



ABC 123

An American-Born Chinese Abroad

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*This book is dedicated to my father, who pioneered his way
to America against all odds, giving us all a better life...*

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Chapter One: Pioneers Color Outside the Lines

Taoyuan International Airport

Taipei, Taiwan

June 29, 2012

11:05 p.m.

When I first arrived in Taipei, I had with me a pink SONY VAIO laptop, a small carry-on case and the address of the apartment I had subleased over the Internet.

After more than thirty years, I was returning to the country of my birth, as much a foreigner as any other American.

The airport was congested despite the fact my flight had arrived late at night. People waiting to be reunited with their loved ones stood waiting patiently at the sidelines. Lone passengers looking disheveled and fatigued from a long flight milled about looking for restrooms, water fountains, a rest area. Tourists at the information counter rifled through brochures and maps, their faces a mix of eagerness and confusion. Family members embraced one another, greeting everyone in high octaves and chattering excitedly. And finally streaming through the exit doors, the crème de la crème of the airport - flight crew members

in smart uniforms tailing behind pilots wearing black caps and suits pull their luggage along, sidestepping the riffraff, their heads held high.

Taxi drivers approached all of them, like giant prattling beetles swarming forward, anxious to seat passengers before they decided on cheaper forms of transportation or worse, their competitor. I chose one that looked honest, using my rusty Mandarin to communicate with him and pulled the address from my pocket.

It was written in English.

He took one look at the slip of paper and threw his head back in exasperation, exclaiming, “English!” as though I had shown him something obscene. Frustrated, he took it from me and approached the lady behind the currency exchange counter just behind him asking her to translate. She smiled apologetically and shook her head. He tried the counter next to her, a car rental service. The young man wearing glasses just looked blankly at it and threw his hands out. The driver loped back to me, telling me he needed an address in Chinese, then started walking away, asking other people if they needed a taxi.

I turned my computer on, copying the address in Chinese from Google Maps, writing in a large, blocky script that looked childish and untrained. I had no idea what I was writing. I managed to make out some characters, but overall it just looked like hieroglyphs to me.

This time when I handed him the paper, he laughed at my

child-like script and nodded. I followed him outside. He pointed at a long line of 50 people or more, all waiting for taxis. All around me, I heard a mix of languages, English and Mandarin blending softly together in the background.

Outside the weather was unbearably hot. It was almost midnight in Taipei so I had assumed it would have cooled down. It was the end of June and I had expected warm summer weather, but it was unlike anything I was used to. I had the urge to jump back inside the air-conditioned terminal.

The line crawled forward slowly. I chewed on my lower lip, anxious to start my life in Taiwan, fearful of what would happen next.