The Origin of Rivers
By: Shugi Zheng

4:47AM, and I finally find the place where it all begins.
At the horizon, where reflection meets light
Is where it all started.

One

The trip there was unremarkable: two continental meals and a movie between America and China, with a transfer in Korea. From the airport to the village, we took a bus. After shoving our luggage up into the overhead compartment, father took the window seat. "David," my mom tapped me on my shoulder, and pointed to the aisle seat next to my father, "Go sit with your father." She paused, and then added quietly, "talk to him. Keep his mind off of it."

I took the seat next to my father, and looked at him. He was looking out the window, his face blunt, and his mouth tightly shut. I followed his line of sight to see what he was looking at, and realized that he was looking at his own faint reflection on the glass window. The bus began to move before I could think of anything to say, so I decided to give up and keep quiet. What do I know? I'm just a kid

"China looks different from when we left it," my father finally said after almost an hour of silence, "but then that was ten years ago you were six." I looked out the window, and tried hard to dig up what little memory I had of my homeland, and all I could remember was that there were a lot of bicycles on the streets.

"Ten years," my father continued, "I finally come back, and it's to attend my father's burial."

Grandfather's death had come as a shock to everyone, especially my father. They said that grandfather passed away peacefully, but I wasn't sure what that meant for my father; certainly not consolation.

"I left, and I've forgotten about this place," he took in a deep breath, "I was a bad son."

"It's not your fault," my mother's voice came from the back, she was sitting in the seat behind us, "we've been trying to visit, but we've never had enough time." I looked out the window, at the people riding bicycles, still trying to remember whatever I could about this place, and these people.

When we got off the bus, we were surrounded by a crowd of little children with big brown gazing eyes and darkly-tanned skin. The older kids kept their distance, and stopped their game of basketball briefly to discuss who the foreigners are. We were soon greeted by my uncle, who led us to his house.

My uncle's house was three stories high, with a balcony and a view of the river. The main floor had a large living room, with the doors and windows situated to ensure the best possible Feng Shui. When we walked in, my two aunts and their families were already standing up from the couches, greeting us.
An old lady in her seventies sat in a sofa chair at the far end of the room, watching TV. My father walked up to the old lady, and knelt down. "Ma." It was very quiet, almost inaudible. But the house was even more quiet, and the sounds of children playing outside receded far away. The old lady turned to look at him, but didn’t say anything. My uncle walked up next to her, and said, "it’s lao da, he’s back."

My father reached out to hold her hand, and turned to look at me. "Come here, pay your respect."

I walked toward the old lady, and stopped behind my father. "Grandma." I heard myself, and my voice sounded hollow. The truth was that I really didn’t remember her at all. She was very small, her hair almost entirely white. Her face was covered with wrinkles and brown spots, and her back was hunched and fitted nicely into the indentation on the back of the chair. She looked at me, and then turned and stared at my father blankly. After a brief moment, her mouth curled into a faint smile. "Lao da." Words came out slurred because she had no teeth.

"She’s been forgetting a lot lately," my uncle said to my father, "but she still remembers you."

My mother walked up, and also stopped behind my father. "Ma." Grandma looked up at my mother, and smiled, and nodded. The blankness in her eyes told me she didn’t remember who my mother was. And she obviously didn’t remember who I was.

"When was the burial?" My father asked.

"Yesterday," my uncle replied, "we haven’t closed the tomb. We’ll do that after you kow tou. In fact, we don’t have much time. The best time to close the tomb is five, which gives us only two hours."

My father got up, "is ma coming with us?"

"No," my uncle replied quietly, "she won’t be able to take it. Yesterday she almost fainted from crying."

Two

Half an hour later, we were on our way to my grandfather’s tomb. We were walking along the river behind my uncle’s house. The late afternoon sun cast countless golden shrapnel on the surface of the river, dancing and glittering to the music of running water.

I was walking alongside my aunt. "So you like America?" She asked.

"Yes," I replied in stiff, uneasy Chinese, "It’s very nice there."

"When you were young, your parents wanted to take you to America, and you didn’t want to go," she said in a teasing tone, "you wanted to stay at my house."

"I did?" I asked, "I don’t remember "

"Oh yeah," she said with a smile, "You would cry and stomp your feet and run all over the place begging one of us to keep you here."

"That was silly," I laughed uneasily, and tried to change the subject, "so where are we going?"

"We follow this river, all the way up to that hill up ahead," she said, and pointed to a small hill up ahead, "the origin of the river. That’s where the feng shui is the best. Good place to burry."

There was something familiar about my aunt. I felt close to her, and it felt easier to talk to her; easier than talking to my father. "So why is the feng shui good there and not elsewhere?"

"Because the river carries our ancestors’ presence downstream to us, brings their blessings, and their protection, and so
we will never forget them."

And so I talked to my aunt the whole way, and before I knew it, we were there. The tombstone was about my height, with my grandfather’s name carved into the stone and painted red. In front of the tombstone was a plate with peaches and grapes stacked in a neat pile. My aunt walked up and replaced the fruits on the plate with fresh ones from her bag. My uncle lit up incense, and handed three to my father, and three to me. "Go ahead," he said.

*Go ahead what?* I stood there with incense in my hand, not sure of what to do, and looked to my father for cue. My father knelt down in front of the tombstone, held the incense above his head, and bowed until his forehead touched the ground. I repeated the same thing, and before I could straighten my back, I heard a sob.

"*Ba,*" was all that my father said. It meant dad.

**Three**

Over the next two days, I got to know my cousin really well. We were around the same age. And people told us that we used to be very close when we were little. During the day we would swim and catch fish in the river, and at night we would sit around in the courtyard and watch the stars. The night sky was beautiful, and there was a comet every minute.

On the third day, I caught a turtle in the river. And as I was showing it off to my cousin, I saw grandma walking along the river by herself, upstream, up the hill.

"I don’t think she’s supposed to be going there by herself," I said to my cousin, "I’ll follow her to make sure she’s okay, you go tell the adults."
He nodded, and ran off quickly. I got out of the water, and frantically put on my shirt. As I was climbing up the riverbank, I slipped, and my left sandal fell into the river. The water quickly carried it downstream. I had no choice but to jump back into the river to catch my floating sandal, and by the time I climbed back up on shore, I lost sight of grandma. Panicking, I held my sandals in my hands and ran barefoot as fast as I could toward the hill. *Let's hope that she's going to grandfather's tomb, otherwise I'd be in trouble.*

Fifteen minutes later, I found my grandma by the tombstone. She sat with her back facing me, at the place where the plate of fruits used to be. She was saying something. Quietly. Slowly.

"They don't want me to come visit you," she said, "they worry that it's not good for me."

I walked up quietly behind her, and sat under a tree nearby. I didn't know what to say. I felt bad. She didn't notice me, and continued to talk.

"My memory is getting worse and worse these days. Can't remember anything. When you were around you used to write everything down for me, in that little notebook. And you would read it back to me to help me remember things. You know I can't read or write. How can you leave me behind like this?" I felt a burn in my eyes, and suddenly the world became a very small place—just me, and this frail old lady.

"I'm so afraid," she continued, her voice calm, "I'm so afraid of forgetting things. They don't want me to come see you because they're afraid that being here will remind me of how much it hurts without you around. But I'm so afraid of forgetting. I'm so afraid of forgetting what it was like when we were together. I'm so afraid of forgetting this pain of not having you. I'm afraid that one day I will wake up, and I won't remember you."

A slight breeze made me realize that I had tears in my eyes. As I turned to wipe my face with my shirt, I realized that someone was standing behind me. "Ba." I said. He looked at me, and nodded.

Two days later, we left China for America. On the plane, I replayed everything that had happened during that week in my head, over and over again. "Ba," I asked my dad, "how do you write my name in Chinese?"