



June Lijun Wang

DEC 19, 1944 - MAR 8, 2018



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While on holiday to photograph the wonders of Egypt, June Wang died unexpectedly of a heart attack on March 9, 2018. With her was her husband of 46 years, James Yan. At 73, she was far too young to have left us. We always thought of her as indefatigable. When the odds were against her, she pushed forward. She had grown up without her mother, had survived breast cancer, and, more recently, was managing a chronic immune disorder that left her in danger of bleeding to death. “No worry,” she would tell friends and family who expressed concern. She said the same thing after a Fourth of July gathering when she returned to the house to report a small problem with her car. Everyone went out to see: the car had jumped over the curb, crashed into a neighbor’s gate and was sitting on top of a tall hedge.

When she was diagnosed with her second life-threatening illness, she said she wanted to live a full life, then added, “But if I die, so be it.” Whatever happened, it was time to enjoy life. Together with her cousins Der-ling Hsia and Wee-yong Woo, June and James traveled the world. They developed a core with who traveled with them—to France, Wales, England, Ireland, Jordan, Israel, the world heritage sites of China, and more. The next trip, Lijun told us before she departed for Egypt, would be a Silk Road tour.

Lijun was born on December 19, 1944 in Shanghai and lived with her mother, Ching Daisy Tu, older sisters Jindo and Yuhang. However, in 1949, when the Communists were coming into power, Daisy knew her background as part of a wealthy family would not be looked upon favorably, and she quickly left for the United States. Unfortunately, diplomatic relations between the U.S. and China ended, and Daisy was not able to send for daughters or even write to them directly.



Because Lijun was the youngest, her mother's brother, Gu Da Chun, and his wife, Xia Fei, took Lijun into their family, where she grew up with their other children: Xia Rong, Xia Xiao Quan, Gu Hong, Gu Xiao Gang, and Xia Zheng Zheng, who became as close as brothers and sisters. Lijun wrote: "I'm very grateful to them for this. If I had been left with the other family, I would have continued to suffer. And I would not have been able to go to university because of my bad background. I could have become a peasant in the countryside."

Part of that bad background stemmed from having a mother he now lived in the U.S. But through her uncle's help, she was able to go to college and obtain a degree in engineering. But, she, like many educated people with bad backgrounds, was sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution to work in the fields. Lijun later joked that a college education certainly did not make her a smart farmer. She and the other so-called intelligentsia tried to breed mules, only to learn through everyone's laughter that mules are sterile.

She recalled that life was so strict she could not show any interest in young men, nor could they in her. One time, she happened to study in the same room as another student, a friend, and she was then forced to criticize him over a loudspeaker for his anti-revolutionary ideas. She felt terrible.

There was a young man, however, who took an interest in Lijun. In fact, he had known her over the years as a distant cousin. His name was Yan Zheng and he was an architect. Like her, he had a bad background—a relative who left China for Taiwan. And thus, a courtship began, consisting mostly of letters since they were often apart due to their job assignments. In February of 1972, they married, and on June 25, 1975, their daughter, Ming-xi, was born. For ten years, Lijun told us, Yan worked in Guilin and she in Taiyuan. On occasion, their assignments included travel to other countries—to Japan, Sweden, or Canada—but without each other. That meant that Ming Ming lived apart from one or both of them. They had many pocket-size photobooks made of Ming Ming, starting from babyhood, which they carried with them.

In 1979, after diplomatic relations were re-established between the U.S. and China, Lijun's mother, Daisy, returned to China for a reunion with her daughters and her brother and sister-in-law who had raised Lijun. Daisy said in a letter, "I could not



keep my eyes from growing wet.” She was grateful to her brother and sister-in-law for instilling her daughter with good character—to be honest, respectful, and hard-working. At last, Lijun had the love, advice, and protection of her mother—as well as her constant motherly nit-picking.

In 1987, Lijun met her American sister, Amy, and her “foreigner” husband, Lou DeMattei, when they visited China for the first time. Lijun recalled that her sister could speak almost no Chinese and was wearing a purple dress in contrast to her conservative grey pantsuit. But they soon found commonality when helping their mother prepare dumplings in their Uncle’s house. Through their conversations over the next few years, Lijun began wondering about career opportunities she might have had in the U.S. Although she was a well-regarded engineer, she felt restless, thinking she had not achieved much in her career. “I’m already forty years old,” she wrote to Amy. “Maybe my entire life will be what it is now. I place my hopes on Ming Ming. I hope that she’ll be stronger in all aspects than me and become a girl of promise.” When she wrote this, Ming Ming was 13.

In 1990, Daisy asked Lijun if she would like to come live in the U.S. This was the opportunity she had hoped for, but the decision was not an easy one. Her uncle was a prominent member of the Communist party, who had risen to the level of Vice-Secretary of All China Trade Unions—the U.S. equivalent of Vice-Secretary of Labor. He was so ardent in his beliefs that he once cut short his visit with his sister, Daisy in California, to return to China for an important meeting. “Who is more important to you?” Daisy asked, “Family or country?” And her brother immediately said, “Country.” Lijun was indebted to her uncle and his family. After all, they had saved her. One day, Amy told her that she had been invited to have dinner with the American Ambassador in Beijing and that the invitation had been extended to Yan Zheng and her. If she emigrated, it might be helpful to meet the ambassador. Unfortunately, this was during a time when the dissident Fang Lizhi, a prominent astrophysicist, had sought refuge in the American Embassy. His activism had been a major force in spurring the pro-democracy movement of 1989, and during the chaos of June 4, 1989, stray bullets hit the building where her uncle and aunt lived, killing two neighbors. In the end, Lijun kept in mind her hopes of giving Ming Ming a



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chance to go further than she had. She accepted the invitation. Her uncle said he would not stand in their way. This was their choice. And so Lijun and Yan Zheng openly unfurled their dreams and exhorted Ming Ming to study harder to improve her English faster. Other members of their large extended family offered advice on what they should bring to the U.S. No one knew at the time that they would have to wait in suspense for three more years as two immigration attorneys filed piles of petitions and letters. On June 18, 1993, the new immigrants arrived in San Francisco. Lijun and Yan Zheng had already decided on their American names. From then on, they would be called June and James. Ming Ming opted to keep her name. The family moved into a two-bedroom furnished apartment. On the first day, her sister Amy and brother-in-law Lou helped them open a bank account. They went to a supermarket and bought different flavors of ice cream. But June and James were especially happy when they were taken to a large Chinese supermarket in their new neighborhood. There they found all the foods they were familiar with and all the store clerks spoke Chinese. Her good friends Der-Ling and Wee-yong also showed them the ropes of American life and introduced them to a network of friends. Two weeks after their arrival, a film crew and producer with NBC Nightline came to Amy and Lou's riverside cabin near Lake Tahoe, where James and June were spending the Fourth of July weekend. They were filmed watching an old-fashioned parade in Truckee, watching fireworks exploding over the lake. Ming Ming was filmed paddling a kayak on the river, forced by her aunt to sing, "Row, row, row your boat." James talked about dreams and freedom—like being free to one day buy a home with a lawn. He wisely remarked that with freedom came responsibility. In the next frame he was mowing the lawn. Ming Ming, who was eighteen, said she wanted to make a lot of money. And June talked about her dream to give her daughter a more promising life. A few months later, the family watched a movie that had just been released: *The Joy Luck Club*, based on Amy's book. It opened with a story about a mother who abandons her daughters on the side of a road in Guilin during wartime. Other scenes followed with American-bred daughters who rebelled against their Chinese mothers, before finding understanding in each other much later in life. The closing scene showed an American sister tearfully meeting her long-lost sisters at



the harbor in Shanghai. In spirit, this was Lijun's and Ming's story, too.

The family enrolled in English classes. One of June's homework assignments required her to fill in the blanks: "Pin the tail on the ___"..." "Whale," June wrote. Another question asked: "What does Popeye eat to stay strong?" "Hamburgers," June answered. Yan Zheng was humorously philosophical: "This is what we must know to become American citizens. Donkeys and spinach." And indeed, they eventually became citizens, no thanks to donkeys and spinach. Besides English classes, James and June took courses to update their professional skills to ones needed by American companies in the Bay Area. James found work in the highly regarded architectural firm of Skidmore Owens & Merrill, which was involved in several large projects in China. June became a quality control software engineer with Seibel. Hard work and savings soon enabled them to buy a house in El Cerrito—one with three bedrooms, a view of the Bay Bridge, and a lawn, which James enjoyed mowing. It also had a garden, where June could grow flowers, one of her favorite pastimes.

Over the next few years, her mother, Daisy, was there to give June advice—like how to pronounce certain words in Daisy's own incorrect pronunciations. At last, June was experiencing the "joys" of "mother knows best." Unfortunately, Daisy was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1996, when she was 80. By 1998, the mother that June and her sisters had lost and found was not lost to them to them again. She was unable to recognize her children. A year later, in 1999, Daisy's four daughters and son were standing by her bedside when she took her final breath.

Life gradually became more comfortable for June and James. They remodeled their kitchen and hosted friends and family at their house. Sisters Jindo and Yuhang made longer visits and helped take care of June's grandchildren. Ming Ming fulfilled her own goal to make a lot of money— that is, for others through her work helping families achieve financial freedom and to reach their own American dreams. Like many Chinese mothers, June did not openly boast about Ming's success, but she confided to her sisters that Ming Ming worked hard and was recognized at her company for her work with clients. One of June's dreams was to travel and see new places. One year, June and sisters Jindo and Yuhang, along with cousins Frank and Barbara, went to Hawaii to be part of a surprise 50th birthday party for brother



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John. She hosted regular gatherings in her home. She and brother John developed a bond over computers. She worked as a software engineer and he was a Help Desk Technician. They bored everyone with their tech talk about storage capacity, operating systems, and programs for high-resolution photos. She enjoyed watching her nieces Melissa grow taller each year and talking to them in Mandarin.

She welcomed to her house friends of the family, who became her friends: Sandy and John Bremner, Tuck and Jayne Chin, Duncan Clark, Robin Wang, and Robert Foothorap.

The past joined the present when June became reacquainted with her mother's younger brother, Joe Du Zong Tu, and his wife, Sieu-mei, who emigrated to the U.S. in 1956. Soon her extended family grew to include cousins Norman and Antonia Tu, Elaine and Hans Schoenfelder, Ann and Andre Hsiao, Harold and Joan Tu, David and Kristl Tu. The extended stretched even wider and faster with each new generation of kids. In the summer, there was often a dinner for Ming Ming's and James' birthdays. She gave us updates on her grandsons Preston and Ardin. Both of them were smart and "pretty well-behaved." Ardin was good at golf, she reported, maybe even good enough to be a professional, she said. One summer evening, while everyone was glued to a Chinese soap opera, June suddenly called for everyone's attention to come outside to the garden. What luck, she said, tonight is the one night the tanhua flower will bloom and live for only a few hours. She photographed the tanhua flower every half hour as its petals splayed open and released an intense and wonderful fragrance. We vowed to watch every year. The trouble was, you never knew when it would happen. That was true with disaster as well.

In 2008, James suffered a stroke. In 2009, June was diagnosed with lobular breast cancer and underwent a mastectomy and radiation. And then, in 2010, James was suddenly struck down with a mutated antibiotic resistant bacterial infection in his liver and nearly died of sepsis. Throughout these crises, Lijun tried to remain strong. Family members had always described her as tough, able to handle any challenge. Having been motherless during childhood, she had become a survivor who took care of problems without asking for help. But at times she confessed in emails to being scared, overwhelmed by the enormity of both her husband's and her own health



needs, and having to negotiate the labyrinthine medical and insurance system. She said to Amy that she would never criticize James if he got well. Luckily, Ming Ming stepped in and coordinated assistance from other family members. We realized June didn't know how to ask for help. But she learned to accept it.

In 2011, the good times finally came. Lijun went to Paris and retired that same year. She and James began traveling whenever they could. One year, they went to different cities in China and visited old friends. At one of those reunions she met some of her classmates from nearly fifty years ago, including the classmate she had been forced to publicly malign. They all agreed that those were the circumstances of that era. They had long put that behind them and were simply glad to see that everyone—and their grandchildren—were doing well. Jindo came yearly, and they and their husbands cooked together. Lijun, we had already discovered, did not like either garlic or chili, so it was up to Jindo and Tin Chu to supply the spice.

At family dinners, we either heard about the latest trip she and James had taken or about the one coming up. June was always pleased when someone asked if she had any photos. There were many beautifully bound books of expertly shot photos: green landscapes, softly flowing waterfalls, castles, and fields of flowers—truly amazing. As her photographic skills increased, she bought new camera lenses. James' passion for watercolor painting complemented her passion for photography. They each captured the same scenes. She never openly bragged about her work, although she did solicit opinions: What did we think of this photo that caught fog rising above the field? With James' painting, she was more open about praising his work.

Whenever the family came for dinner, she would call for James to bring out his latest watercolor paintings. Most of them were landscapes, but one time, she was especially eager to have James show the drawing he had done of their grandson Ardin. "It really looks like him, doesn't it?" she said. Then she added that a strange thing had happened to James' artistic abilities. When they were in Jerusalem, she wrote, there was a huge snowstorm, the first in recorded history. Two feet of snow fell, the roads were closed, the whole city was paralyzed." That day, James slipped on the sidewalk, hit his head and lay unconscious. They rushed him to the hospital. Over the next few hours, he recovered enough to be released. June said that his improvements



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continued after they returned home. He recovered some of the language skills he had lost due to the stroke a few years before. And even more amazing, she said, while he had always been pretty good at drawing, ever since he banged his head, he had made a huge leap in watercolor painting. She asked James to give us a before-and-after show of his paintings. The difference was astonishing. June would say, “Not bad, eh?” which was about as close as she ever got to unabashed bragging. With every visit, she told James’ to bring out his latest paintings.

Shortly before James and June went on their trip to Egypt, they hosted the family’s annual Chinese New Year’s dinner. There were fourteen of us. She probably made an equal number of dishes, which barely fit on the dining room table. Each dish came was labeled “Meat,” or “Vegetarian,” or “Fish.” Out of consideration for the three vegetarians at the dinner, most of the dishes she and James had prepared were vegetarian. It was yet another traditional Chinese New Year’s dinner. On the coffee table were sunflower seeds, mandarin oranges, Chinese candies and chocolates. Nearby were her bound books of photos. Propped on tables and chairs were James’ watercolor paintings. And on the wall was a framed photo of the tanhua flower that had bloomed the night we were lucky enough to there to watch.

We are grateful we were with June that night, celebrating family togetherness. We are grateful we were able to give June one last hug. We are grateful she was doing what she loved and was with James and friends at the end. But we still wish that she could have gone on a few more trips, so that we could have looked at more photo books at more family gatherings, and to be with her in the garden to watch the tanhua unfold its petals and scent the night air for a few special hours.

June loved gardening and being in nature. In lieu of flowers, we suggest you give the gift of trees by donating to www.NationalForests.org. For every dollar, a tree will be planted in the national forest to restore areas damaged by wildfire, insects and other conditions. It’s a wonderful way to provide lasting tribute to June’s love of nature.



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Uncle John posted:

I loved LiJun with all my heart. I miss her very much and wish I had more time to say that to her. LiJun made me smile and feel happy whenever I saw her or talked to her on the phone. There was never a dull moment with her humor, laughter, good food, and fun. She inspired me to conquer barriers and be calm on accomplishing my goals. When you see the video that I created of some of only a tiny bit of her life, I grasped the magnitude of her inspirations, her goals, her happiness for her family and friends, her travels, and her love of photography. I hope she is watching us to do the same to do what you want and not be afraid on doing it. My thoughts are always with her. John Tan

March 18 at 3:47 AM



Memories only last if you share them

Join us in honoring June by contributing to a collection of shared memories.



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