

An excerpt from
Rebeca Lau's
Mami: My Grandmother's Journey

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Airports are bittersweet places where longed-for encounters and painful goodbyes take place. But today there is no time for people-watching as I run vigorously from International Arrivals to Domestic Departures in the *Aeropuerto Internacional de México*, trying to make it on time for my connecting and final flight to Tapachula. Earlier this morning in Vancouver, I began this journey to meet up with my grandma, Mami. She is flying in from Campeche, where she has been living with her daughter and my aunt, Tía Lupe. Together, we will spend over two weeks in Casa Lau, which has not been lived in for a few years since Mami permanently moved to Campeche.

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While I put everything away (including the leftover bean paste which I place in the fridge and scoop out as a snack in the days that follow), Mami prepares to cook the buns, which have been evenly distributed on eight aluminum mesh-bottom trays. Mami had the trays especially made to steam Chinese buns stuffed with chicken, pork, or sweet bean paste. I carefully light the stone stove and place an oversize *wok* with water on top of it. Then I place the trays on a tree-like metal-rod structure, and the entire assembly goes into the *wok*. Then I cover this with a large upside-down pot. Since it holds four large round trays, we will cook all the buns in two batches. Mami tells me she will let

me know when the buns are done so we can take the trays out and let the *tou sah pau* cool down.

In the meantime, Mami makes deep-fried, Kau Kong style spring rolls for lunch. She has cut vegetables and chicken into fine thin strips, marinated and then rolled them in very delicate, pig stomach lining sheets. She keeps two rolls for us and the rest, along with a few sweet bean buns, we will deliver to Tía Nelly, Tío Neto, and Mami's doctor Fernando. Next, she asks me to call Tío Carlos and Tía Elda to come by and pick some up because she knows they really like them. Then Mami also puts three steamed buns and a couple of spring rolls on a plate in front of Teti and Tío Pepe's black and white pictures and lights a candle.

Mami also deep-fries prawns in the oil so it does not go to waste after one use, using a flour batter she makes from scratch. She tells me that the secret for getting a fluffy and crunchy consistency is to chill the batter in ice. Then with guilty eyes, she says that she does not usually have rolls or this type of fried prawns since they are unhealthy, "*Hou fei poco hou sek*" ("they are fatty, but yummy"). Then she switches to Spanish, saying that she has *antojo* (craving) since she has not had either of these oily dishes in a long time. With rice, Kau Kong-style spring rolls and deep-fried prawns, we sit down to eat at 2:00 p.m. and Mami continues her story.

"Tía Nelly's father was also from Kau Kong. Shortly after Tai-Ku, Papito, and I returned to Kau Kong, Tía Nelly, Tía Blanqui, and Ah-Ming-Suk left Kong Chau to live in Kau Kong with their aunt [their father's sister]. She took care of them and they developed an almost mother-like relationship with her. The three siblings stayed and studied in China for approximately eleven years."

"Tai-Ku lived briefly in Kau Kong and then joined her grown son in Hong Kong. She decided to help find a suitable wife for him. After her son married, she lived in Hong Kong with him for the remainder of her long and peaceful life. Papito and I stayed in Kau Kong, where Papito continued studying very hard. He loved reading and studying and was extremely good at school. He just

wanted to learn everything and anything. And he never asked me for help with his homework. I think Papito inherited his love for books from Teti.”

“After we were living on our own in Kau Kong, I received a message from Teti that he was coming back to China. According to him, China was not totally safe and was still in political turmoil. Because of the feeling of uncertainty still lingering after the war, Teti bought an apartment on the Kowloon side. So Papito and I rushed to Hong Kong to meet up with him. We were so afraid of being split up again. After ten long years, this was the first time I had a husband by my side and Papito a father. I was very happy.”

“Because of what had happened with Casa Lau during his first trip back to find a wife, Teti was afraid to leave the store with his nephews for too long. After almost a year in Kowloon, Teti headed back to Tapachula. This time, he took us back with him. It was Papito and I, and my nephew, the son of my brother #10; he wanted to work outside of China. We needed to pay for flights for three adults and one child. When we were ready to leave, Teti couldn’t access the funds that his nephews had transferred from Tapachula. We were desperate, and Teti looked for loans without any success. Finally, I had to sell the few things I had left and took out most of my savings to be able to gather enough money to buy all four tickets. It’s good to be frugal; you never know when you’re going to need every penny you have. It was because I have the habit to save and not spend that got us out of trouble again.”

“Teti left for Mexico while the three of us (Papito, my nephew, and I) headed to San Salvador (in El Salvador) where our travelling papers were waiting. Papito’s were all in order because he was Teti’s son. So were my nephew’s because he was sponsored as a worker for Casa Lau under the name of Ramón. But mine were taking a bit longer to process since it was complicated. Teti had made arrangements to buy a birth certificate for me from a Chinese Salvadorean whose daughter was deceased. That meant that I would have to adopt a new identity, entering Mexico as a Salvadorean. I didn’t know I had to do this until we were in El Salvador. I had no other choice.”

This was a risky decision, but it was the only way to get Mami “legally” into Mexico because, at the time, the Mexican government would only allow Chinese males into the country through an employer or a family sponsorship program. And the number of Chinese females allowed was extremely small and under specific circumstances that were costly, time-consuming, and cumbersome. “I was very worried because my new papers showed the age of a girl much younger than I was. The Chinese Salvadorean *paisano* who had sold Teti my birth certificate kept telling me that all Chinese looked alike to most Mexicans so there was nothing to be worried about. As long as I correctly answered all of the Immigration authorities’ questions, getting through would not be a problem. So this raised a bigger problem because I spoke no Spanish. What if the Immigration agent asked me a different question from my name, age, and date of birth? I was very worried.”

“We stayed in San Salvador for about fifteen days at the *paisano’s* house, and there was another Chinese woman living there who was waiting for her papers, too (she was going to Tapachula as well). Poor woman! She had been waiting for a longer time because her husband was having difficulty gathering enough money to pay for her release. I felt so bad for her that once Teti paid for our transport to Mexico, I gave the woman the loan she needed. She was freed soon after.”

“Days later and with papers in hand, the *paisano* drove me, Papito, and Ramón, to Guatemala, where we took a plane to Mexico City and entered the country without any problems. I felt so relieved and thought that I had worried for nothing. Then we took another plane to our final destination to meet Teti. Finally, I could breathe a little easier.”