

## **AirSpace Season 5, Episode 7: Little Bombs**

*Music up and under*

Matt: Welcome to AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum presented by Olay. I'm Matt.

Nick: I'm Nick.

Emily: And I'm Emily.

Nick: We've talked a lot about early aviation in the United States, but that wasn't the only place where people were flying in the early 20th century. Our subject today is Chinese Aviatix, Li Xiaqing. She grew up in a rapidly changing China, which wasn't always friendly to flight.

Matt: Li was already famous in China for starring in movies before she got her flight training in Switzerland and the United States. And then, when China was invaded in the 1930s, she was grounded in her home country but still found a way to use flight to help the war effort.

Emily: We wanted to introduce you to Li because she's another badass in airspace history, and she's not as well known as she should be. So today on Airspace, we would like to introduce you to Li Xiaqing.

*Music up and out*

Nick: Today, we're going to talk about Li Xiaqing. She was an amazing person, famous in her day, and a well qualified aviator and a lot of what we know about her comes from personal papers, correspondence, newspapers at the time, as well as an unpublished autobiography.

Now, a lot of those papers are with us here at the National Air and Space Museum in our archives and if you want to have a look at them, we'll be posting that link on our social media. That's Instagram and Twitter, @airspacepod.

Emily: In addition to everything we have in our archives, there is one published biography of Li written by Patti Gully.

Patti Gully: My name's Patti Gully. I trained as a librarian and I discovered this amazing aviatrix named Li Xiaqing and I thought that people should know her about her.

Matt: Patti's book is called: 'Sisters of Heaven, China's Barnstorming Aviatixes'.

Emily: Right. The book covers two other aviators with ties to China but today we're talking about Li.

Nick: So Li was born shortly after 1911 and she was an active aviator in the '20s and '30s when the aviation industry was just getting off of the ground there and American public schools don't teach a lot about Chinese history except where it intersects with American history so a lot of this was fresh to us, and we wanted to start with a little primer on Chinese history of that era before we really dive into the story.

Stephen MacKinnon: Let's see, this is on the pod... Maybe you should say Stephen, because, you know, being a little more formal.

Matt: So that's Stephen MacKinnon. He's a historian of Modern China and a recently retired professor from my alma mater, Arizona State University.

Stephen: Well, I'm a now retired professor of Chinese studies taught mostly about Modern China and I was director of Asian Studies and this and that.

Nick: Stephen has written several books on Modern Chinese history, but Li is not very well known or at least not as well known as she should be. So even he didn't know a whole lot about her before we spoke to him.

Emily: But Stephen does know obviously a lot about Chinese history so we wanted to ask him about it and have him sort of start around the time of the revolution of 1911, which is around the time Li was born. And it was at this time that the last emperor of China was taken down, ending the Qing Dynasty. And because Li's story is so tied with what's going on in Chinese history, we thought we could all use a mini-history lesson.

Stephen: The fall of the Qing dynasty between 1911 and 1912 was a huge event. It ended the dynastic system in China. The Qing dynasty had been going for 300 years. The effort to end the Qing dynasty, it started to be organized in 1890s and early 1900s and it was around a figure named Sun Yat-Sen, who was from Canton, from the region that Li's father and family are all from, and it is pretty clear from the material I've seen that her relatives were involved in different putsches, you might say, failed attempts to assassinate somebody or have a little uprising somewhere, usually in the Canton region. So they were kind of early revolutionaries.

Matt: So we know because of stories passed down in the family that Li's family was involved in the revolution. There's not a lot of sort of documentary evidence of that but we know on pretty good authority because of what family members have said and what's been written based on that, that the family was pretty involved.

Patti: Her father, her grandmother, her mother, they were all involved and she had this sense of responsibility towards China that her parents and her family had been giving their life to this. So she thought it was important that she carry on as they had done.

Emily: Right. So some of those stories are involving Li's father and her uncle who were allegedly involved in the assassination of a dynastic official. Her grandmother ran an embroidery shop that was essentially a front for a bomb making outfit and family lore also says that her grandmother and great aunt smuggled gun powder from Hong Kong sewn into their clothing.

Nick: The revolution ended with the founding of China as a Republic in 1912. And just a few months later on April 16th, Li was born in Canton.

Matt: So Li came from a pretty well off family. You know, in fact, the family was pretty rich. Her father made his money in real estate and in manufacturing in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Canton. So the family was pretty well off, but that doesn't mean that she didn't suffer tragedy in her early life. Her mother was diagnosed with tuberculosis when she was young and so Li was largely raised by her paternal grandmother, the one with the bomb making embroidery shop.

Nick: And she was part of a new generation of privileged Chinese girls. Her father believed in educating her so she went to British missionary school in Hong Kong and later in Shanghai to an American Chinese mission school.

Emily: So overall Li's upbringing was unusual for sort of the average woman in China at the time but for women in the upper class of society, it wasn't unusual to be educated and expected to pursue many of their own interests and careers.

Nick: So she comes from a family that is very rich, very engaged in the events of the era, and also believes in service to their nation.

Matt: You know, when we're talking about China during this period, it's a pretty extraordinary time. One of the things that I was surprised about when talking to Stephen was that in the 1920s in Shanghai, there was actually a 'roaring '20s' going on very much like the roaring '20s in the United States. There was sort of... Imagine *The Great Gatsby* but set in Shanghai, China.

Stephen: Rich, young women of that kind really did break out in the 1920s and Shanghai too, had a kind of flapper sort of society. So it's not too surprising she got involved with films. There're old Humphrey Bogart movies about Shanghai and so on in the '30s and '20s. It was a very freewheeling place.

Matt: And it was in that context that Li first walked on to a movie set. She was 14 years old and she then had that brief career as a movie star that preceded her time as a pilot and became pretty well known in China as the actor Li Dandan.

Nick: And Dandan was a family nickname but just to really emphasize that point, roaring '20s, she's traveling internationally. She saw air shows around that time and eventually learned to fly in Europe. But before that she was a movie star. Like, she was famous! She was on the cover of magazines! You can't write this stuff in a movie. No one would believe it.

Matt: Yeah. No, she was a glamorous person in a glamorous time. If we think about the 1920s and what that meant. The sort of level of fashion and sort of cultural extravagance of the time.

Nick: Yeah. I love when we get to do stories about glamor and roaring '20s in Asia, in the movie industry, it certainly fits. Li's father actually bought a production company and funded some of her movies but just a few years later, he took her out of the film industry and sent her to school in England, which would send her life on a completely different course.

Emily: Right. So this sort of moves us along in Li's personal history, along that timeline, sort of after this career of being an actress. She was married in 1929 to a diplomat and a member of China's foreign service, who was 11 years her senior and they moved to Switzerland where her husband was the secretariat of the League of Nations World Court. Does anybody know what that means? I don't know what that means.

Nick: No, but it sounds great.

Emily: It sounds great. Sounds very important.

Nick: Well, I mean, the League of Nations, of course we know what that is, right? So the predecessor of the United Nations after World War I. But as for what it means to be secretariat?

Emily: Cool. So you don't know what it means either is what you're saying, Matt.

Matt: I know there's a horse.

Nick: All I know is he wins horse races. Um

Right. But this is keeping up with this being a high flying family, even before anybody takes off in an airplane. And they had a couple of kids while they were in Switzerland and it was in Europe where she was first exposed to air shows and years later, it was in Europe where she learned to fly.

Patti: So she was married. She was married and was in Switzerland when she decided to take flying lessons. All her friends were doing it and so, she was just enthralled by it. And she consulted her father who was the last word in everything and said that she would like to fly for China and he agreed that that would be a good idea.

Emily: Yeah. And I think this is kind of that big sort of turning point of the story where all you at home might be wondering, when are we going to get to the airplane stuff? Uh, this is where we get to the airplane stuff. But really all of that is really important for growing... How do you grow a badass? You have to have a badass history.

So Li took her first flying lessons in Geneva in 1934 and she became the first Chinese woman to get a pilot's license from the Aero-Club de Suisse. So with her goal to fly for her country in a meaningful way, remember Li was brought up with a very strong sense of public service and contributing to her country. She wanted to continue to make a contribution and really have an influence on the world around her. And so she knew she needed more higher level training when it came to flying sort of beyond her basic pilot's license. And so when her husband was reassigned to the United States, she enrolled in flight school there.

Patti: She was going to take flying lessons at the Boeing School of Aviation in California, which was where pilots went to learn to be professionals to fly as pilots for airlines and so forth.

Nick: So Li made a big splash in the United States too. While she was at Boeing, she specifically requested aerobatics lessons. That was not a normal part of the curriculum. And as they were doing loop-the-loops and corkscrews and things that I will watch safely from the ground but don't want to take part in, she slipped out of the airplane. There's no really other way to say it. Her seatbelt came detached and she found herself leaving the vehicle and she says that she fell for a few seconds before she remembered all of her training and pulled her parachute rip cord and executed a perfect three point landing in the middle of San Francisco Bay.

Matt: Yeah. Thankfully, she was wearing that parachute and, you know, because she was able to save herself using that parachute, she was inducted then into the Caterpillar Club. And if you don't know the Caterpillar Club, they have a little pin with a caterpillar on it. We have some in the collection that you can see online and it's given to a pilot that uses their parachute and uses the sort of silk threads of the parachute to save their lives. So that's why it's the little caterpillar that is the emblem of their club.

Emily: And she was the first woman member of the Caterpillar Club, but she also had training in mechanics, aerodynamics and meteorology and she graduated from the Boeing School with a US private pilot's license.

Patti: She graduated with flying colors. She did very well in all her course taking, and she graduated as professional and went to China.

Nick: So after her uh, after her big splash in the United States, Li returned to she China in... *Emily laughs* ...Thank you for laughing at the joke the second time.

Emily: I got you.

Nick: Li returned to China in 1936 and joined the Aviation League of Shanghai. Now, despite her being a very experienced aviator at this point, China didn't want to give her a pilot's license initially and she kind of had to talk them into giving her the test and the military examiner that she was flying with, according to the

papers in our archives, quickly deduced that she knew a whole lot more about flying an airplane than he did.

Matt: Yeah. You can understand why he might have been surprised. It had only been legal in China for just a couple of years for civilians to fly. Before that, the leader, Chiang Kai-Shek didn't want any of the warlords that ruled rural China to be able to build their own air forces. AND so it was illegal for civilians to own planes and to learn to fly.

Emily: So she finally convinces them to let her have a license because she's more qualified than probably most everybody else that these instructors had seen and so she was assigned the task of flying around China to inventory all of the nation's airports and airfields. And what I like about this sort of part of the story is that she's making headway along that path for herself towards contributing back to her home country, which has always been one of the goals that she wanted to achieve with her flying. After she did all this inventorying, she returned to Shanghai to begin teaching at the Aviation League's newly opened flight school.

Nick: And just to recap again, where we are at in the story. Famous movie star learns to fly acrobatically, returns to her country, convinces them to give her a license. And then they give her the job of basically assessing their entire aviation infrastructure. Like, that doesn't sound like a, like a dry mission or one that you give somebody just to keep them out of your hair for a while. She was really kind of the brain and the eyes, certainly, at this point in kind of assessing how China was shaping up in the early 20th century from an aviation standpoint.

Emily: Right. And to move into this position of instructing future aviators and helping build a generation of aviators in China, she's putting herself at this much higher level of visibility and what I hope would be sort of advancing women aviators into the industry also.

Matt: Yeah. And as you're both pointing to, she has this very high public profile and it's sort of, you know, the public has not lost interest in her story at this point. So much so that when in 1936, she divorces her husband, it's actually reported in newspapers. Right, not every divorce makes the newspapers but hers did and the newspapers reported that she did so, so that she could devote her life to the development of aviation in her country.

Nick: So we're in 1937 and the conflict that we're talking about would eventually become a part of World War II, but it started far earlier in China when Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931.

Stephen: The Japanese began to move in on China in a serious way with its military in Manchuria in 1931, 32 and they actually bombed Shanghai and had a battle in the Chinese parts of Shanghai in the spring of 1932 and then sort of pulled back.

Matt: Yeah. So all that we've just been talking about, you know, the survey, evaluating the air fields and the airplanes and the sort of strength of the air forces was in some sense, connected to China's anxiety about war with Japan as this is sort of building up from the early '30s up to the point where we are now.

Stephen : Chiang Kai-shek, who had come to power in 1927, 28, 29, was trying to consolidate his government but also could see that they didn't have the wherewithal to fight the Japanese. And he kind of was putting off the war, trying to build up industrial power, but also military power. He had German advisors from Nazi Germany, trying to, and to some degree succeeding, in building up a more modern military that might resist the Japanese but also he tried to develop an air force. And initially, he turned to Italy of all places as a model for a Chinese military air force and I think that was 33, 34. Madame Chiang Kai-shek was very involved in the development of the military air force in China from that point on. So she, however, tried to get involved in that, Li, our heroine, and she was rejected. They didn't want women as fighter pilots.

Emily: I think this is where the power of the hero in the story sort of really comes to light when their superpowers are, sort of, taken away from them and they really want the opportunity to still contribute and serve their countries.

So Li first starts by helping to run a Red Cross hospital in Shanghai, but quickly finds out that she's on this most-wanted list by Japan. So she actually leaves, she leaves Shanghai to protect herself and she goes to Hong Kong. And so, because she can't fly for China directly, they won't allow her to do it, she's also not safe. She decides to actually leave China to better serve China and also fly.

Patti: She came up with this plan, perhaps she could barnstorm America and raise, raise money.

Matt: So she takes her fame, she takes that name recognition and the contacts that she has, and she brings it to the United States where she tours around to raise money for the war effort.

Emily: And I love this culmination of all the things. Right? Like, there's been kind of a slow burn in the progression of this story, but all of these points are sort of culminating to this moment where she realizes that she can capitalize on her fame, she can capitalize on the contacts that she made by traveling the globe while she was married to a diplomat, and she gets to do all of, she gets to use all of that, combine it with her passion for flying and her talent for flying because it's not just she likes to fly, she's also really good at it. And she figures out a way to take all of those things, smash them together and use it as a way of serving her country when it's not safe for her to be there. And I think that's kind of this, it's really, to me, it's a very creative way of making a really big impact.

Nick: And she does it with style and flare. She borrowed several airplanes, painted them all bright red and white and named them the 'Spirit of New China' and she

traveled around the country, barnstorming in an all white jumpsuit with a white flower in her hair.

Matt: And we don't know how much money she actually raised through all of that but we know that it was substantial and went to support United China Relief and the Red Cross, which, I'm sure, they were very happy to have her on their side.

Nick: And while she's doing all of this, who takes note but Hollywood. They actually asked her to act in a film called *Disputed Passage* in 1939. She played a Chinese aviator and according to some sources, no one there knew that she was a movie star before they approached her for the film. That's how great her public image was and how confident she was as a spokesperson for aviation that she became a movie star twice.

Emily: What I think is interesting about this story is that there's this whole buildup kind of, of her life getting to this moment where she can build on her contributions to her country and sort of her drive for public service.

She manages to continue doing this barnstorming even after the attack on Pearl Harbor but that is when the U.S. enters World War II and that sort of changes how she needed to focus her fundraising efforts for China because naturally if she's fundraising for the war effort in the United States but funding for China, when the U.S. enters the war, folks aren't interested in donating to China anymore. They're much more interested in donating to the war effort here in the United States.

So she spends the early '40s, mostly in South America where she can continue her fundraising efforts for China without having to get in the way of the American war effort.

Matt: So World War II eventually did end, and we could do a whole series of episodes just about how and why the war ended the way it did, but for this episode, you know, the important part is that Li got to go home. She moved back to Hong Kong with her partner and lived there until the mid-60s and then they moved back to the U.S., to California.

Nick: And that's where she stayed for the rest of her life, living with her partner, traveling with her partner and frequently flying the airplane herself and living a much lower profile life than you might expect from a famous national servant, high flying aviator and two time movie star. She, by all accounts, just enjoyed the remainder of her days in style and grace until she passed away in January of 1998.

Matt: One of the things that I think is incredible with a story like this, and we've seen a few of these types of stories as hosts of this podcast and we see it in and other outlets as well, these stories of really amazing lives that were not invisible. They were actually lived at a very high profile, but for some reason just didn't get



carried forward. They were famous in their time, as Li was very much famous in her own time, and yet today, we have very little knowledge of her and her accomplishments.

Emily: To me, it's not a surprise that we don't know more about Li and that us as hosts of this podcast and even as members of the Air and Space Museum, like, we don't know her story because our focus is so much on the story of American aviation. And even when we start breaking down the story of American aviation to start focusing on the folks that maybe we hadn't heard about quite as much, this story does a really great job of sort of highlighting maybe why we've never heard of Li. Because her story is so tied to Chinese history that we barely get a glimpse of when we're all in middle, elementary, high school, when we're learning history of the world. I think for me, world history was like three weeks of my entire history curriculum in high school. Now, that's probably not the same for everybody, but I don't think it's out of the norm.

*Music up and under*

Nick: Yeah. There's way too much adventure here to fit into one movie and all of it is sitting in the archives of the National Air and Space Museum. Amazon, Hulu, Netflix, if you're listening, we're waiting.

Matt: Yeah. It would make a great streaming series. I would totally binge this, you know.

Nick: Oh, absolutely.

Emily: Well, and now it's making me wonder. Patti's book covers many aviators from Chinese aviation history. Li's just one of them. So that is making me want to pick up another book and learn more about all these other aviators that I don't know anything about.

Nick: Yeah. Let's all grab copies and we'll get started on our screenplays.

*Music up then under*

Matt: Airspace is from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. It's produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart, mixed by Tarek Fouda. Airspace is presented by Olay and distributed by PRX.

*Music up and out*

Emily: I mean, I would take a caterpillar pin if I parachuted out of an airplane on purpose or an accident, let's be honest, but I would prefer to do neither of those things.

*PRX Audio Logo*

