

L E A V E S

After the revolution came to China
all my mah mah owned was a wide-brimmed sunhat
that her husband wove from reeds.
Pretend, he said.
You are a grand lady walking in the palace garden.

But the regime was relentless.

One unblinking eye stares from the sky above Canton:
sweat-slicked hands clasp heavy ploughs,
dry lips call for skinny cattle.
Thousands of narrow backs
twist from the weight
of carrying a dynasty through famine.
Under the gaze of that hot sun
my little mah mah's body became the brown ochre of falling leaves.

Decades later, in Lyall Bay, Mah Mah hands me photos.
A baby in hung sik, lucky red
blankets swaddled tighter than they ought to be.

I remember that feeling – a deep pressure in my chest,
wrinkled brown hands wrap over and over,
a ballast tied down in a storm.
While those hands still moved, they whispered to me.
You will never go hungry as I did.
Winds may ravage this land, yet you will never be cold.

On Saturdays we eat cheong fun
out of takeaway boxes at the market.
I hang a keipo to dry in icy Wellington wind.

Lily Ng



mah mah: father's mother

hung sik: bright red

cheong fun: a delicious snack made from wide rice noodles wrapped around various fillings (vegetables, barbecue pork, shrimp) and served with soy sauce

keipo: a short-sleeved, tailored dress with a high neckline that became popular among women in Shanghai during the 1920s and 1930s (also known as a cheongsam or Mandarin dress)

(These words are all Cantonese.)

Leaves

by Lily Ng

Text copyright © Crown 2020

Image by Simon Waterfield copyright © Crown 2020

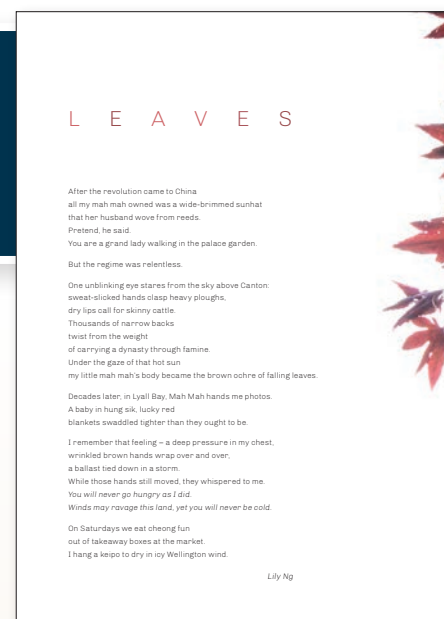
For copyright information about how you can use this material, go to:
<http://www.tki.org.nz/Copyright-in-Schools/Terms-of-use>

Published 2020 by the Ministry of Education,
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

All rights reserved.
Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77669 948 3 (online)
ISSN 2624 3636 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Simon Waterfield
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 4 MAY 2020

Curriculum learning areas	English Social Sciences
Reading year level	Year 8
Keywords	Cantonese, change, China, Chinese Cultural Revolution, culture, family, grandparent, heritage, history, immigration, language, migration, poetry, refugee, relationships, revolution, sacrifice, verse