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A Portrait of an Oriental Woman

by

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ORAL HISTORY

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Walking into Mrs. Teng Loy's living room gives different feelings. The identity of the host is clearly demonstrated by the decorations which are popular in Oriental common families. It's a typical American apartment with pictures almost every where on the wall. Teng Loy, a lady from Cambodia, small, thin, in her fifties, her hair about grey, was lying on the comfortable sofa waiting for me. The younger daughter, Young, was sitting quietly on the carpeted floor, reading. The youngest son, who is fourteen, was playing on the porch.

Mrs. Loy started to talk before I had time to set up the tape recorder. The interview went on about three hours. During the time, Young sat quietly listening to her mother's stories. A friend of Mrs. Loy, a Chinese immigrant from Vietnam was present, helping me to keep the son from making noises.

This is a family of six: a mother and five children. The eldest daughter married a Cambodian and moved out to live with the husband's family. Mrs. Loy, together with her four children, live in a three-bed room apartment at Regency Park Apartments. Mrs. Loy was eager to tell her stories and she asked for duplicates of recorded interview afterwards. "After I die, no one will know my experiences. I want to tell the stories so my children, and children's children know what happened to their parents and grand-parents," I says Mrs Loy. Young says she enjoys listening to her mother tell stories

about their experiences although she herself remembers a great deal at the time as a girl of ten.

Coming from a comparatively wealthy family, Mrs. Loy was born in 1935 and lived in Ma-da-Wang. Her father ran a carpenter's shop and employed Vietnamese workers. Among the three wives of the father, Teng's mother was the second one who died, fourteen months after Teng was born.² When Teng was fourteen, her father passed away. Teng's uncle, the brother of Teng's mother, inherited the shop and took the responsibility of fostering three children, Teng's half-sister, Teng and her half-brother.

Teng's parents were from China so she speaks fluent Cantonese. The family was wealthy enough to send her to the Capital to study standard Chinese language in Chinese schools. Being with the Vietnamese workers in the shop for the family, she picked up Vietnamese. Although being a Cambodian, she only speaks but not reads Cambodian. With English, which she barely speaks, she is proud to tell people the five languages(including dialects) in which she can communicate. Teng constantly refers back to her happy, care free life as a girl in the shop and at school before marriage. "I love singing and dancing. We young girls stay together sing and dancing all the time. I was still that way before my uncle reminded me that I was twenty-eight. He warned me if I didn't get married soon, I would be an old-maid. So I married a guy I never had seen before the wedding day. My

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uncle picked for me and said he was a nice person. It was parents' arranged marriage."3

After married in 1964, she moved from the metropolis Ma-da-Wang to a small mountain village with about several hundreds families. After eight months, the first child was born. "Within two years, I had three children," she said proudly, and then teased herself for being a yellow-faced-mama4 of taking care of so many children. The marriage life changed her from a very social, party-animal like person to a devoted wife and mother. She enjoyed the quietness of the Small Mountain, the rustic life and was fully satisfied.

In 1975, the ordered tranquil life was changed into chaos because of the Communists. The family and private property were collected by the government and the ownerships were deprived. Losing the the land, the grocery shop which had been run for making a living, Teng's family, like thousands of other families at the time, was driven to a pointed place in the mountain to do the collective labouring. Hunger was mostly remembered at that period. The assigned amount of labor was tremendous and the food supply was poor. Children at the time were at the age when they needed good nutrition and food. For three years, the family of seven survived over the poverty until the disaster approached in 1978, caused by the death of Teng's husband because of the lack of medical care. Teng, at the time, a mother of five children at the age of forty-three, after three years

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hardships under the Communist regime, was overwhelmed by the catastrophic reality.

"I even don't know where my husband was buried at. I was totally crushed, totally. We were so poor, only one quilt for the whole family. I split them into two for my eldest son and daughter who were only fourteen and thirteen and they worked in the fields. My husband was wrapped in an worn bamboo mattress in his shorts and was carried by someone, I didn't know who. There was no funeral. I had nothing to mourn for my husband. There was nothing. Finally I got a piece of old cloth and sewed for three days and nights a lament poem for him."

Teng went into her room for a while and took out the cloth. It's about a size of small handkerchief, hand-hemmed, on which is an eight-line lyrics. The poem described the grief of Teng and the bleakness of the mountain where her husband's nameless grave was. The last line reads: "Thus our marriage ends on earth. In Heaven we are meeting again."

"I shaved my hair," Teng continued, "not a single one left. I found it so heavy, so heavy that I couldn't stand it. For over nights and nights, I wasn't able to fall asleep. I was trying to looking into the future. But no future existed. What shall I do? What can I do? A widow with five children, the eldest was fourteen years old, the youngest only three. Poor, helpless and hopeless, I wasn't able to think or to do anything until my husband's brother told me that I had to live for the

sake of children. Thinking of the future for children without father and mother in such chaotic time was horrifying. I have to live only for my children. This was also why I planned to escape my homeland to America."

Like most Oriental mothers, the future for their children means the center of their own life. Plotting for coming to America with the husband's family, Teng Loy left the Small Mountain where she remembered as the happiest time with her husband and children, collected her modest share of private properties and set off for the first journey to Thailand on foot. Thirst of water, fear of Vietnam Communist soldiers and of the Thailand mountain robbers, jeopardy of stepping on mines accompanied the escape.

"Very morning about three o'clock, we had to get up and walk. We hoped the darkness would protect us from being exposed to the Vietnam patrolling soldiers and the Thailand robbers. Also, it was summer, in June. It was too hot in the afternoon. We walked in the early mornings and mid-nights to avoid being sick from the heat. There was no such things as medicine. My youngest son once was sick. He was in coma for the most serious days. I had to hold him and walk. My husband's brother told me that the child was hopeless and asked me left him in the field. I almost did. But simply no way for a mother to leave her child if she still believed he was alive. I hold him not knowing whether he would be surviving or not. Fortunately, it must be God's help, we met two Vietnam

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soldiers. My father's carpenter shop used to hire Vietnamese workers. So I know how to speak Vietnamese. I begged them to rescue my child. They gave me some army medicine."

"I had never experienced the thirst of water ever before the escape. My children were crying because of the thirst. People would throng to the dirty ditch water when they reached an inhabited place. We drank the waste water for people to wash their tractors and cars. Once my youngest son was so thirsty that I had to take him to search for water in the forest. I left my group people of seventy and walked deep in the forest. We met the mountain pirate from Thailand. He was wearing a long big butcher knife and with long hair. He was terrifying but for the sake of my son, I approached to him and begged for water. He gave me the water and gazed at me with a wild look and without a single word. Then suddenly he reached his hand in my upper right pocket and robbed the last gold necklace my husband left me. All of sudden, from the trees around jumped off many husky men with knives threatening me for more jewelry. I am a little bitty lady with a child, vulnerable and weak, even didn't have anything to protect ourselves. After they found out there another some seventy people in the near distance, they went over and grabbed every one. I used to have eight gold rings with me. My husband left them for the children so when the poverty time came, we would be survive on these meek properties. During the escape, they

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were all gone. Every time we met the pirates, I gave them one so that they wouldn't hurt my children. They were all gone."

The Thailand government wouldn't accept us. They drove us to the mountain area along the border. That place was full of mines layed by the Communist. They knew that this was the the place for those unsuccessful escapers. If you step on one mine, it exploded and could kill some thirty to forty people. Again it's God's will that we survived from this horrifying area. After slept with dead bodies side by side for over a week, we went back to Small Mountain and starting planning the second flight."

The second escape which lasted totally for two weeks wasn't as miserable as the first one. Teng's family was able to be accepted at one of the refugee in Thailand. The life at refugee was relieving and secure. An elementary English course was taught for the kids. The hope for coming to America at that time was crystalized. The whole family was prevailed by the drawing happiness and the new settlement after so many years roaming adventure.

"Although I was deeply embarrassed when arriving at America, but it was so funny," said Teng with an evident happy remembering. "After I arrived in New York, I had no earthly idea where in this country my children and I would be. We followed the immigration officers to wherever he went. Then the guy told us through

interpretor that we were going Bowling Green. Never having heard this name before, I asked why they sent my family over there. They told me that I had a nephew there. All of sudden I realized that a nephew joined us during the first escape did succeed. It was so delightful to know that he was in America and we were going to meet him. I was thrilled. Then we came to Nashville. I was even more upset because no body were meeting us at the airport. In front of a totally new places, not being able to communicate through English. Children were complaining that they were hungry, I felt so silly. I finally encouraged my self to go to the service people at the airport and showed them the phone number of the Refugee Center. One lady helped me to call and she told me my nephew and my sponsor were on their way. She was so helpful and comforting. I was deeply impressed."

The first three years at Bowling Green, Teng stayed at home, the family lived on Refugee Welfare. Teng was happy because every child was in school. Two hundred and fifty dollars living expenses for the whole family didn't seem to bother her. "My sponsor, Ms. Marty Deputy gave me a great help. Hearing my stories from my nephew, she thought that I deserved a peaceful life for a while. So I didn't go looking for a job. She tried to bring to different places and helped me socializing with new friends, adjusting to new place. She always asked me to go with her to the places like Louisville to tell my personal stories and my experiences on some social

occasions. After Ms. Deputy happened to meet me at the Mall when actually I lost my way, she worried for me that I might get lost again when I left home on my own. She wrote a note for me to carry in my pocket. On the note was my address, phone number, also wrote 'I am sorry I do not speak English.' It's such a shame that I even could not make myself understood for the simplest things." When Teng said the word "shame", she laughed, not embarrassedly but amusingly.

In 1985, Teng got a job at Community Towel Uniform in Bowling Green. She began to support the family of six. "I love to work. Working makes me feel younger. The work I am doing now is not hard at all. Each day I hang up three to four thousand clothing. That's all. Sometimes I feel tired when come back from work. I cough a lot. When I feel pretty bad, I have some Tylonol. If it still does not work, I call for my doctor. But the medicine the doctor gives me sometimes is too strong. I am not built like strong American. I am so small and fragile So sometimes I use Chinese traditional medicine. It's milder and suits me more."

Like in Cambodia, the busiest time of a day in America is in the kitchen. "Just think of to prepare three meals for six people every day. Very often I stayed in the kitchen for hours. It's more complicated to cook Chinese style meal than American's. We like American food okay. But for daily meals, I cook Chinese." When asked about what kind of traditional food Teng cooks, she

didn't go to details but giving an impression that she is sort of busy "feeding" the children. "Every year when we have the New Year Festival, they ask me to go to cook for it." she said proudly. Obviously she cooks good.

After years of anguish and suffering, struggling to cope with the tragedies continuously occurred in life, Teng Loy gives all her gratitude to God. She became a Christian when at the Refugee camp in Thailand. The orientation of conversion to Christianity at first served at least for one purpose which was it helped them to assimilated with the new culture. "I was a Buddhist. When I was at the refugee camp, every one said that American believe in Christ. So I started to go to church. But it makes no difference to me of Buddha and Christ. They are the same. As long as they want people for charity and good deeds, they are to me the same. I feel like I am close to Christianity because when I was a school girl at the Capital city in Cambodia, I once stood outside one church and watched people in the church singing. It was beautiful and everybody was so happy. That attracted me. I love to be happy. Anyway, Buddha or Christ, they are the same. I do no more Buddhist service here. I go to church every Sunday. My husband's aunt is here, she remains as a devoted Buddhist." However, Teng's explanation of the Buddhist belief of her husband's aunt is that "She is too old, she eighty. Of course she is stubborn."

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Life in the Untited States is described as peaceful and very busy. Children go to school on weekdays, do home work in the evenings and work on weekends. Besides the married daughter, the eldest son is now an Art major at Western Kentucky University, the second daughter Young is going to graduate next summer, the other two boys are still in high school. Teng's life is all devoted to the children. "They are the center and the sources happiness of my life. For my own life, I have never think of remarriage. The only thing that means a lot to me is to see each of them go to college and further to establish a good career. I have to see them establish a solid ground both in life and at work in the new country. I worry about their survival as new immigrants. This is a place which doesn't belong to us originally. I see the difficulties for them to improve their situation. Children need discipline. They are easily influenced by the environment. I worry for them, for their vulnerability of going astray at their age, which will ruin their whole life. Thinking of this is fearing. All I did and am doing are for them. I am grateful that my children are very understanding and considerate. They are good students, they work hard. Although they are still quite young, they know how to comfort me when I am depressed. Young said she would work hard to get scholarship to relieve the financial burden for going to college. Children who have experience the misfortune know how to cherish happiness."

Almost all the talk was associated with children and their education. When talking about the schools in the States, Teng showed her upset and annoyance when she first time heard students calling their teacher names. "According to Chinese tradition you have to bow to teacher. And here students are so impolite calling their names. I still insist to call 'teacher' myself when I meet my English teacher. Of cause for children, let them do the American way so they are not look as strangers. But I really don't like it." For Teng, children are excusable for certain behavior because they are young, but parents are not. "Some adults speak dirty words. That's harmful for children. Children likely follow what their parents do. Some of my work mates like to fuss with dirty words, I told them that I didn't like it. They seldom talk dirty in front of me. I am plesed they do so." Amusingly, Teng shows dramatically how her work mates hush dirty words every time they see her.

Teng openly gives her strong opinion on divorce and nursing home in America. Divorce for Teng indicates totally separate between husband and wife. "Some divorced couple, they bring children to each other to get together sometimes. I can understand this. It's no good to children." Simply against the idea, she says, "Parents getting divorce means they don't love each other any more. Why should let children see unloving people together? I don't like it." Another thing Teng doesn't like is the nursing home. "It's such a horrible place for

old people. I have been there once. The nurses are rude. The older people can't explain themselves clearly, the nurses just yell. Above all, older people often experience lonesomeness. Living in nursing home will make you feel in despair. How can you put your parents who work so hard to foster you to a place like that? I don't want to go. Not at all. We don't have such things in Cambodia. Taking care of aged parents is the first unalterable principle."

Very much aware of the possible conflicts of generation gaps, especially with her experiences from native land to a new country, Teng is open-minded: "I don't want to be nosy on my children. I know there is tremendous difference. I will be quite, but I do want to stay with one of my children's family. A simple small room will be more than enough for me. I will keep my mouth shut." The idea of generations under one roof, which remains strongly in Teng's mind, likely generate the problems among in-laws. Still refreshing a friend of her's tragedy because of the smothering dominant of the mother-in-law, Teng decided to be more liberal. "I know it's hard. In old time, mother-in-law's words are laws. But things change. And now in America, the old way doesn't work, or it will cause conflicts and unhappiness. I will be as reasonable as possibly with my children's family in the future."

Living in America doesn't seem difficult to adjust. Teng believes the philosophy of enduring. "You, no

body from no where come to live in this country which is the land for other people. It's a blessing that people here let you stay and give you a new home. I always tell my children that, as Confucius says, enduring is the best virtue. There is old saying: Under other people's roof, you have to bend your head. I firmly believe that enduring can make one cope with any tragedies and troubles. Disguises can be turned into blessings."

With her firm belief, the unhappy shadow in life seems dim and far away. Teng is happy and satisfied. "I am blessed. Thank God for everything He gives us. I have been through some trauma. That's destiny and that's over. I am truly happy now. Someday in the future I would like to go back to Cambodia just to visit. Since I am a citizen of the United States, I will stay here always."

The tragedies in life have not prevailed against Teng's happiness, but in a way they highlight the happiness. She took out her harmonica and played the "Happy Birthday", a Chinese folksong and "My Country, Ti's of Thee." However, the country in the second song was changed into China instead of America; the tune remains the same. The tune of life remains, too, echoing the sound of Oriental traditions. The traditions that are performed on a new stage, in a new setting and to of new audience.

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NOTES

1. All the quotes in the text are based on the interview with Mrs. Teng Loy on April 16, 1986.
2. The custom in some Oriental countries for the purpose to have male heir in the family.
3. For some, parents arranged their marriages; the young couple is not allowed to see each other before the wedding day.
4. An idiomatic saying for the woman preoccupied by the household chores.