

Emigre sheds shame of early surgery scars through founding of Chinatown performing arts center, writing scripts and poetry

Description

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Clara Hsuâ??s father owned a music bookstore in San Franciscoâ??s Chinatown. (Photo by Myra Krieger)

Clara Hsu is sitting at a studio upright piano in her office at the Clarion Performing Arts Center in Chinatown. Thereâ??s a box of crayons and a stack of childrenâ??s books on the piano bench. Sheâ??s wearing a black and white print dress over long black sleeves, a contrast to her reddish, bob-cut hair

She talks about her love of music and the influence of her father, and their power to heal the shame of a disfiguring adolescent surgery that made much of her younger life a painful struggle.

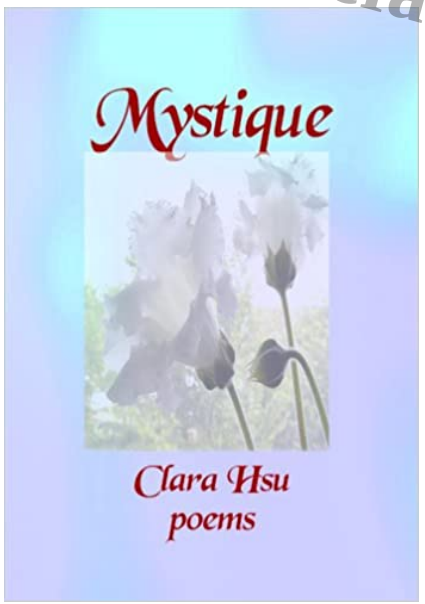
â??I felt inadequate so much of the time because of the appearance of my body. The scars deeply affected the decisions I made â?? such as my marriage, which after 21 years, was dissolved.â?•

The office itself is a testament to her recovery. At 66, Hsu is the founder and executive director of the center, a hub of theatrical and musical performances, childrenâ??s theater, poetry reading, and Asian-American-focused cultural events.

Hsu, who taught piano for years, turned to poetry and other forms of writing as an adult, solace from an unhappy marriage. Her first book of poems, â??Mystique,â?• received honorable mention at the 2010 San Francisco Book Festival. She has published a book of short stories, a translation of classical Chinese poetry and writes scripts for a senior theatrical troupe.

A home awash in music

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Music, though, has been a lifelong passion. Hsu remembers the notes of a piano â?? sometimes religious, sometimes classical but always a soft refrain â?? airing throughout the family home in Hong Kong

Her father, a builder of pianos and the owner of a music bookstore, passed on his passion to his daughters. â??He nurtured my sister and I with his love of music,â?• Hsu said.

In those days, Hong Kong, still under British rule, was a mecca for the artistry of the piano with concerts, recitals, competitions and public gatherings of all types an ideal atmosphere for a budding musician.

But against this lively scene were somber events at home. Her mother died when she was nine. Four years later came more devastating news: Hsu was diagnosed with congenital heart disease. Her open heart surgery, one of the first performed in Hong Kong, was successful. However, the aftermath left her

with psychological and physical scars.

She immigrated to the United States when she was 17. No longer just listening to church music; she was studying it and graduated from Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey.

In 1982, she left New Jersey to join her father, who had remarried and settled in San Franciscoâ??s Chinatown. Still unsure of her career choices, she partnered with him and the pair opened the Clarion Music Center, a popular trading post for pianos, books, rare and exotic musical instruments, piano lessons, and a venue for local and international musicians. (The Clarion Music Center sign on Waverly Street is still proudly displayed alongside the new performing arts center.)

The music center prospered for years. But by 2005, â??the Internet killed everything,â?• Hsu said. â??We couldnâ??t compete.â?•

Poetry a source of solace

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Hsu in her offices at the Clarion Performing Arts Center. (Photo by Myra Krieger)

As the business foundered, her father had a stroke. Hsu sold it to longtime employees but retained ownership of the building.

Now part-time caretaker to her father and stepmother at 44, she found poetry a source of solace, as it had been at the end of her marriage. â??It was then I realized poetry was my true expression.â?•

As she matured as a writer, she thought of establishing a stage where she and other poets could perform. In 2016, she repurchased the Music Center, secured nonprofit status and opened what is now

the Clarion Performing Arts Center.

Quickly realizing poetry readings lacked â??the sparkâ?• to build audiences, she and her partners added childrenâ??s theater, musical performances, plays, visual art, film, and educational events.

Every Saturday at 4 p.m., for example, there is a film screening in which the filmmaker is present and facilitates a discussion. Hsu teaches a free Cantonese language class on Saturdays and gives lessons to the residents of On Lok and Bethany House on Chinese poetry.

Standing against hate

Performances bring in the crowds. In 2021, the centerâ??s production of â??Gai Moa Soup Rap,â?• which took a stand against the wave of hate crimes directed at the Chinese-American community, was particularly successful, Hsu said.



â??Gai Moa Soup Rapâ?• contains such lyrics as â??Arrogant youth, youâ??re quite offensive. Beware our gai mou sou. No more of your twisted ideas. Beware our gai moa sou,â?• which means chicken feather duster, a cleaning tool used on misbehaving children in some Asian households. (Photo from the YouTube video; click on the photo to watch.)



Hsu in the Magic Showgirl Museum. (Photo by Myra Krieger)

The centerâ??s basement houses the Magic Showgirl Museum, where satin gowns, feathers, fans, headdresses and lots of glitter are on display. Itâ??s also the home of the Grant Avenue Follies, a senior cabaret troupe. Hsu is a part of the ensemble and writes the scripts.

Hsuâ??s efforts to bring the arts to the neighborhood were honored in 2021 by Channel 5, the local CBS affiliate, with a presentation of the Jefferson Award.

During a walk through the neighborhood, Hsu stops near the corner of Grant Avenue and California Street, where The Renaissance, a landmark accessories shop, once stood. The popular business didnâ??t survive the pandemic; seeing it empty sparked Hsuâ??s thoughts on â??Chinatown without the tourists.â?•

Many Chinatown businesses depend on tourists,â?• she said, grimacing. Even so, sheâ??s optimistic about the neighborhoodâ??s chances of recovery. â??Even though many businesses suffer without the tourists, the demands from the residents will keep Chinatown vibrant.â?•

Serving the church

Hsuâ??s grandparents, from her fatherâ??s side, came from Guangzhou (south China). â??They were extremely poor and grateful for the missionaries who took care of them,â?• she said. â??Both became religious and served the church after they moved to Hong Kong.â?•.

Her paternal grandmother was one of the first women to graduate from the missionary school in Guangzhou. Her maternal grandfather was a banker who became quite wealthy and passed his fortune to his family. â??Grandpaâ??s money helped to ensure all of his grandchildren got a good education,â?• she said. â??Itâ??s the best way to spend the inheritance.â?•

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The Grant Avenue Follies was originally comprised of four professional dancers from Chinatownâ??s nightclub culture of the 1940s, â??50s and â??60s. Many of their followers frequented such clubs as the Forbidden City, the Sky Room and Shanghai Low. (Photo from

the â??Glammas Wrapâ?• video on YouTube; click on the photo to watch.)

Founding and running the Clarion Center was a long and complex process: Repurposing the Music Center, navigating the bureaucratic hurdles to become a nonprofit, writing grants and hiring staff. It meant methodically putting one foot in front of the other. But she is always a poet first, she said.

An excerpt from her poem â??Excelsior,â?• which speaks of her father and the objects of his affection â?? the piano and his new daughter:

A tinge of nasty buzz

In the voice today.

There might be a piece of fuzz accidentally

Got stuck between the keys.

Or the pebbles

In the glass vase sitting

On the top of the case

Decide to rattle

In protest of the plastic

yellow and red blossoms,

So alive

Yet so dead (no need of water)

In the likeness of mums.

Fake

Is never the sound

That comes out of this piano.

Every movement is an emotion.

Little fisted hands,

Sucking in the moist and

Suffocating air.

A faint smell of saw dust

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Wafts into the room.

Where he is sitting

There are ten upright pianos

Each has a bronze color-plated name: EXCELSIOR

Ring ring â?¦ ring ring.â?¦ the telephone!

â??Yes. Yes,â?• he jumps to his feet.

Itâ??s a girl!â?•

The melody flows

Like a young leaf sailing

Down a steady stream.

He plays it now, on the piano.

His heart

His heart

Is rippling with music.

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myra-editor