



HOME IS
WHERE THE
WATER IS
依水之恋

Hung-Min Chiang

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Preface



THIS IS AN AUTHENTIC STORY that describes a life's journey of eighty-eight years. It draws on my trials and tribulations as a quiet, sensitive, and unassuming Chinese boy, through to my discoveries as a man who struck out for distant shores in search of his freedom, self-knowledge, and calling.

Born and raised in tumultuous times in East Asia, I had already survived earthquakes, wars, foreign occupation, dictatorship, illness, and career missteps before making my way to safety and fulfillment, first in the United States and finally, in Canada. Having gone through so many critical turning points in my perilous journey, I feel as though I have lived not one, but many lives. Along the way I learned and practiced "The Way of Water," described in Daoist writing as lessons for living drawn from Nature.

I was not born a writer and I often worked at glacial speed to describe exactly what I meant. However, I can say that this book is a faithful record of my fumbling but earnest attempts to attain the inner peace and harmony that we all seek. If my personal account can touch a responsive chord in fellow travellers on a similar trajectory of life, I would be very gratified.

Author's Note



IN THIS BOOK, *pinyin* is used for spelling Chinese names and place names whenever possible. Exceptions are the names of the author, the author's family, and friends whose old romanized names are known to the author. For instance, my name would be spelled as Jiang Hong-min in *pinyin* but in this book, I have used my old, romanized spelling, Chiang Hung-Min (or Hung-Min Chiang, as I have been known in the English-speaking world). With regards to Taiwan's institutions and place names, I generally adopted the spelling that appears in Google Maps. For larger cities such as Taipei and Hsinchu, their old, better-known spellings are retained; for all the rest, new pinyin is used.

Wacky Old Fisherman



VILLAGERS WERE STARTLED BY a strange roar driving up from underground, louder and louder, and then BOOM! All hell broke loose at 6:02 a.m. on April 21, 1935. When the dust finally settled, 3,422 people were dead or lay dying, 11,833 more were wounded, and an untold number of homes, buildings, and bridges were destroyed. The Great Central Earthquake, the deadliest quake ever to hit Taiwan, had just wreaked havoc on broad swaths of the central and northern parts of my home island.

I was three-and-a-half, living with my parents and siblings in the century-old Chiang clan compound in the village of Beipu, forty kilometres north of the epicentre. Mother later recalled the terrifying moments of the first shock wave: “Suddenly, the ground roared and shuddered. The house swayed violently. Walls cracked and windows shattered. Ceilings fell and things flew all over. Someone yelled, ‘Quake!’ and we all ran out of the compound.”

All but one, that is, as I was nowhere to be seen.

After a frantic search throughout the house, Mother found me hiding quietly under a desk in my room. This silent disappearing act was

typical of me even at that tender age. I am smart enough to duck, but also foolishly stoical and self-reliant. When I find myself in trouble, I try to find my own way out, rather than cry aloud for help. Such self-reliance can be an admirable trait under normal circumstances, but it could doom me in a critical situation. That day I was lucky. Our house did not collapse. Otherwise, Mother would have had an awful time locating me under tons of rubble.

Taiwan is located in the so-called “Pacific Ring of Fire” and I would experience innumerable earthquakes in the years to come, but this particular earthquake marked the birth of my conscious self. Up to that point, I remembered almost nothing of my earliest years of life. When there is no memory, one cannot claim to have truly, fully lived. The cataclysm changed all that: I was reborn. I began to retain memories, although only a precious few at first.

My family and other occupants of the compound camped outdoors for several months as a series of aftershocks continued well into July. Our lives were turned upside down, but not all was lost, at least not for me. I enjoyed the novelty of frolicking for days on end with my playmates in the close quarters of communal tents. More significantly, I was soon to meet the first mentor in my life – my three-thousand-year-old ancestor.

After months of this enforced camping, we were finally allowed back into our living quarters. As I cautiously stepped into our debris-strewn living room I came to an amazing sight. While all the other taller, showy artifacts were strewn on the floor and broken into pieces, one small, porcelain statue remained intact on the shelf of my father’s antique cabinet. The subject of this lone, surviving figurine was a silver-haired old man, wearing a grass hat and the simple, loose clothes typical of ancient country folk. Holding a fishing pole in his right hand, he sat securely on a rock, gazing intently at something invisible. Obviously, the statue’s compact size and its low centre of gravity had saved the day.

In retrospect, the miraculous survival of this little figurine sparked an early intimation of what I later came to understand as *The Way of Water*, advocated by Daoist philosopher, Laozi. He often used the metaphor of water, especially running water, to drive home his central message: stay low, be humble while remaining true to your inner nature.

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The highest goodness is like water;
Water benefits all things
And does not compete with them.
It dwells in the lowly places that all disdain –
Wherein it comes near the Dao.
Dao De Jing, Chapter 8¹

The rock-solid stability of the figurine and the folksy, unassuming appearance of the man it portrayed left a deep impression on me, but it was not until much later, when our lives were finally back in order, that I had a chance to ask my father who the statue was supposed to represent. “Chiang Taigong (1128–1015 BC), our great ancestor,”² he replied, “a famous prime minister of ancient China.” Then, musing for a moment, he continued, “Yes, he was quite a fisherman.”

Instantly, the word “fisherman” rang a bell. Among the rambunctious Chiang boys, Chiang Taigong was a very popular figure – if only for his outlandish fishing antics. It is said that his hook was straight with no bait attached. What was even more peculiar was that he kept the hook and line three feet above the water and – according to one version of the story – he would also turn his back on it. This tale, circulated among us children, was as funny as it was cryptic. As soon as one of us brought up the name Chiang Taigong, and started mimicking his purported fishing stance, the rest would join in and laugh and laugh as if this were the funniest thing in the world.

We dared to mock Chiang Taigong because it was condoned. There was a big difference between making fun of a more recent ancestor and mimicking a long-dead one. The former was decidedly blasphemous, but the latter was not, especially in the case of an ancestor who had been dead for as long as three millennia.

Having learned that Chiang Taigong was a great man, I began to have a different view of him. He was no longer a mere comical figure but someone who deserved my close attention and respect. Many years later I discovered that the figurine in our possession was probably one of the millions of reproductions of Chiang Taigong found in gift stores, antique shops, and private collections throughout the Far

East and around the world wherever there are Chinese communities. This belated realization only increased my sense of awe and admiration for the man.

Indeed, there was nothing like having a famous man in the family tree, never mind how ancient or wacky he was reputed to be. A lineage of three thousand years is a tenuous linkage, but it did not discourage me from taking advantage of his fame. When asked what my family name was, I would always answer, "My Chiang is the Chiang of Chiang Taigong," subtly hinting at my proud lineage. When the listener's face brightened up with a knowing smile, I glowed with pride.

Still, many tantalizing questions remained: the story I learned as a child did not seem to have an ending. Did Chiang Taigong ever catch a fish? What kind of acrobatic fish would leap so high to snap at a hook with no bait on it? The tale did not say. What was the point of this famous story? No answers were forthcoming, but I sensed that this popular legend had a hidden message.

"Where was the river Chiang Taigong fished in?" I asked many people, but none could give me a satisfactory answer. At this point, my quest for locating his river and the famed rock he perched on hit a dead end. Without anything to anchor it, my untethered imagination flew sky-high: I saw a gray-haired old fisherman with a long beard by an immense river with Chinese silver grass gently swaying around him in a breeze.

Unfortunately, it was a tumultuous time in the Far East and the prospects for travel looked grim. I was only a little boy; there was nothing I could do but wait patiently for the day when I could find my ancestor's legendary rock in the river and see it with my own eyes. This was to become my lifelong dream.