

IN STRANGE LANDS

陌生之地

With her debut novel, journalist Huang Wen-Ling guides readers through the Second World War, the Chinese Civil War, the White Terror, and the coronavirus pandemic with a multi-generational narrative about parting and reunion that showcases the will to survive and the true meaning of family.

To escape war, they left their country and fled halfway across the world. They were seeking refuge, but what they found was a home.

In the 1930s, eighteen thousand Jews fled Nazi Germany to China. Their destination was Shanghai, a city that required no identity papers to enter. To the Hirsch family, it seemed unimaginable to relocate to a completely unfamiliar country like China, but after the events of Kristallnacht in 1938, they decided their only hope was to leave behind everything they knew to build new lives in a strange land. In Shanghai, fate brought them into contact with the Chiang family. In a chaotic world, the two families transcended linguistic and cultural barriers, assisting each other, and building a friendship that was priceless beyond measure. After the war, the Hirsches returned to Germany, thinking they might not ever see the Chiangs again. Little did they know that some years later they would receive a letter from the Chiangs: China was in the middle of a civil war, and the Chiangs feared their only son would be sent to the front lines.

In 2020, Jan, a young man of mixed German and Chinese ancestry, discovers a box among the possessions of his recently deceased grandfather. Inside, a number of objects pique his curiosity: the photograph of a young girl, a silver ring, and a letter of guarantee to be used for German immigration. Growing up, Jan had heard the stories about his grandfather escaping from China, but he never understood why his grandfather always insisted he was from Taiwan, a country he had never set foot in. Hoping to unravel this mystery, Jan undertakes the same journey as his ancestors, traveling to a strange land to search



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for answers, and shed light on events that have been erased from history.

With the sharp eyes of a seasoned journalist, Huang Wen-Ling has produced a gentle and touching work of diaspora fiction that addresses immigrant identity and the scars of war. This moving story of cross-cultural friendship transcends the suffering of dislocation and turmoil to shine a spotlight on the importance of basic human kindness, reminding readers that even the deepest wounds cannot dim our hopes for a better future.

Huang Wen-Ling 黃文鈴

Huang Wen-Ling is a resident of Berlin, where she interviewed Vietnamese immigrants for her non-fiction work *Who are Outsiders: An Investigative Journalist's Journey in Search of Vietnamese Boat People in Germany and Taiwan*. The recipient of various research and writing grants from the Taiwanese and German governments, she previously worked as a reporter at Taiwanese newspapers and is now a writer, a translator, and a correspondent for Deutsche Welle.

STRANGERS IN STRANGE LANDS

By Huang Wen-Ling

Translated by Mary King Bradley

One: A Homeland Left Behind

“The Shamash is the candle that lights the others. Be a Shamash.”

– Rabbi David Wolpe

After that day, he understood that everything would be different.

The day in question occurred during the first year of the global pandemic, on the first Sunday in March. He had left his Berlin studio apartment near Treptower Park early that morning, and driven to Weißensee Jewish Cemetery.

Although Weißensee was part of Berlin, it was a thirty-minute drive from where he lived. After he arrived in the area, he navigated several winding turns before he found the secluded cemetery.

As he walked along the mauve exterior wall of the cemetery, he gradually began to feel calmer. Three-foot-tall menorahs sculpted in bas-relief appeared at intervals along the high wall. He gazed at one of the giant candlesticks with its branches stretching towards the sky, so like an unshakeable tree of life, and his heart was filled with renewed strength.

The weather that day was middling fair, typical for March. The sky was an oppressive, overcast expanse, although the rain refused to fall.

He went in through the main entrance, relying on his spotty memory to search for the Hirsch grave. He recalled that when he was small, he had come here once with his grandfather. At the time his only thought had been that the cemetery was endless. The solemn atmosphere that enveloped it had frightened him a bit, and he had clung to his grandfather’s big, warm hand the entire time, unwilling to let go of it no matter what was said.

The burial monument etched in his memory was an inky black. Though not as grand or imposing as the others, its design had its own unique charm: A mausoleum less than two feet wide, it resembled a small courtyard, open at the center. The names of its occupants – Mr. and Mrs. Hirsch, who had been interred together – were carved into its walls and picked out in gold lacquer. Brief summaries of their lives had been arranged symmetrically to either side; beneath these was an exquisitely rendered Big Dipper, symbolizing good fortune for the family’s future generations.

Only later, through research, did he learn about the grave’s ingenious details and thoughtful design, as well as the cemetery’s history. Just then, however, he was preoccupied by other thoughts, fixated on any potential clue that finding the grave might provide.

He struggled to follow the cemetery’s section markers, turning left and right, and was

almost convinced that he was lost when he suddenly spotted a mausoleum straight ahead that seemed to match the memory he'd come in search of. Someone was standing in front of it. At that distance, it looked to be a frail, elderly woman.

He took a closer look. Could this old woman be Aunt Tsui, who for years had been housebound, scarcely ever even stepping outside?

Berlin, 2020

Two months earlier, while clearing out his grandfather's things, he had come across a letter of personal guarantee. The letter stated that Mr. and Mrs. Hirsch were willing to pay all of the fees for Chiang Ning's room and board and hoped the Shanghai government would grant travel permission for him to go to Germany, allowing him to continue the studies that had been interrupted by the war. A date was written at the very bottom of the letter: 15 January 1948.

Chiang Ning was Jan's grandfather on his mother's side. Mr. and Mrs. Hirsch were Jan's maternal great-grandparents, and had died before Jan was born. Inside the ebony box that had held the letter of guarantee were also an exquisitely crafted silver ring and a black-and-white photograph, in which two children, both around ten years old, smiled brightly at the camera. The boy had slicked back hair and wore a short-sleeved shirt with crisply pressed shorts; the girl's delicate features were framed by two brown braids hanging to mid-breastbone, with a playful curl resting on her forehead. A floral sundress cleverly concealed her slightly too-thin frame. Two rows of now faded Chinese characters had been written on the back of the photograph: N & S, summer, 1941.

N had to be his grandfather, but who was S? Jan thought the girl looked familiar, as if he'd seen her somewhere before. Though it was an old photograph, the intimacy radiating from it made it clear at a glance that the two children were close.

And yet, he'd never heard his grandfather mention a childhood sweetheart in China. Then again, what kind of friendship was it if his grandfather had deliberately hidden the photo of the two of them, placing it with other important documents in the deepest recesses of a drawer, as if determined to keep it a secret? Jan examined the wooden box more closely. Although it showed its age, not a speck of dust marred its surface – someone must have been wiping it down regularly.

Having brought the wooden box home, Jan opened it again to scrutinize every detail of the photo. He had never seen a picture of his grandfather as a young boy before. His grandfather had always told people that he was from Taiwan. Only close relatives had known his family actually came from Shanghai. But as he dug deeper into the matter, Jan was baffled, unable to understand why his grandfather had insisted he was Taiwanese. His mother had told him once that his grandfather had even argued with staff at the Residents' Registration Office because the clerk had listed his nationality as PRC – China – on the registration form. At that time, Germany's civil registry system didn't even include Taiwan as an option. But Grandfather couldn't have cared less about any of that. He snatched all the papers back in one swift motion and angrily declared to the

clerk, "I will never be Chinese, so long as I live. That godforsaken place is no home of mine."

Once when he was little, Jan had been sitting on his grandfather's lap and had begged him to tell him more about that far-off country. He wanted to know if his thick black hair came from there – the Eastern part of the blood running through his veins had always been a mystery. But his grandfather had simply patted him on the head and said that he would understand one day when he was older. Now that his grandfather had passed away, it was up to Jan to find the answer.

Jan's parents had divorced when he was fifteen, and he had gone to live with his mother, Chiang Ssu-ya, Chiang Ning's only daughter. Jan had kept his father's surname, however, and so his full name was Jan Sonntag.

After the divorce, Jan's mother had chosen to move from their original home in Hanover to Berlin, where she would be closer to her elderly parents and could care for them. She had rented a three-room apartment in Zehlendorf, in the southwest part of Berlin, driving to work at a hospital in Charlottenburg every day. Her irregular shift work as a nurse gave her few opportunities to sit down and enjoy dinner with Jan. During his high school years, Jan had therefore usually gone directly from school to his grandparents' house, which was nearby. His grandfather had been a good cook, and Jan still had fond memories of that time in his life.

It was also then that he had first begun to spend more time chatting with his grandfather. His ability to speak Chinese had gradually improved with increased use, and he had progressed from minimal comprehension and being unable to speak to being able to converse with his grandfather in simple sentences.

During that period, the two of them had usually ensconced themselves in the study. From his earliest memories, Jan always recalled his grandfather immersed in a thick history book, or reading with obvious pleasure a newspaper purchased at the newsstand. When his grandfather saw that Jan had arrived, he would pull a book from the shelf and proceed to recount with great flair events that had unfolded throughout China's various dynasties. Unlike the dry, methodical accounts in his school textbooks, the historical figures in his grandfather's stories came alive, the centuries-old tales so vividly rendered that Jan listened utterly spellbound.

One entire wall of the study was plastered with his grandfather's collection of newspaper clippings. In the midst of these was a framed photograph of four massive tanks, gun barrels raised high as they advanced, their way blocked by a small, scrawny man in a white shirt.

At the time, Jan couldn't yet read any of the text; it was only later that he understood it all had to do with why his grandfather had left his birthplace to come to Germany. That wall of newspaper clippings revealed that his grandfather's concern for his native land had remained constant, and yet, paradoxically, he had also absolutely refused to set foot there for all these years. Based on the fact that over half of the books in the study were filled with dense rows of characters that looked like hieroglyphics, Jan was even more at a loss to understand his grandfather's flat refusal on the several occasions his grandmother had proposed a trip to Shanghai.

What exactly had happened in Shanghai?

After his grandfather's death, Jan's puzzlement had increased with each passing day. The letter of personal guarantee he had found in his grandfather's things had confirmed his suspicions:

his grandfather had left his home because of the war and come to Germany alone.

All these years, his grandfather had seemingly cut all ties and contact with China, neither acknowledging the past nor looking back.

There was Auntie Tsui, but had his grandfather had other family in Shanghai? Why had there never been any news of them in all this time?

The grandfather Jan knew was a kind-hearted and caring family man willing to do anything in his power for his loved ones. He and Jan's grandmother had been envied by all as an ideal couple. Jan simply couldn't believe his grandfather would abandon his family in China without reason.

Was it possible, Jan wondered, that he still had family in the mainland whom he'd never met and knew nothing about?

Strictly speaking, Jan was only one quarter Chinese by blood. His grandmother Lotte was a German Jew, who at the age of ten had fled Germany with her parents – the Hirsches – for Shanghai. That was supposedly when she had met Chiang Ning and his family, although Chiang Ning's and Lotte's mutual affection would not develop until more than a decade later, igniting while the war's ashes still smoldered.

Shanghai, 1927

"Big news! Hsiu-hsiu, I've got big news!" The moment he got home, Chiang Chao-sheng rushed into the kitchen in search of his wife, not even pausing to set down his work bag.

It was still light outside, but their daughter was in the bedroom fast asleep. Wang Hsiu-hsiu, seven months pregnant and big bellied, was in the kitchen preparing an evening meal for the three of them. When she heard her husband shout, she laid down the big kitchen knife in her hand and looked up at him.

"What's wrong? Why are you making all that racket?"

"I have amazing news! Chiang Kai-shek is getting married and asked our studio to take the wedding portraits." Chiang Chao-sheng blurted out his "big news" in one breath and watched as his wife's eyes grew big. "It's true. The boss told me. He wants Kuei-hsun to take the photos."

Hsiu-hsiu stood in stupefied astonishment for a moment, and then tears welled up in her eyes. "That's wonderful! Good days are just around the corner for us."

Chiang Chao-sheng and Wang Hsiu-hsiu had been married for three years and had a two-year-old daughter, who was still in the babbling stage. Their household relied on Chao-sheng's meager salary at the photography studio. Photography wasn't a very lucrative profession, but in Shanghai's golden age there was potential for growth.

After the humiliating defeat of the Qing government in the First Opium War, the Treaty of Nanking signed with the British government in 1842 had stipulated that the "Five Treaty Ports" were to be opened to foreign trade. When Shanghai had opened to trade the following year, it was transformed almost overnight into a major port. During this period, numerous Westerners and

foreign missionaries brought photography equipment with them across the ocean. By 1920, the number of photography studios had skyrocketed, and having one's portrait taken had gradually become the fashion.

Chao-sheng had started out as an apprentice at the China Photo Studio with Hsiu-hsiu's elder brother, Wang Kuei-hsun. Five years had passed in the blink of an eye. Not only were the two men now masters of their craft, but they were also full of enthusiasm for photography and the latest photography techniques. Because the owner of the China Photo Studio had been a schoolmate of T. V. Soong, Kuei-hsun and Chao-sheng both secretly believed that they just had to stick it out with their boss, and then it wouldn't be long before they rose to prominence. Whenever this thought occurred to them, they threw themselves into their work with renewed vigor, dreaming of the day when they could open their own studio.

The moment they had been waiting for had finally arrived. On December 1, 1927, Chiang Kai-shek married Soong Mei-ling, T. V. Soong's younger sister. Wang Kuei-hsun was the photographer who pressed the shutter, capturing what appeared to be a match made in heaven. Chiang Kai-shek posed for the portrait standing, wearing a well-tailored Western suit, his bright eyes sharp. Soong Mei-ling wore a long veil, the bouquet of flowers she held close to her chest making her white wedding gown appear even more ethereal. The long train trailing at her feet added an additional dreamlike quality to the scene.

From the moment the photos from this wedding of the century were unveiled, they sparked a Shanghai craze for Western-style wedding photography that propelled China Photo Studio to instant fame.

At that time, the most famous photography studio in Shanghai was the Wang Kai Photo Studio on Nanjing Road in Huangpu District. Its owner, Wang Chi-kai, was a man of unparalleled business acumen. That August, Shanghai had hosted the Eighth Far Eastern Game, featuring participants from China, Japan, and the Philippines. Shanghai's newspapers naturally devoted extensive daily coverage to this extraordinary international sporting event. After securing photography rights, Wang Chi-kai had entered the fray, capturing key events on film and rushing to develop the photos that same night, then offering them the next day at low prices to newspapers that had no full-time photojournalists assigned to the sporting events. His only condition was that the photos carry the caption "Photo by Wang Kai Photo Studio, Shanghai". As excitement over the games reached fever pitch, Wang Kai Photo Studio left a deep impression on readers who followed events in the newspapers, and its reputation had soared accordingly.

Although China Photo Studio had had a somewhat less lofty reputation than Wang Kai, the tables were turned after the Chiang-Soong wedding. Many prominent figures from politics and business began flocking to the studio with requests for portraits or wedding photography. With Wang Kuei-hsun's growing reputation, both he and Chiang Chao-sheng felt the time had come to strike out on their own.

Coincidentally, a regular customer had a shopfront for sale in Hongkou District, which was adjacent to Huangpu. Kuei-hsun and Chao-sheng privately rejoiced at this opportunity. The

district had developed rapidly after Shanghai had been opened as a treaty port in the late Qing. Situated in the south of the city at a bend in the Huangpu River, it offered the natural advantage of deep water, and with over twenty wharves established there, it had become Shanghai's most important port.

In addition, the southern part of Hongkou District had been designated as the American Concession since 1848 and had later been merged with the British Concession to form the International Settlement. Since the 1870s, Japanese merchants had come to Shanghai in droves to conduct business, settling predominantly in the Hongkou area. Over the following decades, a massive influx of immigrants had resulted in a vibrant mix of Chinese and foreign residents there, as well as a proliferation of shops and newly established newspapers, schools, churches, and hospitals. The area had thus come to symbolize one facet of the city's thriving development.

Wang Kuei-hsun and Chiang Chao-sheng knew the Hongkou shopfront was a good opportunity for the simple reason that photography at that time was still a luxury reserved for the wealthy. A studio portrait cost two silver dollars – how could ordinary people afford such a splurge? But foreigners were generous spenders. While Kuei-hsun and Chao-sheng had been apprentices at the China Photo Studio, expats who had settled in Shanghai for business reasons would often bring their entire families to have a family portrait taken. These interactions had allowed the two men to pick up just enough basic conversational English to manage business transactions.

Hongkou was also home to numerous theaters. As early as 1908, a Spaniard named Ramos had leased an ice rink at the intersection of Haining and Zhapu Roads. He enclosed the rink with corrugated iron sheets and set up two hundred fifty wooden chairs inside to open China's first formal cinema, the Hongkew Film and Drama Garden, later renamed Hongkew Cinema.

Due to Hongkew Cinema's overwhelmingly positive reception, theaters funded by foreign investors began to pop up in Hongkou like bamboo shoots after spring rain. By the late 1920s, over twenty theaters had sprung up in the area. Notable among them was Victoria Theater on Haining Road, boasting eight hundred seats. Ticket prices were shockingly high: first-class box seats cost a dollar fifty, while special seats were priced at a dollar thirty. At the time, a rickshaw puller earned about four dollars a month. Ordinary citizens could only stare in awe at the movie posters outside the theaters, which were frequented almost exclusively by wealthy Chinese and foreign expats.

Wang Kuei-hsun and Chiang Chao-sheng made some shrewd calculations. Hongkou lay on the other side of Suzhou Creek, just a short distance from Nanjing Road in the city center, yet the rents there were significantly lower. The area near North Sichuan Road, in particular, was a magnet for theaters. The Isis Theatre, renovated at great expense by Chinese businessman Tseng Huan-tang, and the Odeon Theatre, established just two years prior, were both on this road. Meanwhile, just one side street away, the Hongkew Cinema offered working-class residents an affordable escape – just a few coppers could buy them entry to a show. A photography studio opened in this area was bound to draw crowds.

In October 1928, the Yao Hua Photographic Studio opened its doors in grand style on

North Sichuan Road. Chiang Chao-sheng published an announcement in the *Shen Bao* newspaper: **“First-rate craftsmanship, renowned throughout China. Serving ladies of distinction and beauty, we are the most professional choice for portraits and wedding photography. Enjoy a 10% discount during our grand opening.”**

That December brought a double blessing to the Chiang family with the birth of Chiang Ning, Chiang Chao-sheng’s third child and eldest son. The baby’s high round forehead and slender limbs, so strikingly like the father’s, drew praise from all who came to offer their congratulations. Wang Hsiu-hsiu, still bedridden and recuperating, could only worry privately about what kind of world this child would face in the future. She prayed the war would spare the photography studio’s business and that her three children would remain safe.

Hsiu-hsiu’s worries were not without foundation. Towards the beginning of the previous year, workers had often marched through the streets en masse, brandishing rifles. Rumors circulated among the general population that there were increasingly obvious power struggles within the Kuomintang, and that the Communist Party, backed by Soviet Russia, might seize the opportunity to “make a move”. Although she didn’t fully grasp all the military maneuvering, it was clear that the political landscape had shifted dramatically over the past year or two. Even ordinary citizens could sense a major upheaval brewing.

Led by Chiang Kai-shek, the Northern Expeditionary Army of the Nationalist Government had pushed all the way to Shanghai with unstoppable momentum. Shanghai workers, eager to wrest back national sovereignty from the Beiyang warlords, had formed battalions of workers’ pickets, which were supported by Communist Party leadership and training. Armed with rifles and axes, they launched three consecutive armed uprisings. On March 21st, tramway, post office, and railway workers, joined by students from Shanghai University, Fudan University, and Jinan University, made an urgent call for a citywide general strike. They mounted a full-scale assault on district police stations, munitions factories, telephone exchanges, railway stations, and the Zhili-Shandong Allied Forces – the warlord troops stationed in Shanghai. Ultimately, they succeeded in seizing control of Shanghai and established the Provisional Government of the Shanghai Special Municipality.

Although the Beiyang forces appeared to have been driven out of Shanghai, the power struggle between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party had only just begun. On April 12, Chiang Kai-shek dissolved the Shanghai Provisional Government, disarmed the Shanghai workers’ pickets, and ended the workers’ government. During the Northern Expedition, internal strife within the Kuomintang had intensified, spilling from the central to local levels. Chiang decided to initiate a party purge that would eliminate Communist infiltrators in the KMT. Party branches across the country carried out the purge using various methods.

Chiang Chao-sheng was by no means a political zealot, but he had personally seen and heard of numerous gentry who had been falsely accused of being Communists and had ultimately lost their lives. Witnessing the Kuomintang’s (or more accurately, Chiang Kai-shek’s) brutal purge of dissenters merely strengthened his life-long resolve to stay out of politics. Many hinted over the years that he should choose a side, but he consistently declined, citing his disinterest in

politics. He instead remained focused on his newly opened photography studio.

Several years passed. In September 1932, Chiang Ning's youngest sister, Chiang Tsui, was born. He had been just four years old at the time, but Chiang Ning never forgot the first time he saw his little sister – her rosy little face and the tiny body their mother had swaddled tightly in a blanket, fearful the newborn might catch a chill. After his mother had fed the baby and left the room, Chiang Ning had seized his opportunity to creep up to the crib. When his sister opened her big, round eyes and smiled at him, he had felt something warm ripple through his chest...