

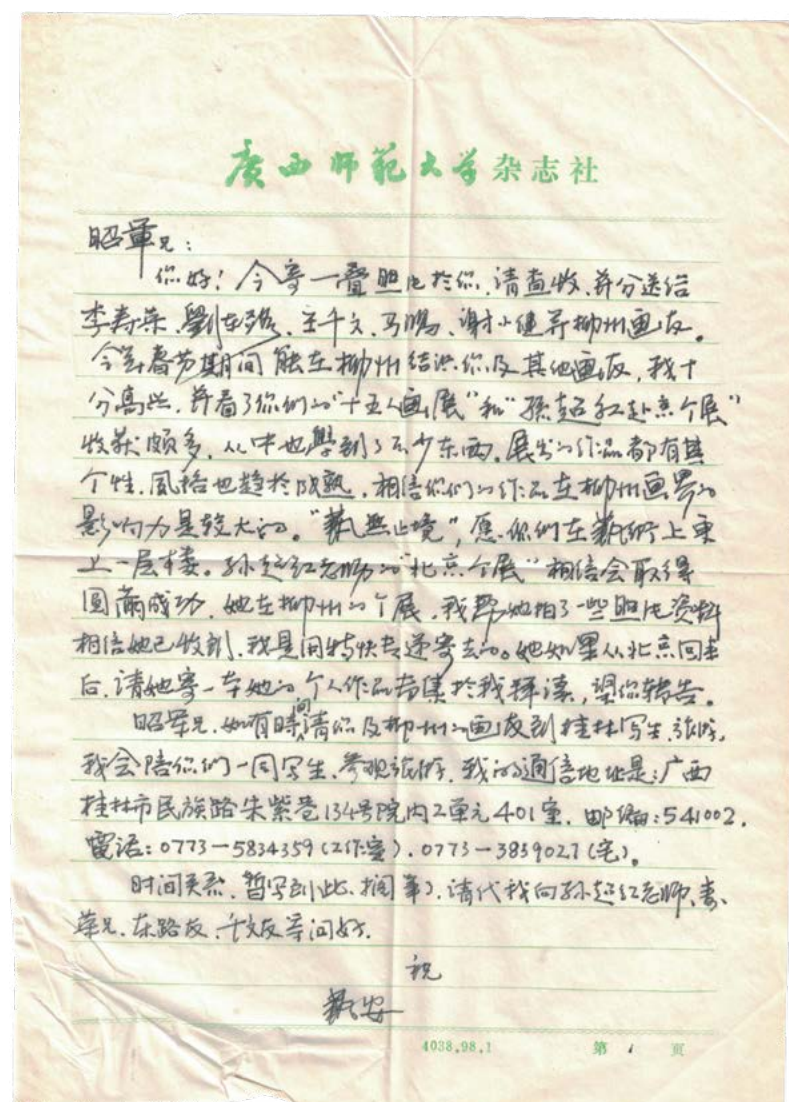
The Departure of Them, The Return of Us is an archival project consisting of photographs, prose, letters and short stories with the intention of exploring the multiple connections of narratives through the assemblage of four publications.



This spring, I found a box of photos and letters, dated between 1980 and the millennium - the period of Reform and Opening Up - that my father had left behind in our family's old apartment in Liuzhou City.

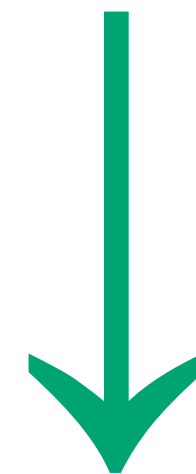
For my last project, I downloaded many photos of political activities from an archive website set up by the Guangxi government.

When placing the two together, such words emerged in my mind: era, history, collective, micro-individual and macro-politics.



Guangxi, a region in southern China designated as an autonomous area for ethnic minorities, is my birthplace. During the rainy season, its mountains often appear in shifting shades of blue and purple. So beautiful. But most people here prefer to leave. When I was five, I moved with my parents from here to a coastal city in Guangdong.

I know it's going to be archival, but how do I organise the material? The first thing that drew me in was the sense of contrast between the two types of photographs. Colour and monochrome; groups and individuals; men and women. I was looking for visual connections in the images.



Projection 1

How can visual connections be used to organise materials into narratives, creating an unconventional historical archive?



Experiment 1

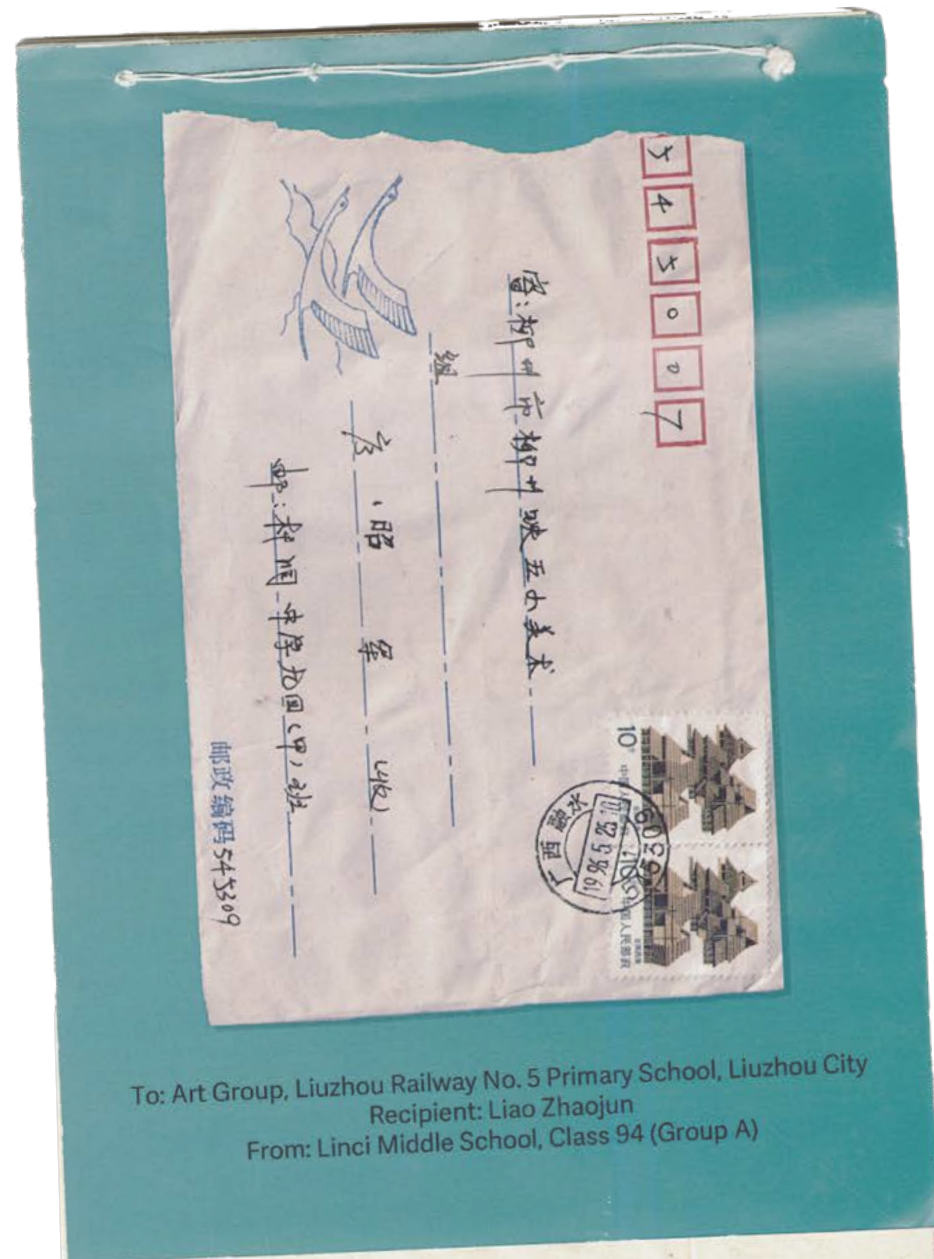
Weaving official and private images together like a bamboo basket.



Experiment 2

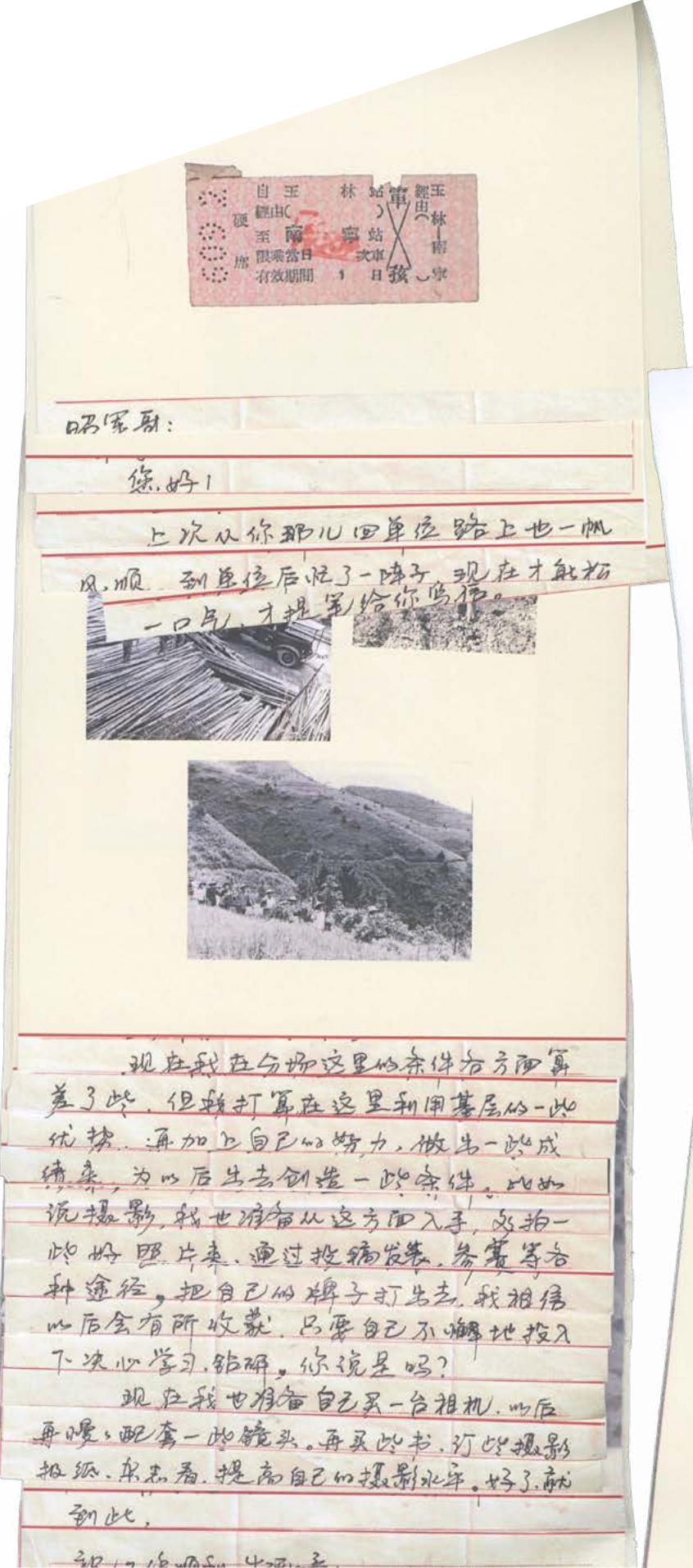
Layout official and private photos on separate pages and paste a fragment of a letter on the side.

The purpose of this was to see what it would feel like to alternate reading two different perspectives.



广西壮族自治区国营钦廉林场文利分场用笺

昭军哥：
您好！
上次从你那儿回单位路上也一帆风顺，到单位后忙了一阵子，现在才能抽一口气，才提笔给您写信。
现在我在分场这里的条件各方面算差了些，但我打算在这里利用基层的一些优势，再加上自己的努力，做出一些成绩来，为以后出去创造一些条件。比如说摄影，我也准备从这方面入手，多拍一些好照片来，通过投稿发表，参赛等各种途径，把自己的牌子打出去。我相信以后会有所收获。只要自己不懈地投入，下决心学习钻研，你说是吗？
现在我也准备自己买一台相机，以后再慢慢配一些镜头，再买些书，订些摄影报纸、杂志看，提高自己的摄影水平。好了，就此。
祝工作顺利，生活如意！
慕海 8.28



昭军哥：
您好！
上次从你那儿回单位路上也一帆风顺，到单位后忙了一阵子，现在才能抽一口气，才提笔给您写信。
现在我在分场这里的条件各方面算差了些，但我打算在这里利用基层的一些优势，再加上自己的努力，做出一些成绩来，为以后出去创造一些条件。比如说摄影，我也准备从这方面入手，多拍一些好照片来，通过投稿发表，参赛等各种途径，把自己的牌子打出去。我相信以后会有所收获。只要自己不懈地投入，下决心学习钻研，你说是吗？
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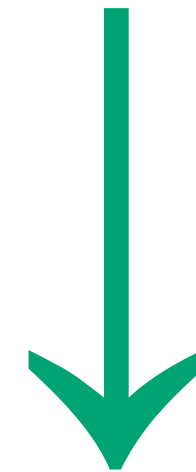


下决心学习钻研，你说是吗？
现在我也准备自己买一台相机，以后再慢慢配一些镜头，再买些书，订些摄影报纸、杂志看，提高自己的摄影水平。好了，就此。
祝工作顺利，生活如意！
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Experiment 3

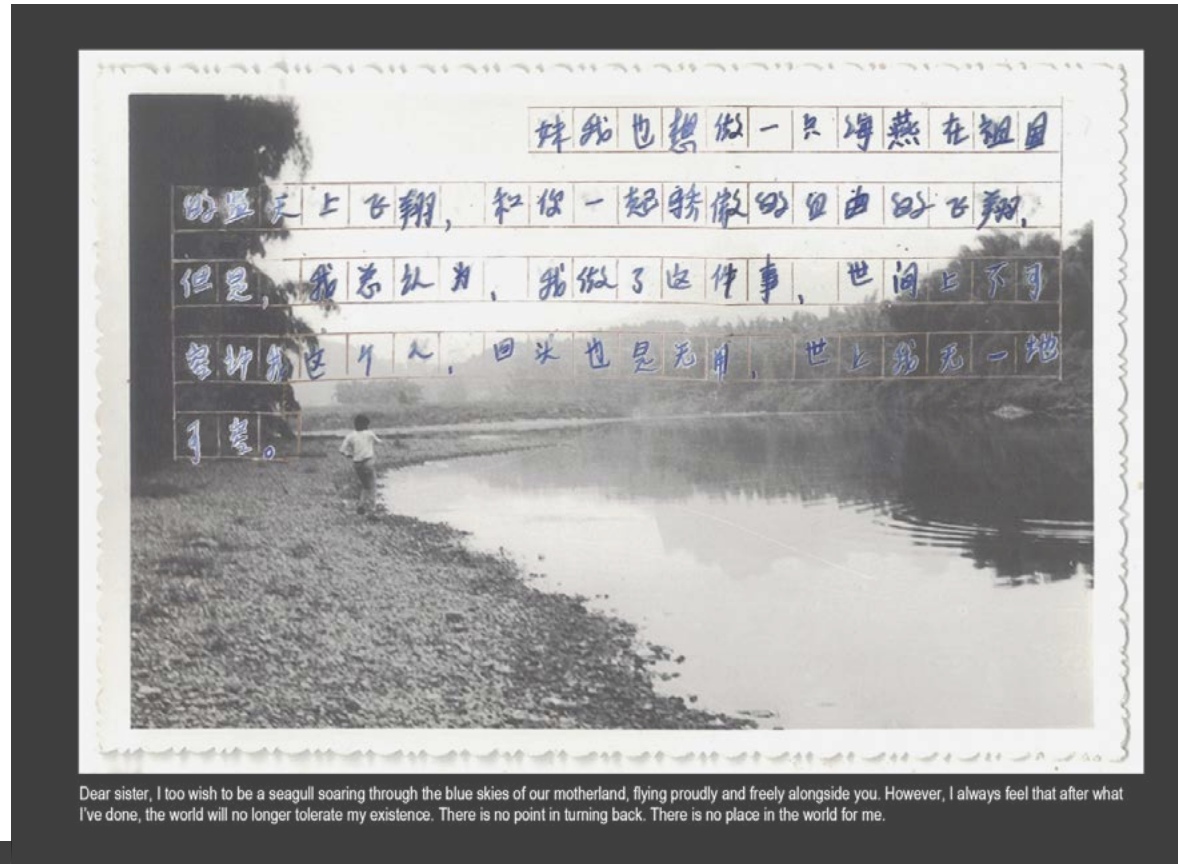
Using an letters as the narrative lead.

After the experiments, I remain certain that what I want to create is a work that allows us to see the era through these materials. At the same time, I chose to forgo using official archival photographs. Why not tell the story using only personal photos and letters? This is a perspective missing from official archives.

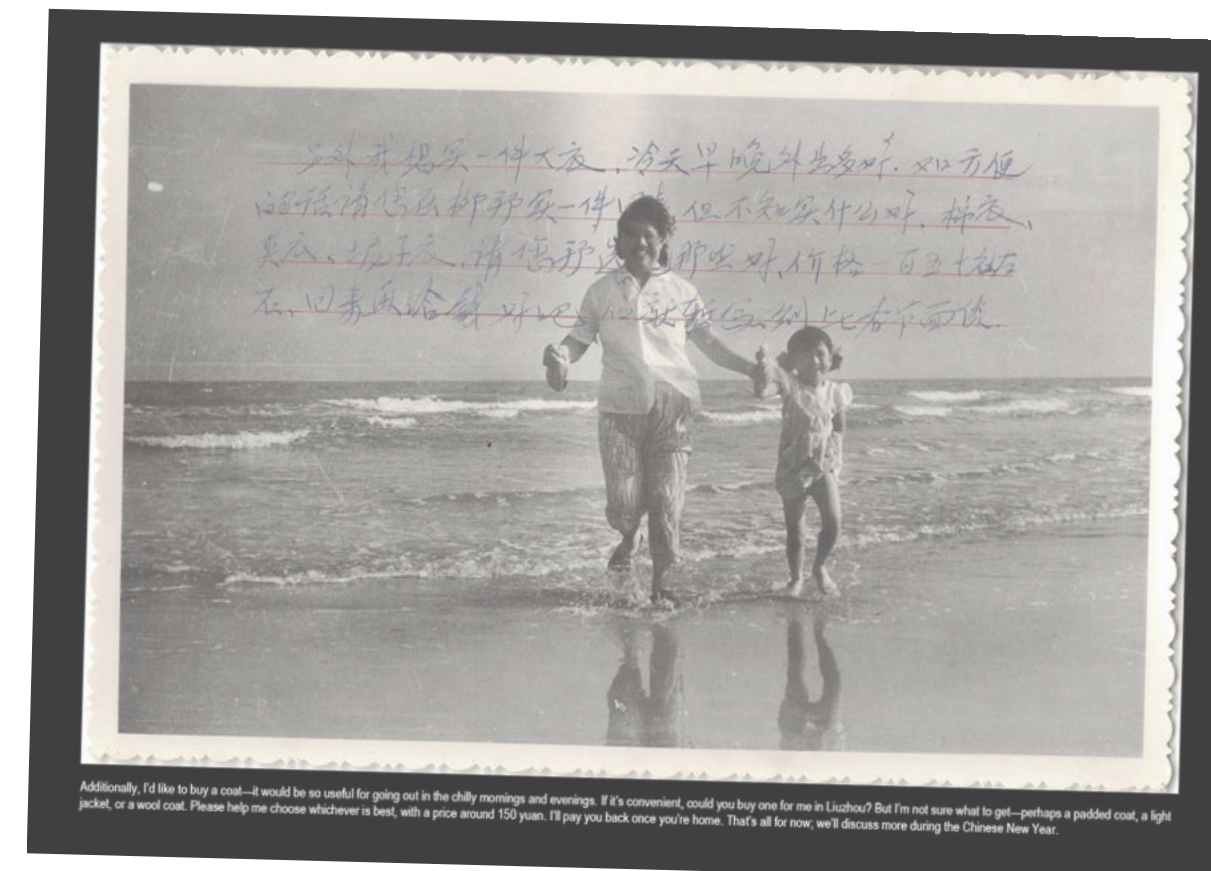




Teacher will you laugh at me? Laugh at me for being a big fool? Maybe people will encounter many setbacks in their lives, I won't be deterred by difficulties, and if I can still study next term, I will treasure it.



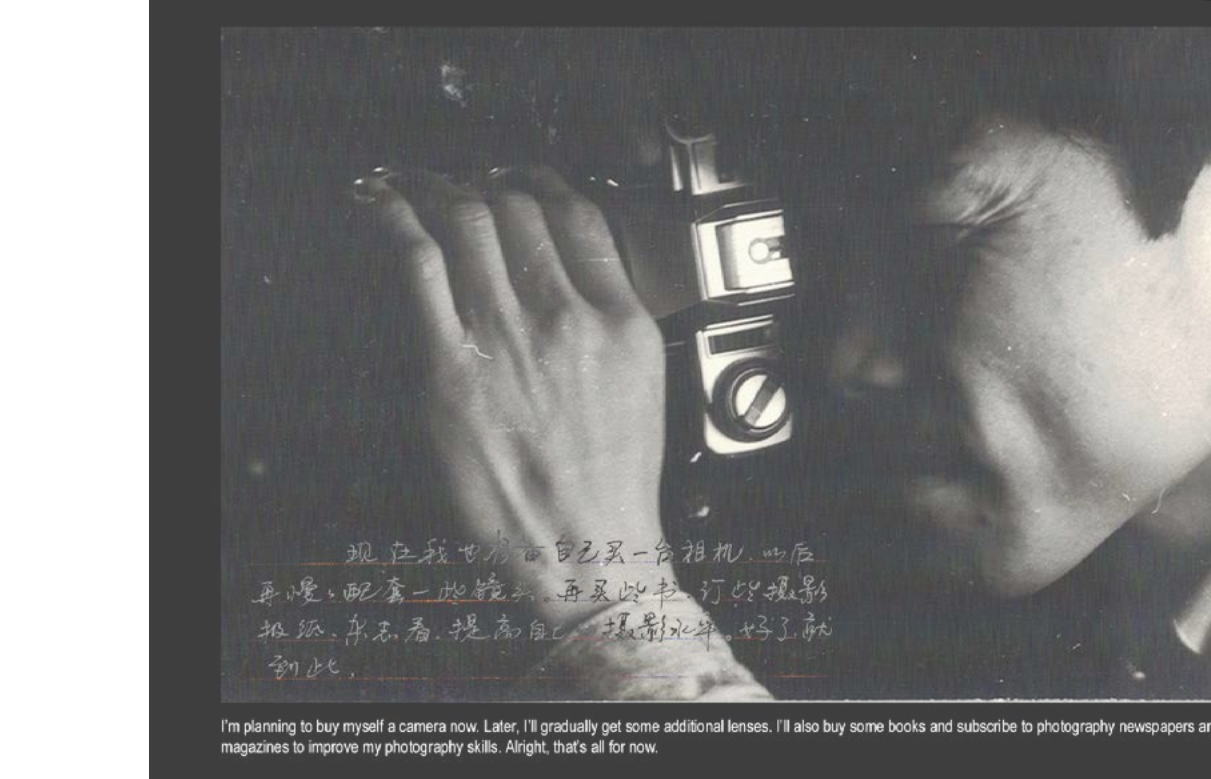
Dear sister, I too wish to be a seagull soaring through the blue skies of our motherland, flying proudly and freely alongside you. However, I always feel that after what I've done, the world will no longer tolerate my existence. There is no point in turning back. There is no place in the world for me.



Additionally, I'd like to buy a coat—it would be so useful for going out in the chilly mornings and evenings. If it's convenient, could you buy one for me in Luchou? But I'm not sure what to get—perhaps a padded coat, a light jacket, or a wool coat. Please help me choose whichever is best, with a price around 150 yuan. I'll pay you back once you're home. That's all for now, we'll discuss more during the Chinese New Year.



Saying these things carries a certain sadness. My career has not taken off, I can't even talk about having a "career." As for relationships, they're like a kite with a broken string, drifting who knows where. But I believe there's always hope. I wish you happiness and hope that my own tomorrow won't be sorrow.



I'm planning to buy myself a camera now. Later, I'll gradually get some additional lenses. I'll also buy some books and subscribe to photography newspapers and magazines to improve my photography skills. Alright, that's all for now.

Experiment 4

I experimented with embedding excerpts from the letters into the photographs. For instance, in one letter, someone mentions his desire to learn photography. I paired this line with an image of a person holding a camera. This was intended as a test: can unrelated images and texts, when juxtaposed, create a kind of intertextual tension?



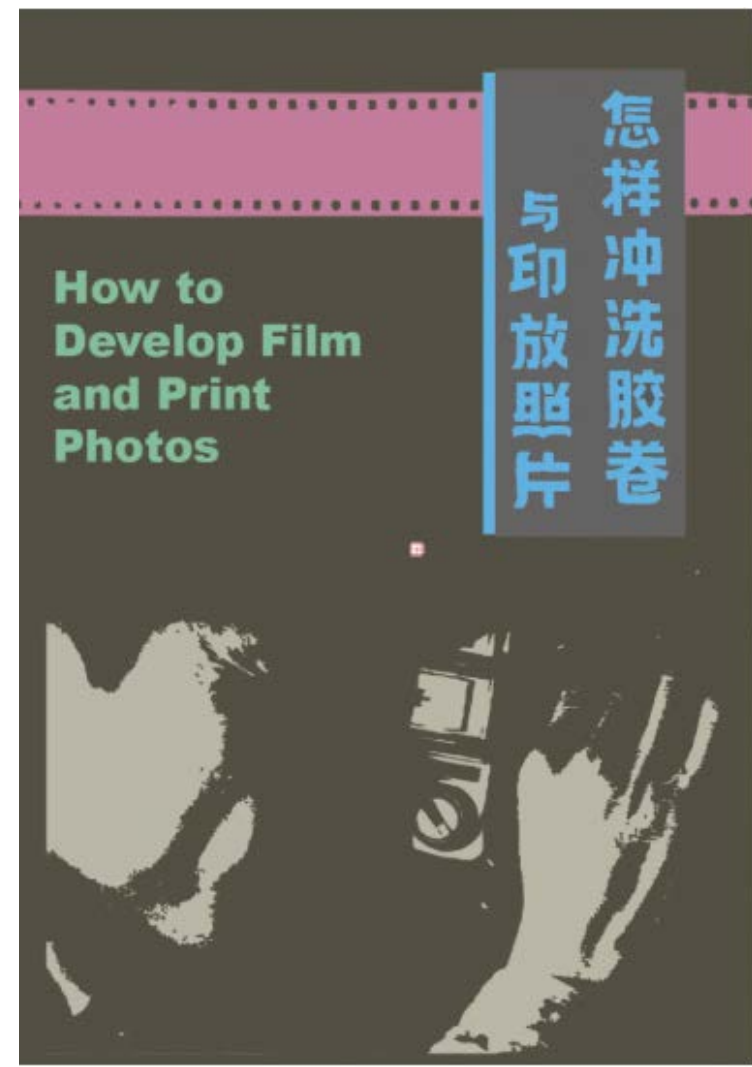
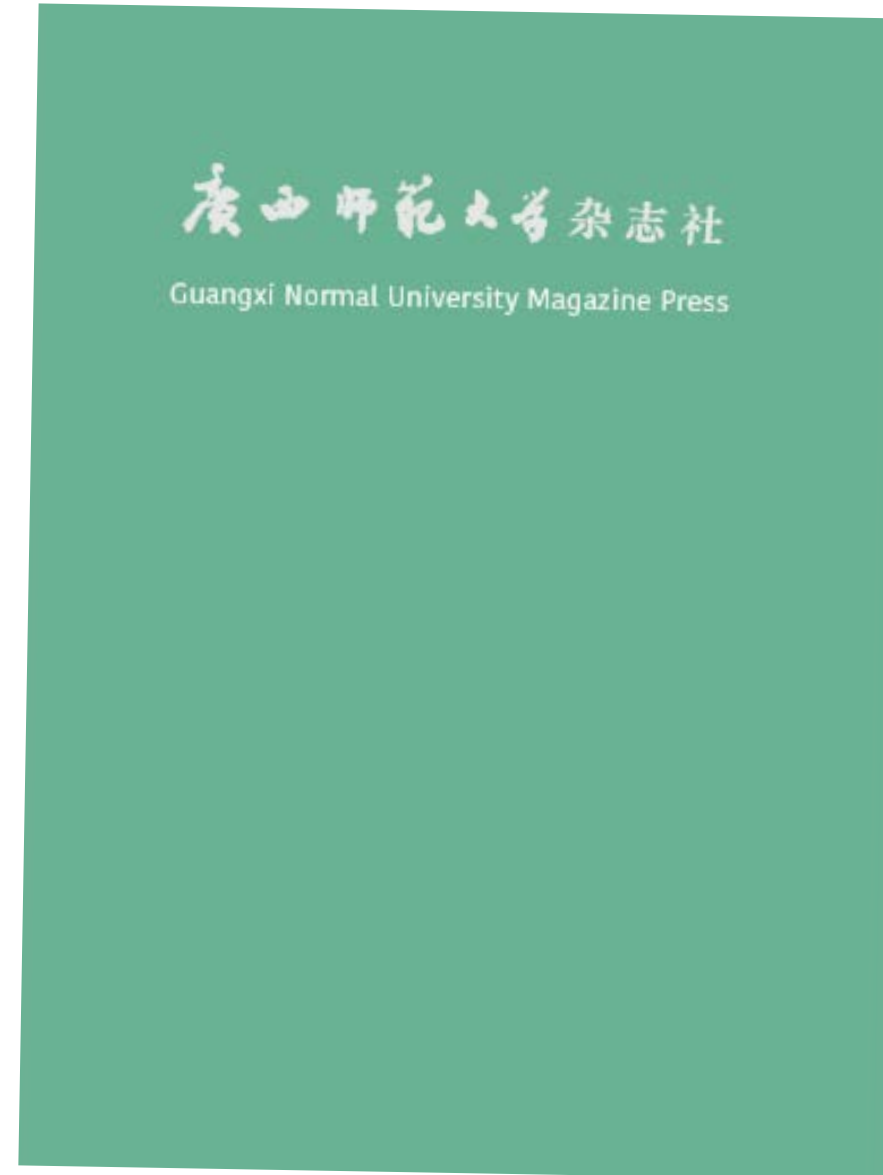
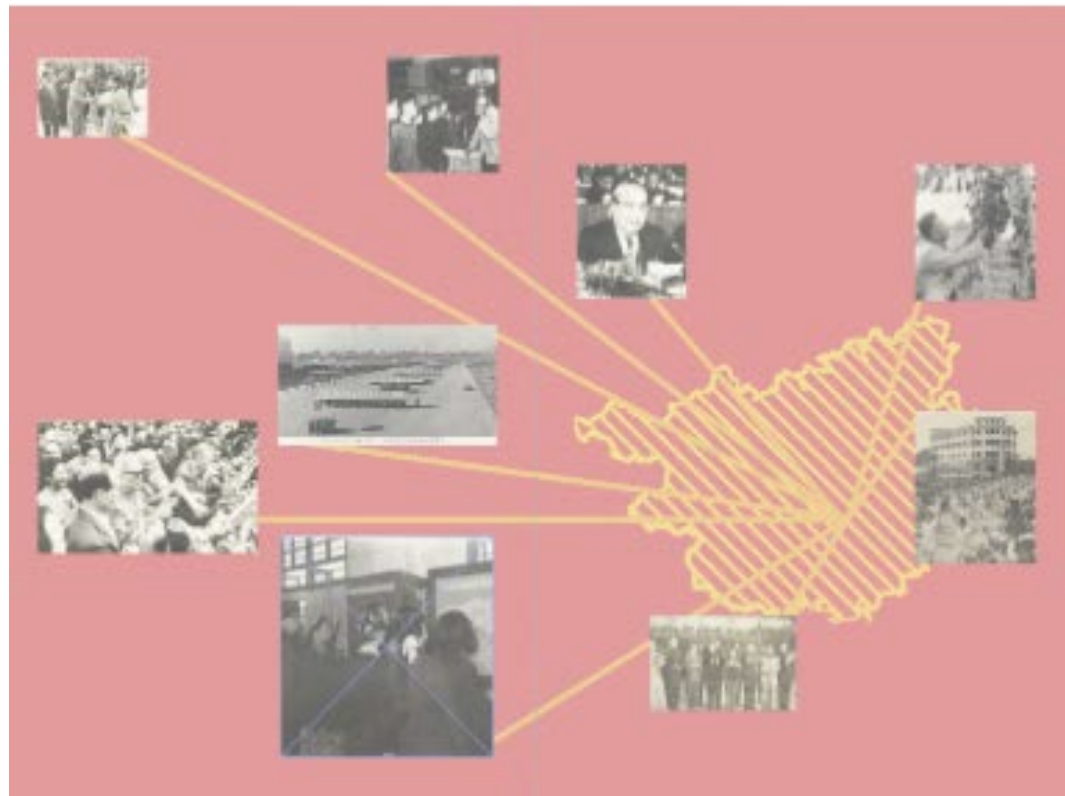
Experiment 5

Inspired by the still-image film *La Jetée*, I created a short video using zoom-ins, zoom-outs, and intentional shifts of photographs. It was an attempt to “describe” the stories from the letters through images.

At the same time, I noticed that although the letter writers didn't know each other, people of similar age often expressed similar worries and concerns. Inspired by the cyclical montage in *Yi Yi*, I structured the film using an alternating narration from two letters

https://youtu.be/v5Vf6ct_H6o?si=jCGlf8ZHOd20gcgj



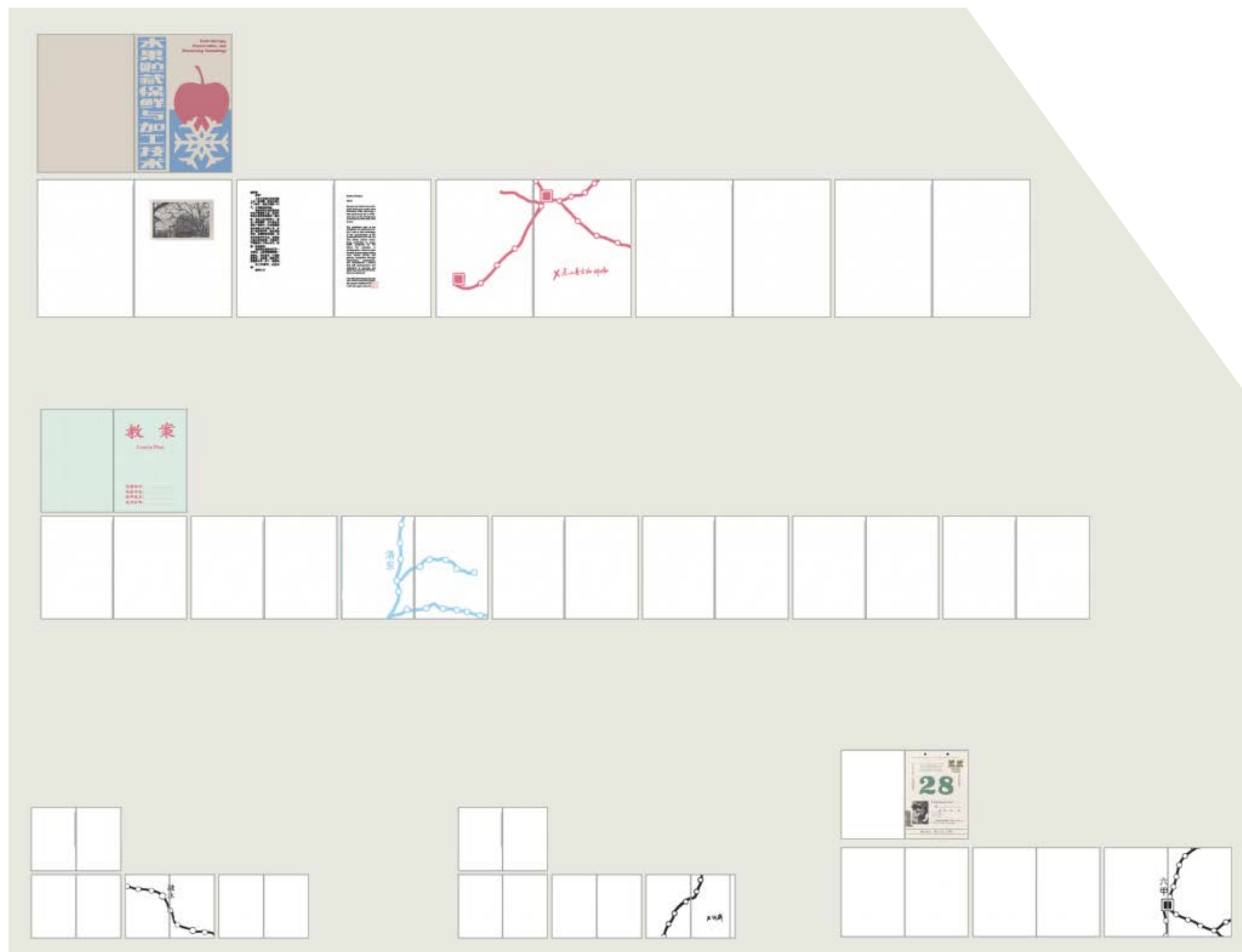


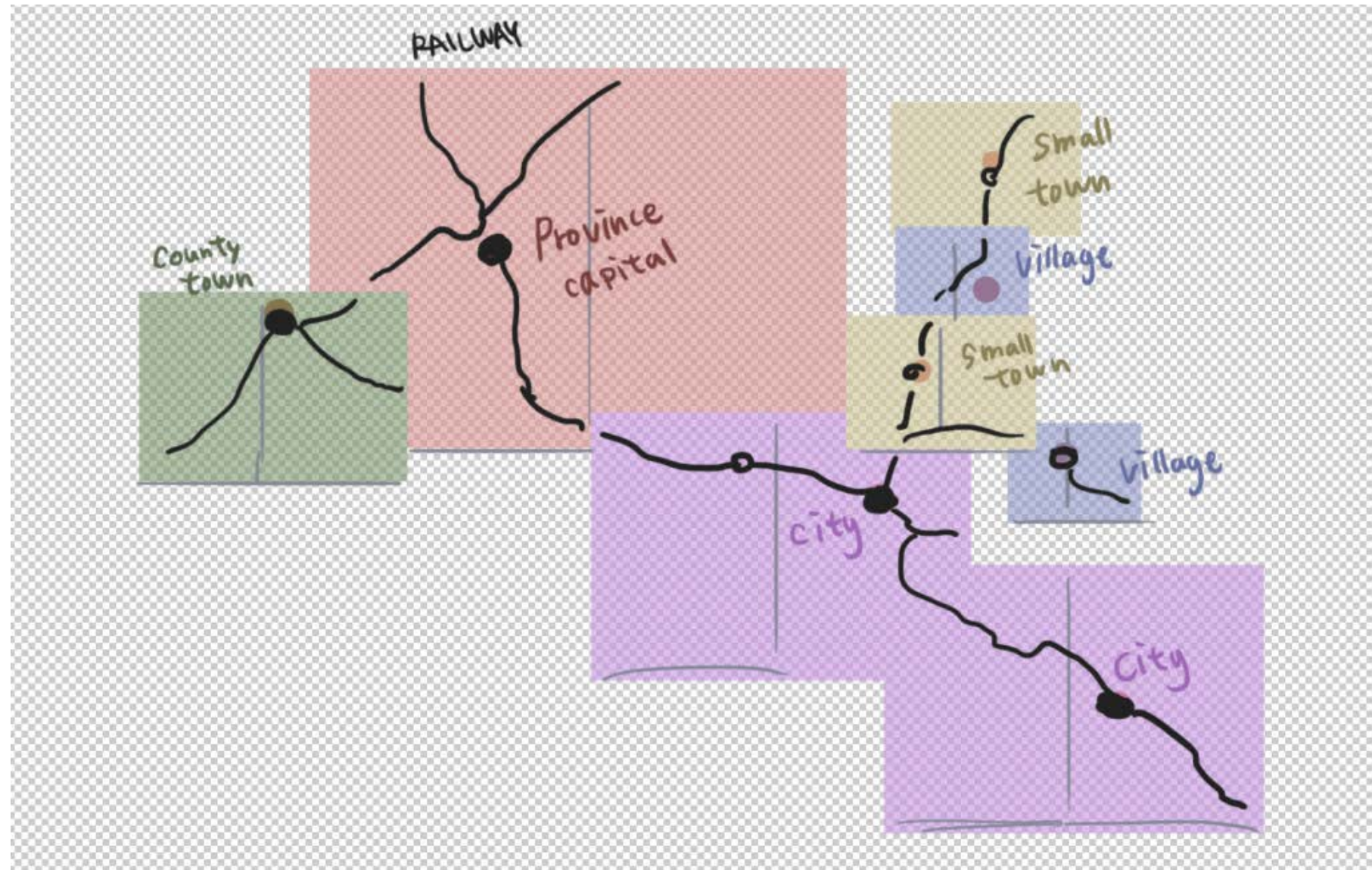
Experiment 6

For this experiment, imagine these moments as they occur (it's a natural move to make while reading a letter). Could these cross-temporal imaginations evoked by the text be made tangible? For audiences unfamiliar with the archival materials, could a more intimate method of engaging with them be developed? I tried to transplant those narratives into the everyday objects of the era.

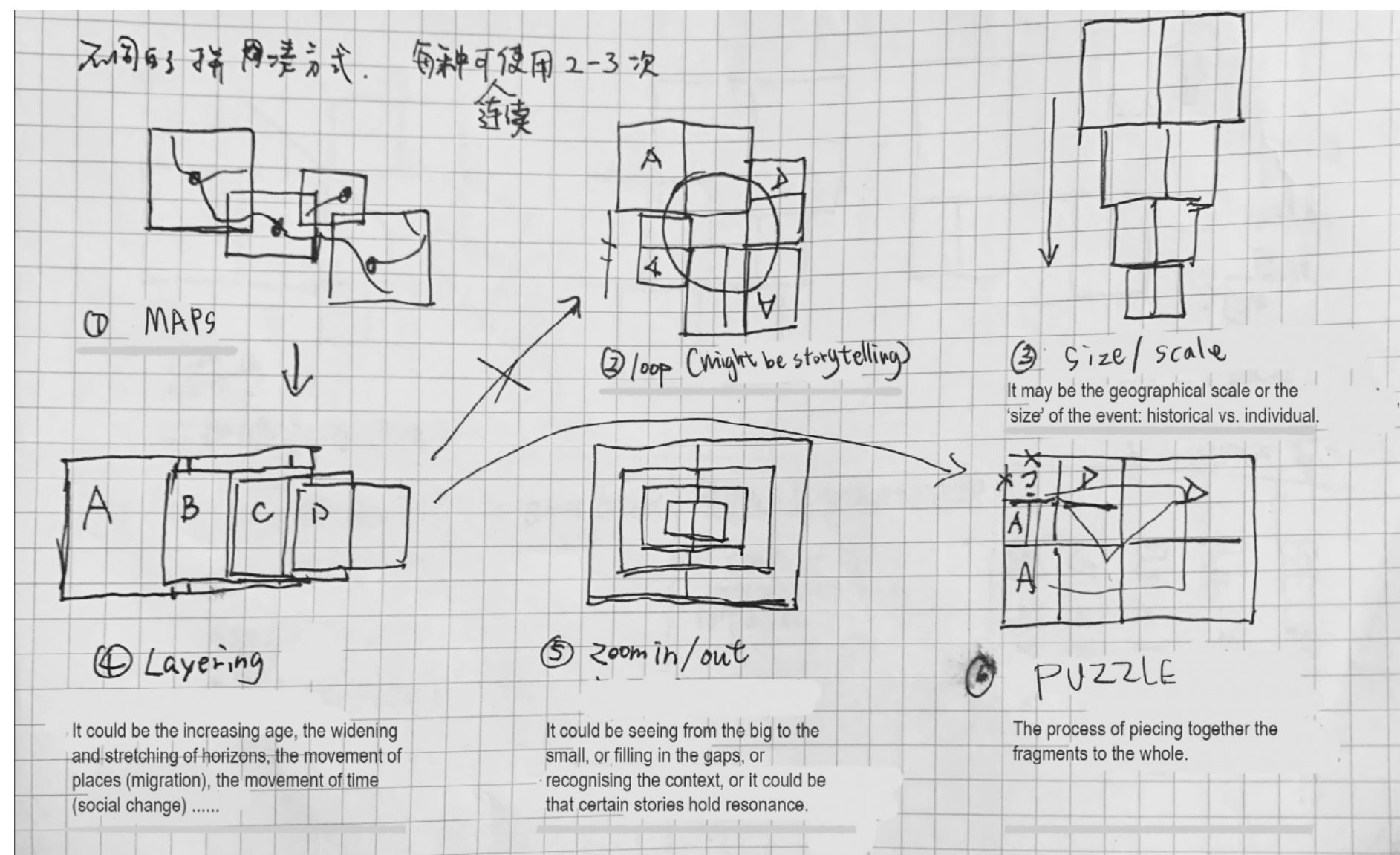


The existence of roads allows people from small places to venture out through their own efforts. The sender and recipient addresses on letters keep changing—moving from villages to towns, then to counties and big cities. Some people follow the railway lines outward, while others remain in one place. In these letters, each person's circumstances are tied to their location. When laid out together, although their worries differ, the uncertainty about the future and the desire to strive forward are closely connected.

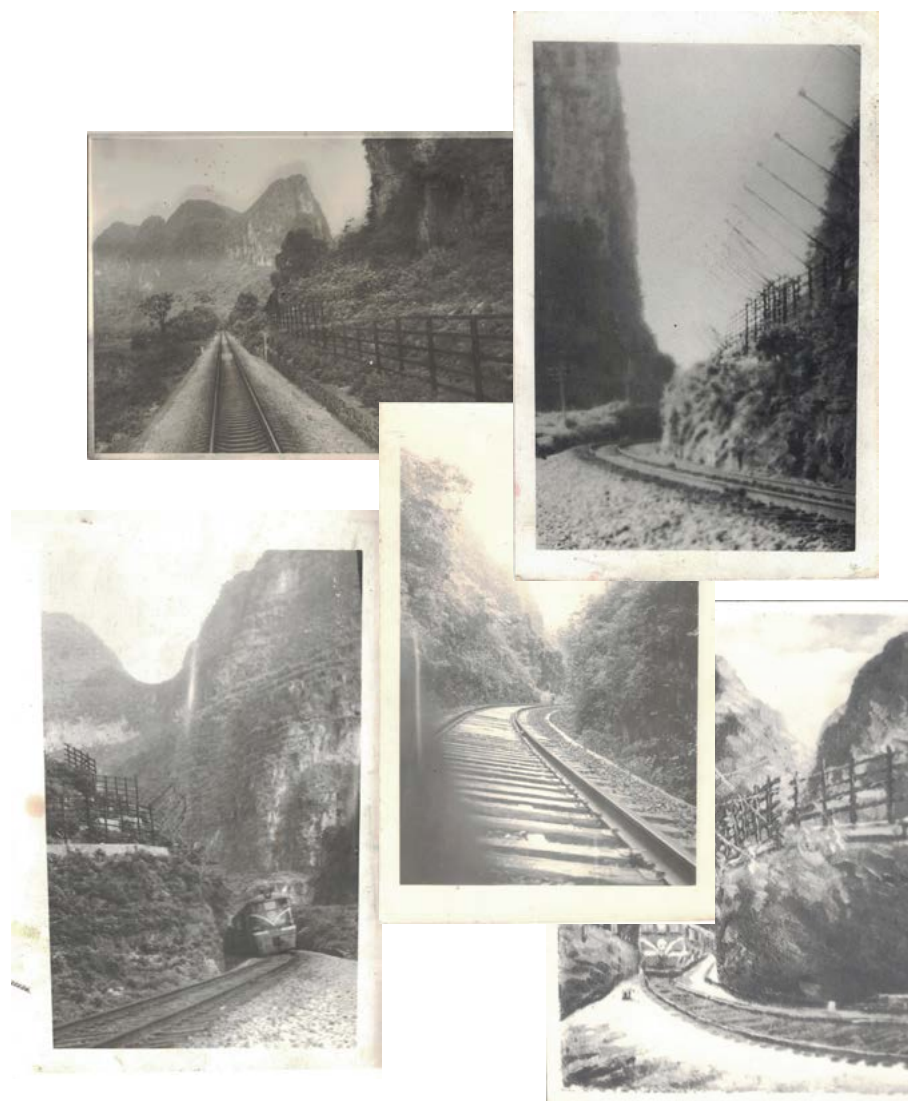




The plan is to determine the size of the story's medium based on the scale of the place from which the letters were sent. On the pages featuring railways, could we see the emotional intersections within the story?



Continuing with this idea of a “puzzle”, I explored several ways the booklets could be arranged to form a complete image or shape when placed together.



Inspired by Carla Liesching's method of weaving together found images through visual associations, I began to look more intentionally for connections within my own materials.

I discovered several such groups: four photos of girls of different ages dancing; five images of trains travelling through the mountains, along with a painting; women and workers walking along the tracks... These materials already tell their own stories — no need for invention. The themes are clear: growth, railways, rural and urban, migration. And from my perspective, looking back decades later, more layers emerge: home, time, and the cyclical bond between generations.



I designed four booklets, each representing a stage in a journey or a moment in one's growth. Photographs were carefully paired to suggest these phases, while certain images extend beyond the edge of the page — a way of implying that the story is still unfolding.

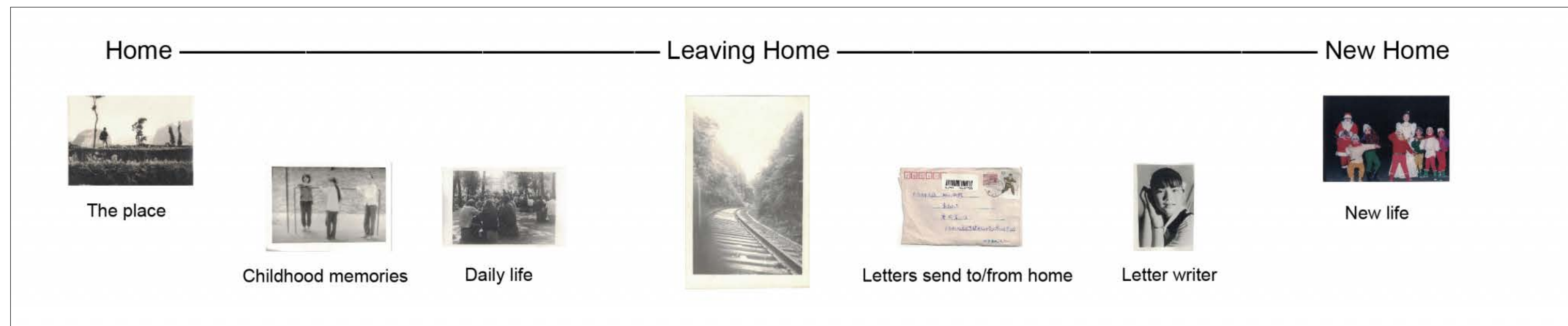
From smallest to largest, the booklets reflect both a progression in scale and a shift in environment and age:

B6: the countryside and childhood

A5: a small town and adolescence

B5: a county-level city and early adulthood

A4: the city and approaching middle age



So I decided to use the four booklets as containers for all the materials. But within these containers, there needed to be a system — a structure that could allow multiple modes of classification, storytelling, and connection to coexist and remain fluid.

For the content within each booklet, I felt that a unifying thread was still necessary — something to loosely tie the fragments together. I thought of the railway: lines drawn across maps, tracks appearing in photographs, the trains that once carried people away from Guangxi, and the train I take now, returning.



在农村，因你爷爷是干部，不用务农，也不会做重的农活。所以我要在休息日和假期，必须帮你奶奶干活和做家务。上山砍柴、割牛草、挑水、下地种收玉米种收稻谷等等

活太苦太累了。我很多次发誓一定得读书走出农村才行。

那

所以当年我们整个中学就考出三个人，两个考上中专，一个考上大学，我中专选择学校时，最后一个志愿为了保底能出去读书，就选择一个师范学校。

5月4日 16:04

没想到，当年因国家教师奇缺，只要你报了师范，无论第几志愿，师范有权提前录取。

可能他对怀群没什么印象

没感觉到受宠

反正我觉得我一直在帮家里人干活

放学回来和放假的时候就牵着牛去放养

lhy: 你自己养吗

反正放牛的任务就是我的

除了上学

The railway and the train naturally extend the metaphor of journey and growth. And what they ultimately speak of, is migration — and the idea of homecoming.

As I revisited the letters, I came to a quiet realization: the very existence of a letter implies separation. If there were no distance, why would two people need to write?

I spoke with older members of my family. Many of them had moved step by step from the countryside — some settled in county towns, others made their way into cities. Whether through their own experience or that of those around them, migration and movement have touched nearly every life. These are not isolated stories, but shared memories across generations.

I lowered my head and focused on my noodles, carefully taking in the sounds around me. The sky was clear, sunlight stretched across everything, and the heat from the busy kitchen fire warmed the dry fingers of the cooks. Beyond the town, somewhere in the middle of the rice fields, an elderly man might be strolling alone along a narrow ridge, wearing a pointed straw hat, followed by a young village dog. The dark green mountains watched over them in silence, standing still like the markers of time, while mist at their base floated lightly—drifting into the forests, into the water, into the crevices of shoes... Before I was even born, our house walls had been decorated with photos of such scenes.

Shuniang and I sat on her motorcycle, the back seat empty.

home. The wind rushed past my face, carrying her voice to my ears: “Are you alright? Not cold, are you? Huaqun is surrounded by mountains—the cold air can’t get in.” She was my cousin’s mother, my father’s sister-in-law, spending her years raising silkworms and tending to mulberry trees. When she was eight or nine, she and her sisters herded cattle and gazed into the distance from the mountainside. But their eyes could only see so far—beyond the mountains, the sea remained out of sight. Her sisters longed to see the ocean, and later, her daughter did too. But my second uncle’s wife always thought that having mountains was enough.

Every winter, when letters arrived

Walking Home, It Was Drizzling Again

When she was 10 years old, Ali and sister Lu from the house next door met on a rainy day.

In the kitchen of Lu’s house, the two of them were roasting on the stovetop, watching the water spilling down from the sky and the smell of dry wood in the house becoming more pronounced. While stoking the fire, Lu took out a volume of textbooks and threw them into the stove, startling Ali, who had come from the city. Ali watched in horror as the paper covered in beautiful handwriting curled into ashes in the flames. The rolling heat hit her face, stung her, and quickly dissipated again.

Lu stared at her, thinking she was making a fuss, but smiled awkwardly. Ali later realised that at that time, Sister Lu no longer wanted to continue her studies. For the sake of her family, she decided to give up her studies to work. Such decisions are always made lightly.

Dear sister 萍:

Hello! When I read your letter, it was as if I was awakened by a spring flight, and as if a spring sun shone on me.

Sister, I really don’t know how one should live and pursue in the world. He is in love with her now, but he will not let me go in the future; he will surely come back to woo me and come back to woo me. What shall I say to him later? It is because of this incident that I despise my life, and I have walked back from the death line several times. Sister I also want to be a seagull flying in the blue sky of the motherland, and you together proudly fly freely, but I always think, I did this thing, the world can not allow me this person, turn back is also useless, the world I have no place to accommodate. Sister, for the sake of my life, for the sake of my door friendship, meet, please help me think of a way? He came to pursue me later, can I reply to him? She once said this to her classmates, ‘I split from her because she spoke to him.’ Sister, perhaps you remember now what my mother? said to me? It’s true that I don’t have a heart like she said. As the saying goes: freedom of marriage? How could I force people?

Sis, the meeting between the two of us was probably the last time you came to school that time! Are you coming home to play at my place? If you do, please don’t tell my family what I said, let alone anyone else. Sis, on behalf of my classmates, I’d like to ask you something. Are there any male students in the school writing to you?



Through conversations with my elders, I began to notice how differently we see our shared hometown — and how differently we understand migration. This led me to make the idea of the “railway” more specific: not just as a physical line, but as a symbol of departure and return.

As I revisited the old materials, my memory returned to Guangxi — to stations, to houses, to places I once knew. Meanwhile, the people in the photographs and letters were captured in moments far behind me in time, striving to move outward. This meeting across time felt quietly profound.

I wrote personal reflections based on my own memories, translated and edited stories passed down by my elders, and included excerpts from the letters. I hope to arrange them within the books using parallel or alternating narration, allowing these voices to exist side by side, quietly responding to one another.

1/4

4/4
The Opening

The bus made a U-turn in front of the township hall, and that's it, it arrived. I jumped off the bus with my school bag on my back and got smothered by the exhaust fumes. The other passengers disappeared purposefully to various intersections, while I held my little brother's hand and waited in confusion for adult instructions. The town centre was bustling, perhaps today was market day. My aunt led us across the road to a noodles shop. I fainted with hunger and almost buried my face in the bowl. My little brother still feeling carsick, looked pale and rested his tiny body aunt's shoulder. The townspeople all knew each other and greeted loudly in the Zhuang language. Our bewildered expressions, as if listening to an incomprehensible script, seemed to stir their affection. Warm, kind eyes lingered on us.

4

5

The First
Departure

and

The Fourth
Return



8

9

Home

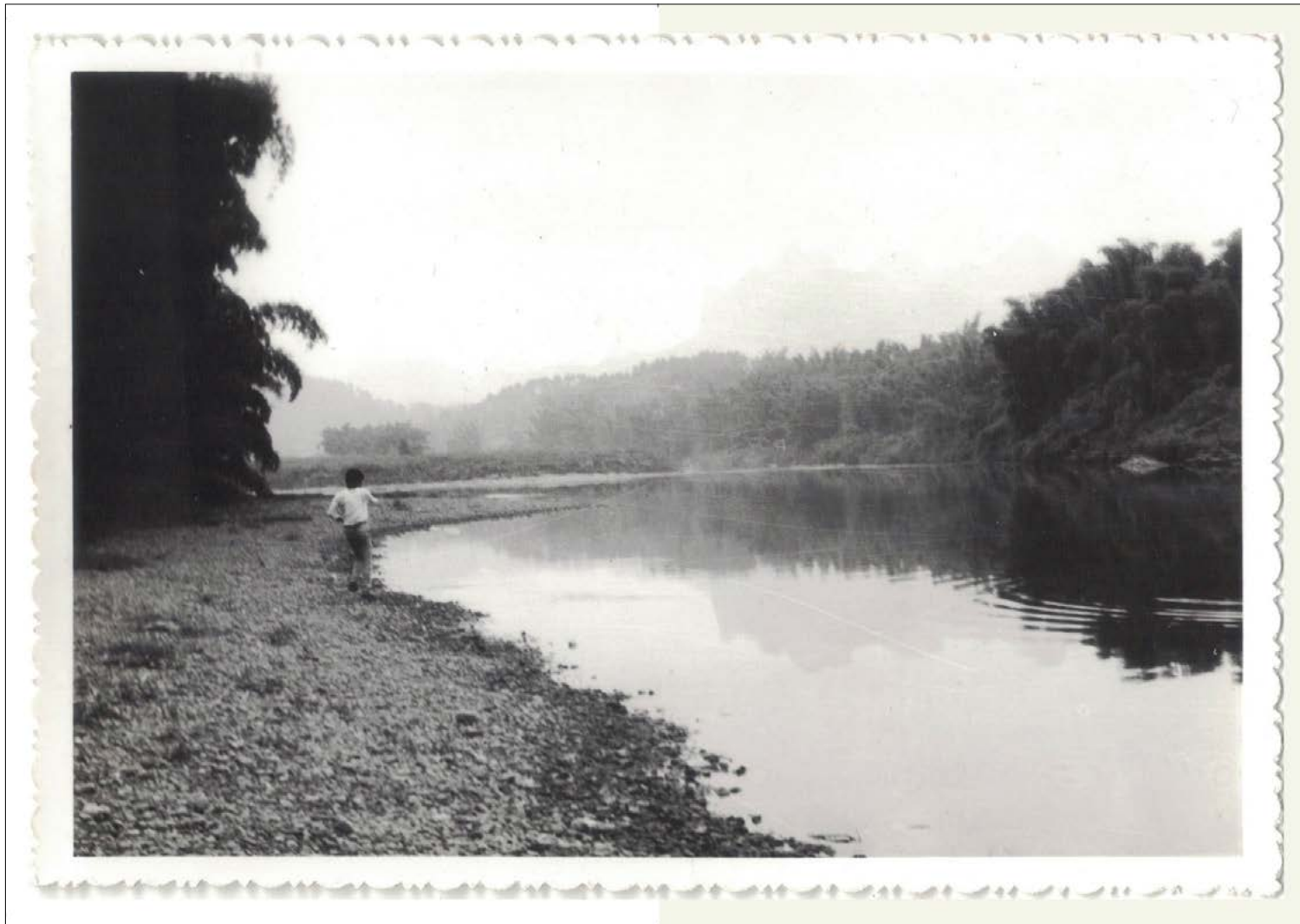
The fourth return, from the damp, grey city of Liuzhou, to the bright nights of Luocheng, winding through the ups and downs of mountain roads, stopping in Huiqun Town for a steaming bowl of rice noodles. Winter has arrived. Pause for half a day, now walking home.

This home—the place where my father, my aunt, and my cousin were born and raised—nestled between the mountains, a tiny dot that cannot be found on a map. The deep forests of the hills where ancestors rested, the rivers coiled and weave through them, the farmers who planted noiselessly, the children scattered like stars under the eaves of each house. Walking to school in the spring with mud on feet, walking home in the autumn with books on backs.



12

13



I use different colours and fonts to distinguish them.

Go

Lu left, leaving a grandmother living on in the village. Grandma woke up at the same time every day and carried an iron bucket to the pig pen in the backyard to feed the pigs. The pigs were very quiet, their eyes shining brightly in the darkened compartments. Several years passed, Ali returned to the village every year for the New Year's Eve, but she never met Lu again. She only heard people say where she went and then where she stayed. The time was misplaced, the place was also misplaced, perhaps, the two will never see each other again.

Ali would always think of the textbooks burning in the stove. The sparks overflowed, like her and all the playmates she had met in the village: sharing the same hometown, having swum and danced together, yet the friendships were so temporary, so short-lived. If they met again, would they still be able to recognise each other?



Each booklet centers on a shared theme: the memories two generations hold of the same place, and how they each left — or returned to — that place. These narratives not only reflect changes in physical space, but also trace emotional shifts over time.

Structurally, each booklet follows a similar rhythm: beginning with a brief introduction, it moves into descriptions of the environment and everyday life, followed by moments of departure — whether experienced directly or witnessed from afar. The letters then unfold, sharing glimpses of life in a new setting, and finally close with a note of blessing.

Letters

In 2025, I found a bunch of letters and a box of photos in my father's old belongings through my aunt and cousin. Three of the letters were addressed from the countryside, from a girl named Yan - addressed to her sister, a primary school student named Wu Hongdan - addressed to her former teacher, my father, and a young man named Liang - addressed to his cousin.

Dear sister 燕:

Hello! When I read your letter, it was as if I was awakened by a spring flight, and as if a spring sun shone on me.

Sister, I really don't know how one should live and pursue in the world. He is in love with her now, but he will not let me go in the future; he will surely come back to woo me and come back to woo me. What shall I say to him later? It is because of this incident that I despise my life, and I have walked back from the death line several times. Sister I also want to be a seagull flying in the blue sky of the motherland, and you together proudly fly freely, but I always think, I did this thing, the world can not allow me this person, turn back is also useless, the world I have no place to accommodate. Sister, for the sake of my life, for the sake of my dear friendship, meet, please help me think of a way? He came to pursue me later, can I reply to him? She once said this to her classmates, 'I split from her because she spoke to him.' Sister, perhaps you remember now what my mother said to me? It's true that I don't have a heart like she said. As the saying goes: freedom of marriage? How could I force people?

Sis, the meeting between the two of us was probably the last time you came to school that time! Are you coming home to play at my place? If you do, please don't tell my family what I said, let alone anyone else. Sis, on behalf of my classmates, I'd like to ask you something. Are there any male students in the school writing to you? Please tell me. You won't be offended if I ask! Yumei and the others wrote to you, did you receive them. Please send me your portrait! May I ask you if I can promise him in the future?

A person's life is an expedition, some people walk the sunshine road, I walk the muddy path, some people climbed to the top of the beauty, I have fallen off the cliff, the abyss, never look back the day. Please answer.

Best wishes to all your family! Progress in your studies! Overcome the difficulties and fly over the motherland!

Your foolish sister 燕
April 14th morning





1/4

4/4 The Closing

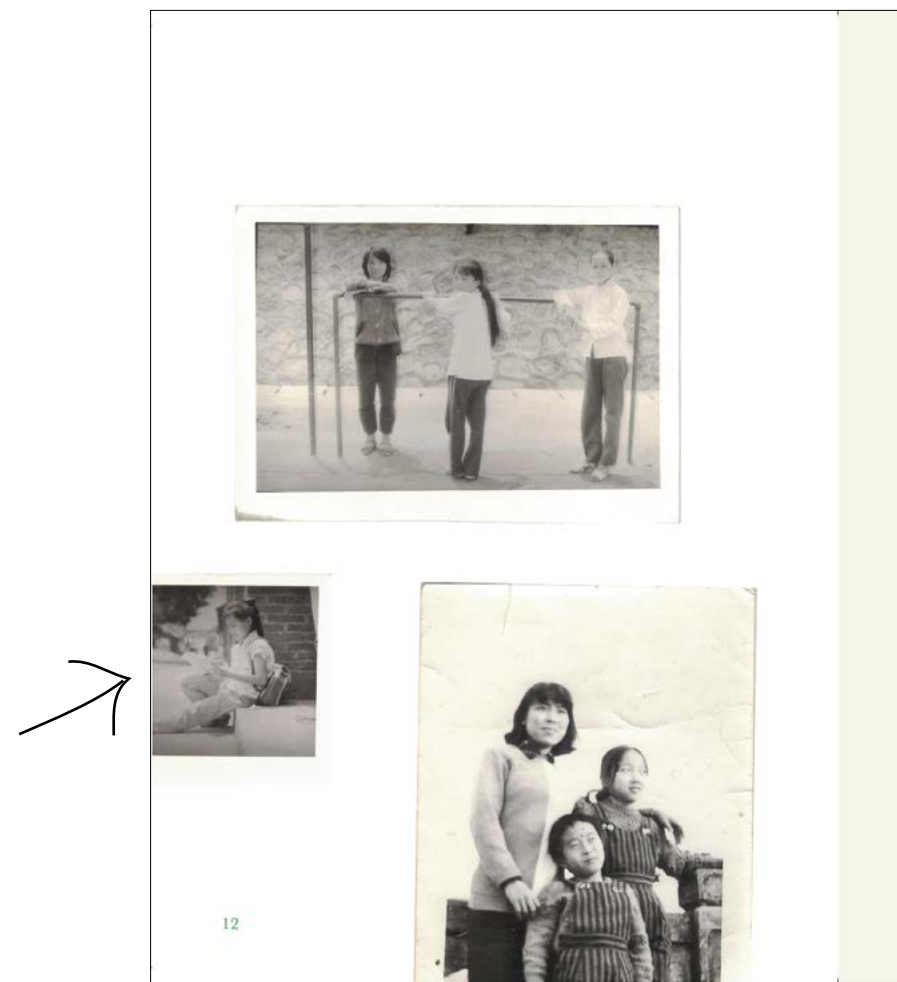
Shuniang doesn't like to talk when she's not necessary. Maybe it's because I've grown bigger and bigger and am not as cute and funny as I was when I was a kid. As a result, now she doesn't ask me questions like whether I'm cold or not, but sweeps me from time to time to make sure I'm thirsty, hungry, or bored. I ate the yellow skinned fruit on the table and watched my cousins' children run and play in circle after circle around the ancestral home.

My younger cousins, who were carsick a decade ago, are now growing taller and sitting a little uncomfortably like me. I think this may be getting worse, as none of us have been back home in years. Each time, my young nieces and nephews have to get to know me all over again.

It was New Year again, and the ground in the village was littered with fragments of exploded firecrackers. The big red pieces of paper rolled in the wind like flower petals, so beautiful. Then on one wet night, they caught the dew, and the red deepened, then darkened, turning the colour of the land.

As the pieces of paper melted, the people who came back for New Year's Eve also left the village. The electric switch was also switched off and the gates locked at our ancestral home, there was no more farmland to look after, no more firewood to burn, no more.

43



The First Departure

and

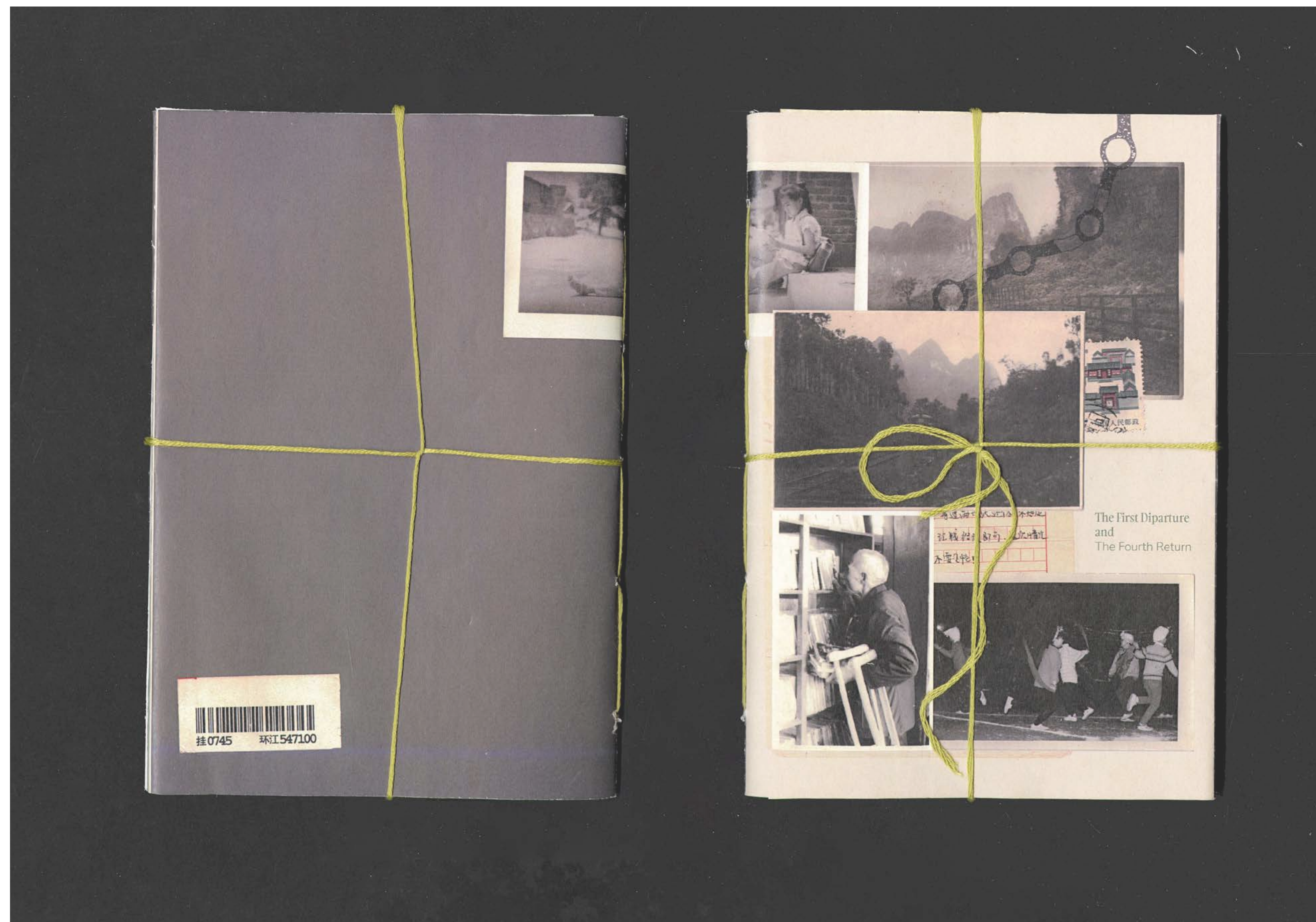


8

As for the parts intended to function like puzzle pieces, my initial idea was that any image extending beyond the page margin would signal a point of connection. However, in retrospect, this design proved to be unclear — the cue was too subtle, and could easily be overlooked or misinterpreted.



The First Departure
and
the Fourth Return



The First Departure

The Fourth Return

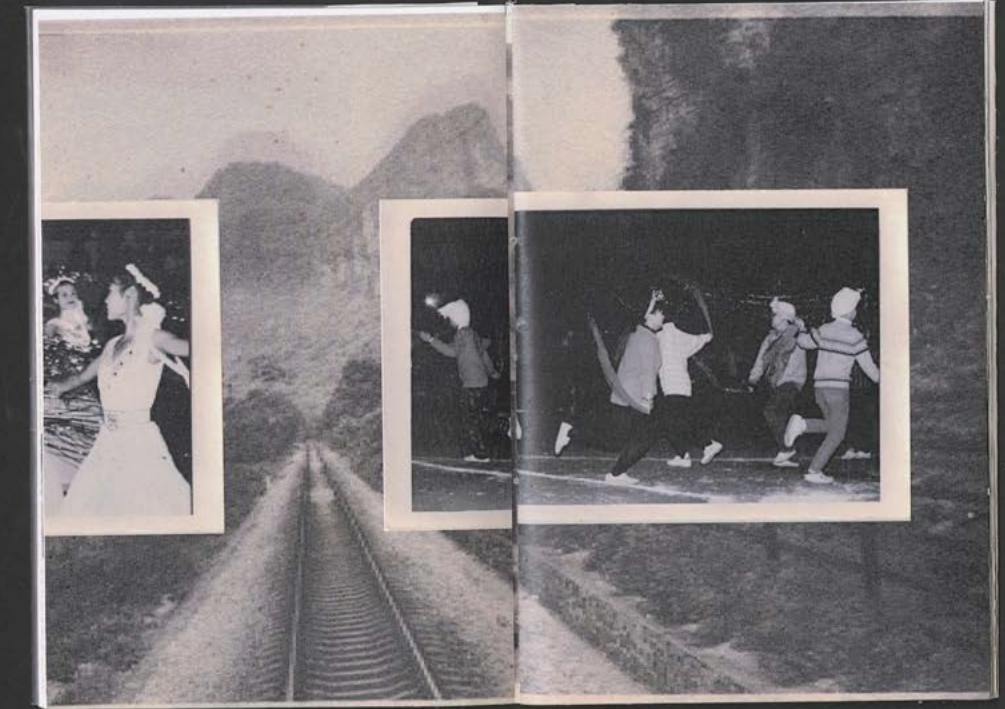
and



1/4

4/4
The Opening

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Dear sister II:

Hello! When I read your letter, it was as if I was awakened by a spring flight, and as if a spring sun shone on me.

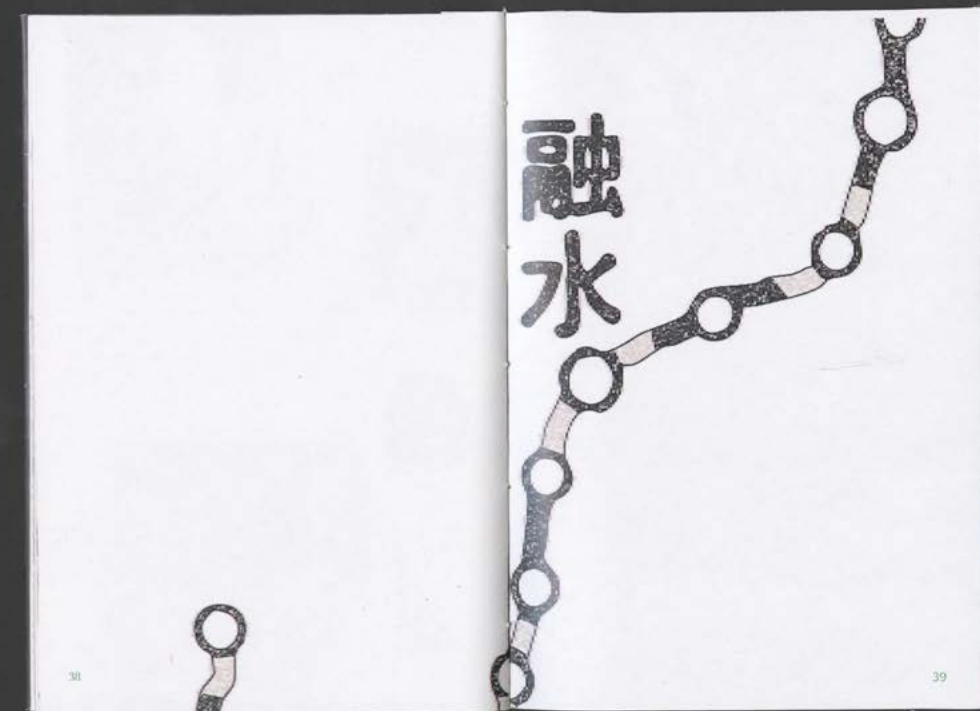
Sister, I really don't know how one should live and pursue in the world. He is in love with her now, but he will not let me go in the future; he will surely come back to woo me and come back to woo me. What shall I say to him later? It is because of this incident that I despise my life, and I have walked back from the south line several times. Sister, I also want to be a swallow flying in the blue sky of the motherland, and you together proudly fly freely, but I always think, I did this thing, the world can not allow me this person, turn back to also useless, the world I have no place to accommodate. Sister, for the sake of my life, for the sake of my dear friendship, more, please help me think of a way? He came to pursue me later, can I reply to him? She once said this to her classmates, 'I split from her because she spoke to him.' Sister, perhaps you remember now what my mother said to me? It's true that I don't have a heart like she said. As the saying goes, freedom of marriage? How could I force people?

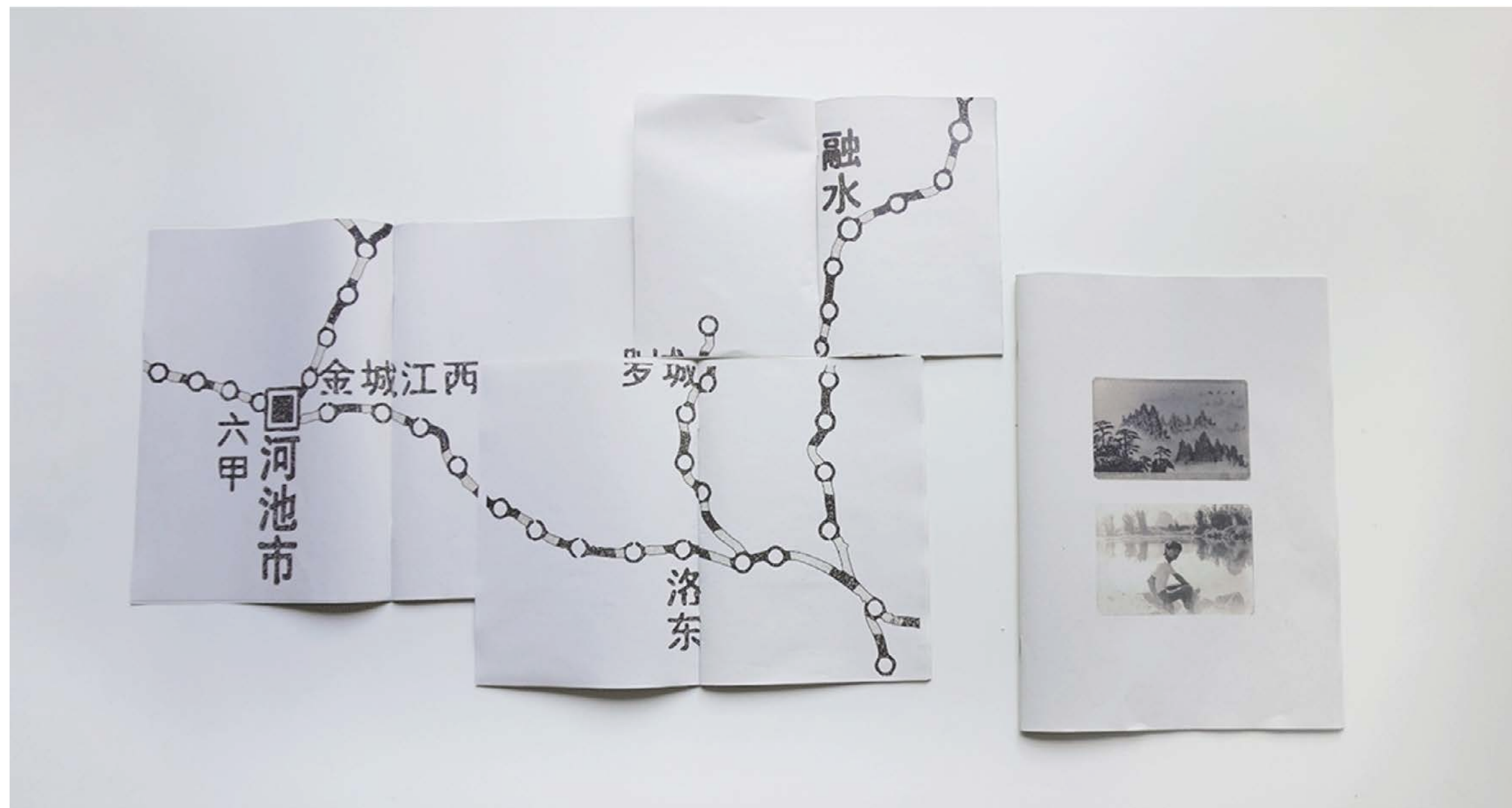
Sis, the meeting between the two of us was probably the last time you came to school that time? Are you coming home to play at my place? If you do, please don't tell my family what I said. Be alone anyone else. Sis, on behalf of my classmates, I'd like to ask you something. Are there any male students in the school writing to you? Please tell me. You won't be offended if I talk about the others wrote to you, did you receive them. Please send me your portraits! May I ask you if I can promise him in the future?

A person's life is an expedition, some people walk the sunshine road, I walk the misty path, some people climbed to the top of the beauty, I have fallen off the cliff, the sky, never look back the day. Please answer.

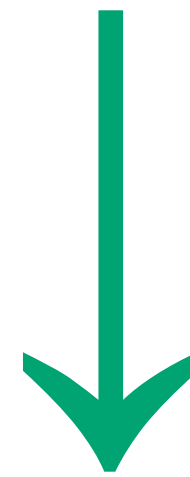
Best wishes to all your family! Progress in your studies! Overcome the difficulties and fly over the motherland!

Your faithful sister III
April 14th morning





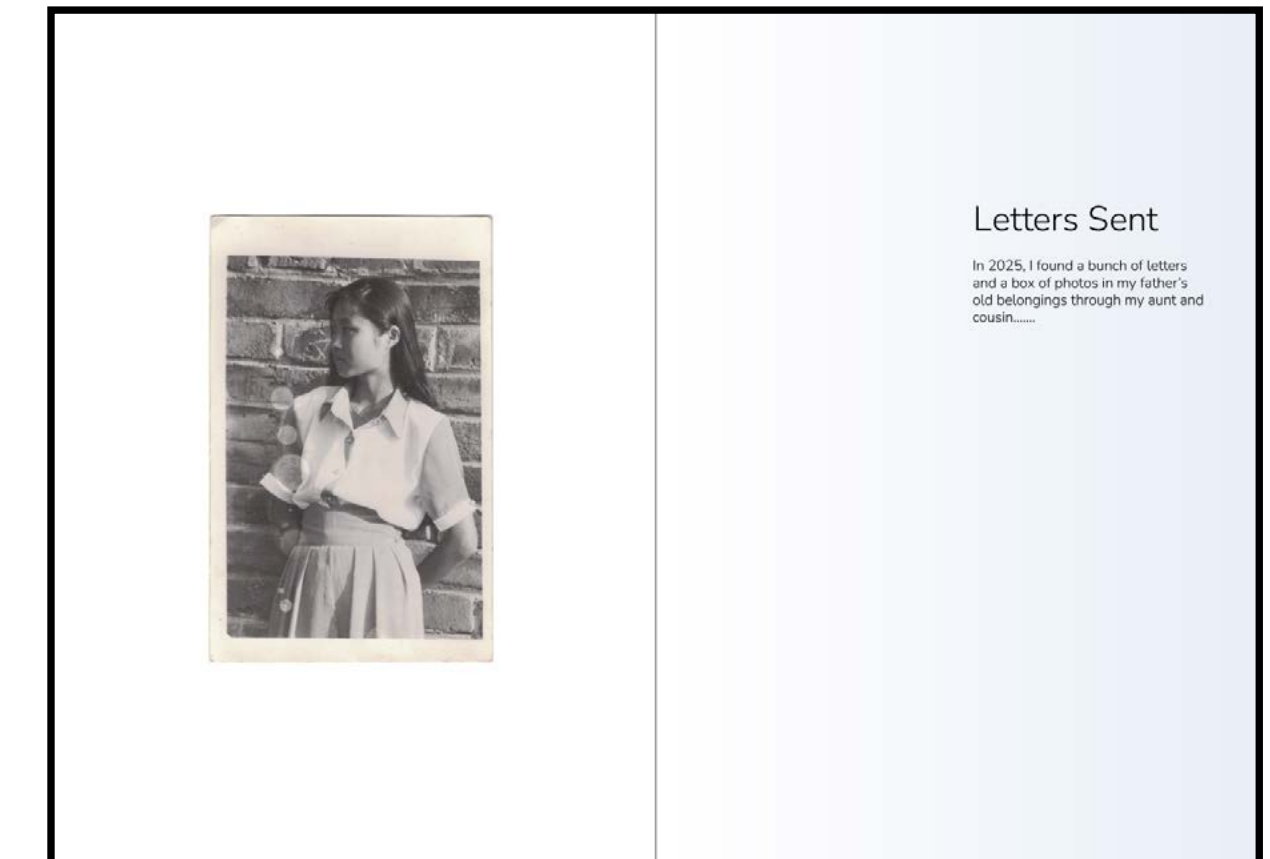
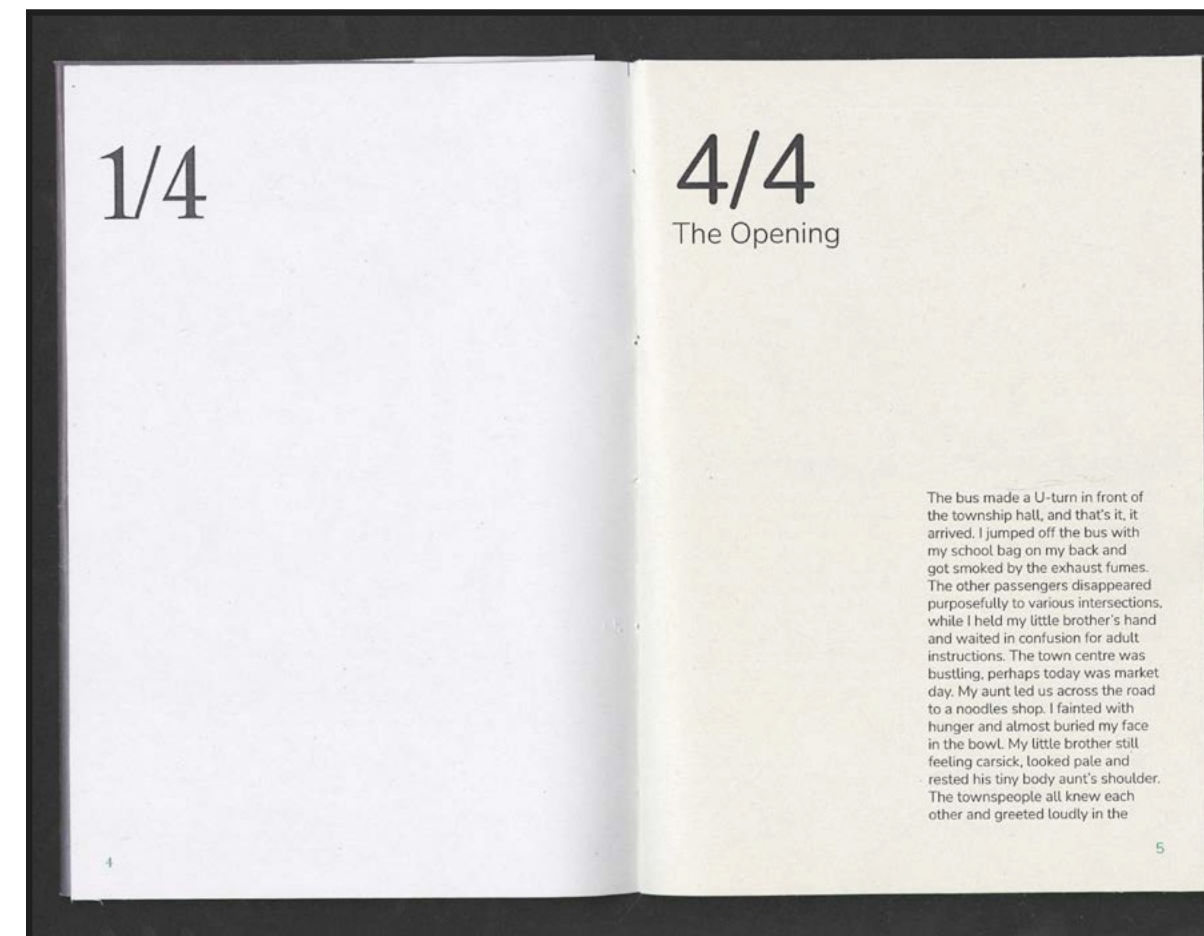
Projection 2 is a continuation of Projection 1. While the first phase focused more on the development and implementation of the concept, the second phase involved ongoing adjustments to the visual system and continuous refinement of the narrative structure.



Projection 2

How can a series of publications be designed to place stories from different individuals, within a structure that enables multiple connections, allowing them to maintain their individuality while collectively forming a narrative about migration, generations, and home?

Due to poor color reproduction in print, I decided to remove the design that used color to distinguish the two sides.



Another reason was that using color to distinguish the left and right pages became confusing: when a photo originally placed on the left had to appear on the right due to layout adjustments, it made it visually unclear which time period that section belonged to.

Temporary Home

The third time I returned, I carried a whole holiday's worth of homework on my back, riding the bus across mountain after mountain to arrive at Huzqan Town. I stayed at a rice noodle shop owned by a couple who were old friends of my father. The shop was spacious, but the private quarters upstairs were cramped. At night, I squeezed onto a single bed with their daughter, sharing a wired earphone, listening to pop songs playing on a loop from an MP3 player. For girls our age, as long as we could stay up chatting in the dark, anything could be endlessly fun.

At night, we whispered under thick cotton quilts; by day, we slept until noon, woke to a bowl of rice noodles, and then wandered the streets. Walking west from where the buses stopped, the road gradually narrowed, passing rows of shops: long stretches of furniture and renovation stores, a Western-style bakery with a green sign, small pharmacies, clothing stores, stationery shops...until more and more food stalls appeared,

signaling that we had reached the vicinity of the township's elementary school. The sunlight was dry and gentle, the concrete road giving way to cobblestones. Occasionally, children in sandals played noisily at the street corners, and old men led yellow oxen slowly down the road.

The elementary school during winter break was a quiet, yellowed building. Across a black iron fence, we looked in at the small courtyard and a few bare trees, chatting about classes, teachers, and holiday homework. As the New Year approached, no more children would appear here, everyone had returned to their village homes.

We too went home, while the setting sun still lingered, and the courtyard echoed with the sounds of roosters and barking dogs.

?

Fang

Fang and Cheng were a pair of siblings five years apart. They were born into a relatively well-off farming family in the village. Their parents were farmers; their grandfather worked for a local government office and had elegant handwriting. Fang was the eldest grandchild, and from the moment she was born, her grandfather doted on her, often bringing her new clothes and treats after work.

Yet he was also strict, especially about her studies and behavior. Thus, though naturally mischievous and lively, Fang learned early on to be obedient and even helped the elders with chores. When Cheng was born, Fang already had a strong sense of responsibility and served as a role model, diligently studying while taking good care of her little brother.

Soon, the siblings grew into teenagers, and their home's walls were covered in their red award certificates. Fang had left the village to attend high school in the county, while Cheng went to middle school in town and could still come home for meals, though he needed Grandpa to ferry him by bicycle. Grandpa still treated them like little kids, even though their rooms were now plastered with posters of pop stars and their desks piled with lyrics books.

When Fang got her first perm, Grandpa scolded her harshly; she cried

Left

After a series of adjustments, I ultimately decided to differentiate the two sides through font size. In terms of layout, the historical narrative adopts a first-line indent style, while the story of the migrant generation uses block style with green text.



As long as the text remains positioned at opposite ends of the spread, the image floating between them feels natural rather than forced. The image doesn't strictly belong to either narrative voice, but instead serves as a visual material that bridges the perspectives of the two generations.

Left

She ran along the riverbank, summer wind pressing against her full cheekbones like a veil of green mesh, her pores brushing against the fibers. She ran past a fishing rock, a taking-off songbird, a docked bamboo raft, a patch of slippery pebbles; she picked up a pebble and threw it into the deep green river. She went to school, then comes home to labour, day after day. Her cattle tethered in a shed, the tail swishing against the stone wall.

Right

The bus made a U-turn in front of the township hall—that was it, we had arrived. I jumped off with my school bag and was hit by a cloud of exhaust. The other passengers disappeared into different streets, I held my mother's hand, waiting for her to lead the road. The town center was crowded, it was market day.

I lowered my head, eating my noodles, listening to the sounds around. The sky was clear, sunlight stretched across the

1/4

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He was also strict, especially about her studies and behavior. Though naturally mischievous and lively, Fang learned early on to be obedient and even helped the elders with chores. When Cheng was born, Fang already had a strong sense of responsibility. She took good care of her little brother.

Soon, the siblings grew into teenagers, their home's walls were covered in their red award certificates. Fang had left the village to attend high school in the county, while Cheng went to middle school in town and could still come home for meals, though he needed Grandpa to ferry him by bicycle. Grandpa still treated them like kids, even though their rooms were now plastered with posters of pop stars and their desks piled with lyrics books.

When Fang got her first perm, Grandpa scolded her harshly; she cried and ran to the storage room on the rooftop, hiding behind the rice mill to listen to melancholy songs on repeat. She was so angry she refused to speak to him for two days. But when it came time for her to return to school, Grandpa still stubbornly packed her a bag full of food and, as always, stood at the doorway watching her leave until she disappeared.

Fang studied hard but still didn't manage to get into university. She spent a long night talking with Grandpa and finally decided to leave the province and try her luck in *Guangdong*.

20



1/4

I stood with you on this dam built in 1971, the pouring of the waterfall encroaching on our five senses; when you spoke, your voice was so raucous and silent, like the sound of a cricket I heard when I put my ear to the box; you parked your motorbike on a platform made of concrete, those wet concrete freshly set in the early summer, with foot prints of people and dogs appearing on it; you walked to the centre of the dam, the river called *Kama*

21

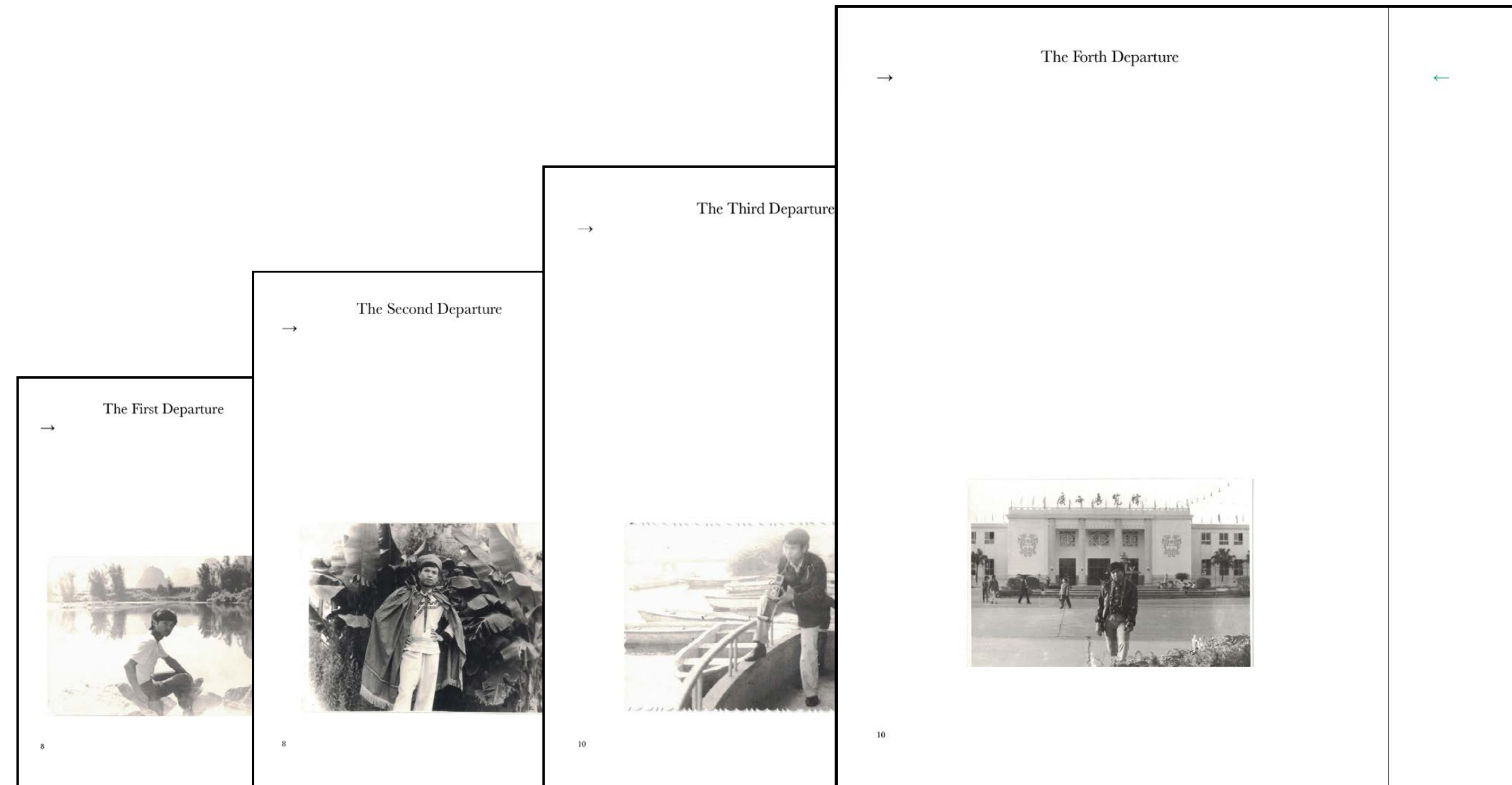
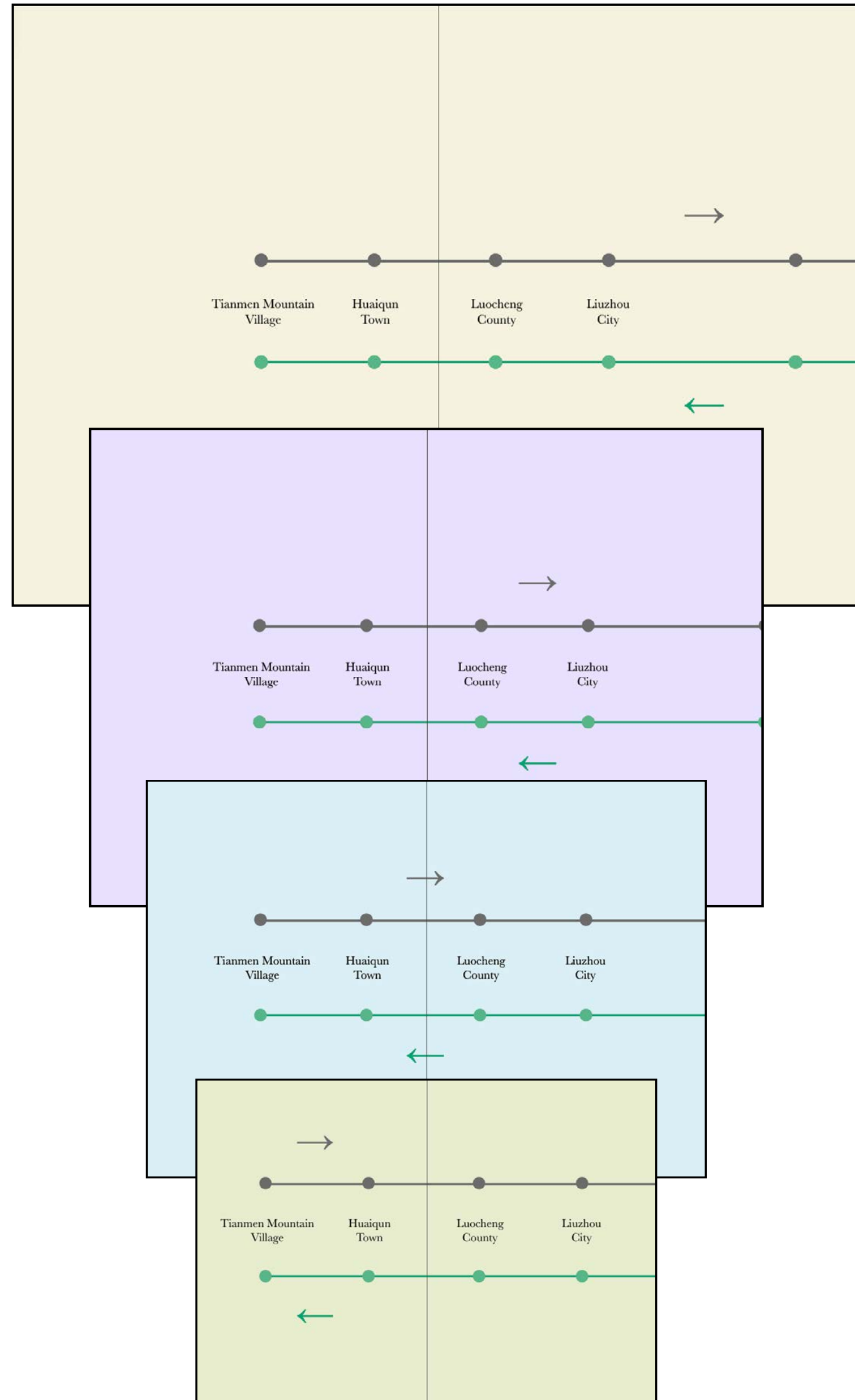
At the beginning of the story, I revised the numerical titles to include the time periods of the two generations, as well as the locations and routes of their movements.

<h1>2/4</h1> <p>4</p>	<h1>3/4</h1> <p>The Opening</p> <p>The bus made a U-turn in front of the township hall, and that's it, it arrived. I jumped off the bus with my school bag on my back and got smoked by the exhaust fumes. The other passengers disappeared purposefully to various intersections, while I held my little brother's hand and waited in confusion for adult instructions. The town centre was bustling, perhaps today was market day. My aunt led us across the road to a noodles shop. I fainted with hunger and almost buried my face in the bowl. My little brother still feeling car sick, looked pale and rested his tiny body aunt's shoulder. The townspeople all knew each other and greeted loudly in the Zhuang language. Our bewildered expressions, as if listening to an incomprehensible script, seemed to stir their affection. Warm, kind eyes lingered on us.</p> <p>5</p>
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<h1>2/4</h1>  <p>Huaiqun → Luocheng County</p> <h2>1991</h2>	<h1>3/4</h1>  <p>Luocheng County ← Huaiqun</p> <h2>2010</h2> <p>The flowing scenery outside the bus window made me yawn uncontrollably. My eyes barely awakened from a nap, were already growing drowsy again. I sat up straight, trying to stay alert.</p> <p>The vehicle taking us from Luocheng County to Huaqun Town was an old-fashioned bus with pull-down windows and a faint smell of gasoline. I clutched the thin paper ticket in my hand, resting my head against the constantly vibrating glass, passively watching the town recede into the distance. The scenes along the</p>
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<p>→ The Second Departure</p>  <p>8</p>	<p>← The Third Return</p> <p>9</p>
<p>Huaiqun → Luocheng County</p> <h2>1991</h2> <p>In March 1991, light snow fell in Beijing, and at the same time, a spring drought came to Guangxi. She snuffed and stuffed the newspaper into the bag. The Monument to the People's Heroes was going to be refurbished, a large enterprise in Tianjin had introduced new technology, and a woman from Wenzhou had made the front page—he helped her official husband maintain an honest household and was praised as a model "upright wife."</p> <p>She stared at the woman's name, Zhan Dewei, so beautiful, like a name from a novel. Her name had only one 'Fang', a common girl's name in the village. She returned home, with a pile of found newspapers; the windless air was dry and cold, as if the sun had condensed it. She sat by the fire and imagined the cloudy, snowy day in Beijing.</p> <p>Tiananmen must be beautiful in the light snow, and the solitary monument, the desolate moat of the Forbidden City (her grandfather had so longed for Beijing that those brightly coloured pictorials had been imprinted on her brain). She tore off a newspaper and threw it into the stove, many distant names disappearing in the flames; Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Wenzhou, Sweden,</p> <p>10</p>	<p>Luocheng County ← Huaiqun</p> <h2>2010</h2> <p>The bus has been travelling for half an hour, my eyes awaken from sleep, so I sit my body up straight; the light switches between tunnels and fields.</p> <p>I pull down the window of the old bus and it smells like petrol; the paper ticket prints Rocheng to Huaqun on top, so I lean my head against the constantly vibrating glass, let the buildings move away. The small shops on either side of the road became factories, and then flood control dams; a thinly frozen river passed under the bridge, all the passengers on the bus fell asleep. I didn't.</p> <p>I was happy to feel my body detach. Cities grow in anthills;</p> <p>11</p>

Rather than using vague numerical labels like 1/4 or 4/4 to indicate parallel station points, I added a cross-spread page in each volume, using diagrams to clearly mark our current location. Near the title page, the visual continuity within the photographs also hints at the environmental shift—from rural to urban or urban to rural.



The structure of the story has been revised. Its current logic unfolds as follows:

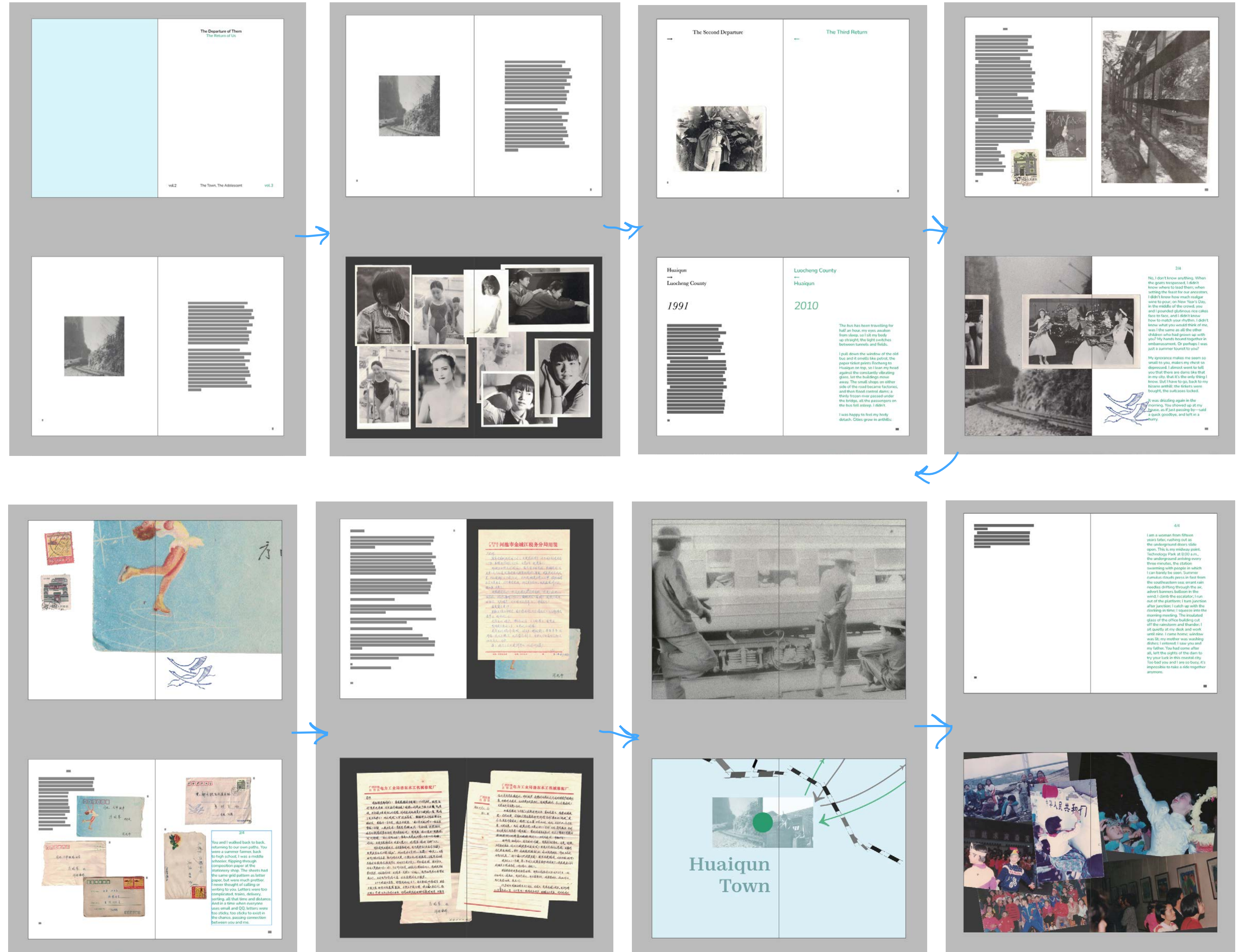
a preface describing movement and being in transit;

fragments of life at the destination;

the departure of the older generation in pursuit of wealth, followed by the younger generation leaving as the holiday ends;

letters written after the departure;

and finally, life in the city.



I became more acutely aware of how form shapes meaning in writing. To distinguish the two voices from within the text itself, I not only used different narrative perspectives, but also adopted distinct writing styles—one unfolds like a gently told story, while the other takes the form of poetic prose.

1/4

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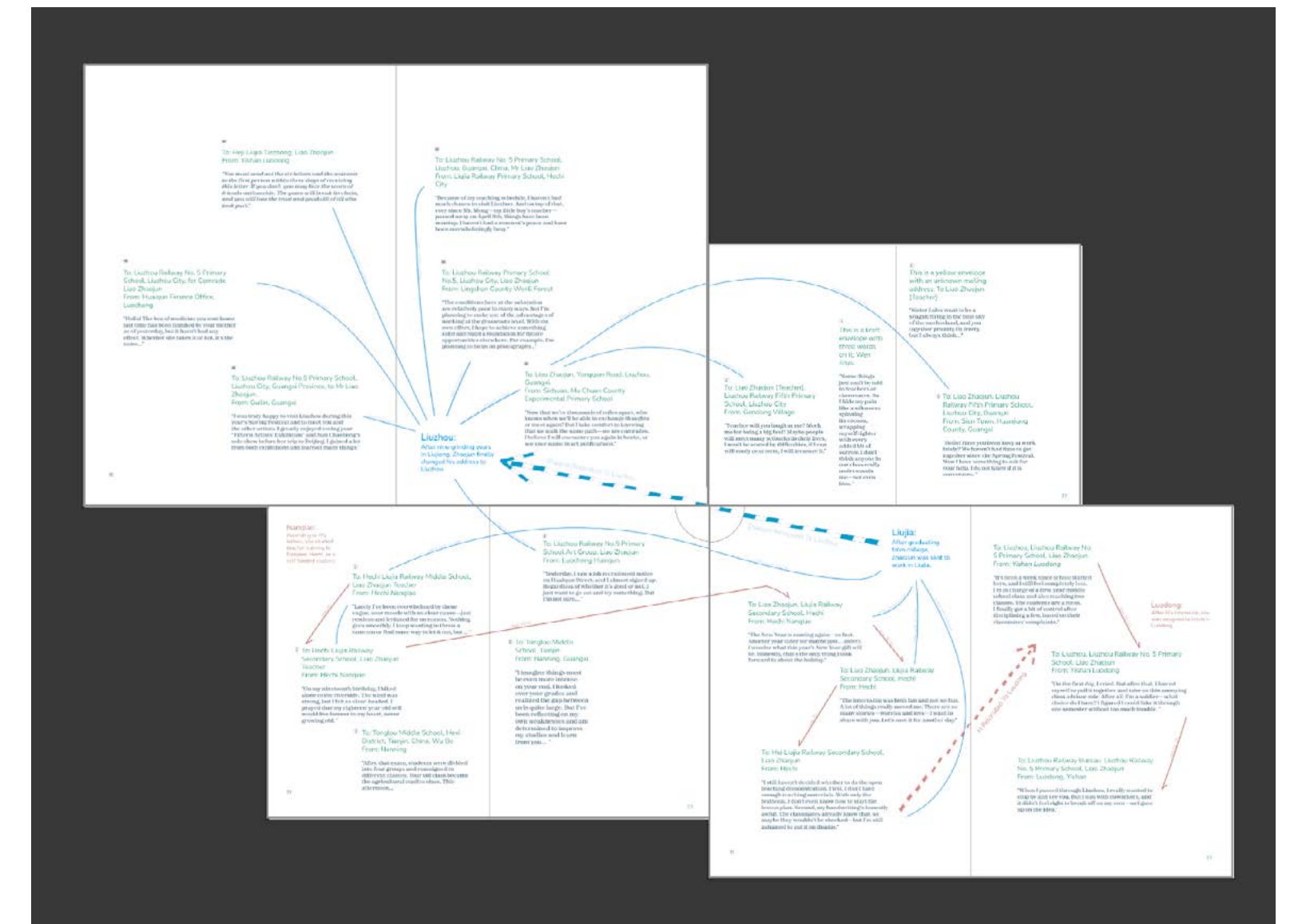
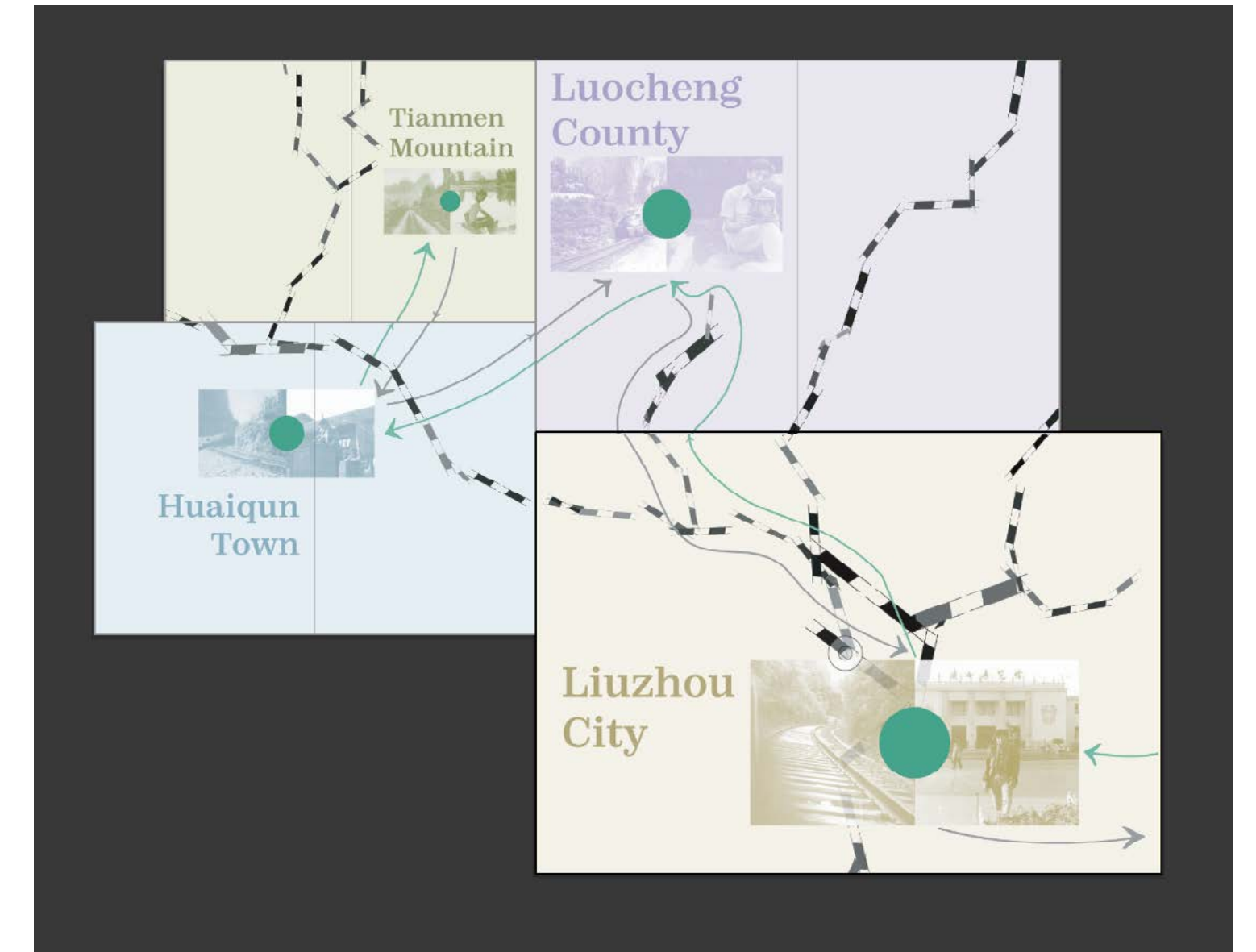
Soon, the siblings grew into teenagers, their home's walls were covered in their red award certificates. Fang had left the village to attend high school in the county, while Cheng went to middle school in town and could still come home for meals, though he needed Grandma to ferry

1/4

I stood with you on this dam built in 1971, the pouring of the waterfall encroaching on our five senses; when you spoke, your voice was so raucous and silent, like the sound of a cricket I heard when I put my ear to the box; you parked your motorbike on a platform made of concrete, those wet concrete freshly set in the early summer, with foot prints of people and dogs appearing on it; you walked to the centre of the dam, the river called *Kama*

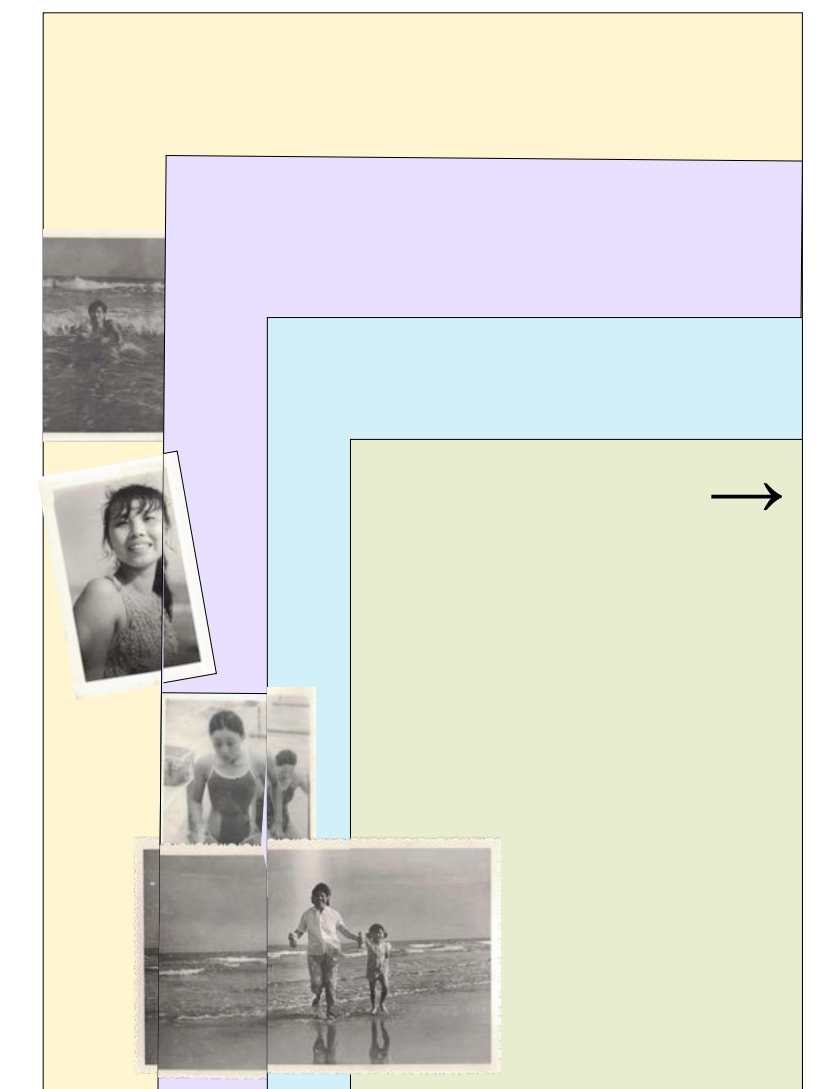
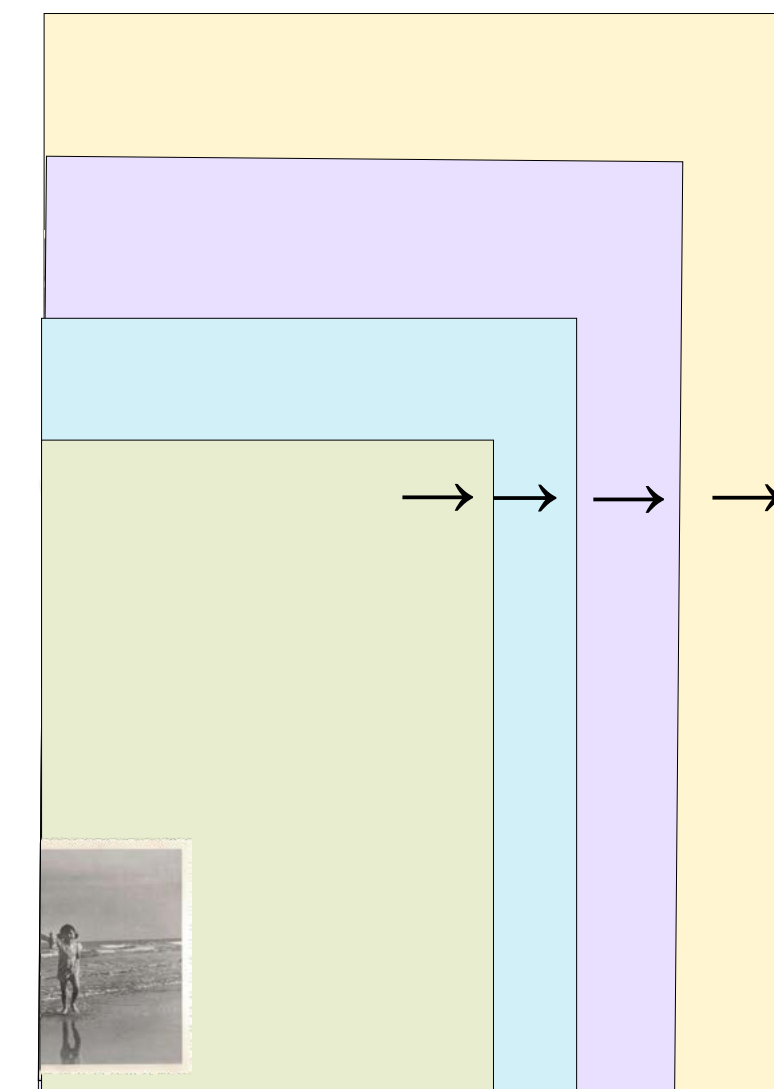
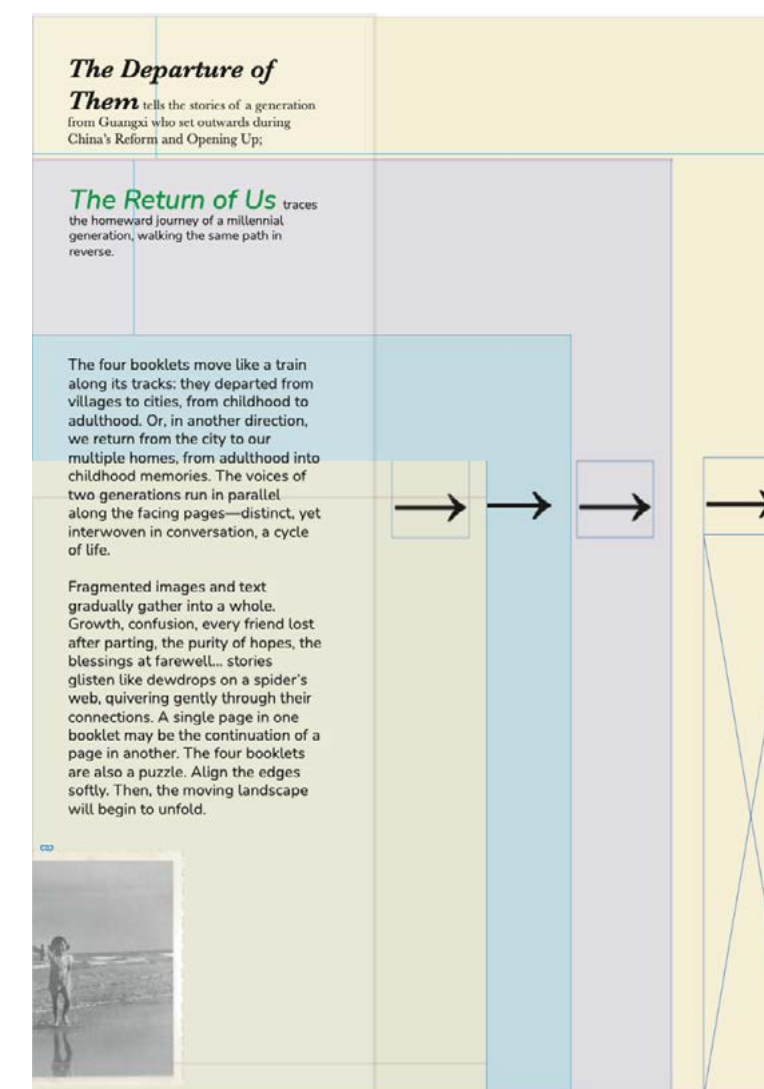
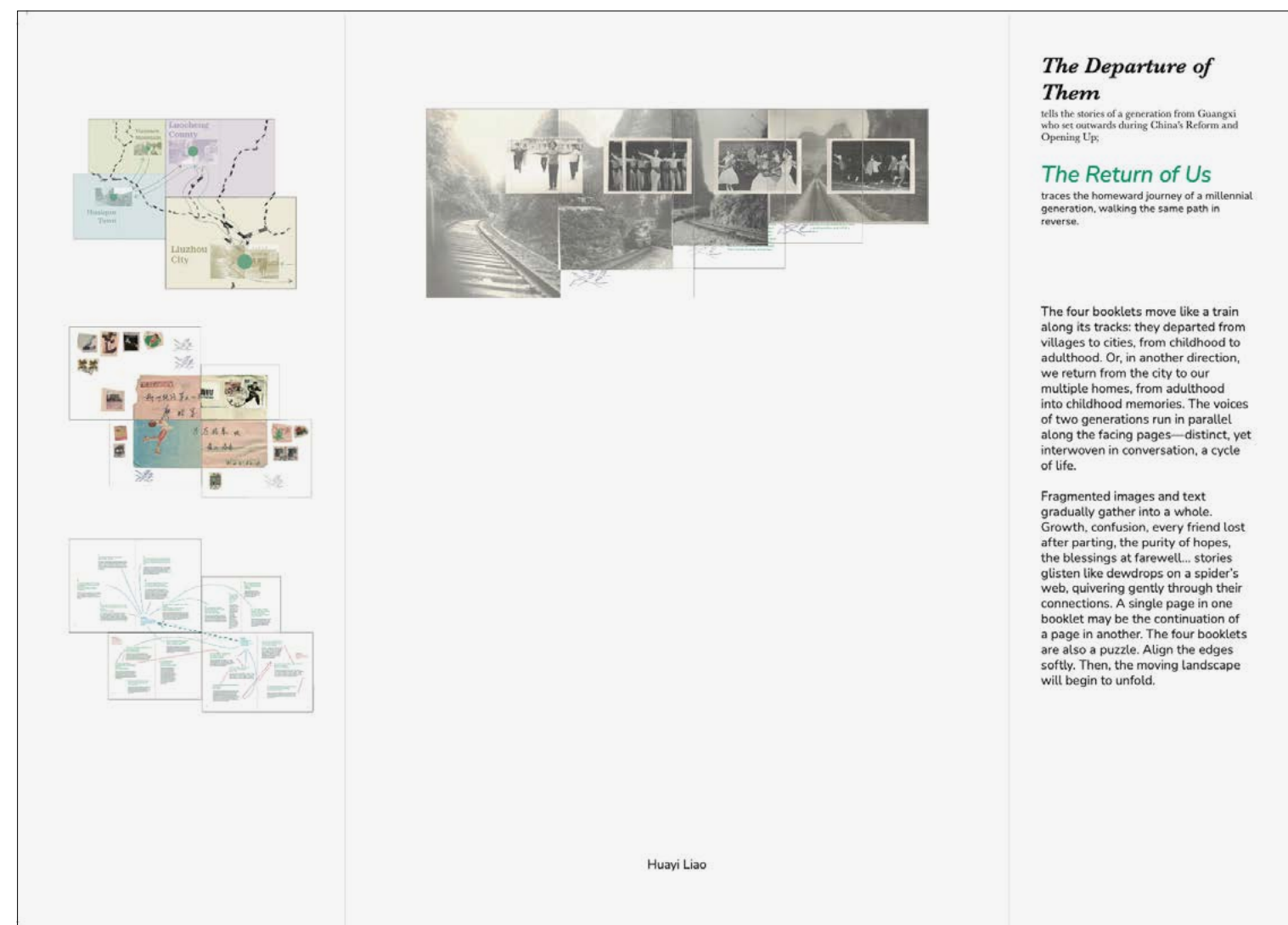
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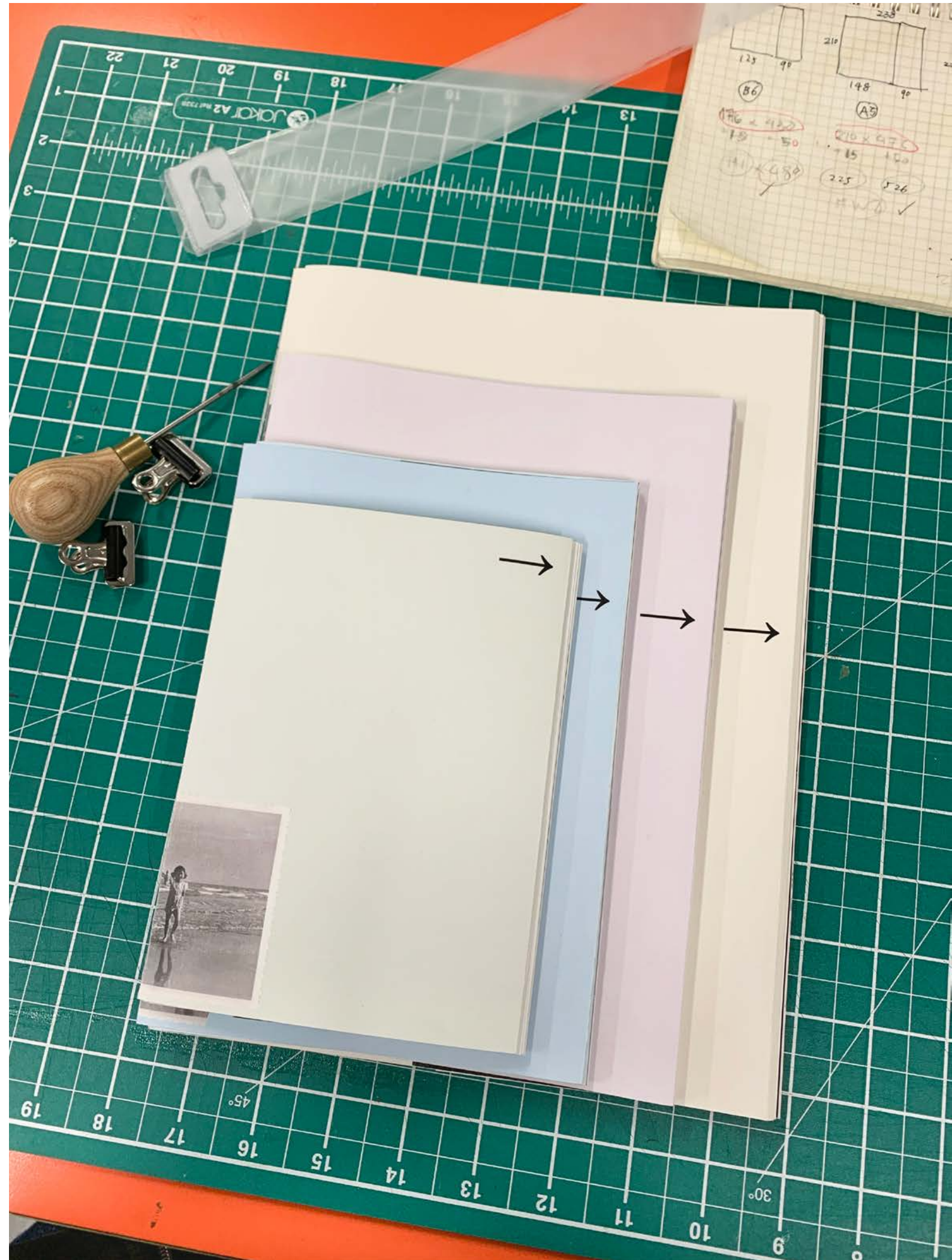
I reorganized the “puzzle pieces” that could be meaningfully assembled from the four booklets. These include: letters and stamps, railway maps, a coming-of-age process staged against a railway backdrop, and diagrams illustrating the temporal-spatial connections and emotional parallels between the letters.



For the cover design, I once again applied the idea of a puzzle between booklets to express the two central themes of the project—migration and multi-layered narrative across publications. When all booklets are left-aligned, an arrow symbolizing migration appears; when they are realigned to the right following the arrow, the visual connections between their covers begin to emerge.

To give readers a basic understanding of the project's background and how to engage with it upon first contact, I added an outer wrapper that includes an introductory cover for the set of four booklets.







The Departure of Them

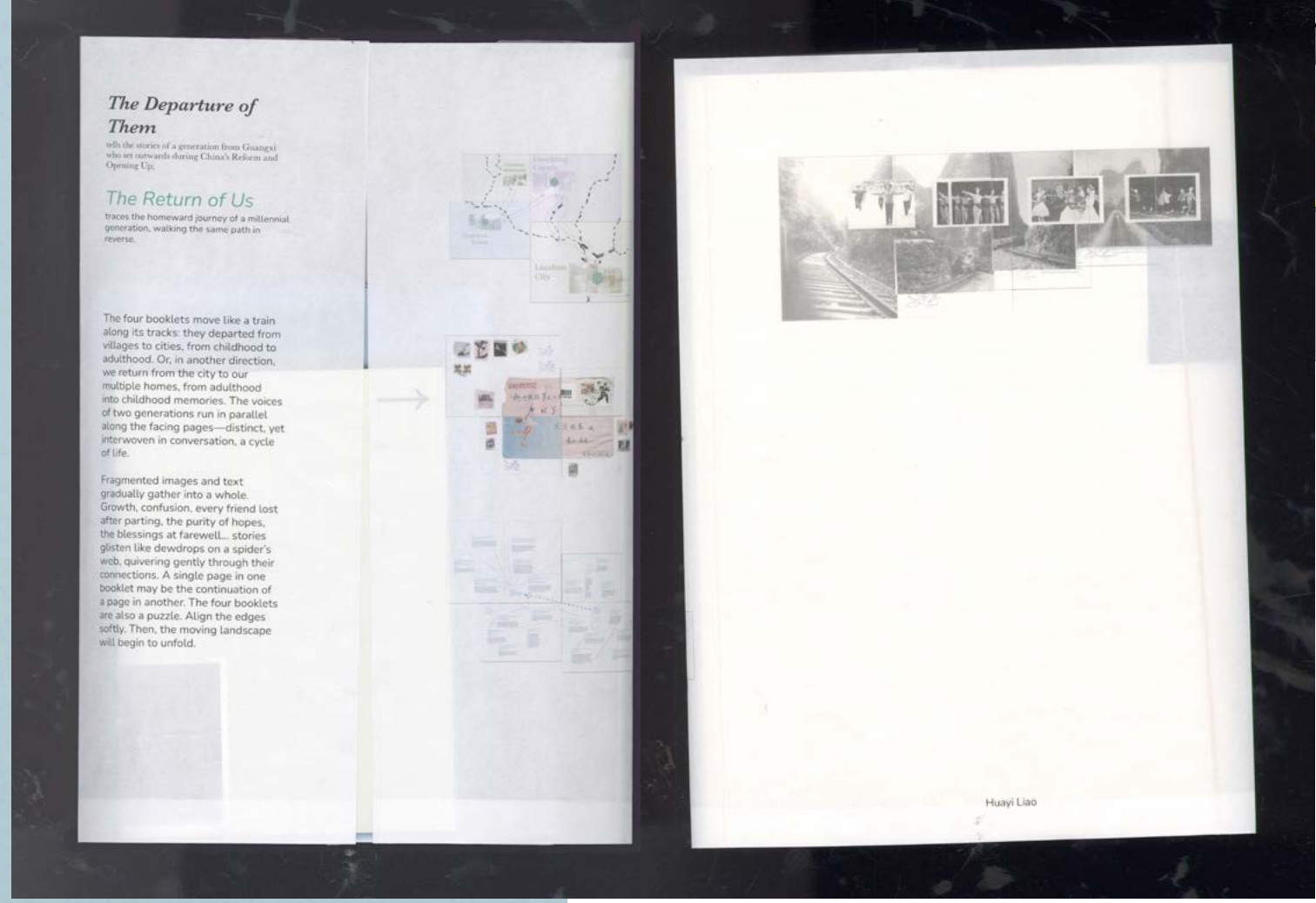
tells the stories of a generation from Guangxi who set outwards during China's Reform and Opening Up.

The Return of Us

traces the homeward journey of a millennial generation, walking the same path in reverse.

The four booklets move like a train along its tracks: they departed from villages to cities, from childhood to adulthood. Or, in another direction, we return from the city to our multiple homes, from adulthood into childhood memories. The voices of two generations run in parallel along the facing pages—distinct, yet interwoven in conversation, a cycle of life.

Fragmented images and text gradually gather into a whole. Growth, confusion, every friend lost after parting, the purity of hopes, the blessings at farewell... stories glisten like dewdrops on a spider's web, quivering gently through their connections. A single page in one booklet may be the continuation of a page in another. The four booklets are also a puzzle. Align the edges softly. Then, the moving landscape will begin to unfold.



The Departure of Them

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Haayi Liao



to make spoons out of leaves under the tree in the nursery; the leaves of the banyan tree were too small and brittle, you tore the leaves along the vein lines, folded them together and pretended to pass them to your mouth.

On the third day, I stole my grandfather's cigarette box and used it after dinner to hold fireflies. I placed one into your sweaty palm; its glow lit up your eyebrows.

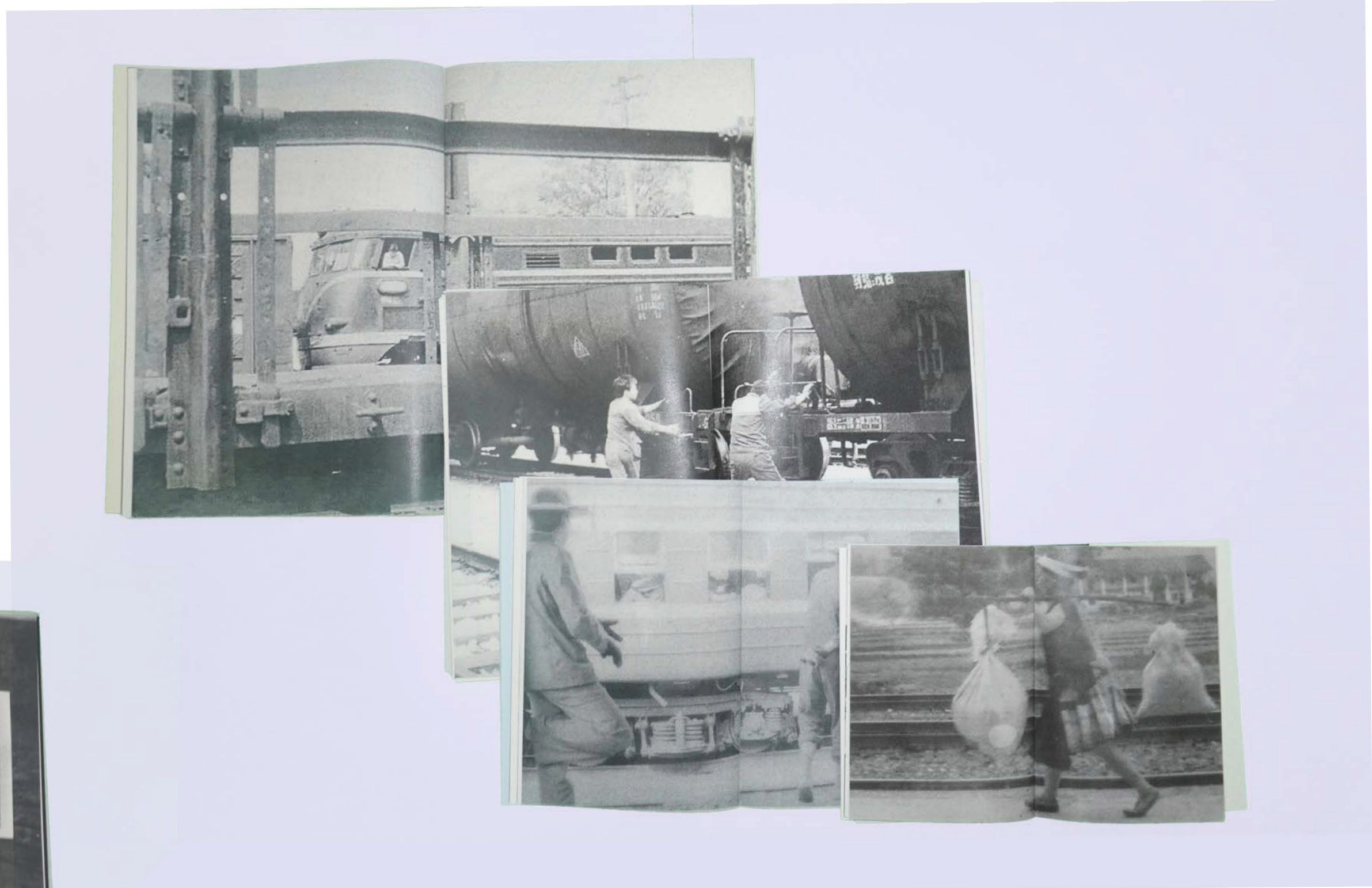
On the fourth day, I dreamed the long canal below the cliff split into many streams. One becoming a meandering brook on the slopes, one an inclined waterfall in a rainstorm, one a moist web between roots and soil, and one a river, calmly carrying my boat. I drifted among the paddies, floating until the leaves of the magnolia tree fell. Summer w by so fast.

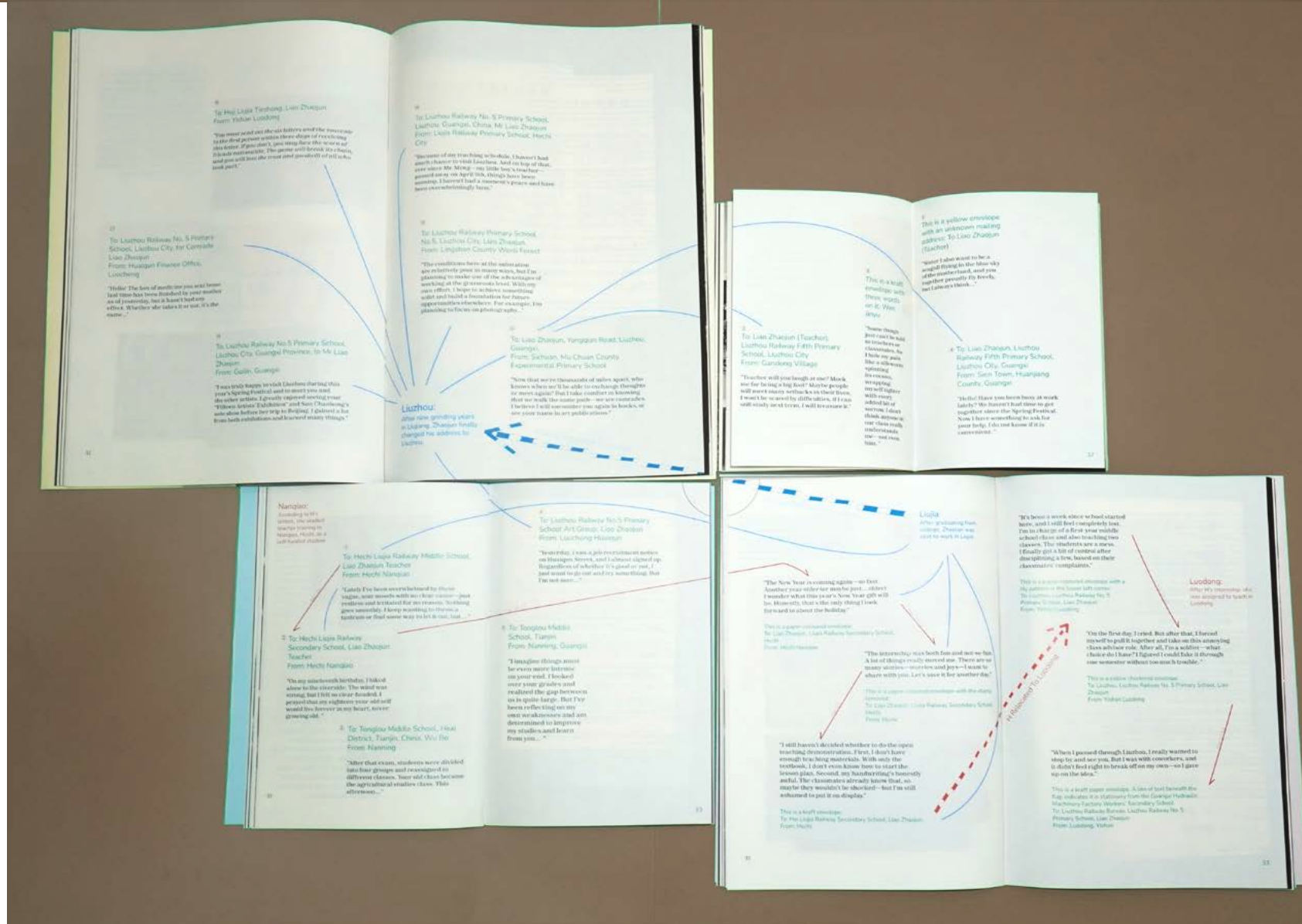


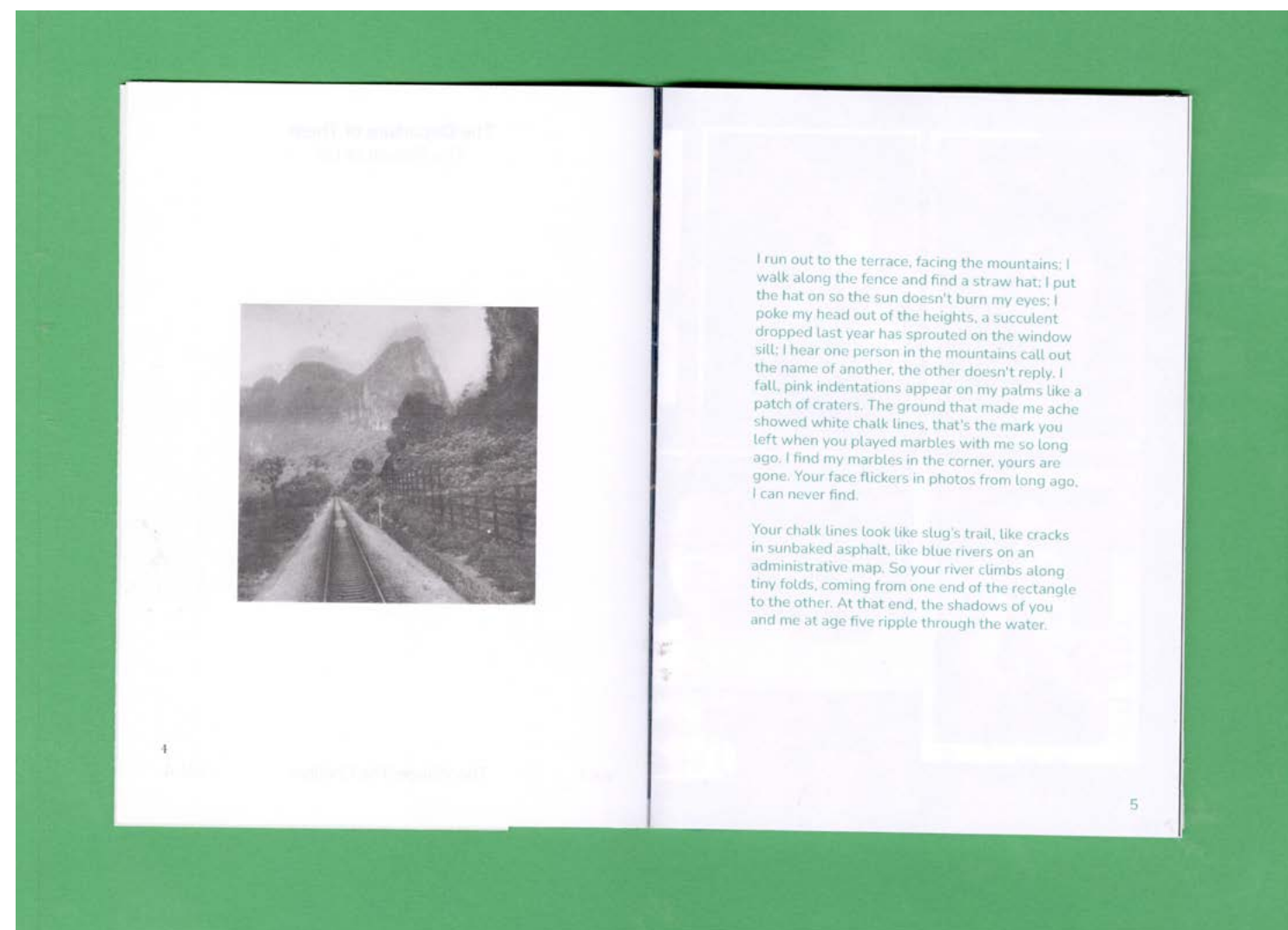




Beyond the visual connections revealed through puzzle-like alignment, additional layers of meaning are subtly suggested across the spreads.







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Notes

*Translation from Chinese provided with the assistance of OpenAI's ChatGPT.