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Hello and welcome to Origin Stories, a podcast by the Immigration Policy Lab that explores migration through research and storytelling. I'm Adam Lichtenheld, IPL's executive director. Across the world, migration has become one of the most contentious political and policy challenges of our time. With branches at Stanford University and ETH Zurich in Switzerland, the Immigration Policy Lab generates rigorous evidence and innovative solutions to help policymakers make more informed decisions on immigration.

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We also try to highlight the human stories behind the data. Our guests in this episode are Charlene and her daughter Rachele. Charlene is currently a counselor at Redeemer Counseling Services in New York. Rachele is a licensed acupuncturist and herbalist and founder of Fountyn Acupuncture. Charlene graduated from Stanford in 1983. Rachele in 2013. We'll let them take it away.

Okay, so mom, why don't you first tell a little bit about where did you grow up? How did you experience this place?

I grew up in the 60s in Hong Kong. My parents were, both their families were refugees of the Sino-Japanese War and they all migrated to Hong Kong where a lot of people from China moved to.

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And my parents were very young children during the war. So there was a lot of talk about war and the trauma that they went through.

Can you tell me more about what it was like growing up in Hong Kong?

It was a British colony back then and life was really pretty difficult in the 60s because communism had set in, in China and there was a great famine when I was born.

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And in my childhood years, I remember so much talk about our relatives that are left in China and how life is very hard for them.

You mean that didn't make it to Hong Kong.

Didn't? Yes, the people who didn't make it to Hong Kong and that we felt lucky that we made it to Hong Kong.

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But life in Hong Kong wasn't all fantastic either because it was a struggle for most people to make a living. So we were always fearful also because Cultural Revolution was going on in late 60s and 70s and we were living in somewhat in fear that maybe our freedom, our life wouldn't continue as it was.

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My dad's family is from Shanghai, so they migrated through all of China slowly during the eight years of war and eventually arriving to Hong Kong. And my mother's family was from Guangdong and they didn't have as far to travel. But it was also very traumatic. My grandfather on my mother's side, he died during the war.

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My family experienced a lot of losses, both in terms of losing all their wealth or losing some members of the family. And I did not realize how important that part of intergenerational trauma affected the way that I lived most of my life.

What about growing up in Hong Kong when it was like a British colony?

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Well, the first thing you notice is the guy who runs the place is a white guy. And everybody who is anybody in government are all sent from England. And the Queen's picture is everywhere in government offices. So there was definitely a sort of an assumption that Chinese people don't deserve to have the higher end jobs.

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So that's another thing that, we didn't have the vocabulary that, I lived with racism that became part of our sort of everyday life. Okay, Rachele, why don't you talk about how you grew up?

So I grew up in New York City, Manhattan. Well, you and dad got divorced when I was, what?

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Around two.

Three.

So at the time, I stayed with my mom and my dad moved back to Hong Kong. So my family was very interesting in the sense that I really had two homes. Most of the school year, I would be in New York, but then in the summers, I would spend a good chunk of time, like about three months with my dad, who still lives in Hong Kong.

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And I grew up in the Upper East Side, so I would say my school was predominantly white, and there were very few people who looked like me in my class. Maybe I think there was, what? One other girl who was Chinese, but she was Chinese-American. So, like me, I was born in New York, but, all her family by then had moved to the US, whereas for me, it really felt like I still had a lot of family and, like, ties to Hong Kong.

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So, Rachele, one thing that I often wonder was that you would spend long stretches of time in the summer in Hong Kong with your dad. And throughout grade school, high school, you never struck me that you missed your friends in New York. And can you talk more about your sense of belonging or feeling part of this school or growing up in the private Upper East Side school that you did?

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I think looking back, I definitely feel like I always had a hard time making really close friends. I had some core friends, but then I just always felt like it was very hard for me to connect with them. And I think a big part of that is because there was this huge connection that I had to my Hong Kong-Chinese side that I really had to.

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It's not that I had to tone it down or play it down or anything like that. It was more that it couldn't be present with me all the time.

So tell us more about growing up in New York? And your experience with being part of a predominantly white society?

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I think I wasn't able to really incorporate my Chinese side a lot of times when I would hang out with my white friends. A lot of it was not because they weren't accepting so much, as they didn't really understand. I think spending a lot of time in Hong Kong and really feeling like I had a home there, it really allowed me to feel very comfortable in Hong Kong culture and society.

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And I felt like every summer when I would go back, I would kind of feel like a local. I was able to experience Hong Kong in that way, which I think was very different from some of my other Chinese-American friends. Because whenever they would go back, even if they had family there, they would experience it kind of more as a tourist.

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But whenever I went back to Hong Kong, I felt very much like I lived there.

But you're also a local in New York.

I know, yeah. But so I got to kind of have these two homes and experience these two cultures, I think, very fully. And I think it really shaped how I saw myself, what I liked, my interest in food, like, the things I like to eat, these everyday things.

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And so I. I think whenever, let's say, I would come back from Hong Kong and I would be spending time with my friends from school, they haven't experienced or they don't know about Hong Kong or the kinds of foods I like to eat or the things I like to do.

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And I think because of that, I really had to shut that off during the school year is kind of how it felt. And so sometimes that kind of made it hard. And I think there was always this longing to bring back certain things from Hong Kong and have that incorporated into my life.

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But it was very hard being in a very white community.

So how did that change at Stanford?

Well, first of all, I think just being in California, there are a lot more Asian American kids just all around. That was something that I just didn't experience growing up on the upper east side.

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And I think meeting these other kids and hearing about their experiences and how Chinese culture was brought into their American home was like, it was super cool to me. It was like, wow, they still celebrate Chinese New Year and bring a lot of these traditions into their home.

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And I was like, wow, none of my friends back in New York really did this. And it was really fun, I think, to celebrate these things again. I remember going to Stanford and then there would be, it's Dragon Boat Festival, or just all these kinds of things that I never really celebrated when I was in New York because no one around me was celebrating.

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And even at home, and it was really hard to bring in these elements.

I think one of the things that you said to me early on freshman year, literally in the first quarter, maybe even in the first month. And I was a bit shocked was that you said, mom, I don't miss home at all because I feel like I found my family here.

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Your friends were like family to you?

Well, I think the idea of being able to eat the same kind of foods that we like and celebrate certain things together, it made it feel like my home. I met a lot of people through the Hong Kong Student Association.

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I thought it was really cool to share in things like that we would miss about being in Hong Kong.

So what were the years that you attended Stanford?

I first visited Stanford when I was ten years old. My parents took me and my siblings to California for my first ever visit to this country.

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And we stayed with my mom's best friend from college who had immigrated to California. And she took us driving around the Bay area, and one of the stops was Stanford and I remember walking around the quad. I really remember that and thinking. And they were all saying, one of these days, maybe you go to school here.

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And that was always, always on my mind. And eventually I made it to Stanford winter quarter of 1981. I was there from winter quarter of 81 to spring of 83, and my mother passed away within months of my arriving. So, actually the entire time was a blur and probably I was seriously depressed.

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It was a very hard time in my life. Unfortunately, there wasn't a lot of happy moments to think about. I'm really glad that you and Grace, I have another daughter who is currently a sophomore at Stanford, class of 23. That through the experiences that you guys have which are so wonderful of your years at Stanford and coming to visit you, even a very simple thing like moving you into the dorm.

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Something that I really felt like at the time when I was a teenager, it felt so sad that everyone else had their parents there and I didn't. So helping you guys with move in, move out, being involved with your lives at Stanford really helped me rewire my brain to experience a new dimension of Stanford that really helped in my healing.

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So at the time when you got to Stanford, you had already been in the US for-

Yes.

For like a year or so?

Yeah.

So did you miss home or did you experience any sort of culture shock. What was that like?

I definitely missed home.

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My mother became ill middle of freshman year, and so I think that was affecting me more than the missing home part. Maybe it made me miss home even more. I attended school, my first year and a half was on the east coast and definitely hard to find Chinese food or not many friends were Asian.

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And so when I came to Stanford it definitely was easier culturally.

Why easier?

Well, there were more Asians and the weather was more temperate. I didn't grow up in the freezing cold. And so after Stanford, I went to business school and then moved to New York and started a life in financial services.

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I worked on Wall street as an institutional salesperson and then for 30 years I did that and managing money. And I raised two kids and thought working in financial services would be my career. But little did I know that eventually I would go back to school after I retired from finance and start a new career in mental health, which I very much focused on Asian Americans.

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And that's been very satisfying. But at Stanford, actually, the timing was great because when I got to Stanford, it was the sort of the beginning of real economic reforms in China. And I took these courses in contemporary Chinese history, about economics and political science, and it really opened my eyes about things that I didn't really learn about growing up in a British colony.

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Yeah, I feel like you had a fascination with China.

Yes.

And I think growing up in a British colony, it's not like they're gonna teach you.

No, they're not gonna teach me about Opium War.

Yeah.

And I was just really fascinated. So for my senior thesis, I wrote about that.

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My long career was in Asian stocks and, of course, it started before there was even a stock market in China. So it was a very exciting time in investing in Asia. And definitely, taking those classes and learning about the reforms really informed a lot of my career choices.

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You were also interested in Asian stuffing at Stanford, tell us about your academic stuff.

So I was at Stanford 2009, I graduated 2013. And I think similar to you, I also had a desire to, well, definitely learn more about China. And for example, I pretty much after I got there, I was, Pretty determined to also study abroad in China, I think I really wanted to experience what it would be like to be a student in China, so I-

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Well, you took a lot of Chinese at Stanford.

I did, and I think that was because at home, we spoke Cantonese and I realized just how intertwined language is with the culture. We always talk about how there are a lot of idioms or just sayings and Cantonese that really capture the Chinese mindset or just how you would do things.

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So, I think in that sense I always understood the importance of learning the language in order to learn about a culture. And I think that's why I also really prioritize studying Chinese at Stanford. I think kinda, in terms of my career choices and what I ended up being really interested in.

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I grew up being taken to the Chinese medicine doctor a lot.

Not by me.

Not by you, by my dad in Hong Kong and there for a variety of different ailments. But it started pretty young, when I was maybe around ten years old. And I think I was just really fascinated because Chinese medicine is, it's not just a form of healing.

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But it's a form of healing that is very guided by Chinese philosophy and thinking. And I, I think I really aligned with that, and so now I'm a Chinese medicine doctor myself. And I think I really influenced why I decided to pursue that career for myself. And I think there's a certain sense of pride in continuing a tradition that exists in China.

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Well, if I remember correctly, all those years of going to Chinese school that I forced you to do, you weren't so crazy about that.

Well, I think later on I was grateful that you forced me to,

Go to school on the weekends, on Saturdays.

Yeah, so where do you live now?

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I live in the Bay Area now, not too far from Stanford.

You didn't do Chinese medicine right out of Stanford, so maybe you can tell people a little bit about your journey.

I think going to Stanford, there's a lot of excitement around startups, technology. And this was 2013, so there's a lot of exciting stuff happening in the tech sector and I definitely got sucked into that.

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I think it was very exciting for me and it was like a very creative and fast paced environment and way of thinking. And so, for a couple of years after school, almost five years, I was working for a variety of startups and I was doing product design and some marketing work as well, so,

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You also did UX design?

Yeah, and that was heavily influenced, I think, by my friends at Stanford.

And then what happened, what led you to being a Chinese doctor? I mean, no, you majored in East Asian Studies?

Yes, and I think at the time when I was majoring in East Asian Studies.

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I was like, I have no idea how this is going to relate to my work in the future because at the time I was, my focus was more on Asian art. And so it didn't really feel I was going to do anything related to that. But now looking back, Asian art, Asian literature, it was very much, we learned a lot about Chinese philosophy.

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And that I think is very tied with many principles that exist with Chinese medicine, so it's kinda funny how it all came together.

So one of the most exciting things that I, I feel I'm, I keep telling people this is my post-retirement career. And it was kinda accidental that I came upon it, but I run a Asian American support group for women.

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And we talk a lot about what's it to grow up as different ethnicities of Asians in America. The identity issues that we struggle with, the sense of belonging, such as what you talked about earlier. And a lot of times the deep struggles that we have with our parents, which I'm sure you have shared that as well.

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And it's especially having raised two daughters of my own here and being an immigrant myself, it just feels very close to home.

You run this women's group now, right?

Yes, I also have individual clients, many are Asian American.

So what inspired you to start this women's group?

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It started during COVID and in New York City there was a lot of attacks on Asians. People really felt very triggered, even if you are not attacked yourself. Just watching the news, reading the paper, watching tv, it's very triggering. Because when I was in graduate school, I read a lot of research about how Asian Americans tend not to seek mental health support.

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Because of so much stigma in our culture about being known as crazy. And I just felt there are not enough Asian persons, you mean there aren't enough Asian therapists? Yes, practitioners, in this, in this field, because it's not particularly a career that is considered glamorous or pays well.

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And so most people wanted their kids to be more financially rewarding professions. So I wanted to give back, and I was also mentoring a kid, I was involved with this group that mentors kids in New York in high schools. And this kid went to Stuyvesant and was telling me that a lot of the Kids that are having issues with depression.

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Who actually get to see a therapist finds that it's not helpful because they feel that the therapist cannot understand their functional issues, and so they give up. And I did have that experience in graduate school where, most of the people I went to school with were not Asian, in fact, it was hardly any Asian.

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The profession is still a very much white person profession. Rachele, how about telling us how the years at Stanford changed the way you think about your own identity?

I think I became much more comfortable in who I was and myself, and I didn't feel I was always hiding a part of myself.

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And let me explain, because growing up in New York and growing up in Hong Kong, I felt every time I was in each place, I had a different identity, and it felt very disconnected. And when I got to Stanford, I realized, I can have these two parts together and I don't have to hide one side from the other.

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They convert.

Yeah, they merge, and so I think I developed a lot more comfort with that. And it was nice to be around other students that had a similar experience, in that sense, I didn't feel so alone in it.

How's it for you to have your little sister, your baby sister at Stanford now having her own experience?

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I mean, she's definitely doing very different things from what I was doing, the different clubs that she's a part of. And so I think it's really fun to experience it through her eyes and to hear about all the different classes that she's taking.

Speaking of classes that she's taking, remember for Parents Weekend recently.

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I went to a class with her, and, man, that was something else because she was taking a class on contemporary Chinese history. I guess all three of us have taken that class, but sitting in that class with her, listening to the lecture, she was the same age as when I took that class.

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And thinking about how it has informed my life path, I got a little bit teary. Because she's also very excited, but in a different way because, her major is archaeology, and she's really. But she's really fascinated with how colonialism is still present in all the stories that are being told now, she to work with museum artifacts.

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And she tells me that she would never have been so interested in that if not for our family history. And the awareness of me talking about, growing up in Hong Kong and you talking about your experience living in Hong Kong.