As a vice-president at Wonton Food, Inc., in Long Island City, Donald Lau manages the company’s accounts payable and receivable, negotiates with insurers, and, somewhat incidentally, composes the fortunes that go inside the fortune cookies, of which Wonton is the world’s largest manufacturer. Each day, Wonton’s factory churns out four million Golden Bowl-brand cookies, which are sold to several hundred venders, who, in turn, sell them to most of the forty thousand Chinese restaurants across the country. Wonton’s primacy in the industry and, for that matter, in the gambler’s imagination is such that when, in March, five of six lucky numbers printed on a fortune happened to coincide with the winning picks for the Powerball lottery, a hundred and ten people, instead of the usual handful, came forward to claim prizes of around a hundred thousand dollars. Lottery officials suspected a scam until they traced the sequence to a fortune printed with the digits “22-28-32-33-39-40” and Donald Lau’s prediction: “All the preparation you’ve done will finally be paying off.”

“We’ve had winners before, but never this many,” Lau said the other day, in his East Williamsburg office, which is furnished with stacks of financial reports and “A Dictionary of American Proverbs.” “A computer picks the numbers, not me. If only a computer could also write the fortunes.” Lau never expected to become a fortune-cookie writer. After graduating from Columbia with degrees in engineering and business, he joined Bank of America, then ran a company that exported logs from the Pacific Northwest to China. In the early eighties, he was hired by a Chinatown noodle manufacturer, which eventually expanded into fortune cookies. The firm bought the Long Island City plant, and it soon became apparent that its antiquated catalogue of fortunes would have to be updated. (“Find someone as gay as you are,” one leftover from the nineteen-forties read.) “We knew we needed to add new sayings,” Lau said. “I was chosen because my English was the best of the group, not because I’m a poet.”
At first, the writing came easily. Finding inspiration in sources ranging from the I Ching to the *Post*, Lau cranked out three or four maxims a day, between scrutinizing spreadsheets and monitoring the company’s inventory of chow mein. “I’d be on the subway and look up at the signs and think, Hey, that would make a great fortune,” he said. (One such adage: “Beware of odors from unfamiliar sources.”) “I’d keep a small notebook and jot down whatever came to me. I don’t think I ever sat in front of the computer and said, ‘I am going to write ten fortunes right now.’ It has to come naturally.”

Love, riches, power: there is a limited range of experience that can be expressed in one sentence, and, about eleven years into his tenure, Lau began to run out of ideas. He leaned increasingly on traditional Chinese sayings, which offer insight (along the lines of “True gold fears no fire”) but not foresight (“Your income will increase”), and in 1995 he gave up altogether. “I’ve written thousands of fortunes, but the inspiration is gone,” Lau said. “Have you heard of writer’s block? That is what happened to me.”

These days, he cycles selections from his vast oeuvre in and out of circulation. He is worried that readers will notice that the cookies are in reruns, which might result in Wonton’s losing its edge on the competition. (This is unlikely. Although there are about forty fortune-cookie companies in the United States, few have Wonton’s manufacturing capabilities.) So Lau has decided to bring in new blood. The company will soon advertise for a new fortune writer, and Lau will make the transition to editor. “Maybe when I retire I’ll write again—perhaps a book about writing fortunes,” he said. Returning to form, he summarized the thrust of the book with two simple axioms. “Don't have too complicated a mind,” he said. “Think in ten-word sentences.” ♦