

In Google Maps, I Explore Chinatown For the First Time

by Crystal Peng

Millennium gate. Snow, dirtied, clots curbs. Cars drift: junks over Pender; Huangpu runs in asphalt, shimmering with Pacific brine. Street lamps flooding red, imperial in the half-light, flicker hidden dragons to life: origami shadows, exfoliating walls. I, yellow girl on Google Earth, follow the floating arrows: a tourist's trail, a hero's journey, a kind of homecoming. I, riding the following seas, rail tracks, rushes of gold back to Shanghai, Shanghai Alley (these streets named for mainland cities, traffic jams¹, strange flowers²). I, sock-eyed and yellowing in streetview light, swarm upstream, past curdling technicoloured graffiti, past snakes of vape smoke, past faux-neon signs with the characters I can no longer decipher. Here, I am trying to find myself again. Take root. Propagate. Sow millet kernels into Yangtze basin as my ancestors did eight thousand years ago. Flock within this quarter like my compatriot immigrants to safety, to shelter. Tributaries gathering, bloodlines conglomerating, like wool on a spindle. Here, I am trying to find my country again. No: I am trying to remind myself that there is nothing of me to find here, only discards and parodies from another era. A diorama of a nation, a miniature of a civilization, a caricature of what I'm supposed to be. A yellow girl lost on an uncanny landscape, inaccessible by time. A yellow girl whose country is a museum in her heart. A yellow girl who was never really here. So each time a tone slips from my tongue, muddied & bleached, I am crossed, like the perpetual bus wires, shamefully unpatriotic and bulbous like December lanterns. Each time I try to cross these millennial boundaries and go to the town which boasts a country, the stone lions melt me with their adamant gaze and I am a visitor to myself again.

[1] Chinese name of Carrall Street is 卡路, which translates to “jammed road.”

[2] Chinese name of Keefer Street is 奇花, which translates to “strange flower.”