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
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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
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ical assistance to developing nations. "From a very
young age, I felt I had a responsibility," Li says.
also learned that there was much work to be done
in her adopted country. As a doctoral student study-
ing 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 develop-
ment 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
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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 com-
municate 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 dra-
matically 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 educa-
tor 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."

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—Dr. Virginia Li