

Name: _____

Class: _____

Surviving

By Marie Lu
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Marie Lu is a bestselling author of young adult fiction, including the Legend and Young Elites trilogies. Lu's family fled China for the United States when she was five years old, immediately following the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. In "Surviving," Lu explains how watching her parents navigate the impossible have taught her valuable lessons and helped to shape her own life's path.

As you read, take notes on how Lu describes her feelings about protests over the course of her life.

- [1] I was five years old in 1989, the year I left for America and the year the Chinese government cracked down on college-age protesters in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.¹



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I was a kid. So, my memories of that time are simple and fragmented. The protests had been happening all throughout the spring of that year, culminating² in a hundred thousand people filling the square, each calling for democracy. At the time, I lived near the square with my family — and for us, the sight of the weekly crowds was something of a tourist attraction.

"Let's go see what the students are up to," my aunt would say, and she would wheel out her bicycle, help my cousin and me on, and then ride us out to the fringes of the square.

What I remember is keeping an eager eye out for the Popsicle vendors who set up shop around the square. I remember thinking that the sea of bicycles looked like a moving river. I remember the way my skin would stick to itself from the warm air.

And on the day the government finally cracked down, I remember the tanks out in the streets, waiting at the square's entrances for orders to come from above. I remember the massive, massive crowds, and my aunt leaning down to me, telling me that we should head home early. I remember that kindergarten was canceled the next day.

- [5] This kind of unrest was new and unusual to me, of course — I grew up in late-1980s China,³ a time of rapid

1. Tiananmen Square is a prominent city square in Beijing, China that was the site of a massive student protest in 1989. An undisclosed number of protesters were killed when the Chinese military opened fire on the unarmed protesters who were surrounded by tanks and truckloads of Chinese soldiers armed with automatic weapons.
2. reaching its highest point

economic growth and rising wealth. But my parents were all too familiar with events far worse; they had survived the Cultural Revolution,⁴ one of the darkest periods in China's history. To this day, my mother will not tell me all the things she witnessed during those dark days of her youth, but the stories she *has* shared sound like something out of a dystopian novel.⁵

The way you survived during the revolution was to stay off the radar. My grandfather, an accomplished poet, burned every single one of his books. My mother's family flushed any family jewelry or valuables down the drain. They memorized Mao's "Little Red Book"⁶ in school while secretly studying on their own at home.

Whatever you did, your goal was to keep the Red Army's⁷ eyes from falling on you. Being *other* was dangerous.

I would listen to them tell these stories and think that some of them must be far too outlandish to be true. But then I would remember Tiananmen Square, and nod along.

It was that past world to which my parents said their goodbyes. It was that world my parents left behind, setting their sights instead on the light across the sea. And it was that world that cemented the fundamental lesson I thought we took with us to our new home:

- [10] Assimilation was the key to survival. You lived by keeping your head down. Do not rock the boat. Do not speak out. What was a better example of this than the Tiananmen Square Massacre? It's hard to say how many protesters died that day, but it was obvious to me that speaking up and standing out had killed them.

My father had already left for America — specifically, for Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge — a year earlier on a student visa⁸ that had taken ten years to acquire. Several months later, the travel visas for my mother and me were approved too, and we left to join him. He picked us up late at night in a beat-up yellow Cadillac that must have been on its last legs, and I rode back sandwiched in between my parents in the front seat, the ride so bumpy and the smell of old leather so pungent⁹ that I upchucked right onto my exhausted mother's shoes.

None of us spoke English yet, outside of the limited conversations my father could piece together. One of our first American experiences was Mardi Gras¹⁰ (of all things), and I can still remember us standing there on the

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3. In the late 1980s, China enjoyed a brief period of intellectual freedom and freedom of the press.
 4. The Cultural Revolution was a sociopolitical movement created by Mao Zedong from 1966 until his death in 1976, with the goal of preserving Chinese communism by expelling the remnants of capitalism and traditional Chinese society and culture.
 5. Dystopian novels are about society in decline or ruin, with characters who battle environmental catastrophe, technological control, and government oppression.
 6. Entitled Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong, the "Little Red Book" is a book of quotations from Zedong that served as a central piece of propaganda during the Cultural Revolution. It was required reading in school, and citizens viewed owning it as important to staying alive.
 7. the armed forces of the Chinese Communist Party from 1928-1937
 8. a legal document issued to students from another country that allows them to study for a certain period of time
 9. having a strong odor
 10. Mardi Gras is a carnival celebration held after the Christian Feasts of the Epiphany and ending on the day

street, feeling distinctly like an *other*, not understanding a word being said. What was this bizarre place where people dressed in costume and partied until morning? What was with all the shirtless people? Where were we? Why were we here?

We were incredibly poor. My parents rationed their food strictly — one orange a day, meat only on the weekends. Anything considered a treat was reserved for me, and eating out at fast-food restaurants was a luxury we almost never indulged in. On weekends, we searched for yard sale signs and church donation tents. Of course my parents couldn't afford child care, so my mother was forced to take me with her to her shifts at a local Chinese restaurant, where she learned to balance eight plates at once on her slim arms as I watched TV in the restaurant's broom closet from morning until evening, the only place anyone could keep a restless five-year-old.

I was as happy as a clam. Children adapt to almost anything when they're young, and my existence was the norm as far as I was concerned, because, well, what else could I compare it to? I was fed, clothed, sheltered, and loved. I took these privileges for granted and had absolutely no concept of poverty. In my protected little world, my hand-me-down stuffed toys were made of magic, and my summers in that broom closet were spent singing songs and making up my earliest stories to myself. We couldn't afford new clothes, but what did I care? My mother would spend weekends transforming reams of cheap cloth and unusable old shirts into the most beautiful dresses for me, full of lace and pockets and flower patterns. Our first Christmas, my father splurged on a tiny, two-foot-tall pine plant, and we excitedly decorated it with a single garland of lights and a dozen ornaments.

[15] My parents were determined for us to adapt as quickly as possible, so we set about doing it in earnest. My mom gave me an assignment to go to kindergarten every day, write down five new English words I didn't know, memorize what they meant, and use them in sentences. I was encouraged not to speak Chinese at home. We watched American shows, cartoons, and movies. My parents put away our statue of the Guanyin Buddha,¹¹ and every Sunday, I got on the little bus that took me to church, where I memorized Bible verses in exchange for plastic toy figurines.

I wrote English. I drew American cartoons. I played American video games. As my parents gradually found their footing — my father as an engineer, my mother as a software developer — and moved us to a more comfortable home in Texas, I adapted at an alarming speed. It wasn't long before my parents realized that, far from hoping I would be able to pick up English, they actually needed to worry about the fact that I no longer spoke Chinese at all. When I went to school, I wanted the brown paper bag lunch the other kids had — I wanted the Lunchables, the sandwich and juice, not the rice and fish my mom would pack for me. I was determined to shake off the *other* image, and I would accomplish that by erasing myself completely, by blending in with everyone else and following my adaptation rule: Stay quiet, be good.

It wasn't until I left for Los Angeles to attend the University of Southern California that I suddenly found myself immersed in an environment where everyone was an *other* — a bubble of young people thrust together into semi-independence for the first time in our lives.

before Ash Wednesday (Fat Tuesday). Among the most famous and rowdy Mardi Gras celebrations are the ones held in New Orleans.

11. Guanyin Buddha is associated with compassion in Buddhism.

I distinctly remember the sheer chaos on campus during my freshman year, and my surprise that all of these teenagers were *loud* — sometimes for trivial things, other times for global issues. The Iraq War¹² had just begun, and there was a sense of electricity in the air, a campus-wide buzz of protest.

It baffled me at first. Look at these young people raising their voices, making decisions with real consequences! All I could think of was my memory of those college-age students gathered in Tiananmen Square, one hundred thousand of them, and the way the tanks had looked on.

[20] Didn't my peers know the rule? Speaking out makes you a target, gets you killed. I stayed quiet.

One day, I walked past a table at which students were signing up to join a massive antiwar protest happening in San Francisco. I passed it on the first day, then the second and third day. On the fourth day, I stopped in front of the table to look at the sign-up sheet. I don't remember what compelled me to put my name down. But I did.

My mother, understandably, did not want me to go. I could hear the fear in her voice over the phone without even seeing her expression. It was dangerous, she told me, and I knew she was remembering her years in China, what she had seen and lived through. What could I say to justify my desire to go? It certainly wasn't bravery, or even a sense of justice and doing what was right. It was sheer curiosity, a reason my mother could never have afforded to use. What was a protest in America like? Would it resemble at all the only other protest I had ever witnessed, with tanks in the streets and soldiers facing off against civilians?

I went.

A sea of people. Deafening chants. Like the Tiananmen Square protests, there were a hundred thousand people protesting against the Iraq War. I remember standing on a bench with a half dozen of my classmates, holding a corner of our "USC Students Against the Iraq War" sign, and thinking about whether any of these students feared for their lives. Then I wondered if maybe those students in Tiananmen Square, those who were killed, would have demonstrated anyway, even if they had known what was going to happen to them.

[25] The Iraq War protest was the first one I ever participated in. After it ended and I returned to school, I found myself sitting in on classes where I didn't belong, even if I got the occasional funny look. I signed up to join the student senate, even though I was incredibly awkward and anxious in public. I turned down law school and made a serendipitous¹³ decision to work on video games at Disney.

The version of me that had wanted to disappear would never have made these choices. They went against every lesson I'd ever learned about adaptation, about surviving via silence, about not rocking the boat.

But I realized that I had a fundamental misunderstanding of the lessons my parents had tried to teach me about adaptation. Never at any point in their journey did they survive by mere silence and assimilation. They did not make it out of the Cultural Revolution by keeping their heads down. When the world around them fell apart and their government refused to let them learn in school, they rebelled by studying secretly by candlelight

12. The Iraq War (2003-2011) was an armed conflict that began with an invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies that overthrew the Iraqi government and Saddam Hussein.

13. seeming to happen through good luck, by chance, or by "happy accident"

at home. Instead of staying in China and falling into step, they left behind everyone they knew and loved and instead set out to a foreign, frequently hostile land. Somehow, somehow, they stood on their bedrock of disadvantage and built a foundation.

Being *other* was dangerous. And yet, my parents had — in defiance, optimism, and determination — still *chosen* to be other.

Survival was never about keeping your head down or not rocking the boat. It was about finding a way.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which statement best expresses the central idea of "Surviving"?
 - A. Regardless of the personal risks involved, it is important to openly fight back against oppressive forces.
 - B. Generational differences can be difficult to overcome when attempting to integrate into a new culture.
 - C. Although it can be emotionally difficult, completely conforming to a new culture is for the best when survival is at stake.
 - D. Surviving and thriving sometimes requires both the patience to be silent at times and the bravery to take immense personal risks.

2. What is the best definition of the word "assimilation" as it is used in paragraph 10?
 - A. strengthening a vessel for a long trip across the open sea
 - B. converting food into material that can be used by the body
 - C. adopting the language and culture of a nation or majority social group
 - D. highlighting the best features of one's own culture to fit in with the new one

3. Which detail from the text best demonstrates that the author's parents wanted to adapt quickly to life in the United States?
 - A. "In my protected little world, my hand-me-down stuffed toys were made of magic, and my summers in that broom closet were spent singing songs and making up my earliest stories to myself." (Paragraph 14)
 - B. "My mom gave me an assignment to go to kindergarten every day, write down five new English words I didn't know, memorize what they meant, and use them in sentences." (Paragraph 15)
 - C. "When I went to school, I wanted the brown paper bag lunch the other kids had — I wanted the Lunchables, the sandwich and juice, not the rice and fish my mom would pack for me." (Paragraph 16)
 - D. "I distinctly remember the sheer chaos on campus during my freshman year, and my surprise that all of these teenagers were loud — sometimes for trivial things, other times for global issues." (Paragraph 18)

4. How do paragraphs 18-20 help to develop the author's ideas?
 - A. They explain how Lu was able to easily relate to her peers once she reached college.
 - B. They clarify the reasons behind Lu's parents having been so protective during her childhood.
 - C. They demonstrate that the divide between Chinese and U.S. culture is one that she cannot overcome.
 - D. They show how her family's experience with political oppression still affected her choices as a young adult.

5. In paragraph 29 Lu writes, "Survival was never about keeping your head down or not rocking the boat. It was about finding a way." What does this quote suggest about the author's point of view regarding her parents?
- A. She better understands that her parents did try to conform to survive, but they also fought back in important ways.
 - B. She loves and respects her parents, but she resents their decision to take her away from the country where she was born.
 - C. She feels that the cultural differences between herself and her parents are too great for there to be any true understanding.
 - D. She grieves the loss of her parents and wishes that she had told them that she was proud of them when she had the chance.

6. What connection does the author make between protests and making choices for one's future?
