

April 1, 2013, WTE Column. Editor's Headline: "Revisiting the past isn't easy, but it is essential"

Winberg Chai, Professor of Political Science at University of Wyoming, authored scholarly books on Chinese philosophy and modern China, some in collaboration with his father. As he neared retirement, he embarked on a family memoir with his daughter May-lee, also a successful writer. Their book, published in 2001, unfolds a family history in China and America over the course of the entire nineteenth century. Anyone curious about China—its people, its wars, its customs, its culture—would do well to reflect on "The Girl from Purple Mountain." Indeed, I hope to persuade my Chinese friend, who seems oddly uninterested in her country's past, to read this.

The girl in question is on the book's dustcover, a breathtakingly beautiful young woman photographed alongside her bespectacled, dreamy-looking fiancée. In fits of pain and moments of pride the narrative evolves around these two people and their respective families. Born in China, each garnered a scholarship to the United States, where they married before returning home. Family fortunes vanished in armed conflicts, first against the invading Japanese; later, in power struggles between Chian Kai-shek and Mao Tsung, whose Communist forces ultimately prevailed.

"You gave away the milk! How will we feed the children?" the once-beautiful woman would scream at her husband during family gatherings. Decades after the man's transgression, the war years long behind them after they settled in the U.S., the ugly scene repeated itself time and again, with children and grandchildren at a loss to explain the matriarch's mindset.

This woman once was one of the "eight female geniuses" of China, that first-ever group of women admitted to National Central University in 1920, as 40,000 male students enrolled in universities across the country.

This woman earned a scholarship to Japan she eagerly accepted, ditto the scholarship to the U.S. This woman chose her own husband over and against the matchmaker's advice to her family. Her acuity and grasp of political realities repeatedly saved husband and children with strategies of surreptitious flights.

This woman's "book of secrets" contained the ultimate humiliation for a husband she could not forgive: she secretly planned her burial by coercing her youngest son's collaboration,, not in the conjoining plots her husband had purchased but in a mausoleum of her own. If in her lifetime she could not free herself of the man, she would do so in death. There's a suggestion she may have taken her own life by doubling her medication, perhaps to ensure her preemptive strike would hit the mark.

For the five years he survives her, Winberg's dad will conjure up elaborate scenarios to explain to himself and his children why his beloved spouse would put him through yet another of her "tests." For his headstone he chose the epitaph: "Dr. Chu Chai, Husband of Ruth Mei-en Tsao Chai."

Sadly, it's not the husband of whom she could not be free but the undiminished rage against her own culturally-imposed powerlessness of long ago, an obsession that had less to do with the man's milk blunder than with her (albeit unwilling) submission to age-old custom. For, in spite of her phenomenal intellectual achievements, this woman was unable to defy the cultural practice that forbids a woman to contradict her husband in public, to save face.

Yet the milk transactions occurred in the couple's own home. It had no relation to official Chinadom but concerned her husband's friend so-called. It involved no political transaction but centered on foodstuff, traditionally the domain of the woman of the house. Still, convention dictated female powerlessness.

Here's what happened: Her tactics had earned the purple-mountain girl, now a mother of three boys, three sacks of powdered milk from an American wartime distribution. While many Asians are lactose intolerant, two of her three sons stomached milk just fine. The mother considered the milk vital to the survival of her brood.

Along comes the "friend" with a sob story about his sick infant. The husband loads him up with all three sacks of milk—yet his generosity, too, may have been dictated by cultural norms. His wife stands wordlessly by only to let fly once the visitor is out of earshot—and forever after, instigating horrific feuds and cat fights with family on her husband's side.

Could she not have said to her man, "Hey, wait a minute! If you must give him milk, give one sack, keep two of them for us. Our children are three; he has but one."

Their son Winberg recalls that, when he arrived in America on scholarship circa 1949, he was five foot eight but weighed eighty-nine pounds.

The stunningly beautiful woman will have lost all her teeth by the time she is forty, the result of extreme malnutrition. She deprived herself so that her children might eat. Her husband did the same. He, too, lost his teeth. As immigrants to the U. S. in 1950, both had to make do with ill-fitting dentures.

"My mother frightened me," Winberg was to write. Of a transgression she held against him later in life—his visit to China on behest of his father (who could not abide making the trip against his wife's wishes) to the father's dying brother—he says, "My mother could not forgive this act of betrayal. She wrote me I was no longer her son." Yet both parents visited regularly when Winberg and family relocated near the aging couple. Still, bringing up the past was taboo.

A redeeming experience happens when daughter Mai-lee, years after the deaths of purple-mountain grandmother and her widower, takes her father on a return journey to China. It helps Winberg lay to rest some of his ghosts. When he visits the cave where his family hid during bombing raids, it comes to him that his rage against the beat of rock 'n roll stemmed from the times when, as a young boy, he felt the bombs' reverberations in the cave.