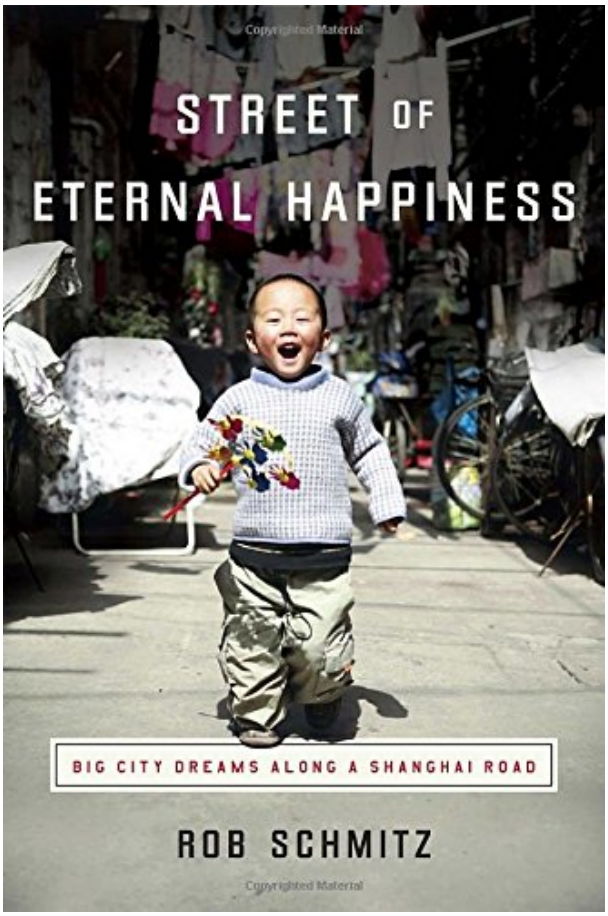
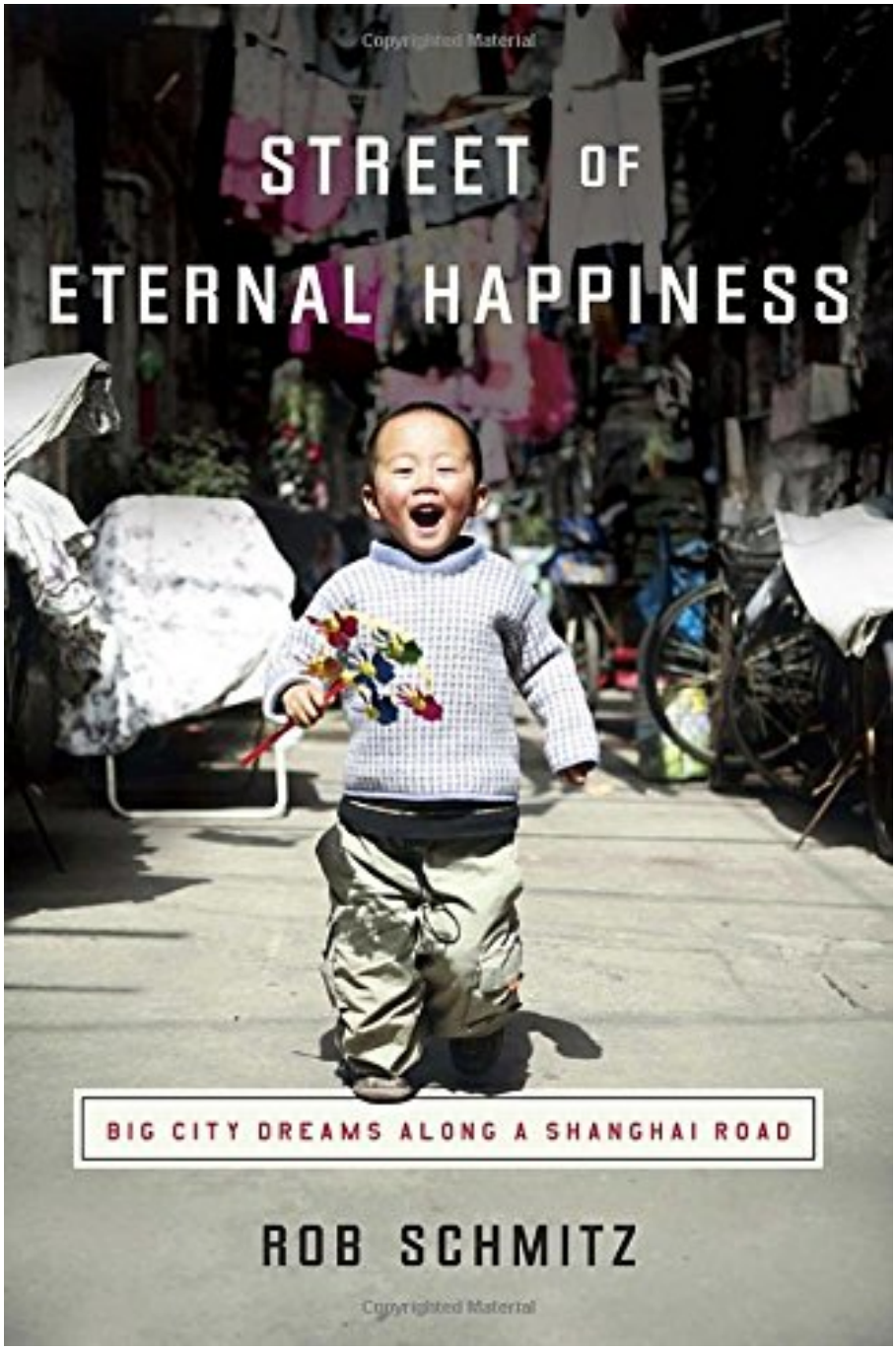
STREET OF ETERNAL HAPPINESS: BIG CITY DREAMS ALONG A SHANGHAI ROAD BY ROB SCHMITZ





STREET OF ETERNAL HAPPINESS: BIG CITY DREAMS ALONG A SHANGHAI ROAD BY ROB SCHMITZ PDF

Reading guide Street Of Eternal Happiness: Big City Dreams Along A Shanghai Road By Rob Schmitz by online could be additionally done easily every where you are. It seems that waiting the bus on the shelter, waiting the list for line up, or other places possible. This Street Of Eternal Happiness: Big City Dreams Along A Shanghai Road By Rob Schmitz could accompany you because time. It will certainly not make you feel bored. Besides, through this will certainly also boost your life top quality.

Review
Praise for Street of Eternal Happiness

“Poignant [and] enjoyable… Schmitz’s eye for scenes and ear for dialogue give an immediacy to his stories that more expository works often lack.”
—New York Times Book Review

“A portrait of China from the stories of a single Shanghai street…a poignant microcosm.”
—The Economist

“Enjoyable and illuminating… The great virtue of these books is that they offer Chinese people a voice, something that is often lacking in news coverage. Schmitz writes with great affection about the shopkeepers and other residents of his street: in telling their stories, he shows how the goals of the Chinese state have ‘often stood in the way of individual dreams.’”
—The Guardian

“Hopes and struggles rise to the surface in this intimate portrait of modern China.”
—NationalGeographic.com

“This beautifully conceived and written book conveys the joys, the tragedies, the comedy, and the vivid humanity of modern China. No one will talk about ‘China's rise’ or ‘the China model’ in the same way after reading it, and years from now people will turn to this book to understand the China of this era.”
—James Fallows, author of China Airborne and Postcards from Tomorrow Square

“Street of Eternal Happiness is a marvel of place-based reporting. This single road illuminates the complexities, contradictions, and funny wonder of today’s China. This book is really about family—the most eternal force on any street in the country.”
—Peter Hessler, author of River Town, Oracle Bones, and Country Driving

“Rob Schmitz has given us a treasure: a patient portrait of an impatient country, a China that is utterly true to life in its beauty and heartache, tenderness and greed. His story is told in real lives that are, like Shanghai

itself, modern and imperfect, romantic and ruthlessly practical. Reading this is as close as most people will come to living there."
—Evan Osnos, National Book Award winning author of Age of Ambition

"Schmitz peels back the layers of a single street to discover ambition, reinvention, faith, corruption, murder, and heartbreak. In this intimate and revealing book, a two-mile stretch of road embodies the dreams and dramas of modern China."
—Leslie T. Chang, author of Factory Girls

"Rob Schmitz is a master storyteller who leads his readers into the heart and history of modern China. Street of Eternal Happiness is, in turn, funny, moving, tragic and—ultimately—emotionally satisfying. Nobody can pretend to understand Shanghai and contemporary China without reading it."
—Adam Minter, author of Junkyard Planet

"At last, an intimate look at daily life in contemporary, convivial Shanghai. All great cities have a great book that captures their rise or fall; Street of Eternal Happiness is Shanghai's."
—Michael Meyer, author of In Manchuria and The Last Days of Old Beijing

"A kaleidoscope of Chinese history, from famine and Cultural Revolution to one-child policy. Above all, these tales illustrate the perils and hopes of living the Chinese Dream, written with penetrating insight and charming fluidity. A delight."
—Mei Fong, Pulitzer Prize winner for International Reporting and author of One Child

"For nearly two centuries Shanghai has been a city that offered both Chinese and foreigners the possibility of success, wealth, and status. Rob Schmitz paints a vivid canvas of the city from the perspective of one big city street that neatly encapsulates the myriad aspirations of one country and its people. The Street of Eternal Happiness: a thoroughfare of aspirations and dreams, hard earned successes and sadly thwarted hopes where Schmitz encounters the ghosts of China's troubled past, the hard working yet wistful dreamers of today, and those whose sights and visions are firmly fixed on China's, and their own, future."
—Paul French, author of Midnight in Peking and Fat China

"Rob Schmitz has crafted a deeply empathetic marvel of a book. Alternately poignant and humorous, it has much to offer anyone who has been to Shanghai, thought about going there but not made it yet, or simply wants to get a better feel for the rhythms of life in twenty-first century China."
—Jeffrey Wasserstrom, editor of the Oxford Illustrated History of Modern China and author of China in the 21st Century

"Authentic, boisterous, convincing, dynamic, energizing, the street stretching on, each window a non-fictional tale more fantastic than the fictional in the dramatic, almost unbelievable transformation of the Chinese society in its contemporary history, narrating with an Ezra Pound-like multiple cultural perspectives and linguistic sensibilities, and leading, eventually, to overwhelming questions. The reading of Street of Eternal Happiness cannot but compel a Shanghai-born Shanghainese like me into another trip back to the city in this global age."
—Qiu Xiaolong, author of Death of a Red Heroine and Shanghai Redemption

"What a treat to follow Rob Schmitz's journey into the epic lives of people living in the shadow of China's most storied city. Their heartache and hope spill from this small corner of Shanghai to the far reaches of modern Chinese history and geography. I've walked down this street a hundred times. I'll never see it the same way again. Schmitz has found a brilliant way to illuminate the big price little people pay for the

profound changes reshaping the world’s most populous country.”
—Ching-Ching Ni, former Los Angeles Times Shanghai Bureau Chief, current editor-in-chief of The New York Times Chinese website

“[Schmitz’s] web of characters speaks to his time in the country and his exemplary journalistic abilities… Weaving a gripping narrative peppered with historical facts, he leaves readers with an intimate glimpse into a culture undergoing a complex transformation.”
—Publishers Weekly

“In his deliberative, observant journalistic style, Schmitz, the China correspondent for Marketplace, chronicles his interviews and friendships with several of the shop owners on the street where he has lived for some years, plumbing their dreams and capitalist motivations… With each chapter, Schmitz delves deeply into the families’ endurance through the Cultural Revolution and famine and current drive to better themselves. Probing human-interest stories that mine the heart of today's China.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“[Schmitz] gives his portraits a financial underpinning, which reveals both the sparkle of a dynamic economy and the longtime corruption and ineptitude by China’s central government that have ruined so many millions of lives...A brutally revealing, yet unexpectedly tender, slice of Shanghai life.”
—Booklist [starred]

About the Author

ROB SCHMITZ is the Shanghai correspondent for National Public Radio. Previously he was the China correspondent for American Public Media's Marketplace. He has reported on a range of topics illustrating China's role in the global economy, including trade, politics, the environment, education, and labor. In 2012, Schmitz exposed fabrications in Mike Daisey's account of Apple's Chinese supply chain on This American Life, and his report headlined that show's much-discussed "Retraction" episode. The work was a finalist for the 2012 Investigative Reporters and Editors Award. He has won two national Edward R. Murrow Awards and an award from the Education Writers Association for his reporting on China. Schmitz first arrived to the country in 1996 as a Peace Corps Volunteer in rural Sichuan province. This is his first book.

CHAPTER 1

???810?

STREET OF ETERNAL HAPPINESS, No. 810

CK AND THE SYSTEM

THE STREET OF ETERNAL HAPPINESS is two miles long. In the winter when its tangled trees are naked of foliage, you can see past their branches and catch a view of the city's signature skyline in the distance: The Jin Mao Tower, the Shanghai World Financial Center, and Shanghai Tower. The three giants stand within blocks of one another, each of them taller than New York City's Empire State Building.

Below, people are too busy to take in the scenery. Today will be the first day of life for babies born at the Shanghai No. 1 Maternity Hospital along the street's midsection. For several souls at Huashan Hospital's emergency room at the street's western end, it will be their last. In between there is life, in all its facets: a bearded beggar sits on the sidewalk and plays the bamboo flute, lovers step around him hand in hand, cars honk and lurch around two men spitting and thrashing over whose car hit whose, a crowd of uniformed school children gathers and stares, an old woman with a cane yells at a vendor in disgust over the price of lychees, and the rest of the street pitches forward with a constant flow of people. Life here is loud, dirty, and raw. Every inch of the street pulses with it.

On a map, the street is a tiny squiggle to the southwest of People's Square, the center point of Shanghai. My home is at the western end of that squiggle. It looks out over a canopy of leaves that appears to hover two stories above the ground most of the year. Below, the trees are the only living beings standing still. I spend mornings zigzagging around their trunks from sidewalk to pavement and then back again among pedestrians vying for space in their shade.

Few streets in China are lined with trees like these, and on the weekends the bustle of local workers is replaced by groups of tourists from other parts of China, pointing telephoto lenses down the street at rows of limbs, admiring their exotic beauty.

The French had planted the trees in the mid-19th century when European and Americans carved up the city into foreign concessions. Nearly a century later, the French were gone, but the trees remained. The Japanese bombed Shanghai and took the city for a spell, but they eventually retreated, too, leaving the trees unharmed. Then came the Communists under Mao with revolution, class warfare, and the untimely deaths of millions. The trees endured. The street is now a capitalist one, lined with restaurants and shops. When I stroll along its sidewalk, I sometimes catch glimpses of rundown European-style homes through the cracks of closed gates, and I think about the relentless churn of history this street has witnessed. Here, an empire rose, fell and now rises again. The only constant were the trees.

I had lived on the street for nearly three years before I noticed Chen Kai's sandwich shop. It was less than a block away from my apartment, above a tiny boutique fashion store, and during the warm summer months, the leafy Plane trees obstructed the entire affair. A narrow spiral staircase took you upstairs to behold the café's floor-to-ceiling windows. On the other side of the glass, a wall of leaves swayed in the wind, hiding the bustle of Shanghai below. The place felt like a modernist glass tree house deep in the forest.

Inside, Chen – who goes by the nickname "CK" – sometimes stood hunched over a counter, his black mop of hair obscuring his eyes, skinny fingers putting the finishing touches on a sandwich or a dessert before he flipped his mane back and mechanically swiped a cup of piping hot coffee from the espresso machine for a customer. Usually, though, the shop was empty. That's okay, CK told himself, it's going to take time before business takes off. That's how dreams work. During those times, he'd slouch atop a barstool, his boyish, acne-covered face turned away from the glass wall of trees. He'd switch from one Chinese dialect to the next over the phone, making deals for his side business: selling accordions.

The idea for the sandwich shop came to him after he visited one in Chicago. It had been his only trip to the United States, and he came away impressed with what is a part of everyday life for Americans. It was like an

American returning from China inspired by a noodle stand. It was random, and such an approach might have seemed reckless and naïve to Western businessmen who peruse market studies for months before crafting a business plan. But the method was typical of many small business owners I met along the street. In a city as big and rich as Shanghai, you could sell anything if you put your mind to it.

CK dreamed that one day this artsy second-floor sandwich shop would become his main livelihood. He had invested years' worth of earnings from selling accordions into this place, pooling money with a friend's to create a space they hoped would attract young musicians and artists like them.

"One day I had an idea: maybe I can get all these people together and unite them," CK told me. "I want to find people who want to free themselves from the overall system. I want friends like me; entrepreneurs who have independent ideas in art, fashion design, lots of different industries."

Ambitions like CK's made the Street of Eternal Happiness a fascinating stroll: tiny shops and cafes like his lined the narrow thoroughfare, the dreams of bright-eyed outsiders stacked up against each other, all looking to make it in the big city.

It wasn't easy. Neither CK nor his friend Max had any experience working at – much less owning – a restaurant. The two had met in 2011 at an antique camera shop in the former French Concession where CK had taken a part time job to learn more about photography. Like CK, Max had a background as an entrepreneur, and through long conversations at the camera shop each had come to appreciate the others' business savvy and approach to making and selling product.

They named the shop Your Sandwich. It was two blocks from a busy subway station, in the shadow of a 45-story skyscraper that spit out hundreds of office workers each day at noon in search of a quick lunch. But nobody could see Your Sandwich. No one ever looked up through the canopy of the Plane trees while strolling the Street of Eternal Happiness.

So they changed the name to 2nd Floor. It was a hint to passersby that they should elevate their gaze as they passed. Below the new name, in diminutive typeface were the words: Your Sandwich. They also changed chefs, constructed a bar with mixed drinks and imported beer, and obsessively tweaked the menu. One day I dropped by CK's apartment and noticed a pile of electronic tablets stacked in the corner. "Touchscreen menus!" CK told me with a smile. Certainly, he figured, their drab, non-interactive menus had to be the reason the iGeneration wasn't eating there.

For someone who had built a profitable accordion business so quickly, CK was naïve as a food and beverage man. Lunch crowds — typically office workers struggling to pay rent — tended to opt for cheap local food, and they preferred eating cooked food aided by the distance of chopsticks. In the coming months, he adjusted to these realities. He inserted affordable lunch sets, and tweaked the sandwiches on offer. Through it all, CK didn't seem worried about his empty sandwich shop. Selling accordions was a reliable source of revenue, and he felt fortunate to manage both businesses inside a place of his creation, like a jittery squirrel stashing nuts for the winter inside his cozy tree house.

It was a sanctuary within a sanctuary. The surrounding neighborhood was founded as a refuge for outsiders. After losing the first Opium War in 1842, the Qing Dynasty court handed over parts of Shanghai and other Chinese port cities to Western colonial powers. The French occupied this section of the city and transformed what was an expanse of rice paddies into an exclusive neighborhood, establishing the French Concession in 1849. Since then, one group after another had sought shelter there. In 1860, the French allowed tens of thousands of local Chinese to take up residence to escape the Taiping rebellion, a violent peasant uprising

against the dynasty. Later on, theatres, cinemas, and dance halls — frowned upon by the ever-changing Chinese leadership of the city — were allowed to flourish under French protection. Churches, temples, and mosques soon followed.

When the Communist Party took over in 1949, it vilified the foreign concessions, regarding them as humiliating symbols of foreign aggression. Missing from Party propaganda, though, was that in 1921, the twenty-eight-year-old Mao Zedong secretly met with other young radical thinkers of the time at a girls' boarding school deep within the French Concession, convening the first congress of the Chinese Communist Party there. Mao and his comrades chose the site precisely for the type of refuge it provided others. It was less likely that authorities in control of the Chinese-run part of the city would find them, arrest them, and put them on trial, a fate that would have prevented the communists from gaining ground, forever altering the course of China's history.

The French had built their neighborhood with a layout typical of an arrondissement in Paris: narrow, winding boulevards lined with trees that locals still call Faguo Wutong, "French Phoenix Trees," though they are neither French nor Phoenix Trees. Like the muddled history of Shanghai, they were much more cosmopolitan: London Plane trees, a hybrid of the Oriental Plane – native to central Asia – and the American Sycamore. The first London Plane tree was discovered in Spain.

Baron George-Eugene Haussmann had made the London Plane famous. The urban planner loved the leafy look of the tree, and he had them planted throughout Paris in the 19th century when he transformed the city from a chaotic mess of tiny streets into neighborhoods connected by wide, tree-lined avenues. Soon after, London Plane trees appeared in cities throughout the world. They still dominate the streets of Rome and Sydney, and they make up nearly a third of New York City's canopy. The London Plane's leaf, similar to a maple, is the official symbol of New York City's Parks Department.

Two out of every three trees in Shanghai is a London Plane. City planners call it "the Supertree" because of its shallow root systems and its high tolerance to smog, extreme temperatures, and pests. They're planted between 18 to 24 feet apart and are pruned with a technique known as pollarding, which stunts their growth and promotes a dense canopy of leaves between two and three stories high, forcing the branches from opposite sides of the street to grow towards each other, intertwining to form dark green tunnels. The arched canopy offers pedestrians shade from the sweltering sun and cover from the fierce storms that frequently come rumbling off the East China Sea.

By 2010, when I moved to the neighborhood, the Parisian layout and its Plane trees remained, but the Chinese had reclaimed the street names. Rue Chevalier and Route Garnier had become Jianguo Lu and Dongping Lu - Build the Nation and Eastern Peace Roads. Other streets once commemorating notable dead Frenchmen had transformed into Rich People Road, Famous People Road, and Lucky Gold Road. On walks through my new neighborhood, I practiced my Chinese by reading their auspicious sounding names. There was ???(Peaceful Happiness Road), ???(Eternally Fortunate Road), and ???(Winding Peace Road). I lived on what was perhaps the most auspiciously named one of all:???– literally "Long Happiness Road," which I took to calling the more eloquent-sounding "Street of Eternal Happiness."

When locals read the names of these streets, though, eloquence and auspiciousness aren't the first things that come to mind. The street south of my apartment, Anfu (Peaceful Happiness), is a small city in Jiangxi province famous for processing pig parts for ham. Maoming Lu, Famous People Road, is a thriving Cantonese port city. And Changle Lu, my own Street of Eternal Happiness, is the name of a coastal town in Fujian province from which Ming Dynasty explorer Zheng He had set sail to explore much of Asia. When the Chinese renamed these French streets, those running south to north had been named after Chinese provinces or provincial capitals, while streets running east to west were named after prominent Chinese cities

of the time, which themselves had been named for countless forms of auspiciousness so many dynasties ago.

Whenever I pedal my bike along the Street of Eternal Happiness, I need all the luck I can get. The narrow street is one of the neighborhood's few two-way thoroughfares. Taxis often use it to escape the traffic of the nearby expressway, but they must contend with droves of electric motor scooters that seem to pour into every open space. Scooter drivers often barrel down the wrong side of the road in packs against oncoming traffic, dispersing just in time to make way for cars cutting through the hordes, horns blaring, headlights flashing. Survival is the rule of the road, and the right-of-way cedes to the biggest, most aggressive vehicles. City buses sit at the top of the food chain. They command respect from scooter and car drivers who pull over to make way for the behemoths, a survival instinct akin to diving out of the way of a rampaging elephant. All this activity leaves bicyclists to fend for themselves near the curbs or on the sidewalks, where riders often take out their frustrations by plowing through pedestrian traffic.

I choose to ride with the electric scooters. I can usually pedal my bike fast enough to keep up with them, and their riding habits –traveling as an integrated unit like a peloton in the Tour de France – helps protect me. Each morning's ride requires a constant awareness of my surroundings. The fact that most everyone else is in the same state of mind means that –despite the appearance of vehicular pandemonium – many drivers possess a conditioned athlete's mental focus, behaving according to the unspoken rules of the road. They move in concert with one another as they speed and swerve down the Street of Eternal Happiness, a system disguised as chaos.

On a cold day in the winter of 2012 I ascended 2nd Floor Your Sandwich's spiral stairway to warm up with a cup a coffee in a corner booth. The branches of the Plane trees lining the Street of Eternal Happiness were nude, brittle chopsticks, pointing in all directions, making scraping sounds across the second floor windows whenever a freezing wind came swirling down the street.

On a shelf in the middle of the sunny dining room sat CK's accordion, a massive black instrument with Polverini engraved across the front in elegant cursive. The shop was empty that day, so CK heaved it off the shelf, slumped into a booth bathed in the morning sunlight, bowed his head, and pressed the air release button, slowly opening the bellows. The instrument exhaled, a sigh so deep it seemed to be coming from CK himself. The day before, his head chef had quit in a fury, taking half the wait staff with him. If any customers arrived today, CK and his partner Max were on their own.

He paused for a moment, and then launched into a furious, fast-paced ballad, his fingers racing across the keyboard. He closed his eyes as the melody took shape, expanding and contracting the instrument with a fluid motion, his fingers moving so quickly they seemed to have minds of their own. It was a patriotic song from his childhood, and as his head bobbed back and forth, memories suddenly came to him, driving the song forward, faster and faster.

CK was eleven years old when it dawned on him: killing himself wasn't going to be easy. For two straight months, he had explored his options each day after school. Swallowing sleeping pills should be the most comfortable way to do it, he thought, but the pharmacist wouldn't sell them to him. "You're too young," she said. Walking off the roof of his family's apartment building was a possibility. Nah, he concluded: too painful. "I realized I didn't have the courage to jump," he said.

There was another problem. He rarely had a moment alone. The boy was an only child with overbearing parents and a nai nai – his maternal grandma – who left his side only when he used the toilet.

Each day he ate a porridge breakfast seated inches from them. At the school down the dirt road from his family's rural home, teachers took over. After that, it was back home with nai nai and his parents for homework, music lessons and a vegetables-and-rice dinner. He couldn't even steal a minute alone at night in his bedroom: nai nai slept on a thin bamboo-matted bed beside him.

One afternoon while his father was writing at his desk, CK took one final, determined inventory of his family's cold, bare apartment. Outside, the air was thick with the exhaust of neighboring chemical and mining equipment factories. He walked through the apartment, quietly foraging for household objects with the most promising life-ending potential. His quest ended in the only room where he had a reasonable excuse to be alone: the bathroom. He settled on a straightedge razor he discovered in his father's shaving kit. One night before turning in, he slipped the folded razor into his pajamas pocket.

It was a chilly autumn evening. Moonlight filled the room. The night was still, save for nai nai's steady breathing and the occasional train in the distance. It announced itself with a soft, sustained horn blast, followed by the soothing rumble of freight rolling along track before dissipating into the quiet night. As he waited for his grandmother to fade into deep sleep, CK thought about his family.

From an early age, the boy had listened to his father talk about "the system." He was never sure what the words actually meant, but he could usually predict when his father was about to utter them. His father had a way of pausing before he said the words, pronouncing the phrase slowly and carefully, making the words stand apart from the rest of a sentence so the boy would take note.

"You see, Kai Kai, you just can't fight ….the system." The phrase was imprinted onto the boy's memory in italics.

After a difficult day at work, his father would return home and sit his son down, a ready audience for his rants. The system didn't allow him to choose his career. The system didn't reward intelligence. The system discouraged individual talent. You could never get ahead in the system. "Zhongguode guoqing buhao!" –"China's state of affairs is terrible!" his father would rage.

"My father thought he was an intellectual," CK said. "He wasn't happy with his job and the fact that he didn't choose what he wanted to be. He knew he was smarter than others. He wanted to succeed based on his talents, but he couldn't. The system wouldn't allow it. He didn't think my mother was very smart, and that frustrated him, too. He didn't like his colleagues at work, and he hated China."

When CK tried to ask questions, his father shushed him, continuing his tirade. Eventually, CK felt it made little sense to talk in a home where no one listened. So he stopped talking altogether.

CK didn't have any brothers or sisters. He was born in 1981, two years after the birth of China's one-child policy. His shared living quarters with his mother, father, and nai nai were on the top floor of a rundown four-story brick building assigned to them by the city railway bureau, his grandmother's work unit. The stairwells were littered with garbage. CK's father employed the system's propaganda of the day – Leader Deng Xiaoping's "Four Modernizations" campaign and President Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" slogan – to describe the place. "He called it a 'three no-managements' area: nobody cleaned it, nobody administered it, and nobody cared about it."

The same could be said for the city where CK grew up. Historically, Hengyang, as far from Shanghai as New York is from Chicago, was a place to avoid. The city in the central province of Hunan made brief appearances in Chinese records beginning 1,400 years ago, when Tang Dynasty emperor Gaozong punished

a rebellious assistant by banishing him to administer the city. Later, emperors used the city again and again as punishment for other dodgy high-ranking court officials, all sent to govern a far-flung city on the edge of the empire, where they were seldom heard from again.

Modern times hadn't been much better for the people of Hengyang. On a freight rail map of China, the north-south and east-west lines crisscross at Hengyang, creating an X in the heart of the country. It's one of the region's most important centers of heavy industry. Chemical factories abound, as do coal, lead, and zinc mines. The air was polluted and rancid, but there were jobs: CK's grandmother worked at the railway bureau, his mother at a phosphate fertilizer factory, and his father at the Hengyang City Number Two Construction Company.

CK's parents were born in the early 1950s alongside the birth of Communist China. Their generation grew up with the Party's schizophrenic campaigns, revolutions, and counterrevolutions that left tens of millions dead, persecuted, and imprisoned. There was rarely a moment of calm. Survival depended on a keen ability to adapt to an ever-changing political environment, understanding that, like a swimmer caught in a riptide, you must resist the urge to swim against a much stronger force. There was always the possibility of patiently maneuvering your way to safety, but you first had to cede control to the system.

As teenagers, CK's parents were sent to the countryside to farm for several years, a typical fate for city kids under the policies of Chinese leader Mao Zedong. Mao dreamed of a China where urbanites worked alongside farmers in a proletariat utopia; when he died in 1976, his dreams went with him. Most "sent-down youth" promptly dropped their hoes and returned home to their families. Upon their arrival, the Party stepped in again, assigning them jobs at local state-owned enterprises. By the time they turned thirty, CK's parents hadn't yet made a single career decision for themselves.

"Would you like to draw or play the violin?" CK's parents asked him one day in 1985. The three sat at the dinner table, the adults searching the boy's face for an answer. His father had always aspired to be a writer or a musician. He was convinced that had he mastered an artistic skill as a boy, he might have been able to wrest some control from the system that had robbed him of his choice in how he made a living. Pushing his son into the arts would serve as a safety net in case China's economy took another treacherous turn someday, he reasoned.

CK's parents had whittled the boy's choices down to skills other family members had shown talent for. The boy's grandmother was a gifted illustrator. His father had happened upon an erhu – a two-stringed traditional Chinese instrument vaguely similar to the violin – in the garbage one day, and had taught himself how to play. The two choices were clear.

"Draw or play the violin," his father demanded as he stared at his son. The boy thought for a moment.

"Draw," he replied.

His parents turned away from him, whispering to each other, before turning back to him. "You will play the violin," announced his father.

CK had just turned four.

CK's lessons started when his family shelled out half a year's salary for a new violin. They ended a couple of

years later when the government launched a series of reforms that privatized parts of China's economy. This put employees at the most inefficient state-owned enterprises, such as Hengyang City Number Two Construction Company, on the chopping block. CK's father lost his job, and with that went money for the violin teacher. The family scrambled for an alternative, and someone remembered that an uncle owned an accordion. A new instrument was chosen. CK's uncle taught the boy the basics for half a year until one night when an electrical fire burned down the government-owned shop where the man worked. CK's uncle was the manager, so the government held him responsible and sent him to prison.

"It wasn't his fault," CK's father said about the incident, "It was the system's fault."

CK's father, who had no idea how to play the accordion but plenty of time to learn, took over as instructor. It didn't take long for CK's knowledge to surpass his father's, and practice became a subtle power reversal as son began to instruct father. Lessons turned tense at unpredictable moments, with CK's father screaming and slapping his son for any perceived misstep.

CK's father was insecure, temperamental, and so scrawny he looked feminine. His mother was calm and confident, with the strong hands of a peasant. The Chinese say such characteristics often sprung from childhood. CK's father grew up in the city, while his mother was raised on the shores of Dongting Lake in the Hunan countryside. She seemed to have absorbed the resolute stillness of its serene waters. "She was somehow more masculine," CK said. "She demanded self-esteem and independence."

CK's father hit his mother, too. CK sometimes heard screaming from their bedroom at night. He usually noticed a spattering of purple bruises on his mother's face and arms at breakfast the next morning. As he got older, the boy would try to step in between his parents at the height of these arguments. "I would try to protect her, but he was too fast," he said.

CK spoke of his father not with bitterness, but with the resignation that the Chinese often feel towards people they despise yet also love out of duty. It wasn't his father's fault, he says, nor was it the system's. It was his father's spleen.

The Chinese believe the spleen is the receptacle for a person's temperament and willpower. This belief is immortalized in the Chinese character for spleen: ?, or pi. Add in the Chinese character for energy, ?, qi, and together piqi — literally "spleen energy" — comes to mean "temperament" in Mandarin. Many Chinese believe that any damage to the spleen threatens your piqi, making you unable to control your emotions. When CK's father was a boy, he was punched so hard in a fistfight that his spleen ruptured. CK said once his dad had injured his spleen, his piqi had been lost forever.

It was the spring of 1989. CK was eight, too young to understand the news of student protests and hunger strikes from Beijing. There were whispers of democracy and the possible end of one-party rule in China. Hundreds of miles away in Tian'anmen Square, protesters had erected a white statue, 'The Goddess of Democracy,' that towered over a sea of students. She held aloft a torch with both hands and her gaze was fixed on the oversized portrait of Mao hanging at the entrance to the Forbidden City, and, beyond that, to China's current patriarchs ruling the country from inside their guarded compound, like a mother protecting her children from the tyranny of their father. But the students had swiftly assembled the goddess from metal, foam, and papier-mâché in just four days, and they were pitting it against a civilization that had lasted millennia. It was hardly a surprise when China's patriarchs prevailed, employing their brute strength to kill thousands, silencing the discussion about the system that would endure.

In the aftermath of the Tian'anmen crackdown, CK's father ratcheted up his politically inspired rants. CK, again, was forced to play audience. "I was a kid and I didn't understand much of it," he told me, "I just felt depressed. I wanted to be alone. I didn't want to be stuck at home, left to face my father."

Soon after, CK's mother sought an audience of her own. She sat him down and delivered some news. "Ma's going to be staying somewhere else from now on," she told him. "How about every Wednesday or Thursday I come back here to see you?"

At the time, divorce was uncommon in China. Marital strife was typically worked out behind closed doors, moderated by older generations to ensure the family unit — the backbone of Chinese culture — remained unbroken. CK's mind raced. His classmates would soon find out. His teachers would know. He would have to live alone with his father, with only his grandmother as buffer for his rants and tirades. CK's father stepped into the room. Would his father blame his mother's departure on the system too? The boy wondered. Family, he concluded, was the only system that mattered.

"I want to go live with mom," CK announced.

His father didn't pause. "It's been decided," he said. "You'll live with me."

The first song CK learned on the accordion was Caoyuan Gechang Mao Zhuxi, or "The Grasslands Sing for Chairman Mao." CK obediently mastered the song, playing the refrain over and over like a machine under the stern watch of his father, who was always ready to strike the boy at any hint of attitude. Between lessons, his father would complain. "Your mother is no good," his father told him, "how could she leave us?"

At school, it seemed everyone had learned about his parents' separation. His classmates asked questions, wondering what it was like to have parents who lived apart. His teachers used the news to embarrass him in front of other students when he wasn't paying attention in class. CK began to feel anxious. He yearned to isolate himself from his classmates and his family –to become chouli – detached. "The only quiet time to myself that I had was my walk between home and school. I was basically walking from one source of pressure to the other."

CK lay awake that autumn evening of his 11th year, staring at the ceiling, far from chouli as nai nai's breathing grew deeper. He felt the weight of the folded straightedge razor pressing lightly on his thigh through his pajamas pocket. When he was certain nai nai was asleep, he sat up in bed and withdrew the razor from his pocket. He unfolded it. He took a breath. Holding the handle firmly in his right hand, he pressed the blade to the inside of his left wrist.

He penetrated skin, cutting into flesh. He watched as blood rose to the surface. He began making swift cutting motions, pressing left to right again and again. He was bleeding, but there was no gushing blood. He switched hands and tried the other wrist. The family matriarch continued to doze peacefully beside him. His blood seeped into his pajamas, but the wounds kept clotting. It wasn't the geyser he'd expected. He couldn't find a vein. And his wrists began to hurt. "I continued to cut, but it was useless. I couldn't see well, and my wrists were so thick," CK told me.

CK slowly folded up the razor and returned it to the pocket of his bloodstained pajamas. This is just too difficult, he thought to himself before falling asleep.

The bellows of the accordion expanded and compressed like the lungs of a runner in mid-sprint. The fingers of CK's right hand frantically raced up and down the keyboard, staccato bursts of treble notes trickling over

a shifting landscape of bass controlled with a swift mechanical reflex of his left fingers, the two sides chasing each other. CK's eyes were still closed in concentration. A freezing wind blew down the Street of Eternal Happiness, sending the branches outside clattering against the windows of the shop. All appeared to be in harmony, but then CK hit a wrong note. Then two. He opened his eyes, looked at me, and laughed, giving up.

"Wow. What was that?" I asked him.

"Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy," he said, still laughing.

The song was a revolutionary epic that opened one of eight Beijing operas allowed during Mao's Cultural Revolution. It borrowed heavily from Water Margin, a 14th century Chinese novel known as one of the four classics of Chinese literature. Party leaders turned the novel's tales into musical propaganda – a portrayal of a proletariat hero to rouse the masses in support of the system.

CK shook his head, embarrassed he had forgotten how to play a song he had spent his childhood practicing.

"I used to play traditional Chinese songs, but I later discovered I didn't like to play them," CK told me, wiping sweat off his forehead to reveal two bright, oval brown eyes that seemed larger than they were because of his thin face. "I preferred something different. It took me a while to realize I can play my own songs."

With that, CK began playing one: a slow, sad melody that conjured up a cold, lonely street in Paris. Or Shanghai.

CK's first job interview after college was at Pearl River Piano, China's largest accordion manufacturer. All the practice as a child had finally paid off. After the encounter with his father's razor blade, he'd come to accept the idea that he would spend the remainder of his teenage years living under his father's roof. So he decided to focus on what would come after. He worked hard in school, practiced the accordion, and earned a spot at a few hundred miles from home at a college in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou, where he studied music. His Pearl River interviewer was impressed that he played the accordion, and within minutes CK found himself in the president's office. Pearl River's president handed him an accordion and removed his own from a case next to his desk. The two played a duet together, and when the president asked CK to play a solo, he thought about it carefully.

"I picked a very complicated piece: Liszt's 'La Campanella.' I got the job."

CK was assigned a position in the company's accordion sales and marketing department. For the first time in his life, CK's father was proud of him. Pearl River was one of a handful of state-owned musical instrument makers that had survived the country's ambitious market reforms. Sales were picking up, thanks to China's rising consumer class. CK would receive a competitive salary, health benefits, and a generous state pension. But the work was mind numbing. "Each day you'd work two or three hours and then you'd run out of things to do, so you'd just sit around chatting, reading the newspaper," CK said. "Others used the time to cultivate relationships with each other, but I didn't see the point of that."

Instead, CK spent his free time looking for a more interesting job. After a quick search, he found one: Polverini, an Italian accordion maker, had opened a tiny factory a dozen miles west in the suburbs of Shanghai. The company sought an assistant to liaise between its Italian factory manager and its Chinese workers.

Polverini's accordions were world-class – Pearl River accordions seemed like plastic toys in comparison. The job would be technically challenging: Kai would have to learn every step in the manufacturing process so that he could help teach low-skilled assembly line workers how to do it.

CK read the job posting over and over.

"It sounded interesting," CK told me. "I could finally learn something."

When CK called home to say he found a new job outside the state system, his father was livid. "You can't just walk away from the iron rice bowl!" his dad screamed over the phone. His new job failed to deliver a step up in pay, and he'd also lose the state benefits package he'd gotten at Pearl River.

"Suddenly, my dad felt unsafe," CK said, "He was extremely angry with me. He kept repeating the same thing: 'When you work for the state, your future is unlimited!'"

In the early 2000s, though, that was no longer true. CK's father still hadn't found a job since he was laid off from Hengyang City Number Two Construction Company. At forty-seven, CK's mother was pressured into early retirement after Hengyang Chemical Factory's orders were decimated by new competition from China's nascent private sector. In 2001, China had entered the World Trade Organization, and cushy jobs at state-owned enterprises were becoming rare. Capitalism was the new norm. CK began to feel that his parents, exhausted from a lifetime of dependency on the state, were now adrift in these new surroundings, and each had begun looking to him for financial stability.

CK explained his decision patiently. He wasn't learning anything by watching others socialize at Pearl River. At Polverini he'd at last acquire the skills to develop himself and his individual talents. This is something you should be able to relate to, he told his father gently.

The system had turned out exactly as CK's father had explained it to him as a boy: it was there to restrain and control you, rather than to enable you to learn and grow. But as his father got older, he began to realize the importance of money, and the stability that the system provided. "When I started working at Pearl River, he suddenly embraced the system. I didn't know how to talk to him about escaping it."

The private sector may have helped fuel China's remarkable economic growth, but jobs there seemed risky to the one-child generation. Most Chinese I knew in their twenties and thirties still longed for jobs in a big state-owned firm. Such jobs were seen as recession-proof, and their benefits were second-to-none. In 2013, more than two-thirds of Chinese college graduates couldn't find a job that paid more than $300 a month – less than what a typical factory worker makes. Part of the problem was an oversupply of labor. The Chinese university system had quadrupled in size in the past decade, and it was producing far too many graduates for the country's marketplace to absorb. The jobs available – construction or manufacturing – were not what graduates wanted, and the work they envisioned wasn't yet available in an economy that was still in an early stage of development.

CK took the job with Polverini and left for Shanghai. His new roommate – a middle-aged Italian engineer – also happened to be his new boss. The two shared a passion for tinkering. As boys, each had spent afternoons taking things apart and piecing them back together, and now they would get paid to do it. At Polverini's cramped factory on the outskirts of Shanghai, their mission was to modify the brand's classic accordion to bring its price down. Chinese accordion players tend to either drop thousands of dollars on an expensive Italian instrument, or penny-pinch to buy the cheapest Chinese brand they could find. An accordion between the two price points did not yet exist. CK's mission was an affordable Polverini, tailored for China's rising middle class.

CK spent months on the assembly line, learning about every part of the instrument. In Italy, his boss designed Ferraris. An accordion was an even more complicated machine, he told CK.

“An accordion is very small, and you have more than three thousand tiny parts inside of it, so a millimeter misstep is a huge mistake,” CK explained. “You must have a good understanding of chemicals, wood, steel, how they interact inside the machine, and the sounds they create.”

Within a year at Polverini, CK had mastered every step. In the years to come, CK’s boss encouraged him to learn more, and CK became a jack-of-all-trades. “I was a manager, a translator, a supply chain point person, a customer service agent, I made the prototypes, I was in charge of sound QC, and by the end, I could build an accordion from scratch.”

Within four years, CK went from making $400 a month to $4000, jumping from the average salary in China to that in the United States. For the first time, Shanghai – with its fancy cars, scenic tree-lined boulevards and international appeal – began to feel like home.

“Can you play something else?” I asked.

It was 11 o’clock in the morning and CK had been playing for over half an hour. 2nd Floor Your Sandwich had been empty all morning. The lunch hour was approaching though, and soon the tower across the street would spew hundreds of hungry office workers onto the sidewalks of the Street of Eternal Happiness. CK checked the clock, paused, and then nodded, his hands expanding the instrument, letting it breathe.

“I wrote this for a girl I once loved. It’s called ‘2-27.’ That’s the date we met.”

It began with a sustained note in the minor key, and then another, and another, haunting tones patiently repeating like the deep breaths of someone fast asleep. Then, a playful melody arose, unpolished at parts, like a boy strolling down the street without a care in the world, whistling to himself.

CK closed his eyes again, and I stole a glance at his wrists. The wounds of his childhood had long since healed. His music filled his shop. And for the moment, the system disappeared.

STREET OF ETERNAL HAPPINESS: BIG CITY DREAMS ALONG A SHANGHAI ROAD BY ROB SCHMITZ PDF

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STREET OF ETERNAL HAPPINESS: BIG CITY DREAMS ALONG A SHANGHAI ROAD BY ROB SCHMITZ PDF

An unforgettable portrait of individuals who hope, struggle, and grow along a single street cutting through the heart of China's most exhilarating metropolis, from one of the most acclaimed broadcast journalists reporting on China today.

Modern Shanghai: a global city in the midst of a renaissance, where dreamers arrive each day to partake in a mad torrent of capital, ideas, and opportunity. Marketplace's Rob Schmitz is one of them. He immerses himself in his neighborhood, forging deep relationships with ordinary people who see in the city's sleek skyline a brighter future, and a chance to rewrite their destinies. There's Zhao, whose path from factory floor to shopkeeper is sidetracked by her desperate measures to ensure a better future for her sons. Down the street lives Auntie Fu, a fervent capitalist forever trying to improve herself with religion and get-rich-quick schemes while keeping her skeptical husband at bay. Up a flight of stairs, musician and café owner CK sets up shop to attract young dreamers like himself, but learns he's searching for something more. As Schmitz becomes more involved in their lives, he makes surprising discoveries which untangle the complexities of modern China: A mysterious box of letters that serve as a portal to a family's – and country's – dark past, and an abandoned neighborhood where fates have been violently altered by unchecked power and greed.

A tale of 21st century China, Street of Eternal Happiness profiles China's distinct generations through multifaceted characters who illuminate an enlightening, humorous, and at times heartrending journey along the winding road to the Chinese Dream. Each story adds another layer of humanity and texture to modern China, a tapestry also woven with Schmitz's insight as a foreign correspondent. The result is an intimate and surprising portrait that dispenses with the tired stereotypes of a country we think we know, immersing us instead in the vivid stories of the people who make up one of the world's most captivating cities.

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Review
Praise for Street of Eternal Happiness

"Poignant [and] enjoyable… Schmitz's eye for scenes and ear for dialogue give an immediacy to his stories that more expository works often lack."
—New York Times Book Review

“A portrait of China from the stories of a single Shanghai street…a poignant microcosm.”
—The Economist

“Enjoyable and illuminating… The great virtue of these books is that they offer Chinese people a voice, something that is often lacking in news coverage. Schmitz writes with great affection about the shopkeepers and other residents of his street: in telling their stories, he shows how the goals of the Chinese state have ‘often stood in the way of individual dreams.’”
—The Guardian

“Hopes and struggles rise to the surface in this intimate portrait of modern China.”
—NationalGeographic.com

“This beautifully conceived and written book conveys the joys, the tragedies, the comedy, and the vivid humanity of modern China. No one will talk about ‘China's rise’ or ‘the China model’ in the same way after reading it, and years from now people will turn to this book to understand the China of this era.”
—James Fallows, author of China Airborne and Postcards from Tomorrow Square

“Street of Eternal Happiness is a marvel of place-based reporting. This single road illuminates the complexities, contradictions, and funny wonder of today’s China. This book is really about family—the most eternal force on any street in the country.”
—Peter Hessler, author of River Town, Oracle Bones, and Country Driving

“Rob Schmitz has given us a treasure: a patient portrait of an impatient country, a China that is utterly true to life in its beauty and heartache, tenderness and greed. His story is told in real lives that are, like Shanghai itself, modern and imperfect, romantic and ruthlessly practical. Reading this is as close as most people will come to living there.”
—Evan Osnos, National Book Award winning author of Age of Ambition

“Schmitz peels back the layers of a single street to discover ambition, reinvention, faith, corruption, murder, and heartbreak. In this intimate and revealing book, a two-mile stretch of road embodies the dreams and dramas of modern China.”
—Leslie T. Chang, author of Factory Girls

“Rob Schmitz is a master storyteller who leads his readers into the heart and history of modern China. Street of Eternal Happiness is, in turn, funny, moving, tragic and—ultimately—emotionally satisfying. Nobody can pretend to understand Shanghai and contemporary China without reading it.”
—Adam Minter, author of Junkyard Planet

“At last, an intimate look at daily life in contemporary, convivial Shanghai. All great cities have a great book that captures their rise or fall; Street of Eternal Happiness is Shanghai’s.”
—Michael Meyer, author of In Manchuria and The Last Days of Old Beijing

“A kaleidoscope of Chinese history, from famine and Cultural Revolution to one-child policy. Above all, these tales illustrate the perils and hopes of living the Chinese Dream, written with penetrating insight and charming fluidity. A delight.”
—Mei Fong, Pulitzer Prize winner for International Reporting and author of One Child

“For nearly two centuries Shanghai has been a city that offered both Chinese and foreigners the possibility of success, wealth, and status. Rob Schmitz paints a vivid canvas of the city from the perspective of one big city

street that neatly encapsulates the myriad aspirations of one country and its people. The Street of Eternal Happiness: a thoroughfare of aspirations and dreams, hard earned successes and sadly thwarted hopes where Schmitz encounters the ghosts of China's troubled past, the hard working yet wistful dreamers of today, and those whose sights and visions are firmly fixed on China's, and their own, future."
—Paul French, author of Midnight in Peking and Fat China

"Rob Schmitz has crafted a deeply empathetic marvel of a book. Alternately poignant and humorous, it has much to offer anyone who has been to Shanghai, thought about going there but not made it yet, or simply wants to get a better feel for the rhythms of life in twenty-first century China."
—Jeffrey Wasserstrom, editor of the Oxford Illustrated History of Modern China and author of China in the 21st Century

"Authentic, boisterous, convincing, dynamic, energizing, the street stretching on, each window a non-fictional tale more fantastic than the fictional in the dramatic, almost unbelievable transformation of the Chinese society in its contemporary history, narrating with an Ezra Pound-like multiple cultural perspectives and linguistic sensibilities, and leading, eventually, to overwhelming questions. The reading of Street of Eternal Happiness cannot but compel a Shanghai-born Shanghainese like me into another trip back to the city in this global age."
—Qiu Xiaolong, author of Death of a Red Heroine and Shanghai Redemption

"What a treat to follow Rob Schmitz's journey into the epic lives of people living in the shadow of China's most storied city. Their heartache and hope spill from this small corner of Shanghai to the far reaches of modern Chinese history and geography. I've walked down this street a hundred times. I'll never see it the same way again. Schmitz has found a brilliant way to illuminate the big price little people pay for the profound changes reshaping the world's most populous country."
—Ching-Ching Ni, former Los Angeles Times Shanghai Bureau Chief, current editor-in-chief of The New York Times Chinese website

"[Schmitz's] web of characters speaks to his time in the country and his exemplary journalistic abilities… Weaving a gripping narrative peppered with historical facts, he leaves readers with an intimate glimpse into a culture undergoing a complex transformation."
—Publishers Weekly

"In his deliberative, observant journalistic style, Schmitz, the China correspondent for Marketplace, chronicles his interviews and friendships with several of the shop owners on the street where he has lived for some years, plumbing their dreams and capitalist motivations… With each chapter, Schmitz delves deeply into the families' endurance through the Cultural Revolution and famine and current drive to better themselves. Probing human-interest stories that mine the heart of today's China."
—Kirkus Reviews

"[Schmitz] gives his portraits a financial underpinning, which reveals both the sparkle of a dynamic economy and the longtime corruption and ineptitude by China's central government that have ruined so many millions of lives...A brutally revealing, yet unexpectedly tender, slice of Shanghai life."
—Booklist [starred]

About the Author

ROB SCHMITZ is the Shanghai correspondent for National Public Radio. Previously he was the China correspondent for American Public Media's Marketplace. He has reported on a range of topics illustrating China's role in the global economy, including trade, politics, the environment, education, and labor. In 2012,

Schmitz exposed fabrications in Mike Daisey's account of Apple's Chinese supply chain on This American Life, and his report headlined that show's much-discussed "Retraction" episode. The work was a finalist for the 2012 Investigative Reporters and Editors Award. He has won two national Edward R. Murrow Awards and an award from the Education Writers Association for his reporting on China. Schmitz first arrived to the country in 1996 as a Peace Corps Volunteer in rural Sichuan province. This is his first book.

CHAPTER 1

???810?

STREET OF ETERNAL HAPPINESS, No. 810

CK AND THE SYSTEM

THE STREET OF ETERNAL HAPPINESS is two miles long. In the winter when its tangled trees are naked of foliage, you can see past their branches and catch a view of the city's signature skyline in the distance: The Jin Mao Tower, the Shanghai World Financial Center, and Shanghai Tower. The three giants stand within blocks of one another, each of them taller than New York City's Empire State Building.

Below, people are too busy to take in the scenery. Today will be the first day of life for babies born at the Shanghai No. 1 Maternity Hospital along the street's midsection. For several souls at Huashan Hospital's emergency room at the street's western end, it will be their last. In between there is life, in all its facets: a bearded beggar sits on the sidewalk and plays the bamboo flute, lovers step around him hand in hand, cars honk and lurch around two men spitting and thrashing over whose car hit whose, a crowd of uniformed school children gathers and stares, an old woman with a cane yells at a vendor in disgust over the price of lychees, and the rest of the street pitches forward with a constant flow of people. Life here is loud, dirty, and raw. Every inch of the street pulses with it.

On a map, the street is a tiny squiggle to the southwest of People's Square, the center point of Shanghai. My home is at the western end of that squiggle. It looks out over a canopy of leaves that appears to hover two stories above the ground most of the year. Below, the trees are the only living beings standing still. I spend mornings zigzagging around their trunks from sidewalk to pavement and then back again among pedestrians vying for space in their shade.

Few streets in China are lined with trees like these, and on the weekends the bustle of local workers is replaced by groups of tourists from other parts of China, pointing telephoto lenses down the street at rows of limbs, admiring their exotic beauty.

The French had planted the trees in the mid-19th century when European and Americans carved up the city into foreign concessions. Nearly a century later, the French were gone, but the trees remained. The Japanese

bombed Shanghai and took the city for a spell, but they eventually retreated, too, leaving the trees unharmed. Then came the Communists under Mao with revolution, class warfare, and the untimely deaths of millions. The trees endured. The street is now a capitalist one, lined with restaurants and shops. When I stroll along its sidewalk, I sometimes catch glimpses of rundown European-style homes through the cracks of closed gates, and I think about the relentless churn of history this street has witnessed. Here, an empire rose, fell and now rises again. The only constant were the trees.

I had lived on the street for nearly three years before I noticed Chen Kai's sandwich shop. It was less than a block away from my apartment, above a tiny boutique fashion store, and during the warm summer months, the leafy Plane trees obstructed the entire affair. A narrow spiral staircase took you upstairs to behold the café's floor-to-ceiling windows. On the other side of the glass, a wall of leaves swayed in the wind, hiding the bustle of Shanghai below. The place felt like a modernist glass tree house deep in the forest.

Inside, Chen – who goes by the nickname "CK" – sometimes stood hunched over a counter, his black mop of hair obscuring his eyes, skinny fingers putting the finishing touches on a sandwich or a dessert before he flipped his mane back and mechanically swiped a cup of piping hot coffee from the espresso machine for a customer. Usually, though, the shop was empty. That's okay, CK told himself, it's going to take time before business takes off. That's how dreams work. During those times, he'd slouch atop a barstool, his boyish, acne-covered face turned away from the glass wall of trees. He'd switch from one Chinese dialect to the next over the phone, making deals for his side business: selling accordions.

The idea for the sandwich shop came to him after he visited one in Chicago. It had been his only trip to the United States, and he came away impressed with what is a part of everyday life for Americans. It was like an American returning from China inspired by a noodle stand. It was random, and such an approach might have seemed reckless and naïve to Western businessmen who peruse market studies for months before crafting a business plan. But the method was typical of many small business owners I met along the street. In a city as big and rich as Shanghai, you could sell anything if you put your mind to it.

CK dreamed that one day this artsy second-floor sandwich shop would become his main livelihood. He had invested years' worth of earnings from selling accordions into this place, pooling money with a friend's to create a space they hoped would attract young musicians and artists like them.

"One day I had an idea: maybe I can get all these people together and unite them," CK told me. "I want to find people who want to free themselves from the overall system. I want friends like me; entrepreneurs who have independent ideas in art, fashion design, lots of different industries."

Ambitions like CK's made the Street of Eternal Happiness a fascinating stroll: tiny shops and cafes like his lined the narrow thoroughfare, the dreams of bright-eyed outsiders stacked up against each other, all looking to make it in the big city.

It wasn't easy. Neither CK nor his friend Max had any experience working at – much less owning – a restaurant. The two had met in 2011 at an antique camera shop in the former French Concession where CK had taken a part time job to learn more about photography. Like CK, Max had a background as an entrepreneur, and through long conversations at the camera shop each had come to appreciate the others' business savvy and approach to making and selling product.

They named the shop Your Sandwich. It was two blocks from a busy subway station, in the shadow of a 45-story skyscraper that spit out hundreds of office workers each day at noon in search of a quick lunch. But nobody could see Your Sandwich. No one ever looked up through the canopy of the Plane trees while

strolling the Street of Eternal Happiness.

So they changed the name to 2nd Floor. It was a hint to passersby that they should elevate their gaze as they passed. Below the new name, in diminutive typeface were the words: Your Sandwich. They also changed chefs, constructed a bar with mixed drinks and imported beer, and obsessively tweaked the menu. One day I dropped by CK's apartment and noticed a pile of electronic tablets stacked in the corner. "Touchscreen menus!" CK told me with a smile. Certainly, he figured, their drab, non-interactive menus had to be the reason the iGeneration wasn't eating there.

For someone who had built a profitable accordion business so quickly, CK was naïve as a food and beverage man. Lunch crowds — typically office workers struggling to pay rent — tended to opt for cheap local food, and they preferred eating cooked food aided by the distance of chopsticks. In the coming months, he adjusted to these realities. He inserted affordable lunch sets, and tweaked the sandwiches on offer. Through it all, CK didn't seem worried about his empty sandwich shop. Selling accordions was a reliable source of revenue, and he felt fortunate to manage both businesses inside a place of his creation, like a jittery squirrel stashing nuts for the winter inside his cozy tree house.

It was a sanctuary within a sanctuary. The surrounding neighborhood was founded as a refuge for outsiders. After losing the first Opium War in 1842, the Qing Dynasty court handed over parts of Shanghai and other Chinese port cities to Western colonial powers. The French occupied this section of the city and transformed what was an expanse of rice paddies into an exclusive neighborhood, establishing the French Concession in 1849. Since then, one group after another had sought shelter there. In 1860, the French allowed tens of thousands of local Chinese to take up residence to escape the Taiping rebellion, a violent peasant uprising against the dynasty. Later on, theatres, cinemas, and dance halls — frowned upon by the ever-changing Chinese leadership of the city — were allowed to flourish under French protection. Churches, temples, and mosques soon followed.

When the Communist Party took over in 1949, it vilified the foreign concessions, regarding them as humiliating symbols of foreign aggression. Missing from Party propaganda, though, was that in 1921, the twenty-eight-year-old Mao Zedong secretly met with other young radical thinkers of the time at a girls' boarding school deep within the French Concession, convening the first congress of the Chinese Communist Party there. Mao and his comrades chose the site precisely for the type of refuge it provided others. It was less likely that authorities in control of the Chinese-run part of the city would find them, arrest them, and put them on trial, a fate that would have prevented the communists from gaining ground, forever altering the course of China's history.

The French had built their neighborhood with a layout typical of an arrondissement in Paris: narrow, winding boulevards lined with trees that locals still call Faguo Wutong, "French Phoenix Trees," though they are neither French nor Phoenix Trees. Like the muddled history of Shanghai, they were much more cosmopolitan: London Plane trees, a hybrid of the Oriental Plane – native to central Asia – and the American Sycamore. The first London Plane tree was discovered in Spain.

Baron George-Eugene Haussmann had made the London Plane famous. The urban planner loved the leafy look of the tree, and he had them planted throughout Paris in the 19th century when he transformed the city from a chaotic mess of tiny streets into neighborhoods connected by wide, tree-lined avenues. Soon after, London Plane trees appeared in cities throughout the world. They still dominate the streets of Rome and Sydney, and they make up nearly a third of New York City's canopy. The London Plane's leaf, similar to a maple, is the official symbol of New York City's Parks Department.

Two out of every three trees in Shanghai is a London Plane. City planners call it “the Supertree” because of its shallow root systems and its high tolerance to smog, extreme temperatures, and pests. They’re planted between 18 to 24 feet apart and are pruned with a technique known as pollarding, which stunts their growth and promotes a dense canopy of leaves between two and three stories high, forcing the branches from opposite sides of the street to grow towards each other, intertwining to form dark green tunnels. The arched canopy offers pedestrians shade from the sweltering sun and cover from the fierce storms that frequently come rumbling off the East China Sea.

By 2010, when I moved to the neighborhood, the Parisian layout and its Plane trees remained, but the Chinese had reclaimed the street names. Rue Chevalier and Route Garnier had become Jianguo Lu and Dongping Lu - Build the Nation and Eastern Peace Roads. Other streets once commemorating notable dead Frenchmen had transformed into Rich People Road, Famous People Road, and Lucky Gold Road. On walks through my new neighborhood, I practiced my Chinese by reading their auspicious sounding names. There was ???(Peaceful Happiness Road), ???(Eternally Fortunate Road), and ???(Winding Peace Road). I lived on what was perhaps the most auspiciously named one of all:???– literally “Long Happiness Road,” which I took to calling the more eloquent-sounding “Street of Eternal Happiness.”

When locals read the names of these streets, though, eloquence and auspiciousness aren’t the first things that come to mind. The street south of my apartment, Anfu (Peaceful Happiness), is a small city in Jiangxi province famous for processing pig parts for ham. Maoming Lu, Famous People Road, is a thriving Cantonese port city. And Changle Lu, my own Street of Eternal Happiness, is the name of a coastal town in Fujian province from which Ming Dynasty explorer Zheng He had set sail to explore much of Asia. When the Chinese renamed these French streets, those running south to north had been named after Chinese provinces or provincial capitals, while streets running east to west were named after prominent Chinese cities of the time, which themselves had been named for countless forms of auspiciousness so many dynasties ago.

Whenever I pedal my bike along the Street of Eternal Happiness, I need all the luck I can get. The narrow street is one of the neighborhood’s few two-way thoroughfares. Taxis often use it to escape the traffic of the nearby expressway, but they must contend with droves of electric motor scooters that seem to pour into every open space. Scooter drivers often barrel down the wrong side of the road in packs against oncoming traffic, dispersing just in time to make way for cars cutting through the hordes, horns blaring, headlights flashing. Survival is the rule of the road, and the right-of-way cedes to the biggest, most aggressive vehicles. City buses sit at the top of the food chain. They command respect from scooter and car drivers who pull over to make way for the behemoths, a survival instinct akin to diving out of the way of a rampaging elephant. All this activity leaves bicyclists to fend for themselves near the curbs or on the sidewalks, where riders often take out their frustrations by plowing through pedestrian traffic.

I choose to ride with the electric scooters. I can usually pedal my bike fast enough to keep up with them, and their riding habits –traveling as an integrated unit like a peloton in the Tour de France – helps protect me. Each morning’s ride requires a constant awareness of my surroundings. The fact that most everyone else is in the same state of mind means that –despite the appearance of vehicular pandemonium – many drivers possess a conditioned athlete’s mental focus, behaving according to the unspoken rules of the road. They move in concert with one another as they speed and swerve down the Street of Eternal Happiness, a system disguised as chaos.

On a cold day in the winter of 2012 I ascended 2nd Floor Your Sandwich’s spiral stairway to warm up with a cup a coffee in a corner booth. The branches of the Plane trees lining the Street of Eternal Happiness were nude, brittle chopsticks, pointing in all directions, making scraping sounds across the second

floor windows whenever a freezing wind came swirling down the street.

On a shelf in the middle of the sunny dining room sat CK's accordion, a massive black instrument with Polverini engraved across the front in elegant cursive. The shop was empty that day, so CK heaved it off the shelf, slumped into a booth bathed in the morning sunlight, bowed his head, and pressed the air release button, slowly opening the bellows. The instrument exhaled, a sigh so deep it seemed to be coming from CK himself. The day before, his head chef had quit in a fury, taking half the wait staff with him. If any customers arrived today, CK and his partner Max were on their own.

He paused for a moment, and then launched into a furious, fast-paced ballad, his fingers racing across the keyboard. He closed his eyes as the melody took shape, expanding and contracting the instrument with a fluid motion, his fingers moving so quickly they seemed to have minds of their own. It was a patriotic song from his childhood, and as his head bobbed back and forth, memories suddenly came to him, driving the song forward, faster and faster.

CK was eleven years old when it dawned on him: killing himself wasn't going to be easy. For two straight months, he had explored his options each day after school. Swallowing sleeping pills should be the most comfortable way to do it, he thought, but the pharmacist wouldn't sell them to him. "You're too young," she said. Walking off the roof of his family's apartment building was a possibility. Nah, he concluded: too painful. "I realized I didn't have the courage to jump," he said.

There was another problem. He rarely had a moment alone. The boy was an only child with overbearing parents and a nai nai – his maternal grandma – who left his side only when he used the toilet. Each day he ate a porridge breakfast seated inches from them. At the school down the dirt road from his family's rural home, teachers took over. After that, it was back home with nai nai and his parents for homework, music lessons and a vegetables-and-rice dinner. He couldn't even steal a minute alone at night in his bedroom: nai nai slept on a thin bamboo-matted bed beside him.

One afternoon while his father was writing at his desk, CK took one final, determined inventory of his family's cold, bare apartment. Outside, the air was thick with the exhaust of neighboring chemical and mining equipment factories. He walked through the apartment, quietly foraging for household objects with the most promising life-ending potential. His quest ended in the only room where he had a reasonable excuse to be alone: the bathroom. He settled on a straightedge razor he discovered in his father's shaving kit. One night before turning in, he slipped the folded razor into his pajamas pocket.

It was a chilly autumn evening. Moonlight filled the room. The night was still, save for nai nai's steady breathing and the occasional train in the distance. It announced itself with a soft, sustained horn blast, followed by the soothing rumble of freight rolling along track before dissipating into the quiet night. As he waited for his grandmother to fade into deep sleep, CK thought about his family.

From an early age, the boy had listened to his father talk about "the system." He was never sure what the words actually meant, but he could usually predict when his father was about to utter them. His father had a way of pausing before he said the words, pronouncing the phrase slowly and carefully, making the words stand apart from the rest of a sentence so the boy would take note.

"You see, Kai Kai, you just can't fight ….the system." The phrase was imprinted onto the boy's memory in italics.

After a difficult day at work, his father would return home and sit his son down, a ready audience for his rants. The system didn't allow him to choose his career. The system didn't reward intelligence. The system discouraged individual talent. You could never get ahead in the system. "Zhongguode guoqing buhao!" –"China's state of affairs is terrible!" his father would rage.

"My father thought he was an intellectual," CK said. "He wasn't happy with his job and the fact that he didn't choose what he wanted to be. He knew he was smarter than others. He wanted to succeed based on his talents, but he couldn't. The system wouldn't allow it. He didn't think my mother was very smart, and that frustrated him, too. He didn't like his colleagues at work, and he hated China."

When CK tried to ask questions, his father shushed him, continuing his tirade. Eventually, CK felt it made little sense to talk in a home where no one listened. So he stopped talking altogether.

CK didn't have any brothers or sisters. He was born in 1981, two years after the birth of China's one-child policy. His shared living quarters with his mother, father, and nai nai were on the top floor of a rundown four-story brick building assigned to them by the city railway bureau, his grandmother's work unit. The stairwells were littered with garbage. CK's father employed the system's propaganda of the day – Leader Deng Xiaoping's "Four Modernizations" campaign and President Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" slogan – to describe the place. "He called it a 'three no-managements' area: nobody cleaned it, nobody administered it, and nobody cared about it."

The same could be said for the city where CK grew up. Historically, Hengyang, as far from Shanghai as New York is from Chicago, was a place to avoid. The city in the central province of Hunan made brief appearances in Chinese records beginning 1,400 years ago, when Tang Dynasty emperor Gaozong punished a rebellious assistant by banishing him to administer the city. Later, emperors used the city again and again as punishment for other dodgy high-ranking court officials, all sent to govern a far-flung city on the edge of the empire, where they were seldom heard from again.

Modern times hadn't been much better for the people of Hengyang. On a freight rail map of China, the north-south and east-west lines crisscross at Hengyang, creating an X in the heart of the country. It's one of the region's most important centers of heavy industry. Chemical factories abound, as do coal, lead, and zinc mines. The air was polluted and rancid, but there were jobs: CK's grandmother worked at the railway bureau, his mother at a phosphate fertilizer factory, and his father at the Hengyang City Number Two Construction Company.

CK's parents were born in the early 1950s alongside the birth of Communist China. Their generation grew up with the Party's schizophrenic campaigns, revolutions, and counterrevolutions that left tens of millions dead, persecuted, and imprisoned. There was rarely a moment of calm. Survival depended on a keen ability to adapt to an ever-changing political environment, understanding that, like a swimmer caught in a riptide, you must resist the urge to swim against a much stronger force. There was always the possibility of patiently maneuvering your way to safety, but you first had to cede control to the system.

As teenagers, CK's parents were sent to the countryside to farm for several years, a typical fate for city kids under the policies of Chinese leader Mao Zedong. Mao dreamed of a China where urbanites worked alongside farmers in a proletariat utopia; when he died in 1976, his dreams went with him. Most "sent-down youth" promptly dropped their hoes and returned home to their families. Upon their arrival, the Party stepped in again, assigning them jobs at local state-owned enterprises. By the time they turned thirty, CK's parents hadn't yet made a single career decision for themselves.

“Would you like to draw or play the violin?” CK’s parents asked him one day in 1985. The three sat at the dinner table, the adults searching the boy’s face for an answer. His father had always aspired to be a writer or a musician. He was convinced that had he mastered an artistic skill as a boy, he might have been able to wrest some control from the system that had robbed him of his choice in how he made a living. Pushing his son into the arts would serve as a safety net in case China’s economy took another treacherous turn someday, he reasoned.

CK’s parents had whittled the boy’s choices down to skills other family members had shown talent for. The boy’s grandmother was a gifted illustrator. His father had happened upon an erhu – a two-stringed traditional Chinese instrument vaguely similar to the violin – in the garbage one day, and had taught himself how to play. The two choices were clear.

“Draw or play the violin,” his father demanded as he stared at his son. The boy thought for a moment.

“Draw,” he replied.

His parents turned away from him, whispering to each other, before turning back to him. “You will play the violin,” announced his father.

CK had just turned four.

CK’s lessons started when his family shelled out half a year’s salary for a new violin. They ended a couple of years later when the government launched a series of reforms that privatized parts of China’s economy. This put employees at the most inefficient state-owned enterprises, such as Hengyang City Number Two Construction Company, on the chopping block. CK’s father lost his job, and with that went money for the violin teacher. The family scrambled for an alternative, and someone remembered that an uncle owned an accordion. A new instrument was chosen. CK’s uncle taught the boy the basics for half a year until one night when an electrical fire burned down the government-owned shop where the man worked. CK’s uncle was the manager, so the government held him responsible and sent him to prison.

“It wasn’t his fault,” CK’s father said about the incident, “It was the system’s fault.”

CK’s father, who had no idea how to play the accordion but plenty of time to learn, took over as instructor. It didn’t take long for CK’s knowledge to surpass his father’s, and practice became a subtle power reversal as son began to instruct father. Lessons turned tense at unpredictable moments, with CK’s father screaming and slapping his son for any perceived misstep.

CK’s father was insecure, temperamental, and so scrawny he looked feminine. His mother was calm and confident, with the strong hands of a peasant. The Chinese say such characteristics often sprung from childhood. CK’s father grew up in the city, while his mother was raised on the shores of Dongting Lake in the Hunan countryside. She seemed to have absorbed the resolute stillness of its serene waters. “She was somehow more masculine,” CK said. “She demanded self-esteem and independence.”

CK’s father hit his mother, too. CK sometimes heard screaming from their bedroom at night. He usually noticed a spattering of purple bruises on his mother’s face and arms at breakfast the next morning. As he got older, the boy would try to step in between his parents at the height of these arguments. “I would try to protect her, but he was too fast,” he said.

CK spoke of his father not with bitterness, but with the resignation that the Chinese often feel towards people

they despise yet also love out of duty. It wasn't his father's fault, he says, nor was it the system's. It was his father's spleen.

The Chinese believe the spleen is the receptacle for a person's temperament and willpower. This belief is immortalized in the Chinese character for spleen: ?, or pi. Add in the Chinese character for energy, ?, qi, and together piqi — literally "spleen energy" — comes to mean "temperament" in Mandarin. Many Chinese believe that any damage to the spleen threatens your piqi, making you unable to control your emotions. When CK's father was a boy, he was punched so hard in a fistfight that his spleen ruptured. CK said once his dad had injured his spleen, his piqi had been lost forever.

It was the spring of 1989. CK was eight, too young to understand the news of student protests and hunger strikes from Beijing. There were whispers of democracy and the possible end of one-party rule in China. Hundreds of miles away in Tian'anmen Square, protesters had erected a white statue, 'The Goddess of Democracy,' that towered over a sea of students. She held aloft a torch with both hands and her gaze was fixed on the oversized portrait of Mao hanging at the entrance to the Forbidden City, and, beyond that, to China's current patriarchs ruling the country from inside their guarded compound, like a mother protecting her children from the tyranny of their father. But the students had swiftly assembled the goddess from metal, foam, and papier-mâché in just four days, and they were pitting it against a civilization that had lasted millennia. It was hardly a surprise when China's patriarchs prevailed, employing their brute strength to kill thousands, silencing the discussion about the system that would endure.

In the aftermath of the Tian'anmen crackdown, CK's father ratcheted up his politically inspired rants. CK, again, was forced to play audience. "I was a kid and I didn't understand much of it," he told me, "I just felt depressed. I wanted to be alone. I didn't want to be stuck at home, left to face my father."

Soon after, CK's mother sought an audience of her own. She sat him down and delivered some news. "Ma's going to be staying somewhere else from now on," she told him. "How about every Wednesday or Thursday I come back here to see you?"

At the time, divorce was uncommon in China. Marital strife was typically worked out behind closed doors, moderated by older generations to ensure the family unit — the backbone of Chinese culture — remained unbroken. CK's mind raced. His classmates would soon find out. His teachers would know. He would have to live alone with his father, with only his grandmother as buffer for his rants and tirades. CK's father stepped into the room. Would his father blame his mother's departure on the system too? The boy wondered. Family, he concluded, was the only system that mattered.

"I want to go live with mom," CK announced.

His father didn't pause. "It's been decided," he said. "You'll live with me."

The first song CK learned on the accordion was Caoyuan Gechang Mao Zhuxi, or "The Grasslands Sing for Chairman Mao." CK obediently mastered the song, playing the refrain over and over like a machine under the stern watch of his father, who was always ready to strike the boy at any hint of attitude. Between lessons, his father would complain. "Your mother is no good," his father told him, "how could she leave us?"

At school, it seemed everyone had learned about his parents' separation. His classmates asked questions, wondering what it was like to have parents who lived apart. His teachers used the news to embarrass him in front of other students when he wasn't paying attention in class. CK began to feel anxious. He yearned to isolate himself from his classmates and his family –to become chouli – detached. "The only

quiet time to myself that I had was my walk between home and school. I was basically walking from one source of pressure to the other."

CK lay awake that autumn evening of his 11th year, staring at the ceiling, far from chouli as nai nai's breathing grew deeper. He felt the weight of the folded straightedge razor pressing lightly on his thigh through his pajamas pocket. When he was certain nai nai was asleep, he sat up in bed and withdrew the razor from his pocket. He unfolded it. He took a breath. Holding the handle firmly in his right hand, he pressed the blade to the inside of his left wrist.

He penetrated skin, cutting into flesh. He watched as blood rose to the surface. He began making swift cutting motions, pressing left to right again and again. He was bleeding, but there was no gushing blood. He switched hands and tried the other wrist. The family matriarch continued to doze peacefully beside him. His blood seeped into his pajamas, but the wounds kept clotting. It wasn't the geyser he'd expected. He couldn't find a vein. And his wrists began to hurt. "I continued to cut, but it was useless. I couldn't see well, and my wrists were so thick," CK told me.

CK slowly folded up the razor and returned it to the pocket of his bloodstained pajamas. This is just too difficult, he thought to himself before falling asleep.

The bellows of the accordion expanded and compressed like the lungs of a runner in mid-sprint. The fingers of CK's right hand frantically raced up and down the keyboard, staccato bursts of treble notes trickling over a shifting landscape of bass controlled with a swift mechanical reflex of his left fingers, the two sides chasing each other. CK's eyes were still closed in concentration. A freezing wind blew down the Street of Eternal Happiness, sending the branches outside clattering against the windows of the shop. All appeared to be in harmony, but then CK hit a wrong note. Then two. He opened his eyes, looked at me, and laughed, giving up.

"Wow. What was that?" I asked him.

"Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy," he said, still laughing.

The song was a revolutionary epic that opened one of eight Beijing operas allowed during Mao's Cultural Revolution. It borrowed heavily from Water Margin, a 14th century Chinese novel known as one of the four classics of Chinese literature. Party leaders turned the novel's tales into musical propaganda – a portrayal of a proletariat hero to rouse the masses in support of the system.

CK shook his head, embarrassed he had forgotten how to play a song he had spent his childhood practicing.

"I used to play traditional Chinese songs, but I later discovered I didn't like to play them," CK told me, wiping sweat off his forehead to reveal two bright, oval brown eyes that seemed larger than they were because of his thin face. "I preferred something different. It took me a while to realize I can play my own songs."

With that, CK began playing one: a slow, sad melody that conjured up a cold, lonely street in Paris. Or Shanghai.

CK's first job interview after college was at Pearl River Piano, China's largest accordion manufacturer. All the practice as a child had finally paid off. After the encounter with his father's razor blade, he'd come to accept the idea that he would spend the remainder of his teenage years living under his father's roof. So he decided to focus on what would come after. He worked hard in school, practiced the accordion, and earned a spot at a few hundred miles from home at a college in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou, where he studied music. His Pearl River interviewer was impressed that he played the accordion, and within minutes CK found himself in the president's office. Pearl River's president handed him an accordion and removed his own from a case next to his desk. The two played a duet together, and when the president asked CK to play a solo, he thought about it carefully.

"I picked a very complicated piece: Liszt's 'La Campanella.' I got the job."

CK was assigned a position in the company's accordion sales and marketing department. For the first time in his life, CK's father was proud of him. Pearl River was one of a handful of state-owned musical instrument makers that had survived the country's ambitious market reforms. Sales were picking up, thanks to China's rising consumer class. CK would receive a competitive salary, health benefits, and a generous state pension. But the work was mind numbing. "Each day you'd work two or three hours and then you'd run out of things to do, so you'd just sit around chatting, reading the newspaper," CK said. "Others used the time to cultivate relationships with each other, but I didn't see the point of that."

Instead, CK spent his free time looking for a more interesting job. After a quick search, he found one: Polverini, an Italian accordion maker, had opened a tiny factory a dozen miles west in the suburbs of Shanghai. The company sought an assistant to liaise between its Italian factory manager and its Chinese workers.

Polverini's accordions were world-class – Pearl River accordions seemed like plastic toys in comparison. The job would be technically challenging: Kai would have to learn every step in the manufacturing process so that he could help teach low-skilled assembly line workers how to do it.

CK read the job posting over and over.

"It sounded interesting," CK told me. "I could finally learn something."

When CK called home to say he found a new job outside the state system, his father was livid. "You can't just walk away from the iron rice bowl!" his dad screamed over the phone. His new job failed to deliver a step up in pay, and he'd also lose the state benefits package he'd gotten at Pearl River.

"Suddenly, my dad felt unsafe," CK said, "He was extremely angry with me. He kept repeating the same thing: 'When you work for the state, your future is unlimited!'"

In the early 2000s, though, that was no longer true. CK's father still hadn't found a job since he was laid off from Hengyang City Number Two Construction Company. At forty-seven, CK's mother was pressured into early retirement after Hengyang Chemical Factory's orders were decimated by new competition from China's nascent private sector. In 2001, China had entered the World Trade Organization, and cushy jobs at state-owned enterprises were becoming rare. Capitalism was the new norm. CK began to feel that his parents, exhausted from a lifetime of dependency on the state, were now adrift in these new surroundings, and each had begun looking to him for financial stability.

CK explained his decision patiently. He wasn't learning anything by watching others socialize at Pearl River. At Polverini he'd at last acquire the skills to develop himself and his individual talents. This is something you should be able to relate to, he told his father gently.

The system had turned out exactly as CK's father had explained it to him as a boy: it was there to restrain and control you, rather than to enable you to learn and grow. But as his father got older, he began to realize the importance of money, and the stability that the system provided. "When I started working at Pearl River, he suddenly embraced the system. I didn't know how to talk to him about escaping it."

The private sector may have helped fuel China's remarkable economic growth, but jobs there seemed risky to the one-child generation. Most Chinese I knew in their twenties and thirties still longed for jobs in a big state-owned firm. Such jobs were seen as recession-proof, and their benefits were second-to-none. In 2013, more than two-thirds of Chinese college graduates couldn't find a job that paid more than $300 a month – less than what a typical factory worker makes. Part of the problem was an oversupply of labor. The Chinese university system had quadrupled in size in the past decade, and it was producing far too many graduates for the country's marketplace to absorb. The jobs available – construction or manufacturing – were not what graduates wanted, and the work they envisioned wasn't yet available in an economy that was still in an early stage of development.

CK took the job with Polverini and left for Shanghai. His new roommate – a middle-aged Italian engineer – also happened to be his new boss. The two shared a passion for tinkering. As boys, each had spent afternoons taking things apart and piecing them back together, and now they would get paid to do it. At Polverini's cramped factory on the outskirts of Shanghai, their mission was to modify the brand's classic accordion to bring its price down. Chinese accordion players tend to either drop thousands of dollars on an expensive Italian instrument, or penny-pinch to buy the cheapest Chinese brand they could find. An accordion between the two price points did not yet exist. CK's mission was an affordable Polverini, tailored for China's rising middle class.

CK spent months on the assembly line, learning about every part of the instrument. In Italy, his boss designed Ferraris. An accordion was an even more complicated machine, he told CK.

"An accordion is very small, and you have more than three thousand tiny parts inside of it, so a millimeter misstep is a huge mistake," CK explained. "You must have a good understanding of chemicals, wood, steel, how they interact inside the machine, and the sounds they create."

Within a year at Polverini, CK had mastered every step. In the years to come, CK's boss encouraged him to learn more, and CK became a jack-of-all-trades. "I was a manager, a translator, a supply chain point person, a customer service agent, I made the prototypes, I was in charge of sound QC, and by the end, I could build an accordion from scratch."

Within four years, CK went from making $400 a month to $4000, jumping from the average salary in China to that in the United States. For the first time, Shanghai – with its fancy cars, scenic tree-lined boulevards and international appeal – began to feel like home.

"Can you play something else?" I asked.

It was 11 o'clock in the morning and CK had been playing for over half an hour. 2nd Floor Your Sandwich had been empty all morning. The lunch hour was approaching though, and soon the tower across the street would spew hundreds of hungry office workers onto the sidewalks of the Street of Eternal Happiness. CK checked the clock, paused, and then nodded, his hands expanding the instrument, letting it breathe.

"I wrote this for a girl I once loved. It's called '2-27.' That's the date we met."

It began with a sustained note in the minor key, and then another, and another, haunting tones patiently repeating like the deep breaths of someone fast asleep. Then, a playful melody arose, unpolished at parts, like a boy strolling down the street without a care in the world, whistling to himself.

CK closed his eyes again, and I stole a glance at his wrists. The wounds of his childhood had long since healed. His music filled his shop. And for the moment, the system disappeared.

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“Hopes and struggles rise to the surface in this intimate portrait of modern China.”
—NationalGeographic.com

“This beautifully conceived and written book conveys the joys, the tragedies, the comedy, and the vivid humanity of modern China. No one will talk about ‘China's rise’ or ‘the China model’ in the same way after reading it, and years from now people will turn to this book to understand the China of this era.”
—James Fallows, author of China Airborne and Postcards from Tomorrow Square

“Street of Eternal Happiness is a marvel of place-based reporting. This single road illuminates the complexities, contradictions, and funny wonder of today’s China. This book is really about family—the most eternal force on any street in the country.”
—Peter Hessler, author of River Town, Oracle Bones, and Country Driving

“Rob Schmitz has given us a treasure: a patient portrait of an impatient country, a China that is utterly true to life in its beauty and heartache, tenderness and greed. His story is told in real lives that are, like Shanghai itself, modern and imperfect, romantic and ruthlessly practical. Reading this is as close as most people will

come to living there."
—Evan Osnos, National Book Award winning author of Age of Ambition

"Schmitz peels back the layers of a single street to discover ambition, reinvention, faith, corruption, murder, and heartbreak. In this intimate and revealing book, a two-mile stretch of road embodies the dreams and dramas of modern China."
—Leslie T. Chang, author of Factory Girls

"Rob Schmitz is a master storyteller who leads his readers into the heart and history of modern China. Street of Eternal Happiness is, in turn, funny, moving, tragic and—ultimately—emotionally satisfying. Nobody can pretend to understand Shanghai and contemporary China without reading it."
—Adam Minter, author of Junkyard Planet

"At last, an intimate look at daily life in contemporary, convivial Shanghai. All great cities have a great book that captures their rise or fall; Street of Eternal Happiness is Shanghai's."
—Michael Meyer, author of In Manchuria and The Last Days of Old Beijing

"A kaleidoscope of Chinese history, from famine and Cultural Revolution to one-child policy. Above all, these tales illustrate the perils and hopes of living the Chinese Dream, written with penetrating insight and charming fluidity. A delight."
—Mei Fong, Pulitzer Prize winner for International Reporting and author of One Child

"For nearly two centuries Shanghai has been a city that offered both Chinese and foreigners the possibility of success, wealth, and status. Rob Schmitz paints a vivid canvas of the city from the perspective of one big city street that neatly encapsulates the myriad aspirations of one country and its people. The Street of Eternal Happiness: a thoroughfare of aspirations and dreams, hard earned successes and sadly thwarted hopes where Schmitz encounters the ghosts of China's troubled past, the hard working yet wistful dreamers of today, and those whose sights and visions are firmly fixed on China's, and their own, future."
—Paul French, author of Midnight in Peking and Fat China

"Rob Schmitz has crafted a deeply empathetic marvel of a book. Alternately poignant and humorous, it has much to offer anyone who has been to Shanghai, thought about going there but not made it yet, or simply wants to get a better feel for the rhythms of life in twenty-first century China."
—Jeffrey Wasserstrom, editor of the Oxford Illustrated History of Modern China and author of China in the 21st Century

"Authentic, boisterous, convincing, dynamic, energizing, the street stretching on, each window a non-fictional tale more fantastic than the fictional in the dramatic, almost unbelievable transformation of the Chinese society in its contemporary history, narrating with an Ezra Pound-like multiple cultural perspectives and linguistic sensibilities, and leading, eventually, to overwhelming questions. The reading of Street of Eternal Happiness cannot but compel a Shanghai-born Shanghainese like me into another trip back to the city in this global age."
—Qiu Xiaolong, author of Death of a Red Heroine and Shanghai Redemption

"What a treat to follow Rob Schmitz's journey into the epic lives of people living in the shadow of China's most storied city. Their heartache and hope spill from this small corner of Shanghai to the far reaches of modern Chinese history and geography. I've walked down this street a hundred times. I'll never see it the same way again. Schmitz has found a brilliant way to illuminate the big price little people pay for the profound changes reshaping the world's most populous country."

—Ching-Ching Ni, former Los Angeles Times Shanghai Bureau Chief, current editor-in-chief of The New York Times Chinese website

“[Schmitz’s] web of characters speaks to his time in the country and his exemplary journalistic abilities… Weaving a gripping narrative peppered with historical facts, he leaves readers with an intimate glimpse into a culture undergoing a complex transformation.”
—Publishers Weekly

“In his deliberative, observant journalistic style, Schmitz, the China correspondent for Marketplace, chronicles his interviews and friendships with several of the shop owners on the street where he has lived for some years, plumbing their dreams and capitalist motivations… With each chapter, Schmitz delves deeply into the families’ endurance through the Cultural Revolution and famine and current drive to better themselves. Probing human-interest stories that mine the heart of today's China.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“[Schmitz] gives his portraits a financial underpinning, which reveals both the sparkle of a dynamic economy and the longtime corruption and ineptitude by China’s central government that have ruined so many millions of lives...A brutally revealing, yet unexpectedly tender, slice of Shanghai life.”
—Booklist [starred]

About the Author

ROB SCHMITZ is the Shanghai correspondent for National Public Radio. Previously he was the China correspondent for American Public Media's Marketplace. He has reported on a range of topics illustrating China's role in the global economy, including trade, politics, the environment, education, and labor. In 2012, Schmitz exposed fabrications in Mike Daisey's account of Apple's Chinese supply chain on This American Life, and his report headlined that show's much-discussed "Retraction" episode. The work was a finalist for the 2012 Investigative Reporters and Editors Award. He has won two national Edward R. Murrow Awards and an award from the Education Writers Association for his reporting on China. Schmitz first arrived to the country in 1996 as a Peace Corps Volunteer in rural Sichuan province. This is his first book.

This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof

CHAPTER 1

???810?

STREET OF ETERNAL HAPPINESS, No. 810

CK AND THE SYSTEM

THE STREET OF ETERNAL HAPPINESS is two miles long. In the winter when its tangled trees are naked

of foliage, you can see past their branches and catch a view of the city's signature skyline in the distance: The Jin Mao Tower, the Shanghai World Financial Center, and Shanghai Tower. The three giants stand within blocks of one another, each of them taller than New York City's Empire State Building.

Below, people are too busy to take in the scenery. Today will be the first day of life for babies born at the Shanghai No. 1 Maternity Hospital along the street's midsection. For several souls at Huashan Hospital's emergency room at the street's western end, it will be their last. In between there is life, in all its facets: a bearded beggar sits on the sidewalk and plays the bamboo flute, lovers step around him hand in hand, cars honk and lurch around two men spitting and thrashing over whose car hit whose, a crowd of uniformed school children gathers and stares, an old woman with a cane yells at a vendor in disgust over the price of lychees, and the rest of the street pitches forward with a constant flow of people. Life here is loud, dirty, and raw. Every inch of the street pulses with it.

On a map, the street is a tiny squiggle to the southwest of People's Square, the center point of Shanghai. My home is at the western end of that squiggle. It looks out over a canopy of leaves that appears to hover two stories above the ground most of the year. Below, the trees are the only living beings standing still. I spend mornings zigzagging around their trunks from sidewalk to pavement and then back again among pedestrians vying for space in their shade.

Few streets in China are lined with trees like these, and on the weekends the bustle of local workers is replaced by groups of tourists from other parts of China, pointing telephoto lenses down the street at rows of limbs, admiring their exotic beauty.

The French had planted the trees in the mid-19th century when European and Americans carved up the city into foreign concessions. Nearly a century later, the French were gone, but the trees remained. The Japanese bombed Shanghai and took the city for a spell, but they eventually retreated, too, leaving the trees unharmed. Then came the Communists under Mao with revolution, class warfare, and the untimely deaths of millions. The trees endured. The street is now a capitalist one, lined with restaurants and shops. When I stroll along its sidewalk, I sometimes catch glimpses of rundown European-style homes through the cracks of closed gates, and I think about the relentless churn of history this street has witnessed. Here, an empire rose, fell and now rises again. The only constant were the trees.

I had lived on the street for nearly three years before I noticed Chen Kai's sandwich shop. It was less than a block away from my apartment, above a tiny boutique fashion store, and during the warm summer months, the leafy Plane trees obstructed the entire affair. A narrow spiral staircase took you upstairs to behold the café's floor-to-ceiling windows. On the other side of the glass, a wall of leaves swayed in the wind, hiding the bustle of Shanghai below. The place felt like a modernist glass tree house deep in the forest.

Inside, Chen – who goes by the nickname "CK" – sometimes stood hunched over a counter, his black mop of hair obscuring his eyes, skinny fingers putting the finishing touches on a sandwich or a dessert before he flipped his mane back and mechanically swiped a cup of piping hot coffee from the espresso machine for a customer. Usually, though, the shop was empty. That's okay, CK told himself, it's going to take time before business takes off. That's how dreams work. During those times, he'd slouch atop a barstool, his boyish, acne-covered face turned away from the glass wall of trees. He'd switch from one Chinese dialect to the next over the phone, making deals for his side business: selling accordions.

The idea for the sandwich shop came to him after he visited one in Chicago. It had been his only trip to the United States, and he came away impressed with what is a part of everyday life for Americans. It was like an American returning from China inspired by a noodle stand. It was random, and such an approach might have

seemed reckless and naïve to Western businessmen who peruse market studies for months before crafting a business plan. But the method was typical of many small business owners I met along the street. In a city as big and rich as Shanghai, you could sell anything if you put your mind to it.

CK dreamed that one day this artsy second-floor sandwich shop would become his main livelihood. He had invested years' worth of earnings from selling accordions into this place, pooling money with a friend's to create a space they hoped would attract young musicians and artists like them.

"One day I had an idea: maybe I can get all these people together and unite them," CK told me. "I want to find people who want to free themselves from the overall system. I want friends like me; entrepreneurs who have independent ideas in art, fashion design, lots of different industries."

Ambitions like CK's made the Street of Eternal Happiness a fascinating stroll: tiny shops and cafes like his lined the narrow thoroughfare, the dreams of bright-eyed outsiders stacked up against each other, all looking to make it in the big city.

It wasn't easy. Neither CK nor his friend Max had any experience working at – much less owning – a restaurant. The two had met in 2011 at an antique camera shop in the former French Concession where CK had taken a part time job to learn more about photography. Like CK, Max had a background as an entrepreneur, and through long conversations at the camera shop each had come to appreciate the others' business savvy and approach to making and selling product.

They named the shop Your Sandwich. It was two blocks from a busy subway station, in the shadow of a 45-story skyscraper that spit out hundreds of office workers each day at noon in search of a quick lunch. But nobody could see Your Sandwich. No one ever looked up through the canopy of the Plane trees while strolling the Street of Eternal Happiness.

So they changed the name to 2nd Floor. It was a hint to passersby that they should elevate their gaze as they passed. Below the new name, in diminutive typeface were the words: Your Sandwich. They also changed chefs, constructed a bar with mixed drinks and imported beer, and obsessively tweaked the menu. One day I dropped by CK's apartment and noticed a pile of electronic tablets stacked in the corner. "Touchscreen menus!" CK told me with a smile. Certainly, he figured, their drab, non-interactive menus had to be the reason the iGeneration wasn't eating there.

For someone who had built a profitable accordion business so quickly, CK was naïve as a food and beverage man. Lunch crowds — typically office workers struggling to pay rent — tended to opt for cheap local food, and they preferred eating cooked food aided by the distance of chopsticks. In the coming months, he adjusted to these realities. He inserted affordable lunch sets, and tweaked the sandwiches on offer. Through it all, CK didn't seem worried about his empty sandwich shop. Selling accordions was a reliable source of revenue, and he felt fortunate to manage both businesses inside a place of his creation, like a jittery squirrel stashing nuts for the winter inside his cozy tree house.

It was a sanctuary within a sanctuary. The surrounding neighborhood was founded as a refuge for outsiders. After losing the first Opium War in 1842, the Qing Dynasty court handed over parts of Shanghai and other Chinese port cities to Western colonial powers. The French occupied this section of the city and transformed what was an expanse of rice paddies into an exclusive neighborhood, establishing the French Concession in 1849. Since then, one group after another had sought shelter there. In 1860, the French allowed tens of thousands of local Chinese to take up residence to escape the Taiping rebellion, a violent peasant uprising against the dynasty. Later on, theatres, cinemas, and dance halls — frowned upon by the ever-changing

Chinese leadership of the city — were allowed to flourish under French protection. Churches, temples, and mosques soon followed.

When the Communist Party took over in 1949, it vilified the foreign concessions, regarding them as humiliating symbols of foreign aggression. Missing from Party propaganda, though, was that in 1921, the twenty-eight-year-old Mao Zedong secretly met with other young radical thinkers of the time at a girls' boarding school deep within the French Concession, convening the first congress of the Chinese Communist Party there. Mao and his comrades chose the site precisely for the type of refuge it provided others. It was less likely that authorities in control of the Chinese-run part of the city would find them, arrest them, and put them on trial, a fate that would have prevented the communists from gaining ground, forever altering the course of China's history.

The French had built their neighborhood with a layout typical of an arrondissement in Paris: narrow, winding boulevards lined with trees that locals still call Faguo Wutong, "French Phoenix Trees," though they are neither French nor Phoenix Trees. Like the muddled history of Shanghai, they were much more cosmopolitan: London Plane trees, a hybrid of the Oriental Plane – native to central Asia – and the American Sycamore. The first London Plane tree was discovered in Spain.

Baron George-Eugene Haussmann had made the London Plane famous. The urban planner loved the leafy look of the tree, and he had them planted throughout Paris in the 19th century when he transformed the city from a chaotic mess of tiny streets into neighborhoods connected by wide, tree-lined avenues. Soon after, London Plane trees appeared in cities throughout the world. They still dominate the streets of Rome and Sydney, and they make up nearly a third of New York City's canopy. The London Plane's leaf, similar to a maple, is the official symbol of New York City's Parks Department.

Two out of every three trees in Shanghai is a London Plane. City planners call it "the Supertree" because of its shallow root systems and its high tolerance to smog, extreme temperatures, and pests. They're planted between 18 to 24 feet apart and are pruned with a technique known as pollarding, which stunts their growth and promotes a dense canopy of leaves between two and three stories high, forcing the branches from opposite sides of the street to grow towards each other, intertwining to form dark green tunnels. The arched canopy offers pedestrians shade from the sweltering sun and cover from the fierce storms that frequently come rumbling off the East China Sea.

By 2010, when I moved to the neighborhood, the Parisian layout and its Plane trees remained, but the Chinese had reclaimed the street names. Rue Chevalier and Route Garnier had become Jianguo Lu and Dongping Lu - Build the Nation and Eastern Peace Roads. Other streets once commemorating notable dead Frenchmen had transformed into Rich People Road, Famous People Road, and Lucky Gold Road. On walks through my new neighborhood, I practiced my Chinese by reading their auspicious sounding names. There was ???(Peaceful Happiness Road), ???(Eternally Fortunate Road), and ???(Winding Peace Road). I lived on what was perhaps the most auspiciously named one of all:???– literally "Long Happiness Road," which I took to calling the more eloquent-sounding "Street of Eternal Happiness."

When locals read the names of these streets, though, eloquence and auspiciousness aren't the first things that come to mind. The street south of my apartment, Anfu (Peaceful Happiness), is a small city in Jiangxi province famous for processing pig parts for ham. Maoming Lu, Famous People Road, is a thriving Cantonese port city. And Changle Lu, my own Street of Eternal Happiness, is the name of a coastal town in Fujian province from which Ming Dynasty explorer Zheng He had set sail to explore much of Asia. When the Chinese renamed these French streets, those running south to north had been named after Chinese provinces or provincial capitals, while streets running east to west were named after prominent Chinese cities of the time, which themselves had been named for countless forms of auspiciousness so many dynasties ago.

Whenever I pedal my bike along the Street of Eternal Happiness, I need all the luck I can get. The narrow street is one of the neighborhood's few two-way thoroughfares. Taxis often use it to escape the traffic of the nearby expressway, but they must contend with droves of electric motor scooters that seem to pour into every open space. Scooter drivers often barrel down the wrong side of the road in packs against oncoming traffic, dispersing just in time to make way for cars cutting through the hordes, horns blaring, headlights flashing. Survival is the rule of the road, and the right-of-way cedes to the biggest, most aggressive vehicles. City buses sit at the top of the food chain. They command respect from scooter and car drivers who pull over to make way for the behemoths, a survival instinct akin to diving out of the way of a rampaging elephant. All this activity leaves bicyclists to fend for themselves near the curbs or on the sidewalks, where riders often take out their frustrations by plowing through pedestrian traffic.

I choose to ride with the electric scooters. I can usually pedal my bike fast enough to keep up with them, and their riding habits –traveling as an integrated unit like a peloton in the Tour de France – helps protect me. Each morning's ride requires a constant awareness of my surroundings. The fact that most everyone else is in the same state of mind means that –despite the appearance of vehicular pandemonium – many drivers possess a conditioned athlete's mental focus, behaving according to the unspoken rules of the road. They move in concert with one another as they speed and swerve down the Street of Eternal Happiness, a system disguised as chaos.

On a cold day in the winter of 2012 I ascended 2nd Floor Your Sandwich's spiral stairway to warm up with a cup a coffee in a corner booth. The branches of the Plane trees lining the Street of Eternal Happiness were nude, brittle chopsticks, pointing in all directions, making scraping sounds across the second floor windows whenever a freezing wind came swirling down the street.

On a shelf in the middle of the sunny dining room sat CK's accordion, a massive black instrument with Polverini engraved across the front in elegant cursive. The shop was empty that day, so CK heaved it off the shelf, slumped into a booth bathed in the morning sunlight, bowed his head, and pressed the air release button, slowly opening the bellows. The instrument exhaled, a sigh so deep it seemed to be coming from CK himself. The day before, his head chef had quit in a fury, taking half the wait staff with him. If any customers arrived today, CK and his partner Max were on their own.

He paused for a moment, and then launched into a furious, fast-paced ballad, his fingers racing across the keyboard. He closed his eyes as the melody took shape, expanding and contracting the instrument with a fluid motion, his fingers moving so quickly they seemed to have minds of their own. It was a patriotic song from his childhood, and as his head bobbed back and forth, memories suddenly came to him, driving the song forward, faster and faster.

CK was eleven years old when it dawned on him: killing himself wasn't going to be easy. For two straight months, he had explored his options each day after school. Swallowing sleeping pills should be the most comfortable way to do it, he thought, but the pharmacist wouldn't sell them to him. "You're too young," she said. Walking off the roof of his family's apartment building was a possibility. Nah, he concluded: too painful. "I realized I didn't have the courage to jump," he said.

There was another problem. He rarely had a moment alone. The boy was an only child with overbearing parents and a nai nai – his maternal grandma – who left his side only when he used the toilet. Each day he ate a porridge breakfast seated inches from them. At the school down the dirt road from his family's rural home, teachers took over. After that, it was back home with nai nai and his parents for

homework, music lessons and a vegetables-and-rice dinner. He couldn't even steal a minute alone at night in his bedroom: nai nai slept on a thin bamboo-matted bed beside him.

One afternoon while his father was writing at his desk, CK took one final, determined inventory of his family's cold, bare apartment. Outside, the air was thick with the exhaust of neighboring chemical and mining equipment factories. He walked through the apartment, quietly foraging for household objects with the most promising life-ending potential. His quest ended in the only room where he had a reasonable excuse to be alone: the bathroom. He settled on a straightedge razor he discovered in his father's shaving kit. One night before turning in, he slipped the folded razor into his pajamas pocket.

It was a chilly autumn evening. Moonlight filled the room. The night was still, save for nai nai's steady breathing and the occasional train in the distance. It announced itself with a soft, sustained horn blast, followed by the soothing rumble of freight rolling along track before dissipating into the quiet night. As he waited for his grandmother to fade into deep sleep, CK thought about his family.

From an early age, the boy had listened to his father talk about "the system." He was never sure what the words actually meant, but he could usually predict when his father was about to utter them. His father had a way of pausing before he said the words, pronouncing the phrase slowly and carefully, making the words stand apart from the rest of a sentence so the boy would take note.

"You see, Kai Kai, you just can't fight ….the system." The phrase was imprinted onto the boy's memory in italics.

After a difficult day at work, his father would return home and sit his son down, a ready audience for his rants. The system didn't allow him to choose his career. The system didn't reward intelligence. The system discouraged individual talent. You could never get ahead in the system. "Zhongguode guoqing buhao!" –"China's state of affairs is terrible!" his father would rage.

"My father thought he was an intellectual," CK said. "He wasn't happy with his job and the fact that he didn't choose what he wanted to be. He knew he was smarter than others. He wanted to succeed based on his talents, but he couldn't. The system wouldn't allow it. He didn't think my mother was very smart, and that frustrated him, too. He didn't like his colleagues at work, and he hated China."

When CK tried to ask questions, his father shushed him, continuing his tirade. Eventually, CK felt it made little sense to talk in a home where no one listened. So he stopped talking altogether.

CK didn't have any brothers or sisters. He was born in 1981, two years after the birth of China's one-child policy. His shared living quarters with his mother, father, and nai nai were on the top floor of a rundown four-story brick building assigned to them by the city railway bureau, his grandmother's work unit. The stairwells were littered with garbage. CK's father employed the system's propaganda of the day – Leader Deng Xiaoping's "Four Modernizations" campaign and President Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" slogan – to describe the place. "He called it a 'three no-managements' area: nobody cleaned it, nobody administered it, and nobody cared about it."

The same could be said for the city where CK grew up. Historically, Hengyang, as far from Shanghai as New York is from Chicago, was a place to avoid. The city in the central province of Hunan made brief appearances in Chinese records beginning 1,400 years ago, when Tang Dynasty emperor Gaozong punished a rebellious assistant by banishing him to administer the city. Later, emperors used the city again and again as punishment for other dodgy high-ranking court officials, all sent to govern a far-flung city on the edge of

the empire, where they were seldom heard from again.

Modern times hadn't been much better for the people of Hengyang. On a freight rail map of China, the north-south and east-west lines crisscross at Hengyang, creating an X in the heart of the country. It's one of the region's most important centers of heavy industry. Chemical factories abound, as do coal, lead, and zinc mines. The air was polluted and rancid, but there were jobs: CK's grandmother worked at the railway bureau, his mother at a phosphate fertilizer factory, and his father at the Hengyang City Number Two Construction Company.

CK's parents were born in the early 1950s alongside the birth of Communist China. Their generation grew up with the Party's schizophrenic campaigns, revolutions, and counterrevolutions that left tens of millions dead, persecuted, and imprisoned. There was rarely a moment of calm. Survival depended on a keen ability to adapt to an ever-changing political environment, understanding that, like a swimmer caught in a riptide, you must resist the urge to swim against a much stronger force. There was always the possibility of patiently maneuvering your way to safety, but you first had to cede control to the system.

As teenagers, CK's parents were sent to the countryside to farm for several years, a typical fate for city kids under the policies of Chinese leader Mao Zedong. Mao dreamed of a China where urbanites worked alongside farmers in a proletariat utopia; when he died in 1976, his dreams went with him. Most "sent-down youth" promptly dropped their hoes and returned home to their families. Upon their arrival, the Party stepped in again, assigning them jobs at local state-owned enterprises. By the time they turned thirty, CK's parents hadn't yet made a single career decision for themselves.

"Would you like to draw or play the violin?" CK's parents asked him one day in 1985. The three sat at the dinner table, the adults searching the boy's face for an answer. His father had always aspired to be a writer or a musician. He was convinced that had he mastered an artistic skill as a boy, he might have been able to wrest some control from the system that had robbed him of his choice in how he made a living. Pushing his son into the arts would serve as a safety net in case China's economy took another treacherous turn someday, he reasoned.

CK's parents had whittled the boy's choices down to skills other family members had shown talent for. The boy's grandmother was a gifted illustrator. His father had happened upon an erhu – a two-stringed traditional Chinese instrument vaguely similar to the violin – in the garbage one day, and had taught himself how to play. The two choices were clear.

"Draw or play the violin," his father demanded as he stared at his son. The boy thought for a moment.

"Draw," he replied.

His parents turned away from him, whispering to each other, before turning back to him. "You will play the violin," announced his father.

CK had just turned four.

CK's lessons started when his family shelled out half a year's salary for a new violin. They ended a couple of years later when the government launched a series of reforms that privatized parts of China's economy. This put employees at the most inefficient state-owned enterprises, such as Hengyang City Number Two

Construction Company, on the chopping block. CK's father lost his job, and with that went money for the violin teacher. The family scrambled for an alternative, and someone remembered that an uncle owned an accordion. A new instrument was chosen. CK's uncle taught the boy the basics for half a year until one night when an electrical fire burned down the government-owned shop where the man worked. CK's uncle was the manager, so the government held him responsible and sent him to prison.

"It wasn't his fault," CK's father said about the incident, "It was the system's fault."

CK's father, who had no idea how to play the accordion but plenty of time to learn, took over as instructor. It didn't take long for CK's knowledge to surpass his father's, and practice became a subtle power reversal as son began to instruct father. Lessons turned tense at unpredictable moments, with CK's father screaming and slapping his son for any perceived misstep.

CK's father was insecure, temperamental, and so scrawny he looked feminine. His mother was calm and confident, with the strong hands of a peasant. The Chinese say such characteristics often sprung from childhood. CK's father grew up in the city, while his mother was raised on the shores of Dongting Lake in the Hunan countryside. She seemed to have absorbed the resolute stillness of its serene waters. "She was somehow more masculine," CK said. "She demanded self-esteem and independence."

CK's father hit his mother, too. CK sometimes heard screaming from their bedroom at night. He usually noticed a spattering of purple bruises on his mother's face and arms at breakfast the next morning. As he got older, the boy would try to step in between his parents at the height of these arguments. "I would try to protect her, but he was too fast," he said.

CK spoke of his father not with bitterness, but with the resignation that the Chinese often feel towards people they despise yet also love out of duty. It wasn't his father's fault, he says, nor was it the system's. It was his father's spleen.

The Chinese believe the spleen is the receptacle for a person's temperament and willpower. This belief is immortalized in the Chinese character for spleen: ?, or pi. Add in the Chinese character for energy, ?, qi, and together piqi — literally "spleen energy" — comes to mean "temperament" in Mandarin. Many Chinese believe that any damage to the spleen threatens your piqi, making you unable to control your emotions. When CK's father was a boy, he was punched so hard in a fistfight that his spleen ruptured. CK said once his dad had injured his spleen, his piqi had been lost forever.

It was the spring of 1989. CK was eight, too young to understand the news of student protests and hunger strikes from Beijing. There were whispers of democracy and the possible end of one-party rule in China. Hundreds of miles away in Tian'anmen Square, protesters had erected a white statue, 'The Goddess of Democracy,' that towered over a sea of students. She held aloft a torch with both hands and her gaze was fixed on the oversized portrait of Mao hanging at the entrance to the Forbidden City, and, beyond that, to China's current patriarchs ruling the country from inside their guarded compound, like a mother protecting her children from the tyranny of their father. But the students had swiftly assembled the goddess from metal, foam, and papier-mâché in just four days, and they were pitting it against a civilization that had lasted millennia. It was hardly a surprise when China's patriarchs prevailed, employing their brute strength to kill thousands, silencing the discussion about the system that would endure.

In the aftermath of the Tian'anmen crackdown, CK's father ratcheted up his politically inspired rants. CK, again, was forced to play audience. "I was a kid and I didn't understand much of it," he told me, "I just felt depressed. I wanted to be alone. I didn't want to be stuck at home, left to face my father."

Soon after, CK's mother sought an audience of her own. She sat him down and delivered some news. "Ma's

going to be staying somewhere else from now on," she told him. "How about every Wednesday or Thursday I come back here to see you?"

At the time, divorce was uncommon in China. Marital strife was typically worked out behind closed doors, moderated by older generations to ensure the family unit — the backbone of Chinese culture — remained unbroken. CK's mind raced. His classmates would soon find out. His teachers would know. He would have to live alone with his father, with only his grandmother as buffer for his rants and tirades. CK's father stepped into the room. Would his father blame his mother's departure on the system too? The boy wondered. Family, he concluded, was the only system that mattered.

"I want to go live with mom," CK announced.

His father didn't pause. "It's been decided," he said. "You'll live with me."

The first song CK learned on the accordion was Caoyuan Gechang Mao Zhuxi, or "The Grasslands Sing for Chairman Mao." CK obediently mastered the song, playing the refrain over and over like a machine under the stern watch of his father, who was always ready to strike the boy at any hint of attitude. Between lessons, his father would complain. "Your mother is no good," his father told him, "how could she leave us?"

At school, it seemed everyone had learned about his parents' separation. His classmates asked questions, wondering what it was like to have parents who lived apart. His teachers used the news to embarrass him in front of other students when he wasn't paying attention in class. CK began to feel anxious. He yearned to isolate himself from his classmates and his family –to become chouli – detached. "The only quiet time to myself that I had was my walk between home and school. I was basically walking from one source of pressure to the other."

CK lay awake that autumn evening of his 11th year, staring at the ceiling, far from chouli as nai nai's breathing grew deeper. He felt the weight of the folded straightedge razor pressing lightly on his thigh through his pajamas pocket. When he was certain nai nai was asleep, he sat up in bed and withdrew the razor from his pocket. He unfolded it. He took a breath. Holding the handle firmly in his right hand, he pressed the blade to the inside of his left wrist.

He penetrated skin, cutting into flesh. He watched as blood rose to the surface. He began making swift cutting motions, pressing left to right again and again. He was bleeding, but there was no gushing blood. He switched hands and tried the other wrist. The family matriarch continued to doze peacefully beside him. His blood seeped into his pajamas, but the wounds kept clotting. It wasn't the geyser he'd expected. He couldn't find a vein. And his wrists began to hurt. "I continued to cut, but it was useless. I couldn't see well, and my wrists were so thick," CK told me.

CK slowly folded up the razor and returned it to the pocket of his bloodstained pajamas. This is just too difficult, he thought to himself before falling asleep.

The bellows of the accordion expanded and compressed like the lungs of a runner in mid-sprint. The fingers of CK's right hand frantically raced up and down the keyboard, staccato bursts of treble notes trickling over a shifting landscape of bass controlled with a swift mechanical reflex of his left fingers, the two sides chasing

each other. CK's eyes were still closed in concentration. A freezing wind blew down the Street of Eternal Happiness, sending the branches outside clattering against the windows of the shop. All appeared to be in harmony, but then CK hit a wrong note. Then two. He opened his eyes, looked at me, and laughed, giving up.

"Wow. What was that?" I asked him.

"Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy," he said, still laughing.

The song was a revolutionary epic that opened one of eight Beijing operas allowed during Mao's Cultural Revolution. It borrowed heavily from Water Margin, a 14th century Chinese novel known as one of the four classics of Chinese literature. Party leaders turned the novel's tales into musical propaganda – a portrayal of a proletariat hero to rouse the masses in support of the system.

CK shook his head, embarrassed he had forgotten how to play a song he had spent his childhood practicing.

"I used to play traditional Chinese songs, but I later discovered I didn't like to play them," CK told me, wiping sweat off his forehead to reveal two bright, oval brown eyes that seemed larger than they were because of his thin face. "I preferred something different. It took me a while to realize I can play my own songs."

With that, CK began playing one: a slow, sad melody that conjured up a cold, lonely street in Paris. Or Shanghai.

CK's first job interview after college was at Pearl River Piano, China's largest accordion manufacturer. All the practice as a child had finally paid off. After the encounter with his father's razor blade, he'd come to accept the idea that he would spend the remainder of his teenage years living under his father's roof. So he decided to focus on what would come after. He worked hard in school, practiced the accordion, and earned a spot at a few hundred miles from home at a college in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou, where he studied music. His Pearl River interviewer was impressed that he played the accordion, and within minutes CK found himself in the president's office. Pearl River's president handed him an accordion and removed his own from a case next to his desk. The two played a duet together, and when the president asked CK to play a solo, he thought about it carefully.

"I picked a very complicated piece: Liszt's 'La Campanella.' I got the job."

CK was assigned a position in the company's accordion sales and marketing department. For the first time in his life, CK's father was proud of him. Pearl River was one of a handful of state-owned musical instrument makers that had survived the country's ambitious market reforms. Sales were picking up, thanks to China's rising consumer class. CK would receive a competitive salary, health benefits, and a generous state pension. But the work was mind numbing. "Each day you'd work two or three hours and then you'd run out of things to do, so you'd just sit around chatting, reading the newspaper," CK said. "Others used the time to cultivate relationships with each other, but I didn't see the point of that."

Instead, CK spent his free time looking for a more interesting job. After a quick search, he found one: Polverini, an Italian accordion maker, had opened a tiny factory a dozen miles west in the suburbs of Shanghai. The company sought an assistant to liaise between its Italian factory manager and its Chinese workers.

Polverini's accordions were world-class – Pearl River accordions seemed like plastic toys in comparison. The job would be technically challenging: Kai would have to learn every step in the manufacturing process so that he could help teach low-skilled assembly line workers how to do it.

CK read the job posting over and over.

"It sounded interesting," CK told me. "I could finally learn something."

When CK called home to say he found a new job outside the state system, his father was livid. "You can't just walk away from the iron rice bowl!" his dad screamed over the phone. His new job failed to deliver a step up in pay, and he'd also lose the state benefits package he'd gotten at Pearl River.

"Suddenly, my dad felt unsafe," CK said, "He was extremely angry with me. He kept repeating the same thing: 'When you work for the state, your future is unlimited!'"

In the early 2000s, though, that was no longer true. CK's father still hadn't found a job since he was laid off from Hengyang City Number Two Construction Company. At forty-seven, CK's mother was pressured into early retirement after Hengyang Chemical Factory's orders were decimated by new competition from China's nascent private sector. In 2001, China had entered the World Trade Organization, and cushy jobs at state-owned enterprises were becoming rare. Capitalism was the new norm. CK began to feel that his parents, exhausted from a lifetime of dependency on the state, were now adrift in these new surroundings, and each had begun looking to him for financial stability.

CK explained his decision patiently. He wasn't learning anything by watching others socialize at Pearl River. At Polverini he'd at last acquire the skills to develop himself and his individual talents. This is something you should be able to relate to, he told his father gently.

The system had turned out exactly as CK's father had explained it to him as a boy: it was there to restrain and control you, rather than to enable you to learn and grow. But as his father got older, he began to realize the importance of money, and the stability that the system provided. "When I started working at Pearl River, he suddenly embraced the system. I didn't know how to talk to him about escaping it."

The private sector may have helped fuel China's remarkable economic growth, but jobs there seemed risky to the one-child generation. Most Chinese I knew in their twenties and thirties still longed for jobs in a big state-owned firm. Such jobs were seen as recession-proof, and their benefits were second-to-none. In 2013, more than two-thirds of Chinese college graduates couldn't find a job that paid more than $300 a month – less than what a typical factory worker makes. Part of the problem was an oversupply of labor. The Chinese university system had quadrupled in size in the past decade, and it was producing far too many graduates for the country's marketplace to absorb. The jobs available – construction or manufacturing – were not what graduates wanted, and the work they envisioned wasn't yet available in an economy that was still in an early stage of development.

CK took the job with Polverini and left for Shanghai. His new roommate – a middle-aged Italian engineer – also happened to be his new boss. The two shared a passion for tinkering. As boys, each had spent afternoons taking things apart and piecing them back together, and now they would get paid to do it. At Polverini's cramped factory on the outskirts of Shanghai, their mission was to modify the brand's classic accordion to bring its price down. Chinese accordion players tend to either drop thousands of dollars on an expensive Italian instrument, or penny-pinch to buy the cheapest Chinese brand they could find. An accordion between the two price points did not yet exist. CK's mission was an affordable Polverini, tailored for China's rising middle class.

CK spent months on the assembly line, learning about every part of the instrument. In Italy, his boss designed Ferraris. An accordion was an even more complicated machine, he told CK.

“An accordion is very small, and you have more than three thousand tiny parts inside of it, so a millimeter misstep is a huge mistake,” CK explained. “You must have a good understanding of chemicals, wood, steel, how they interact inside the machine, and the sounds they create.”

Within a year at Polverini, CK had mastered every step. In the years to come, CK’s boss encouraged him to learn more, and CK became a jack-of-all-trades. “I was a manager, a translator, a supply chain point person, a customer service agent, I made the prototypes, I was in charge of sound QC, and by the end, I could build an accordion from scratch.”

Within four years, CK went from making $400 a month to $4000, jumping from the average salary in China to that in the United States. For the first time, Shanghai – with its fancy cars, scenic tree-lined boulevards and international appeal – began to feel like home.

“Can you play something else?” I asked.

It was 11 o’clock in the morning and CK had been playing for over half an hour. 2nd Floor Your Sandwich had been empty all morning. The lunch hour was approaching though, and soon the tower across the street would spew hundreds of hungry office workers onto the sidewalks of the Street of Eternal Happiness. CK checked the clock, paused, and then nodded, his hands expanding the instrument, letting it breathe.

“I wrote this for a girl I once loved. It’s called ‘2-27.’ That’s the date we met.”

It began with a sustained note in the minor key, and then another, and another, haunting tones patiently repeating like the deep breaths of someone fast asleep. Then, a playful melody arose, unpolished at parts, like a boy strolling down the street without a care in the world, whistling to himself.

CK closed his eyes again, and I stole a glance at his wrists. The wounds of his childhood had long since healed. His music filled his shop. And for the moment, the system disappeared.