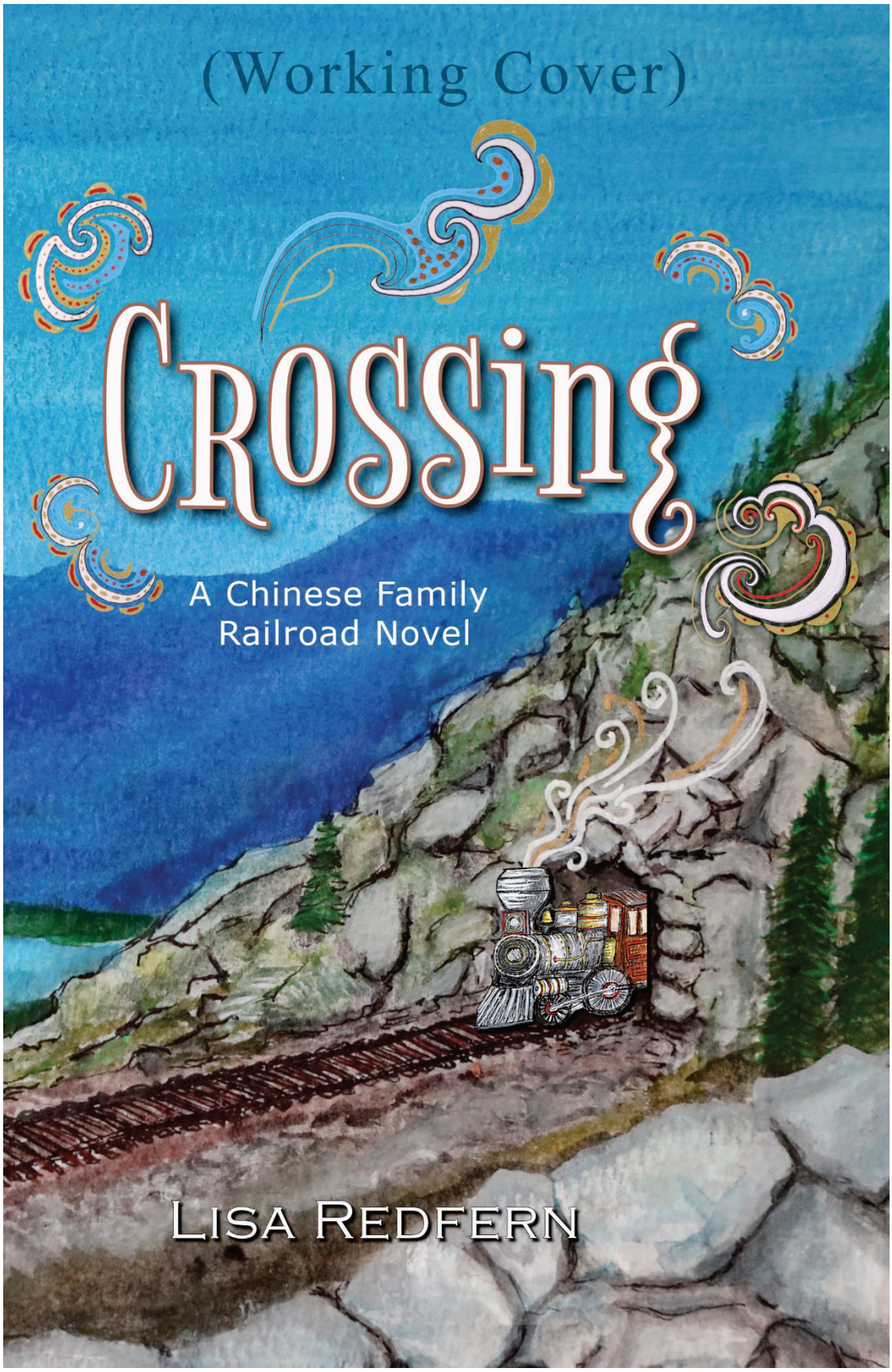
(Working Cover)
Crossing
A Chinese Family
Railroad Novel
Lisa Redfern

Crossing

A Chinese Family Railroad Novel

Lisa Redfern

Little Mountain Publishing.biz

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Crossing is movement through life.

If there's need, greed, opportunity, or environmental trouble, people cross geographical spaces.

If we are on a 'home team' when others are crossing near us, we can be welcoming and accommodating, territorial and cruel, or somewhere in between.

Depending on how our decisions work out, we may cross into new ways of thinking and being in our work or lifestyle.

When on-the-move and approaching intersections, it is *always* wise to listen first, then look left, right, and behind, before crossing.

Donner Summit cover design
Cassandra Raiche

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023924579
ISBN: 978-0-9998591-1-7

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Dedication

First, this book is dedicated to family. The ones we know and the ones we haven't met yet. And to people of differing cultures and genders blending in communities. They make them prosperous, in ways that don't involve money. It is dedicated to the State of California, a wild and wondrous place that leaves permanent impressions on those who visit and live there.

Finally, it is dedicated to bones. Everyone reading this has them. They support and move us from place to place. They're durable. Once water and soft tissues disappear, they lay there just beneath the surface. Sometimes…they return to the world above to retell their stories.

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INFORMATION, ORGANIZATION & SUBTLE SUBTEXT

The story you are about to enter contains a few things you should know about before beginning.

Animal Vignettes are scattered throughout. They are there to remind you that humans are not the only living beings that are part of this story. Each is a mini time snapshot showing body language and thoughts which are communicated in English. (Obviously, this is not how they think!)

Newspaper article snippets are mostly, but not always, at the end of the California chapters. They highlight speech styles used at that time as well as topics editors thought were important. Each snippet includes the publication and article title, and the month, day, and year it was published making it easy to find should you wish to read it in its entirety.

Spoken language. While Crossings is told in English, all the Chinese characters are speaking Cantonese. They also speak a formal language, Mandarin, that all Chinese, across the country, are taught. When a Chinese character speaks English, it is noted.

Chinese Names. Chinese names are listed with surname first and given name last. Example: Yang (given name) Gee (surname) in Chinese is listed as Gee Yang. Historic Chinese naming conventions are used for all the Chinese characters.

U.S. National activities and attitudes in the mid-1860s. Bitter feelings lingered from the Civil War. Hope for uniting the nation focused on completion of the transcontinental railroad.

The Union Pacific Railroad Company (UP), building from the east, employed war veterans and free Blacks.

The Central Pacific Railroad Company (CPRR), building from the west, would cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains, presenting some of the most difficult challenges with steep grades, hard rock, and severe weather. They also struggled to find and keep workers.

To solve the labor problem, Charles Crocker of the CPRR recruited thousands of young men from southern China.

When the newcomers arrived, Anglo-Americans did not understand the function of the Chinese Associations (a social service supporting travelers in foreign countries). They assumed it was another form of slavery and ‘Celestials’ were blamed for taking work from white men.

This **cultural scapegoating** set the framework for the for the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

A bibliography at the end contains research resources including books, documentaries, videos, and websites that could keep you busy for years.

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LOCKPORT

Early Spring
Sacramento Delta, California
1868

Lee squats to scoop up a handful of saturated earth. He spreads it evenly between two palms. “I’m checking to see if my father will speak to me through the soil,” he explains to nine-year-old Bing Hap. Lee inhales deeply, closing his eyes to concentrate. He holds his hands out to the girl whose nickname is his shadow, Lǐ de yǐngzi. She brings her nose close, mimicking his actions. With a satisfied smile, she returns his gaze. Lee recognizes the spark of curiosity gleaming there. His delight in the simple moment splinters as thoughts of his children fill his mind. Song, his daughter, would be six and his son, Luck, who he’d never met, would be four. *Have they learned to honor the soil?* He wonders. Another child at his family farm, Ming, makes him wince and turn away.

“Did it work?” Bing Hap asks. “Did he say anything?”

Lee gazes off in the distance while he spreads his fingers, letting the mud drop. He brushes away the clingy pieces. “Father is content because Mother prepares food for him. He likes the new clothing she sends through the flames.” Lee reaches over to rinse his hands in the water of the Sacramento River. As he does, he’s acutely aware of its melting headwaters and the snow it comes from—evil stuff. “When I was working on the iron road in the mountains,” Lee nods toward the east, “Father sent someone to tell me about your town, Lockport. It shares similarities with my home. It is near the water; families live here. The ancestors knew,” he continues, “coming here would help me sort out dilemmas that are too troublesome for a young girl to understand.” Lee smiles to take the sting out of his words. He flicks a spray of water in her direction.

Bing Hap giggles, swiping droplets from her arm.

Before reaching for a rope tied to a railroad spike planted in the earth up to its flat head, Lee hesitates. The sight of the cordage, attached to something unseen, makes him think about the most recent tragedy on The Hill. Coburn’s Station burned to all but two or three buildings. Was the fire caused by an accidental spark? Or was it set by someone wanting to rid the town of Celestials? While he can’t say he loved the place, important parts of his life happened there. When the town was rebuilt, they moved it slightly and gave it a new name, Truckee.

Bing Hap watches him grasp the submerged rope and begin pulling it, hand-over-hand, curving his back. His heels sink into the mud. A fish trap comes into view, emerging like a phantom from murky green depths. Hauling it onto dry ground, water sieves through the screen. It teems with squirming, potato-sized crawdads. Hap holds a basket steady as Lee opens the door to shake the crustaceans out.

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Signal Crayfish, *Pacifastacus fortis*

Falling.

TAIL: Squip…squip. Squip, squip, squip!

Escape moves always worked before. No water.

PINCERS: Waving, snapping.

A crush of squirming hard bodies.

Too many us together.

NOT good.

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MAP | Southern China, Panyu District

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SLEEPWALKER

Panyu District, China
1847

"Yang!" Five-year-old Lee, the youngest boy in the family, shouts in the darkness. He was sound asleep but sprang up from bed. His eyes were open, but if anyone saw his face, they'd notice his vacant gaze.

"Yang!" the boy called again.

His brother, Yang, who'd awoken the first time Lee spoke, scooched to the far edge of their bed and tightly pressed a pillow over his head.

The oldest, Fu-chi, who had his own bed alongside his brothers, cracked an eye open to watch their interaction.

Predictably, blankets shuffled, and Lee's bare feet came to the floor. He stood in place while Fu-chi counted five breaths. Holding a corner of his pillow, he backhanded it on top of Yang's.

"Ouch!" Yang complained, uncovering his face.

The front door opened. Fu-chi could see Lee's shape, illuminated by moonlight, moving across the threshold. "Go get him!" He shouted. "You can't let him wander!"

Yang's eyes pooled with tears. "It's scary out there, Fu-chi," he complained.

"If you answered him when he first woke, you wouldn't have to go, would you? You're sharing a bed with him. He's your responsibility."

As Yang went sniffling out the door, Fu-chi groaned and sat up. He scratched his scalp, then combed his fingers through long hair that needed a wash. On his chin, where a few stiff hairs sprouted, there was an inflamed tenderness from a fresh batch of pimples. He'd like nothing better than to scrape away the pus-mounds. But the memory of Mother's reaction last time stopped him.

She'd narrowed her eyes when she first spotted his handy-work. Stepping close, she pointed. "Phlegm stagnation!" She said it as if she were announcing a crime. He noticed Father unsuccessfully attempting to hide a smile as he left. Fu-chi was further humiliated when Mother made him pull her in the cart to the herbalist. More so when the medicine man, his wife, and their teenage daughter inspected his face. He hated the itchy paste they'd bought. Mother insisted he slather it on the welts and drink the bitter tea they recommended. Thinking about it, Fu-chi's mouth filled with saliva. He swallowed hard to keep himself from gagging.

Making fists. Squeezing his fingernails into his palms, Fu-chi forced his attention from his chin back to his little brothers. *I'll give them to the count of ten before I go,* he thought.

Hearing them on their way back, Fu-chi flopped down. "Good boy, Yang. I knew you could do it," he said when the door closed.

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MO CHOU & MOTHER GEE

Spring
Panyu District, China

1848

"Success depends upon previous preparation,
and without such preparation, there is sure to be failure." – Confucius

Mo Chou slides her fingers under the covers to touch Fu-Chi's bare thigh. It is warm and smooth. By his rhythmic breathing, she can tell he still asleep. From the time of their marriage, the couple occupied the only private room in the house. Mo Chou knew her husband would gladly respond if she started clouds and rain. But her mother-in-law would know… Rolling out of bed, in complete darkness, she reached for the rough-spun house dress she'd lain out the night before, pulling it over her head. Tiptoeing across the room, she lifted the door handle, putting downward pressure to the left so the hinges wouldn't squeak. Closing it behind her, she slipped her feet into cloth-soled slippers before moving toward the faint candle glow in the kitchen.

Mother Gee was already there, lighting the stove. Mo Chou reached for the empty water pail by the back door. Changing shoes again, she stepped outside, pausing as her chest tightened. A multitude of childhood stories about tiger attacks in predawn hours and roaming hungry ghosts paraded through her mind. The hair at the back of her neck prickled.

At the well, she attached the bucket to a rope and let loose the clamp, that held it in place. She bounced up and down on the balls of her feet while waiting for the splash. Once the bucket reached the bottom, she jiggled the rope around, making sure it filled. Assured she'd accomplished her goal, she set to work cranking the shaft. Soon, moisture droplets beaded on her forehead and dripped between her breasts. Mo Chou was relieved that her worries had receded back into the corners of her mind.

Mother raised her eyebrows when she saw splash marks down the front of Mo Chou's dress. She had a cooking pot ready for the water. This would remain on the stove all day. Mother backed away to the far edge of the workspace where she filled a teapot with loose leaves, measuring them out with precision.

Mo Chou moved with confidence, adjusting the fire logs to heat another section of the stove top. Adding a mixture of dry grains to a smaller pot, she slid in a heaping spoonful of goose fat before submerging the mixture under water and adjusting its position for maximum heat. She worked on chopping peanuts and pickled vegetables, sliced thin, just the way Mother liked them.

Shao Pei no longer viewed her daughter-in-law as a burden. The girl was fully trained. She'd even accomplished teaching Mo Chou to play the erhu, an instrument like a two-stringed guitar. Pei had learned to play as part of her girlhood training. Her father had gifted a fine instrument to the Gee family when she married. Grandfather Gee had fashioned a second

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