

A CHANCE MEETING IN SPRING: MY GRANDFATHER'S EXECUTION AND THE TANGLED THREAD OF OUR FAMILY HISTORY DURING THE WHITE TERROR

春日的偶遇：白色恐怖、我的阿公黃溫恭與家族記憶追尋

Purely by accident, a researcher uncovers the will left by her grandfather before he was executed as a communist traitor in 1953, thereby initiating a quest to understand the multi-generational trauma borne by her family under the shadow of the White Terror, and the influence it exerted over her fraught relationship with her mother.

The relocation of the government of the Republic of China to Taiwan in 1949 was followed by a series of campaigns to root out communist traitors among the island's populace. Initiating the period known as the White Terror, which cast a shadow over Taiwan for four decades, these campaigns were marked by unlawful surveillance, detentions, trials, and executions, inflicting incalculable trauma on the victims and their families. Swept up in these campaigns, the grandfather of co-author Chang Yi-Lung was sentenced to death in 1953 for the crime of subverting the government. The execution of



Category: Memoir

Publisher: SpringHill

Date: 11/2023

Rights contact:

bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw

Pages: 304

Length: 86,000 characters
(approx. 55,900 words in English)

Huang Wen-Kung was more than the taking of a life, it marked an entire family as “enemies of the nation”. Until the lifting of martial law decades later, they faced countless difficulties, among them the loss of the opportunity to study abroad for Chang Yi-Lung’s mother.

In truth, the trauma of political violence doesn’t end with the first or second generation; it becomes a genetic inheritance that can be passed further. The first half of the book narrates Huang Wen-Kung’s involvement in underground communist organizations and his eventual arrest. Along the way, Chang Yi-Lung explores the political persecution experienced by her mother and her entire family. Using the analytical skills she developed as a biology researcher, she pieces together how this intergenerational trauma gave birth to her mother’s strict style of parenting, leading to an eventual breakdown in their relationship.

In the second half of the book, sociologist and co-author Lin Chuan-Kai adopts a scholarly perspective to fill in the picture concerning the operation of resistance networks under the White Terror, and the methods of surveillance and extra-judicial punishment employed by the autocratic government of the ROC. Simultaneously, Lin Chuan-Kai interrogates his own role as both an observer and facilitator in Chang Yi-Lung’s quest to uncover her family’s past through interviews and archival research.

Beginning as the story of a political criminal whose life was sacrificed on the altar of an era, *A Chance Meeting in Spring* transforms into the difficult quest of a third-generation inheritor of trauma to confront and heal her family’s wounds. Transcending the bounds of family history and archival research, the book is a deep meditation on the legacy of political violence and its profound impact on a mother-daughter relationship.

Chang Yi-Lung 張旖容

A third-generation victim of political violence, Chang Yi-Lung holds a PhD in biology. Having grown up in a family that never discussed politics, it was only by accident that she discovered the cruel reason behind her family’s reticence, thereby initiating a process of unearthing her family’s political past that spanned over a decade.

Lin Chuan-Kai 林傳凱

An assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at National Sun Yat-sen University, Lin Chuan-Kai specializes in the post-war political history of Taiwan.

A CHANCE MEETING IN SPRING: MY GRANDFATHER'S EXECUTION AND THE TANGLED THREAD OF OUR FAMILY HISTORY DURING THE WHITE TERROR

By Chang Yi-Lung, Lin Chuan-Kai

Translated by Christina Ng

Chapter 1: A Chance Meeting in Spring

In early 2010, I received an admission letter from the British doctoral program I applied for, meaning I would have to leave Taiwan in a few months. When I heard that Lynn, my good friend, was planning to go on a road trip around the island and visit friends along the way, I was overcome with the desire to also see more of Taiwan, since I would soon be leaving its shores. Therefore, I joined him midway on his round-the-island trip. He set out from Taipei, and drove down the western half of the island all the way to Kenting. I left from Kaohsiung and went to meet him in Kenting, so as to travel with him for the return trip north via the eastern route.

As we drove past Fangliao Township, I saw the sign for Chunri Township and suggested that we go there for a look-see. The last job that my maternal grandfather, or *A-Kong*, held was the chief physician at the Health Center of Chunri Township. I wanted to know something about the place where he spent the last few years of his life. In September of 1952, A-Kong was arrested in Chunri Township, and after he was sent to the security headquarters in Taipei, he never returned again.

Chunri Township is located in the southern part of Taiwan's Central Mountain Range. Ninety-five percent of the land is mountainous. The township's administrative center is located in Chunri Village on Chunri Road, where Chunri Elementary School and the Chunri Public Health Center are also found. Following the road into the mountains, and taking notes of landmarks along the way, we arrived at our destination without difficulty. The turnoff to Chunri Village, a settlement of the Paiwan people, is adorned with large Paiwan sculptures, and a carved wooden map indicating major roads and landmarks. There were traditional slate houses everywhere, their windows and door plates engraved with traditional wooden carvings. I stopped in front of the Health Center and took a few pictures. The Chunri Elementary School compound was very

new. It had a library akin to a greenhouse, and its walls were adorned with murals and carvings of the Paiwan people.

Just as I was wondering how to begin my search, my companion Lynn, who was always ready to make new friends, suggested going to the local church. We asked some people chatting outside the church if any of them was familiar with the situation at the Health Center during A-Kong's time. One person suggested that we talk to Madam Kao Hsing-kuei, the mother of the village leader, as she was the chief nursing officer at the Health Center back then.

We followed the directions given to us by the helpful people at the church and found our way to the village leader's residence. There was a horizontal inscribed board above the door, as well as a pavilion outside furnished with tables and chairs for people to enjoy the shade. We knocked on the door and, luckily for us, Madam Kao was at home. She came out and sat with us at the table in front of the house for a chat. Madam Kao had jet black hair, looking like she was perhaps fifty or sixty years old, younger than she actually was.

In the beginning, she was rather confused about who we were. I explained that my A-Kong was Huang Wen-kung. He used to be a physician at the Health Center in Chunri, and I asked if she might know him. She said that she did, and that he was very stern as the Health Center's chief physician. She was not very coherent in Mandarin, which made me wonder if it was because she seldom spoke Mandarin, or if she could not quite recall what it was like back in those days.

All of a sudden, without any warning at all, she turned her head and spoke to my friend Lynn in Japanese. Coincidentally, Lynn had lived in Osaka for many of the twenty five years he was on the political blacklist in Taiwan, resulting in him being highly fluent in Japanese. They then started to talk in Japanese, a language that I had absolutely no knowledge of. I did not know how Madam Kao came to the conclusion that this American who came knocking on her door actually spoke Japanese, as she did not ask Lynn if he did, but simply went ahead and spoke to him in Japanese.

They would talk for a bit, pausing now and then during the conversation so Lynn could translate for me. In the midst of their halting conversation, Madam Kao mentioned that A-Kong once had a chicken coop.

"Physician Huang was very fierce back in the day. Nobody was allowed to enter his chicken coop except him. Not even his wife could set foot in it. She would be scolded if she even went near it! Physician Huang would spend his nights there sometimes. He was sleeping in the chicken coop the day he disappeared. His wife only realized that something had happened when she woke up the next day and couldn't find him anywhere", she said.

Following that, Physician Huang never returned and his wife left with their kids. She was not sure what happened after that.

Before we left Lynn could not help but ask Madam Kao how she figured out that he spoke Japanese.

"Do I look Japanese?"

"Yes, you do", Madam Kao replied with conviction. I had so many questions in my head, but Lynn simply tittered. I was sure that he looked more like Santa Claus – a big white American

with a head of white hair and a bushy white beard. In what way does he look Japanese? I mentioned this incident to my friends after that and they suspected that Madam Kao was not really talking to me or Lynn at that time, but our questions had brought her back to the past, a time when speaking in Japanese was second nature to her. Since Japanese had once been her dominant language, she used it to speak about times bygone. Luckily Lynn, who spoke Japanese, was able to respond to her in kind and became the bearer of her memories, allowing her to continue on with her recollections.

Lynn's mother tongue is English, whereas Mandarin Chinese and Japanese are languages that he learned as an adult. He says that a Japanese person would recognize that he was not a native speaker in a phone conversation. He fared better in Mandarin. When he spoke Mandarin on the phone he would sometimes be mistaken for a Taiwanese. Since Madam Kao saw him as Japanese right away, that would also indicate that his Japanese was not bad at all!

According to what Madam Gao had implied, a person could sleep (or hide) in a chicken coop, but there was no evidence to prove whom A-Kong might have hidden in there. Perhaps, only A-Kong knew the answer. In his written records, at least, A-Kong had never mentioned anything that was related to the chicken coop.

At that time, I had already received from the Taiwan National Archives a photocopy of the last letter my grandfather wrote before his execution, the court verdict, his personal written records, and his confession. I had been fighting with the authorities to have the original copy of his letter returned to us. I wanted to know all about A-Kong, but there were so few available clues. When I saw any inkling of a lead, I had to seize it. I heard that the former Health Center has now become the township's recycling center. After the trip, I shared the pictures of the recycling center with my uncle, as he was the only person in the family who might still remember the old Health Center. Uncle said that the center looked completely different, and did not match his memory of it at all.

After Lynn and I came down the mountain, we had the lingering feeling that we had just gone on a mystical journey. From how we spontaneously decided to go up the mountains, to how we found a person who still remembered A-Kong, and how that person suddenly switched to speaking Japanese with us, it was all very surreal. Fortuitously, the friend I brought with me was able to respond fluently. Everything was unplanned, and yet it all unfolded so naturally. Through all of my years inquiring about A-Kong, those were some of the most beguiling moments that I still very much cherish to this day. They showed that as long as you put your heart into something, Heaven will lend a hand, just as it happened on that trip. What we did not know at that time was that Lynn would be diagnosed with terminal cancer a few years later. It was a journey never to be repeated.

Lynn Miles (1943 to 2015), American. His Chinese name was Mei Hsin-yi. He came to Taiwan to study Chinese in the beginning of 1962. I was not born yet when he was actively involved in rescuing overseas political prisoners in the 1970s. I got to know him in 2009 through a human rights campaign on Green Island. He was living in Longtan District, Taoyuan, then. He

had friends all over Taiwan, which was why he undertook that round-the-island road trip to visit them.

Huang Wen-kung (1920 to 1953). Head of Chunri Township Health Center from March 1950 to September 1952. After he was arrested on September 23, 1952, he was sent to the security headquarters in Taipei. The following year, Chiang Kai-shek personally intervened to alter his sentence, and was executed by firing squad on May 20, 1953. When he was arrested, his eldest son was three years and nine months old, and his eldest daughter one year and six months. His second daughter, who is my mother, was not born yet. At the end of 2008, when I applied to see the records at the National Archives, I discovered the letter that A-Kong wrote the night before he was executed. No one in the family knew of this letter. It was after that that I started my long journey of investigating A-Kong's life.

Many times, I felt like I was piecing together a jigsaw puzzle that had a hole in the middle. The pieces that I managed to gather formed mirror images, or reflections, around the hole. No matter how hard I tried, the missing pieces in the middle could never be recovered. Even so, I still decided to embark on this journey. I did not know what I would find or encounter along the way. I would just have to go on the journey and find out. If one path led to nowhere, I would switch to another path. I often stumbled around in the dark. The more I discovered, the more questions popped up. Perhaps, no one would be able to provide answers to my questions anymore.

Chapter 2: Childhood Years and the Farewell Letter

Remembering My Childhood

I was born during the martial law era. I came from a family that never talked about politics. They only asked about my grades, and never anything else. Not long after I was born, my mother entrusted me to the care of my paternal grandparents and eldest aunt, as she was leaving to pursue her lifelong dream of doing her graduate studies in the United States. After I matured and started to have a better sense of the world, I became close to my eldest aunt. Whenever I was sad or troubled, she was the first person that I would go to. I would always feel much better after talking to her.

When my mother graduated from university in 1975, she had applied for a full scholarship to go to the United States to pursue her graduate studies. However, the ROC government would not allow her to leave the country. No reason was given; they simply refused to grant her a passport, destroying any opportunities she might have had. After seven years, she married and gave birth to me. At that point, she applied once more, and was finally successful in getting a full scholarship to pursue her studies in the States. However, she never forgot how she had been denied the chance to leave the country in 1975. That deep regret still affected her tremendously.

The year after Mother left Taiwan, my father, who originally wanted to do a Ph.D. overseas, changed his mind about leaving, and stayed in Taiwan to do his post-baccalaureate program for

medical school. One year and ten months later, my Mother received her master's degree and returned to Taiwan. Following that, she gave birth to my younger brother and later went to do her Ph.D. at the National Taiwan University. My father was studying at National Cheng Kung University in Tainan at the time, so they had to live separately for several years until Father finished his doctorate and went up north to do his residency.

Many years later, I myself also obtained a doctorate and gave birth to a child. Looking back, I can finally see the unbelievable difficulties they faced in their lives. How did Mother manage seeing her husband only on weekends? Her working week was akin to going to war – she was a warrior fighting off two young opponents, since it could not have been easy taking care of two kids on top of managing her doctoral studies. Somehow, she managed to graduate according to plan in just four years.

When I was in third grade, my whole family moved out of Grandpa and Grandma's home in Shuanglian to a rental near National Taiwan University. I had to switch schools, and I did not take it well. I would cry on the sofa after coming home from school every day, insisting on going back to Grandpa and Grandma's to look for my eldest aunt. My parents did not know what to do with me, and tried to move me to the small elementary school at the foot of Chanchu Shan (Toad Mountain). I was much happier in that school and stayed there till I graduated.

Every class in that elementary school had its own vegetable garden, a stream and a small pond. There were all sorts of creatures living there: frogs, toads, dragonflies, damselflies, tadpoles, minnows, etc. There was a tiny, natural ecosystem right on the school campus. We watched the frogs mate, and we learned how to distinguish the resting dragonflies from the damselflies: the dragonflies would lay their wings flat when they were resting whereas the damselflies would hold their wings erect. We found the egg cases (or ootheca) of praying mantises wedged in the school's wooden toys and games, which the translucent baby mantises would emerge from one by one. Then there were the tiny tadpoles with their comma-like bodies. We would compare tadpoles at various stages of transforming into frogs: those that had only hind legs, those that had tiny forelegs, those that had both forelegs and hind legs but also had a tail, and those that had already transformed into a full-grown frog. I only came to know after many years, when I was watching the news one day, that the spring on the campus was actually the result of a happy accident: a water tap had been leaking water all year round.

During my summer vacation, I would go to the grocery store with my classmates to buy bait for ten yuan. The bait was in the form of yellow powder with a hint of fragrance. After adding some water to shape the powder into balls, we would then go prawning at Drunken Moon Lake at National Taiwan University. We scattered the balls all over the water, luring the tiny, transparent shrimps to us. When they were close, we would use a BBQ grill net to catch them. When we were not busy catching prawns, we could be found under the Xindian Creek Bridge building an earthen oven. We would wrap eggs in layers of foil, wet newspapers and mud, and then toss them into a pile of hot clods of soil we had heated with a fire. We would then break up the soil clods so the eggs would be braised by their residual heat.

I grew up on the periphery of Da'an District in Taipei. Fortunately, that area still had space for me to be close to nature. I remember my classmates lived in a variety of distinctive homes. Many of my classmates lived in the same community; if I went to visit one classmate, I would end up seeing the whole lot of them since they were all neighbors. The sign at the entrance to the community read "National Taiwan University Staff Quarters".

I also had classmates who lived in a neighborhood like a labyrinth. I had to pass through the doorways or corridors of many other people's homes before I could enter theirs. It was only many years later that I found out that the neighborhood was mostly composed of illegal dwellings. The soldiers from the nearby air force base lived there with their families, and the fathers of my classmates were usually old soldiers from the mainland provinces. Their mothers were often indigenous women from other parts of Taiwan.

Many years later, my classmates' homes were no longer there, and only a few households remained on the mountain. It has now become the Treasure Hill Historical Settlement. I had no concept of ethnicity at that time and only had an inkling of what American born Taiwanese (ABT) was. There were quite a few people in my class who were born when their parents were studying in the United States, so they had Taiwanese and American dual citizenship. They only settled in Taiwan after their parents found teaching positions at National Taiwan University. As Mother did her doctorate studies late in life, she was similar in age to her instructors, so her instructor's children were often my classmates.

My Relationship with Mother Was a Ticking Time Bomb

After school let out, I would cut through the university campus and walk to the former chemistry faculty building to look for my mother. The building was very old. Steel cylinders packed the corridors and an odd smell filled the air. Looking at the building from today's perspective, it would likely not pass a fire inspection. After locating the correct door to enter the building, I would see Mother busy with her work at a lab bench.

I attended Mother's doctoral graduation ceremony when I was in grade four. I donned her square academic cap and took photos at the Institute of Atomic and Molecular Sciences as well as by Drunken Moon Lake. Even though I did not understand the significance of those photos, I knew that it was Mother's big day. For the next two years, Mother continued working in the same laboratory as a professor, and then she found a teaching position in Kaohsiung. Our family had to move south for her job. Father had not completed his residency, so Mother took me and my younger brother to Kaohsiung with her. All by herself, she dealt with moving, renting a place, starting a new job, and getting us settled in school – a new elementary school for my younger brother, and junior high for me.

It was a difficult period. Looking back, I don't think I did anything that added tension to my relationship with Mother. It was simply that Mother had just started a new job, and she had to take care of us single-handedly. She had also just obtained her driving license and had to drive

to work as a rookie driver. On top of that, we had just changed schools and had to adapt to our new environments. Stress was everywhere, and Mother's temper was easily triggered, even by trivial matters.

When it came to my mother's wrath, my brother and I were very different. He knew how to leverage the force of her anger to his advantage, or, at least hide around a corner where it would be hard to reach him for a beating. He also knew how to apologize immediately, and shed a few tears to evoke sympathy. As for me, I just made my mother angrier – I refused to apologize or back down. I have never felt like I was in the wrong. Not in the past, not in the present. There was one time when Grandpa and Grandma came to Kaohsiung to stay with us for a few days. While I was asleep, my Grandma saw my bruised and battered feet poking out from under the blanket. She broke into tears. At the time, I had no idea why Mother would beat me so horribly. But there is no doubt she overstepped the bounds of mere discipline; the fact was she used me to vent her emotions.

At that time, Mother and Father were afraid that I would not be able to get into a decent high school simply on the merit of my grades. Therefore, after a year and a half, they sent me to a middle school in Taipei. Many years later I found out that Grandma, after seeing how badly I was beaten by my mother, used my grades as an excuse to bring me back to Taipei. She was afraid that I would be seriously injured if she didn't intervene. My eldest aunt once again took good care of me. She gave me a safe environment, and I knew that she would never lay her hands on me. I felt safe staying with her. Grandpa used to do plowing work in those days so he did not eat beef. However, my eldest aunt knew what an appetite I had. She would wake up before anyone else and make a steak to put into my lunchbox. Often, I could not wait and sneaked a few bites once I was out of the house. I was in grade nine and under the intense stress of preparing for the year-end exams that would decide whether or not I would graduate. Those sneaky bites were stolen moments of bliss amidst the immense pressure.

Even though my aunt was my sanctuary, I still missed living with Mother and Father, and playing with my younger brother. At home we used to invent all kinds of games and adventures. For example, we taught ourselves how to change the knobs on the doors, and we bought a semi-finished electronics kit to build our own wiretap. So, after a year and a half, I went back home to Kaohsiung when it came time for me to take the joint college entrance exam. At that time, the city of Taipei held entrance exams for all students in Taipei, whereas students from the rest of Taiwan had to take the provincial exams held in Kaohsiung. The two exams happened on the same day, and I could only take one.

Doubts in My Youth

At that time, we used the versions of textbooks provided by the National Institute for Compilation and Translation. I went through two joint entrance exams: one for senior high school, and one for university. I was part of the last cohort of students who were tested on The Three Principles of

the People for our joint college entrance exam. When I was in middle school, our geography textbook still contained the words “our country has a long history and a vast territory”, and there were only four lessons on Taiwan geography. Our history textbooks were about Chinese history, and the history of Taiwan was treated as a side note. In later years, students had the opportunity to take courses focusing on Taiwan. But the textbooks I used treated Taiwan as an offshore island of China. They claimed “our country’s capital is Nanjing” despite this being completely disconnected from our political reality. This unreal fantasy of China seemed far removed from the actual environment where I grew up.

Even now, I remember the Jiangxi and Hunan river systems we studied, which have absolutely no connection to my daily life. We learnt about the four rivers of Jiangxi: the Gan, the Fu, the Xin, and the Xiu Shui, as well as the four rivers of Hunan: the Xiang, the Zi, the Yuan, and the Lishui. We learned that Northern China, Central China, Southern China constitute the first, second and third harvest zones. However, our textbooks never told us that Taiwan’s Kaoping River is located to the south of the Chashui River, or that the Hsiukuluan River flows into the Pacific Ocean, or that Taipei city grew and expanded due to its proximity to the Tamsui River. The textbooks from that era were out of touch with our reality.

My social studies score on the senior high school joint entrance exam was 134 out of 140. Even though I already knew that stating our capital as Nanjing was disconnected from reality, I diligently memorized those “facts” in order to score well. For the joint college entrance exam my score on The Three Principles of the People was 44 out of 50. In those days, test scores were everything. Even though I did not agree with what was written in the textbooks, I put my nose to the grindstone and memorized it as best as I could.

A-Má and My Stormy Youth

My grandmother, *A-Má*, moved to Kaohsiung to live with us when I was in middle school. In all those years, I don’t recall A-Má ever mentioning A-Kong. It was as if he never existed. A blank does not arouse any suspicion. No one ever considers why it is a blank, since it never existed. It is simply a blank.

For Mother, too A-Kong was a blank. I have never heard her talk about her father. In my memory, my brother and I once asked her how A-Kong, her father, died. Mother said that he died in a car accident. And that was it, nothing more.

Situated in the middle of it all, it was difficult for me to recognize the influences that made our lives the way they were. There was no parallel timeline which could show us what our childhood would have been like if we still had an A-Kong, or what Mother’s childhood would have been like if A-Kong had been around.

And if Mother had had a different childhood, would she have become a different kind of adult?