



Alice P. Lin

Scattered and Gone: Remembrances of Cousin Li

Ho Lin's note: I don't have many memories of Cousin Li—my most vivid recollection is when she lost her glasses during her stay with my family in Albany, and was eager to enlist me in trying to find them, as if it was a grand adventure. In the end, I think she suspected I had misplaced them. She was a woman of chatty energy and a certain steel, as you will see in this piece. I've had the pleasure of maintaining a friendship with Cousin Li's daughter Rong Rong (perhaps named in tribute of my mother) over the years, as mentioned in my essay "[China, September 11](#)," but my mother's piece is for another generation, a generation with a particular perspective. We must let them have their say.

The last time I saw Cousin Li was in London's Chinatown, on a wet summer evening in 1992. I had stayed for a few days in Hanover, Germany, with my husband Nan while he was attending an international conference close by, and we decided to make a side trip to London to see Li and her husband Chi. Li was then working in the People's Republic of China Consulate General's office as the First Secretary to the Educational Attaché. *I-mi*, the abbreviated version of First Secretary in Chinese bureaucratic

lingo, had a tint of special mystery, for the word *mi* can also be translated as “secret.”

“Now, now, don’t tell me you’ve joined a secret society,” I kidded her.

Far from it, she claimed, looking serious. “Most people are impressed by my title.”

“Then I’m glad,” I commented, turning to the menu just handed us by the waiter in white uniform at this Beijing-style restaurant in the heart of Chinatown, which, after renovations in recent years, had a pedestrian walk, and a bright and colorful entrance sign, as gaudy and conspicuous as signs are for most Chinatowns overseas.

Li was decked out in a stylish jacket over a long skirt. She explained that she needed the long skirt to protect her calves from feeling the dampness in the air, the result of a second surgery to reset her broken calf bone, an injury incurred while in Japan on official business the year before; her treatment at a local Japanese hospital was, she declared, disastrous. “You would think that Japanese medicine should be more advanced than ours,” she said contemptuously. “Not so. I had to have a second operation when I returned to Beijing to correct the mistake.” “And her smooth recovery is all due to her own determination and effort,” her usually quiet husband chimed in. Chi had retired from his work with the Chinese *Chinghua* News Agency where he had managed the science desk. Having graduated with a college degree in science some decades earlier, he had fallen into newspaper reporting, instead of working in his own field. “The only problem now,” Li concluded, “is that I’m the best barometer for English weather.” We chuckled politely.

Her broken bone problem was nothing new. When Li came to visit us in Albany for a year in the late 1980s, taking time out to study English so she could improve her career advancement opportunities in the Ministry of Education, we discovered her osteoporosis by accident. In Albany, Li had fallen down while chasing after a bus to get to her language class and suffered a fractured wrist. I was at work when the call came from Albany

Medical Center emergency room, which luckily was only a few blocks away. By the time I had rushed to the emergency room, she was sitting on the exam table, calmly conversing with her resident physician. Seeing me, she bravely put on a weak smile and said, “I hope nothing is broken.” Just a casual glance at her wrist convinced me that she had a big problem, for the protruding bone was no ordinary fracture. Moments later her x-ray photo came back and the physician explained that she has an advanced case of osteoporosis, and that, startlingly, her bones were those of a woman in her seventies. Li was only forty-seven then. Seeing my shocked expression and hearing gravity in the tone of the physician, Li wanted to know the prognosis, which was not good.

She bore it well then, and dutifully went for rehabilitation after her cast was taken off. She continued to go to her classes, only in less of a hurry than before. I brought her to my home for a couple of weeks and then she moved into an apartment of her own until she returned to China a year later.

Her news in London about her second injury was thus not a surprise to me. Remembering the warning from her physician in Albany, I reminded her of the importance of taking care of herself by avoiding a second fracture. “You simply can’t run around without thinking about your fragile old bones anymore.”

I was being severe with her, but it was expected of me; growing up in the same household, the household of my grandmother, the two of us were like sisters. But we had been separated from the moment the Communist regime took over China, until the summer of 1979, when Nan and I had obtained a special visa to China from the China Mission at the UN, and I finally met Li again. I remember that summer well. As our train arrived in Beijing station, I saw hordes of people waiting on the platform. Not trusting our changed appearances over the decades, I was slow in recognizing her among my Beijing relatives’ welcoming entourage, until Li called from the platform, “Are you my sister Rong-rong?” She had already burst out crying, handkerchief in hand.

In my grandmother’s house, Li was like my older sister, and I followed her everywhere. We both were without fathers. Her father,

a pilot for the China air force, died a war hero fighting the Japanese before Li was born, and my father was out of the country learning manufacturing of airplanes in US factories while working on his graduate degree in aeronautical engineering at Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute. Yet the difference between the two absent fathers was obvious even to us as children. When I got mad at Li, which was often, I would say heartlessly, “You don’t have a father. At least I have one.” Li would sob and was inconsolable, and I would be punished by my First Aunt, whose mission in life was to keep the youngsters in check. Mother had to work to support the all-female household, so was rarely around to run interference.

On the day our family departed Wuhan to meet Father in Guangzhou, before sailing for Taiwan—I was five and my younger brother Mu-ming was barely one month old—Li cried. It was predawn and I was not quite awake. Mother furtively nudged me to get dressed while she packed a small bundle for Mu-ming. I heard Li’s muffled cry from deep inside the house, in Grandmother’s bedroom: She wanted to come with us. My grandmother struggled to calm her. “You stay with me, you are the *ming gung* (life root) of my only son. I will take care of you.” “No, I want to go with Mother and Rong-rong!” Ever since her own mother had eloped with another young pilot soon after her birth, Li had only known Mother and First Aunt as her caretakers. Mother brought her up just like another daughter; whatever I got in material goods, Li had it too. Grandmother’s concern over not burdening Mother, who was a young woman with two small children traveling far and alone, helped cement the family’s decision to leave Li behind, a decision that would haunt Mother for years. Living in Taiwan after our exodus, Mother had many pensive hours thinking about Li, always ending with the same conclusion, “Why didn’t I bring her out of China when I could? Had I done that, she would have been with us now.”

After we were reunited in 1979, Li would sometimes wonder aloud about the different life paths we had taken. I lived in a safe and relatively free society (the martial law installed under Chiang Kai Shek’s regime in Taiwan had little impact on small children), and went abroad for my graduate education, followed by a steady ascendancy in state government and in my second career, teaching

and consulting, whereas Li experienced the turmoil of the Mao regime, from loss of freedom to poverty and hunger. When Mother broached the subject of her deep regret in not taking Li with us when we left China, Li said little, only nodding in silence. Strangely, the guilt Mother and I shared made us less giving toward Li. To be openly affectionate would validate the mistake of leaving her behind so many decades ago. I noticed Mother's attitude toward Li was not all that warm and welcoming, and Li said to me on more than one occasion that our mother was no longer the person she remembered. In fact, she found Mother to be a rather unpleasant, discontented woman. It gave me pause to consider changes in Mother, if any at all. Yes, she had grown petty and dissatisfied with life; nothing seemed to please her anymore. Then I remembered all the years when she always had on her mind the safety of her own mother and sisters and her other relatives left in mainland China, and her chronic insomnia. Mother might indeed have changed, because her world had changed beyond her comprehension, certainly beyond her ability to cope.

Yet in Beijing in the summer of 1979, I was also to find a different person in Li. I had not thought much about how Li would turn out to be. Younger by a few years, my memory of our childhood with Li was hazy—only faded memories from age one to five. After picking my husband and me up at the Beijing railroad station, Li opened her own apartment for us, while her family of four, including two young daughters, stayed in another apartment in the same building. She would not take no for an answer. I knew we had greatly inconvenienced her family and wanted to make amends. My other cousins did not seem too pleased with our acceptance of Li's hospitality, for it had deprived them of the opportunity to give. This was the intricacy of human interaction in post-Mao China. Overseas relatives were to be treated as visiting dignitaries, and vacation days were generously granted by the work units in order to entertain visitors. We were concerned about hurting Li's feelings by refusing to stay in her apartment, for we had almost committed a similar social blunder in Wuhan, visiting my Fifth Aunt. There we had tried to stay in a hotel instead of staying with her and her family. We were literally hijacked by my Fifth Aunt's family and had to move into their tiny apartment, even though they had an inconvenient outhouse. Comparatively speaking, Li's

Beijing apartment was an improvement, with modern appliances and bathroom, and I sensed her sharing it with us gave her some pride.

It was our first trip to China and we were mesmerized by what we saw. To go native, I followed Li in taking public transportation. In those days, a Beijing bus was a super-long vehicle with an elastic rubber middle to ease maneuvering on the street corners. Li and I both were champion bus riders, knowing exactly how to get on from a crowded waiting line, and where to move to create more room for ourselves on a packed bus. Nan usually followed us, shaking his head at our unfathomable enthusiasm. I felt good about riding public buses with Li, and felt better when she proudly introduced me as her sister to her neighbors. Yet after we exchanged news about the family, there did not seem much to say to each other. The newness of the reunion, and the changed circumstances in our lives must have formed an invisible barrier, not easily overcome at the first meeting. I was trying to get to know her, like a stranger, all over again. Li came across as a determined woman, petite in her height of 5'2" but energetic in her movement. Her mind worked fast and well. She had our days planned, and she seemed to be the chief conductor; everyone at home was playing to her music. She was equally demanding of her two daughters. To showcase their language study, Li asked them to read for us a page from their English text, and when they failed to deliver to her satisfaction, Li hit their heads with her knuckles. Li said, "I had to learn English after mastering Russian, so why can't they? I say learn, learn, learn."

Of Li's life in mainland China, I knew bits and pieces from her account, and that of her friends in Beijing, many of them Li's friends from their youth together. Now and then I gathered more facts about her life, from her dropping a comment here, telling a story there, and some chance encounters with her friends. "Those were hard times; many of us went through the same hardship," said a sage friend of Li's, echoing those who survived the brutality of life without choices, and without basic sustenance. Yet there was something disquieting and unsatisfying about this refusal to dig deeper. My cousin did not want to talk about her past, just as my mother did not want to talk about hers. The Chinese have a

collective conspiracy of silence about human atrocities in their lives. I'm thus often taken by surprise when reading individual memoirs in which cruel treatment was recounted at all. Bo Yang, the outspoken essayist whose fame reached far and wide when his book *The Ugly Chinaman* was published in the 1970s, and who was imprisoned on Taiwan for nine years on a trumped-up charge to get him out of print, recently provided an oral history about his own past. His vivid descriptions of the beatings he took from his stepmother and the physical abuse from the KMT interrogators were unusually straightforward. Even then, these descriptions were factual, not emotional.

I did learn, however, that Li completed college with a degree in music (she tried singing, and failing that, tried a musical instrument) and upon graduation worked with the Eastern Cultural, Singing and Dancing Troupe, and moving herself from her hometown of Wuhan to Beijing. There she married and settled down. During a walk with Li in her neighborhood, she abruptly stopped to point out a man walking a block away, a man whose cultivated manners were evident even at that distance. "That was my former boyfriend," she said. "I had to leave him because of his questionable rightist family background. I couldn't afford to compromise my standing with the Party." Her husband Chi was from an impoverished farm family in the Northeast, a preferred class in Mao China. She talked about her matrimonial choice in a matter-of-fact and emotionless tone, as if it was about someone else. I knew that during the Cultural Revolution, tales of this kind were common. Still, that it also happened to my cousin jolted me. I asked if it was an easy decision. "Oh you don't think about it much. You just move on. There are more important things in life." I was tempted to suggest it was ill-advised self-denial, but bit my tongue. Such Western notions were of no use to my cousin. She left the man she loved to marry someone for the sake of satisfying the political ideology of the times. It was a deed that had been done, and there was no use dwelling on it. At first an enigma, her husband Chi won our respect during our stay. He came from a region where famine was common in lean years, and as the only one in his family who had completed a college education, he had a coveted position working for the prestigious Xinhua News Agency. He seemed a totally devoted husband and father, and

seemed to place a high premium on ethics, holding himself to high moral standards, avoiding the “going behind the backdoor” phenomenon that permeated post-Mao China.

After my mother took us out of China, Li continued to stay with my grandmother and First Aunt, and a small stipend came to them in honor of the heroic deed of Li’s father (survivors of war heroes of the Sino-Japanese War were given special treatment by the Communist government). With no adult men in the house, First Aunt and Li took in laundry from soldiers stationed nearby, but not large items such as clothes or bed linens, just socks. If the socks were tattered, they would have to be mended. Li’s recounting of washing and mending dirty socks by hand, in cold water with the temperature under freezing, allowed me a glance into those lean years. To bring extra income to the household, Li also sold vegetables from a food stand, vegetables that First Aunt had grown in her backyard.

There were more tales like these. One day, while we were shopping in a supermarket, Li let me know that she now believed her osteoporosis was caused by long-term food deprivation. During the 1950s Great Leap Forward movement in China when agricultural production was paralyzed and famine returned to regions far and near, Li was in junior high school, with a monthly allowance as the offspring of a war hero. To help First Aunt and grandmother, who were starving at home, she gave her food stipend to them and lived on one meager meal a day, going to bed hungry every night. Hunger changed family relationships as well. Li noted with some bitterness that whenever she visited her second aunt’s house, her cousins would hide their snacks from her. The same cousins are now working in Beijing with Li, and I detected, after hearing Li’s story, the coolness of their interaction. Li may not have talked much about her past, but I was sure she did not forget it.

I met Li’s friend Zhang, a lead dancer from the Eastern Dance Troupe; both participated in public performances during the Mao era. From Zhang I learned that they both spent some time in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, and did manual labor, including plowing the fields and cleaning out public outhouses.

Zhang explained, “We were actually enthusiastic about going to the countryside. We were all willing participants in the Cultural War.” In passing, Zhang mentioned a joint plot she and Li engineered, in smoking out a supervisor as a sympathizer of the “rightist movement.” Reporting on others was common practice in Mao China. Though their deed resulted in the ruin of a fine man and his family, such was common practice among those who sought survival as the first priority. I often wonder how much the lapse in ethics troubled Li and her friend. I sense their rationalization had shielded them from probing deeper into their own psyche.

Does deprivation of basic needs and fear for survival change our moral stance? No doubt it does. The literature from the Holocaust shows that people do bend under extreme circumstances. I often wonder if Li or her friend Zhang were victims or perpetrators during the Cultural Revolution. That one can be both is a chilling thought. I heard some murmurs from my other relatives in China that Li’s ascendancy in the bureaucracy was her reward for unmasking counter-revolutionary tendencies in coworkers, and people whose backgrounds showed “undesirable elements” (including intellectuals, landowners, and sympathizers of the previous regime). It was too delicate a subject to broach, and I never did. I tried not to judge. Being righteous is easy when circumstances are normal. The Cultural Revolution was not a normal time in recent history. There would be no opportunities to look for answers, for by then, Li was on a mission to seek other avenues for herself and loved ones.

I noticed, little by little, how my parents did not fully trust Li, who was so eager to be part of her new-found family again. They withheld their affection, and speculated that her overtures of affection had ulterior motives. During a visit from my parents with Li in our Albany house, I returned from work one evening to find my father fuming downstairs. When asked, he muttered, “Those damn Communists! They just love to divide and conquer!” Upon further inquiry, his fury had something to do with Li’s trying to pass on to him some negative comments my mother-in-law had said about my mother. Hoping to be complimented, Li received a

rebuke from my father about minding her own business. Li tried to do the same thing with me. One day she passed on a minor complaint from my mother-in-law, a complaint so trivial as not to be of any serious concern. As she retold it, I saw the sparkle in her eyes, her hushed tone, and her sense of conspiracy. It came to me: Did her living in Communist China change her, or was she like this even before?

Like a well-trained hunter, Li had a nose for human intrigue, and preferably human secrets. She wanted so much for us to be like the old pair of innocent girls we once were, but could never be again. She wanted so much for me to confide all my secret thoughts in her, which I wouldn't do, not even with my closest friends. She wanted so much to be part of my life, which had gone on without her for more than three decades. She wanted to start a new life in post-Mao China but all she knew were the old Communist maneuvers. I watched her with pain in my heart, with deep guilt, for I could give no more, nor return the kind of affection she expected, and always with a suspicion that her affection was not genuine, but a calculated measure.

We parted as friends when she left Albany, not even close friends at that. I gave her some financial assistance, but not my sisterly affection. We moved on. We politely and dutifully corresponded. She still addressed me in her letters as "Dear sister," but I took instead to writing her as "Dear Cousin."

She gained steady promotion in the Chinese bureaucracy over the years. Li always studied hard, worked hard, and was eager to help her colleagues and supervisors with extra personal services. In return, they helped her maintain her popularity in the bureaucracy. Li's husband Chi meanwhile took a back seat when it came to fighting for resources. They moved twice, each time to a bigger apartment, all the result of Li's shrewd moves.

A few years later I received a letter from Li, asking me to find a scholarship for her daughter's boyfriend who was interested in pursuing graduate studies in biology. I made suitable suggestions for his applications and offered to pay the application fees, but I reminded her of my inability to guarantee a scholarship. "This is

not how it works,” I said. If he was good, he would be awarded one on his own. No amount of advocacy on his behalf, other than writing personal reference letters, could do much good. “But you have a Ph.D and you are connected with academic institutions,” Li said. Never mind that I was actually working for the state government, not as a full-fledged faculty member. This was difficult for Li to understand. In her mind, if you try to manipulate life, life will change its course. She believed in that doctrine deeply, for it had worked for her. Disappointed, she turned to my brother Mu-ming, asking for his assistance. Mu-ming was on the faculty at Yale and took in many graduate students from China for his research projects, but he did not think the applicant was suitable, and declined to do more.

Li was utterly disappointed in us. I could relate to her frustration and her sense of injustice, but I could not deliver what she wanted. The incident reminded me of her own effort on behalf of her children a few years before. During her stay with us, Li one day exclaimed upon reading a letter from home. “Can you imagine this! My second daughter couldn’t go to the high school of her choice because she missed the entrance exam by one point! One lousy point!” She put away the letter in disgust over the inability of her husband to negotiate. “Had I been there, I could have turned the admission process around.” After comforting her about her daughter, who after all was entering a good high school, even though it was not her first choice, I asked how she would go about changing her daughter’s fate. “It’s easy. I will go through the back door.” I inquired no more. I knew of the back-door connections, pervasively used in China to counteract poor access at the front door. Yet this use of pull is ultimately unfair, perpetuating the advantaged against those less so. Li could not see the irony in this, a member of the Communist Party taking advantage of the system. For her, the world was for those who can fight for themselves.

Soon after the incident with Li’s unfulfilled request for her daughter’s boyfriend, Mu-ming received a blistering letter from Li, accusing him of neglecting his duty as a family member, and interpreting his insufficient effort as ungrateful and unbecoming. Muming did not become indignant; he was used to dealing with people like Li, he said. Stung by the realization that we were

treating her not as a family member, but as part of a generalized group, I decided to leave the issue alone.

My visit to Li in London was meant as a goodwill gesture. I saw no reason why we couldn't still maintain some cordial contact, even if I had disappointed her in her quest on behalf of her daughter's boy friend. Our dinner in the Beijing-style restaurant was pleasant. Li was full of tales about her current station in life, her work, improved housing and salary, and Chi seemed delighted in his new surroundings, having taken an offer to write special features for his former news agency. I suggested that they visit the United States together, especially our new residence in North Carolina, now that I had moved out of New York. I reflected with Nan after the meal that Li seemed to have found her footing in life, and I was happy and relieved.

In 1994 our first son Ho, with a newly minted MA from Johns Hopkins, went to teach at the People's University in Beijing for a year, and there he met his relatives, including Li's two daughters, as well as Li herself, who had returned from England to report to the Ministry of Education. By then, the incident about our inability to help her son-in-law forgotten, she showed her ease in describing Ho's stay as an expatriate. "It was good to have him home for a dumpling party," she wrote. "He seems to manage life here quite well."

One year later, I learned that Li's daughter was engaged to the boy friend on whose behalf Li had requested our assistance in obtaining a scholarship, and that he was leaving for a college near London to pursue graduate studies. I saw Li's handiwork in getting her future son-in-law the desired offer, for his college was close to where she worked. But Li herself was also moving on. The next time we corresponded, she had moved to Sydney, Australia, becoming the educational attaché there. I wrote to congratulate her. In her letters to me, I learned that she had had some difficulty getting along with the new attaché assigned to the London station. Yet out of career obstacles came career advancement—a feat I believe only Li could pull off.

In late 1996, the night before I left to visit Mother in Taiwan following her stroke, I received a surprise call from Li. The telephone connection from Sydney was amazingly clear, and I heard the bad news about Li's cancer. She indicated that she was returning to Beijing for treatment. She asked that I find a special Chinese herb for her. I mumbled my condolences and told her I would try. By then, I had settled in North Carolina with teaching and consulting as my second career, and my trip to Taiwan was for business and personal purposes. After sharing the sad news with my parents in Taiwan, I became involved in my work for a couple of weeks.

As soon as I returned to the States, I called Li's husband at home to check on Li's status. Chi was obviously shaken by her illness. "I told her not to work herself to death like this, but she insisted on doing everything herself, sometimes working until the wee hours in the morning. I believe the workload contributed to the breakdown in her immune system." I learned Li had an advanced case of lung cancer, and that it might be too late for aggressive treatment. I called Li at the hospital in Beijing. She sounded weak on the phone, but said her older daughter was back from London to stay with her in the hospital. I asked her about the treatment, and Li said she was hopeful that the treatment would work. I wired some money for her treatment, knowing that she would receive the best treatment as a high-ranking official. I asked Li if there was anything I could do, or if she has any messages for me. She said, "I'm not worried about my daughters, but I am about my husband." I reassured her that she had plenty of support from family, and friends would be there for them both. We never talked about the poor prognosis of her illness. She was certain a cure would be found and she would overcome the disease, the way she'd overcome adversity in life, and I did not have the heart to discourage her.

Of all people, I believe Li was not surprised by her own illness. Many years ago, she had told me that one day she might die of cancer. I was curious about her seemingly unfounded premonition. "Just look, I have had lumps in my breast for some time, and my other half-sister just died of cancer." Li visited her half-sister at the hospital during her last days, having located her mother and

confronted her past. Her mother, after eloping with a pilot of my uncle's outfit, had also lost her second husband to the war, and remarried two more times. Her last marriage had been to an architect; four children were born from her subsequent unions. Li reunited with her mother in 1985, the year I took a New York delegation to visit China. In one of our quiet talks she related her own feelings about her mother. "I am only able to treat her as any elderly person, but I have no real emotions about her one way or the other. I can't even get angry any more. I don't really have a mother, when you think about it." It was one of the saddest statements I'd heard from this outwardly strong cousin of mine. I held her hands as she told me the story; her hands were cold, even though it was a warm summer's day.

In the spring of 1997, I heard the inevitable news from Chi. Li had grown weaker, sustained on morphine shots in her final days, but she could no longer communicate with her family. Her cries of pain became nightmarish for her daughter, who dutifully stayed by her bedside in a makeshift bed until the final day. Chi was now more concerned about the health of his daughter, who left for London soon after the funeral. I asked Chi if Li had left any messages for the family. "No, she refused to talk to us about any of it, until she was too weak to talk."

When Nan and I returned to Beijing again in 2000, three years after Li's death, we met Chi for supper one evening. I asked about Li's final days. Chi said he had tried to help her open her up by inviting Li's childhood friend from Wuhan. When Li's friend showed up at her bedside, Li looked at her severely, shaking her head, refusing to listen. When Li's friend, in tears, started to plead with her, Li simply turned her back, facing the wall, and said nothing more.

That final scene haunted me for a long, long time. I had the image of an emaciated Li lying in bed, not talking. What could be going through her mind at that moment, I wondered. I felt I did not really know her, for I too, like those close to her, had expected her to take the initiative in telling us precisely what she had in mind, and what she needed from each of us. We did not consider the possibility that for Li, her life had been built on iron will but not much else.

She could never show her weaknesses, for that would be like declaring defeat. From her early struggles she had decided that life was nothing but a game of survival, and she was the anointed warrior, fighting imagined and real enemies, including her last battle against cancer. Fatigued in her final fight, her sword broken, her body self-destructing, she was going to fight on, alone, until the end.

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