

*Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden: Two Sisters Separated by China's Civil War.* By Zhuqing Li. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022. Pp. xii + 353. \$13.99 hardcover.

The author of this book, Zhuqing Li 李竹青, comes, on her mother's side, from an extraordinarily distinguished scholarly family, which during the Ming-Qing period produced, by her count, no fewer than twenty-one *jinsshi* 進士 and 110 *juren* 舉人. One of those *jinsshi* was Chen Baochen 陳寶琛 (1848–1935), tutor to Puyi 溥儀 (r. 1909–1912), China's last emperor; he was her great-uncle. Her grandfather, Chen Daodi (1895–ca. 1952), however, did not follow in their scholarly footsteps. Instead, he attended the Baoding Military Academy and afterwards “briefly served in the Nationalist Army” (p. 5). Later on, he was the salt commissioner for Fujian province, and yet later he worked for the Nationalist regime in Shanghai in some unspecified capacity, from which he resigned around the time of the 1936 Xi'an Incident.

By then Chen Daodi had amassed a substantial fortune and had built a large family compound atop a hill in the southern suburbs of Fuzhou. Called the Flower Fragrant Garden (Huaxiang yuan 花香園), it was “one of Fuzhou's biggest and richest homes” (p. ix) and was fit “to provide room for all three of his brothers, their families, and his widowed mother, the family matriarch” (p. 8). Chen Daodi's own family included two wives. The first (and principal) wife came from another illustrious Fuzhou family, the Lins 林. (The author does not say, but this wife was possibly related to Lin Zexu 林則徐, another *jinsshi* from Fuzhou.) The second wife (or concubine), who was named Yan, was “from outside of the city's elite” (p. 6). The children of the two wives referred to the former as Ah Niang 阿娘 and the latter as Ah Nai 阿奶. Ah Niang and her offspring lived upstairs in the mansion; Ah Nai and her family lived downstairs. The two wives seemed to have lived harmoniously with one another and with their common husband, though in later years one of Ah Niang's daughters “believed that neither of her mothers had ever been truly happy in their marriages to her father” (p. 118). The author is the granddaughter of Ah Nai, the second wife, whom she calls her Downstairs Grandma; her Upstairs Grandma was Ah Niang.

Li's book is a joint biography of her two aunts, Ah Niang's daughters. The elder of the two sisters, Chen Wenjun 陳文鈞 (or, simply, Jun 鈞), was born around 1923; her sister, who is called here at her request by the pseudonym Hong 鴻, was two years younger. Their idyllic life in the Flower Fragrant Garden ended in the summer of 1937 with the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. As the Japanese, having captured Shanghai, approached Fuzhou, the Chen family fled to the interior of the province. They retreated up the Min River 岷江 to Nanping 南屏, where Chen Daodi purchased a hotel to generate some family income. Jun, then a teenager, attended a three-year teacher-training school in nearby Yong'an 永安, the wartime capital of the province; on her graduation she returned to Nanping to teach at an elementary school. Hong, meanwhile,

attended high school in Nanping. In the summer of 1945, as the war neared its end, both sisters took, and passed, their college entrance examinations, Jun for Fujian Normal University and Hong for Fujian Medical College. When they left Nanping and returned to Fuzhou, the Chen family discovered, to their dismay, that one of their relatives had sold off the Flower Fragrant Garden. They moved into a “farmhouse . . . isolated amid a vast stretch of fields” (pp. 51–52).

In the postwar years, Chen Daodi’s family spiralled into “poverty and illness” (p. 50). The hotel at Nanping had burned down; a movie theatre that he had started in Fuzhou was “repeatedly vandalized” (p. 50); and China’s hyperinflation threatened “everything [he] still possessed” (p. 50). The family’s financial situation became so dire that in the early 1950s Ah Niang was forced to give up her newborn baby for adoption. Nevertheless, by 1949 both Jun and Hong had managed to graduate from their respective college. Jun landed a plum teaching job at a secondary school in Xiamen, and Hong was starting an internship at a hospital in Fuzhou. However, when the Communists swept into Fujian on their way to victory over Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 (1887–1975) and the Nationalists, Jun happened to be visiting a classmate on the offshore island of Jinmen 金門. Though Jinmen was only a mile away from Xiamen, the Communists, despite their battlefield successes elsewhere, failed to capture it. As a result, Jun was unable to return to the mainland to start her new job. She was marooned. Thus began a thirty-three-year separation of the two sisters.

Jun, in Jinmen, worked as a publicist for a Nationalist general, whom she married two or three years later. Soon afterwards they moved to Taipei, the “national” capital of the much-reduced “Republic of China,” where they joined the community of “displaced Mainlanders” (as distinct from the local “Taiwanese” majority). In the mid-1960s, with a small import-export company that her husband bought for her, Jun started a new career as a businesswoman that became quite successful. By 1970, her “[w]eekends were increasingly taken up by cocktail parties and wine-tasting events in different grand settings” (p. 268).

Hong, throughout her separation from her sister, worked as a medical doctor in Fuzhou; from 1954 on, she was on the staff of the Fujian Women and Children’s Hospital, specializing in obstetrics and gynaecology. From the start, owing partly to her father’s former and Jun’s continuing ties to the Nationalists, she was bedevilled by her “complicated” family history. In addition, she was accused of having been the president of the Nationalist Women’s Youth League when she was a student at medical school in the late 1940s. While she acknowledged that she had been the leader of the Women’s Youth League in high school, she insisted that there had been too few women students at the medical college to form a league and, therefore, she could not have been its president. These accusations were hurled at her repeatedly, beginning with the Thought Reform movement in the early 1950s, again during the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, and yet again during the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s.

Hong's response to these political campaigns was "to live a public life submitting to the Party's authority and accepting it as necessary for herself, her family, and her country" (p. 69). During the Thought Reform, she dutifully engaged in self-criticism. During the Great Leap Forward, she went to the countryside with a twenty-student team to deal with an outbreak of measles. Then, in 1969, during the Cultural Revolution, she was denounced as a "counterrevolutionary quack doctor" (p. 179) and for three months was made to stand mutely in front of her hospital with a placard hanging from her neck. Afterwards she was sent to a May Seventh Cadre School in the countryside to learn from the peasants, while her husband and their three children were sent to another part of the countryside. After two or three years in Longdi Village 龍地村, she was allowed to return home to Fuzhou and to resume her work at her hospital. Sometime afterwards, she was politically rehabilitated. "The Party admitted it had been a mistake to label her a suspected counterrevolutionary" (p. 235). Much later, in a strange turnaround, Hong in 1987 was invited to join the party that had repeatedly persecuted her. She was to be named the director of the hospital, and "in order for her to be in such a position, she would have to be a Party member" (p. 279). She accepted the invitation.

In the 1970s, beginning with Nixon's surprise visit to China in 1972 and culminating in Deng Xiaoping's 鄧小平 (1904–1997) reciprocal tour of America in 1979, relations between the two countries became much less hostile. Jun had long hoped to reconnect with her sister Hong, from whom she had heard nothing since the early 1950s. In 1976, she sold off some of her businesses in Taiwan and took up an offer to run a Chinese restaurant in College Park, Maryland. With an American passport, she figured, it might soon be possible for her to go to China. As it happened, Jun received an unexpected letter from Hong in 1979 and managed to see her in Fuzhou in 1982. She also saw her two mothers, Ah Nai and Ah Niang. Hong, in turn, came to the U.S. in 1993 and visited Jun in College Park. Jun died in Maryland in 2017 at age ninety-four; Hong was still alive in Fuzhou as of 2021, at age ninety-six, and, according to her niece, "continues to see patients three days a week" (p. 348).

Zhuqing Li is a professor of Chinese linguistics at Brown University, with numerous publications on the Chinese dialect of her native Fuzhou. In this book, she renders Chinese poems and songs in their original Chinese text as well as in English translation. But otherwise this is not a scholarly tome. There are no citations to secondary sources, no footnotes, no bibliography, no index. The book is, instead, a family history that is based almost entirely on what she was able to learn directly from her two aunts. Li herself grew up in Fuzhou and apparently was in close contact with Hong throughout the years. She also had access to a 135-page memoir that Hong wrote and published in 2015 on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday. The memoir is "packed with intricacies and technicalities of her achievements in medical practice," but there is "no hint of the nationwide tragedy unfolding throughout her countryside tours" (p. 126). Finally, though Li was not allowed to reveal Hong's real name, Hong

gave her a list of “people you can call to learn more if you want” (p. 344). As for Jun, Li knew hardly anything about her until her aunt returned to China in 1982. Thereafter and especially after 1986, when Li herself, with Jun’s financial help, came to the U.S. to study and to work, she would have had many opportunities to quiz Jun about her past history. The book is well written and reads like a novel. It is replete with conversations, which are probably recreated rather than verbatim. The book is organized chronologically. The first two chapters deal with the Chen family prior to the Communist takeover; the last two cover the post-1982 period; the central twelve chapters focus on the contrasting experiences of the two sisters following 1949, with alternating chapters about Jun and Hong. There is, however, one chapter, “The Past That Refused to Fade,” that seems quite out of place. Largely about Hong’s joining the Communist Party in 1987, it is placed between chapters that deal with Jun in Taiwan in the 1970s and with Jun’s return to China in 1982.

There is much to learn from this book, such as the following:

- The family dynamics within a traditional Chinese family that was once well-to-do (and perhaps is now bouncing back). The relationships between the two wives and between them and their children and grandchildren are especially interesting. It is also noteworthy that this particular family met its downfall even before the Communists had come to power.
- Life in the interior during the Japanese occupation of the coastal areas of Fujian.
- The battle for Jinmen in 1949. The Nationalists’ victory here left them, even today, in control of territory that is within sight of the Communist-held mainland.
- The medical work that Hong did, especially among women in the Fujian countryside. She became so well known and respected as a gynaecologist that when Xi Jinping 习近平 (1953–) was mayor of Fuzhou in the early 1990s and he and his wife were expecting, she was summoned to deliver their baby!
- The May Seventh Cadre School in Longdi Village, Fujian, that Hong was sent to in 1969. The “school” consisted of only three cadres. She was not allowed to practise medicine among the villagers, but she was able to offer informal medical advice. She got along well with the villagers, and they with her. According to her niece, “Nobody in Longdi tried to lecture her or criticize her” (p. 208). Her “re-education” at the hands of the peasantry was much more benign than that described in other accounts.
- The expatriate lifestyle of the Mainlanders (like Jun and her husband) in Taipei in the 1950s. The author writes, “Taipei reeked of . . . nostalgia . . . revelers and socialites dancing and drinking with the hedonism of people not sure if there would be a tomorrow” (p. 142).

— Jun's entrepreneurial activity in Taiwan as a case study of the island's economic success in the 1960s and 1970s.

From the perspective of a historian, however, there are some weaknesses or gaps in the book. The author might have said more about Chen Daodi's relationship with the Nationalist Party, which was part of Hong's "complicated" family background. What was his job in pre-war Shanghai with the Nationalist government? Moreover, what was the cause of "his disillusionment with Chiang Kai-shek's government" around the time of the Xi'an Incident in 1936 that led him to quit his job in Shanghai (p. 12)? Was it because of Chiang's earlier appeasement of Japan? Or perhaps his capitulation to the Communists? Or something else altogether?

There are a couple of big gaps in Li's account of Hong's life, notably between 1958 and 1969 and between 1976 and 1987. This is due to the author's inclination to emphasize the recurrent political troubles that Hong had to endure. In other years, however, when politics did not take command, Hong may have been able to pursue her professional life, but this largely goes unmentioned. Li is also frustratingly vague about dates. When were Jun and Hong born? When did their father die? When did Hong leave the May Seventh Cadre School and return to her hospital? When did she get her bad political labels removed? These were all important events, yet none is precisely dated.

The three maps in the book might have been more instructive. Two show clearly the relationship between Jinmen and Xiamen and the relationship between Jinmen and the Republic of China on Taiwan. But for those readers who do not read Chinese, the location of Fuzhou city within Fujian province and its location vis-à-vis Xiamen are not specified, nor are the various places in Fujian province where the Chen family fled during the Anti-Japanese War (like Nanping) or where Hong was sent in the countryside (like Longdi). Similarly, on the map of Fuzhou city, the location of the Flower Fragrant Garden is not indicated.

Finally, there are several inaccurate or questionable statements. Li minimizes the significance of the anti-Japanese United Front formed between the Nationalists and the Communists following the Xi'an Incident. She describes it as "a smokescreen" (p. 12) ostensibly because it merely "covered up" a deadly struggle that would erupt again eight years later. She misdates Mao Zedong's 毛澤東 (1893–1976) pronouncement that "The Chinese people have stood up!" It was uttered not on 1 October 1949, when the Peoples Republic was proclaimed, but several days earlier, on 21 September, at the first plenary session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. And she attributes to Jun a belief that Taiwan in the 1950s was "a democratic alternative to the Communist dictatorship back home" (p. 138). Li is probably correct in stating that

“Jun didn’t arrive on Taiwan until well after the worst of the Nationalist repression,” (p. 138) but martial law on the island was not lifted until 1987. Until then Taiwan, especially for the Taiwanese majority as opposed to Jun and the Mainlander minority, was hardly “democratic.”

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