

Then: in 1949, my mother's father stood on the deck of a warship as a fleet of 1.3 million fatigued men carried canvas bundles on their backs, retreated from China, and sailed into Taiwan's Keelung harbor. His Kuomintang-issued combat boots landed on the island with a thud, a wintry cloud of dust swimming with the false, lofty promises of retaking their motherland from the Communists once more. Their reality: the young men were ordered to work on constructing roads and railways on a foreign land someone else — at a faraway conference in Cairo — had decided belonged to them. By day, my grandfather spoke the Mandarin language, the Beijing tongue of colonizers; at night, in military villages popping up all over our island, he whispered to his comrades in their native Zhejiang dialect, the tongue of refugees. At the very least, in an attempt to assuage the pang of exile for his men, their Generalissimo had brought along the best cooks that China had to offer. My maternal grandfather, I imagine, sat on those long, inky evenings on a short plastic stool and sank his teeth into braised bamboo shoots and dongpo pork, swallowing the chewed-up memories of his mother's cooking and the taste of his old country.

Of course, the Kuomintang never left. Just as the Japanese Empire had left behind a cuisine of balanced dishes and a passion for fresh, raw fish, provincial recipes from the corners of that boundless continent converged in Taiwan, now made with the local ingenuity of an oppressed and industrious people who, above all else, loved to eat.

One day, after school, I rent a U-bike and pedal south across our metropolis of mouthwatering delights. The city of Taipei lingers on the tongue with the spicy bite of mala and the rich, milky shoyu of Ramen broth. In Ximending, a line curls around the block for a deep-fried donut tossed in sugar dust. A woman, parked in front of a gated school, sells watermelon out of her truck that dissolves in the mouth like cotton candy. Listen closely, beyond the constant grind of traffic: Roadside stands, just outside of MRT stations, cackle with fried stinky tofu. Knives crunch across the crispy skins and brittle bones of barbecued ducks. Egg shells crack, yolks hissing with