

Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden in the Classroom

By Mark Dodge



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always been on the economic and cultural exchanges within colonial systems, and he has written about slave resistance in the Atlantic, the silver trade in the Pacific, and most recently the Presbyterian involvement in the Taiwanese tea industry.

Zhuqing Li's *Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden* offers an exciting new twist on a classic Civil War motif, the "brother against brother" narrative. This story is not about two brothers who chose to fight on opposite sides of a bitter war against each other on personal or moral grounds, but rather two sisters who, contrary to their own desires, and even at odds with their own convictions, were separated from each other by a conflict that lasted most of their adult lives. The Civil War that separated them, was not the American Civil War, about which so many of the brother against brother stories we read have been written, but rather the Chinese Civil War—an event which due to its long complicated history and geographic and cultural distance, has largely been overlooked in popular American literature.

Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden is a powerful story about how the Communist Revolution in China bent, but did not break, Li's upper-class Fujian family, and how her aunts, the two eldest children growing up through these turbulent times, rose to prominence on opposite sides of this conflict despite their personal disdain for the ideological contest that separated them, and how they were able to reunite their family forty years later.

Li's aunts Jun and Hong (Hong is a pseudonym for one of her aunts) grew up in an old family compound in Fuzhou known locally as the "Flower Fragrant Garden." Their father was an officer in the army of the Republic of China, and the descendant of a line of scholar-gentry that included twenty-one Jinshi and 110 Juren stretching back through the Ming Dynasty. Indeed, as they say in Fujian, "The Chens and Lins take up half the world," (3) and Jun and Hong's father was a Chen and their mother was a Lin. Their father was an artillery officer in the army of the Republic of China, and later served as the



Li's grandfather, fourth from the right, among other ancestors in the Chen family shrine.

Source: Page 22 of *Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden*.

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local salt commissioner. The wealth and stability that his position and family status provided, as well as the hopes and dreams of his two eldest daughters, were all dashed by the invasion of China by Japan in 1937. As Japanese forces occupied coastal China the family was forced to move to Nanping. The family lost most of their property and possessions along the way, and Jun was forced to finish her education at a less prestigious provincial school rather than the National Normal School she had hoped to graduate from.

When the war with Japan finally ended, the Chen family's situation did not immediately im-

prove as expected. Instead of returning to their family estate and privileged lifestyle, they were forced to sell their home in the face of an advancing Communist People's Liberation Army (PLA). Hong went away to medical school and her older sister Jun accepted a prestigious teaching position on a small island just off the mainland in order to help support the family, that was surviving by selling the few family treasures they had left. Afterwards, Jun and a friend went to the nearby island of Jinmen to celebrate. Then, in 1949, facing certain defeat at the hands of communist forces, the remnants of the Nationalist Army and the government of the Republic of China evacuated mainland China to a self-imposed exile on Taiwan and its surrounding islands. The island paradise that Jinmen had been when Jun accepted her teaching position on the mainland turned into the frontline in the war between the PLA and Nationalist Army. The PLA invaded Jinmen, but were defeated. The Nationalist Army drew its line in the sand at Jinmen, isolating Jun from her family in Fujian. Eventually, accepting that she would never again be able to return home, Jun taught a local school, worked as a news reporter, then later married a Nationalist general and took a position writing promotional material for the Kuomintang. In 1953, she and her husband moved to Taipei, the capital of Taiwan. She eventually became the owner of a lucrative import firm that became a leading supplier of clocks and other machinery in Taiwan, all while raising a blended family of her husband's children from

his prior marriage who managed to escape from the mainland.

The rest of Jun's family, ostracized by communist society for its gentry past and its ties to the Nationalist Government of the Republic of China, went through a long series of increasing hardships. There were deaths from curable diseases, times when the family nearly starved, two children were sold to Communist soldiers in the hopes that they would be cared for and saved from childhood famine. Hong became a doctor, and eventually a prominent member of the Communist party, but only after she was accused of counterrevolutionary thought, rusticated, and sent to Longdi to engage in agriculture labor for reeducation. After years of reluctantly faithful service to the Communist party through the hardest periods of its Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, Hong returned to Fuzhou where her specialty in gynecology propelled her to significant success leading province-wide medical initiatives related to the implementation of China's one-child policy.

Only after decades of struggling to rise above these separate difficulties were the two sisters able to reunite. Jun, by virtue of her business connections, was able to migrate to the United States, and eventually became an American citizen where she could use her US passport to visit the home she could never be admitted to from Taiwan. Sadly, upon returning to her childhood home, Jun finally realized that the home she had longed for so long no longer existed, and that the lives of the family that she loved and missed have diverged so greatly from her own, that she could never truly return home.

This work's greatest strength is in the accessibility of its eloquent prose and the compelling complexity of its central characters. Readers do not need to be experts in Chinese history to be captivated by the events of this book as they unfold. Since it is told from the perspectives of a cast of characters so overwhelmed by the events they are living through, they often scarcely understood what was going on themselves. The reader finds it easy to be swept up into the currents of history as it unfolds. The tidbits of random news, obscure allusions, and partial explanations that Li scatters throughout her narrative will leave educated lay readers feeling as if they had experienced the chaos of twentieth-century China first-hand.

Despite this impressionistic treatment of events, the book is surprisingly comprehensive. From the Ming Dynasty and the examination system through Deng Xiaoping's 1979 visit to the United States and his four modernizations, nearly every topic that I would routinely cover in an introductory class on modern Chinese history or in a unit on modern China in a class of Asian or world history is memorably touched on at least once in the course of this narrative, and the writing is so captivating that *Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden* would make an excellent foundation for a study of modern China for advanced high school students, undergraduates, or even educated non-specialists interested in strengthening their background in China. Spence's *Search for Modern China*,¹ the only source that Li footnotes in the work, would make an excellent complement, filling in substantial information about the many historical events that

Li references with well-selected primary sources. A short textbook centered on modern China, such as Harold Tanner's *China: A History* could similarly facilitate an in-depth reading of Li's work.² Li's work is rich enough in its treatment of twentieth-century China that properly supplemented it could serve as the framework for an entire course.

From the opening passage in which the author-narrator explains how she grew up with two grandmothers, who were relics of premodern Chinese culture, the particular challenges faced by women during this dramatic reconstruction of Chinese social identity create a strong and recurring theme throughout the work. Li's narrative includes traditional Chinese woman who were child brides with bound feet. It highlights the masculine prejudices of the post war era in which the "New Marriage Law" which required a woman's consent to marriage was considered the final word on women's liberation even as Hong was advised to specialize in gynecology because, "how will you convince your patients to trust a woman doctor?" (119) Li shows the personal sacrifices modern women face as they attempt to balance their professional commitments with their love and attention for their family and children, and ultimately how despite their heroic efforts supporting their families their mother ultimately chooses to live in a home with her son (in a house purchased by Jun) out of loyalty to Confucian gender norms.

One thing that was noticeably missing from Li's extended narrative of twentieth-century China was the death of Hu Yaobang and the subsequent protests and lockdown that strained

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This is a spectacular portrayal of the hardships faced by one Chinese family during what many would consider the most difficult period in its history.



the last years of Deng's chairmanship. This omission was not so surprising. After all, Zhuqing Li grew up in Communist China, where any discussion of these events is banned from schools and suppressed in the media. Li has no difficulty referring to Mao's death as a thankful development, or criticizing party policies during the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution for the troubles they caused for the people of China. Perhaps Li, like her Uncle Guang who has been too indoctrinated with communist ideology to see the tragedy in the destruction of the Flower Fragrant Garden, is not yet ready to openly discuss such controversial topics.

For most of the work, Li actively attempts to avoid taking a clear position on contentious political issues, instead reinforcing the central theme that politics are secondary to family and society. Jun and Hong are both reluctant to join their respective parties, and do not do so out of ideological conviction, but for pragmatic reasons associated with providing for their families' futures. Jun's induction into the KMT is described as the accident that permanently changed her life (340). Even when she accepts an important position writing newspaper articles promoting the KMT for President Chiang's wife, Jun is reluctant and afraid, ever aware that politics can be a Damoscles' sword that may lead to her family's undoing. When Jun chooses to marry a KMT general, Li emphasizes Jun and her husband's shared sense of loss of family in China rather than their shared Nationalist politics as the source of their connection.

Similarly in Hong's life, political obligations represent an omnipresent threat that constantly endangers the stability of her relationship with her family. Hong is forced to deny her love and fidelity to her family in order to protect herself from the damage their nationalist past could do to her position. Despite her efforts, she is accused of counterrevolutionary thought and is separated from her family for years while her children are still young, remanded to the provincial town of Longdi to undergo reeducation. When she is finally redeemed through hard work (motivated by a desire to return to her family, rather than

any newfound faith in communist ideology), she finds herself "forced" time and again to amend unwanted realities to meet with communist party agendas by falsifying reports or reluctantly overseeing programs of enforced sterilization. While Hong often agrees with the objectives of the Communist Party's directives, her character is ever critical of its methods. At every turn she attempts to rationalize the party's policies in order to limit and reduce the abuses that are happening around her, and as such represents a strong vision of what communist policy could have been if it had not been allowed to spiral out of control.

Li, in my opinion, carefully portrays each moment in Hong's career leaving the impression Hong's career was devoted to righting the wrongs of communism from within, and that all of the tragedies that occurred under her watch were a function of the fact that the communist revolution in China was too broad and radical for one woman to fix alone.

But sometimes even a delicate attempt to remain politically noncommittal is itself an important political statement. Li's central theme that the Kuomintang nationalists in exile in Taiwan hold their love of family and China above their own political ideals, and want nothing more than to return to their homeland, is itself a politically contentious statement, with which most of the people in Taiwan would not agree. Li recognizes this in a short paragraph on page 137:

But there was already another population there, some six million people, mostly earlier migrants from the coastal Mainland and a smaller number of indigenous islanders. These people, who often referred to themselves as the native Taiwanese, had their own dialect and native languages, incomprehensible to the arriving Mandarin speakers. They had experienced a half-century of Japanese colonial control, often speaking Japanese better than they spoke Mandarin, and they tended to see the million or so arriving Nationalist loyalists and soldiers as a new kind of foreign invasion.

While Jun is represented as being well-educated in Taiwanese history, nevertheless she summarizes centuries of Taiwanese history dismissively as a simple story of Chinese people invaded and reeducated by the Japanese, who refer to themselves as "native Taiwanese," but "after all, 'Taiwan is a world waiting to be built.'" (152) Despite the fact that the indigenous population of Taiwan was almost as high as the total number of refugees that fled to Taiwan from the mainland between 1945 and 1955, Li reduces them to an imprecise "smaller number." Similarly, Li fails to meaningfully address the reasons that "earlier migrants from the coastal mainland" might not share Jun's longing to return home to China. Many Han Taiwanese had arrived in Taiwan

as many as four centuries earlier and had not considered themselves Chinese for hundreds of years. One of the largest groups of Chinese immigrants, Ming loyalists who followed Koxinga to Taiwan in the seventeenth century, had arrived during their own civil war against the Qing, and considered the Qing to be foreign invaders in the seventeenth century just as much as they considered the KMT to be invaders in the twentieth century. Li does mention the 228 incident and the White Terror, but she significantly whitewashes these events. While as many as 20,000 people were killed and 140,000 imprisoned by Chiang Kai-shek's regime during these events, Li reduces the death toll to "hundreds" and notes that political prisoners were shipped to a remote volcanic island off the coast. (138)

Again, these discrepancies in Li's narrative are easily understandable. Li grew up in mainland China knowing Hong much more intimately than she did Jun, and the majority of her narrative is centered on Hong's experience rather than Jun's. Li knows Hong's experiences much better and is able to bring a more diverse range of Hong's acquaintances to life. Li does not describe a single character from Jun's life in Taiwan who is not directly affiliated with the KMT and their exile. As such, Li's depiction of Taiwan represents only a narrow segment of the people there.

But this too is an underlying feature of the "brother vs. brother" trope. Many of the hundreds of families that were divided against each other during the American Civil War were wealthy slave-owning families in the border states, conflicted by their strong commitments to the Union Government and their investment in slavery and economic dependence on the deep south. As a result, most of the narratives within this genre end up romanticizing the lives and lifestyles of a small cross-section of Americans who are far from representative of the hundreds of thousands who died to criminalize that lifestyle.

As long as Li's readers remember that this is a book about China, and not "how Taiwan came to be,"³ they will not go astray. This is a spectacular portrayal of the hardships faced by one Chinese family during what many would consider the most difficult period in its history, and makes strong statements about the divided lives of Chinese people living in diaspora everywhere. It is a compelling story that will undoubtedly etch itself into our communal memory of China's most turbulent epoch. ♦

NOTES

1. Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2012).
2. Harold M. Tanner, *China: A History* volume 2 (New York: Hackett, 2010).
3. Diedre Mask, "A Family Divided," *New York Times Book Review*, August 7, 2022.