



Growing up Chinese

Stephen Ling

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Stephen Ling's personal story captures a man who has always been true to himself and guided by his own ethic.

Stephen Ling's immigration memoir *Growing Up Chinese* moves from his early poverty in Malaya (now Malaysia) to his life the United States.

Ling, whose Chinese name is Yongfa, always longed for life beyond the poor, tiny village he was raised in. Alongside this reality, his book also captures the heart, humor, and conflict of his childhood. His coming-of-age narrative features identity and family expectations as its central themes.

As a boy, Ling was torn between his desires and the limited opportunities and heavy responsibilities that appeared to be his lot in life. Struggle is also a fundamental thread in the family line; he describes the conditions his grandfather faced before leaving China as "a living hell." Of his own entrance into the world, he says, "One could say I was born at the worst of times, on the eve of the Japanese assault on Malaya and Singapore."

Along with Ling's personal history, the book provides a rich view of the broader forces of history and national politics that were at work in Ling's life and family. The historical information and events are woven in well, bolstering the story rather than bogging it down or distracting from it. Explanations are concise and easy to understand, even for those with little background knowledge.

Ling's family relationships are rendered with intensity, deeply relatable and marked by their cultural milieu. The view of transplanted cultures—here, from China to Malaysia—from a person who immigrated to a third culture in the United States is intriguing and layered, covering both cultural fractures and assimilation. Ling narrates with insight and nuance.

The narration is filled with vivid visual details, enlivened by childlike and deep emotions. Individual scenes are balanced with sweeping exposition. Sparing dialogue is aptly used and often tense.

The book's pace is quick and smooth. Ling's tone is open and inviting, even as it carries the tension, agitation, and energy of his youth. The story is at turns nostalgic, detached, rebellious, and wry, and often works to strike a balance between deep respect for and irreverence toward his family and culture.

Stephen Ling's personal story captures a man who has always been true to himself and guided by his own ethic. *Growing Up Chinese* is an American immigrant's fascinating and humble "before" story about a place of origin that never quite fit.

MELISSA WUSKE (April 13, 2018)

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