

# Who Killed Soek-Fang Sim

## Wang Ping

I'm one of them, Soek-Fang  
Already assuming you're just another  
Dumb teacher, dumb scholar, dumb woman  
Just because we share a yellow face,  
A funny accent, and an eternal doubt  
Between our eyebrows: are we good enough  
Will ever be good enough  
In this fruited prairie?

I'm one of them, Soek-Fang  
As I sat watching rumors shroud you  
Poison gas seeping into your breasts  
Heart, lungs, liver, spleen, tongue, throat  
Till every drop of blood, every cell of our being  
Is filled with this cancerous doubt:  
Are we good enough? Will ever be good enough?  
In this gas chamber of slander  
We die from inside, a lone alien  
Under the purple mountain majesties

I'm one of them, Soek-Fang  
Filling vita with our bone marrow  
Books, honors, awards, student evaluations  
Testifying how we've changed their lives with ours  
Oh how we toil with our bleeding dream  
No holiday, no weekend, no vacation  
No time for friends or children  
Only our vita bigger than this nation  
Only this year to be seen  
Through the glass of justice  
As "good enough equals"  
Under the beautiful halcyon skies

## WHO KILLED SOEK-FANG SIM

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I'm one of them, Soek-Fang  
Killing you with my silence, my quick  
Belief in this whitewashing slander  
Even though the truth is just a button away:  
You're a great scholar, a passionate  
Teacher, a generous colleague . . .  
You should have been the face of the institution  
With your roots in China, your birth in Singapore  
Your PhD from London, the only international  
Degree as a crown jewel for the global mission  
Yet I assumed your incompetence  
Because of this internalized doubt—  
Are we good enough?  
Must we toil on our knees for a foothold  
Under this alabaster tower dimmed by our tears?

I'm breaking through this gas chamber, Soek-Fang  
I refuse to believe this whitewashed lie—  
“Not good enough, will never be good enough”  
Just because of our yellow face, our black accent  
Our brown immigrant feet . . . refuse to please  
On our knees . . . in our deathbeds  
In the name of diversity, human rights  
I refuse to swallow the doubt  
That kills you and me  
That kills our sisters and brothers  
Across the amber waves of grain

I'm rising, Soek-Fang  
We're rising, Soek-Fang  
If the law won't speak justice  
We'll sing it with our poetry  
If justice becomes a cover for lies  
We'll burn it with our eyes  
If lies smear our spirit  
We'll cleanse it with our blood  
If our spirit can't cross the chasm of hope  
We'll make wings of 7 billion hearts  
To fly from sea to shining sea

Take our hands, Soek-Fang  
Fear is no longer an option  
Silence is no longer an option  
Rise with us, Soek-Fang  
Out of this alabaster tower  
From sea to shining sea  
Under the beautiful halcyon skies  
Over the purple mountain majesties  
Across the amber waves of grain  
Through this fruited prairie  
Till we reach the land of the free

**Soek-Fang Sim**, a Singapore Chinese immigrant, taught International Studies at a Midwest liberal arts college. She was an award-winning scholar and students loved her as a teacher and mentor. Before her third-year review, however, the rumor to defame her as a teacher and scholar had already started. She didn't pass the review and died shortly of breast cancer at 35, in her home near Berkeley.

# My Name Is Pariah

## Wang Ping

“Ping,” said my colleagues when they learned my promotion denial, “just stay quiet till a new president and provost, and you’ll have no problem to be promoted.”

“Ping,” said another, “if you make ‘noise,’ no college will ever want you, no matter how breathtaking your resume is.”

“Ping, don’t complain to the human rights department if you still want to teach here. It’s equivalent to taking poison and hoping that your enemy will die. It’s a suicide.”

*Suicide: an act of taking one’s own life . . . may stem from social and cultural pressures, such as isolation, bereavement or estrangement. - Merriam-Webster*

I know what they’re saying. That’s why I stay quiet since I started teaching in 1999. Quietly I taught MWF 8:30-3:30, three weeks after my surgical labor, still wobbling from a torn birth canal. Quietly I watched my male colleagues got their early promotions with 1/7 of my publication while I was denied the promised opportunity. Quietly I complied when I was told I couldn’t teach poetry, or fiction, even though I was hired as a poet and fiction writer. Quietly I cut 1/5 of my salary to do service: create new curriculums, expand the writing program, establish the Chinese program, serve on many committees, organize conferences, bring visitors from all over the nation, world, curate permanent photo installations for the college.

For 13 years, I kept my mouth shut and worked. Creative Writing became the most popular major. I hired every single faculty in the department, and helped establish the Chinese department. I brought 45 visitors to the campus. I organized over 30 student readings, mentored and nurtured many students into great poets and writers. I published 10 books, won book awards, national fellowships and Distinct Alumna Award, gave hundreds of readings, lectures, key-note speeches, served on EPAG, Freeman Grant and ACTC committees, judging for NEA, PEN, Griffin . . .

For 13 years, I’m the first to arrive in my office, the last to leave. The security guard knows my blue Honda, parked 7 days a week outside the Old Main, even

on New Year's Day. My kids know it's impossible to make me sit down on the couch. They no longer ask me to take them somewhere for a family vacation.

For 13 years, I have no time for my family. I give my bone marrow to the college.

For 13 years, I made hundreds of dinners for students and faculty, elaborate banquets that require weeks of preparations, food made for joy and peace.

My photos adorn the President and Admission's Offices as symbols for harmony.

Everyday I endure pain: joints, muscles, stomach, TMJ, IBS, depression, loneliness . . .

For the dream that I'd be an equal, someday, if I keep quiet and work hard . . .

Until I was summoned into the office: "Your promotion is denied. You're not good enough, compared to your colleagues."

Until my appeal was rejected. "You're just not enough."

Until the FPC chair pointed her pinky at me, "Ping, you're nothing, compared to our colleagues."

Until they try everything to stop my research.

Until they cut all my teaching fund.

Until they dismantled the Creative Writing program I built.

Until they ignored my pleas to stop their retaliation and let me teach in peace.

Until they hired a five-lawyer team to Shock & Awe me into dust, pushing for a trial.

Until lies run rampant about my demand for a "large sum of money," my refusal to mediate.

Until I become the Pariah on the campus: nobody looks at me; nobody speaks to me, nobody knows me, nobody returns my email, including those I hired, sheltered, worked with, co-taught with, traveled with, shared meals with . . .

That's when I realize I will never ever be an equal, no matter what I do, no matter how quiet and low, just because I'm a Chinese, a Chinese woman, a

Chinese woman immigrant, a Chinese woman immigrant who dreams and speaks in America, who dares to demand the equal rights as a human.

In fact, the more achievements I make, the deeper is my trouble, the more hatred and violence. It goes so deep it can no longer be explained with logic. The refusal to support the Kinship of Rivers project cost the college about \$250,000 potential grants, and much coveted publicity. The dismantled writing major will cost thousands of dollars of potential tuitions. Their passion to eliminate me through the legal battle is costing the college thousands of dollars, its invaluable reputation.

The lies and estrangement from this battle are costing my life . . .

All because I ask to stand as an equal to my colleagues, to teach and research as an equal in an institution built on the principles of justice, diversity, internationalism, and academic freedom.

Academia has become a violent place, especially for women of colors, especially for those who dare to speak.

I watched the violence unleashed upon Soek-fang, Kieu Linh, Rosalie Tung, Sun, Feifei, Carmen, and many others. I watched my sisters flailing, writhing, dying alone. I stood by with my mouth shut hoping it wouldn't be me next. I worked with my teeth clenched hoping I'd be spared. I endured waves of retaliations praying they might stop some day. I called and emailed begging for a face-to-face meeting to resolve the conflicts, NO MONEY NECESSARY. Finally, my attorney sent a sample complaint hoping for an internal resolution . . .

My private complaint was answered in court. I was blasted into the public arena for a "hunger game."

That's when I realize that my silence is a suicide that has been killing myself from inside, a homicide that killed Soek-fang, almost killed Kieu Linh, a genocide that is killing the entire group of women of colors in academia, one by one, thousands by thousands . . .

Read my story, our story, Soek-fang, Kieu Linh, women from *Presumed Incompetent*, every detail backed by facts and legal documents, every word soaked with tears, sweat, blood . . . Call EEOC, Human Rights Department, Chronicle of Higher Education, AAUP, NAS . . . They'll tell you they're overwhelmed by discrimination claims.

And if you dig, anywhere, you'll unearth the skulls and bones of women of colors upon which the Great Wall of American Academia is built.

Kieu Linh, assistant professor at UC Davis fighting for her tenure, described the other world and how she came back from her “90 minute clinical death,” her survival already a “miracle” in the modern medical history.

*It was cold there, littered with bones. “Eat us, eat our bones,” begged the voices, “so that you’ll have strength to go back.” I hold them, bones like roots that won’t die, brown, red, black, yellow. I cried, “No, I can’t eat you, sisters.” “But you must,” ordered the bones. “You must take us back to the living and tell them what they’ve done to us. Eat us so we can live, so you and your baby daughter can live. Eat us!” So I chewed, and the bones uttered a sigh with each bite . . . as each story was released into the light . . .*

**Genocide:** *a deliberate and systematic destruction of a racial, political, or cultural group . . .* - Merriam-Webster

Before I spoke, I was dying slowly from exhaustion, shame, doubt, violence. . .

After I spoke, I’m dying from isolation, estrangement, retaliation, intimidation, terror and heartbreaks . . .

To speak or not speak, it’s no longer an option.

I am dying no matter what, being a woman of color, an immigrant who dares to dream for equality, justice and truth in American academia.

If I’m given a death sentence for this dream, then let me die with my mouth wide open. Let the public eye be my shield. Let the public conscience be my sword.

Let me the Pariah so that other women of colors will never have to go through what I have gone through, so that my sisters and children can live with dignity and joy.

Speak, if you don’t want to be the next in the “Hunger Game.”

**Genocide****Merriam-Webster**

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Preventive measures</i>
1. Classification	People are divided into “us and them.”	“Develop universalistic institutions that transcend divisions.”
2. Symbolization	When combined with hatred, symbols may be forced upon unwilling members of pariah groups . . .	“Combat symbolization, hate symbols can be legally forbidden as can hate speech.”
3. Dehumanization	One group denies the humanity of the other group. Members of it are equated as incompetent, inferior, animals, vermin, diseases . . .	“Local and international leaders should condemn the use of hate speech and make it culturally unacceptable.”
4. Organization	Genocide is always organized and institutionalized	“Impose embargoes on . . . citizens of countries involved in genocide . . .”
5. Polarization	Hate groups broadcast polarizing propaganda . . .	“Security protection . . . or assistance to human rights groups . . .”
6. Preparation	Victims are identified and separated out because of their ethnic . . . identity	“At this stage, a Genocide Emergency must be declared . . .”
7. Extermination	It is ‘extermination’ to the killers because they do not believe their victims as equals or fully human	“Safe areas or refugee escape corridors should be established with heavily armed international protection.”
8. Denial	The perpetrators . . . deny that they committed any crimes . . .	

# The Cost of Speaking

## Wang Ping

It marks you a black-sheep, boat-rocker, loser, misfit, maverick, mother-f-er, mad-creature in the attic . . .

You're shushed, shunned, shamed, then shoved into the court where money equals power equals truth.

You're stripped naked: internship, study abroad, sports, grants, research, publishing, travel, work, dignity, friends, colleagues, shelter, food, peace, joy, your rights to be a student, teacher, human, woman . . . your plans de vidas.

Everyone flees from you: colleagues, "friends," publisher who has published six of your books, claiming "We're your house and we'll publish every word you write . . ."

You feel alone in the jungle, surrounded by thorns, vines, fire ants, scorpions, snakes, pythons, owls, hyenas, wolves, each waiting to jump on you . . .

Before they take you down, you're already torn from inside: doubt, betrayal, bewilderment, outrage: what have I done to deserve this?

The worst is fear: losing your job, shelter, children, parents, friends, publisher, community, country, everything you've been working for—your dream, belief, hope.

Your core is shaken. You can't eat, sleep, concentrate, care for your children . . . you cry, scream, tremble, sweat . . . your mouth tastes bitter, dry, stuffed with cotton . . . you lie awake all night long . . . you jerk awake gasping and whimpering . . . you alternate between diarrhea and constipation . . . your heart palpitates . . . your breath stinks . . . your temples pound with migraines . . . you can't eat, talk, yawn from TMJ . . . your innards twist like a boa constrictor . . . your world spins into a vertigo.

You die prematurely, depending on your strength, your will to live.

## The Cost of Not Speaking

You still die prematurely, depending on your level of conscience.

It eats you up from inside, starting from the heart, up to your throat, tongue, teeth, eyes, temples, brain, down to your stomach, spleen, liver, guts, kidney, back, limbs . . .

You try to justify your silence: internships for good grades, good grades to graduate, graduation to get a job, job to pay off the loans ticking like time bombs. Silence to keep the job that feeds the kids and keeps them sheltered; silence to secure grants for research projects that secure the job, promotion, respect, happiness . . .

And you work 24/7 to make beauty, laughter and dreams, for children, for students from K-graduate schools, for the seniors, the poor, the sick . . . You feed those misfits, mavericks and losers with food, money, poetry, story, hope . . . pulling them out of the pit one by one, turning them into superstars, warriors, poets, writers, artists, activists . . . you give your bone marrow, not for money, but out of your conscience.

Yet your windows and doors shut one by one, with nails and invisible glue: no more grants, funds to teach, field trips, visitors; you're put on academic probations constantly; you're forbidden to intern outside the campus, or study abroad, therefore you can't graduate; your tenure is threatened, denied . . . Before you know it, you're in a pit alone, airless . . .

You start rotting from inside: IBS, anemia, depression, tidal fever, night sweating, weight gain, weight loss, blurry vision, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, cancer . . .

You tell yourself: I'm picking the right battle to fight; let others speak, and I'll second, as you watch your big-mouth colleagues taken down and out one by one, your brilliant misfit students on probation, your friends declaring bankruptcy, homes taken away by the bank and law firm that also represents your boss charging \$800 an hour that you'll end up paying if you lose in court . . .

Your conscience begins to gnaw its way through the organs: acid reflux, ulcer, alternation between diarrhea and constipation, manic depression, cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, Hashimoto's thyroiditis, Lupus, Graves' Disease . . . In the long silence, the body attacks itself as its enemy . . .

## **Reasons to Speak**

You're marked anyway, if you're a minority, a misfit, a non-conformist, a mad woman in the attic . . . you're not the same, will never be.

You can't hide or pretend. Your body hums with the energy, the urge to speak.

Once a maverick, forever a maverick.

Once a big mouth, forever a big mouth.

It's the essence of being alive, our hallmark, our plan de vidas.

# Today Soek-Fang Accepted My Friend Request from Another World

**Wang Ping**

It's mid-April and the river  
Is under a new blizzard

Kate comes over and we walk into the snow  
That carries the weight of the entire Mississippi

Trees bend into lizards, crocodiles, wolves  
An eagle leads us to robins, snow owls, yellow finches

We chat about kids, schools, divorce, race  
We follow the footprints of turkeys, dogs, coyotes

At the confluence, Fort Snelling is still besieged  
Cries of Dakota warriors peel from the Pike Island

Far away in Houston, Fady, a rising star  
Vows patience, his fever for love and beauty

So breathless, the earth trembles under our boots  
The river whirls like dervish, white skirt swelling

We halt at the silence that seizes our breath  
And I know you're with us, Soek-Fang, keeping us alive