

Two Letters from Chiang Ssu-chang

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Introduction

Note on Romanization: I use Wade-Giles for Chiang and his family members in Taiwan and Hanyu Pinyin for place names in China and Chiang's family members in the mainland.

The recipient of the two family letters translated in the following was retired Nationalist veteran Chiang Ssu-chiang (Jiang Sizhang 姜思章, 1936-). Chiang was among the tens of thousands of ordinary menfolk in China who were conscripted by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist army in the final days of the Chinese Civil War. These individuals were forcibly brought to Taiwan against their will. Many were young teenagers like Chiang when they were pressed into service. The Nationalists took these people away literally at gunpoint from their hometowns and families. The first letter was written by Chiang's father and the second by Chiang's youngest sister in China. These two documents represent a form of clandestine correspondence via Hong Kong and other intermediary locations between separated family members in Taiwan and China during the Cold War, before the start of contemporary cross-strait relations in the late 1980s.

Chiang Ssu-chang's birth name is Jiang Wenbiao (姜文標). He was born and raised in a small fishing village on Daishan Island (岱山島), Zhejiang Province. Daishan is the second largest island in the Zhoushan Islands (舟山群島). These islands lie just outside of Hangzhou Bay and the busy port city of Ningbo. Most of the Zhoushan residents were fishermen. Some were seafaring merchants. Chiang was the eldest son of a moderately successful fishing family. He grew up in a relatively carefree environment and had a happy childhood despite Japanese occupation of Zhoushan during China's Resistance War. Unfortunately, this happy world collapsed as the Chinese Civil War reached Zhoushan in late 1949 and early 1950. Due to their close proximity to major cities such as Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Ningbo, Chiang's home islands became one of the last remaining strongholds for the Nationalist retreat to Taiwan from the Yangtze Delta.

In mid-May, 1950, teenage Chiang was among the 13,000 local male residents (out of a total population of roughly half million) drafted into

military service by the Nationalists before they left Zhoushan for Taiwan. While on their way home from school, he and his two classmates were abducted and ruthlessly beaten by a group of Nationalist soldiers hunting for new recruits. They also witnessed the soldiers chase down and brutally execute another draftee after the draftee made a run for freedom toward nearby woods.

After reaching Taiwan, Chiang was determined to return home and see his Daishan family once again. He became rebellious. He hated the Nationalists. He saw his involuntary service in Chiang Kai-shek's army as a form of slavery. The Nationalist military court sentenced him to three years in prison for insubordination and an attempt to desert the army in the 1950s. His life did not improve until he finally submitted to the authorities, but Chiang never gave up on his mission to go home.

In the late 1970s, when Deng Xiaoping's reforms opened up the PRC, Chiang seized the opportunity immediately. Breaking Taiwan's martial law and "Three-Noes Policy" (no contact, no negotiation, and no compromise), which strictly prohibited any communication with the "communist bandit territory" of mainland China, Chiang started corresponding with his parents and siblings via the help of sympathetic friends and contacts in Hong Kong. The letters translated in the following were two of the earliest pieces of this correspondence. Different from the communication among Hong Kong residents, Chinese diaspora, and their native communities in China, which had begun earlier, cross-strait correspondence at this early stage had to be conducted in strict secrecy and at great personal risk to family members on both sides. People knew their letters could be confiscated and read by authorities in Taiwan and in China. They focused on family matters and refrained from writing about politically sensitive topics.

Both letters were sent from Chiang's mainland family. His relatives in the PRC destroyed most of his letters during this time after reading them and passing them along among family members for fear of the return of Maoist mass campaigns and political struggles. In the meantime, Chiang preserved most of the letters sent from his mainland relatives. This discrepancy reflects the more relaxed political atmosphere in late 1970s Taiwan, albeit still under the Nationalist single-party dictatorship, in contrast to the immediate post-Mao China, which was still reeling from the trauma of the Cultural Revolution.

These letters also show family members on both sides of the strait trying to

reacquaint themselves with one another after decades of forced separation and politically induced misery. Chiang was the eldest son and grandson in his extended family. His sudden abduction brought a great sense of loss and grief to his mainland kin. It also cast a long and painful shadow. His Zhoushan family came under suspicion by Chinese Communist authorities and suffered dearly during the Maoist years. They were seen as problematic people who had ties with the Nationalists in Taiwan. His father was interrogated repeatedly by local cadres and humiliated publicly during the Cultural Revolution. The old man was forced to wear a tall dunce cap as fellow villagers paraded him through town. All of Chiang's younger brothers were prohibited from entering high school, depriving them of higher education and social advancement. The second letter writer, Chiang's youngest sister, was not yet born when Chiang was taken away. She bore the consequences nonetheless. Due to her family history, she was sent to the "northern great wilderness" (北大荒) of Heilongjiang to "support the borderland" (支边). The hardship took a toll on her health. She lost the ability to have children and remained unmarried. Though she cannot have her own children, we see that in the second letter, she tries very hard to reconnect with an elder brother and his children whom she has never met but had been the main source of her misfortune.

On August 11, 1982, after several rounds of letter exchanges with his mainland relatives, Chiang forged a fake identity with the help of a friend in Hong Kong. He entered the PRC via the British colony. Not only was Chiang able to see his family again, the former abductee also returned to Taiwan to help countless others in the same situation. At the end of the first letter, we see that Chiang's father urged Chiang to encourage his friend and fellow Daishan Island native, Wang Yue (王岳), to also write a letter home. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, most of Chiang's fellow Zhoushan natives and in fact a majority of the Chinese Civil War exiles, or the first-generation "mainlanders" in Taiwan, were still afraid to contact their families in China. People were still fearful of Nationalist reprisals despite a more relaxed political atmosphere. Chiang became one of the few open advocates of the mainlander homebound movement in Taiwan after returning from China. He fought especially for aging and single retired Nationalist veterans without family in Taiwan.

In early 1987, Chiang and a small band of retired veterans forged an alliance with the newly formed political opposition to the Nationalist Party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Taking advantage of the growing public

sympathy for disenfranchised army retirees at the time, they launched what came to be known as the “Veterans’ Homebound Movement” (老兵返鄉運動, VHM). The Movement quickly gained momentum and received popular support. It put tremendous pressure on Chiang Kai-shek’s eldest son and successor, Chiang Ching-kuo, who was seriously ill and nearing the end of his life. By late 1987, the younger Chiang gave in to the VHM demands. He lifted the ban on contacting relatives in China and traveling to the mainland. This historic decision marked the starting point of contemporary cross-strait relations between Taiwan and China as we know it today.

The homebound journey did not bring closure to mainland exiles’ search for home and belonging. For Chiang and many of the returnees from Taiwan, the idea of going home remained elusive during this time. Notwithstanding the touching family reunions, lavish banquets, and solemn graveside rituals, most of the mainlanders quickly realized that they no longer felt at home while being physically “at home” in China. Decades of forced separation turned their hometowns into foreign places and family members into “familiar strangers.” However, this does not mean that mainlanders’ search for home ends on a sad note. Rather, after visiting the PRC, many of the Civil War exiles and their children born in Taiwan began to see Taiwan as their true home. Chiang Ssu-chang is one of these people. Now in his mid-eighties and still in touch with his Daishan Island relatives, Chiang has chosen to live out the remainder of his life in Taiwan. It is the only place in the world that he truly feels at home, despite the divisive ethnic politics and war on historical memory that erupted following Taiwan’s democratization.

Citation

“Two Letters from Chiang Ssu-chang.” Translated by Dominic Yang. Primary Sources on Taiwanese History, 2021, <http://taiwanprimarysources.com>.

Citation of Original Sources

Letter from Chiang Ssu-chang’s father to Chiang Ssu-chang. January 1, 1979. Translated by Dominic Yang. Primary Sources on Taiwanese History, 2021, <http://taiwanprimarysources.com>.

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Further Readings

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Letter 1 (from Chiang's father)

My dear son Wenbiao and daughter-in-law Yuhu,

I hope your entire family is doing well.

I got your second letter on 8:00 AM in the morning of December 27 on the lunar calendar. I got all the content.

You left home on March 29, 1950.¹ You were only a fifteen-year-old minor. You had neither family nor friends. You were all alone out there. We worried day and night about how you would survive. Today, you have worked hard and worked diligently, being able to stand on your own and start your own family. It feels like a dream for us. In addition, granddaughter Su-hsuan and grandson Tsung-tai are already in school. Seeing the two letters (you sent), the entire family rejoices; we feel so happy.

My dear Yuhu, you and Wenbiao are now married. He is all alone out there, having no bricks and tiles over his head, no base on the bottom, and no possessions. He needs to build everything up from scratch, and he needs to depend on you for everything. If Wenbiao is being inconsiderate/has inconsiderate places, please forgive him. I want you two to live in harmony and affection. You need to consult each other on important matters, and you must not quarrel. This is my one request. My second request is for you to raise Su-hsuan and Tsung-tai to be fat and strong.

My dear granddaughter Su-hsuan and grandson Tsung-tai, you two are so, so smart. You are only eight to nine years old. You wrote in our own words: "I miss you grandpa and grandma. I wish you good health and all the best." Very good writing, but alas, I cannot see you in person. I don't know if we will ever get to meet. Su-hsuan and Tsung-tai, grandpa wants you to study hard, to respect your teachers, and to listen to your parents.

My dear son Wenbiao, I am sixty-seven years old; your mother is sixty-three. We are healthy and retired, resting at home.

¹ Chiang's father is referring to a lunar calendar date here.

Grandmother passed away twenty-six years ago. Wenyuan [Chiang's younger brother] is a fisherman. His wife is a native of Shenjiamen² and her name is Liu Yanzhu. They have a son and a daughter. The son's name is Qiuyi; he is seven. The daughter Pingping is nine and is already in school. Wenxiang [another of Chiang's brothers] is a doctor working in the hospital of Zhejiang Dongfengying Mine in Jinhua. His wife is a Jinhua native named Fan Liuyan. The two have a daughter and a son. The daughter's name is Jiangfan; the son is called Jiangge. Wenliang's wife is a native of Daixi.³ Her last name is Liu and her first name is Meidi. The two just got married. Little brother Wenliang is a fisherman. Wenning is twenty-one years old. He works in big (six illegible characters) mining cart shop.

Your elder sister's husband is a Xiushan⁴ native. His last name is Li and his first name is Jiasheng. They have two daughters and a son. The older daughter's name is Daming. She graduated from high school. The son's name is Xiaoming. He is in elementary school. The younger daughter's name is Weiming. She is also in elementary school. Sadly, your brother-in-law passed away eight years ago. But their life is good. Please do not worry. Your middle sister Aini's husband is a Shenjiamen native. His last name is Yang and first name Yonglin. He is in graduate school. The couple has two sons. The first son's name is Zhigang, eight years old; the second son's name is Zhibo, three years old. Your middle sister is a doctor in Xiazhizhapeng Hospital in Putuo County. Her address is Yang Yonglin, No. 12 Shenjiamen West Big Road, Putuo County. But then your youngest sister Ailing remains unmarried.

Your older uncle is seventy-six years old. He is in good health and has grandsons now. Your younger uncle passed away twenty years ago. Chen (two illegible characters, maybe *Zongmao*) maternal grandparents had passed away. Your cousin Zhou Youding is doing well. He has two sons. Both are fishermen. His parents have passed way.

² Shenjiamen (沈家门) is the largest fishing port in China. It is located on the eastern side of the main island of Zhoushan. Before the late 1990s, Shenjiamen was also the largest town in the area.

³ The town of Daixi (岱西) is located on the western side of Chiang's home island Daishan.

⁴ Xiushan Island (秀山島) is one of the Zhoushan Islands. It sits between Daishan Island and the main island of Zhoushan.

My dear son Wenbiao, you should respect your father- and mother-in-law. Take good care of your own health. Love each other as husband and wife. If Yuhu is being inconsiderate/has inconsiderate places, do not argue with her. Bear with her. You need to bring Su-hsuan and Tsung-tai up properly.

Please give my regards to your father- and mother-in-law as well as uncles. You can write about your occupation and life next time around.

We received another letter from Lin Yi-ben. His parents and sister are doing well. Their address is No. 10 Shahe Road.

Wenbiao, please tell Wang Yue to write a letter. His parents are still alive and in good health. He has two younger brothers and two younger sisters. Wang family's address is No. 103 Shahe Road.

Please send photos of your entire family. Your father is not an educated person, so I write things down as they come to my mind.

These are words from your father (父字).

Putting down my pen here (擱筆).

Lunar New Year, January 1, 1979

Letter 2 (from Chiang's youngest sister)

My dear elder brother,

I hope your entire family is doing well.

Our family has received and read your June Fourth letter. We got it, no worries!

Elder brother, every time we received [one of] your letters, we passed it around among the siblings. We feel very delighted seeing your handwriting. Brother Wenxiang has made three photocopies of your family portrait. Brothers and sisters who worked outside [of Chiang's hometown] each received a copy. Elder brother, like you,⁵ we repeatedly viewed your letter and the photograph attached. We can hardly put them down. My nephew Tsung-tai looks like the son of second brother Wenyuan. Niece Su-hsuan looks like eldest sister's daughter. Father and mother often reflect on your childhood, which forms a respectable impression in my mind. Elder brother, how I long to see you and your family. Our parents are trying to find a way. If we are allowed to travel out [of China], could you come meet us in Hong Kong? Please write to let us know.

Father's photo has been sent via Ms. Huang earlier. Have you received it? Elder brother, you are away from home, please take good care of yourself and your family!

Finally, on behalf of our entire family, I offer thanks to the friends in Hong Kong!

My best wishes,
Sister Ailing
1979.7.19

⁵ The meaning of this phrase is uncertain, although it may be that, in an earlier letter, Chiang had mentioned that he repeatedly read the letters from his family in Zhoushan. Historians must sometimes work with incomplete evidence and draw the best conclusions that they can.

Reading Questions

1. In what ways do the contents of these two letters contribute to an understanding of Taiwan history and its relationship with the PRC?
2. What do the letters tell you about separated family members on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, and more broadly about displaced people during the Cold War period and beyond?
3. In your opinion, what were the possible reasons for the Nationalists and the Communists to ban all correspondence and communication between people on both sides of the Strait?
4. Do you find the human emotions expressed in the letter by Chiang's family in China genuine? In what ways did government censorship shape the content of the letters?