Wang Huiguang’s Family History- Naomi Hughan

Whilst on my year abroad in Taiwan I was tasked with interviewing a Taiwanese person about their family history. For a while I found myself in a bit of a rut. I had no clue where to start. I felt I couldn't just go up to a stranger and inquire about such a personal topic. I also felt the pressure of trying to find someone interesting, I was constantly inspecting people on the street and the MRT to see if they looked compelling enough to approach. My usual targets were the elderly as I thought the longer the life, the more stories to tell. However, it was not until my water tank broke that I had found a subject. Whilst trying to interpret what my landlord was saying in Mandarin about a clogged filter did I think to ask him about his family history. The topic of conversations we had in the past never strayed from air-conditioning units, fire alarms, rubbish collection day etc; evidently a plethora of truly fascinating subjects. And so, I figured I ought to know more about the man whose house I am living in other than that he knows how to fix a microwave. And thus, I found myself with the fantastic opportunity to interview my landlord Wang Huiguang (王惠光). I was in for a remarkable treat learning about his family’s story. It is one of great perseverance, drastic changes of wealth, and shows that an individual’s ancestry and past may be more shocking and impressive than one might think.

Like most Taiwanese families, Mr Wang’s originally came from China. His ancestors were from Fujing, a small village in Anxi county. The major clan residing in Fujing was the Wang (王) clan. When asked why is family moved to Taiwan, he replied, “because they were poor, no one at the time would move to Taiwan unless they had nothing left for them in China”. People moved as they wanted a better life. This is not to say that at the time Taiwan provided a good life, quite the contrary, it was just seen as a step up from the dire straits some families found themselves in living in China. After their lives have been destroyed from generations of tragedy, namely the Taiping rebellion and the emergence of the Opium Wars many decided to move to Taiwan. Taiwan was seen as a barren land with little other than rice fields.

Wang Mali (王馬力), the first of Wang Huiguang’s (王惠光) relatives to move to Taiwan was born in 1849. As previously stated, his main motive for this was purely due to the prospect of a better life in Taiwan and thus moved there in 1860. Wang Mali (王馬力) was an uneducated, illiterate man and ended up being a labourer outside of Taipei in Shen Keng (深坑). Contrasting modern day western ideals, getting married in one's teens was a luxury. Generally getting married at 17 or 18 was ideal, however, this was not an option for Wang Mali (王馬力) as money was needed for marriage. He eventually got married when he was 37 to Tang Shizhao (唐氏招) aged 33. This was extraordinarily late for the standards of the time, and is a demonstration of their financial situation. Wang Mali (王馬力) had his first Child in 1886, and died in 1889. His life story was not particularly noteworthy for those outside his friends and family, his wife however led an intriguingly fascinatingand remarkable life.

Tang Shizhao (唐氏招) the wife of Wang Mali (王馬力) lived nearly 50 more years than her late husband. In 1895 Taiwan became a dependency of Japan after the victory of the Japanese in the First Sino-Japanese War and the subsequent Treaty of Shimonoseki. Most Taiwanese were opposed to Japanese rule and there were many petitions against the Japanese. Rebellion and rioting broke out in Shen Keng (深坑) when the Japanese arrived. It was no longer safe for a widow and young children in Shen Keng (深坑) and so in 1896 Tang Shizhao (唐氏招) fled to Taipei. Little did she know she would become an extremely powerful character in the Taipei Mafia.

Tang Shizhao (唐氏招) was illiterate, poor, and had no means of providing for her family. Somehow through an intricate network between the labour force in Taipei, Tang Shizhao (唐氏招) managed to become involved in the mafia. It is unknown just exactly how she made these connections, however it is speculated that she began to date a man who was involved in the mafia. These gangs/mafia groups were known as Shan-Hai-Kuan and were made up of both native Taiwanese and Chinese immigrants. Because Tang Shizhao (唐氏招) was extremely headstrong, she managed to weasel her way into a gang. It was her only means of providing for her family as a woman with no outstanding skill set, and no husband. At the time Taiwanese women were deemed as meek and fragile, she was an anomaly. Her savvy and skilful tactics of manipulating situations to end in her favour, the apparent hold she had on men in the lower ranks of the mafia, and her own personal will enabled her to work her way up through the mafia’s impenetrable system. She already stood out as a woman who had children so late, which may be a factor in her resilience. She was by no means a mafia leader, however, she ran gambling circles, particularly surrounding horse races and bet making. Their house was an extraordinary mix of family life and community, conglomerated with illegal activities such as gambling rings and prostitution creating a bizarre environment where there was a huge sense of loyalty, with sinister undertones. Wang Huiguang (王惠光) recalled his grandfather telling him stories of him playing with toys in the living room being blindingly unaware of illegal transactions and corruption occurring right in front of him. Tang Shizhao (唐氏招) was not a violent woman, however one can question the moral integrity of those to support illegal, manipulative and villainous methods of accumulating wealth and power. Nonetheless it demonstrates the importance of family and the sacrifices she was willing to make, and the potential danger she would get into just to give her children a life outside of the slums.

The Wang family’s participation in the mafia lasted only one generation. Tang Shizhao (唐氏招) died in 1937, and her children had no real passion for remaining in the mafia, the vigour was lost and thus the mafia netwroks their mother had created were doomed to fail. Moreover, as the war began the Japanese started to lose control over Taiwan. The connections and corrupt alliances the mafia had made with the Japanese police were fading. Finally as the Japanese left in 1945 the conditions for this mafia to continue disappeared.

In 1904 Wang Huiguang’s (王惠光) grandad Wang Kunyu (王坤輿) was born (the grandson of Tang Shizhao (唐氏招). Wang Kunyu (王坤輿) had two wives which demonstrates how far the Wang family had come in terms of wealth. Only two generations prior, Wang Mali (王馬力) was unable to get married until the age of 37 due to lack of funds, yet Wang Kunyu (王坤輿) was wealthy enough to have two wives. Joining the mafia enabled the Wang family to lift themselves out of poverty. Despite accumulating this wealth via ‘unconventional’ methods, the change in social status is admirable. Wang Huiguang’s (王惠光) father was born in 1927 and so bare witness to the gang/mafia lifestyle, as Tang Shizhao (唐氏招) did not die until 1937. However, Wang Kunyu (王坤輿) wanted no criminal affiliations and so during the Second World War he took his two sons to Japan and set up a shop. This was not to avoid conscription as the Japanese did not originally make the Taiwanese soldiers fight. The Japanese did not want to give the Koreans or Taiwanese weapons in fear of them using the ammunition against them, the relationship between Japan and Taiwan was not strong enough to warrant the Taiwanese fighting on behalf of Japan. However, many Taiwanese did participate in the war effort, sewing clothes for the Japanese, organising letters etc. The Taiwanese did not see Japan with the same animosity as the Koreans did. When Japan annexed Korea, Korea already had a nationwide solidified culture, and so resentment towards the Japanese for forced assimilation was strife. However, as Taiwan was an ununified amalgamation of various cultures without sturdy foundations, the Taiwanese did not have as much bitterness towards the Japanese, as in actuality the Japanese did much to aid the development of Taiwan, and fostered a nation of people driven for intellectual pursuit. Despite the Taiwanese seeing themselves as Chinese more than Japanese, when the KMT came to Taiwan, they were faced with much acrimony. Because the KMT were much weaker at governance, control and public welfare than the Japanese Taiwanese started to dissociate themselves from their Chinese roots.

Wang Kunyu (王坤輿) was determined his children receive a good education, unlike him and his ancestors, and so enrolled his children Wang Chending (王陳定) and his brother into high school in Japan. After the war they came back to Taiwan having received their high school diplomas and both became primary school teachers. Wang Chending (王陳定 ) married Xu Cao (徐草) and had their son Wang Huiguang (王惠光), my landlord. I questioned Wang Huiguang (王惠光) about his childhood and asked him his thoughts on Taiwan’s development throughout this period. He explained that to a Westerner the change Taiwan has gone through may seem almost instantaneous, and that the country developed from a barren land to a fairly liberal metropolis over night, however to a local the change has been slow and continuous. He explained that the biggest change was Taipei’s expansion. Before Taipei had no high rises, few offices, no apartments, yet over the years it blossomed into a competitive urban centre. However, I would say that, the reason for there not being any high rises at the time was not due to Taiwan’s underdevelopment compared to the west, however more a product of the time. Excluding metropolitan hubs such as New York or London, most cities did not have industrialisation to the same scale until much later.

Wang Huiguang (王惠光) did however state that the presence of western people in Taiwan did grow. However, this presence was not integration. The reason for higher number of westerners was mainly due to The Vietnam War, with soldiers coming to Taiwan on their holidays. Whilst this presence of westerners did not bring culture, it did bring Caucasian race. With the large number of soldiers coming to Taiwan saw an influx of bars and hospitality industries, which in turn saw an increase in the number of bar girls. These women would ‘entertain’ many white Americans and fall pregnant. Thus, throughout the 70s there was a large number of mixed race babies. However, whilst these babies were racially half white, culturally they were fully Taiwanese. Another change Wang Huiguang (王惠光) mentioned was the reduction of crime and gangs. Taiwan does still have a mafia, however it was more accessible in the past with the sale of opium and a generally weaker and more corruptible police force. Nowadays the police in Taiwan are referred to as baby sitters as they are called for any minor inconvenience as they have nothing else to attend to. I can vouch for this as my doorman sent the police to my front door to help me pay my Wi-Fi bill. Obviously, there is still an element of crime within Taiwan, and many victims suffer immeasurably from these crimes, however, compared to the past, and to most other countries in the world, Taiwan now has an extremely low crime rate. Even homelessness does not create hostility within Taipei, as they are provided with shelter and food outside of Taipei Main station every night from 9pm.

Interviewing Wang Huiguang (王惠光) gave me a fantastic insight into the perception of Taiwan’s development from a Taiwanese perspective. Additionally, the privilege I had of learning about Wang Huiguang’s (王惠光) family history opened my eyes to a whole world of Taipei I have had no previous exposure to, as well as showing me the importance of family sacrifice and the positive outcomes of unconventional ways of supporting one’s family. This experience was truly captivating and certainly one I will not be forgetting.