

Editor's Note: The following symposium reviews the highly praised story by Zhuqing Li, *Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden: Two Sisters Separated by China's Civil War*, of her aunts during and after China's 1949 Civil War. The book has already received very positive reviews from newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. The following three reviews approach the book from different perspectives.

Another version of author Zhuqing Li's story from our spring 2022 issue, "Sisters and Enemies: A True Story of Two Sisters," which includes classroom activities for high school and undergraduate students, is available in our archives at <https://tinyurl.com/bd hx2b62>.

A Symposium on *Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden: Two Sisters Separated by China's Civil War*

by Zhuqing Li



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The Story of a Family Divided by the Communist Revolution in China

By Margot E. Landman



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Many books have been written on the experience of Chinese intellectuals and pre-1949 capitalists during the Mao years, including those with relatives who had fled to Taiwan, and some have described reunification of Taiwan and mainland branches of a family after cross-strait tensions began to ease in the 1980s. *Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden* is the first volume I have seen describing the parallel lives of family members separated accidentally in 1949, and reunited decades later. Part history, part biography, part memoir—the protagonists are the author's aunts—it is a deeply moving tale.

The Chen family had a long history in Fuzhou, Fujian Province. By the time the author's aunts were born in the 1920s, the large family lived well, enjoying a large compound on a hill-top overlooking the city and the Min River called Flower Fragrant Garden. Their father was an early graduate of a Nationalist military academy; he joined the KMT (Kuomintang) military upon graduation. To the western reader approximately one hundred years after the girls' births, it is a bit surprising to learn about the author's "two

grandmothers"—the grandfather brought home a second wife (not a concubine)—but perhaps the most surprising aspect of the grandfather was his emphasis on education for his daughters. At first they sat in on lessons offered to their older brother by a tutor; when it was clear that the girls were academically inclined, they were given the same educational opportunities as their male siblings (there was a younger brother, as well).

The idyllic childhood was disrupted by war, first against Japan and then the civil war after the Japanese surrender in 1945. In 1937 the family fled upriver to the relative safety of a small town called Nanping. The grandmothers were Christian, having been educated in missionary schools, so it is presumably no accident that the first chapter of the book is called "The Garden" and the second, "The Expulsion." Life became increasingly difficult as time passed, but the girls studied hard and took advantage of educational opportunities even when their plans went astray due to the fighting. The older of the two daughters, Chen Wenjun, called Jun throughout, had planned to attend the top high school in Fuzhou, and then to go on to Fuzhou Teachers University; she intended to become a teacher. Due to the war, the high school closed, and she attended a vocational school instead. It was quite a step down from her dream, but it was an education. She was eventually admitted to university and did, indeed, become a teacher. For a while.

Two years younger, the second daughter, called by the pseudonym Hong in the book because she did not want her real name used, had her heart set on becoming a doctor. She, too, succeeded, with fewer twists and turns, as the top high school had reopened when it was time for her to attend. She wanted to be an internist (a doctor of internal medicine), but by the time

she completed her studies, she was told to become an obstetrician-gynecologist, which she did.

Jun's story is highly unusual. In the summer of 1949, she and a friend received invitations to teach history at a high school near Xiamen. They had a few weeks before the school year was to begin, so the friend invited her to relax at her family's home in Jinmen, an island off the Fujian coast. She planned to take the train from Fuzhou to Xiamen, but her father thought that the fighting between the Communists and the Nationalists made overland travel too dangerous. He bought her a plane ticket for the first flight of her life. As the plane took off, she watched her father recede; it would be the last time she saw him.

After landing in Xiamen, Jun made her way to the ferry that would take her to Jinmen. The Communists took Xiamen the day after she left. The teaching invitation was first suspended because of the uncertain situation and then revoked entirely, and ferry service stopped. When the People's Republic of China was established on October 1st, Jun found herself cut off from her family and her country. She could not depend on her friend's family forever, so when she was invited to write some articles for a local newspaper, she did so, realizing that covering the visit to Jinmen of Madam Chiang Kai-shek might cause her family some difficulty—she had no way of knowing just how much difficulty! A little later, she was invited to join the “Anti-Communist and Resist Russia Union.” Again, she hesitated, fearing for her family, but ultimately accepted the invitation because she thought it offered her the only chance she might have to leave Jinmen. She moved into her own apartment near a military base at the north end of the island where she worked closely with a KMT general. She was a bit surprised when he proposed marriage some time later: although he had told her that he had married, had two sons, and then divorced, she had not shared that she, too, was married . . . but not divorced. They got married anyway (the author does not explain whether the political situation prevented Jun from filing for divorce, or whether she decided that it was unnecessary).

Eventually, Jun and her husband moved to Taipei where they had three children in quick succession. They were also joined by her husband's two sons who escaped the mainland through Hong Kong, having had harrowing experiences because their father was a KMT general. She took over a business, becoming an extremely successful entrepreneur, and finally, in a truly unexpected twist, became a restaurateur in Maryland. She took on the restaurant because living in the United States might allow her to return to China as relations between the US and China began to improve during the 1970s.



Jun's college photo.
Source: Page 51. *Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden*.

Jun and her mother in the mid-1980s.
Source: Page 318. *Daughters of the Flower Fragrant Garden*.

The contrasts in this beautifully written book abound: between capitalism and communism, business and medicine, nostalgia and amnesia.

Hong's story is in many ways more familiar: she suffered mightily due to her KMT connections, choosing to distance herself from them by never mentioning her older sister. Despite her best efforts, she had a very difficult time, both in the 1950s and especially during the Cultural Revolution. For just one example, the extended family was so poor, living on her salary alone after her father died in 1952, that in 1953 they sold her youngest infant half-brother and a nephew to PLA families. The babies might otherwise have starved to death. She was extremely tough and determined, though, and devoted herself to her patients, especially rural women. She attacked two common problems among them: fistula and uterine prolapse, not only treating many women herself, but also training rural healthcare providers, medical students, and young doctors whose training had been interrupted by various political campaigns. Despite many difficult years, she was ultimately recognized for her contributions, and named director of her hospital. Such a position required CCP membership, however, so she was invited to join the Party. In so doing, she felt that she had finally vanquished her past.

While survival on the mainland side of the Taiwan Strait required a certain amnesia, Jun was nostalgic, wanting to go “home.” If she could become a US resident and then citizen, she would be allowed to visit China. In 1976, she

uprooted herself from the life she and her husband had built in Taipei and moved to Maryland. A few years later, after US diplomatic recognition in 1979, she contacted Hong through a distant relative in Hong Kong, and eventually received a response informing her, among many other things, that their father had died decades before. Her mothers were still alive. Her first trip back took place in 1982. The reunion was not as she had expected: the PRC relatives, including—especially—Hong, were very cautious about what they shared about their lives over the past thirty plus years. The first dinner was hosted by the Overseas Chinese Office of Hong's hospital, and started with speeches by hospital officials.

Jun made an offer that changed the lives of some members of the next generation: she would pay for the education of two family members, one from each grandmother's branch of the family, if they were admitted to a US university. The first to take her up on the offer, in 1984, was Hong's youngest child, a son. The second was the book's author, Zhuqing Li, following in 1986. “Aunt Jun had single-handedly created a pathway for a family once targeted for political prosecution [sic] to become the envoy of a new modern era.” (320)

Hong also made it to the United States years later, to attend medical conferences. The sisters re-united for the last time in 2009. Both had been widowed within two months of each other, at the ages of eighty-six and eighty-four. Jun died in 2017 at ninety-four. As Li completed the book in 2021, Hong was still alive at ninety-six, seeing patients three days a week.

The contrasts in this beautifully written book abound: between capitalism and communism, business and medicine, nostalgia and amnesia. The sisters are united not only by their close childhoods, but also by their extraordinary determination and resilience. ♦