

4:28

Helen:

[SPEAKS CHINESE], and I'm just so honored to be here at the 1882 Institute. Thank you, Ted. Ted Gong and everyone affiliated with 1882. It's so important to be having these conversations and to make sure that our stories are visible and part of the narrative of this country. I'm just so thrilled to see so many of you on this afternoon. I thought it was going to be Spring again like that today. Winter is back. But even so, I see a number of people here who were part of the making of this book. And I don't think I can acknowledge everybody. But I would like to say the Kwak family is here, and so their story, [muffled] Kwak, father and mother and aunties and uncles who I've been meeting. Scott Sullivan, another author here, who has helped me out tremendously. Marsha Mao, and the Mao family archives. And I think there's a whole crew here from the Smithsonian who are keeping the stories of Asian Americans part of the American narrative. And if I went around I could spend the whole afternoon just thanking and acknowledging every one of you. I'm just so grateful that you're here.

And so, my book, "Last Boat Out of Shanghai", launched, umm, went on the, started being sold on January 22, about 3 weeks ago, and it's already in its fourth printing. [APPLAUSE]. And may I also say as an Asian American who also has all those voices of critical ancestors pointing out that even though it's in its fourth printing that means it was a little underestimated. [LAUGHING]. And truly, that's why 1882 and the gatherings in our community are so important. Because just like *Crazy Rich Asians*... "Oh, they go to movies?!" and now it's like, "They read books!? And speak English!?" And I'm sorry, but we know that this is something that is still a question to many people.

And so, it's very exciting, this book *Last Boat Out of Shanghai* I spent 12 years on. And for me it was a very long gestation process. And it's finally hatched. You never know how a book will be received once you've spent this time on it. I didn't have any idea that it was going to take 12 years, of course, when I started it. I should have known better, because it really is the story of modern China. And the story of how China emerged, why, and how it came to be to have a Communist revolution there, and to talk about the different dynamics of people and diversity of people within Shanghai, within China. In spite of the view that all Chinese are the same, or this government in China walks in lockstep all together, anyone who's been to China knows that actually there is a great divergence and variety of opinions, political views. They might not all be able to be loud about their divergent views but they're there. And that was true in the 1930s and the 1940s and the 1950s, which are the period that I cover in this book.

Just out of curiosity, how many of you have been to Shanghai? Quite a lot! Alright. You might have seen some of the slides as they were running through earlier which were just scenes of old Shanghai from the period of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. So those of you who've been there, you know

Shanghai has been known as the Paris of the Orient. It's not just today, well now it might be the burgeoning new city of the 21st century. But in the 1940s... 1930s, really, it was known as the Paris of the Orient. What did that mean? Well, in the world there were really only a few world class cities, and Shanghai was one of them. It ranked with New York, London, Paris, Berlin, and Shanghai.

Man:
Washington?
[LAUGHTER]

Helen:
Unfortunately, back then, and perhaps as now...
[LAUGHTER]

It's famous for many things, but so the intellectuals of the world would travel around to go to these different cities and just have these global exchanges. Shanghai was one of those stops. Albert Einstein had been there, George Bernard Shaw, W.H. Auden, Eugene O'Neill, Charlie Chaplin. And you could have a long list of the top intellectuals of the world, and Shanghai was a place they also had to stop just to have a sense of what were these global conversations that were happening at that time.

Now I just want to say a few words about why this title, *Last Boat Out of Shanghai*? And so let me ask, how many of you have family members who said they were on the last boat out of Shanghai? Or the last plane? Or the last train out of Shanghai? A few. Everywhere I go with these book talks there's always some people who say "our families were on the last boat" When I was a kid growing up that was about the only thing I knew about my family. I'm one of those jooksings who went to China too, so I'm an ABC, and I grew up not knowing, even though people would say "go back to where you came from" well for me that was New Jersey.

[LAUGHTER]

And I don't live there now, and I don't want to go back.

[LAUGHTER]
[muffled speech]

I would ask my parents, "what about China, what is that place like?" And all I would hear from the time that I was a kid was that my mother and my aunt had been on the last boat out of Shanghai. And it would be said with that kind of very serious, hushed tone... "the last boat". And "dot dot dot", and the dot dot dot was "before the Communists came". As I got older, I was like, "well, what is it?" And I would meet more and more people who would say "our families were on the last boat" or last plane, last train. It soon

became very clear there was no boat that could handle all the people who claimed to be on the last boat.

[LAUGHTER]

And then if you pursued it a little bit more, they were different months, different years, different times, and going to different places. However, what they all shared was this sense that they were on the last one. And had they not been on the last one something dire would have happened. So, that was one of the things I knew about it. And the other thing that would happen is that I would say to my mom, "gee, Mom, tell me something about when you were growing up, when you were a kid". And my mother would always say "that was war time, unhappy memory". And that would be the end of discussion. And so there was a time in growing up that I just thought "well, OK, there's nothing to say."

So, then... I want to share this one story that was one of the things that spurred me on to start interviewing people. And that was a little passage I'm going to read about one of my characters. I call them characters because I have stories of four main people that I tell the story of what happened, starting with the Sino-Japanese War and the first major battle, which was the battle of Shanghai, a three month battle where Shanghai was pretty much decimated except for the foreign concessions. So, I start with the Sino-Japanese War even though we're talking about an exodus that happened in 1949 because it really is the story of modern China, And you can't talk about what happened in 1949 and the victory of the Communists over the Nationalists without laying the foundation of why that happened. And so, that is a whole history. And quite honestly, if I had been allowed to by my publisher I would have started this in 1911 or 1912 because really we're talking about the founding of the Republic of China, the hope for it, and the disappointment in its collapse. So by starting with the invasion by Japan, we're talking about a time when China was already in deep crisis because of the Opium Wars, because of extraction of the wealth and resources out of China, to be replaced by opium to sap the strength of the people.

Shanghai was the leading light of China. It was the most advanced, the most technological, the most industrialized, the most international, the most sophisticated, the most cosmopolitan city in China. It was where some of the wealthiest people of China lived. It was a city of 6 million. New York at that time was about 7 million maybe. And so, it was really comparable to New York in population. One of the things I did when I was beginning to research this was "how big was this diaspora... what potentially was it in size?" I talked to one of the top demographers of the city of Shanghai and he said of the 6 million there were maybe 5% of the population was what you would call wealthy... quite wealthy. About 20% of the population was middle class. You know, tradespeople, professionals, lawyers, doctors, teachers, shop keepers. And so 20% is pretty sizable. And so we're talking about 20-25% who, as the revolution approached, had reasons to be concerned. So that was my gauge

of how large this exodus potentially was. And I describe it as people who were from Shanghai or passed through Shanghai to leave.

So, this particular section I'm going to read comes from 1936, a little girl whose name is only Mei mei, "little sister". She was with her father, about to go on a special trip. He was her Baba, and they lived in Changzuo, which was at that time sort of a suburban, not even an exurb city maybe about 100 miles beyond, in the direction of Suzhou, except beyond Suzhou, kind of next to Suzhou, and it was called Changzuo, and this little girl and her father were going on a special trip.

So Baba announced that he would take little sister on a train ride to Suzhou, 60 miles toward Shanghai. She remembered every moment of that journey, for she had been giddy that Baba had chosen her, not one of her brothers. She sat on her father's lap, her eyes glued to the window, mesmerized by the neat rice fields and towns just like hers sweeping by in a blur. When they approached Suzhou she saw men and women dressed in fine silk fabrics, and even foreign outfits unlike her mother and father who wore roughly woven traditional dress. Big posters showed pretty ladies with curly black hair wearing tight qipao promoting cigarettes, mosquito coils, and rat poison. When they left the train station, Baba flagged down the driver of a wooden moon-wheeled cart. After a twisty bumpy ride over arched stone bridges and canals lined by weeping willows they finally came to a stop at a small store. Inside her father spoke to the shop keepers in a low voice while she stood waiting by the door looking out at a parade of vendors and hawkers on the street. Soon Baba called for her and told her to stand still beside him. The shop keepers looked into her mouth, and squeezed her thin arms. When they were finished poking and prodding her, one of them took her hand and led her toward another room. As she turned to look for her father she saw his back as he headed toward the door. "Baba! Baba!" she had shouted after him. He didn't turn around. "Baba, come back!" she cried. How could he leave without her. The stranger gently pushed her into a small dark storeroom and locked the door. Alone and terrified of what might lurk in the darkness, at first she could only whimper, then she steeled herself and called for her father as hard as she could until she grew hoarse and couldn't shout any more. Exhausted, she sobbed herself to sleep. When the little girl awakened on the musty dirt floor she thought she had had a terrible nightmare, but when she tried to open the door it wouldn't budge. She could see the glare of daylight around the cracks. Once again she screamed for her father. Baba never came.

So, I heard this story when I was in my 50s. I had already been thinking about "what's this last boat thing", why did everyone think they were going to be on the last boat? And I heard this story, and it was told to me by my mother. And it was a secret she had held for more than 70 years. I had never heard this story before. I had always said, "Mom, tell me something of your childhood", and I told you what her answer was: "bad memory". And one day we were having dinner and I said "gee Mom, too bad you can't tell

me anything about your growing up". And this time she said "alright, you want to know? I'll tell you!" And any child, no matter what age, you stop... and I suddenly heard a story that began with this. And of course I was just shocked. I hadn't had any idea. At some point I asked my mother "you didn't tell anyone?" She said "I couldn't tell anybody, it was such a shameful secret". The idea of having been abandoned. This was the beginning of a story of her life that began when she was 6 years old. And at some point I said "Mom, your memory is so good". [LAUGHTER] What can I say? And my mother said "I was 6 years old. I remember everything. It was the worst day of my life".

And so, she really did remember everything. And from 6 years old to her being on the last boat out of Shanghai. And I began to wonder, what was that journey for her. At some point as a former journalist, I began to take out my tape recorder and ask her question after question for a period of more than 12 years. Every time I saw my mother, or I'd call her on the phone at every hour you can imagine saying "but Mom, what happened then?" And she remembered and was willing to share that.

Now, a couple things about this. I then began to interview as many people as I could find. Partly because I wondered about this already, and then also to really understand what happened to my mother. What was the context? Was this just a thing that happened to her? And of course I found out there were many, many children at that time who were abandoned, given away, left on the streets. It was wartime. It was poverty. People were deciding if they didn't have enough food, who would eat and who wouldn't. And those were terrible choices and decisions people had to make on a daily basis. The people who lived in Shanghai, the children growing up, my mother ended up in Shanghai, I know there are a number of you here who have family, or yourselves grew up in Shanghai... every one of the more than 100 people I interviewed, several I interviewed many times would just talk about being a child going to school and knowing, and being told, from the time they were little "if you see a dead body on the street turn away, or walk to the other side." And those were the people who didn't make it through that night. There were also the multitudes of the living dead, the people who were near death, and it would be a question of whether they would live to the next day, who because of war and famine and all of the resources going to the military of Japan mostly, because that was being seized under this wartime period.

And so, as I began to talk to people, it was very clear to me I was talking to a generation of people who had suffered extreme trauma. Today we have a diagnostic term for it, right? PTSD. But whether it was in China, whether it was in Europe, anywhere there was war, we're talking about an entire generation really. And for many, whether they were in China or not, or Jewish survivors of the Holocaust these were not stories they wanted to just share easily with people. They were terrible memories for most people. The idea that it might take a generation or two before they felt safe enough, before they felt healed enough, or strong enough that they could actually tell

these stories. That was part of it. I began to understand that more as I interviewed more people.

I talked to so many folks. I would say the average age, when I started interviewing for this book was about late 70s, early 80s. It was a 12 year process that I went through, so by the time this book came out many of them are no longer with us. And I would interview them and I would say as they told me the most incredibly, heart wrenching, remarkable stories of survival and strength and resilience, I'd stop and I'd say "do your kids know this story?" And their kids would be grown adults, my age or older, and often the reply was "I don't think they're interested. No, I haven't told them." And there was sometimes when I actually would be interviewing, and I met them through their adult child who would be sitting in the next room, and by the end of the interview after we had talked, their child, their grown up child, would say to me "I never heard any of those stories." And that was an experience I had over and over again. I truly felt that for my mother, with every telling of this secret that she had locked up for so many years that every story she told, every time she told it, at a certain point the grandchildren were interviewing her for their school papers and things like that, that she became more able to heal from the things that had been so painful to her as a child.

That was both the genesis and the inspiration and the momentum for me to keep going. The other writers in this room, you know, at a certain point whether it's a year or two or three or four or twelve you start thinking "wow, am I the only person who's going to care about this?" For me, I would have many friends who I would see occasionally over the years, or I hadn't seen them in a couple years and they would say "what are you working on?" And I would say "Oh, the same thing I told you two years ago!" [LAUGHTER] And they'd say "and what was that?" [LAUGHTER] Of course, there's no reason for them to remember, and I tell them, and it's a great thing to now tell them "this was what it was" [LAUGHTER]

I wanted to convey in this book a number of things, even though we're talking about 70 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, we're now in the 0th anniversary of that this year, this was an exodus that kind of reached a peak in 1949, but it actually began earlier than that. Because the writing was on the wall well before then, that the losing side was definitely going downhill. And so the people who had, you could say the most prescient, or the best intelligence of what was going on, and a lot of this was people in business, because they were in the business of international trade and they could really see that the hyperinflation that you read about today in Venezuela, that was going on in Shanghai, and worse. People could not live anymore. People were going to the market with wheelbarrows full of paper money that was almost not worth the paper it was printed on, and coming back with a handful of a little bit of food. And that's what life was like then. For the people in business, especially the capitalists who owned their own factories and had access to foreign capital and international exchange, they

began to hedge their bets. They thought "this could be very bad when and if this government collapses". So beginning about 1947, which is when the peak of the hyperinflation and the current government, the Kuomintang* government, would be unable to stabilize the economy, the people with means began to send some of their capital, some of their machines, some of their equipment to Hong Kong, to Taiwan, to places where they thought they might be able to run to if they had to. They would send their first born sons as well.

This was highly... the idea of an exodus, I guess I want to say. What is painstakingly told in this book is with these four characters and several other of the individuals I mentioned, the one thing that dominated life in Shanghai, there was one question for a period of almost two years: are you fleeing or are you staying? This is all people could talk about, all people could think about. This was by and large a very sophisticated population who knew about geopolitics, who understood immigration laws, who understood what will it take for me to go somewhere, leave everything we have here, leave the lives we have, the community networks, very large extended families, and flee.

This was a very demanding, calculated risk that people would take. So one of the things that became clear to me as I did this was first of all that decision, no matter whether it's made today of 70 years ago or 80, or 100 years ago, the decision to flee your home is never an easy decision. It is a torturous decision. And every one of the people I profile in here, you can see they are talking about "should we go to Europe?" Well, Europe is still in recovery from World War II. What about America? They only admit 105 Chinese a year... still the remnants of the Exclusion Act. What about Australia? Well, they have a white-only policy in Australia. If we go to Hong Kong we will be one of millions of refugees there. If we go to Taiwan, we've never been a supporter of the Kuomintang* government. How will that play there? All of these things came into it. How much would it cost? If we can only afford 3 tickets who goes and who doesn't? What about Mom and Dad? There were many first born sons who actually didn't go, who had the responsibility of not only carrying on the family name, but taking care of their elderly parents, where they actually had the ability and possibility of leaving, but couldn't. It was "who will take care of our parents?" All of these things came into play to make this decision. That was one of the lessons I guess I want to say. The headline today, and for so long has been, the dangerous migrants who walk 1000 miles with their babies in their arms but they are criminals and we have to keep them out. None of them left... none of them left carrying their babies in arm, or getting on a rubber raft in the rough seas. Those decisions are not made easily. And the only thing that will push somebody really, I think in having interviewed so many people, is the prospect that your children will not survive childhood. That's what drove so many of these people, who made decisions like "I have 4 children, I'm going to send them all to different countries, because there's a better chance that one of them will survive". These were part of the calculus of even whether to leave.

So, the first part of the book is about the exodus: the decision, what life was like under Japanese occupation, under martial law, and even after the war ended and before the ink was dry on the surrender papers, the Civil War just totally blew out, and then there was more war. So, these people in China, and particularly I was looking at Shanghai, had already been through 8 years of war and occupation, which was incredibly brutal and cruel, and then 4 more years of the collapse of their society, the collapse of their country, and the collapse of their city, where they didn't even know if they could get a single egg to feed their family. And then the threat of Communist Revolution. So, you wonder what pushes people to the edge. They had already lived through all this. And now, a revolution. And they're in the middle class, they don't really think "well, I'm not a capitalist, I'm not a landowner, how much do I have to fear?" Others were "well, even though I have no money, I was a foot soldier in the Kuomintang army, so I wore that uniform, of course we need to flee". By 1948, the Fall of 1948 the Kuomintang had lost three major battles and hundreds and hundreds of thousands of soldiers on both sides had been slaughtered in these battles. It was really such a tragedy for China. Everybody knew about these things. It was at that point everybody knew the Kuomintang was going to be defeated. The Red Army, or as they called it then, the Red Bandits, were headed toward the Chongjung*, the Yangtze River. And once they crossed that everybody knew it was over for Shanghai. Liberation, or takeover, however you look at it was inevitable. It was at that point that all hell broke loose. Anybody who had anything to worry about or fear started running for the exits. And if you can imagine Washington DC, or in particular New York City, where suddenly everybody is saying "we gotta go! We gotta get out of here!"

The newspaper headlines were filled with stories of ships where people were stampeding at the docks to try to get onto one of those ships. Tickets were almost impossible to get. And inflation had driven the price so high, but even if you had the money it would be hard to get, to get onto any of those. There are stories about the fire wagons coming and spraying fire hoses on people just to get them away. Then the airplanes; there were 2 international airports, hard to believe, but in 1940s Shanghai they had 2 airports that were capable and did send international flights out. Pan Am, Northwest, Alaska Airlines, or what is now Alaska Airlines, all had schedules in Shanghai. At a certain point they just stopped the schedules and they just ran the planes back and forth. As soon as they would land empty, because nobody wanted to go into Shanghai [LAUGHTER], they would just load 'em up like cattle cars and then take off.

I'm curious, how many of you have ever flown into Kai Tak airport in Hong Kong, while it was still around? [LAUGHTER] Well, you know then what a hair raising ride that is, because it's weaving through apartment buildings just to land. It was one of the most dangerous airports in the world. Well that's where those planes were mostly headed. Some were going to Taipei, but they were mostly going to Hong Kong. Every one of these ships, planes, and trains were so overloaded that the ships, some of the worst maritime

disasters in world history happened because the ships collided. More people died in one of those collisions than with the Titanic. Twice as many people. And it actually is on record as being the worst maritime disaster. It was headed toward Taiwan, it too many people and too much stuff on it. One of those airlines, many of them crashed on their way into Hong Kong. One of the gentlemen I interviewed, he had a ticket on one of those planes, one of those very precious tickets, and as he was standing in line to board the plane he got a message from home saying that one of the kids was sick and he shouldn't leave. So he stepped out of line, went back to see his family and the next person up took his seat. That was Quentin Roosevelt II, grandson of Teddy, relation to Franklin. He was on the board of directors of one of the airlines. He got on that plane and it crashed on its way into Hong Kong airport. Everybody perished.

So there are many stories of people who just managed to... they were on that last thing, and didn't, and things happened, and they managed to survive. So, harrowing experiences all the way around.

One of the... one of the lessons as I would have said was that nobody makes these decisions lightly. The only thing really that will push most people to say "leave everything behind, let's go!" is the threat of imminent death. And maybe not to themselves, but to their families, their children. The other is that many of the people who had the most to lose, or felt they had the most to lose, whether that was in Shanghai, or any community we're talking about in Guatemala, Syria, Somalia... around the world, is the people who are of the leadership of their current communities, whether it's as teachers, as religious leaders, as business people... when regime change is coming, they know they're with the old regime and they have something to lose and may be one of the targeted people. That was also true of Shanghai. There was an incredible brain drain that took place, because Shanghai was also one of the most educated, intellectual centers of China. People might not have had a lot of money, they might not have been capitalists, but they had resources, intellectual resources, they had social capital, connections, ability to know about international people and markets, not to feel afraid of foreigners, or landing in a foreign land.

For me, the connection to today is just that the people who fled Shanghai were often... many of the people who could have contributed so much to the building of new China actually that actually had fled because they were afraid of what might happen to them. And I think that's true when we look at refugees today too. And so the idea that they're all going to be criminals and the most dregs of society, actually it takes a lot of initiative, it takes a lot of knowledge to actually think where you can go and make a new life. If they can find safe haven anywhere, then actually they're going to be the most contributing, the most stable, the people who will work the hardest to make sure those children they wanted to have survive and will actually have a life.

One of the things I did toward the end of the book was I traced where they went, and this is one reason that the book took so long, is because I followed them to Hong Kong, to Taiwan, to the US. and also followed the life of somebody who stayed behind. That means there were four parallel histories. Right? When the Korean War happened, the experience of how it was interpreted in Hong Kong was very different from Taiwan. Actually the Korean War was a total turning point for Taiwan's survival. And of course in the United States there was the Cold War, the McCarthy period, all of that that took place then, and just following that through.

So, I think I want to stop a little bit there, but with the recognition of where I am standing today, in Chinatown, Washington DC, a very historic and well-established place. My father, when he was first in the United States in the 1940s he lived and worked in this area, in Washington DC. I have his FBI records... [LAUGHTER] that tracked his whereabouts and assets in Chinatown, sort of also watching other Chinese. So, in the course of this book sometimes people would say "the Shanghainese..." well, it would be not quite as blunt as that, but "why do you want to write about these Shanghai people?" Now some of you may know that Shanghai people have a certain reputation. [LAUGHTER] That they are the braggers of China. They are the ones that are so arrogant, they think they're so smart, they take credit for everything even if it has nothing to do with them. [LAUGHTER] So when I track the people of Shanghai as exiles who ended up in Hong Kong, mostly Quandoren* there was quite a culture clash, let me put it that way. And one of the things that was said to me about that was "well, Shanghai people, if they have \$1 they act like they have \$100." [LAUGHTER] "Quandoren, when they have \$100, they act like they have \$1." [LAUGHTER] So that explained a lot. When I tracked the Shanghai people to Hong Kong there's plenty of culture issues that happened. And of course the language is quite different. And going to Taiwan, of course the 2 million mainlanders who fled the mainland, many of them from Shanghai, landing on the island of Taiwan, where there were already 9 million people living there, the mainlanders came and acted like a victorious occupation force. A lot of what is in this book talking about the birth of modern China still affects us greatly today. Everything that I discuss about Taiwan then and the tension between the mainlanders and the Venchenren* who were there already, still continues today, as we all know with the cross-strait tensions.

So I wanted to say that. Otherwise, I would just love to hear what your questions and your thoughts are about this period. Some of you, your families... and thank you. Thank you so much for this, and I hope it will be something that if you do read it will also try to make the connections to today, because every exodus, really... this is one, and unfortunately we have too many others today as well. So thank you all for being so attentive.

[APPLAUSE]

So, Ted, we have some time for some questions.

Ted:

Oh, totally. We have a lot of questions I'm sure. Of course I'm Cantonese [muffled]. The Shanghainese everyone knows they're all great business people and always [muffled][speaks Chinese][LAUGHTER] But if you want to eat and marry someone who can cook you have to marry Cantonese. [LAUGHTER] Tell us a little more of the experience of that particular family that came to the United States. How do you contrast that with those that grew up in Taiwan? And of course I know that many of us know of many people who went to Taiwan and subsequently came here and made this place their own country. Many of the Cantonese of course came here many years before that and continued to come, and made this their country. And now we continue to see people coming from the mainland directly, and there are these different groups. And Mandarin and Cantonese are the main separations, but we also have these strange Shanghainese people that speak their own stuff, but there are many interesting areas of connections and conflict, and I wonder if you could speak to that. How has America affected those people who grew up in these different places, either growing up in cultural revolution in the Tiananmen period, or growing up in Taiwan where it became a great industrial country, or those people that came here with gold mines and railroads, and now it became who we are now. How do we mix? How do we talk? Certainly when you hear during the FBI period... well, anyway, can you speak a little bit about that? How has America influenced these groups?

Helen:

Well, I think it really depends on what period of time people arrive because certainly for the earliest of the migrants from China, from Guangdong Province mostly, or PoSan*, that experience was very different. I mean, we had a time of lynchings and massacres and so forth. So the experience for those Chinese was quite different, even through this era of the 1950s. Then we go through the exclusion period when very few Chinese were admitted at all. In fact the population reduced from the 1880s and the 1882 Exclusion Act, you can track from the different census reports and see that the population of Chinese dropped drastically. It was really World War II when the allies, America, Great Britain, the really needed China to be on board and it wasn't all clear that they would, that was the beginning of the exclusion laws falling away. I think a number of you know the war gave an opportunity for the veterans, the Chinese American veterans to actually bring women here, to get married, to have children. So that experience was very different from then people coming from Shanghai. And the culture clashes I talked about were very evident also in our Chinatowns. As you pointed out today there are people from many different other areas, Fujinese [muffled]... What's happened is I think many of the immigrants themselves may not interact with each other. As I was saying, there's so much trauma involved. It's a hard thing to leave one society, even if you're voluntarily coming as an immigrant. So to your questions I think it's often really the next generation that doesn't feel so limited in some ways or so connected to the people like

themselves that speak the same dialect or come from the same village or from the same region, who then reach out and just connect. And that's true whether it's for Chinese Americans, or Asian Americans, which we've seen in a generation after the war Chinese and Japanese dissent people were coming together whereas the parents may never have wanted to, having remembered the war and their enemy and hatreds. I think coming to America does give people an opportunity to sort of not be so bounded by those, whether we call it impressions, feelings, stereotypes, animosities that might exist toward another group. We're talking about displaced people. They left something. So when you leave something there's a opportunity to create something too, to create something new. So These Chinese migrants, no matter when they arrived it really is an opportunity to learn new cultures, and it may not be so true of the actual immigrant generation, but for the next generation it really is. Whether it's Jooksings, or you know... it's not really true that all of us are empty. [LAUGHTER] There's actually something there! But it's not like, exactly like what the parents left behind, and it's part of recreating something new. So there really is, we can say, a Chinese American culture, but it's dynamic, with different waves of immigrants, migrants, refugees that culture is going to change. That's true for American culture overall too, so it's not a static fixed thing. But I would say the culture here, for Chinese in America is far more dynamic in the sense than for the Hahn people in China, where it's so much more homogeneous. And we won't even get into government regulation or anything like that. That's my thought about it. I'm sure all of you have deep things to share about that too.

So, we have two questions... one here and one here, so we'll start there, and then we have two in the front.

Man:

You mentioned 5% were extremely wealthy, 20% were middle class, I was wondering if you could comment on how well they fared in the new China. And how many of those 5% of the rich and 20% of the middle class actually made it out?

Helen:

So, how many of the 25%, so that's what? A million and a half of the 6 million potentially could have left. There are no records of those times that I could find, because if you remember we're talking about a society and country in extreme chaos. So, you have a losing regime that is taking everything it can. What are the records there? The records and the archives there... everything that could be taken was taken. Even records of toothpaste... this was by the Kuomintang as they headed out. They had already taken the entire treasury of China. They had already taken the great national art treasures. And those are amazing stories of how that happened. But they also went through and said "let's take all the toothpaste", "let's take anything metal", screws, tools, all those things. And so as they were fleeing in the May period, May 1949, there were fires burning everywhere too,

because they were burning records. What they couldn't take they were burning. They didn't want to leave anything for the Communists.

When the Communist Party marched into Shanghai, then later had the October revolution they basically inherited a country that had been stripped of all useful things, and had no records. Many of the professional and technical class had fled, so who was going to run the hospitals, the schools, the factories. So there aren't numbers that I can give you on how many actually fled. But what I tried to do, and I do go through that in this book to try to extrapolate. We know how many in 1949 there were less than 1 million people living in Hong Kong, their population more than doubled. More than a million refugees crossed the border. Were they all Shanghainese? No, of course not. But a high percentage of it was. And the people of Hong Kong actually said that that they would call these refugees "the Shanghainese". So whether they came from Hunan, or Beijing, or wherever they were, they were "the Shanghainese". [LAUGHTER] So there was enough of a percentage that they had that. And there were neighborhoods in Hong Kong, North Point, and other ones, that were largely Shanghainese people. In fact there were stories that people that went there didn't even have to learn a word of Cantonese because there were so many Shanghainese that they could get by.

Same is true for Taiwan. Up to about 2 million people ended up fleeing to Taiwan. Were they all Shanghainese? No, but a fair number of them were. And there were Shanghai sweet shops that developed, restaurants, night clubs catering to the Shanghai people. Really, I focused on three locations where people went, because it would have been too unmanageable to really focus on everything. And southeast Asia... people went wherever they could. And that's the thing... Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore. All through southeast Asia, Borneo... wherever they could go I found people. Brazil, Venezuela... so I guess that's my long way of saying I don't know how many. [LAUGHTER] But there were a lot! [LAUGHTER] And we also know just from the children of the diaspora, there are so many people who actually trace their way through.

This is the first book in English about this exodus. I actually call it a forgotten exodus, because there were so many people that when I started interviewing people in Hong Kong one reaction I got besides "oh, who cares about Shanghai people?" was "well that's such a common thing! Everybody knows so many people who came here from Shanghai. What's the big deal?" In a way it was such a common story to people that they just never thought of it as a historic moment. So things like that really fed into my extrapolation. So that's the best we can do. By the way, the PRC currently is not interested at all in this group. I don't know why. [LAUGHTER] But my subtitle, I have to say, "the epic story of the Chinese who fled Mao's revolution"... had I known when we came up with that, it was just to describe. It wasn't to say Mao's revolution; good or bad. That's what they were fleeing from. Today, I should have anticipated that there was going to be so much tension and the

prospect of even more. So my subtitle now has a little unpleasant ring to it in China. And I already know my book is not going to be distributed in China. [LAUGHTER] They let my publisher know, "no!"

And there's a question back here, go ahead.

Woman:

I'm wondering if your mother ever reconnected with any family members?

Helen:

The answer is no. Because she was 6, and what you'll read in the book is just what adventures or misadventures her journey took her on, away from where her parents were. And even when I and my spouse, um... Ted, you introduced your lovely wife, I must introduce mine. Leah is back here. [APPLAUSE] So everything I said, Leah was actually there too at that dinner when we were talking and my mother shared the beginning of her secrets. But another time, just a few years ago before my mother passed away, she said, "you know, you... Leah and Helen, you have computers!" My mother had no idea what a computer was, but she knew "computers!" And she said, "you have computers, do you think you could find my mother and father?" Now my mother was in her 80s then and she didn't remember her family name at that point. And so I had the sad daughterly duty to give a response and just say "no, Mom. Even with these computers, I don't think so". But I guess I would say it just showed how much of a hole that left in her heart. And even at that age, where she I'm sure knew the answer to that question, but she still had that hope that these magic computers could maybe find something. And that's one of the things when I think about all of the people that I've interviewed, and how many have had very sad stories to tell, or left behind children and didn't reconnect for another 30 years or more, that the trauma they experienced is the trauma that refugees today are experiencing. And I would just hope that they don't have to carry for the next 70 years, or maybe even to the grave, stories that they can't begin to heal from. But that was... at least my mother did share those things, and did share the wish, that even in her 80s that she still wished this. And I have to say it was a great gift that she gave to me and my siblings, that she got to a point where she could tell us about this.

There's a question here, and then one up here. Go ahead.

Man:

You briefly touched upon your relationship to China. I assume you did some research in Shanghai. Can you briefly talk about that as part of your process?

Helen:

Sure.

So, the question is about my research in Shanghai. I was fortunate to become a Fulbright scholar, which helped fund my staying in Shanghai for 6

months. So I actually lived in Shanghai. I had been there a number of times previously, this was really to just... I was trying to find people who had either gone and come back - I knew people who had done that - as well as to talk about people who had been left behind and to interview them. There were all these networks: alumni networks, school networks of various kinds, business friends, family. So, I tried to connect with everybody I could in Shanghai... and by the way, as a Jooksing I am not fluent in Chinese, and my father said to my mother when I was a child "don't speak Chinese to the children". And that was because it was during the McCarthy period and he thought that we would face discrimination if we were able to speak Chinese, which I regret every day. [LAUGHTER] But for our protection that's what they said. And so, I did find some help, a journalist who worked with me to interview people in Chinese. So, as a translator, he would go with me to the Shanghai municipal archives, which they have a fairly extensive archival collection, and some of the schools, like St. Johns University the entire archive is there at the Shanghai municipal archive. Well, other places too... in Austin, Texas for example. But if you can read Chinese, you can actually search those, and I can't read Chinese, so I did have help on that. The thing about it is that Shanghai was such an international city that there were every language... every language was spoken and printed there. Every European language for sure. And so there were newspapers in German, French, Italian, Danish, Russian. Populations, communities from every nationality in Shanghai, and English. There were, I don't know, about 4, 5, 6 different English language daily newspapers, magazines, and so forth, that are available to find in the libraries in Shanghai. Some are also here in Washington, in the Library of Congress.

So the stories I relied on from people I could also kind of reconstruct on a daily basis because these were daily newspapers of what was going on, in what neighborhood, what people, what streets. And that was something that I did while I was in Shanghai. And also just to walk the streets of Shanghai. Many of you raised your hands. You know that the architecture, the older buildings, if you strip away the new signage and the facades that were put on them, they still are the old beautiful architecture that it once was. And some have been restored. So that's what I tried to also immerse myself in.

And so, you had a question.

Woman:

Yeah, I could talk forever because I'm actually working on the very same period looking at Jewish refugees. So this is a godsend! So I'll focus my question on [muffled]. I was really surprised that [muffled]... I'm just wondering, why did you pick him? Did you have a conversation about cultural clashes [muffled]... United States, New York [muffled]....

Helen:

So, your question is why I had more about the childhoods of the other... and then...

Woman:

Well, basically [muffled]...

Helen:

So, the question is... I'm guessing most of you have not yet read this book. But we have a researcher and a writer here who asked. [LAUGHTER] So I have 4 characters, one whose name is Ho, Ho Chow. And he was a quite brilliant student growing up in Chongzhou outside. And when the war began to break out with Japan his family had the decision of "let's flee" because all of the armies are going to pass through here, and they ended up in Shanghai. So, I have two chapters, or one and a half or something like that, two, about Ho's childhood, and there's a great gap. Meanwhile... so, for those of you who write, or whatever, the whole issue is how do you structure a story that will carry and maintain not just what's happening with each individual, but also what's historically happening around them that they are all each experiencing. You know, the each experienced the occupation, the war, the invasion, and without too much duplication. So that was one reason. So, Ho was this brilliant student, and his life in Shanghai was about going to school and staying out of trouble. This was the main thing. His family was maybe typical in a lot of ways. Shanghai was such a contested place. If you had any political inclination at all you could end up beheaded with your head on a lamppost. And that's the kind of place it was. Because it was under Japanese occupation, so if you were a resistor in any way you and your whole family could get shot and killed on the spot, or sent to one of the torture chambers. Which one of my other characters, his father ran the torture chamber and was a collaborator. So his son, his story about what it was like being the child of a collaborator, which of course because Japan lost the war, their fortunes completely turned around with the loss of the war. So partly... Ho went to school and back a long time. That's all he did. And so that doesn't become... I actually tried to have chapters about that, but it's not fascinating. [LAUGHTER] And so the parts of telling Ho's [muffled], each person, each individual was also a vehicle to say what was happening to them in relation to what was going on historically around them. So that's why. And in your question... what's your name?

Woman:

Sarah.

Helen:

Sarah is doing research on the Jewish community of Shanghai, which there was 20-23,000 Ashkenazi Jews who had escaped eastern Europe, escaped the Holocaust and Hitler. They got on ships, and as I was saying, refugees of any time, of any exodus, are not welcome wherever they go. They were denied disembarkation anywhere in the Americas, anywhere in North America. The United States would not accept this Jewish community that was just fleeing the Holocaust. Europe they could not land. Africa... they ended up in Shanghai because it was the port of last resort. Shanghai admitted

these 20,000 Ashkenazi Jews. And this was during the period... just before, actually, the Japanese occupation of the international settlements. But they ended up being sequestered in the equivalent of a shtetl in Shanghai, and for a while they were worried that there was going to be the "final solution", that that's what Japan would do. Because the Nazi's in Shanghai were pressing for this. There are stories about... that the Japanese understood that they were not Aryans, and that Hitler really liked Aryans. So even though they were implored on to kill the Jews that were in Shanghai they did not do that. But instead what they did was they forced them all to live in the equivalent of a ghetto. So, this is an important area of study. I'm glad you're doing that. But you will also run into these questions of how to structure a story and a book if you're doing it through the people's stories.

The thing about Ho, even though he was an engineer, he was a scientist, in the personality of a scientist he was not super emotional. [LAUGHTER] I would ask him "so, what was it like going to school with Japanese sentries everywhere?" And he would say "well, it was OK". [LAUGHTER] However, the thing about Ho was that he made it to the United States, and he kept a journal. He kept letters, correspondence, which he as an engineer, had saved, scanned, digitized [LAUGHTER] and presented to me! They were all in Chinese, so I did, with the research assistants I had, had them translate it into English and they were a treasure trove. They were emotional, what was happening with his family in China, his exchanges with them. He became a student stuck in the United States because of course these weren't students who were accepted here as part of an exodus, they were already here, and when the revolution happened they couldn't go back. And so also all of their finances ended, because the relations, US and China suddenly the bamboo/iron curtain had gone down, so they had no money. Like students today they were not allowed to work. The newspapers here in the US at the time, and in the National Archives there are letters where people sent appeals to members of Congress and so forth saying, "can't you do something on behalf of these stranded students from China, because they have no way to live, they can't work, they can't afford to rent anything, and they're in dire need?!" So that went on as a political policy football for quite some time, because they really didn't want these [muffled]... Exclusion Act, they didn't want these students here, but they also didn't want to send them back, because many of them were highly educated, and especially those in technical fields. They let the ones who majored in English and history go out, [LAUGHTER] but the ones who majored chemistry, physics, engineering, they refused to let them go. Ho was one of those people and he had the incredible gift of keeping those letters. And you'll see the accounts of his family and what they were going through. And the panic that all of these students, and see, Kwak* was one of those students too, who was here who was stranded.

So those were great questions. How are we doing on time?

Ted:

You know, every time you tell stories, you unpeel and you take off a layer and there's another story, and there's another story. And all of you guys have these wonderful stories. And I want you to thank Helen for having shared a portion of her story with us, which is obviously opening up other people's stories. And what we like to do in our Talk Story series is always open up a period in which people can just mingle around, share with each other things. Helen, I also appreciate, standing around for an hour or so, but I hope you can also make your way to our back bar table and help with... maybe sign some books. And you guys gotta read the book, right?
[LAUGHTER]

So let's thank Helen! [APPLAUSE]