamant is he that even the pangs of seasickness have eluded him. Accompanying yet another group of Chinese workers to America, Haibo comes up on deck to enjoy some fresh air. He soon stands next to a tense Jietang.

HAIBO

I'm told by officers at the helm that you've been standing here a very long time. They asked me to check on you. Are you experiencing seasickness?

JIETANG

Actually, I'm not. Somehow I've been immune to it, thankfully...

Haibo gazes over the calm sea.

HAIBO

I see. Why are you traveling to America, son? Or, are you just passing through?

JIETANG

I'm looking for a friend who traveled on this ship about four months ago. He left our hometown in Taishan to work for the railroad in Northern California.

HAIBO

I have routinely ferried similar workers from Hong Kong to San Francisco in groups of fifty.

(MORE)

HAIBO (CONT'D)
It's very likely that I brought
your friend over with me to work
for the Central Pacific. What's his
name?

Jietang raises his shoulders and inhales deeply before responding.

JIETANG
His name is Zhi Peng, and he's
about my age. Do you know him?

HAIBO
I certainly do! He's one of my most
productive workers.

JIETANG
Really? My friend, Zhi Peng, is
productive?
(furrowing his brow)

HAIBO
Oh, yes! Zhi Peng is highly
experienced in explosives. He's
encamped at Summit Tunnel at the
peak of Donner Pass, beginning to
cut through a dozen tunnels of
almost one mile of solid granite,
before all is said and done. By my
estimation, Zhi Peng should be
stationed there for the next...
(scratching his head)
For the next eighteen months, at
least.

Jietang stands silently for an astonishingly long time.

JIETANG
(suddenly animated)
You don't say! Summit Tunnel, is
it?

HAIBO
Why, yes, Summit Tunnel, the
highest peak on the railroad
survey. Are you planning on
visiting him?

JIETANG
Oh, yes! Soon after I arrive, in
fact.

HAIBO
Are you in need of a job? If so, I
have two openings still available
that I was unable to fill in Hong
Kong.

Jeitang eases his grip on the gunwale and, for the first time, turns to face Haibo.

JIETANG
Consider me interested!

HAIBO
It's done, then. Our quarters are
located in the steerage...

JIETANG
Very well...
(pausing)
Thank you! I'm sorry, I didn't get
your name.

HAIBO
Haibo.

JIETANG
Haibo.
(grinning)
As in, ocean wave?
(giggling morbidly)

HAIBO
(taken aback)
Why, yes. And yours?

JIETANG
Yaoting. Meaning, honoring-

HAIBO
(interrupting)
Honoring the courtyard!

JIETANG
That's right!

Suddenly cutting short the conversation.
I need some time alone, Haibo.
(abruptly)

HAIBO
But, of course.

They both bow. Haibo now crosses over to the port side, leaving Jietang alone to plan his next act.

INT. McDOWELL FARMHOUSE, GRAY'S STATION, CALIFORNIA - NIGHT

Asleep under a pile of quilts, Ellen and Bill experience yet another night of heavy snow that has now found its way over the windowsills. Ellen rolls over onto her side and comes face-to-face with a large, menacing drift. After finally dozing off, she suddenly awakens, shrieking at the top of her lungs.

INT. MILITARY SURPLUS SHOP, PORT OF YOKOHAMA, JAPAN - DAY

Close to boarding time, Jietang browses the aisles of a military surplus shop, adjacent to the Port of Yokohama. Admiring a dagger under the counter, he summons the clerk.

WORKER
Can I help you?

JIETANG
I'm in a hurry and must catch a ship. How much for that dagger there?

Pointing out the knife under the glass.

WORKER
One hundred and one thousand yen!

JIETANG
Make it an even ninety thousand, and you have yourself a sale.

WORKER
Are you crazy? My boss would kill me!

The clerk reaches under the counter, setting the shiny dagger in front of him.

Ninety-five thousand, and it's yours.

The *SS Senator* suddenly sounds its steam whistle.

JIETANG
Very well, ninety-five it is!
(angrily)

WORKER
Excellent choice.

Jietang spills his coins out onto the counter, collects the dagger and sheath, and bolts out of the shop to catch his ship.

EXT. ABOARD THE STEAMER MINT, SACRAMENTO RIVER, SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA - DUSK

Shortly before the *Mint* is to dock at Steamer Landing in Sacramento, Haibo approaches Jietang with important news concerning the weather conditions at Summit Pass. Eager to face off with his enemy, Jietang carefully listens to his boss.

JIETANG

It can't be as bad as all that up there!

Now setting his sight on the steep, jagged snow-capped Sierras.

HAIBO

Forty feet in some places, I'm being told.

JIETANG

Hmm!

(waiving him off)
I'll find a way.

Gripping the iron rail tighter and tighter.

HAIBO

Tell you what. Since you're so eager to see your friend, I could use more sappers up there at Tunnel One.

JIETANG

And what exactly is a sapper?

HAIBO

A sapper is someone who digs his way through solid earth, or in this case, granite... A very necessary job. Those who excel in such an activity can make themselves indispensable.

JIETANG

I see.

(showing false interest)

HAIBO

I suggest you train with a man named Boqin for the next five or six weeks. After that why, I'll take you to the top of the Sierra Nevadas myself.

JIETANG

But how? You just said the snow is
forty feet deep in some places!

HAIBO

We've equipped certain engines with
giant plows that remove massive
snow drifts from the tracks.

JIETANG

Then why not just take me up there
tomorrow?

HAIBO

Because you, as an ordinary
laborer, aren't needed up there
yet.

Jietang once again exhibits signs of prolonged animation.
Are you alright?

JIETANG

Oh, yes... So sorry, I was busy
laying out plans. Up here.
(pointing to his temple)

HAIBO

What kind of plans?

The steam whistle on the *Mint* sounds off as they begin to
enter the Sacramento ship basin.

JIETANG

I'll do as you suggest, *laoshan*.

HAIBO

Splendid. I'll have Boqin notified
at once.

The two men face each other and bow, one far deeper than the
other.

EXT. SUMMIT TUNNEL, WEST PORTAL, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS,
CALIFORNIA - NIGHT

By the light of torches alone, Zhi Peng and Huan, together
with their gang, begin to pierce the surface of what will
become Summit Tunnel. This construction site sits seven
thousand feet above sea level and some fifteen miles from
Cisco, California. Joining them are four additional gangs of
excavators spread out over various portions of the mountain
face.

Their joint objective: to chisel, drill, and blast an opening nineteen feet high by sixteen feet wide, amounting to almost seventeen hundred feet in length. A staggering endeavor considering the vasty walls of granite, ironstone, and trap that await them over the next fifteen months.

Finding a suitable crevice to begin operations, Zhi Peng directs a member of his gang to insert a three-foot iron shaft into the fissure, while two men take turns pounding the drill deeper into the rock, using hefty eight-pound sledgehammers. With a quarter of an inch to go before the drill reaches its objective, Zhi Peng and Huan make preparations to fill the hole with black powder; set a fuse within the particles; and tightly pack the opening of the hole with straw and clay. Yielding to Huan, who sets a match to the fuse, Zhi Peng soon seizes hold of his friend, who suddenly decides to cheat death, and pulls him away to safety.

I/E. VARIOUS SITES IN CHINA AND NORTHERN CALIFORNIA -
CONTINUOUS

Back in Taishan, the rainy typhoon season causes Wei Nongmin's water clock to spill over its brims, while letter after letter, together with silver coins, continue to arrive at the family's *feng shui*. Meantime, Zhi Peng and his gang of excavators continue to make steady progress, blasting inch by hard-earned inch into the formidable mountainside, while struggling to keep a deranged Huan alive. For his part, Jietang, having successfully completed explosives training under Boqin's watch, makes preparations to travel up to Summit Tunnel in the morning, but not before sharpening his Japanese dagger, over and over, on an idle grinding wheel.

EXT. FIREWOOD TRAIN, CAR NO. 7, AUBURN, CALIFORNIA - MORNING

Haibo and Jietang are riding on top of a firewood train bound for Summit Tunnel. About twelve miles into their excursion, the elevation becomes significantly steeper, causing them to tightly clutch the side of the car.

HAIBO

Boqin informs me, rather explicitly, that while you excelled in the area of explosives over the past five weeks, you treated others, especially the older miners, with great contempt. He said you ate every meal by yourself!

JIETANG
I fulfilled the requirements of my
training, didn't I?

Haibo is surprised at the tone of Jietang's voice.

HAIBO
(loudly)
Don't get smart with me, boy, or
I'll have this train turned around
at the drop of a hat!

JIETANG
Sorry, *laoshan*...
(bowing his head)

HAIBO
Don't let it happen again!

Jietang turns away from his boss, while Haibo continues to study the angry young man sitting at his side.

You're probably unaware of a group
of Chinese Bulls who patrol the
area up there at Summit Pass.

Turning to Haibo.

JIETANG
Bulls? Actual bulls?
(confused)

HAIBO
No. Police! Bulls are just another
name for cops in San Francisco.
Anyways, there was a fight in Camp
20 last week, and when the fight
was over, both of the individuals
involved were severely punished by
Chinese Bulls. As for the
instigator, well, he was cast over
the side of the mountain, in the
middle of the night, no less. He
hasn't been heard from since. Sure,
the deep snow may have softened his
landing, but not before passing
through thirty feet of the white
stuff and freezing to death!

Sternly shaking his finger at Jietang.
You'd best steer clear of the
Bulls, Jietang, and keep your nose
to the grindstone;
(MORE)

HAIBO (CONT'D)
otherwise, you'll end up just like
that thug they threw off the
mountain. Understood?

Jietang nods his head in silence.

And another thing! Stay away from
those painted ladies in their fine,
checkered hats! They're nothing but
trouble.

JIETANG

But I'll need to relieve all the
pressure I've been under. I may not
be able to stop myself, boss.

(grinning)

HAIBO

Well, do the best you can, boy!

JIETANG

Please, leave me alone with my
thoughts, *xiansheng*. I have to
reconsider a rather important
matter...

They now pass through Bloomer Cut, the latest marvel of the modern age. Soon after Haibo dozes off, Jietang unsheathes his freshly sharpened knife and throws it over the side, high above Star House Gap.

EXT. McDOWELL FARMYARD, COBURN'S STATION, CALIFORNIA - NIGHT

Ellen McDowell decides to follow through with her plans to simulate the conditions up at Donner Pass by piling newly accumulated snow around a small section of the barnyard, with the assistance of a shovel and a large wheelbarrow. Working throughout the night, in the light of a crescent moon, she stops at daybreak, satisfied with the height of her walls, while Bill continues to part the drapes to witness this unusual behavior.

EXT. CAMP 20, SUMMIT PASS, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS,
CALIFORNIA - EVENING

With so much snow at Camp 20, twelve feet in most places, a network of pathways has been shoveled out to allow for daily pedestrian traffic to and from the mouth of Summit Tunnel, as well as mess tents, latrines, and sleeping quarters. By night, a series of mounted torches light the way for shift workers and other residents.

Arriving shortly after noon today, Jietang sits alone in the corner of a dimly lit canteen. Zhi Peng and Huan soon enter the facility in need of fresh water.

HUAN

With so much snow, you'd think we'd be able to just...scoop it up and eat it.

ZHI PENG

It doesn't work that way. Besides, ingesting snow works like salt water; it only increases your thirst! The only difference is, salt water, when swallowed in great quantities, will kill you.

They arrive at the water trough and fill their canteens.

No. I'll stick to good old, clean water, which is plentiful up here in the mountains...

HUAN

I'll say.

(whispering)

Hey, see that guy sitting in the corner?

Zhi Peng tops off his canteen and looks over in that direction.

ZHI PENG

What about him?

HUAN

He was here when I left dinner five hours ago.

Far too vague to see the man's face, Zhi Peng and Huan exit the tent. As they walk outside, the evening clouds suddenly part, leaving a gibbous moon free to bathe the entire mountain in light, including the face of Jietang, sitting quietly inside the canteen.

EXT. OUTSIDE A BROTHEL, CAMP 20, SUMMIT PASS, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA - AFTERNOON

That following Sunday, Jietang is seen running out of a local brothel clutching a jade green *beidai*. Young Chinese prostitutes soon come pouring out of the bordello, covering their mouths in shock. Once he's a safe distance away, Jietang cleans the blood from his hands in a snowbank before covering the scene with freshly accumulated snow.

INT. MAIN MESS TENT, CAMP 20, SUMMIT PASS, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA - THE NEXT DAY

The next morning, the mess tent is abuzz with news concerning a brutal assault on a Camp 20 prostitute. A worried Haibo stops a canteen worker to glean further information.

HAIBO

Have you learned anything more about that poor girl's condition?

WORKER

I'll inquire, *laoshan!*

Disappearing into a mass of sizzling woks, the worker soon returns.

They say she's improving under the care of a traditional Chinese doctor from Sacramento, and that her baby appears to be unharmed.

A cook slides Haibo's breakfast in front of him.

HAIBO

Xie xie. And her assailant?

WORKER

They're searching for him now! I've discovered she's the wife of a Bull, here in camp. I'm told he's calling for *shiji zhanshou* when they bag him.

HAIBO

This is bad, very bad...

WORKER

Indeed. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must get back to work.
(bowing)

HAIBO

But, of course...

A concerned Haibo now picks through the contents of his steaming rice bowl.

EXT. FARMYARD OF WEI NONGMIN, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE, SOUTHERN CHINA - MORNING

Pulling weeds in the family's rice paddy with her mother, Xingxing discusses the latest news from California, while her baby sleeps inside.

AIHAN
What else did he say?

Standing upright with both hands supporting her sore back.

XINGXING
Well, in his latest letter, which arrived in record time, he claims that a new worker from Taishan arrived in camp. His name is Yaoting.

Continuing to weed, while wiping her brow.

AIHAN
And his parents' names?

XINGXING
He didn't say.

AIHAN
I know most everyone in the village...did you know anyone in school who went by that name?

XINGXING
No one. Funny, but I would remember that name...

AIHAN
Hmm? Yaoting. Honoring the court...

INT. SUMMIT TUNNEL, WEST PORTAL, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA - DAY

A fuse glowing in a darkened cave blazes a trail to its intended destination, causing a wall of stone to crumble to the floor. Soon after the smoke clears, and the gang assigned to clear away the rubble begins to work, Zhi Peng and Huan, hands on hips, stand at the mouth of the tunnel to admire their latest assault on the granite mass blocking the way. Meanwhile, opposing blasts on the other side of the mountain can be heard echoing their way through the cliffs below.

EXT. CAMP 20, SUMMIT PASS, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA - LATER

Amid great commotion, a hooded assault suspect is brought to Haibo by a group of bulls outside the main mess tent. Every single worker and inhabitant of the camp suddenly quit what they're doing to witness this event.

Haibo signals for the Bulls to bring the detainee into the canteen so he can speak to him. They now retire inside the structure, as the crowd continues their vigil.

HAIBO

Someone yell for Zhi Peng, I'm going to need a witness. Put the suspect at the table, there in the corner.

Pointing at the table at the far end of the mess tent. A puzzled Zhi Peng soon enters.

ZHI PENG

Yes, *xiansheng*!

HAIBO

Come here and sit down, I need you to witness this.

Zhi Peng sits down at the table with Haibo and the suspect, while the Bulls look on.

Has anyone searched the bag he's holding in his hands?

HEAD BULL

Why, no, we...

HAIBO

Never mind, we'll get to that! Now leave the tent. I'll hail you if he tries to flee. Besides, where's he going to go at seven thousand feet in deep snow?

The Bulls reluctantly leave, only to surround the entire perimeter of the canteen. Haibo stands and removes the hood.

Yaoting!

(exclaiming)

ZHI PENG

That's not... What did you call him?

HAIBO

Yaoting, I hired him during my latest voyage here.

ZHI PENG

I don't know what he told you, but his name is Jietang, and he's from my village!

HEAD BULL
I heard shouting. Is everything alright?

HAIBO
Yes, yes, everything is under control. You may go now. Remain outside!

The Head Bull follows Haibo's order and ducks out of the tent.

He told me his name is Yaoting and that you were best friends...

ZHI PENG
And I'm telling you, boss, that his name is Jietang, and he's not my friend.
(angrily)
He's from a wealthy family, and his father is a magistrate.

HAIBO
Is this true?

Turning his attention to Jietang.

Well...? Tell me the truth, Yao, I mean, Jietang, or I'll feed you to the Bulls this instant!

(forcefully)
I'm waiting. Send in the Bulls!

JIETANG
No, wait...

Haibo orders the Bulls back out of the tent.

HAIBO
Let's have it!

JIETANG
My name isn't Yaoting, it's Jietang, like your boy here said.
(glaring)
And my father is a magistrate, and if he were here...

HAIBO
Enough of that. He isn't here!

Beginning to walk the floor.
Did you beat that girl?

JIETANG

What girl? I don't know what you or
the Bulls are talking about.

Jietang stands up to express his anger.

Why, I've never set foot in any
other place up here than my
quarters, this mess tent, and the
latrine!

HAIBO

Sit down, Jietang! Then why did
they arrest you, hmm?

JIETANG

As you know I, I keep to myself!
The Bulls likely noticed that I'm
sort of a loner...

HAIBO

That's not good enough, and you
know it! They have eye witnesses
placing you at the scene of the
crime.

JIETANG

Oh, sure, the word of common
prostitutes...! I tell you, I was
never there. I'm completely
innocent, you must believe me,
whatever our differences!

(pleading)

HAIBO

That's what you want me to tell
them out there?

(shouting)

Why, that unfortunate girl's
husband is a Bull!

JIETANG

Husband?

Swallowing hard.

HAIBO

I only have a few more minutes
before I give them my report.

Studying him closely.

Why did you come to California, if
not to see your friend?

ZHI PENG
He's not my friend.
(sternly)

HAIBO
That's pretty evident!

Turning to Jietang.

Why did you come here? I'm waiting,
Jietang! Shall I send in the Bulls?

Waiving Haibo off, Jietang proceeds to explain himself.

JIETANG
I came here to deliver news from
Taishan...

ZHI PENG
What news? What news, I say! Does
it concern my wife? Or my son?

Jietang hangs his head.

HAIBO
Jietang, I'm warning you! If you're
lying...

JIETANG
I'm not!
(suddenly quieter)
I'm not.

HAIBO
Then out with it, boy!

ZHI PENG
There's absolutely nothing wrong
with my wife or my son, is there!
(defiantly)

JIETANG
You're so wrong, Zhi Peng... You
know how she enjoys going up to
Immortal Bridge? Well, shortly
before I left for America...

ZHI PENG
Yes?
(louder)
Yes!

JIETANG

Shortly before I left for America,
news was flying through the village
that Xingxing and your son had
had...

ZHI PENG

Had what? Had...

JIETANG

Had accidentally stumbled off of
Immortal Bridge.

ZHI PENG

Why, that's preposterous!

JIETANG

Those were my very words.
(gravely)

The door to the mess tent suddenly opens as a worker steps inside, removes his hat, and bows.

WORKER

The head cook said, Unless you
vacate the canteen, there will be
no dinner for the workers tonight.

HAIBO

Very well, tell him we'll be out
momentarily.

WORKER

I'll inform him at once!
(bowing)

Haibo sits back down.

HAIBO

Go on! And you had better be
telling the truth!

JIETANG

On my father's honor, *xiansheng*!
(with false devotion)

ZHI PENG

He's grasping at straws, boss.
Besides, what proof does he have?
Why, it's no secret that he's in
love with my wife, always has been,
always will...

JIETANG
(abruptly)
I went up there!

HAIBO
Where?

Slapping his hand on the table.

JIETANG
Why, Immortal Bridge...! When I arrived at the spot, I carefully inspected the area and discovered a crag just before you step onto the first rock. I had trouble with it myself. Anyways, there's a cypress tree directly next to this crag.

ZHI PENG
Everybody who's been up there knows that, Jietang! Why, I've helped Xingxing over that scarp many times, and she, me.

JIETANG
So, there's always been someone there to help her, right?
(cunningly)

ZHI PENG
Well...

JIETANG
And the rumor around the village before she...she fell, was that she was alone with a young Taoshih, up there a few weeks before the accident.

Zhi Peng becomes visibly shaken.

HAIBO
That proves nothing! Let's go.

Getting up from the table.

JIETANG
But, this does.

Reaching into his workbag and pulling out a sort of sling. I found this jade-beaded *beidai* snagged on a cypress branch directly next to that uneven hazard.

(MORE)

JIETANG (CONT'D)
It must have gotten caught in the
thicket, causing her to tumble over
the edge, along with her son.

With his mouth agape, a now bereft Zhi Peng is close to
falling for Jietang's compelling tale. He need only hear one
more thread of convincing evidence.

HAIBO
Get up, Jietang, it's time to go.

Jietang, realizing the mortal penalty awaiting him, continues
to sit, while incoherently muttering his final words.

JIETANG
(sobbing)
It was bad. Oh, it was very bad. I
loved her, I freely admit it. I
loved her! My beautiful, precious
Xingxing...

Soon led away by the Head Bull, Haibo follows Jietang out of
the canteen, leaving an unsettled Zhi Peng thoroughly
convinced of the tragic death of his wife and son.

EXT. SUMMIT PASS, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA - LATER

Jietang's body is thrown over the mountainside, followed by
his detached head.

EXT. TUNNEL NO. 6, SUMMIT PASS, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS,
CALIFORNIA - THE NEXT DAY

A defeated Zhi Peng and his friend, Huan, together with the
rest of their gang, slowly make their way to the crest of
Summit Pass to take part in the digging of an eight-by-twenty-
foot opening in the mountaintop. Once this hole reaches its
proper depth, excavators will be able to attack the tunnel
using four separate passageways.

Now operational, workers find it ever more difficult to lift
heavy rock and debris out of the shaft with only the use of a
manual derrick. As a result, the Central Pacific Railroad
sends one of its principal supervisors to the site for an
important consultation.

JAMES
Who is the Chinese boss in charge
of this operation?

WORKER

His name is Haibo, shall I call him up to the surface?

JAMES

Yes, get him up here.

The worker yells to the men below, and Haibo is soon brought to the top riding on a wooden platform, drawn by ropes and pulleys.

Haibo! It's good to see you again.
We have a bit of a problem,
production-wise, and I need your input.

Haibo steps off the platform and shakes hands with his boss.

HAIBO

It's been pretty rough getting the rocks and rubble out efficiently. The men hoisting the ropes of our derrick here can only handle so much weight.

JAMES

I agree.

They now move away from the ongoing activity and set their workpapers down on top of a large boulder.

I have an alternative that might interest you.

HAIBO

Alright...

JAMES

We have a small locomotive called the Sacramento, which was once used during ceremonial events. We believe this small engine has outlived its usefulness.

Haibo listens intently over the sound of squeaky pulleys hauling another debris platform up to the surface.

Our plan is to run the engine up as far as Gold Run, where our tracks end, remove its wheels and excess equipment, and, uh...get it up here.

HAIBO

Here? But how?

JAMES
By using a logging truck driven by
yokes of oxen!

Haibo removes his hat at the thought of such an arduous task.

HAIBO
Really?

JAMES
Really! When the oxen no longer
have the footing to be able to haul
up the heavy engine, our CPRR
freight team will be there to take
over.

HAIBO
How heavy an engine are we talking
about?

JAMES
Twelve tons, give or take. That's
why we're stripping her down.
(confidently)
Then, we get the machine up here
and set her in that sinkhole there.

Pointing to the primitive operation nearby.

HAIBO
And then...

JAMES
And then, house the engine in a
wooden structure to protect it from
the elements; fire her up; set an
eye hook at the end of a derrick to
connect four equidistant platform
ropes, and...

HAIBO
No more manual derrick! Brilliant.
(laughing)
But can we get the fire-eating
beast up here? That's the question!

James picks up his paperwork from the boulder, preparing to leave.

JAMES

If the Royal Navy can haul three-ton cannons up the side of steep cliffs with nothing more than ropes, winches, and pulleys, why, I ask, would it be impossible to get that...what did you call it? Fire-eating beast up the side of this mountain to the top of Summit Pass?

HAIBO

Mr. Strobridge, if you can get that engine up here, my men would welcome such an advantage...

JAMES

Then, I wish you good day!

James disappears over the edge of Summit Pass, leaving a bemused Haibo to wonder about these headstrong Americans. A courier now hands an important message to the busy *laoshan*.

HAIBO

You, down there!

Hollering into the opening.

WORKER

Yes, boss...?

HAIBO

Get Zhi Peng up here right away. I need to speak to him!

The worker soon replies.

WORKER

He said he's on his way!

INT. TUNNEL NO. 10, EAST PORTAL, SUMMIT PASS, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA - THE NEXT DAY

The following day, Haibo and Zhi Peng arrive at the eastern portal to Tunnel 10. There, they enter a labyrinth of passageways thirty to forty feet below the surface of the snowpack. With light from an array of oil lamps placed high on wooden timbers, they find their way along the icy walls to camp central, where they soon locate the main commissary. Once inside, Haibo discovers that he's wanted at the western portal, not the eastern. With that, they soon depart the frozen hub.

ZHI PENG

I don't believe I've ever seen anything like it back there.

HAIBO

I happen to agree.

ZHI PENG

To have that much snow routinely on top of you has to be tough to get used to.

HAIBO

Indeed. I was a bit cowed myself.

Stepping over a sizable puddle of slush.
The Central Pacific Railroad wasn't going to let forty feet of snow stand in the way of their tunnel excavation timetable.

ZHI PENG

Sounds like them...I hear there's another storm coming from the north. It could get bad.

HAIBO

Nothing worse than the place we just left!
(laughing)

ZHI PENG

Right...!

They soon complete their trek to the western side of the peak. After their consultation with Tunnel 10 engineers and a meal fit for a dignitary, they bed down in a workers' dormitory. That night, a great thundering sound is heard, shaking the wooden beams above them. A wall, fifty feet in height, soon rushes down an adjacent mountainside, splitting open their cabin and trapping everyone inside under a towering bank of snow and ice.

I/E. FARMHOUSE OF WEI NONGMIN, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG PROVINCE - EVENING

Having received no correspondence or subsistence from Zhi Peng in over three months, a dismayed Xingxing, fearing the worst, once again considers the best way to divine her husband's whereabouts, deep in the mountains of Northern California. Meanwhile, rain continues to slip over the rims of the water clock in the rear of the family's *feng shui*.

A week later, she pauses in front of her parents' bedroom curtain.

XINGXING
Mother, father, we have to talk.

INT. HARBOR MASTER'S OFFICE, HONG KONG HARBOR, CHINA - THE NEXT DAY

A diminutive figure toting a child enters the Harbor Master's Office seeking passage. She now sets the toddler down on the floor.

HARBOR MASTER
Can I help you, miss?

XINGXING
I need to get to San Francisco. Can I purchase a passage here?

The Harbor Master studies Xingxing closely.

HARBOR MASTER
Will you be traveling by yourself?

Xingxing opens up her bag.

XINGXING
Yes, and little Pooyi here...

The Harbor Master peeks around the corner of his desk.

HARBOR MASTER
And how old is the little tike?

XINGXING
Pooyi will soon turn two.

HARBOR MASTER
Well then, I think I'll put you on the Mary Whitridge. She's one of the fastest clippers in the fleet, and only about ten years old.

XINGXING
That sounds fine. How much for the fare? I'm only carrying silver dollars.

HARBOR MASTER
Oh...is your husband in America working for the railroad?

XINGXING
How did you guess?
(startled)

HARBOR MASTER
Well, they pay their railroad
workers in silver, that's how! Did
he leave from this port?

XINGXING
Why, yes, he did. A few years ago,
to be exact...

Looking down at her son.
He was hired in this harbor by a
man named Haibo, from Kaiping.

HARBOR MASTER
You don't say!

Getting out of his chair.
He happens to be a good friend of
mine.

XINGXING
Really?

HARBOR MASTER
Oh, yes. He's still ferrying gangs
of fifty Chinese workers to
California, mostly from Guangdong
Province.

XINGXING
That's where I'm from. I live in
Taishan.

HARBOR MASTER
(smiling)
Haibo tells me his best worker is
from there, an explosives expert
named Zhi Peng. Do you know him?

XINGXING
He's my husband!

HARBOR MASTER
Well, then, I can put you in First
Class, which I highly recommend!
(eagerly)

XINGXING
Oh...no, no! Put us in the
steerage!
(MORE)

XINGXING (CONT'D)
How much is that, exactly?
(determined)
How much, please?

Taken aback by the fortitude of this slight young woman.

HARBOR MASTER
Thirty dollars, but...
(disappointed)

XINGXING
No, no, we'll be fine.

Xingxing begins counting out thirty silver dollars inside her bag, ready to set them on his desk.

HARBOR MASTER
Maybe you will, but what about your little one! It's filthy opposite the cargo hold, and the air inside the steerage is nauseating.

He now stiffens up.
Nonsense, I'm putting you in second class!

XINGXING
Don't be difficult, sir. I have so little money as it is!

HARBOR MASTER
No, no. Haibo wouldn't have it.
He'd be so angry with me were he to find out that I allowed you to cross the entire Pacific Ocean in steerage!

With his wheels turning, he quickly arrives at a valid solution.

How much do you have in your hands there?

XINGXING
Thirty dollars...

The Harbor Master holds out his hands to receive the silver dollars. Xingxing reluctantly hands over the coins and is soon presented with a Second Class Ticket aboard the American clipper ship *Mary Whitridge*, assigned to Cabin 25, a single-occupancy lodging.

EXT. ABOARD THE MARY WHITRIDGE, CALIFORNIA COAST - MORNING

The *Mary Whitridge* now threads its way through Golden Gate Strait, with its towering palisades visible on both sides of the ship. She eventually makes her way around Sea Bird Island and is soon guided by marine pilots to an awaiting dock located at the base of Brannan Street.

Back in Taishan, an anxious Aihan fervently prays on *mala* beads for the safety and well-being of her daughter and grandson.

Eventually passing through Immigration, Xingxing and her son now board a passenger carrier for the Embarcadero ferryboat terminal, but not before riding past teeming throngs in Chinatown. There, holding Pooyi on her knees, Xingxing studies the many market stalls and merchant shops that line the streets of this densely populated urban enclave, amazed at the bustle going on around her.

EXT. ABOARD THE STEAMER SAN ANTONIO, SAN FRANCISCO BAY, CALIFORNIA - AFTERNOON

Xingxing and Pooyi cross San Francisco Bay aboard the *San Antonio*, headed for the Alameda Wharf for their connecting birth to Sacramento. As they take in the sights at the bow, the steam whistle sounds, causing a frightened Pooyi to run to the safety of his mother's arms.

INT. SUMMIT TUNNEL, CENTER SHAFT, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA - CONTINUOUS

Over the sound of the *Sacramento's* engine, which continues to haul pallet after pallet of granite, ironstone, and trap up the center shaft, Huan successfully drills the tiniest hole into the East Portal, chipping away at its opening before passing his arm through and shaking hands with his counterpart on the other side.

EXT. CARSON RANGE, EASTERN SLOPE, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, NEVADA - CONTINUOUS

A large number of Chinese loggers have been employed by the Central Pacific Railroad to remove anything standing in the way of its downhill pursuit to Promontory Point. These efficient gangs are seen felling trees as tall as one hundred fifty feet. Following up this cumbersome work come the grubbers, whose job it is to remove large stumps by any means possible, including the use of explosives.

Breaking free of bad memories associated with Summit Pass, especially the news of Xingxing and Pooyi's death, not to mention Haibo's tragic demise, Zhi Peng escapes to the Carson Range on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevadas. There, he blasts his way through an equally challenging substance - the unrelenting roots of embedded tree stumps.

EXT. SACRAMENTO STEAMSHIP TERMINAL, SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA - THE NEXT DAY

Soon after the *Mint* is secured to its pier in Sacramento, Xingxing steps off the boarding ramp with her son. One of the first things she notices is a sign written in Chinese reading **Chinese Cooks Wanted**, in large bold letters. Studying the bearer of this placard carefully, Xingxing steps over to address him.

XINGXING

I'm looking for work and am a very
accomplished cook. My name is
Xingxing from Guangdong Province.

Setting her son and baggage down on the ground.

GILBERT

I'm sorry, we're only interested in
hiring men. Railroad workers can be
very aggressive where women are
concerned...

Xingxing once again demonstrates her persuasive side.

XINGXING

I can do anything, light stoves,
chop, peel, mince, and dice
vegetables...clean up, wash pots
and bowls, scour woks, mop floors,
anything!

Gilbert continues to display his sign. Receiving no takers coming off the vessel, he resumes their dialogue.

GILBERT

(imploringly)

I'm afraid you underestimate the
dangers you'd face were I to take
you on.

Xingxing presses onward, ignoring his warnings.

XINGXING

You speak very good English...

Pouring on the charm.

What did you say your name is?

GILBERT

Gilbert, Gilbert Chang.

XINGXING

My name is Xingxing.

GILBERT

Ah, star... That's a very special name!

XINGXING

I know!

(stalling)

Oh, and this is my son, Pooyi.

Gilbert sets down his sign and bends over, coming eye to eye with the youngster.

GILBERT

Well, hello there, Pooyi.

XINGXING

How did you come to speak English so well?

GILBERT

My mother is American.

XINGXING

I see...

(somewhat abashed)

GILBERT

Anyways, I attended a boarding school in San Francisco along with other American boys, and, well...

Suddenly taken by the charm of this pretty emigre.

XINGXING

And your mother, she obviously speaks English?

GILBERT

Irish, to be exact!
(laughing)

XINGXING

Does she prepare Chinese food at home?

She picks up Pooyi and holds him against her hip.

GILBERT
She does, but not very well, I'm
afraid...

Shaking his head.

XINGXING
Maybe I could teach her.
(cajolingly)

GILBERT
Yeah...?

XINGXING
Yes! I could teach her and, well,
you would get to see how good a
cook I am.

GILBERT
I don't know...
(mulling it over)
My father would certainly enjoy it,
particularly coming from someone
fresh off the boat!

XINGXING
You see...?
(beguilingly)

GILBERT
Tell you what I'll do.

Pointing at her.

You wait outside our house, and
I'll run this by my mother.

XINGXING
And father!
(convincingly)

GILBERT
And father, too. If they agree to
give you a try, would you be
interested?

XINGXING
Yes, very. You seem polite enough.
How far away is your *feng shui*?

GILBERT
Only about four blocks from here. I
can't believe I'm doing this.
(MORE)

GILBERT (CONT'D)
But what other choice do I have? I
haven't found one cook today, not
one...! Come on, I'll carry your
bags.

On Xingxing's second day in America, she accompanies Gilbert, disappearing with him into an adjoining neighborhood, but not before he pitches his sign into an open tool shed.

INT. CENTRAL PACIFIC PASSENGER TRAIN, OUTSIDE CISCO,
CALIFORNIA - MORNING

Weeks later, Gilbert escorts Xingxing and her son by train to her official worksite. As the newest Chinese cook for the Central Pacific Railroad, and its only known woman, Xingxing has been assigned to an infirmary in Cisco, California, to feed sick and injured workers. Many of the patients at this facility have fallen victim to the dreaded disease of dysentery, among other bodily illnesses.

XINGXING
I so appreciate you persuading the railroad to hire me.

GILBERT
Well, after Chinese cooks sampled your dishes, railroad management didn't need much convincing, as long as they could place you in a safe location...

XINGXING
Even so, I must thank you.

Turning away from the window toward Gilbert and covering up her sleeping son.

GILBERT
It's the least I could do to repay you for transforming my Irish mother into the mistress of the wok!
(laughing)

XINGXING
Well, she was an excellent student, just the same. And your father, a willing Guinea pig.

Folding her hands in her lap.

GILBERT

He simply adored your cooking, as did I. As for my mother, she now has many Chinese recipes to add to her cookbook. In English!

XINGXING

Yes! You were most helpful with that.

GILBERT

As for my father, he couldn't get enough of your oyster lo mein! Bowl after bowl, in fact. What did you say the secret ingredient is?

XINGXING

Star anis!

GILBERT

(grinning broadly)

Yes...

Calling to mind that day.

XINGXING

My father carefully packed dozens of those pods in my belongings before my departure, including many Star anise seeds.

Xingxing directs her attention back to the window.
How close are we to Cisco? Shall I wake up Pooyi now?

GILBERT

Fifteen minutes or so.

XINGXING

How long is that, exactly?

GILBERT

Oh, forgive me... The time it would take to feed the pigs.
(pausing)

Xingxing nods and begins to rouse her son.
When can I see you again?

Xingxing slowly turns to face Gilbert.

XINGXING

I'm afraid I've been less than honest with you.

GILBERT
How do you mean?

Placing her hand on his.

XINGXING
I'm a married woman, Gilbert...

GILBERT
(taken aback)
Oh, I'm terribly sorry! I just
assumed...

XINGXING
That I'm a single mother, or
perhaps a *jinshānpo*.

GILBERT
In a word, yes... A Gold Mountain
Wife!

Now withdrawing his hand.
So your husband is Pooyi's father?

XINGXING
Yes.

GILBERT
Is he alive?

XINGXING
That's what I've come here to
determine. Please forgive me. I
didn't know anyone when I landed
here in California... You must
understand.

GILBERT
There's no need to apologize; you
have done my family immeasurable
good. Harmony in the kitchen!

XINGXING
Yes, harmony...
(laughing)
It was my pleasure. My Taoshih back
home would agree!

GILBERT
Taoshih?

XINGXING
Yes! He married my husband and me
in Taishan.

GILBERT

I see. But your husband left your side to come here.

XINGXING

Only to escape my father's fury and make a fortune for ourselves.

GILBERT

By mining gold?

A porter announces their arrival in Cisco.

XINGXING

No, by working as an expert in explosives for this railroad.

Beginning to gather her effects.

I haven't received any correspondence or silver coins from him in months, and I fear the worst.

(soberly)

I'm here in California to search for him or otherwise learn his fate, whatever the hardship.

GILBERT

I wish you well. I do. You'll locate your husband, I'm sure of it. However, if the worst has indeed happened, I want you to know that someone is waiting for you in Sacramento.

(pining)

XINGXING

That won't be necessary.

(sincerely)

But, I know where you live, just the same.

Passengers soon stream out of the train and onto the station platform. Gilbert and Xingxing soon follow.

GILBERT

I've arranged for an infirmary employee to pick you up. There he is now. Here, let me carry your bags over to the surrey.

They arrive at the surrey, where Gilbert secures the bags in the rear.

He soon gets down on one knee to say goodbye to young Pooyi. As for Xingxing, Gilbert stands, offering only his hand.

Good luck, Xingxing. I hope you
find what you're looking for and
that it brings you lasting joy.

XINGXING
That's how it must be, Gilbert.

Taking his hand while casting her eyes on the horizon.
I must find my yang...

Gilbert helps this young mother and child board the front passenger bench, and soon bids them farewell. As they ride away, he catches sight of Xingxing's jade hair *buyao*, swaying with every dip of the surrey.

INT. CENTRAL PACIFIC INFIRMARY, CISCO, CALIFORNIA - DUSK

Weeks after Xingxing arrives at the infirmary, the medical staff notice a remarkable improvement in the overall health of their patients. With a steady diet of fresh meat and vegetables, spices, herbs, and boiled tea, many workers return fully fit to their jobsites within weeks. This transformation soon grabs the attention of a workforce-conscious Charles Crocker, who soon pays the infirmary a visit. Welcomed at the front door by facility officials, Crocker soon discovers the person responsible for this marked improvement in patient well-being.

INFIRMARY PHYSICIAN
Allow me to introduce you to our
cook. Her name is Xingxing.

Charles takes the hand of this miracle worker.

CHARLES
The Central Pacific Railroad owes
you a debt of gratitude, Miss!

INFIRMARY PHYSICIAN
Her cooking, with its fresh meat
and vegetables, spices, herbs, and
boiled tea, entirely turned the
tables in our fight against
dysentery.

CHARLES
So, it all came down to the food
your patients were fed?

INFIRMARY PHYSICIAN
I can find no other explanation for
it!

XINGXING
And tea, boiled tea.

CHARLES
Go on.

XINGXING
Boiled tea removes impurities from
the water. My mother, back in
Taishan, taught me that a long time
ago.

Charles turns to the physician.

CHARLES
Would you agree, doctor?

INFIRMARY PHYSICIAN
It's very likely. An English
physician named John Snow, of all
names, discovered that the source
of a cholera outbreak in London a
few years back was a public water
pump, where ordinary citizens
filled their pails. It wouldn't be
a stretch to draw the same
conclusion concerning dysentery.
Besides, boiling water has been
known to remove foul contaminants
going back years.

Studying Xingxing.

CHARLES
I've never seen Chinese fare
before... I'd like to see your
kitchen operation.

INFIRMARY PHYSICIAN
By all means. Come along, Xingxing.

The physician follows Crocker and his chef into the cookery,
where the door is soon closed.

CHARLES
Now, show me everything you know
about Chinese cuisine, Xingxing.

For the better part of the next hour, Xingxing displays the many aspects of Chinese food preparation by peeling, chopping, and dicing such fresh vegetables as eggplant, cabbage, bok choy, broccoli, pea pods, and mung sprouts.

Is that all?

XINGXING

Oh, no, Mr. Crocker!

(smiling broadly)

There's short rice, wontons, and
noodles, which I have already made
here.

Showing Charles her heaping mound of lo mein.

Soups, sauces, sweetcakes, congee,
and tea, lots of tea...!

Charles wanders over to a row of small wooden drawers above
the twin hearths.

CHARLES

And these tiny drawers, what do
they contain?

XINGXING

Spices, herbs, seeds, and other
seasonings.

CHARLES

May I?

Pointing to a particular drawer.

XINGXING

Of course.

Charles pulls out the little spice box.

CHARLES

And these are?

XINGXING

Peppercorns. Try one!
(invitingly)

CHARLES

I'll pass, thank you. Anything with
the word pepper in it sounds spicy.

XINGXING

But, good for the inflammation of
sore joints and muscles.
Peppercorns also aid in the
digestion of food.

Charles turns to the physician standing by.

CHARLES
This is all very interesting...

INFIRMARY PHYSICIAN
Yes, indeed. Who knew?

CHARLES
Exactly. My, these meat cleavers
are sizable!

XINGXING
They have to be! Chopping up
chickens is one thing, but
butchering pigs is quite another...

Charles moves over to an adjacent table.

CHARLES
And these glass containers?

INFIRMARY PHYSICIAN
Xingxing?
(coaxing)

XINGXING
Sesame and peanut oil, soy and
oyster sauce, rice vinegar, and
Shaoxing wine...

Xingxing now fires up the hearths, boils water for the lo mein, soaks the dried oysters, and soon drizzles sesame oil across the woks, sending curls of vapor high above their heads.

CHARLES
That smells surprisingly good! Uh,
I'd stay for dinner, but I have a
meeting. Besides, your reputation
precedes you, Xingxing. Good
evening.
(bowing his head)
Doctor, can I see you for a minute?

INFIRMARY PHYSICIAN
Yes, of course...

Xingxing looks over at the physician.

XINGXING
Mr. Crocker, if you have a moment,
I have something rather important
to ask you. It won't take long.

INFIRMARY PHYSICIAN
I'll be in my office, Mr. Crocker.

Opening the door and departing from the cookery.

CHARLES
Now, what can I do for you,
Xingxing?

Closing the door.

Late that evening, Xingxing, satisfied with the outcome of her private meeting with owner Charles Crocker, grabs her *mala* beads, checks on Pooyi, and drifts off to sleep. In a series of dreams, Xingxing encounters throngs of Chinese railroad workers passing by on a distant road. She studies each face, desperately searching for Zhi Peng, before waking at dawn in tears.

INT. TUNNEL NO. 10, EAST PORTAL, SUMMIT PASS, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA - DAY

Now assigned to the Tunnel No. 10 railroad camp, operating some thirty feet under the surface of the snowpack, Xingxing quickly launches Charles Crocker's campaign to prevent dietary diseases by serving his workers with fresh meat, vegetables, special sauces, oils, and spices. In effect, Chinese cookery. Given its proven health benefits, a growing number of Irish and European workers begin to sample Xingxing's culinary delights. They become particularly taken with the hot tea delivered to their work gangs, night and day, during every season, by scores of kitchen personnel.

INT. TUNNEL NO. 10, EAST PORTAL, SUMMIT PASS, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA - MORNING

Weeks later, James Strowbridge arrives at the Tunnel No. 10 railroad camp and makes his way to the mess tent to pick up Xingxing.

WORKER
May I help you, sir?

JAMES
Can you retrieve Xingxing? She's expecting me.

The mess tent employee soon emerges from the cookery with Xingxing, who dries off her hands on a dish towel.

XINGXING
I'm ready, Mr. Strowbridge.

Now addressing the kitchen worker.

I'll be back well before lunch. You might want to check in on Pooyi.

WORKER

Yes, mam.

The worker watches as Strowbridge and Xingxing depart the tent. Once out of the network of passageways, they approach their wagon.

JAMES

Right this way. It shouldn't take long.

Helping her up the side and onto the bench, they ride away and head for the campsite on the other side of the mountain.

I understand Mr. Crocker spoke to you about your husband.

He passes a junior foreman.

Fine morning, Mike!

XINGXING

Yes. I didn't want to inquire with anyone else, since I'm here in California, alone with my son.

JAMES

That's certainly understandable. I'll take you to the area where the avalanche buried your husband's dormitory. According to my information, workers were able to eventually pull Haibo's frozen body out of the pile, but were unsuccessful locating your husband, finding only his boots.

XINGXING

Yes, that's what Mr. Crocker told me. In any event, my husband hasn't been seen since, at least around these parts anyway.

JAMES

That confirms the information I have. Oddly enough, the boots were found next to each other in a space behind a large boulder. The leather laces were stripped out of their eyeholes, and the tongues were missing...

XINGXING

Hmm...!
(wondering)
How much farther?

JAMES

Down the hill, a little to the
right. You can't miss the colossal
bank of snow!

XINGXING

I see it now...

JAMES

I'll get as close as possible. Then
we'll have to go over the side.

XINGXING

Watch my time. I have to be back in
time to supervise the noontime
meal.

JAMES

I will...

They stop, descend the side, and approach the tragic site.
She soon turns to James.

XINGXING

May I be left alone for a moment?

JAMES

Surely.
(nodding)

Within minutes, Xingxing returns to the wagon and is ready to
be helped up the side.

Easy does it...

XINGXING

Thank you. We can go now!

JAMES

(surprised)
Why so soon? There's still plenty
of time before we have to travel
back.

Xingxing turns to James.

XINGXING

(with great conviction)
He's not here...Mr. Strowbridge! My
husband's not here.

JAMES
But, how do you know?

XINGXING

I know...

(emphatically)

We were married at the bend of the Taicheng River in Taishan, at dusk, holding lanterns. The Taoshih Yee, who secretly married us, believes that true love, faithfully committed between two people, leads to balance, and balance to harmony, and harmony to eternal happiness.

In a real sense, double happiness!

James listens intently to the words of this exceptional young woman, as she recalls Taoshih Yee's very words.

He also taught us about the timeless concept of *Yin* and *Yang*. Explaining that I, as the *Yin*, am the feminine in nature. And my husband, Zhi Peng, as the *Yang*, is the masculine in nature. He concluded by saying that, as the *Yin*, I, in the strictest sense, am the darkness, whereas my husband, Zhi Peng, as *Yang*, is the light. Together, by complementing each other in the timeless cycle of night and day, we become...immortal.

Fixing her eyes on the mountainside.

You see, we Chinese believe that since the beginning of time, the concept of *Yin* and *Yang* is a spiritual dynamic, whereby the whole is greater than its parts, and its parts, an indivisible body of the whole.

Xingxing, remaining steadfast in the belief that her husband is somehow still alive, now quizzes her driver.

Do you know what the name Zhi Peng means in my language?

JAMES
Tell me...

XINGXING
It means *self-doing!*
(defiantly)

JAMES
Then where do you think he is?

XINGXING
I...I don't know. I just know, deep
in my *yin*,

Pointing to her heart.
...that his spirit is in no way
enclosed back there.

The pair remain quiet until they reach the perimeter of Camp No. 10. Before leaving the wagon, a resolved Xingxing now turns to James.

I'm running low on a secret spice
used in my recipes. There's a
Chinese farmer, I've been told, who
operates a produce stand in nearby
Truckee. I wonder if you would be
available tomorrow, or sometime
this week, to take me there, so I
can purchase a new supply for the
cookery.

Impressed with this delightful cook, James replies in the affirmative.

JAMES
I'll pick you up tomorrow at the
same time.

Tipping the brim of his hat.

XINGXING
Wonderful!

She reenters the complex of large snow tunnels and makes her way to the canteen, where she makes ready for the noontime meal.

Later that night, after retiring to her quarters, Xingxing, once again in dreams, encounters great numbers of railroad Chinese, this time holding empty rice bowls, eager to be served. Of the hundreds, possibly thousands of imaginary faces, Zhi Peng's is not among them.

EXT. DOWNTOWN FARMERS MARKET, TRUCKEE, CALIFORNIA - THE NEXT DAY

Shown from a distance, Xingxing and James Strowbridge approach farmer Shen Nung, who is now seen shaking his head and pointing in a northerly direction, beyond Truckee.

While in transit to McDowell Farm, Ellen unwittingly passes James's wagon while riding into town.

EXT. McDOWELL FARMHOUSE, TRUCKEE, CALIFORNIA - LATER

Xingxing and James stand on the side porch of McDowell Farmhouse and knock on the door. Bill soon appears.

BILL
Can I help you?

Eyeing Xingxing while addressing James.

JAMES
Hello, my name is James
Strowbridge, and I'm the General
Foreman for the Central Pacific
Railroad.

BILL
Glad to meet you, James.

JAMES
The roadbed up there has reached
Summit Pass, where we're currently
excavating over a dozen tunnels.

Pointing to the mountains to their west.

BILL
I've been monitoring your progress
in our local newspaper!

JAMES
Anyways, we're on a supply mission
for Tunnel Number Ten. This is our
cook, Xingxing.

Xingxing bows her head in acknowledgment.
She's in need of an important
ingredient in the meals she serves
to the Chinese and others that,
interestingly enough, staves off
illness. My boss, Charles
Crocker...

BILL
I'm familiar with him.

JAMES

My boss has ordered me to provide
her with anything she deems
necessary where the health of his
workers is concerned.

BILL

And this involves me, how?

Looking about his property.

JAMES

This actually has to do with your
wife, sir.

BILL

Ellen?

JAMES

Yes, Ellen. You see, we rode into
Truckee this morning to purchase a
rather unusual spice from a Chinese
farmer who sells produce there. He
informed us that his supplier
is...your wife! Is she around?

BILL

Actually, no. She's headed into
town to buy groceries from that
particular farmer. His name is Shen
Nung!

(laughing)

She should be back in an hour or
so.

Ellen's wagon is now spotted entering the long driveway
leading into the farm.

Here she is now, in fact!

She soon pulls up to the apron of the porch to address the
pair.

ELLEN

I understand from farmer Nung that
you're interested in
purchasing...Star anise, of all
things?

XINGXING

Yes.

(bowing)

ELLEN

I grow many herbs here, why Star anise?

XINGXING

We are most interested in acquiring this particular cooking ingredient to maintain the health of our railroad Chinese, as well as many indigenous workers.

ELLEN

I see...

Turning to Bill while removing her bonnet and riding gloves.
And just how many pods are you interested in?

XINGXING

Enough to get us through the remainder of the winter.

ELLEN

And where exactly are you encamped?

JAMES

Up at Summit Pass, where we're currently digging tunnels for the track...

ELLEN

Tell me more about your operations up there, sir. I'm sorry, I didn't get your name.

James removes his hat to introduce himself.

JAMES

My name is James Strowbridge, I'm the General Foreman for the Central Pacific Railroad. And this is our cook, Xingxing. Her operations are located at Tunnel Ten, just parallel to Donner Pass.

Ellen again focuses in on Bill.

ELLEN

And the snow, how deep is the pack up there these days?

JAMES

Prid near thirty feet!

ELLEN

I might be inclined to sell you two bushels.

XINGXING

That would be wonderful!

JAMES

How much for both?

ELLEN

Let's see... Given the climate here in Truckee, I must grow them indoors in pots. Our whole house smells like licorice.

(laughing)

An even three dollars ought to do it!

JAMES

Sold.

Handing her the coinage out of his waist pocket.

ELLEN

I don't use Star anise much, but I enjoy keeping the plants around.

Placing a hand on her hip.

They're beautiful in a peculiar sort of way... Besides, Bill dislikes Chinese spices in his food.

XINGXING

Do you cook Chinese dishes?

ELLEN

Let's just say, I make a valiant effort!

(frowning)

Congee is the only thing I've been able to master.

XINGXING

Congee is very good!

ELLEN

It certainly is. I prefer the sweet kind and top it with slivers of ginger, rock sugar, fresh muscat raisins, and dates!

XINGXING

Actually, I prefer the savory kind,
and my favorite toppings are black
sesame seeds with foxtail millet.

ELLEN

I must try that...!

This discussion causes Bill to scuff his boot across the weathered porch planks.

JAMES

We had better be going. Xingxing
must be back before lunch.

XINGXING

Oh, yes...

ELLEN

And what are you preparing today,
if I may ask?

XINGXING

Of course! Chicken With Snow Peas.
The men love it!

Catching Bill's eye.

ELLEN

How many men do you feed in your
setup?

XINGXING

Well, since half of the men work
the nightshifts, the daytime crowd
is around two hundred.

James nods in agreement.

ELLEN

My! And you cook all by yourself?

XINGXING

Mostly, though, I have kitchen
assistants who chop, peel, butcher
meat, that sort of thing...

ELLEN

Still, that's a great deal of work.

XINGXING

I manage.

JAMES
We really must be going if we're
going to get back in time.

ELLEN
I'll gather the pods and have them
out here momentarily. May I
interest you in anything to drink?
I know! I have some lemonade
chilling in the root cellar.
(smiling)
I'll be right out.
(pausing)
Bill, can I see you for a moment?

Ellen and Bill go into the house. Ellen soon appears with a
container of lemonade and two glasses.
Help yourself.

JAMES
Thank you!

XINGXING
Yes, you're most kind.

ELLEN
Not at all... I'll be out shortly
to fasten the bushels to your rig.

JAMES
Excellent!

Fifteen minutes pass. Ellen and Bill now emerge from their
house, each carrying a bushel basket heaped with bronze Star
anise pods, which they load and tie down onto the wagon bed.
James and Xingxing climb aboard their transport, but not
before shaking hands with the McDowells.

ELLEN
One more thing to retrieve
inside...

Ellen returns holding a suitcase.

Since I am to be your supplier of
this vital spice, I'd like to visit
your operations and maybe learn a
little in the process. Right, Bill?

BILL
I can pay for her board while she's
up there.

JAMES
(surprised)
That won't be necessary. I'm sure
Xingxing could use the help.

XINGXING
Yes, I could. But, it's positively
frigid up there! Are you sure you
can adjust to such harsh
conditions?

ELLEN
I already have.

Ellen stows her luggage and boards the wagon, waiving goodbye to her husband, who appears oddly relieved.

INT. TUNNEL NO. 10 RAILROAD CAMP, SUMMIT PASS, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA - LATER

Standing at the entrance to the Tunnel No. 10 railroad camp, Xingxing extends her hand to lure inside a reluctant Ellen, who is noticeably traumatized by the colossal snowpack towering above this subnivean colony.

INT. COOKERY, CAMP 10, SUMMIT PASS, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA - LATER

A settled Ellen busies herself assisting Xingxing with the noon meal. Amazed at the speed with which her cooking partner performs her tasks, Ellen strives to simulate such mastery, learning much within a short time. That night, after leaving the cookery in sparkling condition, the pair retire to Xingxing's private quarters. With nothing to do but consider the amount of snow above her, Ellen seeks out Xingxing's counsel.

ELLEN
Do you ever get used to living
under such snow?

Xingxing rolls over onto her side.

XINGXING
Actually, I don't really think
about it.

ELLEN
You're kidding!

XINGXING

I'm certainly not! There are many advantages to living under the snow.

ELLEN

Such as...

XINGXING

Such as, no blinding snowstorms, no wind, no freezing temperatures... Notice how warm it is in here. And sturdy! Nothing could break these walls, except the thaw in May, and we'll be far away from here by then.

They break off their conversation, seeking to sleep. Hours later, Ellen awakens in a profuse sweat.

ELLEN

(panicked)

Xingxing, I'm afraid...

XINGXING

(half-awake)

Of what?

ELLEN

Of the mounting snow above us. I've had this fear ever since I was a girl. I can't...I, I can't breathe.

Attempting to get up.

XINGXING

Where are you going?

ELLEN

I, I don't rightly know...

XINGXING

Well, before you do, lie back down and take these *mala* beads. They have never failed to console me in times of great fear.

Handing them over to Ellen.

ELLEN

Oh, I couldn't. Why, these are solid jade!

XINGXING

Then, at least allow me to loan
them to you...

ELLEN

(reluctantly)

Well, alright. But...how do I pray
on these beads?

XINGXING

Pray what's in your heart.

ELLEN

Hmm. I'm so fearful here, Xingxing.
I simply can't concentrate under
such stress!

Xingxing removes the *mala* beads from her hand.

XINGXING

This bracelet has 27 beads, one-
quarter of a full set of malas. On
each bead, try meditating on...say,
the next meal we're about to
prepare in the morning! Oh, that's
not personal enough. Bad idea! How
about your husband's finest
qualities or the different plants
you'll be cultivating this coming
Spring? Anything! After a while,
these meditations will become
second nature to you, like a
mantra...

ELLEN

(nodding)

I see...

XINGXING

Alright. Let us begin. What is
Bill's finest attribute?

ELLEN

(pondering)

Well, he's a wonderful provider.

XINGXING

Then pray that Bill continues this
success, affording you a good life.
What else?

ELLEN

Hmm. He's strong and a good
listener!

XINGXING

Good. Then I-

ELLEN

(interrupting)

Then I will pray that...he remains strong, and always respects what I have to say.

XINGXING

See how easy that was?

ELLEN

Yes, but now that I know what to pray for, who exactly do I pray to?

XINGXING

Oh, there are many deities to choose from! Might I suggest...Tengliu, Goddess of Snow.

Ellen quickly retrieves her beads.

ELLEN

Tell me more about this Tenliu, so I can seek her guidance.

XINGXING

Very well, but then we must return to sleep.

ELLEN

I promise.

XINGXING

I know little about this particular Goddess, but do recall a short poem in honor of Tengliu that beautifully describes her.

Gently clearing her throat while studying the frozen ceiling.
 From heavens high, a whisper soft,
 Tengliu descends, where snows
 aloft.
 A canvas white, a world serene,
 Her breath of frost, a winter
 scene.
 Purity's touch, a gentle grace,
 In snow's embrace, she finds her
 peace.

The glimmering *mala* beads now rest in Ellen's loosened hand, while Xingxing passes imaginary gemstones across her fingers, praying fervently for her husband's safe passport.

EXT. McDOWELL FARMHOUSE, TRUCKEE, CALIFORNIA - AFTERNOON

Six months later, as a wagon makes its way out of the McDowells' driveway, a rejuvenated Ellen steps onto the porch and raps on the screen door. Admitted in, she sets her baggage down outside the entranceway and embraces Bill, who is waiting inside.

INT. CUSTOM TRAIN CAR, PROMONTORY POINT, UTAH - DAY

At the same time as dignitaries depart CPRR President Leland Stanford's train, following the Golden Spike Ceremonial Luncheon, a delegation of Chinese foremen and pre-selected laborers enter through the rear door. A cheery Stanford now stands to address them, while company co-owners, engineers, surveyors, and general foremen look on.

LELAND

My dear friends! Please, be seated.

Halting momentarily to allow his guests to sit around a large table.

I'm pleased to welcome you here today. The building of the Central Pacific Railroad to this very spot has been long and arduous. Five years to be exact! I can't imagine how much longer it would have taken us were it not for your sheer talent and efficiency. Words cannot begin to express my sincere gratitude to each and every one of you.

Making eye contact with those seated.

When the idea of hiring Chinese laborers was first put to me, I was skeptical, to say the least.

Stopping to glance at Crocker and Strobridge, seated to his right.

But when I witnessed your steadfastness, reliability, strength, agility, and demeanor, I was forced to admit that I was wrong.

Many of you have agreed to stay on to help us maintain the many bridges, walls, tunnels, and railbeds you have so ably constructed. For that, I am most grateful.

(MORE)

LELAND (CONT'D)

However, others plan to return to China or settle into a different line of work in Nevada and California. Among the many workers I'd like to recognize are two men from Southern China, one living and the other tragically killed in an avalanche a few years back, high in the Sierras at Summit Pass.

Looking Zhi Peng's way.

Zhi Peng, here, was instrumental in the excavation of Tunnel Number Six, including its novel center shaft, which made operations immeasurably more efficient. From there, he moved on to Carson Range to blast out stumps from felled pine trees, making way for the extensive switchbacks descending the mountain's eastern slope. Finally, the Great Race not two weeks ago!

Cheering erupts throughout the train car.

Yes, and Zhi Peng helped lead the way, speedily fastening over three thousand fishplates to the tracks! And the rest, as they say, is history.

Zhi Peng's extraordinary conduct is a tribute to you all. I'll have you know, that President Grant shares this sentiment. As for Haibo, I'm sure everyone in this compartment has their own personal memories of him. Tough, yet fair. He was the quintessential conversationalist and a dear friend of Zhi Peng. Congratulations to you both!

Acknowledging the applause.

Now for the encore! James Strobridge, my Superintendent, has brought with him to Promontory his wonderful cook, a woman, I might add!

(loudly)

Causing cheers and whistles.

...To prepare our meal today, which will be brought onboard momentarily, minus the young lady, that is, for her...

The jocularity continues.
...for her own safety!

An enormous *hao wa* explodes in the cabin. Attendants now enter with steaming bowls of Dried Oysters with Lo Mein and Fresh Vegetables, along with tea. After the meal is dispatched by the hungry laborers, they soon depart the train, with the exception of Zhi Peng, who Leland motions to stay behind. Stanford retrieves an ornate box from a nearby end table and sets it down in front of Zhi Peng.

This is for you! I understand you
are leaving for China this
afternoon.

ZHI PENG
I am, sir.

LELAND
I hope you'll reconsider your plan
and remain with the company...

ZHI PENG
That's impossible. My mind is made
up.

Running his fingers over the intricate oriental scene on top of the wooden box.

LELAND
Very well, then. Take this box home
to your village of...Taishan, is
it?

Zhi Peng nods.
Take this box home to Taishan as a
token of our appreciation and
esteem for your unprecedented work
in America, building the
Transcontinental Railroad. Go
ahead, open it...

Zhi Peng undoes the brass clip and opens the lid. There, he finds a box filled with gold coins. Leland nods his head in approval.

You've earned this, Zhi Peng...

ZHI PENG
Yes, I have. Thank you...

Leland Stanford now rests his hand on the shoulder of this highly valuable Central Pacific employee.

INT. ABOARD THE UNION PACIFIC NO. 119, APPROACHING THE CALIFORNIA BORDER - EVENING

Hours after leaving Promontory Point for Sacramento, Xingxing and Pooyi, seated across the aisle from James, approach Tunnel Number Ten. The once snowy encampment, now dissolved, soon comes into view. Upon reaching the end of the tunnel, the train slows down, making a complete stop.

JAMES

We're here. The Brakeman will be holding a lantern for you at the bottom of the stairs.

XINGXING

Thank you. I'll only be a minute.

She departs the train car through a rear door, while clutching her spirit box. Led by lamplight, she soon arrives at the site of the Tunnel Ten avalanche. The brakeman now sets the lantern down beside her, while she kneels to collect her husband's spirit. Back inside the train car, Xingxing secures the *Zhaohun xiang* in her baggage before preparing for the remaining passage to Sacramento.

JAMES

What are your plans once we reach Sacramento?

XINGXING

I'm going to either board a steamship to San Francisco or look up an acquaintance in Sacramento. I'm really not sure...

Removing a handkerchief from her bag to dab her eyes. Perhaps I can work for his family...

JAMES

Who is he, exactly?

XINGXING

He's a friend, that's all. Nothing more.

JAMES

Well, I have business to attend to when we get to Sacramento, so maybe I'll say goodbye right now.

XINGXING

There's really no need...

JAMES
Oh, no, I insist.

Pulling out a piece of paper from his top pocket and putting his spectacles on.

(swallowing)
Dearest Xingxing,
By now, you'll be heading back to Sacramento, riding miles of track so strenuously won, far away from the high Sierras where our struggles were the greatest. At the outset of my Superintendency, I never could have imagined meeting someone like you. Like your people, you are strong and resilient, yet creative and thoughtful. My job wouldn't have been half as productive without you.

XINGXING
Please...

JAMES
No, no, it's true.

Shedding his spectacles to wipe them off before placing them back on his nose.

You have many talents, Xingxing, but perhaps the greatest one of all is your warmth and humanity. For that, I am forever grateful.

XINGXING
Thank you, Mr. Strobridge.

Xingxing continues to look out the window into the late Spring night. James folds the page in half and stuffs it into his pocket. A man seated in the front of the train car now turns his head to study the lone figure in the dimly lit compartment. He is barely able to make out her profile. Xingxing soon shifts in her seat.

You know, last night the stars over Promontory shown so brightly, they produced a light I never dreamt possible. We Chinese believe that stars are heralds of good luck, prosperity. Who knows, maybe my fortunes will change.

(auspiciously)

JAMES
Well, if that's the case, nobody deserves it more than you...

EXT. SACRAMENTO STEAMSHIP TERMINAL, SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA -
THE NEXT DAY

Unsure of where to go, the home of Gilbert Chang, just blocks away, or the dockyard to the *Mint*, Xingxing decides her fate.

Moments later, while standing at the edge of the Sacramento steamship basin, Zhi Peng once again notices the woman he observed on the train last night. Steamship workers soon busy themselves moving the boarding ramp into place, just as the whistle blows, catching young Pooyi off guard. This causes his mother to shout over the deafening sound.

XINGXING
It's alright, Pooyi! Here, come to mama.

As she swings to pick him up, her jade hair *buyao* is suddenly revealed to Zhi Peng, prompting him to speak.

ZHI PENG
(hesitantly)
Xingxing, is that you?

Immediately recognizing Zhi Peng's voice, Xingxing turns to seize the hand of her long-lost husband, who now stands before her as a fully grown man. She sets Pooyi down, so his father can meet him for the first time. As for the *Mint*, it pulls away from the dock without them, chugging its way south to Alameda.

EPILOGUE

In the back kitchen of the Star of China Restaurant, located on Hillside Avenue in the New York City borough of Queens, a grandmother supervises her grandchildren in preparation for the many dishes to be served tonight to dine-in and take-out customers alike. While these young people chop cabbage, bok choy, broccoli, pea pods, and sprouts, she once again reminds them of their great-great-great-grandmother, who cooked for the mighty Central Pacific Railroad beside the windswept railbeds of the Transcontinental Railway before traveling to New York with her husband and son.

On the shelf directly above the twin stoves sits the jade *Zhaohun xiang* that Xingxing brought with her from Northern California to the place now known as Queens Village. Contained inside are the Warranty Deed, Articles of Incorporation, Certificate of Occupancy, and Liquor Permit for this highly profitable family business.

Surrounding this box are cruets from which are poured sesame and peanut oil, soy and oyster sauce, rice vinegar, and Shaoxing wine.

At the end of this shelf, rest jars of spices, herbs, seeds, and special seasonings, not unlike Star anise.

THE END