“FINDING OURSELVES can be messy, but Laura Gao tells her story of self-discovery with HONEST and VULNERABLE BEAUTY.”
—MIKE CURATO, Lambda Award—winning author of Flamer

“Through hilarious inner dialogue, video-gaming references, and fun explainers, Gao EFFORTLESSLY brings readers into their world.”
—MALAKA GHRIB, author of I Was Their American Dream

“Messy Roots is FUNNY, INTIMATE, ABSORBING, and DEEPLY MOVING. What a gift to have this peek into Laura Gao’s memories, in all their sweetness and complexity.”
—BECKY ALBERTALLI, New York Times bestselling author of Kate in Waiting

“Hilarious, heartfelt, and BEAUTIFULLY ILLUSTRATED, Messy Roots deserves to join the Chinese American canon right next to Gene Luen Yang’s American Born Chinese.”
—R. F. KUANG, author of The Poppy War

“Messy Roots surprised me in ALL THE BEST WAYS. It’s a book that will stay with you for a long time to come.”
—TILLIE WALDEN, author of On a Sunbeam

“Messy Roots is about the hardship of IDENTITY and the beautiful but messy JOURNEY TO FIND IT.”
—AMINDER DHALIWAL, author of Cyclopedia Exotica

After spending her early years in Wuhan, China, riding water buffalos and devouring stinky tofu, Laura immigrates to Texas, where her hometown is as foreign as Mars—at least until 2020, when COVID-19 makes Wuhan a household name.

In Messy Roots, Laura illustrates her coming-of-age as a girl who simply wants to make the basketball team, escape Chinese school, and figure out why girls make her heart flutter.

Insightful, original, and hilarious, toggling seamlessly between past and present, China and America, Gao’s debut is a tour de force of graphic storytelling.
MESSY ROOTS
A Graphic Memoir of a Wuhanese American

LAURA GAO

with color and art assistance by Weiwei Xu
This is a work of nonfiction. Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

To my greatest inspiration and mentor, Ms. Alexander, for teaching me how to dream.

To Jerry, for keeping my ego in check while reviewing this book like a true little brother.

And finally, to my parents, whom I'll always love. I hope one day you'll read this and understand everything.
SAN FRANCISCO, JANUARY 2020, RIGHT AFTER COVID IS DISCOVERED.

The city of Wuhan is shutting down because of coronavirus. Officials speculate it came from bats sold at wet markets. Let’s take some calls for viewers’ opinions.

This virus thing is actually a big deal now. Where even is this “Woo-huh” place?
You think it'll spread to SF?

Look, I'm just saying if these savages want to eat bats, then they deserve it!

Why would anyone want to eat a bat?

Heh, think it tastes like chicken?

Is this all you want to talk about?!

Chill out, it was a bad joke. What's up with you lately?
CHAPTER 1
The Wuhan I Knew

This is the Wuhan I knew.
Infinite rice paddies...
peaceful lilypad ponds...

SPLASH
...and my cousins and me, with no internet and too much energy.

Oh right—and our lovely grandma, Popo.

Though she never finished second grade, she had a PhD in getting kids in line.

Wǒ yào gē diào nǐmen de érduo! I'M GOING TO CHOP OFF YOUR EARS!
Canjie, however, always tried (and failed) to be our babysitter.

When I wasn't with Popo and Dede, I hung out with my mom's side* of the family in the city. My memories there with my grandma Nainai involved less mud and more math.

If you have five pieces of candy and I take one, what do you get?

ANGRY!!!

My grandpa Yeye was our resident master chef. His Wuhanese dishes could make Gordon Ramsay cry.

At night, she'd read my favorite Chinese folktales, like the ones about Chang'e and her guardian rabbit and Sun Wukong, the monkey king.

Our ringleader was Lulu, who, despite being the youngest, had mastered the art of mischief.

Our grandpa, Dede, toiled in the fields during the day and enjoyed a round of mahjong with a side of bāji@* at night.

Who knew girls could be more trouble than boys?

*Typically “Yeye” and “Nainai” are names for paternal grandparents, but I mixed them up early!
I loved going to the market with them every morning to devour all the street food.

But when I turned four, I found myself in a strange, new world.
A world with strangers and nightmare clowns chasing me—

Hey, those "strangers" were your parents!
And we only chased you because you ran away from us at the airport.

How was I supposed to know? Y'all left me for the U.S. right when I was born!

We had to! Grad school started that fall.
We sacrificed our homes, families, comfort, to come here so—

—so we could have a better future, yada yada... I've heard it a bajillion times now!

I asked y'all to check my Chinese essay, not take me on another guilt trip, jeez. Besides, this is MY story.

Mom and Dad never even asked if I wanted to come here. I could barely understand my classmates in pre-K. Who'd want to play with the silent kid with the weird bowl cut?

Gather around, kids! Let's see where everyone's from.

Over here!
Near Grammy's!
Houston!
FRANCE!

WHOAAAAAAAA!
Okay, quiet down! Who’s next?

How about you, Yu- Ya- um...

Young?

Yuyang.

From Wuhan.

Woo... huh?

Is that where Sue’s from?

I’m from Korea!

Wu-HAN.

China.

That’s weird.

John, that’s not very nice. Young may be from China, but now Texas is home to all of us.

Roll call was always a living nightmare. I started memorizing the list so I could save the teachers from their misery.

Here we go, she’s making that face again.

Yuh—

HERE!

PRESENT!

NEXT!

Mama, I want a new name!

Why?

Yuyang is beautiful!

No, it’s WEIRD!

But it’s so special to Baba and me!

I barely knew how to pronounce “Texas,” let alone call it my home. Wuhan was more foreign than Mars here. I wished we’d never moved so that I wouldn’t have to explain myself.
高 (Gāo) means tall and mighty, like the skies.

And lastly, 洋 (Yáng) means the seas, peaceful and safe.

 Altogether, it means you are our world!

The First Lady, Laura Bush, arrives in Dallas!

The First Lady! Could it get more American than that?

Mama, that’s so cheesy.

Sigh, then how about...

No clue. But she sounds cool!

My mom said I’m named after the First Lady!
CHAPTER 2
DISS (Deception for Immigrant Sibling Solidarity)

After being the queen of attention for five heavenly years, I was dethroned by an ugly cinnamon roll.

I wanted a puppy!

What do you think we should name him, Yang Yang?

Jerry! Like Tom and Jerry!

It’s fitting! Like Jersey, the first place we landed in.

And so Jerry Gao was born that day, the first official American of the family.

**Rule #1:**
If one of us hides something from our parents, we both hide it with our lives!

**Rule #2**
If one of us finds out something our parents are hiding, we must share it!

**Rule #3**
Snitches get stitches!

Sign here to mark your blood oath:

**Laura Jerry**

[Drawing of a heart and cranberry juice]

This was the surprise?

I wanted a puppy!

What do you think we should name him, Yang Yang?

Jerry! Like Tom and Jerry!

It’s fitting! Like Jersey, the first place we landed in.
MOOOOM, JERRY RIpped MY DRAWING!

We fought daily. As the older one, I always got blamed.

Jerry used CRY. IT'S super EFFECTIVE!

YANG YANG, WHAT DID YOU DO THIS TIME?

SHH! You can hit me back!

Aiya, Yang Yang, what did you say?

An alien family abandoned you there from their UFO.

You're lucky we took you in.

Popo, let's throw him in the trash. I won't tell.

See that trash can?

But as immigrant siblings, we quickly realized the power of teaming up.
Why don't we ever have snacks? Let's bake something! OOH, like cake! With gummy worms!!

No gummy worms. But cookies are easy, right? Welp, guess we'll wing it.

Welp, guess we'll wing it. RACE!

What's that smell?
SHOULD WE CALL 911?! NO WAY!
Would you rather die from a fire or from—

MOM
DAD
FEBRUARY 2020, AT THE RISE OF COVID.

The older we got, the higher the stakes became. The DISS code was an oath for life.

What is that?

Looks like Mom’s plastic tray.

Ugh, I didn’t check the oven when I was preheating!

This never happened.
Oh good, you’re wearing masks.

Well, you only told us a million times.

Our mom’s favorite pastime was nagging. I knew she did it because she cared, but I couldn’t help but worry about who’d overhear her Chinese.

Flight to San Francisco is now boarding!

Gotta go!

Should we keep them on?

I’m not sure what’s better... risking COVID or twenty hours of dirty looks.

Heard rumors that TSA is cracking down on Chinese people flying. We have U.S. passports... we should be fine.
CHAPTER 3
Mathlete to Athlete

Growing up, I moved to a new school every year. Once I picked up some English, making friends as the new kid in elementary school was as easy as liking the same Pokémon.

First grade

Second grade

Third grade

Laura & Andre sitting in a tree

Fourth grade

wow!

McCoy Elementary was where I felt most at home. My classmates were from all different backgrounds with unique passions. Together, we competed on the mathletes team and I got first place!

Nainai, look!

Tai bàng le!

Amazing!

It was short-lived. I moved one last time for middle school.

WELCOME BACK, COPPELL COWBOYS & COWGIRLS!
Hank Murphy!

Whoo Hank! Attaboy!

Go Cowboys!

The MVP goes to...

Next category, Math Olympiad! Second place goes to...
Who?

Laura, come on up!

Of course she’s Asian.

Crickets

Crickets

Snickers

Yang Yang, why didn’t you go up onstage?

Laura Gao!

Where is she?

I didn’t hear my name.

Don’t lie to us. You’re just embarrassed you didn’t get first again!

You barely studied this year! You thought I wouldn’t notice you reading those useless comic books instead?
Everyone thinks I’m a nerd!

Nobody was—

I just want to fit in! I’m not at McCoy anymore. They’re gonna eat me alive!

Who cares what others think—

I hate Math Olympiad...

...and I hate that you make me do it!

HOW DARE YOU—

Stop yelling!

Wasting our money on math books!

SCREECH!

SKRRRT!

Then spend it on basketball lessons! Or move us back home!

Yang Yang, it’s okay. You’ll do better next time.

Thanks, Nainai.

My dad and I butt heads on everything. My mom says it’s because I’m stubborn like him. But he wanted us to fit in as much as I did.
That summer, my dad and I trained at the YMCA every day. I kicked off seventh grade by trading in my TI-84 for a fresh new pair of Jordans. You'll be matched for two on two. When I blow the whistle, the guards will race for the ball. Play until someone scores. Losing team will...

RUN LAPS

JESSIE/LAURA VS CARLY/TAYLOR

FWEET!
She looked so flawlessly cool. I knew that’s what I wanted to be.

Hey, forget them.

Oh—Who are they?

Eighth graders.

I couldn’t take my eyes off of them, especially the one with the red headband.

Why am I always matched with the only other Asian—

She looked so flawlessly cool. I knew that’s what I wanted to be.
Today's special. Lucky me.

Is that someone's hair in it?

Ewww, what is that?

Thwey're dumplings. It smells like something died in there.

So... what did y'all think of that math test?

Ugh, left a quarter of it blank. I need an A or my dad won't give allowance.

Your dad pays you for As?!

Laura, no offense but you're Asian. You don't need to try.

N-no... I suck at math! I barely studied!
WATCH OUT!

HANK, WHAT THE HECK WAS THAT FOR?!

Laura, gimme your napkin.

Laura?

Helloooo, Earth to Laura.

Don't tell me you're into one of those airheads.

Wha- I'm not. How did you-

You could try- I don't know- talking to him?

Easy for you to say, y'all are family friends!

Laura, gimme your napkin.

Laura?

Helloooo, Earth to Laura.

Laura?

Haven't you noticed?

She's in love with Hank.

Don't tell me you're into one of those airheads.

Wha- I'm not. How did you-

You could try- I don't know- talking to him?

Easy for you to say, y'all are family friends!

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Helloooo, Earth to Laura.

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Haven't you noticed?

She's in love with Hank.

Laura?

Helloooo, Earth to Laura.
CHAPTER 4
Messy Roots and Ripped Genes

Every Sunday, I went to Chinese school to pay my heritage dues.

This is the Wuhan I knew. Infinite rice paddies, peaceful lilypad ponds—

Oops, where was I... Wuhan has some nice... uhh... Yangtze River bridges!

Thank you.

This is the Wuhan I knew. Infinite rice paddies, peaceful lilypad ponds—

Oops, where was I... Wuhan has some nice... uhh... Yangtze River bridges!

Thank you.
Everyone spoke English. Why did I have to learn one of the hardest languages in the world? Mandarin had everything from complex roots to characters that looked like chicken scratch.

I liked to imagine each word as a drawing.

$$Ai = love$$

A roof hiding lovers from their nosy parents.

Tears of laughter

A warm embrace
I lost most of the Chinese I knew early on, and calls with my family in Wuhan were rare.

Hey, Nainai!
This week I had... umm... one sec.

BABA, HOW DO YOU SAY "BASKETBALL TRYOUTS"??

Lán qiú -uhh- saba săi!
Lán qiú xuán bá săi!

How did they go?

I’ll let you know when I find out.

Nainai said great conversations were like exhilarating badminton matches, one’s swing feeding off the energy of the other’s serve.

Ours could barely make it over the net.

Nah, I’ll just google it.

You kids are so spoiled. When we were learning English at LSU, we memorized every page of the dictionary!

Lesson 4. Promotions. "Can we discuss opportunities for promotion?"

Can we discuss oppo-TEN-ties for promotion?
TOON-ni-tees, Baba.

Oppo-TOON-ni-tees. Opportunities for promotion.

The truth was, I could've ditched Chinese school if I tried. But I was afraid I'd stick out among Hank and his friends.

I tried everything from dyeing to straightening to shaving off my thick black hair.

They were all so damn hot, like the High School Musical actors with their gorgeous, sleek locks.

NOT ANOTHER SUBURBAN MALL

I tried everything from dyeing to straightening to shaving off my thick black hair.
My mom proudly said her genes were to thank for my hair.

Frankly, the only jeans I wanted were the ripped ones on Abercrombie models, but she said, “That’s what poor people wear.”

But the roots grew back even more tangled.
Mom took us to the library every weekend. It was our version of being kids in a candy shop.

I always made a beeline for the new comics section, though "section" is generous. The single shelf only carried a few superhero comics and four Naruto volumes—all of which I binged in a month.

You're still reading picture books! A Chinese kid? Really, Jerry? Captain Underpants? They're graphic novels!

Cardiovascular Diseases?! Blood and germs are GROSS! I like drawing!

Learn something useful! You'll thank me when you're a rich doctor.

Can you buy a house by drawing?

My art teacher says being happy is all that matters.

That's so American.

Well, it's the American Dream.
I never asked to be the oldest kid in an immigrant family just a generation removed from poverty. Popo told me stories of how people starved and had to abandon babies. The only thing I was starving for was Hank’s attention. Was I really cut out to be my ancestors’ greatest hope?

What happened to your eyebrow?

I—uhh—ran into a wall.

A flat wall?

Yeah... my ancestors were screwed.

THE NEXT DAY...

Why’s your eyebrow?

Please don’t.

STOMP!

PUSH!

WHOOSH!

TRYOUTS ARE POSTED!
We made it!

To the bench.

Welcome to the team. I’m Colby.

To the bench.

Hi—I’m umm—Gao!

Welcome to the team. I’m Colby.

Maybe being a hotshot doctor or artist was out of the picture. But my ancestors could settle for the next Kobe, right?

Gao? See you at practice.

My cousin from China is so embarrassing!

Merry Jerry Christmas

*Not real pages of the book, just from my terrible memory. Check out the real book by the amazing Gene Luen Yang though!
Can we do Elf on the Shelf?

Elf on the Shelf. It watches kids and tells Santa if they’ve been good or bad.

Elf on the Shénme? Elf on the Shelf.

That’s... creepy.

Right?

But little kids love it. Saw it at Jessie’s house last year.

This wasn’t a chapter in the Parenting for Immigrants book.

As the family member who had watched the most reruns of Elf, I was volun-told to be our family Santa. Jessie filled me in whenever I had questions. No traditions were left behind at her house.

So everyone flies in for Christmas?

Yep, I hate it. Don’t be so negative, honey, you love caroling with Mammaw.

Oh! What do I do with the elf?

Write a letter to Santa.

I’d love a big family for once...
Dear Santa,
I was a VEEEERRY good boy this year.
I got the bestest grades
and brush my teeth every day.
I want a Nintendo DS for x-mas.
Love, Jerr

Fine. But if he starts slacking,
I'm taking it away.

Step two: Sneak it over to your parents.

Aiya, so expensive!
Games ruin your brain!

Secretly, I wanted the DS too, for Nintendogs. If I couldn't get a real dog, it was the next best thing.

What if you got him the DS but skip his hóng bāo* for the next two Chinese New Years?

Aiyah, so expensive! Games ruin your brain!

Fine. But if he starts slacking, I'm taking it away.

Step three: Write a letter back from Santa.

Chinese Santa knows school comes first.

Step four: Hide the gift and letter under the tree—
We don't have a tree.

Really? Then the fireplace?

And step five: Get rid of that creepy doll.

What if you got him the DS but skip his hóng bāo for the next two Chinese New Years?

* hóng bāo = red packets of money given to kids for Chinese New Year
Dear Jerry,

Ho ho ho! Mr. Elf on your shelf tells me you’ve been a good boy! You did well in school and pitched your first baseball game. However, stop talking back to your sister! Enjoy the present!

...with love, Santa!

And... it’s recording!

This was my favorite part. Besides a few things my parents made me include, I had full creative liberty to craft whatever letter I wanted.

We got better at this Christmas thing year after year. But no matter how pretty everything looked in gold wrapping paper...
Ehh? Did you not press record?

And fake it?

Christmas never felt as magical as in the movies.

...whatever. Put all the presents back in their boxes and we'll redo it! This has to be perfect!

WE'RE SENDING THESE MEMORIES TO FAMILY!

WHAT MEMORIES?

YOU YELLING?!

I thought I did—

Do you see a blinking red dot?!

I thought at least on Christmas, we'd stop fighting! Who cares if the family sees it?

They're not here and never will be!
I thought I had followed every step in the recipe perfectly.

But we were always missing one key ingredient.

At least Chinese New Year was right around the corner and my parents didn’t need a guidebook for this one.

**Yang Yang, go help your mama finish the eggrolls.**

I suck at cooking.

What will you do once you have your own family?

I’ll be rich then and hire a chef!

Besides, I’d already started one fire too many...

---

*I Come Home Often* by Chen Hong, a popular song in the ‘90s and one of my dad’s favorites!
My mom’s cooking was rivaled only by Yeye’s. After moving to the U.S., she tried to replicate dishes she grew up eating with ingredients she could find here.

Why does Jerry get pizza?

He won’t eat our food, so I’m trying something new.

Maaaamaaa! Did you use ketchup!?

Oh, is that not right? It’s supposed to be tomato sauce!

Same thing.

Pass the chili oil.

Eat this. It’ll make you smarter.
Don’t tell your friends you eat fish head at home.

You say that about everything.

Do you think I could be a pro eater?

I knew someone who did that.

What happened?

Our mom had the wildest ways of delivering lessons.

She died.

At the end of the night, we always called our relatives to wish them happy New Year. This time, however, my dad had an announcement first.

Mama and I have a surprise.

ARE WE GETTING A DOG??

We’re finally going home this summer.

HOME?
CHAPTER 6
The Wuhan I Knew?

My favorite Chinese folktale is Chang'e and her guardian rabbit on the moon.

Chang'e once lived on Earth with her lover, Houyi, an archer who saved humanity from burning up by shooting down nine sun spirits. For his deed, the gods gifted Houyi the elixir of immortality.

One day, to stop someone from stealing the elixir, Chang'e sacrificed herself and drank it, causing her body to fly up into the heavens. To stay close to her love, she decided to land on the moon.
During the Mid-Autumn Festival, when the moon is the largest, you can see the rabbit watching closely from above.

Nainai felt sorry for Chang'e. How lost and isolated she must be.

But I was jealous. How freeing to fly away and make someplace your own.
NAINAI

YEEE

MEET MOM'S SIDE

Brother!
Baba, your egg rolls are perfect. A few of mine always break. You must be so hungry. Come in!

Maybe you’re stuffing too much in? I’ll show you later.

New perm, sis? Don’t I look a decade younger?

I didn’t expect Yang Yang to like Chinese food.

I make this every day. Only Jerry is picky.

We sang nursery rhymes together! Do you remember them?

I wished I could answer everything like little Yang Yang would.

She still has the same chubby cheeks. But so much more quiet...

I didn’t expect Yang Yang to like Chinese food.

Was this really my home anymore? I thought coming here meant I didn’t have to explain myself.
There was at least one thing that didn’t need explaining: breakfast! In Wuhan, breakfast is an Olympic sport. There’s even a unique verb for it in the Wuhanese dialect: 过早 guò zǎo! Little Uncle’s family took us kids out on a street food tour.

Fried sticky rice and meat wrapped in bean skin.

Hot and dry noodles in sesame paste.

Fried dough wrapped in sticky rice.

Spicy duck neck, only for the bravest souls.

Tofu pudding soup, or, as I like to call it, “tofu brains.”

There’s Pizza Hut here?!

You’re still hungry?!

Don’t get pizza when we’re in freaking China!

Don’t worry, I’ll buy him some.

Fine, I’m gonna go buy a drink.

Okay. With or ?

I want that one.
Uhh, what? OR 🤔?

Okay... how's this—
Yang Yang, take this—

There were a lot of Chinese things I didn’t understand.

NO, WE REFUSE! I’M PAYING!!

There were a lot of Chinese things I didn’t understand. NO, WE REFUSE! I’M PAYING!!

There were a lot of Chinese things I didn’t understand. NO, WE REFUSE! I’M PAYING!!

However, some things were universal. And the unstoppable YAO MING slams it down for the Rockets!

However, some things were universal. And the unstoppable YAO MING slams it down for the Rockets!

On our last night in the city, we took a ferry down the Yangtze river. Skyscrapers and rows of illuminated bridges formed a stunning light show rivaling the stars above. My Chinese essay did not do this spectacle justice.

On our last night in the city, we took a ferry down the Yangtze river. Skyscrapers and rows of illuminated bridges formed a stunning light show rivaling the stars above. My Chinese essay did not do this spectacle justice.

Wow! Were these here when you were a kid, Mom?

Wow! Were these here when you were a kid, Mom?

Some of them! A few are new.

Some of them! A few are new.

They’ve been building them ever since I was a kid.

They’ve been building them ever since I was a kid.

They’re as beautiful as I remember back then.

They’re as beautiful as I remember back then.
What was Wuhan like back then?

See those skyscrapers?

They used to be tiny concrete buildings.

And then y'all got married and had me?

Yes, I think the hospital where you were born is somewhere over there.

Though I probably wouldn't recognize it now...

My parents went to the same high school, where Mom bragged she was #1 while Dad, at #2, could never catch up. He joked he let her win. As fate would have it, after going to opposite sides of China for college, they met again in Wuhan for work.

...so much has changed.