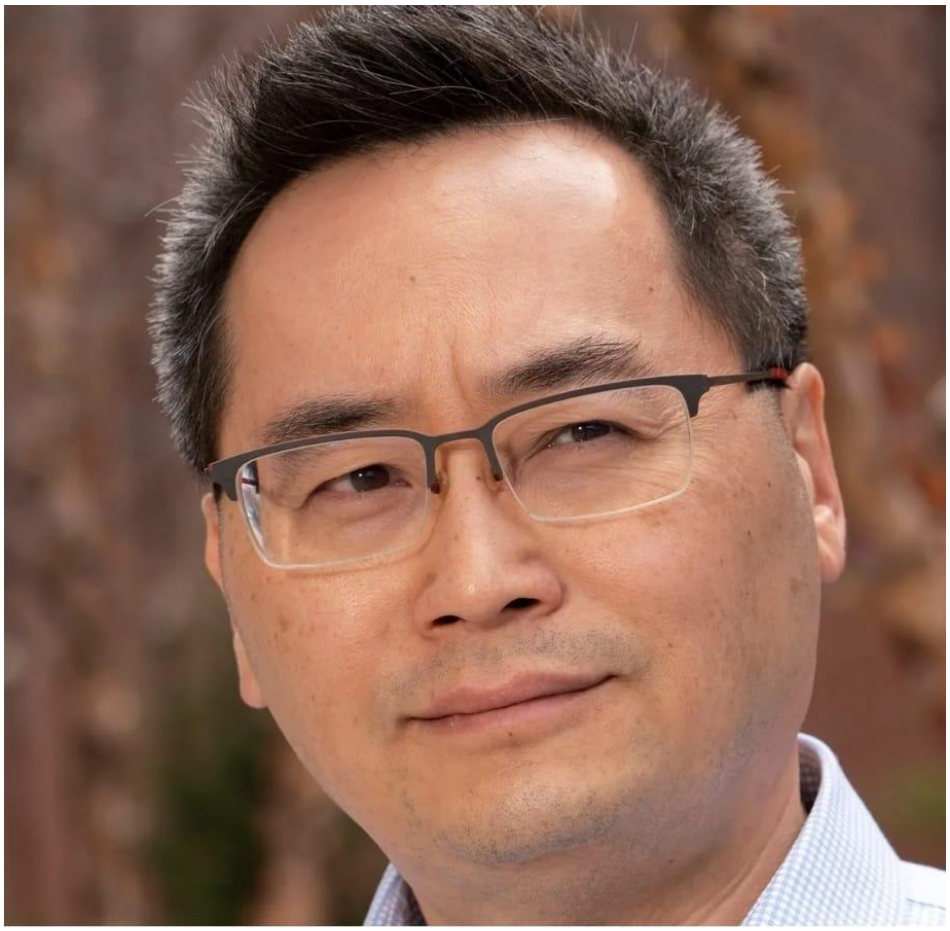
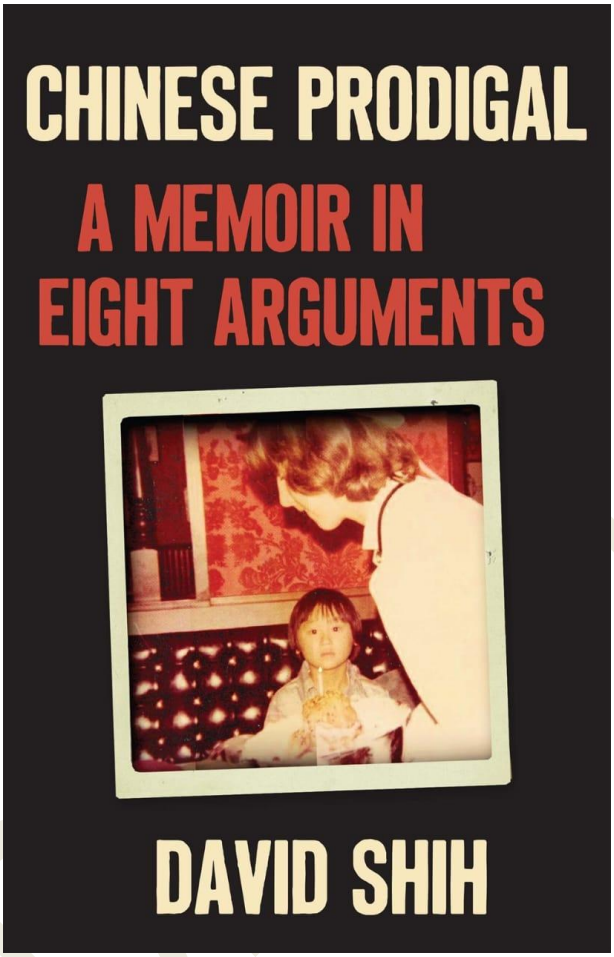
Biography of David Shih



Chinese Prodigal

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Chapter 1
A Hong Kong Infant and a “Model” Childhood in Texas (1970s–1980s)



David Shih was born in Hong Kong in 1971 and immigrated to the United States with his parents when he was only one year old. His family followed a familiar pattern among Chinese immigrants: his parents left China for America, purchased a home, opened a business and engaged in wholesale trading. They settled in Texas, where Shih grew up in the Dallas area.

In Texas during the 1970s and 1980s, the meaning of Asian identity was “still being negotiated.” Shih later wrote that he had “mastered English at the expense of Chinese,” and that by elementary school, he had not only ceased to need his parents' guidance but had begun actively distrusting it. This linguistic separation became the starting point for his later exploration of identity. His father worked as a travelling salesman, spending much of his time away from home, while his mother managed the household. The family sought to integrate into American society, but Shih grew up under the weight of expectations associated with being a “Chinese prodigy”: academically accomplished, obedient and devoted to following an established path. These expectations became one of the defining burdens of his childhood.

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Chapter 2
From an Engineering Scholarship to English Studies: An Unconventional Turn Towards Becoming a “Prodigal Son”

When David Shih entered university, he initially received an engineering scholarship. For the son of Chinese immigrants, this appeared to be the “correct” path: practical, stable and approved by his parents. Ultimately, however, he lost the scholarship. Several years later, in an unexpected turn, he received a graduate fellowship supported by affirmative action and pursued advanced studies in English.

From his parents' perspective, this change of direction amounted almost to becoming a prodigal son. He had abandoned the prescribed path of the “model minority” in favour of a discipline that seemed to offer little financial security. Yet this very decision provided him with the intellectual tools he would later use to examine his personal identity and family history. He earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Texas, a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of Oregon, and a doctorate in English from the University of Michigan.

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Chapter 3
A Predominantly White Academic Department in Wisconsin and an Interracial Marriage

In 1999, David Shih began teaching in the Department of English at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, with an additional affiliation in the Department of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Working in a predominantly white academic department, he became a professor specialising in Asian American literature and critical studies.

He married a white woman, and they had a son of mixed racial heritage. His interracial marriage and the birth of their child prompted him to reconsider the racial geography of American society. He later wrote that his parents eventually supported his “stereotype-breaking decisions,” as well as his white wife and future parents-in-law. He examined these relationships against the historical background of the Supreme Court decision that established the constitutional right to interracial marriage.

His writing began appearing in major national media outlets, including The New York Times, NPR's Code Switch, The New Republic, Slate, and Inside Higher Ed. Gradually, he emerged as a public commentator on questions of Asian American identity.

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Chapter 4
2019: His Father's Death and an Arrival That Came Too Late

In 2019, David Shih's father died from complications associated with diabetes. Shih did not return in time to see his father before his death.

At the beginning of Chinese Prodigal, he acknowledged: “The simple answer, although not entirely inaccurate, is that I was selfish and indifferent.” Yet he refused to accept this explanation as sufficient. He began examining his past, connecting his late arrival with other, more complicated reasons. This process ultimately developed into the eight arguments that give his memoir its subtitle.

He contrasted his father's approach to life as an immigrant, that of an imperfect problem-solver who faced difficulties with limited choices, used whatever resources were available and accepted the consequences, with his own approach as the son of immigrants, despite having arrived in America at the age of one. As Shih explained, “You almost take pleasure in the problem, in thinking about it and having the time to consider it carefully. There is a particular kind of enjoyment in that.”

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Chapter 5
Chinese Prodigal: Asian America Through Eight Arguments

Chinese Prodigal was published by Atlantic Monthly Press in August 2023. The 292-page memoir contains eight chapters, each presented as an argument. Its title deliberately plays upon the expression “Chinese prodigy.” Shih stated explicitly: “I don't believe in the Chinese prodigy. I don't believe there is anything natural about being Asian American or Chinese American in this society. That is, there is nothing genetic, biological, or essential about who you are. Who you are is a construction, an invention.”

The book is organised as follows:

• Chinese Prodigal: His father's death and his arrival too late.

• The Book of Genesis: The creation story of his family.

• It's Not Fair: An examination of the meaning of fairness.

• Affirmative Action Hire: Affirmative action and his own academic journey.

• Loving Story: Interracial marriage.

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• Madame Chu's: Chinese restaurants and racial stereotypes.

• Paper Son: Paper sons and immigrant identity.

• Eleven and a Half Pounds: An eventual return and reconciliation.

The book's central argument is that “Asian American” is a constructed and invented identity whose visibility has “always been relative, coming into focus only when it aligns with broader political agendas.” Beginning with the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, Shih traces how Asian American identity emerged in the United States after the Civil Rights Movement, how it was shaped by the myth of the model minority, and how it became entangled in controversies surrounding affirmative action.

Kirkus Reviews awarded the book a starred review, describing it as “a profound and fearlessly honest Asian American memoir.” Chang-rae Lee praised it as “essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the distinctive narratives of the Asian American experience, both public and private.”

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Chapter 6
Concluding Reflections: The Honesty of a Prodigal Son

David Shih's life cannot easily be summarised through a conventional success story. He did not follow the path laid out by his engineering scholarship, did not become the practical and professionally secure son his parents had expected, and did not arrive in time to see his father before his death. In his own book, he even described himself as “selfish and indifferent.”

Yet it is precisely this refusal to romanticise his experiences or deceive himself that gives his story its distinctive strength. He is not a conventional “model minority”: he lost his engineering scholarship and pursued a doctorate in English with support from affirmative action. He does not present himself as an exemplary filial son: he missed his father's final moments. Nor does he accept an essentialist understanding of Asian identity: he insists that “Asian American” is an invented identity, shaped through a series of social constructions and disguises.

From Hong Kong to Texas, from engineering to English literature, and from being one of the few Asian faces in a predominantly white academic department to becoming a husband and father within an interracial family, David Shih has used his eight arguments to pursue a sustained examination of

what it means to become an American with honesty. His answer is suggested by the title of his memoir: to be a prodigal son is to refuse an identity predetermined by others, and, after departing from the expected path, finally to learn what it means to return home.

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