

## **The red from twenty three year ago**

**Julie Wang**

Yellow sky, burnt air, blurred vision—the wildfire has cast a yellow veil over our dream-come-true senior prom boat ride on the East River. I see the disillusionment under my classmates' beautiful long lashes and ill-fitted suits, and I'm secretly relishing it.

Twenty-three years ago, in China, my mother faced a similar situation during her own wedding. People back then were experiencing rapid development in the country, so rapid that many things occurred in a juxtaposed way. You could see young people in halter tops and low-waisted jeans alongside those who still believed that a woman's marriage is the determination of her life's success. Unfortunately, my mother had to deal with the latter. "Your dad and I didn't really think of having a wedding at first," my mom said, "but my hometown was still very conservative back then." My mom came from a small town in Inner Mongolia, an undeveloped province in China. She was one of the few people who had the opportunity to study in Beijing, the capital. Marrying my dad, a man from Beijing, was deemed lucky by some in her town. "All I wanted to do was to make your grandparents happy and keep them away from possible mess," she explained. "If I didn't have a wedding, people would assume there are some shameful secrets in our marriage." Though she recounted the story with a calm humor, all I felt was sadness. "I really wanted you to be able to enjoy this moment though." However, she replied with the most my-mom-like thing, "Obviously, girl, I had my real wedding in Beijing by parting with your dad, uncle, cousin, and a bunch of friends."

People migrated indoors since there wasn't much to see on the ship deck, considering our school is located next to the East River—the river we shipped out to have some “unique” and “fresh” experience. Sometimes I feel like a hypocrite, sometimes I feel like I’m one of the few genuine beings in this hypocritical school. Students danced around the cabin to loud, boring music they’d heard a million times at parties; that is when I noticed why the girls dressed in spaghetti strap dresses that are short and loose, so that they are able to dance and reach the dance floor. I thought about the unspoken rule in our school while seeing different colors of the same kind of dress moving in the center of the room: you shouldn’t dress better or worse than any others. You should dress up, but not too dressed up. You should be yourself, but it is “yourself” similar to other people. According to these guidelines, my dress was undoubtedly inappropriate, though beautiful. A red silk tube top dress with a clean, sharp silhouette, adorned with a few designed folds from chest to hip. Its “sharpness” comes from the corset that holds the structure in place. This dress fits well with my body, so the corset doesn’t feel like a shackle, but an armor. The bottom of the dress is tight, meaning that I can’t dance with people, but this armor brings me the confidence that I feel glamorous and powerful enough to stand there and do nothing. My favorite part of the dress, the color—a red that required no prefix, a striking hue that stung with prolonged gaze. It is the kind of red that people think of when they have to imagine the color “red.” I like its aggression because I didn’t want to play “best friends” with most people in my school that barely had any conversations. I want to be the one that gently ruins this event.

The same shade of red graced on another silhouette in Inner Mongolia, 2000. She wore a simple knee-length dress, which aside from its bright color couldn’t be seen as different from what she wore to work, and she even paired the dress with a white blazer. “I just didn’t like the

Western wedding dress; it's too much for me, I want to feel more comfortable at my own wedding." I asked her why she didn't wear a traditional Chinese wedding dress; she replied, "that is so simple because I had no money, I just quit my job at Nanjing and moved back to Beijing, I wouldn't borrow money for a dress when I need it for transitioning my life from one place to another." My mom's usual fashion is quiet; from college to work, she's always in her blue jeans and white T-shirt. She didn't like to be the center of the room, but at her wedding, she chose the most eye-catching red. "I know I wasn't wearing any fancy gown, but it's my moment, I want them to look at me, whether they love or hate me." I can already imagine how the conservatives reacted to her, calling her the odd one but can't say anything else. "That feeling must suck," we both laughed. I call her move a chill rebellion.

"Oh my god Julie, this dress is so beautiful, you look great! I always knew that you are the most fashionable person in our school," many unfamiliar faces said this to me. Though it is a small school, it still took me a second to dig into my memories to recognize who they are and why they are acting like we've been friends for ages. I know that I'm arrogant, naive, and passive-aggressive. I hate that I always imagine myself as a morally ambiguous character in Quentin Tarantino's movies. But I have to confess that I reached an internal climax as I see the shocking look in my classmate's eyes, and hearing their compliments. "You should keep this image in mind, because y'all will probably never see me again," I burst into silent laughter, adorned in the reddest dress. I think I can read the struggle, rebellion, playfulness, and power in this color, because it comes from a small town in Inner Mongolia twenty-three years ago.