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AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Tracing Our Footsteps: Fifteen Tales of Hope, Struggle, and Triumph
Wei Wei
Friesen Press
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Four Stars (out of Five)

This poignant memoir related in fifteen separate but cohesive tales explores the emigration experience of the author's father, Yong Da, and his struggles to reinvent himself, reestablish a relationship with his daughter, and adapt to the loneliness of widowhood. For readers with aging parents, the book effectively strikes a universally empathic chord of what it takes to become a caregiver without resorting to condescension.

Born in Communist China, author Wei Wei came to America as an international student in 1981, excelled academically, married a Caucasian, and is now a fellow of the Special Libraries Association. The awkward coexistence of two diverse cultures is evident in her world, as deeply ingrained childhood traditions of honoring one's parents are juxtaposed against the desire to retain autonomy as an adult. Wei's conflicted pressures to be "a good daughter" are frequently tested. She confesses resentment and guilt, for instance, that her father's ongoing quest to save face by having her purchase his gifts for others sometimes cripples her own bank account.

The book begins with Yong Da's arrival from Beijing and, speaking no English, his bewilderment at getting lost in San Francisco International Airport. Wei contrasts this with her own arrival twenty-three years earlier and empathizes with her father's frustrations at being a stranger in a strange land. But the man she once regarded as strong is a fragile shell of his former self due to the loss of his beloved wife. "The love between them was not dramatic and short-lived like a fireworks display," Wei writes, "but one of enduring permanence, like the predictable bloom of flowers in spring."

Wei soon discovers that Yong Da is a fervent creature of habit who balks at venturing beyond his comfort zone, whether it's his daily wardrobe, television viewing, or "ability to eat any kind of Chinese noodles three times a day and thirty days a month without blinking an eye or getting bored."

She is likewise baffled how a man "who grew up in a mountain village and was used to

playing in the forest as a child, who had walked for a month to join the Red Army in Yan'an and had even been on the long march with Mao" would dislike her family's camping trips and prefer to stay home. Humor underscores many of Wei's stories, as in the revelation that Yong Da developed a fondness for Costco pizzas, "most likely because it reminded him of Chinese pancakes."

The generic cover design does not do the content justice. The book contains so many lovely photographs—especially the picture of the author's daughter with Yong Da—that any of them would be an engaging hook for prospective readers.

This volume will appeal to anyone interested in China's cultural and political history. It would work well in a high school or college social studies curriculum or as part of a psychology course focusing on multigenerational perspectives.

Christina Hamlett