



The author (right) and her friend J., 1978

Journey from Taiwan

A Personal History by Chiufang Hwang, M.D.

With Lilian Duval



The author (left) and her friend J. in 2009, five years before her death.

Contents

Nothing is What it Appears to Be 1

[Chapter Title]..... 5

Nothing is What it Appears to Be

I am an immigrant, and I'm an American. I'm a psychiatrist, but it took me forty years to know myself. With one foot in each culture, I straddled the divide, never knowing the girl on the cover who became the author of this book. Quick to adapt, I fit in everywhere. To tell the truth, I fit in nowhere.

“Daughters of Taiwanese immigrants” — that's the group to which I belong. Like other immigrant children, we struggled to assimilate. We knew without being told not to expose anything about our particular burdens to our American classmates. Our parents imposed inordinate expectations on us. We were bound by inescapable restraints, and we still are. Like pets trained to stay within an invisible fence, we never strayed beyond our boundaries. We submitted to the ancient traditions of our parents' homeland in a country where they made no sense.

Hardest of all, we had to understand everything — and reveal *nothing*. From the outside, our families looked proper and civilized. Quiet. Nice people. On the inside, our homes were turbulent cauldrons of swirling negative emotions. Such good girls we were. And we kept everything to ourselves. In school, we got A in practically everything. Good girls.

Nothing was what it appeared to be.

As a ten-year-old sixth-grader, I spent three hours every afternoon wandering the dangerous streets of Columbia, South Carolina. Slinking past smelly vagrants loafing in the bus terminal, I rode buses with my student pass and roamed the sidewalks and stores, escalators and elevators, in all the places where a young girl should never go alone. As tiny as a six-year-old, I sneaked around, day after day, escaping violence or kidnapping; by what miracle, I never knew. My parents had no idea where I was after school, and never asked.

The environment at home was perilous. My father, in Sisyphean pursuit of a PhD in mathematics, moved our family from one cramped, substandard apartment to another, sometimes every few months, meandering across the Deep South. The high school from which I graduated was the twelfth school I attended. Welfare and public assistance were our life blood.

My mother, a factory worker who never learned English, neglected her children, including my much younger siblings: a brother who didn't talk until four, and a sister who died suddenly in her sleep at thirteen. The family effectively had two children, not three, because I was a semi-adult from age five: the translator of every single piece of paper in the household; writer of school letters and forms; telephone interpreter; and problem solver. I was responsible for renting apartments, hiring babysitters for my siblings and me, negotiating with schoolteachers and business people, and keeping my little siblings out of trouble.

It took forty years of intensive study of three extraordinary peers for me to see myself reflected in their intricate lives. And it took the death of my best friend, the kind-eyed lady on the cover, to give rise to this book.

For more than four decades, I've been privileged to follow the lives of these three women. My immersion in their lives is like a cross between friendship and a formal, longitudinal case study. My extended visits to their homes are comparable to formal site visits, but much more personal. So drenched am I in their lives that I'm more than a friend, but not quite a relative.

As a site visitor, if you play your role convincingly, your subjects might treat you as one of their own and let their guard down, forgetting that you're a house guest. In effect, you're part of a reality show. Sometimes these women would fight with their husband, mother, or others right in front of me, unabashedly. Two of them made me into a sort of assistant parent, encouraging me to discipline their children and ordering the kids to obey me.

This personal history is the story of four daughters and their families' escape from political persecution. As adults, we have all had our struggles, and yet, our chaotic lives appear tranquil from the outside. People like us are very secretive, even among our closest friends.

I was the fourth girl in the study, and I have followed the other three daughters since their childhood in the '60s to the present; we are all now in our forties. Our common denominator is our fathers' departure from Taiwan to avoid political persecution. Our mothers all followed them to the United States. It was the Kuomintang, the party of the brutal Chiang Kai-Shek regime, who drove our parents from their homeland.

This is the only longitudinal study ever written about families of these young men who emigrated in the 1960s, very intelligent graduate students who were anti-Kuomintang and anti-Chiang Kai-Shek. At that time, the U.S. was financially supporting the dictator. Lots of money poured into Taiwan from the U.S. to enable Chiang Kai-Shek to set up his military bases.

What deeply concerns me is how these fathers managed to settle in this country, and what became of their daughters over the years. We will penetrate the lives they built in a foreign land and observe their interaction with American culture.

My immediate reason for writing this book was the death of my dear friend J., who is Case #2 in this book. Her demise in 2014 provided my impetus to start this book, to work on these cases, and to record them in depth as a longitudinal study. Losing J. fired me up for memorializing these women with as much passion as the artists who I admire painted portraits or carved sculptures.

Photographers record images precisely, but painters color their work with emotion. In these case studies, the threads of four lives unfurl within the context of survival. How did four little girls survive in a strange land, torn from their culture with no promise of a future? The answers are varied, inspiring, and surprising.

I will take you along with me, following these four girls, later four women, exactly as I did, as an intimate and involved observer. We'll keep their schedules, eat their food, attend their schools and universities, interact with their families, and strive to live a good life in a country where you can be yourself — whoever that is. By immersion in their lives, we will see how enormously the struggles of these four successful women differ from those of other immigrants.

Americans are fascinated by the so-called Asian mystique. Why do Asians succeed in academics and professions? Why do they keep their problems hidden away, always putting on a happy face, even when the facts of their lives are depressing or terrifying? These four personal histories will expose the mystique around inscrutable, high-achieving Asians.

The four of us grew up to achieve dramatic success. But underneath all the sparkling success stories were darker themes. I went into psychiatry, a caring profession. Only eventually did I realize that I was caring for others because I'd always wished that others would care for me, beginning as a little child. Wishing so hard that I'd be cherished, I transformed that wish into solicitude for my patients.

Not one among us four daughters, even the most ambitious, rebelled against her parents. It was unthinkable and undoable, and remains so.

Immigrant Asian women withstand specific pressures that have not affected other immigrant groups. For each of the four women, the selection of a husband was nothing like an American girl's pattern of dating and engagement. True, other immigrant cultures practice matchmaking, but the Taiwanese have their own distinctive brand. A girl's choice of a marriage partner affects the course of her life, and in the case of Taiwanese families living in the U.S., the dynamics of matching, mating, and marriage diverge very far from the usual American pattern. Marriage, Taiwanese-American style, is *insane* from the Western point of view.

What was it like, living with husbands who were strangers to us? On the outside, it was a love story. On the inside, it was another story.

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Fear is something that we don't discuss among ourselves, and it is time to look fear in the eye. Compared to some other immigrants, there was a shroud of fear over all of us. We and our parents left Taiwan, but it never fully left us. We grew up at a time when parents were always afraid to say this, to do that. It would hurt our relatives in Taiwan if we did. "When can we go back?" our parents wondered. Going back, even to visit a dying parent for the last time, was too dangerous. The Kuomintang could catch up with the immigrant and get fatal revenge. They often did.

My American counterparts throughout my schooling didn't go through that. My classmates in college didn't, either. They didn't experience what we did at home; they didn't share our worries and concerns. Growing up, I had a sense of dread and foreboding and I was very fearful of what the Kuomintang might do.

To readers of my first book, Grown-Up Child, this book is the continuation. I think of it as the adult portion of my autobiography because the first book stopped at around age 18. This time, I'm in the driver's seat, and I invite you to tour the roadways of these four improbable lives. How on earth did we become independent and outgoing, all the while respecting our parents and their wishes? How did we blend in without losing ourselves? How did we reconcile ingrained cultural values with life as modern American women? And how did we do it without breaking down?

To outsiders, we're over-achievers who are always polite and never get ruffled. We seem serene. But we are not. Nobody grows up unharmed by the threats that overhung our lives from our earliest days.

It took me half a lifetime to find out who we really are. For immigrants in my group, nothing is what it appears to be.

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[Chapter Title]

[Text for Chapter 1 starts here.]