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# Separations And Reunions

*Despite four decades of separation,  
an extended family maintains close ties.*

KAREN STEFFEN CHUNG

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE AUTHOR

*The post-1949 political situation made contacts between Taiwan and the mainland highly risky if not impossible. After a hiatus of nearly four decades, family reunions again became possible on a large scale in November 1987, when Taiwan residents were allowed to visit family members on the mainland. The following story, narrated by an American teacher and linguist whose husband is Chinese, traces one family's separations and reunions. The experiences, happy and otherwise, reflect common themes in the contacts now taking place virtually every day as people travel across the Taiwan Straits not only for family reunions, but also for business, tourism, academic meetings, and sports events.*

**I**t is 1947, and the Chinese civil war is continuing to heat up. Chung Ling and wife Kuo Hsiang bring their eight-month-old first-born son to Chung's parents in Hsingning county, Kwangtung province. Kuo is loathe to part with her baby son, but realizes it is probably in everybody's best interest to let her father-in-law and stepmother-in-law care for the child. She and Chung both work in Nanking, and good child care is hard to find.

The war drives the Chungs to Shanghai in 1948. With things looking bad for the KMT government, they decide to flee by boat to safety in Taiwan. The couple is unable to return for their son because they have to wait for a boat ticket and, besides, Kuo is pregnant again. They set sail soon after Kuo gives birth to their second child, a daughter.

The Chungs arrive in Taiwan in April 1949, and by August, Kuo locates

one of her brothers. Having found someone to take care of his wife and daughter, Chung plans to make a quick trip back to the mainland to fetch their son Hsiao-ling. He only gets as far as Swatow in Kwangtung province, however, before being forced to turn back. The baby boy is stranded.

After Chung returns to Taiwan, the impoverished family sets up their household in a Taipei government housing project for military dependents. Soon after bearing the last of her five children—a common family size in those days—Kuo takes a job to help support the family. Some of the children are farmed out to friends or relatives to ease the burden of child care.

It is 1959 before the Chungs receive any news of the son they left behind. Through a relative that has settled in Hong Kong, they learn that Chung's stepmother died in 1956, and that Hsiao-ling has been sent to live with one of Chung's elder brothers. Chung breaks down and weeps upon hearing that his father has recently died of starvation during the mainland's disastrous "Great Leap Forward" campaign.

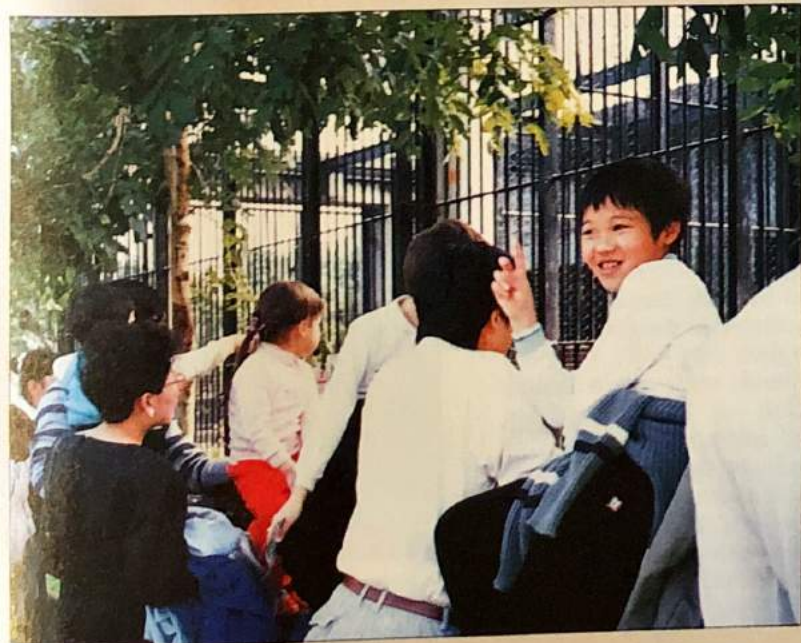
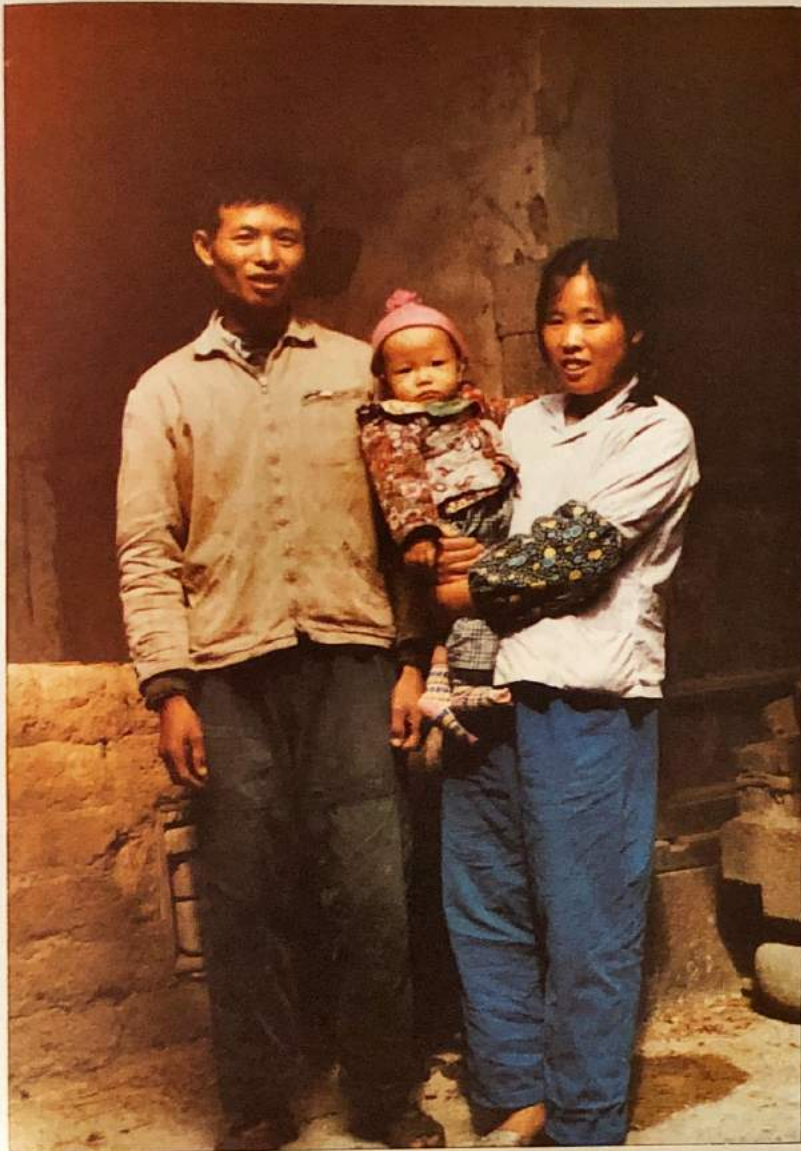
The uncle who has taken in Hsiao-ling has seven children of his own, and he isn't particularly fond of his nephew, so the boy is not treated very well. A neighbor, Auntie Wu, feels sorry for Hsiao-ling and takes him into her home.

Some years later, a kindhearted relative intervenes on Hsiao-ling's behalf to claim his portion of the family inheritance. There is no money to be argued over, but Hsiao-ling is given a unit in the Chung ancestral home to live in, and

**In a few years, baby Chung Shan, pictured here with his mother and Hsiao-ling, his father, will move from the mainland to join his grandfather and other relatives in Taipei.**

**Chung Shan visits the Taipei Zoo—smooth adjustments to the demands of a family extended across the Taiwan Straits.**





land to farm. But being in poor health and unable to farm, he is still unable to support himself. At the age of 16, and again at 23, he is sent to prison after local Communist officials fail to get any information out of him about what his father does in Taiwan.

Hsiao-ling eventually makes letter contact with his parents in Taiwan via Hong Kong, and he asks for money so he can flee to Hong Kong to start a new life. The money comes and he and some friends get halfway to their goal, but a chronic ailment of Hsiao-ling's flares up and he is forced to return home. His friends all make it to freedom. The process of intended flight is repeated as many as seven or eight times, each time financed by Chung, but each time it fails. Eventually, the Hong Kong border is closed to destitute mainland refugees.

Sometime after Hsiao-ling turns 25, he again asks for money, this time to take a wife. No woman would marry a man without the prerequisite electrical appliances, bicycle, and such, he claims. But even with all his capitalist booty, this particular girl changes her mind. Another letter arrives in Taipei asking for more money for a second attempt at tying the knot. More money is sent, and this time a ceremony does indeed take place. The new daughter-in-law bears a son, but the birth is a difficult one, and both mother and child are not in good health. So could Father in Taiwan help out a little financially...?

By this time Chung has become irritated with the unending stream of requests for money. He feels Hsiao-ling has become dependent on an easy income instead of trying to strike out on his own to make a living for himself. So this time Father doesn't even write back. "I hate you!" Hsiao-ling declares in subsequent letters to his parents. "You were the ones who wanted me to get married so you could have grandchildren, and now you won't even help us out!"

After a lapse of a few years, the flow of letters begins again. Hsiao-ling wants to build a home for his growing family, which now includes a daughter. Could Father help finance it? After sending five times the amount of Hong Kong dollars originally asked for, Chung receives a request for still more money. Hsiao-ling's health is not good, and he can't build the house himself; he wants to buy one ready-made. After the money for this new request arrives, more and more needs come up, each requiring additional funds. What meager income the couple makes on their own comes from Hsiao-ling's wife working in the rice paddies assigned to them.



**H**siao-ling's unwillingness to struggle for his own livelihood leaves his father heartbroken. Rapidly approaching retirement, Chung knows he can't go on supporting his 40-year-old son forever, and he has no desire to, even if he could. After turning the matter over and over in his mind, Chung comes up with the idea of having one of his other children—most of whom are living abroad—adopt Hsiao-ling's four-year-old son Chung Shan, so he can get a better education and start in life. Chung's long-term goal is to enable his grandson to someday either get his parents out of the mainland, or to help support them, if they cannot do so themselves.

The idea is thwarted for various reasons, and more than two years pass before Chung by chance hears that children under 16 and senior citizens over 75 years old can apply to come directly from the mainland to Taiwan to establish residence. When asking around about ways of bringing his seven-year-old grandson to Taiwan, Chung learns of an organization that handles such applications on a routine basis: the Free China Relief Association (FCRA).

Established in 1950, the low-key FCRA has a branch office in Hong Kong, and provides services, such as resettlement in Taiwan, to mainland refugees who make it to Hong Kong. The FCRA's usual procedure is to serve those who come knocking at its Hong Kong door. So Chung sends funds and arranges for Hsiao-ling to take young Chung Shan to Hong Kong to complete the paperwork. The whole process takes about half a year.

Hsiao-ling and his wife support the plan from the beginning, and even offer to send their daughter Szu-hsiang out as well. But the reaction is not so favorable with the rest of the family. The women are opposed to the idea of separating a young child from his parents, but the two sons say they will do whatever Father decides. In any case, the boy arrives in Taipei in 1984, making further discussion superfluous.

One decision remains: which uncle should be responsible for his mainland nephew? Father rules he should stay with "Uncle #3," who married a Thai, rather than "Uncle #2," whose wife is American. He figures this son will be less likely to pack up and leave Taiwan for study or whatever.

Chung Shan starts out as an exotic object of curiosity and wonder for the whole family. He speaks not a word of Mandarin, only a rustic version of the Hakka dialect of Chinese. Chung Shan

seems to understand everybody else sometimes, but few understand him.

Though old enough to attend first grade, he is enrolled in the community kindergarten for half a year so he can gain confidence in Mandarin in a less pressured environment. "Don't speak your hometown dialect," Grandma exhorts him, "talk Mandarin." He takes the words to heart, and learns to speak fluent Mandarin in an amazingly short period of time.

Chung Shan's precocious social maturity seems to include a special facility for saying what the adults around him want to hear. "Do you miss your parents?" Grandma asks. "No," he answers without forethought. "Don't say that! You should miss your parents!" Grandma reprimands. "Well, OK, I miss them," he says, rethinking his reply, "but I don't want to go back." He never once wavers in his determination not to return to his mainland home.

Chung Shan seems to have no trouble adjusting to first grade in the large Taipei public school he attends. "I don't think anybody in my class knows I'm from the mainland, except my teacher," he once announces. A year or two after his arrival Chung Shan is trained to help around the house: sweeping, carrying groceries, caring for his younger cousins, and, by third grade, doing the dishes every night.

Though not immune from being disciplined, he is generally a model of good behavior. Asking him the rhetorical question of whether he wants to return permanently to the mainland is the ultimate in threats to ensure good behavior. Grandpa exhorts Uncle #3 to make Chung Shan understand that he bears a burden that most other children do not: his whole purpose in being here is to work hard and be successful in school and, eventually, in a career, so he will someday be able to "save" his parents on the mainland.

In January 1988, Grandpa and Grandma take Chung Shan to Hong Kong to see his parents for the first time since leaving home four years earlier. The boy can hardly communicate with his own mother without his father acting as interpreter. But the family, minus little sister, is happy to be reunited, if only for a short time.

Hsiao-ling and wife return home with more cash in hand, and two suitcases full of everything from shampoo to running suits. But in a letter that arrives later, Hsiao-ling complains that everyone else who goes to Hong Kong comes back laden with goods, but all he got was...

**A**lmost immediately after family visits to the mainland are opened up for Taiwan residents in late 1987, the Chungs decide to go to the mainland for a look; but they do not yet dare venture home to Hsingning county, for fear of facing an unspecified assortment of problems. By April 1989, however, they finally work up the courage to go, and are fully prepared to take gifts for their many relatives.

They are greeted with profuse and raucous firecrackers as they prepare to pay their respects at the family shrine. But the day's experiences fill them with mixed emotions, mostly heartbreak. "Hsingning is even poorer and more dilapidated than how I remember it forty years ago," Chung sighs, in spite of the fact that the exterior of their ancestral home has been freshly whitewashed with the aid of funds from Taiwan. Chung finds the same family feuds still smoldering, and not much progress of any kind, except for a street full of privately run businesses that have cropped up since Teng Hsiao-ping began initiating his economic reforms.

Chung ends up giving out more money than originally planned. Although not particularly wealthy, he keeps reaching into his pocket, instructing one or another of his nephews to take charge of renovating this or painting that. The Chungs say they didn't sleep well for at least two weeks after returning to Taiwan. What they saw was just too disturbing to write off as though nothing had happened.

**Chun Shan gets into the Christmas spirit with his Taipei cousin.**





The Chungs have to endure yet another blow. Due to a series of misunderstandings that culminate in a heated confrontation, relations are effectively broken off between the Chungs and their Thai daughter-in-law. Chung Shan is moved first to the Chung's home, then to that of Uncle #2. Chung Shan seems to take the change in stride. He quickly becomes integrated into his third home in Taiwan, and seems to have no trouble adjusting to things like occasional meals of sandwiches or pizza prepared by American Auntie #2.

After extensive discussion, and in view of the frequency of comings and goings now allowed between Taiwan and the mainland, the Chungs decide to allow Chung Shan to return to his mainland home for the summer. Chung Shan's impression of his parents and particularly his sister is already faded and blurred. He can hardly remember what his hometown looks like. A trip home would re-cement family bonds, reintroduce him to his roots, and maybe refresh his knowledge of the Hakka dialect. Aunt #2 offers to take a few days off work to make the trip with him, and father-in-law Chung agrees.

After finally clearing customs, made easy without all the usual return-home gifts, both aunt and nephew begin the final leg of the trip to the ancestral village. It is a first experience for Aunt #2, who has never been to the mainland before, and it is a rescreening of practically lost memories for Chung Shan.

When the bus finally arrives in Hsingning county, Auntie recognizes

brother-in-law and sister-in-law immediately, and Chung Shan has his first emotional reunion—he is home! A rented van rocks the group wildly from side to side as it bounces over a dirt road full of potholes to Hsiao-ling's new three-story concrete home.

Hsiao-ling speaks Mandarin quite well, and must often act as interpreter for both Auntie and his son, Chung Shan. The others can sometimes understand mandarin, but cannot speak it. Even little sister Szu-hsiang, who has just finished third grade, can only read simple written texts with Mandarin pronunciation; Hakka is the medium of instruction in school.

"Is this your first time to 'return home'?" they ask Auntie. To the Chinese, "home" for a daughter-in-law is her husband's ancestral home, even if she was born in Minnesota. Tea is served, and the tiny cups are constantly refilled.

The house has three spacious floors, with the top floor set aside for raising chickens. It is luxurious by Kwangtung rural village standards. Hsiao-ling has electricity most of the time, an electric fan, a radio-tape recorder, and a color television. An electric pump brings water right into the kitchen and bathroom area. Coal powder pressed into flower-shaped cakes with holes is used as cooking fuel, and to heat water in an oversized wok for splash showers. No refrigerator, though. Three bicycles take care of transportation needs.

The first floor has a store front, which Hsiao-ling is in the process of converting into a photography studio, at his father's suggestion. Chung figured that although Hsiao-ling could not do hard labor, he should be able to handle a less physically demanding trade, and photography seemed like a good candidate. Hsiao-ling now spends each morning taking lessons in photography and dark room work from an acquaintance who runs his own studio. It is his father's latest attempt to make Hsiao-ling self-sufficient.

In the evening, after everybody splash-showers, Chung Shan sleeps with his father, and Szu-hsiang with Mother, so that Auntie #2 can use the largest straw mat-covered wooden bedstead for the night. The cool country air is filled with the chirping of life in the rice paddies.

The next morning, Hsiao-ling and family, along with his Taiwan visitors, pile into a rented van to make their pilgrimage to the Chung ancestral home, about five kilometers away. Harvested rice is spread out on the front courtyard

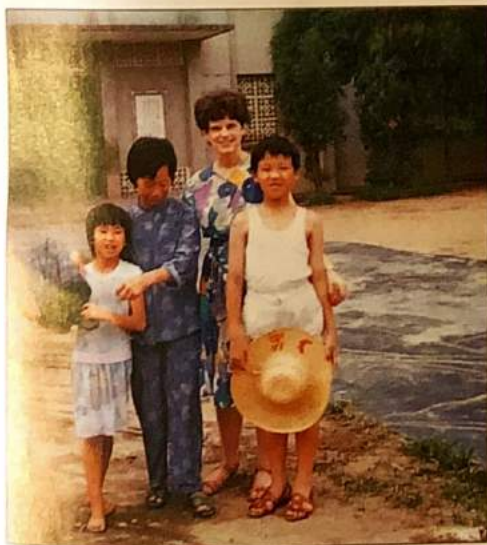
to dry. Firecrackers explode with a deafening potency. Sacrificial offerings of chicken, pork, and a fish, are set out. Candles are lit on the family shrine, incense is burned, and fake paper money sent to the dead in the form of smoke. Auntie and Chung Shan, and Hsiao-ling and family bow and kowtow to pay their respects to the Chungs who have gone before them, according to the wishes of Hsiao-ling's father in Taiwan. "I'm sure this is the first time my ancestors ever had a foreigner come and burn incense to them," Hsiao-ling's father says later.

After the ceremony, the whole extended family, along with friends and neighbors, gather around a table to munch on crackers and drink tea. Chung Shan is plagued by constant inquiries of "Do you remember me?" to which he almost inevitably must shake his head. He doesn't seem to remember much of anything, except bits and pieces in unexpected places. Chung Shan tours his former home, but doesn't even recognize the bedroom where he used to sleep.

After Aunt #2 returns to Taiwan, Chung Shan establishes a daily routine of doing his summer homework, playing with his sister and neighbors, helping around the house, and keeping up his diary. After once trying to harvest rice, Mother tells him to stay home; harvesting is hard, back-breaking work, and he should put his energy into his school work. Chung Shan gets used to riding a bicycle long distances to go into town or visiting his maternal grandparents. He writes letters to his Taiwan cousins and makes some progress in Hakka, but does not speak it fluently.

All too soon it is time to return to Taiwan. Confronted with unexpected bureaucratic obstacles, Grandpa in Taiwan finally arranges for someone to clear his grandson's paperwork and get him back to Taipei. Chung Shan happily distributes some small gifts he has brought from the mainland for cousins and friends, but then seems unusually quiet during his first couple weeks back in Taiwan. "What am I doing here, so far away from home?" he laments in his diary one day. "Just to get a better education. But is it worth it?" He often looks longingly at the pictures of his parents and family he keeps on his desk, and complains of homesickness.

A month or so later, however, he is again busy with the demands of sixth grade, and seems to be back to his former, optimistic self. "Are you still homesick?" Auntie asks. "What?" he replies. "Oh...no." ■



Chung Shan and American Auntie #2 visit his sister and Auntie Wu.