

THE SEEDS OF A PUBLIC HEALTH CAREER WERE SOWN DURING A CHILDHOOD IN WARTIME CHINA, WHERE SHE NOW RETURNS REGULARLY TO CONSULT. HER NEW BOOK TELLS THE COMPELLING STORY.



Virginia Li: Helping Communities to Blossom

“From One Root Many Flowers: A Century of Family Life in China and America” (2003: Prometheus Books), by Dr. Virginia C. Li, professor of community health sciences, is many things. It’s the story of a girl growing up during the Sino-Japanese War; of her father, first a general and then the wartime governor of Guangdong Province under Chiang Kai-Shek, intimately involved in the final struggles of the Communist Revolution; of her mother, whose heroic efforts helped save the lives of thousands of refugee children; of an immigrant family’s triumphs in America; of a vibrant culture and a nation long embroiled in political turmoil but rapidly modernizing and braced for a brighter future.

It’s also the story of Li’s journey to the United States as a teen, her ascent to prominence as a public health scientist and educator, and her eventual return to a newly opened China, where she travels, sometimes several times a year, to consult at the invitation of the Chinese government, universities and international organizations.

Her memoir portrays a life that has been anything but dull, and reveals Li’s passion for making a difference – once even at the risk of offending China’s then-leader Deng Xiaoping, who hosted a banquet for Li’s parents in 1982. In the book, Li, who accompanied her parents, recounts:

Cigarette smoking was ubiquitous in China ... Near the end of the banquet the dignitary who sat next to me was ready to light a cigarette for me. I seized the opportunity to tell everyone, but especially Deng Xiaoping, about the harmful effects of cigarette smoking ... I was engaged in research in tobacco use and smoking prevention at the Johns Hopkins University at

the time and got just a bit carried away. Deng listened. When I finished my little lecture, he looked me straight in the eyes and said, “You are absolutely right.” Then he lighted his cigarette.

Virginia Li has vivid childhood memories of bombings, enemy attacks and retreats. Her father, Li Hanhun, was “torn between two conflicting sets of values”: The born leader with a strong sense of loyalty and duty to country “also had the heart of a poet who abhorred killing and believed in the nonviolent teachings of Buddhism.” Displaced from his homeland, the former chief executive and his wife moved their family to New York City and opened a successful Chinese restaurant.

Li’s mother, Wu Chufang, overcame the suicide of her psychologically abused mother – who took her own life when Wu was 14 months old – and went on to direct a rescue operation that saved 30,000 newly orphaned refugee children from occupied territory, organizing a massive housing and educational effort to assist them. Several years earlier, when Li’s father had asked Wu what she most hoped for after their marriage, she replied, “a university education.” After bearing three children, Wu got one.

Like mother, like daughter – when Virginia Li was the mother of three young children, she returned to school and earned her M.P.H. and Ph.D. She decided on public health as a way to provide technical assistance to developing nations. “From a very young age, I felt I had a responsibility,” Li says. She also learned that there was much work to be done in her adopted country. As a doctoral student studying the anti-poverty program in a poor African American neighborhood in Durham, N.C., in the 1960s, Li says, “I saw the other America, and acquired a passion for community development.”

On the faculty at the University of Maryland, the Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health, and, since 1982, the UCLA School of Public Health, Li has made community development a constant theme. (Another theme, as Deng Xiaoping learned, was smoking cessation. In the mid-1970s, Li conducted the first large-scale clinical trial of the impact of having primary care physicians routinely counsel their patients on the hazards of smoking. The study was part of a body of evidence that made such counseling a national priority.)

She conducted her first community-development demonstration project in the early 1970s, training community organizers in Baltimore to engage high-risk inner-city teens in recreational activities as a way to interest them in health issues.

Nearly two decades later, when Li was contacted by the Ford Foundation to help design a women’s

reproductive health program in an impoverished section of rural Yunnan, China, she argued that the clinical component should represent only a small piece of the effort – that developing the women’s sense of self-worth and capacity-building were even more important. The funding agency agreed, and the result was a multi-faceted program in which the village women were partners at every step, and barely missed a beat once the grant period expired. Among other things, 63 semi-literate village women were given cameras and asked to take pictures of the local conditions over a 12-month period as a way to communicate their needs to policy-makers. Their efforts were published in a photo-book, with Chinese and English captions as dictated by the photographers.

Currently, with financial support from the school’s Bixby Program in Population and Reproductive Health, Li is working with Dr. Roger Detels, professor of epidemiology, to pilot-test a reproductive health Web site for rural health workers and teachers in remote villages of Yunnan Province. “This is about giving an agency one computer and teaching the people who work there how to use it and get information,” Li explains. “They’re quite excited, because they see this new world opening up through access to our Web site as well as others.”

Li returned to her country of birth for the first time in 1974 as part of a study group looking at China’s cooperative medical system and prevention-focused “barefoot doctors,” a system that had dramatically increased life expectancy over a relatively short period of time. Since 1981, she has been a frequent traveler to China through invitations from the World Health Organization, the Ministry of Health, and various universities. “I went as an educator and as a scientist, not to go back and rediscover my roots,” she says. “But in the process, as I saw China firsthand over an extended period of time, the teacher became the learner.” Convinced that there was a story about her land of birth that Westerners were seldom told, she decided to share her observations with the world beyond academia. The book was designated “Pick of the Month” for September by the Web site Bookviews.com.

“Americans have long been fascinated with China, and especially now that she is a major player on the world stage,” Li says. “Because of inaccessibility and ideology, there is much not told and much that is misinterpreted. I wanted to tell the story of China from the latter part of the 19th century to the present, through the story of my family, in the hope that it will enhance public understanding of China during a period of war, foreign imperialism, revolutions, and rapid social change.”

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—Dr. Virginia Li