Alumni

His Long March

By
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Li Xietang retired from Jinan University in Guangzhou, China, in 1966, just before the start of the Cultural Revolution. It may have saved his life. Since he was no longer on campus, the Red Guards didn't know of his Western education, which might have put him in serious danger if found out. To protect himself, however, he burned his Columbia diploma.

Born in the shadow of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, Li has lived through World War I, the second Sino-Japanese War, World War II, the communist takeover, the Cultural Revolution, and, now, China's unprecedented prosperity. He has seen the country under the Qing Dynasty, and as the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China. He also survived a sojourn in New York to get his master's degree in finance, graduating in 1929 from the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. At the age of 106, Li may well be the oldest Columbia alumnus.

Li resides in the weathered three-story house in which he's lived since 1937, in the bustling city of Guangzhou, approximately 100 miles northwest of Hong Kong. Upon greeting a visitor to his home, Li smiles brightly and exhibits a serene demeanor. Over the 75 years since leaving the US, he's forgotten most of his formerly fluent English. Now his children usually speak for him.

The son of a clothing-shop owner, Li was the eldest of eight children, and grew up in Guangdong Province's Taishan County. His journey to Columbia began at Guomin University in Shanghai. While studying economics, Li came across the work of Edwin Seligman 1880CC, 1885GSAS. The Columbia economist played a pivotal role in reforming the U.S. income-tax system in the early 1900s. "Since Seligman was from Columbia, I wanted to study there," Li says. With the financial support of his father, Li boarded a ship in Shanghai and sailed for San Francisco in July 1927, leaving

behind his wife and two children. At Columbia, with Seligman as his adviser, Li completed a thesis comparing the U.S. and British income-tax systems.

Li recalls his Columbia days, renting a room near 116th Street for $6 a week, and working at a Chinese restaurant called China Land near Times Square. To save money, he ate fried eggs and rice at home. “When I walked out on the streets, some people called me ‘chink,’” Li says. The slur is one of the few English words Li remembers. He returned to China in 1931, was reunited with his family, and began teaching finance and English at universities.

After the Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, Li and his family fled from city to city until Japan surrendered to the Allies at the end of World War II. “It was really tough,” remembers Li’s third-eldest son, Yaoguang, 74. “We lived in one place for a couple of months, and then all of a sudden we would pack up and leave, carrying only our most precious belongings.”

In 1946, with a communist takeover looming, Li’s friends, many of whom were also educated in the US, urged him to leave China, warning that his capitalist background and Columbia pedigree put him at risk. But he decided to stay. “He was worried that he couldn’t raise the family anywhere other than China,” explains Yaoguang.

A decade after his retirement, and with China ending its isolation from the world, Li began efforts to visit his alma mater. “Father always wanted to see Columbia again,” says his daughter Huangchang. After several denied visa requests (he was deemed an immigrant risk), Li finally made it to New York in August 1996 at the age of 96. During his visit, he made a stop at Fayerweather Hall (once home to the economics department), posed on the steps of Low Library, and even tried to find China Land.

Li’s progeny number at least 63 and are spread out among Guangzhou, Hong Kong, San Diego, and Boston. Every five years, they hold a birthday party for him, with more than 100 members of the Li clan in attendance. When asked what he thinks about the new China, Li just smiles. “He is very happy now,” says Yaoguang. “China has changed for the better. The later generations are now prospering and will not be poor again.”

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