

When city lights receded into the night, a silver speck against the immense, dark ocean, a bright beam shot from the heart of the city where Taipei 101 would soon dominate the skyline.

“What if,” I turned to ask my mother, “I never get to slurp a tapioca ball through a comically large straw again?”

My mother rubbed my head. She didn’t reply.



But perhaps the story of our tongues began somewhere else entirely: in the hold of a Portuguese ship in the 16th-century as it raked the Pacific seas. Historians estimate that cassava, a plant indigenous to South American tropics, arrived on the Asian continent with Portuguese explorers by way of their colony in Brazil. Once here, locals mixed the extract from cassava roots with boiling water and kneaded them into starch. As empires rose and receded from Taiwan, Han migrants dropped these 粉 fen 圓 yuan, like pearls in necklaces, into sweet dessert soups and sprinkled them on shaved ice. In night markets, hawkers bellowed out their prices in a Minnan language that was just beginning to blend with indigenous tongues on the plains and riddle with colonial Dutch in fortified Zeelandia.

Across the world, across the centuries—in California and then in New Jersey—I too began to sculpt my tongue to the alien curves of a foreign language. It didn’t take long for me to become ashamed of the stiff, blockish Mandarin intonation that seeped into my English, like garlic that lingered too long on my breath. When my white middle school friends upturned their noses at the whole fish steaming out of my mother’s oven, I forced my tongue to adapt to the sugary crunch of cinnamon toast cereal and the smoky, sauce-smattered barbecued ribs. With my American peers, I learned to smile at the white carton of orange chicken doused in MSG, and I tried to ignore that their favorite Chinese take-out joint, “Colden China,” was staffed by Hispanic workers. With my parents, though, we sought out Thai and Malay restaurants along the Jersey Turnpike so I could sip on Thai