

A Portrait of Wu

Newtown, USA — 9:30 p.m.

The last customer has gone. Xiao Wu locks the door of the beauty and massage shop she co-owns with other friends, wipes down the massage table one final time, and counts the earning of the day. She has done this routine for years —twelve-and-a-half-hour shifts, nine in the morning until half past nine at night. Fifty-five years old, and she still remembers every pressure point and every knotted muscle from a client who walks out lighter than they walked in.

She is the oldest woman on the strip. In China, her age would have been a problem. Customers there want younger faces and smooth hands. But in this part of the United States, age is not a barrier. If you can work well, you work. The market does not discriminate—not entirely, not perfectly, but enough. Enough for her to still be standing here and work for her living.

Wu did not come to America young. She came because one of her friends talked about money, about an earning potential that made the Chinese salon business look like just pocket money. She came without a work permit, undocumented for the first four years, invisible and indispensable all at once. Those years combine cash payments, borrowed beds, and the unceasing fear.

Then came the green card; her effort had finally been acknowledged. Not through marriage or lottery, but through something stranger: a humanitarian form of relief measure for families who fled to the United States to have a second child. China's one-child policy was still in effect, and for Wu, a second pregnancy meant leaving everything behind. So she did. The American government, in one of those odd bureaucratic mercies, offered a path. She then brought her husband and her son to the US.

At first, her husband had been full of ambition. He threw himself into the move with the confidence of someone who expected a better life to be handed to him. But two years later, the reality set in - he could not find work. So, he headed back to China. They are still married, legally speaking at least. He calls every few weeks, though the conversations have grown noticeably shorter than in the early days.

The son stayed longer. He attended local public schools, sat in classrooms where classmates and peers spoke a language he couldn't understand and talked about things he had never heard of. He was confident, a little uneasy about the cultural gap, with the English education before; however, immersing oneself in an English-speaking environment is much more different than studying English through a textbook. He enrolled in community college, and for a year, Xiao Wu allowed herself to hope. However, his grades were poor, and he struggled to have any fluent conversation. His confidence is poorer. He went back to China, claiming he was going back to take a break and recharge, but he stopped coming back. His re-entry permits expired. He now wants to buy a house in China and asks his mother for money.

Here are the numbers that keep her awake:

Monthly income: \$5,000.

Mortgage on her townhouse—bought five years ago her single proudest American achievement: \$2,000.

Other expenses: \$1,000.

Surplus: \$1,500.

It is not nothing. It is also not enough. She has no days off. Not one. The shop is open seven days a week, and so is she. High rent, high utilities, high everything—the surplus accumulates slowly. But there is one line in her budget that does not tremble: health insurance. Consistent. Reliable. The kind of coverage she never had in China. That alone, she tells herself, makes some of this worth it.

She has also learned to be clever. The second bedroom in her townhouse sits empty most of the time now that her son is gone and her husband has returned to China, so she started short-renting it to other Chinese mothers. These mothers are people much like herself – middle-aged, practical, and visiting their children who study at nearby schools. They need a clean, quiet place to sleep for a week or two, and they appreciate staying with someone who speaks their language and understands their situation. Wu charges less than a hotel would, yet the room is perfectly comfortable.

This is the intelligence that has kept her alive: not brilliance, but invention. A woman who knows how to turn empty space into income.

She plans to go back to China in a few years. Retire there, where the cost of living does not devour everything she saves. Reunite with her husband, if he will have her. See her son, even if he only calls when he needs money. Live somewhere smaller, quieter, without the twelve-hour days and the English she still stumbles over in her dreams.

She plans to return to China in a few years. Retire there, where the cost of living won't eat up everything she's saved. Reunite with her family, even if they mostly get in touch when he needs money. Live somewhere smaller and quieter, without the twelve-hour workdays and the English she still trips over in her dreams.

America gave her something. A townhouse. A green card. A job that does not care how old she is. But it also gave her a ledger that never quite balances and a family scattered across an ocean.