



STUDIO OCHENTA ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT

MIJA (ESPAÑOL) – 203: Hien, the little bird

[00:08]

Hi, my name is Mija. This podcast is about my family, those alive, those long gone and those still dreaming. Here's what you need to know about Hien: She's a big foodie, She smiles all the time. She loves to talk. But most of all, she's very optimistic. Hien is my mom. So here we go, 10 minutes to tell her story.

[00:46]

Hien is the 8th of a sibling of 9 children born to Uyen and Rui, two jewelers in Vietnam. Yes, you heard right, in Vietnam.

[00:53]

Remember when I told you I didn't want my mother to speak to me in Chinese anymore? Well, the truth is, she *never* spoke to me in Chinese. Though she spoke mandarin with Nong, Hien spoke to me in Vietnamese.

[01:09]

Her mother was vietnamese and her father was chinese, so, It was her mother tongue. But for me, since everyone called me 'the chinese girl', I often forgot about the vietnamese part of me. Little by little, like everyone else in France, I started using 'China' to talk about all of Asia. There are so many countries and cultures in Asia, all different from each other. And Vietnam is one of them. And it is a part of me as much as China and France.

[01:43]

Anyway, where was I ? Right, Hien, my mom, is the eighth of nine children. She is the last daughter of vietnamese jeweler Uyen and chinese jeweler Rui. They had a happy life, she

would sing classic songs every morning as she helped her mother prepare rice soup for breakfast.

[01:53]

Instead of a radio, her voice was the soundtrack to their meal. She loved singing stories, and was known in the family for her beautiful singing voice. .No matter where life took them, they found solace in her singing. That's why they called her **Little Bird**.

[02:25]

Anyway, Uyen and Rui were working class people. They worked hard to provide the best education for their children. Thanks to their efforts, they were able to send their last 3 girls to the best school in the city: a French Catholic boarding school.

[02:45]

Picture a schoolyard. It's recess, the children are playing barefoot. The Mother Superior and the sisters are talking in the corner. When all of a sudden, a little girl runs towards one of the sisters and takes off her veil! She shouts to her big sister, Hoang: "I was right, she has long hair!". Hoang and the other children laugh and start running to pull off other sisters' veils...

[03:08]

That day, there was quite a mess in the boarding school. Fortunately, the nuns laughed too. They were used to this kind of mischief because that little girl was Hien, the little bird. The little bird, little bird who hides in the trees when the bell starts ringing for class. Little bird teasing lizards in the boarding school yard. And again, little bird who swaps a mango with her neighbors during evening prayer to get a bigger piece.

[03:35]

She kept her joy and mischief, despite life's trials. Because after boarding school, nothing was the same as before. One day, as she was playing outside with her dog, Hien saw her mom, Uyen, watching their beautiful house dreamily. She came closer and asked her what was wrong. "Mija, look at our house, isn't it beautiful? We will need to leave it. We had a good life, here. I hope you won't forget it." A few days after that, Hien and her family were forced to flee Vietnam." Hien was 10 years old.

[04:10]

First there was a boat to cross the Mekong. Then one town, and then another. All the way to **Thailand**. At the refugee camp in Bangkok, Hien accompanied her mother to the administrative tent **every morning**, to find out if the family name was on the departure list. **Little Bird. would hum a tune on the way there.** And one day it happened. Their name was there, written in capital letters on a blank sheet of paper. And in front of their family name, underlined, the word "France".

[05:01]

I imagine what that first day in Paris was like: My mother, a little girl of 11 wearing a bright yellow summer dress. She carries a tiny pink backpack, which she holds onto tightly to reassure herself. Inside:

- A doll that one of her sisters had made for her 10th birthday DING
- A comb for her hair, DING
- A plush toy that looked like the dog she had to leave behind in Vietnam DING
- And a small buddhist medallion necklace to wear wherever she went. DING

[05:37]

At the airport, she watches her parents try to make sense of this place. They try to speak to people, but no one understands them. They hide their frustration and smile to their children, telling them they'd soon be able to try the famous baguette! She listens quietly. As they step outside, the taxi horns blare, they are in France.

[06:13]

When Hien told us kids about her arrival, she didn't talk about the crowds, the cold or how hard it was to adjust. She said: "I got on the plane. The whole family was there. Granny had a bag, inside she had a bottle of fish sauce and soy sauce. I was sitting next to her. The plane took off. They brought me a big tray with lots of food. I tasted a green fruit and another soft thing I'd never seen before. It was delicious! It's the first time I've ever had a pear and cheese."

[06:44.]

Hien always looked on the bright side, even though her arrival in France wasn't easy: She didn't speak French. And she was separated from her family. It was impossible to find housing for all 11 of them in Paris, so each child was sent to a different foster home outside of Paris until her parents got back on their feet.

[07:15]

Francis and Claudine were kind. They took care of Hien as if she were their own daughter. And everyday, Claudine taught Hien how to speak French. She would repeat: I'm Hien, I'm vietnamese. "**Je m'appelle Hien**". "**Je suis vietnamienne**." She practiced and practiced: "**Je m'appelle Hien**". "**Je suis vietnamienne**." And every night, before bed, she would whisper: "**Je m'appelle Hien**". (chuchoté) "**Je m'appelle Hien**". It wasn't easy but it didn't take long. This little bird was motivated. Eventually, she started French school and ended up first in her class!

[08:07]

Claudine was proud of her protégée. But she noticed that something wasn't quite right. Because, despite her optimism, Hien would lock herself in her room every night. She'd close her eyes, and hold her plush dog tight. She thought about her family, of her parents and brothers and sisters. She missed them so much.

[08:38]

Until one day, while she was practicing with Claudine, her mother and sister appeared on the terrace. She thought she was dreaming, but they were really there. Finally reunited. Together, they went back to Paris.

[08:48]

The Eiffel Tower? Notre Dame? The Louvre? The Moulin Rouge? Well, that's definitely one part of Paris. But the other part, which most people don't think about, is *Les quartiers populaires, or the neighbourhoods of the people*... It's the Paris of the 19th arrondissement, where she used to take us rollerblading or biking in the Buttes Chaumont.

[09:28]

It's the Saturday morning market in the 20th where she'd be tempted by everything she saw, returning home carrying her own weight in fruits and veggies. It's the Paris of 13th, with its asian grocery stores where she'd buy her favorite ingredients. The 13th, with its chinese restaurants and karaoke bars where, she celebrated her wedding, singing all night for her friends and family.

[09:58]

That's **Little bird's** Paris. Or rather, Laura's. In Paris, Her name became Laura. She was asked to choose a French name when she became a citizen. On the radio, Johnny Hallyday's song, Laura, was playing over and over. She liked it, so she decided to change her name to Laura. **And she said: Je m'appelle Laura, Je suis française.**

[10:10]

More than 40 years have passed since Hien and her family arrived at Charles de Gaulle airport. The little girl would never have imagined all that awaited her in France. She learned to speak, read and write French perfectly. Laura is very resourceful and knows how to do everything. So she very quickly found odd jobs: she became a jeweler, a saleswoman, a seamstress in turn. And, most important of all, she stayed close to her family and her culture.

[10:42]

She cooked Chinese noodle soup, Vietnamese pancakes or Thai pasta that she ate in Asia. And would sing songs from home. She would visit her parents and pay tribute to her ancestors. She had three children. 3 little French citizens. She gave them everything she had and said: "Later you can become a doctor, a lawyer, or the President of the French Republic."

[10:55]

She felt grateful for all the things that happened since she arrived in France. She instilled in her children a love for Asia that inspired her son **Julien** to return to China. When he was ready to go, she gave him the buddha medallion she'd brought with her all those years ago. "Take it on your journey," she said. "So it protects you and you never forget where you came from."

[11:43]

This episode was produced by Studio Ochenta. Our Executive Producer is Lory Martinez. Our Associate Producer is Melanie Hong. Story by Melanie Hong. Sound design by Lory Martinez. Artist: Tiffanie Delune. Theme: Gabriel Dalmasso Follow us on twitter and instagram @mijapodcast, m-i-j-a podcast. If you liked the show, you should tell a friend about it and leave us a few stars on apple podcasts in the meantime. See you next time!

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