

About a year ago, I happened to meet an elderly Chinese woman in a spice shop where I worked part time down the street from my house in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. . We will call her Enko, a Japanese name she prefers to use. Enko was very interested in telling me about her not too short life story, which covered a span of 90 years. As it happens, I had written several biographical entries of immigrant Chinese women for an encyclopedia of famous Chicago women when I lived in that city a decade ago. At that time, for a monograph I was working on, I had examined thousands of Chinese case files kept by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in the Midwest between 1882 and 1943. From this experience, I learned how difficult it was for Chinese immigrants to reconstruct their family histories. Thus, when Enko's daughter asked me to help write her memoirs, I was excited and honored.

We began by placing Enko's personal experiences in the context of nearly a century of events in China and sketching a chronology of her life. In the process, we discovered a benchmark for her memoirs—a valued American friend she knew in her late 20s and early 30s. James Burke, the son of a China missionary, had left China after the communist revolution in 1949. Enko had no further contact with “Jim” and, many years later, learned that he had died in a mountaineering accident in 1964. Yet her intense emotional attachment to him gave her the strength to endure and even transcend numerous hardships.

In Chinese culture, family relationships are paramount. Thus, when Enko emigrated to the United States in the early 1990s, she sought to learn something about Jim's family. In particular, she managed to find out that his daughter was researching his life but, after many attempts, Enko was unable to establish contact with his daughter. This autobiographical essay, written in the form of a letter, is what I think she would have told Jim (and his family) had circumstances been different.¹

A Chinese Orphan

Spring 2008

Dear Jim,

Here I am in my fourth floor apartment in the United States looking out the window at the abundant pear blossoms in my backyard. Over the past few years, many people have sat at this table by the window with me. In particular, Chinese journalists have interviewed me and published articles about my life. I don't think I am anything special really. I mean, so many of my friends endured hardships. Of course, by now, most of them are gone. At 90 years old, I yearn to write down what I would have told you had you been alive. Perhaps you would chuckle to know that I am just beginning to feel my age. My knee has been hurting for several months from a recent fall and, while I hope to visit my hometown one last time, to show my new American friend, Peg, the “three blacks” and the Shaoxing wine jugs, I'm afraid that I will not be able to make that trip.²

I want you to know that many years ago you rescued me from what I had taken to be a meaningless existence. It was only after I met you that I discovered the kind of person I wanted to become, what I wanted to do with my life. I didn't really think I would see

¹ The Chinese names in this essay have been changed.

² The three blacks that have endured since my childhood are the black caps that the farmers still wear, the black boats that snake along the waterways, and the black pickled vegetables that I still love to eat.

you again after you left China in '49. Even so, I continued to “talk” to you while I was trying to build a place, a home, I had never had.

You see, when I was very young, my mother took up with a man who was not my father. Our whole family was affected by Mother's decision to leave our home and move in with her lover, a leftist intellectual. In fact, no one could console my brilliant brother, who locked himself in his study like a monk. (Much later, when he emerged to attend university in '36, he couldn't adjust to the world outside of his study and committed suicide after his own first love spurned him. For a long time afterwards, perhaps because his action was so out of sync with our nationalistic fervor at the time, my classmates recalled how he laid himself across the train tracks at the entrance of Tsinghua University.)

I was only five years old in 1923 when my parents divorced. A poet and revolutionary, Father was so devoted to his work that he turned over the running of our household to his sister, who we called Auntie Number Seven.³ Having grown up in the last Chinese dynasty, Father was anxious to ring in a modern China. I still remember him railing against and writing an essay criticizing an ancient poem that glorified suicide among women:

*A daughter is born to a man in Fujian, not worth celebrating,
But expected to grow into womanhood treasuring chastity above life itself.
The death of her betrothed allows for no surviving widow.
Poison wine is in the cup.
A rope hangs from the beam.
A daughter clinging to life is compelled to leave it,
Her heart broken and filled with bitterness!
The clan rejoices at the death of a daughter for
The glory it brings to the family name.
An imposing memorial column stands in front of the gate
While in the night, the cries of her ghost are heard
Begging for a chance to return to life.⁴*

How Father hated the sentiment behind that poem! After all, he was raised in a traditional household and, after three successive arranged marriages in which all his wives died, his parents compelled him to take a concubine to produce a male heir. He (or, his parents) got a daughter instead. That was before he married Mother. She had been a student of his at the school where he taught and was much younger. But even after Mother left us, Father still continued in his quest to change the traditional ways of life.

Auntie Number Seven managed the servants very well but, frankly, she lacked a mother's heart. She never spoke to me, except to bark out orders. On top of that, when I was just

³ It is customary to refer to family members by the position they hold in the family. Auntie Number Seven was the 7th of my father's siblings.

⁴ Translated from the Chinese by Eileen Barnard.

twelve years old, Father died of tuberculosis at 52 years old. His students and friends, who so worshipped him, were devastated, and tried to find good homes for us children. It was then that Auntie Number Seven decided to marry one of Father's colleagues. So, after a year or so of living with family friends, I was shifted from one boarding school to another. It is hard for me to believe it now, but I moved twelve times before I even attended college.

Ah! You, too, were shifted around, between Macon, Georgia, and Shanghai, China. When I visited the United States many years later, I learned that your mother simply could not adjust to a life in China and your father would not give up his missionary work. Perhaps, because of this common thread, you and I were kindred spirits of a sort.

The truth is that a lot of us were running around China in the 30's. It was a tumultuous time during the civil war. As Father surely knew long before me, change was in the air. Our lives were further complicated by the Japanese invasion. I read in the book that you wrote about him that your father actually had helped many young orphans during the Japanese air raids ... and never wanted to be anywhere else.

An orphan myself, I constructed stories, perhaps to stave off a deep well of loneliness. Whatever the reason, I was intensely interested in chronicling the rhythms of life, like when the farmers planted their fields and how long it took to make the daughter's wine that was used during the wedding celebration. One of my favorite "stories" had to do with my Auntie Number Three who carried the light of Buddhism by burning incense and praying to Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, after her betrothed died prematurely. Early on, Father invited her to live with us so that she would not be tempted to follow tradition and either commit suicide or live with her betrothed's family who she had never even met and would undoubtedly mistreat her.

In my childhood, I was vaguely aware of our family's tragedies. Of course, I might have already told you about my family but I am so in the habit of talking to you in my imagination that I no longer remember what I told you. Somehow I just kept moving forward, observing all around me. You'd think that, with my eye for details, I would be great at mathematics. On the contrary! I continued to fail the college entrance exams until I happened to get into Southwest Associated University in Kunming, as a transfer student. Lucky for me, with the Japanese invasion, the entrance exams weren't so stringent.⁵

Curiously, I outperformed everyone around me in, of all things, English. I knew I had a talent for language. Perhaps I inherited that from Father ... although he never cared much for the English language or Western culture. In fact, when I was a young girl and enthralled with translations of short stories by Guy de Maupassant, Father redirected me to short stories by Chinese writers, in particular those by his contemporary, Lu Xun.

⁵ In '37, three of China's most prestigious universities –Beijing, Qinghua, and Nankai –had joined forces and established Southwest Associated University in Kunming.

In '38, when my cousin and I traveled over a thousand miles across China to go to college in Kunming and escape the Japanese, who were known to rape young girls, I had collected so many stories in my head that I was anxious to develop my “material.” For the first time in my sheltered life, I observed first-hand the poor lives of the rickshaw drivers in Guiyang, who stopped off for a quick puff of opium before they could manage to carry their heavy loads uphill. In my own family, Uncle had leisurely smoked opium at home, lounging at a table and whiling away the hours.

I met and married my husband, Ma Hunggui, shortly after I graduated from college. Though he was 20 years older than me, both of us were from well-educated families. In contrast to my family, who lost everything when Father died, my husband’s family was very wealthy and had even established schools in northern China and sent Hunggui to study engineering in the United States. He was educated first at Northwestern University and then at the University of Notre Dame.

But, did history repeat itself? It turned out that, like my parents, my own marriage was deeply flawed. In my case, it was my husband who had many mistresses and drank with all the powerful warlords from northern China. Of course I now recognize that he was addicted to alcohol. But at the time, all I could see was a familiar pattern from childhood—being ignored—a feeling that, once it emerged, left me lonelier than ever.

That was when I met you. Remember? You lived next door to my husband and me when you worked for the Office of War Information in Kunming and always stopped by to visit us after work. We introduced you to many different people, including intellectuals, warlords, and prominent families. For us, it made life purposeful, to be your friend. In those days, we were so far away from our hometown villages. Then, after the Japanese left and everyone went back to their houses, we met up again in Beijing where my father-in-law lived.

Surrounded by beautiful gardens and servants and even a French cook, I comforted myself with the knowledge that I was part of one of the richest families in China. I kept quiet and out of the way, most of the time. Except when I played mahjong. It was then that I noticed the way you used your hands to count Cantonese style. And your funny sounding southern accent always caught people off guard. My husband’s family adored you. I think it made them feel important to be connected to a Chinese-speaking foreign friend. Even then, I yearned to know about the world outside of China. I don’t quite know what my husband’s family thought of your father – but I think they respected the work he did on behalf of so many Chinese souls as much as the fact that he was friends with the famous Soong sisters through their father, Charlie Soong. You would remember, of course, that Charlie was an American-educated Methodist missionary.⁶ In observing you, something in me changed. I realized that I was beginning to see China through your eyes. Even my mannerisms were transformed into something I didn’t quite

⁶ The eldest sister, Soong Ai-ling, married the richest man in China, H. H. Kung, in the 1930s; the middle sister, Soong Ching-ling, married Sun Yatsen, the first president of the Republic of China; and the youngest sister, Soong May-ling, married Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Kuomintang.

recognize. Truthfully, it was more than a little disconcerting to realize that you instinctively seemed to care about me.

It was around that time that you decided to become a photographer. We all thought you were a spy because of your job in Kunming. When we met again in Beijing, in '47, you had married an American woman who also was a journalist ... from the American South. Still, you insisted on taking photographs of me at my father-in-law's house. Why? You said you wanted to publish a picture story on "typical" Chinese housewives...

As far back as I can remember Chinese people always wanted to please foreign guests. I was no different. But now, I wish I could see your picture stories, to look at my father-in-law's gardens, to smell the wisteria, and taste the grapes. Alas, all of my photographs and all of the places I knew so well have been destroyed.

But when the communists "liberated" Beijing in '49, you were determined to get your photographs of their takeover out to LIFE magazine. You tried every avenue possible until you finally decided to trick an airline pilot – one of my husband's nephews – into taking the negatives to Shanghai. You taped them to the bottom of a carton of whiskey and gave it to my husband's nephew as a "gift." You never knew how frightened he was when the people from LIFE stopped him to get that whiskey. You often joked that "one couldn't have fun at LIFE without a camera." But you never knew, and I don't think you would have understood why, my husband's nephew immediately turned over the evidence to the Chinese authorities.

After you returned to America, life seemed pretty normal for a long while. I bargained with my husband to let me have a child and eventually I gave birth to a beautiful daughter, Lukai, in '54. We continued to live comfortably and even vacationed at Beidaihe where my husband's family also had several homes and businesses. It was quiet and peaceful by the water. By then, the Chinese government had asked all the foreigners to leave and forbade us to speak even a word of English. So I read in secret and followed the government's advice to learn Russian. I liked learning languages so this definitely was not a hardship for me!

But in '58, the Chinese authorities arrested my husband and charged him with being a counter-revolutionary spy. Your smuggling trick with the carton of whiskey played a key role in his imprisonment. But it was also because he was wealthy and well connected to so many Chinese reformers who were on the wrong side of the political equation...and foreign guests. In fact, I was close to Zhang Boling's sister and Yuan Shikai's sons, who to this day are larger-than-life figures to so many Chinese people.⁷ Also, my husband and I were one of two Chinese families invited to join the foreign country club scene before our government changed in '49.

⁷ Zhang Boling (1876-1951) was an educational reformer, who studied at Columbia University and was influenced by John Dewey. He established one of the most prestigious universities in China, Nankai; and is known for his emphasis on patriotism and physical education. Yuan Shikai (1859-1916), a powerful leader during the Qing dynasty, became the first president of China and, in a sudden turnabout, reclaimed China's imperial past between 1912-1915 instead of adopting a modern system of governance.

While my husband was generous and invited many scholars to live in our house in Tianjin, others who were jealous of him would say anything to take him down a notch. That was nothing special, just human nature. But my husband was imprisoned for ten years and later the Chinese authorities advised me to divorce him, and even change my name. That was the ultimate separation. At that time, the authorities systematically had begun to destroy family records.⁸ I took back my father's last name and lost contact with my husband. I only heard from friends that he had died of liver cancer soon after he got out of prison.

In the meantime, the authorities confiscated all of our property and businesses. We had been shareholders in many of the businesses that made China tick – waterworks, cement, coal, and so on. In the early '60s, because Lukai and I couldn't get enough coal to heat our house, we had to move into a smaller townhouse that, some years ago, had been owned by a British real estate company. We shared a large courtyard with several neighbors and I encouraged Lukai to take up photography. I often wonder if we in China played a part in your decision to become a photographer. In truth, without photographers, who would have believed all that we went through?

When the Cultural Revolution began in '66, the Red Guards came to our house and took everything they could find – furniture, photographs, and other prized possessions, including all the clothes that I painstakingly had hand stitched for Lukai. The Red Guards burned all of our photographs and my novels and foreign language books. I felt helpless when I saw everything go up in flames...even my English encyclopedia. The bonfire in our yard lasted all day. I had been teaching myself Spanish and even had a few books in Japanese. Even those books, my foreign friends, burst into flames.

I was bombarded. First the Red Guards who were assigned to our neighborhood boarded up our house and stuck us in the windowless basement that didn't even have a kitchen or a bathroom. Then my husband's poorer cousins, who had always held a grudge against us, cut off all my hair. Even Lukai's classmates were caught up in the revolutionary spirit. Though barely 12 years old at the time, they smashed anything they could find. While the ladies from the neighborhood tried to stop them, in the end, roaming Red Guards swarmed around us. I had nothing left for these vagabonds to confiscate, and they became so frustrated that they stripped and beat me.

Before the Cultural Revolution and after my husband was imprisoned, I had comforted Lukai with many different stories of my childhood and college experiences. But in our

⁸ Before the Cultural Revolution, Chinese people kept track of their family lineage in a book called *jiapu* (or, family records). The *jiapu* were very thick and contained records over hundreds of years, detailing the lineage of every family member. For example, it contained records about my husband's family and traced our lineage to a historical figure, Jian Yuan. Legend has it that Jian Yuan, a maiden, followed gigantic footprints into the forest and was impregnated by an alchemist, also known as the god of agriculture, Shen Nongshi. Jian Yuan gave birth to a son who subsequently became the leader of one of the two major Han tribes, the Yan. Apparently, my husband's family members, all hunters and gatherers, were descended from Yandi. The *jiapu* showed that the Lu family came into being after Jiang Taigong, another famous person in Chinese history. But during the Cultural Revolution, all of the *jiapu* were destroyed and, unfortunately, no other family records exist.

Cultural Revolution “home,” I didn’t dare tell stories, even to Lukai. You would never have recognized me as a “typical Chinese housewife” then. I was very thin and wore a simple top and pants with no jewels and no beautiful combs in my hair. At that time, I was ready to die. I swallowed a whole bottle of sleeping pills that I found in the trash and drifted away.

The pills didn’t work. After I regained consciousness, Lukai took charge of watching over me. Another family lived in the basement with us. Those children were very noisy. I tried to drown out their sounds any way I could. Once, a professor friend gave me a typewriter and a science book he had borrowed from the library. I typed the whole thing, from cover to cover, but not before being questioned by the local police. The stupid army family who lived above us heard the tapping and reported me. They thought we were sending coded signals to the enemy!

The Red Guards accidentally left some newspapers and magazines behind and so we took them to a consignment shop to get money for food. Some of our relatives from out of town sent us a little money but, by ’76, I was desperate for a new place to live. Lukai’s health was deteriorating and she couldn’t get the smell of pee –and the nightmares of all that had happened –out of her mind. We were slowly going crazy in that dark, damp, place.

Then, one day, a worker convinced us to move out of our basement and into a room that he had built on the roof of a three-story apartment building. I don’t remember how we met the worker but, during that time, it was easy to become friends with total strangers. With little money but a lot of ingenuity, people built their own shelters. It didn’t take much for him to convince me to move. I craved sunshine.

But when we went to look at our new place, I realized that it was in a very seedy neighborhood. Everything was old and built of wood, not bricks. Of course, we didn’t have much to move...just two cots, a dresser, a table and a few chairs. But it wasn’t until we actually had moved in that I realized that there was no place to cook. We had to negotiate with the worker who built the room to construct a small kitchen outside in the corridor. The family who shared the roof with us borrowed a strong rope, which we attached to a pulley, and hauled building materials to the rooftop. Actually, that rope saved our lives.

On July 28, 1976, about two o’clock in the morning, I woke to a noisy crackling on the roof. At first, I thought it was hail because Tianjin often has summer storms. Then the shaking really started and I realized that it was an earthquake. I could still hear people yelling for help from behind our building. Then it became very dark and I could feel our building gradually crumbling underneath us. At dawn, still on the rooftop, we saw the sunrise and I remember thinking that it was a very bright day. But when I looked back into my room, I realized that both the wall and staircase had crumbled and there was no way for us to get down.

In the earthquake, our dresser and my cot had rolled down with the wall. The dresser contained a photo album that Lukai had filled with snapshots, some she had taken and others from her childhood that relatives and friends had saved for us.

Finally, we used the pulley and rope to scale the wall, like mountaineers. The only things we took were our residence permits and rationing books to buy rice and food. Once down, Lukai ran to the back of the building to see if she could find our photo album. But all she saw were corpses of the people who had been outside the building during the quake.

Wandering about, friends finally found us and helped us relocate to a playground in the center of the city. Ironically, from the playground we could see the townhouse where we had lived in the basement for ten years, still standing. While Tianjin was not the epicenter of the earthquake, everyone was suffering and many of us had no place to live. To make matters worse, our government refused to let other countries know what had happened. Isolated from the outside world, from each other, and even from ourselves for so many years, many of us came to believe that our souls had, once and for all, been destroyed. It was painful to think of you then. I imagined you in a different place, taking pictures of other people around you.

In fact, in this depressed state, people were reluctant to help each other. Lukai had asked some friends in the electronics factory where she worked to help us get our furniture off the rooftop. Though we were considered intellectuals, a category that was despised at the time, Lukai had made friends so easily. She played the accordion and, because many of the factory workers liked to sing, she often accompanied them. But after the quake, even they were afraid to help us salvage our few meager pieces of furniture from the rooftop.

After two months, our time for living on the playground was up. By then we met someone who offered us a hut he had built to live in. It was already November and the weather was turning cold. Distant relatives who lived in the building behind us let us use their toilet and gave us water. Lukai and I spent more than a year in that little hut on the pavement before we found an apartment.

During the ten years that we had lived in the basement, I was able to keep in touch with one family. And even after my dear friends had passed away, their granddaughter continued to visit us. In fact, she introduced us to two female college students whose parents were retiring and moving back to their hometown. They invited Lukai and me to live in their apartment. I took over the cooking and cleaning. Actually, I was happy for the chance to cook. I wanted to make the dishes that held special memories for me – the pickled vegetables and brine-cured meat from my hometown and even the spinach soup from our French chef – and take care of those girls. They were China's future. During the year that we lived there, Lukai continued to work in the factory and study at night so that she could take the college entrance exams. Because she had had only five years of primary school, she had much catching up to do. I couldn't teach her – all I knew was English – but at least I could take care of her.

Fortunately, she passed the exams and was accepted into Beijing University, the best university in China. It was only after she went away to school that I was eligible, under the government guidelines, to hold a job. The chaos of the Cultural Revolution had officially ended and my friends had been invited back to their universities to teach. Luckily, I found a job as an editor and translator of a magazine in a nearby foreign languages institute. It was wonderful to read Western literature again and translate many great works into Chinese. I even started writing down my stories. I wrote hundreds of articles for young people who had no knowledge of history. Lukai keeps them for me now... many have been published in Chinese magazines here in the United States. Still, I could not find a way to write about what you had meant to me.

When I visited the United States for the first time in '91, the first thing I did was to try to find you. The second earthquake came when I realized that you were no longer alive. You had slipped and fallen 800 feet while taking pictures in the Himalayas in 1964. You had died, at 49 years old, even before China's Cultural Revolution began. I don't think I will ever get over the fact that when I was suffering so much, you had already left the world.

After so many students were killed at Tiananmen Square in 1989, the U.S. government invited Lukai and me to become permanent residents in the United States. Settling in Washington, D.C., Lukai was so busy with her new job and I yearned to become part of the country I had always admired from afar. You see, knowing you increased my desire to learn about things that I had only read about in books. For a time, I worked for Traveler's Aid at an information desk at Union Station. My first impulse was to help the American homeless and counsel runaway teens. I continued to write articles for Chinese newspapers in the United States. Most of the articles were to clarify details about Chinese history, and never about my inner feelings. Later, I began to teach English in the Washington, D.C. suburbs to immigrants from around the world and even to teach Chinese language to young American kids. It was then that my daughter urged me to write my memoirs, which I did in Chinese. Now, knowing Peg gives me a chance to get out my stories in English.

I wonder if you would have ever have believed how knowing you, though briefly, helped me prevail through all those times of trial in China. It's funny how seemingly insignificant encounters can change a person's life. To keep alive inside during those hard times, I created so many memories around you, thinking, always thinking, about what it would be like to see you again. I would have wanted you to know that you were the one home I was never able to live in, the one unfinished poem in my life.

And, I would have wanted you to know that I'm fine now. I share my stories with many, many people. And I just taught Peg how to play mahjong! Did I ever tell you about the time I won the swimming competition in my middle school, without even swimming a single stroke? Well, that story is a brush stroke on a much larger canvas. I hope Americans will enjoy the whole painting.

Recently, I watched the Olympics, with one eye open and one eye shut, afraid to hear what Americans would say about Chinese people. “Those cheaters!” I heard people say many times. I wish our two countries could find a common home, and a poem to write together. It would mean so much to all of us kind of “lost souls.” I am proud of my adopted country, but I am and always will be an orphan.

Jim, you of course would know that the Chinese word for country combines the ideographs for “kingdom” and “family.” The Chinese government is the stern parent in our kingdom. On the other hand, the American government lets its children rule. So what will happen when the stern Chinese parent dies off and the American children grow up? I am sure that, by then, I will be with you in heaven.

With my best wishes,

Enko