

Anna's Story

Interview and story written with michelle liu

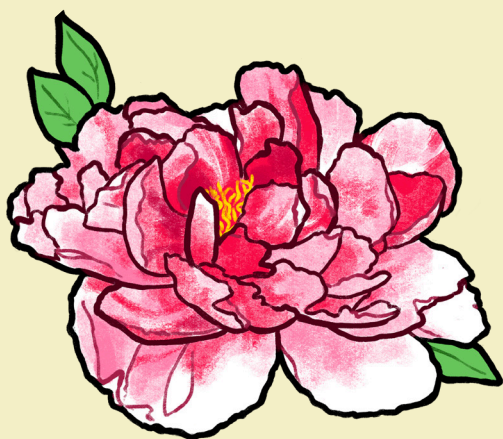


Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou_

Anna is an injured worker and former factory worker.

Anna loves everything about film. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, watching movies has been the primary way she has coped with the fear and anxiety of living as a sick, former factory worker with family members who continue to work full-time on the frontlines. Anna calls watching films her ultimate stress reduction technique, "it saves a lot of money when I don't have to pay for therapy." She recalls spending countless evenings and weekend afternoons in Guangxi with her friends, all in their early 20s, pouring over every TV drama and movie they could find; films from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Hollywood and Vietnam. Vietnam is where her grandfather, whose ancestral home is in Guangxi, had settled and where she was born and raised until the age of 12.

In 1978, a year before the Sino-Vietnamese War broke out, she followed her widowed mother, elder sister and younger brother across Vietnam's north-eastern border to Guangxi, in hopes of arriving to her mother's hometown Fangcheng and finding a way out of the insecurity, violence and chaotic uncertainty of an international conflict far beyond their control. They were assigned to a town just outside of Chongzuo where they were strangers

with no roots or family. This was her first experience with leaving her home behind and the first of two experiences living as a refugee. Her second experience took place in Hong Kong, when changes to the British Hong Kong colonial government's immigration laws turned what was previously a common immigration pathway for Vietnamese people in China to exit the country into a crime and made Anna a refugee. Her third experience leaving home was her immigration to Canada.

Anna's love of learning languages was met easily by the hours spent absorbing the dialogues, plot twists and romantic escapades she admired in films. Vietnamese is her mother tongue. It was the movies, migration and community that taught her Cantonese, Mandarin, a little English, and the Zhuang languages she only distantly remembers. Finding herself back in Guangxi after deportation from Hong Kong, Anna entered the local hemp textile factory to work as a seamstress. In part because of limited economic options and in part because of interest, Anna, a self-taught tailor and clothes-maker, would spend her off-hours with her friends pouring over movies; carefully studying, designing and recreating the newest styles of dresses and skirts they had seen in films into fitting clothes they were proud to wear.

When she was around 20, Anna decided to leave Guangxi for Hong Kong and then the UK, taking the same trip her uncle and relatives had taken without her years earlier. She wanted to work, see the world and have a chance at better economic opportunities like her relatives in the diaspora had described.

To pay off debts at home, Anna at 18 went door to door to fruit canning factories, day in day out, whole-selling fruits she grew from farmland allocated to her family, and 2 years later succeeded in making what was then considered a small fortune. She left some money for her mother and siblings and set off with her friend, bringing what was left of her savings with her across the southern stretches of China towards Guangdong province, following the route many other Vietnamese migrants and refugees had taken in the years during and after the Vietnam war and into the Cultural Revolution.

Border crossing and more specifically the making and remaking of place was an experience that profoundly shaped Anna's world view and her life in Canada. The border was a site of both trauma and possibility, a threshold both

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shapeless and heavily patrolled that leaves invisible reminders in your body. The watery border of the South China sea was where Anna almost lost her life. In the crowded turbulent crossing towards Hong Kong, she fell off the boat and nearly drowned. Today, Anna speaks of what she describes as a terrifying and nerve-wracking time with a casual directness. She remembers the anxiety of daily survival and the frequent dizziness and migraines that came along with prolonged hunger. Both experiences continue to show up and impact her life.

For 3 months she was detained at the Sham Shui Po camp for Vietnamese migrants before being transferred to another camp in Tuen Mun.

Living in detention, she awaited a decision on whether she could settle in another country in the West or be repatriated to Guangxi.

Because of the government's distinction between "political" and "economic" refugees, Anna didn't have the freedom to leave the camp, visit new places, or work as she intended. Thinking about her own experience, Anna remarks that she did not personally suffer any violence during her time in detention and got along well with everyone, including the officers. In the camp, Anna regularly helped other Vietnamese migrants translate between Vietnamese and Cantonese and took on liaising with the police on behalf of

other detainees. She also helped run classes for children growing up in the camp, teaching singing and dancing. After a year in detention she was deported to Guangxi and resigned to work at the local hemp textile factory.

Anna married her boyfriend of 5 years, who is also Vietnamese, in Toronto, after leaving Guangxi by herself once more to join him and his parents in Canada. Their romance was one of serendipitous feeling that Anna described as love at first sight; he was a friend of a friend who worked in the same factory, the one in their town of almost infrastructural scale where over 2000 other mostly young people worked, yet somehow, they had never seen each other. She was on the hemp textile production line and he was one of the mechanics who fixed the machines. When his parents' application for residency in Canada was approved, he accompanied them with the promise they would be reunited.

Once in Canada, her life as an immigrant here was complicated by feelings

of loneliness and longing. She knew no one. She was separated from her friends, relatives and her family and the only English she knew was the little she had picked up from watching Hollywood films. As someone with a facility with language, she hated not being able to express herself and felt incapacitated by the language barrier. She didn't want to be told she couldn't work, and she wanted the warmth of having all her loved ones together with her. With her husband's love and support, she was determined to find a way to bring her whole family to Toronto.

Anna had to make the difficult choice between learning English or working as much as possible to afford the costs of sponsoring her family in Guangxi to join her in Canada.

There were two motivations that kept Anna going, to put away money for days that may unexpectedly turn grey and to bring all her family members together. Both, she observes, were tied to her experience with migration and precarity; the impossibility of saving much of anything when you live as a refugee, the pressure of escaping instability and poverty, the separation from friends and family and the uncertainty around how long she would be able to stay in one home. Her desire to create a home for herself and her family was often countered by the double-bind of labour and time, where the hours you both want and need is what steals away your time. For the next few decades Anna and her husband worked in factory after factory, each taking many shifts and often at different times. For years she worked overtime. At one point, she was working 7 days a week, 2 shifts at 2 different factories, totaling 16 hrs a day Mondays to Fridays after dropping the kids off at school and picking them up, and she worked as a cashier on Saturdays and Sundays. She took as many shifts as she could, working in the production

line making everything from textiles to lighting fixtures, VHS tapes, carpets, windows and bakery goods—thousands of times over, making the things that fill up people's homes.

The jobs acquired through temp agencies were the most demanding and difficult. It was in those environments where she would experience impacts on her health that should be called occupational injuries but would likely not be recognized as such by the Workplace Safety & Insurance Board (WSIB). The job Anna liked most and felt she was best at was her role as quality control worker for the VHS production facility where she was employed for 10 years before the factory shut down. It was a connection somehow to the films she missed watching and the stories she missed being engrossed in. This was prior to the widespread rise of temp agencies.

Since being in Canada, watching films and going to the movies, a favorite activity of Anna and her husband when they were young and in love, has become unfamiliar. Of some regret to her was missing out on years of learning English—a goal that would have opened more possibilities for her but was at the same time eclipsed by the promise of work. Although Anna sometimes laments experiences and opportunities she didn't get to have, Anna is proud of her years of work and gratified with having the security of her own home. "It was all worthwhile" she says, because over the years, she successfully managed to sponsor 5 family members, including her mom, sister, brother, nephew—who now all live close to her in the GTA.

These days, Anna suffers from vertigo, migraines, asthma, weakness, lethargy, forgetfulness and a host of other health issues. Some may be traced to the difficult experiences of displacement and insecurity and others the result of years of exhaustion, precarity, overworking, and exposure to stressful and harmful work conditions.

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On the dusty lines of the carpet factory, Anna developed chronic allergies and asthma, respiratory conditions that now make her especially vulnerable to COVID-19. The toll on one's body is severe when you don't have the stability of a home, when you have to move and move, chasing survival.

Although for Anna, that toll is a fact of life, a trade off one makes between a seemingly permanent rock and a hard place. Vulnerability induced by structural inequality has a way of making you vulnerable again, even when the initial circumstances seem to have passed. Last January, a few months before the pandemic hit in Canada, Anna's temp agency Nuleader, suddenly shut down and stole weeks of wages off the already slim paychecks of hundreds of minimum wage workers. Anna, who was contracted to work at a baked goods factory at the time, was one of them. Anna and her former co-workers are now fighting to win their stolen wages back. In perspective, Anna is a sick and injured migrant worker; her health changed by decades of low wage, overtime, unstable and often essential work. Survival as a working-class immigrant should not be an occupational hazard, yet one is often repeatedly exposed to multiple risks that take up residence in your body.

This January, Anna and her husband both contracted COVID-19 from a meat processing plant in Mississauga where he and their second eldest son work. Other members of their family of 5 include their eldest son, a manager at a restaurant who now works from home as a videographer and editor; and their youngest son who works at a factory. Anna's husband was the first to experience symptoms and he spent 3 weeks at home in recovery while the plant closed to contain the outbreak. For Anna, who had stopped working in March of last year, the symptoms were more severe. Because of her underlying conditions, everyone in her family

was anxious and terrified, fearing the worst. Four months later, she is still suffering from the debilitating and prolonged consequences of the virus, such as difficulty breathing, fatigue and strain in her lungs when she tries to go up the stairs.

Luckily, when she and her husband were most sick, her sons took care of everything else, cooking, cleaning and bringing meals to their doors where

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they were separately isolating. While Anna herself was no longer working on the frontlines, she and her family were all vulnerable. For over a year she tried her best to stay home, be cautious and carefully observe public health measures—fully aware of the risk if she were to be infected with COVID-19. Such individualized measures did not protect her. With 5 people in the house, and Anna and her husband still several years from retirement, staying home from work to prioritize their health was not an option. He had to go to work and so did their sons.

Now, Anna worries most about sickness. She is relieved that her husband is still working. Yet each day she undergoes the stress of wondering if her husband and sons will be bringing home the virus. Because they've lost friends and relatives around the world to COVID-19, the danger of the virus feels especially immediate. For the duration of the pandemic Anna has been living with intense feelings of anxiety and depression, in constant unease about the possibility of severe illness and loss. The heavy-heartedness and worry are supplemented by grief. Anna and her husband both fear they

will be infected with COVID again, only this time the consequences for Anna would be much worse.

Each day, Anna wonders whether her body will allow her to do the things she wishes to do. Her existing illness, now worsened by the disabling impact of COVID-19 leaves her more vulnerable than she was before. This year, for the first time in decades, Anna has been able to rest and watch movies.

She talks about the ability to watch movies as the unexpected upside of this pandemic, her therapy and vehicle for imaginative escape to offset the dull and panic of lockdown and illness. On good days, she has time to catch up with films and catch up with friends in the US, UK, Australia, Sweden, Canada, China and Vietnam for mutual support. When her body allows her to, she walks around her garden. How she will find work again is another source of stress.

At the end of April, Anna received her first dose of a vaccine. She wishes that the Canadian government can quickly and effectively administer the doses, because the best thing that can be done, she believes, is to prioritize the health and safety of everyone, including working-class people in her position with underlying health conditions. This, for Anna, means making sure every single person can get a vaccine, regardless of immigration status and that people's personal information should be respected and not shared with the police. She stresses that the vaccination plan needs to protect everyone because all of us are on the same boat; if people with precarious status can be safe, then we are all safe. “Vaccination would be ineffective if not everyone can access it”, she adds “if there is a threat of deportations and arrests, people will not risk taking it. Protecting everyone is a way of protecting Canada as well. Immigrants and refugees arrive in Canada from all over the world. They are not only Chinese. They need to be cared for too.”