

JANE HUTCHEON



Chapter  
Sampler

# *China Baby Love*

An Australian Grandmother's life  
changing mission to help China's orphans

## ABOUT JANE HUTCHEON



Jane Hutcheon began her career in radio and television in Hong Kong and has witnessed ground-breaking news unfolding over her 30 years as a broadcast journalist. She has served as the ABC Correspondent in China, the Middle-East and Europe. Jane is a keen observer of Chinese society and history. She directed and wrote the 2013 documentary *From Mao to Now* for ABC News and published her first book *From Rice to Riches* in 2003, documenting her family's connections and her own reporting experiences in China. Jane is a broadcaster and moderator who interviews leaders, celebrities and personalities in her weekly ABC-TV program *One Plus One*.

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# PROLOGUE

In 1930's Shanghai early one Summer, a nine year old girl named Beatrice and her father Kit, arrived at The Bund to farewell visitors from Hong Kong. Aunt Rose and Uncle Alfred were heading home on a steamship, docked at the famous Shanghai waterfront. An outing to the pier was always exciting for a young girl. But suddenly, while she was still below deck admiring the cabin, she felt a shudder as she realised the vessel was departing. It was too late to disembark. She didn't understand what had happened. Her father was still waiting in the Studebaker on the pier. Would he be worried or angry, she wondered as she raced out of the cabin to the deck and searched for him on the pier. She saw the black Studebaker first. Then she saw her father's silhouette in the smooth cream-

coloured passenger seat of the car. His face was buried in his hands. He refused to look up.

Unknown to Beatrice, her father and his sister, her Aunt Rose, had hatched a plan. Without the child's consent, Beatrice was being taken from her home in tree-lined French Concession of Shanghai. She had not been given to the option to say goodbye to anyone and now she was being uprooted from her school, her friends, her cousins and brothers and sister, and sent to the British colony of Hong Kong to live with her Aunt Rose, Uncle Alfred and cousin Alec. Everything in the plan had proceeded smoothly so far and now here she was on the ship with Rose and Alfred, heading for her new home and a new life in Hong Kong 36 hours away.

In Shanghai, Beatrice seemed to get sick much of the time as a child. A few months before she was sent to Hong Kong, she contracted diphtheria and was rushed to hospital where surgeons performed an emergency tracheotomy. When she was four her beloved mother Elsie died. She has one faint memory of Elsie sitting at a sewing machine. The absence of a mother combined with the feeling that Hong Kong might be better for her health, lead to the arrangement with Kit's sister and brother-in-law.

Fortunately, though Aunt Rose was a disciplinarian and not particularly loving, Beatrice was doted on by her cousin and her uncle and there were other relatives who showed her patience

and kindness. She found friends, a wonderful school and made a new and successful life for herself. This was very fortunate, because when Beatrice was fourteen, her father, Kit, still living in Shanghai with the rest of his family where he worked as a book-keeper for a firm of chemists, died suddenly. He had not seen his daughter since leaving her on the passenger ship bound for Hong Kong. When Kit died, that made Beatrice, the youngest of four children, legally an orphan.

Beatrice is my mother. More than eight decades after she left Shanghai on the slow-boat to Hong Kong, she is still alive and well into her nineties. She often says that, although the early part of her life had its challenges, that the latter part has more than made up for the hardship. I'm thankful that she had relatives to care for her. Even though their care wasn't perfect, she wasn't given up to an orphanage. Losing her mother at such a young age would have been a terrible trauma, although in those days, any child who suffered a tragedy was just expected to just get on with life. Setbacks unfolded, particularly around the time of the Second World War. But you didn't complain or feel like a victim. You were told to put one foot in front of the other. That's just the way it was.

As a result of my mother's experience, child abandonment is something that tugs at my emotional centre. From an early age I was drawn to stories of orphans from Cinderella, Peter Pan, the world of Oliver Twist. I graduated to the comic strip Little



Orphan Annie and later on when I had a daughter of my own, she brought me some new orphan characters like Sophie from the BFG and of course the boy wizard, Harry Potter.

My mother left Shanghai long ago – and happened to meet my father, who, like her was born in Shanghai – but it would be fair to say that Shanghai, or China, has never really left me. It's not always a love affair, but it's most certainly an ongoing fascination. So when I came across the work of a very Australian woman who decided to dedicate her life to an orphanage in what she likes to call 'the real China' (because it's not one of the big, flashy cities we usually hear about in the news), it was hard for me to walk past.

There are hundreds of foreign NGO's, like Linda Shum's, working on behalf of China's orphans. Even those that have legally registered partnerships with local orphanages (Like Linda's organisation COAT has) feel they operate in a shadowy world where they can never be sure of what the future holds, where one wrong step or criticism will result in a loss of everything they have built up so far. Others face significant funding pressures as China becomes a more expensive place to live and to do business. And of course, the biggest fear is that the children's lives they have worked to improve, will somehow slip backwards.

On the other hand, there are international experts including Professors Xiaoyuan Shang and Karen Fisher at the University

of New South Wales whose research is contributing to building Chinese government policy and creating reform in the area of China's child welfare system.

China is a country of incredible statistics. It has a population of 1.38 billion, more than 300 million children, and more than one million orphaned or abandoned children. About 110,000 of these orphans are state wards, the majority of them living (80%) living in institutions and orphanages. An estimated 60 million children live separately from their parents who leave home to find work elsewhere in China. Parents leave their children behind because of strict controls on internal migration.

China maintains that the 35 year One-Child Policy only applied to 36% of its population and that 53% were allowed to have a second child if the first was a girl. In coming pages, you will hear about the negative side-effects of the One-child policy.

Linda Shum opened her world to me, introducing me to her network in China and beyond. The stories in this book belong to them. Linda is happy to ponder the deeper questions such as why a Chinese couple today is willing to abandon an infant with a small physical disability such as a missing left hand. But she is more concerned about how to give that child the best start in life, to give them an education and if necessary to guide them to adulthood and beyond. For me, I am often stuck on why child abandonment remains widespread and why so

little is done by the Chinese government to counter disability discrimination.

The stories you're about to read don't all have happy endings, but there are many triumphs along the way. Linda Shum likes to tell this story to her volunteers:

Yu Gong was a man who was laughed at by his whole village because he said he could move mountains to a better spot. He got a shovel and began to move the mountain bit by bit. Yu Gong became old, but still he shovelled and shovelled and again, the villagers laughed at him. They said he would die before the mountains was moved... but Yu Gong insisted that his children, their children and then grandchildren down through the generations would continue the work to move those mountains.

That's what Linda Shum is doing. She is moving mountains; bit by bit.

## CHAPTER 1

# RENDEZVOUS

I searched for my name, or something resembling it, on the sea of whiteboards at Zhengzhou Airport. No such luck. Haven't heard of Zhengzhou? It's the capital of Henan Province, the third most populous province in China with almost 100 million people. Unlike China's best known cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chongqing, Zhengzhou is a city of the future. It's one of thirteen super-sized cities that is currently under construction.

The last time I arrived in Zhengzhou in 1998, the city was a demolition zone and the new, gleaming airport with a rippling ceiling like the wings of a giant bird, had only just opened. Travelling with my ABC colleagues, we had come to report on a man who became one of China's super-rich through the

American organisation, Amway. Everyone seemed in such a hurry. ‘To get rich is glorious,’ they were told. But even in the sparkling new airport, the ‘other’ China was plain for us to see. A family of farmers in blue Mao suits were taking a self-guided tour of the airport. They held hands as they walked in awe of the modernity, looking completely out of place.

Fifteen years on, I’m back. It’s October 2013. The advertisements in the airport show the Chinese as sophisticated, sexy, middle-class, jet-setting, smart, connected. The reality is different. There are certainly Chanel handbags and Dolce and Gabbana sunglasses. But my fellow passengers are impolite. I’ve been pushed, tripped over, people have jumped in front of me in the queue. And now, out in the arrivals hall, as I check my watch, I’m in danger of being knocked over by trollies.

I decide to check outside, edging out of the sliding doors where men in leather jackets, taxi-drivers, prepare to pounce.

‘Taxi?’ said a man asked out of the corner of his mouth.

I shook my head.

‘*Mei Wenti (No Problem)*,’ he replied, already eyeing up his next catch.

*Mei Wenti* was a phrase I used to hear a 1.3 billion times a day in China. It’s the equivalent of the Australian ‘no worries’ which usually means there’s something to worry about.

The air caught my nostrils like the plume from a Genie bottle.

*Why am I back in China?*

I went to Beijing as ABC Television's China correspondent in November 1995 and remained until 2001. It was my first international posting before I travelled further afield to the Middle East and Europe. I remember my friends telling me NOT to say to the interview panel that the China job was *meant* to be mine. So I told them I'd been studying Mandarin for two years. Both my parents were born in Shanghai when it was known as the Paris of the East. My Mum was half Chinese. I grew up in Hong Kong and spoke Cantonese. And the clincher was that as I child, I owned a pink toy rodent named Mousey Tung, although I wasn't sure who Mao Zedong was at the time. All I knew was that he was always in the news. And then just as I was leaving the interview, I told them the China job was *meant* to be mine. And two days later, it was.

\* \* \*

My pocket vibrated.

'WHERE ARE U?' said the text. It was from Linda Shum. The person who was supposed to be meeting me.

I left the smog, returning to the arrivals hall and wheeled my luggage across the smooth, marble floor. A large caucasian woman emerged from the far end of the arrivals hall, dressed in black. Though it was cold enough for me to wear a down

jacket, she wore a long summer skirt and top with a light scarf draped around her shoulders. She wore Jesus sandals on her feet. And, to put it bluntly, she was obese. Her hair was very short, dyed brown but greying at the roots. As she came closer, she waved, but although it was the first time I had met Linda Shum in person, I could tell something was wrong.

Next to her was a small Chinese boy in a wheelchair. He looked around five years old, but he worked the wheelchair like a junior Kurt Fearnley. As the two approached, Linda hesitated. I was about to step forward to hug her, but something made me hold back.

‘I bet we stink,’ she said. That was a strange greeting.

She leaned forward to give me a hug while trying not to press against me.

At that point I inhaled the unmistakable odour of vomit. The stench made me gag. I realised now, why Linda didn’t want to get too close. All her clothes were wet because she said they’d been trying to clean themselves up in the bathroom.

‘I gave him the iPad on the bus,’ she said pointing to the boy. ‘What a dumb thing to do. He threw up all over both of us.’

The boy looked up, a polite smile on an otherwise wan face.

‘I always like to bring one of the kids with me,’ she said. ‘It’s good for them to get out.’

It dawned on me that he was one of the orphans. *Weren’t they all supposed to be girls*, I wondered?

‘We must stink,’ Linda repeated. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Breathing through my mouth, I gathered my wits.

‘I can’t smell a thing,’ I lied.

‘I suppose we’d better put something back in his stomach before we head back to Jiaozuo,’ said Linda.

Our destination, Jiaozuo (Pronounced *Jow as in Wow and Zor as in Bore*), was less than 100 kilometres away. It’s what China called a ‘prefecture-level’ city, one of 300 small cities in China. Linda calls it The Real China because apart from a few McDonald’s outlets in the commercial centre, there are no other Western shops or restaurants. Even butter was impossible to find.

‘We’re going to take the public bus back to Jiaozuo. Are you up for a coffee or something first?’

Linda spotted a cafe down the hallway.

Coffee! I didn’t need reminding about how foggy I felt. Coffee sounded very good though I forgot decent coffee outside a major city was as rare as a Ming vase. I gathered my bags and the three of us did a u-turn for the cafe. As we talked and ambled, I was acutely aware we were the centre of attention. People often stare in China. But this wasn’t staring, this was gawking. All eyes were directed, not at the large or even the small Australian woman, but the boy in the wheelchair, Wen Xuan. Living in Beijing in the mid 90’s I only ever saw disabled people on the street, as beggars. Whenever an important



foreign dignitary came to town, the beggars were shooed off the pavements for a week. They always returned after a while. It was a kind of game.

Linda and the boy were oblivious or more accurately, accustomed, to people's stares. A boy pushing himself in a wheelchair clearly wasn't something Chinese people encountered every day. Nobody bothered to hide their amazement.

Coming face-to-face with Linda was not what I had expected. She had an awful lot to say. She talked for all of us, about the eventful ride to the airport on the public bus, about all the orphans, her Chinese 'grandkids' as she called them, in the city of Jiaozuo, her three adult children back home in Australia and her nine grand-children in Gympie and Tasmania. She talked about her dead husband and soul-mate Greg. And she talked about her ageing father Charles whom she cared for. Charles got sent to 'the kennel' as she called his aged-care home, whenever she travelled to China, two, three or four times every year.

I nodded, too tired to take it in. Even Linda seemed to lose the thread of her stories a number of times. I wasn't sure if she was lonely and grateful for company or just extremely chatty. My attention shifted to Wen Xuan who didn't wait for anyone to get him seated. He lifted himself like a professional gymnast out of the wheelchair into the restaurant chair, effortlessly swinging his legs under the table.

‘Wen Xuan is almost ten, but he’s small for his age,’ said Linda looking at the boy with pride.

‘He was born with a hole in his spine. It’s called *Spina Bifida*.’

I’d heard of *Spina Bifida* before but had no idea what it was.

‘Was that the reason he was abandoned?’ I asked.

‘That’s right,’ Linda said matter-of-factly. I could tell she had been a teacher. ‘The police brought him to the orphanage when he was only a few weeks old.’

‘He could still move his legs then. At one stage when he was very tiny, he got very sick with chickenpox. The orphanage medical staff stuck needles into his skull to feed him Chinese medicine. I always hated it when they did that.’

She paused, anxious not to elicit pity.

‘Eventually, he came through.’

Wen Xuan reached for a menu and opened it, revealing laminated pages of photos for foreigners who couldn’t read Chinese. His fingers moved quickly, almost gracefully as if he were flicking the pages of a musical score. His eyes darted back and forth as they concentrated on the important choice he needed to make. Then he rested on a image of an exotic-looking club sandwich decorated with an orchid and a tiny paper umbrella. It looked like something out of a resort magazine. A long index finger slowly uncoiled towards the photo and ever-so-lightly tapped it. It wasn’t every day he got to order a \$10

sandwich from the airport cafe. This was a boy who'd spent his entire life in a welfare institution.

Linda and I opted for cappuccini. They were also \$10 each. \$30 for two coffees and a sandwich. Sydney prices.

She started to tell me more of Wen Xuan's life story, explaining that Chinese doctors had operated on him when he was a toddler. They had purposely cut the tendons in his legs to stop them retracting. As a consequence, he lost the use of his legs. I shook my head, feeling sickened.

Linda also shook her head and tsked at the short-sightedness of the procedure. She wasn't convinced it was necessary at all, but it was a common thing to do in China at the time, she said.

'In Australia we stopped doing that kind of thing in the 1950s,' she said quietly. 'So now he has no feeling from the waist down.'

Her candour took me by surprise.

Taking a sip of coffee and putting the upsetting thought aside, she glanced at Wen Xuan again like a proud grandmother. 'He has really overcome so many obstacles in his life so far.'

Her mood quickly brightened as she continued her story.

'When he was four, he got about by crawling on the floor. The carer in the foster home accidentally locked herself out, leaving babies, toddlers and Wen inside the apartment.'

‘Stuck outside with the children on the inside, she became frantic. She asked Wen Xuan to try to open the door, but wondered to herself how on earth he would do that.’

The boy had searched around and noticed a pile of plastic stools against the wall. He proceeded to drag them using one hand while he crawled across the floor with the other. Within a few minutes he had build them into a staircase. Like a monkey, he swung himself onto the first step and climbed up the stools until he could reach the handle. Using both hands he managed to unlock the door and let the carer back in.

A young woman dressed like a 1950s American diner waitress, emerged from the kitchen with the coffees and sandwich. She carried the tray nervously like a small child, then stood behind us, just so that she could stare unapologetically at Wen Xuan. Once again, he was oblivious to the attention. His focus was on the the ham and cheese sandwich in front of him. To my mind, it didn’t quite live up to the photo in the menu. There was no orchid or paper umbrella. It was held together by a wooden toothpick. That didn’t bother Wen in the slightest. His spindly fingers gathered up the sandwich, which he virtually inhaled within seconds, leaving just the toothpick on the plate. After licking his fingers, he reached for Linda’s iPad, long fingers tapping the screen while we finished our conversation.

\* \* \*

I first heard of Linda Shum during Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's visit to China in April 2013. A ground-breaking deal was going to be signed; a strategic economic dialogue between Australia and China which was supposed to give our government access to the uppermost echelons of China's ruling Communist Party, a privilege given to only a handful of countries including Russia, Japan and Britain.

At the time, I was presenting a nightly program on the ABC news channel. The producers searched for a fresh angle to tell the story of Australia's engagement with China. I was keen to find a human element to this political story but time was running out. Then out of the blue a message appeared from a social media site I rarely used. It was from a woman in Queensland named Linda Shum. I guessed she was Chinese.

'I need your help,' she wrote.

It felt like one of those hoaxes when someone is stuck in a foreign country asks for money which they promise to pay back.

But Linda Shum wasn't asking for money although she seemed anxious. She said she was the CEO and founder of a charitable organisation which ran foster homes for orphans in a small Chinese city. A fire had recently swept through a Chinese foster home in a city in Henan Province in central China which many Australians wouldn't have heard of. Seven

children – all of them with special needs – died. As a result of the fire, Linda Shum feared foster homes all over China were about to face a backlash. Her organisation wasn't far from the scene of the fire. She was worried she might be closed down.

I Googled the incident. Reports said the fire broke out in an unofficial foster home managed by a Chinese good Samaritan. She had sheltered abandoned and disabled children over many years.

I knew China to be a place where rules and regulations could sometimes be quite fluid, particularly beyond the city limits of Beijing. The fire had raised many questions and caused widespread debate about the government's obligations to project abandoned babies and children. The woman who had cared for the orphans had done so out of the goodness of her heart. Her service was personal, not official.

After the fire, the national government in Beijing stepped in quickly. It ordered authorities to strengthen the regulation of foster care delivered by NGO's (non-governmental organisations) and individuals. Linda Shum feared she might have to return all the children in her foster homes to the orphanages they originally came from. It was a soul-destroying prospect after fifteen years of work removing children from damaging institutions and placing them in foster homes to give them a sense of a normal family life. I continued reading her message.

‘I really want t’

That was the end.

My fingers drummed impatiently beside the keyboard.

Was it a hoax?

She didn’t ask for money, so what did she want?

I clicked on the return email address and wrote in the subject line:

*‘Can you email me please Linda?’*

A few hours later, a reply appeared.

‘Hi Jane, what would you like me to email you about?’

Faithfully, Linda.’

*‘I got a message from this address about a fire in a Chinese foster home?’*

And then came a torrent of words. This woman was clearly driven by passion and commitment, but lost me in the detail of China’s welfare system. It was too much information for a first conversation and I didn’t follow her trail of words.

I’d never heard of her organisation, COAT, before but I was intrigued. I hoped I could find the thread of a story somewhere amid this wordy outpouring. Still, she had effectively snared her first big fish in the media and I found the human interest interview that would nicely explain the people-to-people relationship between Australia and China and why the Gillard visit mattered.

Two nights later when Prime Minister Julia Gillard wrapped up her visit to the Asian powerhouse, home to one fifth of

humanity, Linda Shum appeared at the ABC's Southbank studio in Brisbane where I interviewed her for *The World*. I was in Sydney. When her picture popped up, I saw that despite her surname, she was Australian, not Chinese. She was older than I expected, probably in her mid-to-late sixties with a solid face and a body to match. In front of the camera she was much more formal than she'd been over the phone. I wasn't sure if the interview did her justice, but then you never really know for sure.

Much journalistic work involves researching and immersing yourself in someone else's life for as much time as a deadline allows. From your basket of research, you craft questions, the interview happens, and then, when it's over, you say goodbye and move on to the next subject or story.

But once in a while, moving on is a challenge. On this occasion, the story behind the woman with a tendency to give too much information, continued to gnaw at me. In fact, after the program went to air I had even more questions than I had before although none of them had anything to do with the Australia–China relationship.

How did a retired early childhood teacher from regional Queensland (who didn't study Chinese) end up building an organisation, raising money and caring for the needs of Chinese orphans half a world away? Who were these children? How many of them were there and what was the Chinese city



– which I’d never heard of – actually like? She was clearly religious. She mentioned God a lot. Was she a missionary?

When I worked in China in the mid-late 1990’s I confess, I didn’t think the One-child policy was much of a news story. It had been around since 1980 and it didn’t take great powers of observation to notice that everywhere you went in Beijing, the pavements, the squares, the parks, the lakes, the department stores, even the courtyards of the Forbidden City were crammed full of people. I just accepted the premise that the One-child policy was necessary because there were too many people in China. I thought the nation had done the planet a favour. Since meeting Linda, I’ve changed my mind.

\* \* \*

Not far from the airport cafe an advertisement flashed an image of a rich-looking man in a surgeon’s gown, holding a giant needle and syringe to the flawless face of a pretty Chinese woman. When I lived in China as a correspondent in the 1990’s, the focus of the nation was on lifting hundreds of millions of Chinese out of poverty. It was curious to see plastic surgery ads at an airport. Was there still poverty in China if middle class Chinese could afford plastic surgery? I wondered what other aspects of Chinese life had changed since I had lived there. The list of questions were starting to pile up. If China could

afford to build a telescope to search for extraterrestrial life, why couldn't it afford to care for its own orphans? What effect did the thirty-five year old One-child policy have on China? What did the future hold for orphans like Wen Xuan, the boy in the wheelchair who met me at the airport, and who turned heads everywhere? And why was an ex-Australian school-teacher permitted by a government proud of its own achievements to assist Wen and orphans like him?

'Shall we catch the bus?' Linda asked bringing me back to the moment, reminding me that we had another leg of the journey to go before reaching our destination.

'Do you ever wonder why Wen Xuan was abandoned?' I asked. 'Was it because, if his parents could only have one child, according to the policy, they wanted it to be a perfect child?'

Linda thought for a moment.

'I think he was abandoned because of ignorance and superstition,' she said.

'I don't believe it is ever the mother's choice to let her child go. It's the grandparents who only get one chance at a grandchild and they think it should be male and he should be perfect.'

She paused again.

'There's a black mole on his back which is hairy and ugly. You see, some families consider a deformity to be a curse. Villagers are quite superstitious about this kind of stuff. Historically, there's been very little outside help for disabled children. When

Wen Xuan was born his parents knew he wouldn't be any good for working in the fields. He would be a burden to the family.'

I looked across at Wen who was peering at us with big orphan eyes. He reminded me of Mark Lester, the actor who played Oliver Twist in the 1960's musical film. Wen Xuan was my Chinese Oliver Twist. Even in his post-nauseous state, there was something about his eyes. They were alert and a little vulnerable. It was hard to imagine a couple putting him down, turning their backs on him and leaving him forever.

The hawk-eyed waitress watched me put two notes a tray. She took it back to the counter and checked each note against a lamp to ensure I hadn't passed her any counterfeit money. She was probably right not to trust a journalist. Who knows, she could end up in a book.

I sensed a long journey was beginning and not just the one to Jiaozuo city.

## *An Australian Grandmother's life changing mission to help China's orphans*

In 1997 Linda McCarthy Shum had a stable teaching career and a happy marriage with beloved partner Greg. Living in regional Queensland, Linda was a woman of deep faith with a family of grown children and grand-children on the way. She was 49 and her life was fine.

But Linda's life had not always been so settled. Throughout her childhood she had been made to feel unwanted by a mother battling her own troubles. This cold beginning to Linda's life journey, and the sad cruelty she had just read about in a newsletter, would soon bring her life undone.

The article spoke of Chinese babies being abandoned and dying because of a lack of human contact. The unwanted children were seen as 'throwaway kids' and armies of them were filling up the orphanages of China.

Linda Shum was appalled. A year later, on her first-ever trip overseas, she visited an orphanage filled with sick and dying children, the hidden human aftermath of China's One-Child Policy.

For almost two decades, while China busily developed into a wealthy economy, Linda has travelled back and forth from her home, raising money to better care for the orphans. Battling distrusting government officials and a constant lack of funds, Linda has saved countless little lives, while also establishing a school in the orphanage and a foster-care program.

Today she is the founder and President of the Chinese Orphans Assistance Team (COAT). Linda's work has given the 'throwaway kids' a brighter future, but her achievements have been hard won. During her twenty-year sojourn against sorrow, Linda has had to overcome her own tragedies, surviving breast cancer and a double mastectomy and later the loss of her husband Greg.

Host of ABC-TV's One Plus One, and former China correspondent, Jane Hutchison was captivated by Linda Shum's story and driven to write a compelling account of a passionate and complex woman who has journeyed into the abandoned heart of the world's most populous nation.

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