

# A Family Separated by the Bamboo Curtain

By Maura Elizabeth Cunningham



Fuzhou, just outside wall. Gatehouses. Rice fields flooded. Source: Page 4 of *Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden*.



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this mysterious residence knew how to protect its secrets from inquiring trespassers.

Years passed before Li learned that in an alternate universe, she might have grown up a frequent visitor to the compound, rather than regarding it as frightening and off-limits. Named the "Flower Fragrant Garden," the home had been built earlier in the twentieth century by Li's maternal grandfather, Chen Daodi, a Baoding Military Academy graduate who went on to serve in the Nationalist establishment under Chiang Kai-shek. Chen had lived in the compound with his two wives and their many children, only to see one of his brothers sell off the property when the family fled to the countryside during the Sino-Japanese War. The Chen fortunes fell further after Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party came to power, when Chen Daodi's Na-



Hong among the cast of a high school class show "Five Generations Under One Roof," 1945. Source: Page 27 of *Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden*.

tionalist connections posed a serious political problem. In 1963, Li was born into a family that had learned it was best to put the past firmly in the past, never engaging in discussion of its former prosperity or the lost family home.

They also never mentioned their lost family member: Li's Aunt Jun, who had been stranded on the island of Jinmen when the People's Liberation Army arrived in Fuzhou late in the summer of 1949. Jun's trip to Jinmen, only ten kilometers (6.2 miles) from the Xiamen coastline, was meant to be a small bright spot after years of war and upheaval—a few days of relaxation with one of her college friends before both started new teaching positions at a school in Xiamen. Instead, Jun's short vacation turned into a decades-long exile and estrangement from her family on the mainland.

**A**s a child in Mao-era Fuzhou, Zhuqing Li's walk to school followed a path that took her past a secluded compound built atop Cangqian Hill. Only residents of the complex—high-level administrators at a teacher's college—could pass through the gate guarded by sentries and see what lay hidden behind solid stone walls. "Like something from a fairy tale," Li remembers, the compound loomed over the city below it, "forbidding and aloof."

One day, Li pursued a runaway ball through a small breach in the wall and finally entered the domain within. Walking through gardens permeated by a "mélange of fruity and floral fragrances," Li approached the main building's red-lacquered front door and pushed it open to peer in: "The cavernous hall inside sent out a gush of cool air seeming to threaten to suck me into the vacuum of the house. I pulled away and ran for my life." Like all good haunted houses,

Hong's careful, decisive choice to turn away from her family's past will illuminate these complicated dynamics for students who might imagine how they would react in a similar situation.



Only as a young adult did Li learn about Aunt Jun's existence, her post-1949 life in Jinmen and then Taiwan, and her successful import-export business, one of many Taiwanese companies that made the island a postwar economic powerhouse. Meeting Aunt Jun opened Li's eyes to the parts of their history that her family had suppressed, recognizing that in Mao's China it was safest to deny entirely the memory of a family member, rather than permit oneself to miss them. Even Aunt Hong, Jun's younger sister and closest childhood companion, had steadfastly maintained her silence.

Now a professor at Brown University, Zhuqing Li has entwined the delicate but powerful stories of her aunts, Hong and Jun, in *Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden: Two Sisters Separated by China's Civil War*. This absorbing



Jun's 1951 pass for attending the conference celebrating the first anniversary of the founding of the Anti-Communist Resist-Russia Women's Union. Source: Page 107 of *Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden*.

family memoir highlights important facets of women's history across the full sweep of Greater China's twentieth century, and should be considered by any instructor seeking to provide their students with insight on the personal dynamics of the split between mainland China and Taiwan.

While Jun is the aunt who introduced Li to long-buried family stories, it is pragmatic and no-nonsense Hong who stands out as the most compelling figure in *Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden*. A doctor trained in internal medicine during the final years of the Republican Era, Hong was quick to see that her family's class background, combined with having a sister

outside of the PRC, would prove problematic under Communist rule. Jun inadvertently made the situation even more complicated: on Jinmen, she began publishing articles in a Nationalist newspaper, and she soon married a high-ranking officer in the army. Back in Fuzhou, Hong was left to battle with the ramifications of her sister's decisions.

Her family struggling, her father dying, Hong's path forward was to accept the realities of CCP rule. "Then and for the rest of her life," Li writes, "she opted to live a public life submitting to the Party's authority and accepting it as necessary for herself, her family, and her country." Whatever political disagreements she might have had with the Party, and whatever internal conflict she might have felt about cutting Jun out of her life, Hong kept to herself. "Survival in the revolution demanded tough, unsentimental calculations," Li explains, and Hong's careful, decisive choice to turn away from her family's past will illuminate these complicated dynamics for students who might imagine how they would react in a similar situation.

Hong's profession provided her a clear opportunity to show her allegiance to the new government and its mandate to "serve the people." Switching specialties to obstetrics and gynecology, she launched a mission to address the widespread problems of gynecological fistula and uterine prolapse among women in rural China. The lack of doctors in the countryside meant that the large numbers of women who suffered from fistula or prolapse were social outcasts, burdened by conditions that were almost always curable with the proper treatment. Hong spent extended periods of time traveling with mobile clinic teams, leaving her husband and children

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behind in Fuzhou, on a crusade that appears a blend of the personal and political. She wanted to demonstrate her dedication to the New China, yes, but Hong's primary motivation seems to have been a genuine desire to use her medical knowledge to improve the fortunes of the women she treated. In these chapters, students will gain an understanding of how Communist rule, despite the millions of people who died because of Mao's policies, facilitated real change in the lives of those whose needs had been unaddressed prior to 1949.

Even Hong's commitment to her work, however, did not offer protection when the Cultural Revolution started in 1966. Dogged by a false story about her supposed involvement in a Nationalist women's organization as a college student, Hong lost her hospital position and saw her medical license torn in two before she was sent to a remote village for reeducation. Even in these crushing circumstances, however, Li describes Hong as unstintingly matter-of-fact: she learned the local dialect, planted and harvested crops without complaint, and found ways to provide covert medical treatment to the villagers.

With the end of the Cultural Revolution, Hong returned to Fuzhou and soon took up a prominent position in the province's family-planning bureaucracy as China's One Child Policy came into effect. Hong portrayed the policy as a way to improve the health and safety of women and their children by encouraging fewer births. Once again, Hong found a way to navigate a political situation in a manner that she, from all appearances, found personally acceptable.

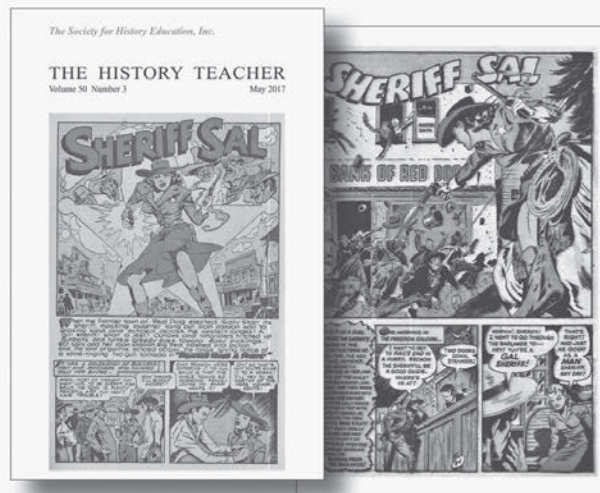
The reestablishment of relations between China and the United States finally enabled Hong and Jun (by then running a Chinese restaurant in Maryland) to reconnect in the 1980s. Their years of separation, however, had created both physical and emotional distances that the two were never truly able to overcome. As a housewife and then business-owner in Taiwan, Jun had dealt with difficulties—juggling family and work, confronting men who underestimated her business acumen, and undergoing treatment for colon cancer—but such trials could not equip her to truly understand what Hong had gone through. Jun looked back on her childhood in the Flower Fragrant Garden with nostalgia and regret for what the family had lost; Hong had spent decades striving to cast off her privileged upbringing.

*Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden* recounts an extraordinary family story that highlights several very ordinary themes in modern Chinese history. While the particulars of Jun and Hong's saga are unique, millions of families endured long separations after the fall of the "Bamboo Curtain" closed off mainland China. Hong, like so many others in the Mao era, grappled with how to ensure her family's survival amidst frequent changes in the political landscape. On Taiwan, Jun and her husband worked hard to establish new lives and build a secure foundation for their children; in the United States, Jun used her restaurant earnings to bring over younger members of the family—including Zhuqing Li—and provide them with American educations.

The Flower Fragrant Garden in which Hong and Jun spent their childhood years no longer stands testament to the Chen family's secret past; the compound has been demolished and high-rise apartment buildings constructed in its place. The generation of people who remember an impenetrable divide between mainland China and Taiwan is growing older. These stories, of lives that radically changed course after the rupture of 1949, need to be committed to print. No textbook or academic monograph can fully capture the jumble of loss, uncertainty, confusion, and determination experienced by so many in China during those chaotic years as Zhuqing Li has in *Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden*. ♦

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