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Li Xiao Mei, a businesswoman in Hangzhou, China, was sitting in her office on the 30th floor of a brand new skyscraper she had paid to be built. Sipping on green tea from her tea plantation situated in the rolling leafy green hills near West Lake, she watched as the rain outside crashed angrily on the floor to ceiling window which overlooked the Qiantang river. It was a biting February day and she had just returned from her familial Lunar New Year celebrations. The clouds outside were dark and the shower of water so heavy that the view out of the window was blurred.

Inside the office, the walls were adorned with ancient Ming Dynasty artwork, characterised by the rich dark brown seal colour and calligraphy which combined to give the painting an ethereal quality. The artistry seemed completely out of place among the glass and firm edges of this modernist structure, built as a monument to an industrialist's life work. Porcelain vases atop hardwood furniture were adorned with fresh flowers each day, in particular roses and lilies, even when Li Xiao Mei was not in the office. On one wall was situated a map of China – Taiwan and 90 per cent of the South China sea proudly symbolised as Chinese property, the 9-dash line swooping to within an inch of the coastlines of Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia.

She sat behind a large desk looking out towards the rain, motionless, barely blinking, rather like a doll stuck on a child's shelf, porcelain and pale. She wore a smart suit which comfortably followed the curves of her body – the communist party badge, bright red with a hammer and sickle, proudly displayed on her lapel. At 44 years old, she looked young for her age – in fact, she would have been a rather attractive lady were it not for a large brown mole at the top of her nose to the inside of her right eye. Four prickly hairs protruded out of its fuzzy texture, black and sharp, requiring constant maintenance. The image of herself she kept on her desk notably lacked the blot, for like all her portraits, any wrinkle, crease or crevice had been airbrushed. At the same time, despite the ease of the procedure, requiring a professional to wield a little knife with careful precision, she never dared to have it removed because it was at once a