# Chapter 1: ……………..

## I

The air had a harsh chill the day I met Xi Wangmu. I knew that I needed to meet her the moment I gazed upon her old frail body. She squinted her eyes under the morning sun, raised her hands to greet me and composed a warm welcoming smile. A smile broken only by voids where teeth once stood upright but were now lost through years of malnutrition. Her faded navy tunic, mended multiple times with pale blue patches, was well worn and torn around the hip. The light cotton trousers extending from the bottom of her tunic were three inches short, exposing a pair of thick grey woolen socks. On her feet she wore a mud-stained slipper that appeared to provide insufficient comfort for the brutality of a mountainous autumn morning.

The exposed skin of Wangmu’s face, neck and hands was covered in deep wrinkles. The depth of these wrinkles narrated the story of a difficult life. One consisting of manual labor and hard slogs. Of days worked in the terraced fields around the village of …….. and nights spent raising a family of four children. Her elderliness also evident by the fine strands of white-grey hair which fought their way loose from the black scarf wrapped tightly around her head. The scarfs presence, a deliberate effort to protect herself from the cold mountain breeze.

Next to Xi Wangmu was her residence, a refuge shelter built from scavenged logs, tarpaulin and a variety of colorful canvases. The fast flowing waters of the …… river rushed behind her and was all that separated her shanty house from the steep landslide scarred slopes of the ….. mountains. The bubbling sounds of a boiling pot of water propagated from inside her house and the sweet aroma of Chinese green tea filled the cool air.