

Cultural Curiosity

THIRTEEN STORIES ABOUT
THE SEARCH FOR CHINESE ROOTS

Edited by Josephine M. T. Khu

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Cultural Curiosity

*For my parents,
José Bun Kee Khu and
Josette Tiampo Khu,
with love*

Preface

JOSEPHINE M. T. KHU

ONE AFTERNOON IN 1996, THREE ACQUAINTANCES WHO HAD studied in Beijing at least ten years earlier happened to meet in Hong Kong: Nancy Work, whose story opens this book; Lily Wu, whose story concludes it; and myself. We were somewhat astonished to find ourselves all still—or again—living in this general part of the world, and the conversation wandered to the stories of what had brought us all to China in the first place and what had happened to the people we'd known back then. Many of them were, like ourselves, ethnic Chinese (at least in part) who had been born and raised outside of mainland China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan and had established lives and careers in the country of our ancestors.

The stories were engrossing, and in that afternoon the idea for this project was born: to collect stories written by ethnic Chinese who had encountered China for virtually the first time. The accounts were to include explanations of why they'd made the trip, their experiences in China, what impact the encounter had had on their lives, and whether it had led them to assess or reassess their ethnic identity. In order to

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explain the motivations behind their trips to China, the writers also would be asked to relate the stories of their families' emigration abroad and something of their own lives in the countries in which they were born or raised. Thus, in describing the significance of their experiences in China, each writer would tell a larger story.

The collection of accounts was not to be limited to people of our personal acquaintance, or news of it spread simply by word of mouth. This being the age of the Internet, I publicized the project online and received a fair response. From approximately fifty submissions, thirteen were chosen for inclusion in this book. The use of the Internet undoubtedly gave the book a certain geographic diversity it would not have had otherwise. Collectively, we were acquainted with people from nearly all of the places represented in this book. However, not all of our acquaintances were willing to write, or felt able to write, about their experiences. Thus, the Internet not only enabled news of the project to reach far larger numbers of people with the required backgrounds than we could ever know personally; it also enabled us to find, within that general group, a much smaller but still diverse group of people who were interested in writing about it.

Although I stipulated that the submissions could be in any of a variety of languages, the only essays submitted were, in fact, written in English. A key reason for this was undoubtedly the fact that the language in which the project was publicized was English. Equally important, however, the outcome reflected the limitations of Internet use and accessibility at the time—the Internet was overwhelmingly dominated by Americans, a fact that is easy to forget given the pace at which Internet use has spread in the past five or so years. In the end, the people who submitted their stories were not very different from the people with whom we were personally acquainted. Thus, use of the Internet was a broadening factor, but not as much as we might have expected.

Certainly, the way the stories were collected and the stipulation that they be personally written have had a bearing on the sorts of people and the sorts of stories that ultimately found their way into the book. But for all that, every story is completely individual: the backgrounds of the writers vary greatly, and their stories reflect a wide range of experiences that collectively represent many larger trends.

First, it is significant that many people now have been able to make a trip to the ancestral country. Such a trip represents a significant expenditure of money and time. It is worth reflecting on what the ability to travel and live elsewhere says about a world where such things have become possible and even routine—and it is worth reflecting on who, in today's world, finds such things possible.

Second, the reasons that people choose to spend time and money on such a trip are also significant. Of course, the decision may represent nothing more than one person's will and circumstances, but it may also reflect much about the society in which the person was raised. It may say something about the wealth of a society that allows people the opportunity to travel and about the social and political environment in a person's home country that leads one to perceive such an expenditure of resources as worthwhile.

For most of these writers, searching for roots and clarifying ethnic identity were important issues, although they were not always the key motivating factors behind their encounters with China. But they found that ethnicity was something that they could not disregard in China, whatever their reasons for making the trip. This is because they (or those they met in China) often expected that, due to the ancestral link, China would not seem so foreign to them, or they to the Chinese—an expectation that in some cases was fulfilled, but more often was not.

Indeed, it was almost shocking how foreign China seemed to all of us who first visited it in the mid-1980s. It was a country that was still emerging from decades of diplomatic and economic isolation, as well as years of political upheaval. It possessed a political, social, and economic system that seemed oppressive to those of us accustomed to freer societies. Official distinctions were made among foreigners, locals, and "Overseas Chinese" that determined where individuals were able to live, the level of their access to goods, services, and places, the prices they paid for such goods and services, and so forth.

In the past ten years or so, rapid industrialization and massive social changes have taken place in China. Today, it is a far more open place, and a much greater range of economic, social, and even political expression is now permitted. These developments are reflected in the stories in this book. The contributors encountered a China in different

phases of development, and this factor alone led to very different individual experiences of the ancestral country.

It was not always easy to disentangle economic, political, and social realities from what was “Chinese.” Although not all of the contributors thought to, or tried to, do this, it was vitally important for many of them to make such distinctions—so different were the realities of contemporary China from the ideas they held of what was essentially Chinese. Were, for example, authoritarian and controlling attitudes and practices a product of communist practice or of Chinese cultural values? Or, indeed, did the issues of “Chineseness” and ethnic identity have less to do with events and developments in China itself and much more to do with circumstances in the contributors’ home countries that the encounter with China highlighted or revealed? Not all of the contributors address these questions directly in their narratives, but echoes of them underlie all of the stories in this book.

This book is subtitled “Thirteen Stories about the Search for Chinese Roots,” and although not every contributor may have begun his or her trip with an active search for roots, the encounter with China ultimately caused each one to pursue the question and each to discover something of significance.



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Most of all, I would like to thank my friend Nancy Work. Nancy coconceived the project and demonstrated her personal commitment to it by helping to solicit contributions, assisting in reading and selecting the stories, and contributing her own story to this volume.

This book is the product of the efforts of not only the individuals who contributed their accounts but of all the people mentioned above. Any mistakes in the text, however, are unfortunately mine.

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Full Circle

NANCY WORK

IT IS A FAREWELL SCENE THAT IS FOREVER ETCHED IN MY MEMORY. My beautiful mother standing out in the crowd in her yellow fake fur coat, crying and waving to my brother and me as we boarded the plane in the Taiwan airport. Some years back, my father had obtained his doctorate of science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Not long ago, he had received permission for us, his two children, to immigrate to the United States. We were leaving Taiwan now because he wanted us to have a good education and a chance to succeed in the land of opportunity.

I remember wishing desperately that my mother could come with us, but this was impossible, since my parents were divorced. A sudden terrible, piercing sense of loss and fear came over me and I, too, began to cry. I didn't know when I would see my mother again. At the other end of our trip would be the unknown: a father I had never met because he had left for the States before I was born. I was now six years old, and my brother nine. So far, I had only seen pictures of our father.

When I first arrived in the United States, life was very difficult. Our

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home environment wasn't very conducive to our adapting to our new country, since our stepmother didn't like us and treated us miserably. She even refused to cook for my brother and me. I was very homesick and missed my real mother a lot. In addition, because I couldn't speak a word of English, a lot of kids at school thought I was stupid or retarded. Our father wanted us to do well at school, so he was very strict with us when it came to our studies. We did extra homework all the time. I'll never forget him saying, "Education is the most important thing in the world—nobody can ever take that away from you."

Two years after our arrival, my father and stepmother separated, and my father took us to Michigan, where he had accepted a job as professor of mechanical engineering. My father was extremely dedicated to his work; he was a true scholar, but unfortunately he didn't know how to manage his personal life or take care of his health. He had terrible stomachaches from his ulcers, which would often make him cry out in pain. It would scare me, because then he would say that he wanted to die. His favorite activity became taking us for long walks in the local cemetery and looking at the tombstones, noting the dates and reading the inscriptions. Each time he would tell us where he wanted to be buried.

Only six months or so after he started his new job, my father came down with jaundice. His colleagues had to force him to go to the doctor, because he wouldn't go himself—this problem wasn't important enough to stop his work. The problem turned out to be hepatitis. During his hospitalization of a few months, my brother and I were taken care of by several of his colleagues in turn.

My father's condition worsened, and it was clear that he was going to die. Although without him we would be alone in the States, he told my brother that we weren't to go back to Taiwan, since we wouldn't have the same opportunities there. Thus, after he died, we were not reunited with our mother but were put up for adoption. I was nine years old when I went to live with a Caucasian family of one of my father's colleagues, and eleven when I was legally adopted by them. My brother, who was three years older than I, became a foster child of a Chinese colleague. We would see each other once in a while, but our relationship became very strained after we were separated.

Throughout the eight years that I lived in my adoptive family's home, I was forbidden to contact my real mother in Taiwan. My adoptive parents reasoned that I romanticized too much about my past, and that by cutting off this connection, I would be happier in their home. They even took away and hid all my pictures of my real family. It was as if they were trying to strip me of my past and identity. I was infuriated by this, but I was helpless to stop them. It was to be many years later, after I had left my adoptive family, that one of my adoptive sisters found my old photographs in the attic and returned them to me.

I think that if I had been happy with my adoptive parents, I wouldn't have missed my real family so much or pined so much to go back one day. Since going to live with them, I had rarely been allowed to make my own decisions. I even had to ask permission to take a shower. Whenever I did anything wrong, I was severely punished, physically and verbally. I never felt that my adoptive parents ever loved or cared about me—I was just a charity case to them. Any letters I received were first read by my adoptive mother before being handed to me. All the letters I wrote to family or friends were systematically censored, and if there were things I wasn't supposed to write about, I had to rewrite the letter. She bought me a diary and encouraged me to write down my private thoughts, saying that no one would read the diary except me. I believed her and spilled out my guts into it, only to discover three years later that she and my adoptive father were reading it. They confronted me with my diary and read the parts about them out loud in front of me. How could they have deliberately lied and betrayed my trust? They punished me and then forced me to burn my diary to try to wipe out my thoughts and feelings, but I couldn't be brainwashed.

Any time I brought up the subject of my real family, my adoptive mother would say very disparaging things about them and about how we had lived in poverty in Taiwan. Then I would get a long lecture on how fortunate I was and how grateful I should be to have been adopted by them—that otherwise I could have ended up in an orphanage. Or she would tell me that if I had been sent back to Taiwan, I would have been sold as a slave or a prostitute or have ended up begging on the streets. I was often told that if they hadn't adopted me they would have been able to buy new carpeting for the house, to acquire a boat, and

so on. They said that I had been adopted because God wanted them to take me in. They were strict Protestants, and my adoptive mother's father was a minister. If I didn't say I was grateful when my adoptive mother told me to do so, I was slapped in the face and pushed down on my hands and knees in a humble position with my head bowed as if in prayer. Often the lecturing session happened in the morning before school; then I wasn't allowed to go to school until I said it. I felt so humiliated, and in the beginning I resisted. I felt that it would be a lie and a betrayal of self to say it, because I didn't feel grateful to them. But when I started to miss whole days of school or was late, I decided it wasn't worth my pride to resist—I just wanted to get away from her craziness.

Not only did I feel unwelcome in my adoptive family, but the small university town that I grew up in was also very redneck. The population was mostly made up of the descendants of Finnish immigrants. There were only two Asian families there, and no black American families. I used to feel like I was being looked at like a funny animal in the zoo by most of the locals, because they so seldom saw Asians. The fact that I was being stared at like that didn't bother me as much as the degrading comments I used to get daily at school, until I graduated from high school. One of the comments I'll never forget was, "Your face looks like it got run over by a truck," followed by cruel laughter. I tried to block out the ugly racist comments I heard. I used to think that if I were back in Taiwan, people wouldn't make fun of me because I was Chinese. To add to my miseries, my adoptive mother made me wear outrageous and outdated clothes that nobody would be caught dead in. They made me stick out even more. Having to keep the suffering and anger inside caused me to keep mostly to myself and not try to make many friends.

One of the happiest days of my life was when I was finally able to leave my adoptive parents in 1975, at the age of seventeen. It had been almost a year since I had run away from home and called Dial Help, a community-service organization that offered help to people in need. I ran away because of a particularly irrational and violent outburst of hysteria and physical and verbal abuse from my adoptive mother, which caused me to snap. I sought help because I knew I was a minor and