

LI LIEN-FUNG

A Daughter 李廉凤
Remembers



A DAUGHTER REMEMBERS

IN SEPTEMBER 1923, A MAN IN HIS MID-THIRTIES WAS WALKING aimlessly in the woods at Haines Falls in Catskill Park, in upstate New York. He looked around at the autumn colors, but could only think of his past and his future.

Suddenly he saw two pieces of *lingzhi*₁, each the size of a round fan. Absent-mindedly he picked them up, took them home, and later carved on them many words.

That man was my father.

When I was born, he was in New York, U.S.A., and my mother was in Shanghai, China.

I had always wanted to know a little more about them.

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- 1 *Lingzhi* (灵芝). *Basidiomycota*, a kind of fungi that is known as “mushroom of immortality” to the Chinese. It is reddish brown in color and shaped like a fan, hard on one side but smooth on the other.



A view of the two pieces of *lingzhi*. On their surfaces can be seen my father's copy of the letter "An Answer to Su Wu."

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*Dedicated to the memory of
my mother Luo Bu-ge (罗步歌) and my father Li Kuo-ching (李国钦).*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WRITING A BOOK THE FIRST TIME WAS FUN; TRANSLATING IT WAS A bore, and checking the finished manuscript was an absolute torture.

The following are some of my reasons.

1. I came to dislike my own writing more and more as time went by and wished I could re-write it.

2. As I grew older, I tended to lose whatever little skill I had acquired in my secondary language which, in this case, is English. I guess what the experts said about old age is right.

3. At the age of eighty-seven, going on eighty-eight, I preferred to knit and watch my DVD dramas at the same time than sit upright in front of a desk, typing out the letters on the keyboard.

4. Since the brightness of the computer screen strained my eyes, I preferred to mark up amendments directly on the print-outs instead of using the computer, and that, God knows, took more time and effort. The silly practise went on and on until I finally gave up and went back to the brightness of the screen and felt proud of being such a martyr.

5. I found it was more fun to have work done for me than by me.

I can go on and on with my excuses, but what I really wish to say is that this book cannot be published without Minfong's loving encouragement and, more importantly, her never-tiring efforts in correcting me, not just my English, but the events and time and places I wrote about, which *she* thought she knew and she remembered. Thanks to her, I almost re-wrote half of the book.

Thus, I take this opportunity to record my sincere thanks to my daughter Ho Minfong who put aside her own professional writing to help me.

Nor could the book be finished without my secretary Gillian Yang's repeated typing and numerous print-outs of the much corrected manuscript, in addition to her other official duties.

I also give my thanks to Violet and Mei Lin from Marshall Cavendish, who have patiently waited for this, to Fiona Goh who has given me

guidance and courage and to NAC who gave me the grant to finish the book.

Frankly, I do not know why they were willing to put up with me.

*Li Lien-fung,
August 2011.*

INTRODUCTION

WHEN I WAS PREPARING THE TRANSLATION OF THIS BOOK FROM the original Chinese edition, 两片灵芝, naturally I thought of calling it “Two Pieces of Lingzhi” which, as far as the meaning was concerned, was absolutely correct. But somehow it sounded like a recipe for an omelet, and not even an appetizing omelet at that. That was why I was overjoyed when my editors suggested changing it to “A Daughter Remembers.”

A daughter remembering was exactly how I felt as I meandered through the murky fog of my memory to find an answer to an issue which had perplexed me all my life: What were my parents really like? What did they mean to each other? What roles did they play in each other’s lives?

Unlike most people, I never, as a baby, had my father hold me in his arms and admire the intricacy with which God had created my ears. And unlike most young women, as I grew up, I never heard a word of motherly advice as I struggled through marriage and raised children. My parents were both there, somewhere in my life, but they were like two separate identities which appeared in different segments of time in my life.

As a matter of fact, I do not remember ever seeing my parents together.

And yet, in my own way, I seem to know both of them well, but never well enough to completely understand them. I knew my mother intimately when I was a child, but since I was young, I never thought of her as someone that could have feelings as an adult. My father was a complete stranger to me until I became a teenager. By then, we had both learned to mask our thoughts and feelings even though we could laugh, joke, gossip, and discuss business together. Only in my father’s later life did we, sometimes, learn to put aside these masks.

That is why, all my life, I have thought and wondered about my parents. In the last two years, as my own life is coming close to an end, I have tried to analyze them by sifting through my memories. This book, therefore, is not my autobiography, nor is it a biography of my father or my mother. It is how I remember them.

Others who think they know my parents better than I do may question that some parts of my memories are not accurate or portrayed truthfully, but what I have written reflects exactly the title of this book: *A Daughter Remembers* her parents who, very likely, shared a bond of love throughout their lives even though they had formally parted ways.

I had to tell their story.

[Publisher's note: Li Lien-fung passed away just before the book went to press.]

WHILE MY FATHER WAS WORKING IN THE UNITED STATES, MY mother lived with her in-laws the way Chinese wives always did. There were many uncles in our household, but since male adults were generally seen but not talked to, we listened more often to our aunts, especially when, during long summer nights, we sat in our backyard under the moon, while they gossiped about the old days.

Sitting on my mother's knees, I believed every word that was said, giving me a lasting memory that was full of nostalgia and a lingering sense of sadness. But now, thinking back on it, I often wondered how much of what I heard was really true.

We urged Mama to tell us about our ancestors. She laughed and said: "I can tell you only about your Zeng-zufu¹, because I know nothing about what happened before him. As you know, his surname was Li, and as the saying goes, "every one under the sky is named Li"², so naturally there had been a lot of Li's in this world, including a great many who were famous and powerful. Unfortunately, none of them had the slightest connection with him or with us."

At this point, Fifth Aunt³ interrupted: "According to your uncles, your ancestor came from Jiangxi⁴ province."

Xin-pei⁵, the baby among us cousins, asked in bewilderment: "What has Jiangxi got to do with us? We live here in Shanghai!"

Fifth Aunt corrected him: "We may live here in Shanghai, but we moved from Hunan⁶ and just happen to live here now, that's all."

Mama smiled. "Yes, there was a lot of moving around. We came from Hunan but have now moved to Shanghai, and your ancestor came from Jiangxi but had moved to Hunan. Why did he move? I have no idea. Perhaps he met a pretty Hunanese girl and decided to stay to marry her, or perhaps he was a notorious burglar coming to Hunan to hide. I don't know. What I do know is that he settled down in Hunan, Changsha⁷ East Village, Big Round Up, Dismounting Slope, and you are some of his many descendants."

I did not care whether I was one of his many descendants, but that address was one I knew by heart because, although we had moved to Shanghai, our uncles feared that we might forget our 'origin,' which was a

terrible sin according to Confucius, so they had drilled us so thoroughly that we could not forget that address even if we had tried.

Not that I ever tried to forget it. Personally, I rather liked the address because it had that romantic flavor of Three Kingdoms⁸. Changsha was the city that the all-time glorious warrior Guan Gong⁹ had defended. East Village was probably so named to differentiate it from the noble lord's other South, West and North villages. Big Round Up must be the lord's hunting ground where the peasants rounded up the wild beasts for him and his cronies to kill. Dismounting Slope? That must be where the heroes from Three Kingdoms dismounted from their horses.

Unfortunately, those from our family could only watch the heroes climb up and down the horses but they never had the luck to ride one. I understand that, for generations and generations, we were just tenant farmers, or what the peasants called, "those who cleared cow's dung." Of course none of our ancestors knew how to read, much less pass an Imperial Examination to earn a degree of *xiuca*¹⁰ or *zhuangyuan*¹¹. We tenant farmers did not even own our land. We could only rent it and cultivate it.

Around the reign of Daoguang (1821–1851), my Zeng-zufu, either from his meager savings or from some illegally begotten fortune, finally had enough money to buy a piece of land. Small though it was, he could support his family of seven on it. But that piece of land, about the size of a beancurd, if divided equally among his five sons, could not keep them and their families alive. Thus he had to follow the time-honored way of the peasants leaving the land only to their eldest sons while sending the others to the city to be apprentices to blacksmiths, or tailors, or whatever. His youngest son, my own Granddad, also his most beloved child, was meant to be a carpenter because, in the eyes of my Zeng-zufu, no other trade could earn a more comfortable living than that of a carpenter.

The only thing about becoming a carpenter was that he had to know how to hold a brush-pen so that he could draw decent pictures of chairs, tables and cabinets. So my Zeng-zufu wanted to send this son to the village school. But he had no money. What was he to do? Where could one find a teacher who would not ask for tuition?

"Ha, lucky for him," laughed Mama. "In the very village where he lived, there was a teacher who was willing to accept eggs and vegetables as tuition. Your Zeng-zufu did not have much, but he did have a lot of

vegetables and quite a lot of eggs, thus thanks to the vegetables and the eggs, your Granddad got into school and became the first one in your family who broke the bondage of illiteracy.”

Granddad had four elder brothers who toiled in the fields along with their father, so he could be spared to study at his leisure. And since his teacher never got tired of vegetables and eggs, he could continue to be properly tutored until he was ten, old enough for him to be taken to the city to be a carpenter’s apprentice. With that in mind, Zeng-zufu went to the teacher to bid him goodbye.

The teacher was a traditional scholar. Because he himself never got past the title of *juren*¹² in the Imperial Examination, he had hoped to be able to teach a student who could become one. He found that, although Granddad came from an illiterate family, the ten-year-old boy was rather gifted and might just someday fulfill his wish, so he was reluctant to let the boy quit school.

He said to Zeng-zufu: “Let your son study a few years more with me. He can then take the Imperial Examination and perhaps become a government official. It would bring glory and wealth to your family. Wouldn’t that be better than being a carpenter?”

Zeng-zufu’s answer was cold and simple. “Such fortune is not for the likes of us.”

The teacher tried to persuade him, but Zeng-zufu remained adamant. Finding Zeng-zufu’s stubbornness beyond reason, the teacher changed his tactic and suggested that his student, my Granddad, study accounting. Surely, he said, an accountant earned more than a carpenter. Zeng-zufu puffed on his pipe for a long while then finally agreed.

As far as the teacher was concerned, nothing in the world was nobler, as the old proverb said, than “studying to be an official”¹³, so he felt that in order to be “an official,” any kind of deception was permissible. Therefore, under the ruse of studying accounting, he taught Granddad to read and write essays as if he were to sit for the Examination. Since Zeng-zufu could not read, it was not difficult to deceive him. All Zeng-zufu complained about was that Granddad burned too much midnight oil.

To prepare Granddad, the teacher took him, without telling Zeng-zufu, to try out all sorts of formal and informal Examinations. When the time was finally ripe he and Granddad went to town, registered themselves for the

city-level examination, took it, and quietly returned to the village to await results.

I don't believe this part of the story. Things couldn't have been so simple. A penniless teacher could not have afforded to bring an equally penniless pupil to town, and not just once but several times. Besides, without parental approval, how could he have registered the son? But, whether I believe it or not, this was what I was told. The story was that, without Zeng-zufu's permission, my Granddad passed the Examination and became a *xiucaï*.

With drums and gongs, the professional messengers from the city came to bring the good news. When they reached Zeng-zufu's cottage and asked for the traditional reward money, Zeng-zufu not only refused to pay but even got into a loud quarrel with them. Thankfully, his neighbors calmed him down and made him pay some money to get rid of those messengers. But that did not quench the fury Zeng-zufu harbored against his son and the school teacher.

"What have you two done behind my back?" he lashed out at his son.

Just then, not knowing he had offended Zeng-zufu, the teacher came to congratulate him. He explained: "The reason I didn't tell you was because I didn't want you to worry. Now that he has gotten a *xiucaï*, you can send him to the next Examination. It will be wonderful if he gets a *juren* the next time."

"No," said Zeng-zufu in a cold and steely voice, "there won't be any next time!"

"But why not?" demanded my Granddad.

Not only did Granddad want to know, but all his grandchildren, sitting on our bamboo stools and listening in Shanghai to the story, also wanted to know. Although we were all born in an era when the Imperial Examination had been abolished for more than seventy years, there was not one among us who was not familiar with the folk stories in which a scholar suddenly found himself a *zhuangyuan*. From time immemorial, it seems a scholar's dream was to become a *zhuangyuan*, after which he would become famous all over China, and even get to marry a royal princess! So why would Zeng-zufu deny his son a chance to raise his status in life?

We couldn't ask our Zeng-zufu or Granddad because they were both dead long before we were born. As for Granddad's sons, my Fifth Uncle¹⁴

knew him best, but Fifth Uncle looked so unapproachable that we seldom asked him about any story. When we asked Fifth Aunt, she said: “Everyone said your Zeng-zufu was eccentric, so that was probably one of his eccentricities.” Mama, when asked, answered in her usual honest manner: “I don’t know for I had never met your Zeng-zufu or your Granddad.”

My aunt Man-yi¹⁵ had her own answer. “Maybe your Granddad did actually take the examination, but because he didn’t pass it, to save face, he used your Zeng-zufu as an excuse.”

This explanation, though cynical, is not impossible. But on second thought, if Mama had never met Granddad, how could her younger sister know the truth? It was probably only Man-yi’s own guess. Because her own father was a *jinshi*¹⁶, she thought failing an Examination must be so humiliating that it was worth lying for, but she underestimated my Granddad’s contempt for the Imperial Examination.

Strangely, a more likely answer came from my father, many years later. It did not come when I was in Shanghai, but when I was in the United States.

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- 1 Zeng-zufu (曾祖父). Great-grandfather.
 - 2 “Everyone under the sky is named Li.” (天下李.) A common saying because so many people in China are named Li.
 - 3 Fifth Aunt (五伯母). Wife of my Fifth Uncle.
 - 4 Jiangxi (江西). A province of China.
 - 5 Xin-pei (新培). My younger cousin, son of Fifth Uncle.
 - 6 Hunan (湖南). The province my family came from.
 - 7 Changsha (长沙). The capital of Hunan province.
 - 8 Three Kingdoms (三国). The period in history (220-280) when China was divided into three kingdoms: Wei, Shu, and Wu.
 - 9 Guan Gong (关公) the famous warrior from the Three Kingdoms period. He is said to be the god of all warriors.
 - 10 *Xiucai* (秀才). Those who had passed the first of the Imperial Examination held at county level.
 - 11 *Zhuangyuan* (状元). The best of all candidates passing the Imperial Examination at national level and was awarded personally by the Emperor himself.
 - 12 *Juren* (举人). Those who had passed the second of the Imperial Examination held at provincial level.
 - 13 “Studying to be an official.” (学而优则仕.) Said by Confucius.
 - 14 Fifth Uncle (五伯). My Fifth Uncle.
 - 15 Man-yi (满姨). My mother’s younger sister.
 - 16 *Jinshi* (进士). Those who had passed the third of the Imperial Examination held at the national level.



I WAS ALREADY 20 AND MY FATHER IN HIS FIFTIES, WHEN WE sat gossiping in the kitchen of his house in Long Island, New York. We had just had our dinner. The dishes were washed and stacked away. All the other family members at the table had retired to their rooms, and my father and I were left alone to enjoy conversing in our Hunan dialect. After a long day of speaking clipped English, the soft vowels of our dialect sounded very soothing to us.

“Diedie₁,” I said, “Granddad has been long dead and yet I still don’t know why he was not allowed to take his second Imperial Examination. Did Zeng-zufu really forbid him to?”

“Oh that,” my father heaved a long sigh. “With the possible exception of your Fifth Uncle, no one but I knows what really happened. Your Granddad had kept it as a secret, out of respect for his father. He told me only the night before I left for England.”

“Out of respect for his father?” I repeated. “Do you mean my Zeng-zufu?”

“Of course I mean your Zeng-zufu! It was the secret of your Zeng-zufu that your Granddad was guarding. You see, your Zengzufu was a follower of the Taiping Rebellion₂.”

I was surprised speechless. With me physically sitting in America, my thoughts flew over time and space to the famous rebels whom even Chairman Mao had praised. To think that my own great-grandfather had something to do with these rebels made my blood tingle.

“To understand the story,” continued my father, “we must go back to the days when your Zeng-zufu was a young man. By the way, how much do you know about the Taiping Rebellion?”

“Only what is common knowledge in history, I suppose. I know who Hong Xiu-quan₃ and Zeng Guo-fan₄ were, and that’s about all.”

“In that case, tell me in what year the revolt actually began? No? Then I’ll tell you. It was in 1850 when Hong Xiu-quan raised his flag in Guangxi₅. In two short years, he had led his army victoriously all the way to Hunan. For seventy days, he laid siege to our city of Changsha. However, it was there that he met his nemesis: the Hunan Militia, who resisted no

matter how viciously he attacked. After two and half months, Hong Xiuquan did not wish to waste any more time, so he gave up Changsha and swung his army northward. For the next fourteen years, he occupied nearly half of China until his empire finally crumbled in 1864.

“You have read all that in the history books, but what you cannot find in the books is how his seventy-day siege affected our Li family.”

“Affected our Li family?” I repeated like an idiot.

“I suppose some people would say it’s all a matter of *yuanfen*₆,” sighed my father. “At the time of the siege, your Zeng-zufu was barely thirty, newly married, and living outside the city. If he had lived inside the city, he would have been recruited by the militia and would have fought against the Taiping Rebels for seventy long bloody days. Then, like all others in the militia, he would have hated the Taiping Rebels.

“But it was his *yuanfen* to have lived in the village outside the city, where the Taiping army settled their camps. And as luck would have it, it was during the early days of the Taiping Rebellion when their army discipline was at its best. Unlike the government troops who usually harassed and bullied the populace, the rebels treated the villagers as their own family. Not only were they humble and polite, they even paid for their food and lodging. When your Zeng-zufu came to the camps to sell the vegetables he grew, he made his first contact with the rebels.

“He soon became friends with the soldiers. The next thing he knew, he was sitting under the trees with other village youths and listening to the rebels explain their goals. The main objective of course, was the expulsion of the Manchu from China, but they also advocated equal distribution of land, equality between men and women, freedom of speech and all sorts of things that your Zeng-zufu had never even dreamed of. I don’t know how much he understood, but whatever little he did won his whole-hearted support.

“It was the same with the other young men; they were all fired up with revolutionary zest. Seventy days later, when the rebels were withdrawing from Changsha, these young fellows went with them. Your Zeng-zufu also wished to go, but he had a wife and children to support. Who would feed them if he went? So he stayed.

“After his friends left with the Taiping army, he waited patiently for news. When the rebels fought triumphantly from town to town, he silently

cheered on their behalf – he did not dare to do so openly because he still lived in the government-controlled area. However, a new army, with most of its soldiers recruited from Hunan, led and trained by our countryman Zeng Guo-fan, came to fight the Taiping Rebels. After years of battle, Zeng Gou-fan’s army, aided by the cannons of Western mercenaries, finally crushed the rebellion in 1864.

“When the downfall of Taiping was celebrated all over China, your Zeng-zufu was heart-broken, but he couldn’t show his despair because it was a capital crime even to be a sympathizer. He could not say it, but he secretly blamed himself for the collapse of the Rebellion...”

“That’s ridiculous!” I snapped. “The Taiping Rebellion failed because they had internal power struggles, corruption, etc. How could he be responsible for all that?”

“Of course he could not. You know and I know, but your Zengzufu didn’t. He was a simple peasant who knew nothing about politics. He only felt guilty that he hadn’t kept faith with his friends. All he could do, to be true to them now that they were gone, was to vow never to serve the Manchu Emperor. With that in mind, how do you think he could allow his son to take an examination whose ultimate aim was to uphold the Manchu ruling class? That was why he did not let your Granddad take the examination. How was he to know that the teacher would trick him?”

“But his son, against his wishes, had now become a *xiuca*. He could continue to use his parental prerogative to forbid his son to take another exam, but why should his son listen to him? After all, your Granddad was old enough to make up his own mind. If he insisted on taking more exams, there was nothing your Zeng-zufu could do to prevent it.

“One day, your Zeng-zufu took your Granddad to sit on a hill top, and pointed at the land beneath them. He talked about how the rebels had aimed to recover this very land from the hated Manchu rule. He told of the siege of Changsha, and how he had admired the rebels and their grand ideas. That talk must have made a great impact on your Granddad because, even as he relayed it to me, his voice trembled with emotion.

“Finally, your Granddad said to his father: ‘I am your son. I will not fail you. I shall never take a job whose pay is from the government, such as a soldier, a policeman, a magistrate, or even a prime minister.’”

“When your Granddad finished telling the story, he smiled ruefully at me. He said: ‘I don’t know which of us was more naïvely foolish – he who wished to keep faith with men who were dead, or I who made a silly promise for no better reason than to make my old man happy.’

“I guess,” concluded my father, “our whole family is foolish in some respect or other.”

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- 1 Diedie (爹爹). Like almost all children in old China, I have always called my father “Diedie,” but I have been told that it may sound very strange to my non-Chinese readers. I could change it to “Daddy” or “Papa,” but after a great deal of consideration, I prefer to stick to my own term for him because he would always be my “Diedie.”
 - 2 Taiping Rebellion (太平天国). A peasant revolution in China around 1850 to 1870 which advocated, most of all, the overthrow of Manchu rule.
 - 3 Hong Xiu-quan (洪秀全). The founder and self-acclaimed emperor of the Taiping Rebellion. He called God his father and preached in his name.
 - 4 Zeng Guo-fan (曾国藩). The Qing Dynasty scholar-general who defeated the Taiping Rebellion.
 - 5 Guangxi (广西). A province of China.
 - 6 *Yuanfen* (缘份). The equivalent to “karma” in English.



SITTING IN THE KITCHEN OF MY FATHER'S HOME IN AMERICA, thinking about the frustrations my Granddad suffered in Imperial China, I felt as though time and space had slipped away and I could touch my Granddad's arm. Suddenly, my father broke my reverie.

"Just like the old fable says," he laughed, "when the old man of Sai lost a horse, who knew it was a blessing₁? Whether he was foolish or wise, your Granddad did the right thing by us children when he did not take any further examinations, even though it seemed like a sacrifice at the time."

"Oh?" I asked curiously, "how was that?"

"Well just think," my father waved his arms in a grandiose manner. "Had he gone to one of those exams and passed it and become a high government official, what do you think would have happened to his children? We would have been a bunch of good-for-nothings who had no scientific knowledge and would have been eliminated by our society today. But, since he did not take the exams and did not become an official, he was able to break away from the tradition of pursuing only Confucian ethics. He encouraged us to study the sciences, so that we could all adapt to the new society and carve out careers for ourselves. There!"

"Diedie," I smiled, "how you can brag!"

"I wasn't bragging," shrugged my father. "Every word I said is true. Didn't my generation carve out a new direction in life so your generation could follow?"

I had to laugh in spite of myself, but I chose to change the subject. "I hear that Granddad finally became a *muliao*₂, is that true?"

"Yes, it's true. A *xiucai* who could never be a *juren* and therefore never be a government official was nothing to brag about. Only three courses of action were open to him: to become a teacher, a professional *xiucai*, or a *muliao*. Be a teacher? He couldn't very well compete with his former teacher; besides, his village couldn't afford to have two teachers. Some people suggested that he should go to the city and offer legal service to the rich because, as a *xiucai*, he was considered by law as a 'friend' or an 'equal' to a magistrate, meaning he could be in a more convenient position to offer bribes. But your Granddad had too much of a conscience to do that.

“So the only thing left for him was to be a *muliao*. Even that job came only through the recommendation of his former teacher. At least as a *muliao* his salary was paid by the magistrate who hired him and not directly by the government, so it could be said that he and his father did not betray their vows. By the way, do you know what sort of work a *muliao* did?”

“He was like a secretary, wasn’t he?”

“Well, more or less. He had to take care of the usual paperwork, such as drafting official documents and writing private correspondence, but he was also expected to be at the beck and call of his boss. The nature of his work depended mostly on the whims of his employer. There were times when all a *muliao* did was to help entertain at banquets, speak amusingly to the guests, play chess with his boss, and perhaps sometimes even get to say a few kind words on behalf of some innocent people. But if his boss was the sort who liked women and wine, then he might have to keep him company in drinking or whoring. Above all, they were trusted to negotiate bribes, something your Granddad hated.

“Your Granddad was a *muliao*, but he was not a happy one. Luckily he was young, his penmanship was excellent, and on the whole he was easy-going, so he was well liked by his various bosses.

“But there was one good thing one could say about being a *muliao*: he got to travel a lot. It gave your Granddad the opportunity to leave his village and see the wide world as he followed his boss’s different postings. He saw things he had never seen before. He often told us how he marveled at the fantastic speed of the steamship which could easily overtake the sailing vessel he was on. He thought to himself that if all the books he had studied could not make him understand the technology of these ships, then something was wrong with his books. He concluded that everything he had studied to pass the Imperial Examination was a waste of time. Technology had surpassed ethics. To save China, he realized, her young men had to learn Western science. He had to prepare his children for that day and he worked with that in mind.

“After he had been a *muliao* for more than ten years, he had made enough to return to his village, buy a small piece of land, and cultivate it. At that time, the Manchu government was busy squandering huge sums of money on the construction of the Empress Dowager’s Summer Palace, with little thought on reforming education. Not until its defeat at the naval battle

in 1894 did the government start the system of ‘New Schools’³ in earnest. That was the beginning of reform in schools, but the reform did not come to our village. Hunan had always been more conservative than the other provinces in China. Compared to major cities like Beijing and Shanghai, ours was always behind. When we were kids, there was not even one primary school in the whole city of Changsha, much less in our village.

“Since your Granddad put all his hopes on his children, he had to teach us himself. I remember how every morning we had to work on the land, digging, hoeing, adding fertilizers, etc. Those were the gifts from your Granddad that enriched our whole lives. What? You are laughing again? What did I say that was not right? Look at all your uncles! Who among us does not toil in our gardens after a hard day of work at the office?”

What he said was true. All of my father’s brothers had this hobby of working in their backyards. They worked in their homes in Shanghai, in Port Arthur, in Hankou, and in the United States. Among them, my father’s ‘farm’ was the largest. He planted cabbage, spinach, leeks, and other vegetables, and even used cobble stones to mark the path leading to the garden with words in Chinese: “Old Man of Xin Garden”⁴. Calling himself “old” was probably only when he wanted to feel poetic. When did he ever admit he was old?

My father continued his boasting. “We not only had to weed, kill bugs, fertilize, and water the vegetables every morning, but in the evening, we had to study the histories, the Analects, classical poetry, the essays written by great writers of the past and all the books your Granddad thought were useful in improving our logic and reasoning faculties. He told us he was preparing us to learn about technology if and when we had that chance. That was how your Fifth Uncle developed his interest in geometry and later became a mathematics teacher.

“If your Granddad did pass the exams, would he have taught us the same way? Doesn’t it prove that the proverb about old Sai is accurate?”

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- 1 The old man of Sai (塞翁失马). It is a fable with twist after twist. Here's how it goes: When a horse belonging to the old man Sai ran away, it was thought unfortunate. Who would know it could be a blessing? When that horse returned, it returned with a horde of mares. It was thought fortunate. Who would know it was a curse? When the son of old man Sai rode on one of the new mares, the mare threw the son and broke his leg. It was thought unfortunate. Who would know it was a blessing? When the government came to draft the young men for war, the son of old man Sai was the only one rejected because of his lame leg. Thus, after the war, he was the only young man alive in the village. Was that not a blessing?
 - 2 *Muliao* (幕僚). A man hired by a magistrate, or someone of higher rank than a magistrate, to do his official or unofficial work.
 - 3 New Schools (新学). The new schools were different from the old ones where one tutor taught pupils to study only books that were required to pass the Examination. It is like primary and secondary schools of modern day that study science and mathematics, and other subjects.
 - 4 Old Man of Xin Garden (辛园老人). Xin means hard work. My father meant himself as the hard-working old man – actually he was glorifying himself.



HOW FIFTH UNCLE STUDIED GEOMETRY ON HIS OWN WAS A STORY everyone in our family knew by heart.

One day, in 1893, when he was about sixteen or seventeen, Fifth Uncle went with his father to the city to sell their vegetables. As was their habit, they stopped on the way home at a second-hand book stall. Amidst the tattered books, he came upon one the likes of which he had never seen before. It had a hard cover and the papers inside were stiff and shiny, unlike the Chinese books whose pages, made of rice paper, were so soft that they might be rolled into cylinders. Even more astonishing to Fifth Uncle was its contents. Not only were the pages printed with little wriggly worms, but the book also had circles, squares, triangles and many incomprehensible symbols. His curiosity aroused, Fifth Uncle stood by the book stall leafing through the book slowly, not knowing that it was to be his first geometry text.

As he stood there, transfixed, with his newfound book in his hand, the bookseller turned to Granddad with an ingratiating smile. “That was left behind by a foreign missionary,” he said. “He bought it for his son, but they left last month and his servants sold it to me. Look at your son! See how mesmerized he is by it. Why don’t you buy it for him?”

Granddad had already noticed the hungry look in Fifth Uncle’s eyes, but he still answered as if he didn’t care. “Only a fool will buy a book he can’t read. Look, since nobody knows how to read it, you may as well give it to my son for free, and I will buy from you fifty sheets of writing paper. If not, I will go somewhere else.”

Negotiations went back and forth and finally, for only fifty sheets of writing paper, a book that was to determine the fate of Fifth Uncle changed hands.

At that time, he was only a teenage boy who could not read a single word of English, although he was quite proficient in Chinese. But what good was his Chinese to him now? It did not help him to understand this book; all he could do was stare at it. But because his father had always encouraged him to embrace Western technology, he went on staring.

Everything in the book fascinated him and inflamed him with curiosity. Was there any relationship between these triangles, circles, straight lines and arcs? The wriggly little worms must mean something, but what did they say? He saw a straight line dropping down perpendicularly from the apex of a triangle to its base, dividing the original triangle into two other triangles. What, he asked himself, had the line done to the two resulting triangles, or rather three triangles?

It was not easy to copy those worm-like letters. His Chinese brush-pen was too soft to deal with the twists and the swerves of the English alphabet, but he tried and tried and finally found it could be managed. Once he was familiar with the wriggly shapes, he noticed that these letters could combine to form words and then sentences. In this manner, his progress, although as slow as a snail, was impressive. How amazing it was that there were only a few letters in this alphabet, and yet they could be combined in so many different ways! He began to notice some of the more frequent combinations and guessed their meanings by comparing their positions in the sentences. Within a year, he was able to write and understand many of the words and symbols without knowing how to voice them. Since he was already very good in arithmetic, his logical and analytical mind enabled him to slowly understand geometry.

Do I mean that, before Fifth Uncle grappled with his geometry textbook, the Chinese had no such knowledge of geometry? No, of course they did. Without their skill in mathematics and physics, they could not have erected their splendid buildings, invented their seismograph, calculated their calendars, cast their bronzes, and created a culture that was the envy of the Western world. Unfortunately, the intellectuals had neglected these subjects in their eagerness to pass the Examination, and thus they were bypassed and not generally known. Nevertheless, books on these subjects had been written. Not only were there books of this kind, but even the geometry that Fifth Uncle confronted then was known in places like Beijing and Shanghai, where students returned from abroad well versed in modern geometry.

But Fifth Uncle and his family did not know of them. They lived in a small and remote village in Hunan, like “frogs living in a well”¹. They knew only the small circle of peasants around them who had no inkling that China had once possessed such traditional scientific knowledge. They had no

libraries, no newspapers, and no one to ask, so Fifth Uncle was forced to wrestle with his problems alone. He applied his cold logic and keen observations of what carpenters and builders did, gradually deciphering the mystery of the geometric theorems.

Even more excited now, he pushed on tirelessly until he could, after two long years, follow every step in the proofs of the theorems. He still could not read aloud a single word of the text, but the pronunciation of words was probably superfluous to a mind that was born mathematical and logical.

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- 1 Frog in a well (井底之蛙). A popular proverb about the perspective of a frog living in a well. Because he can see only the top rim of the well, he thinks the sky is as big as the rim.



FIFTH UNCLE'S PURSUIT OF GEOMETRY HAD NO PRACTICAL USE. It was the mental exercise that stimulated him and gave him immense pleasure. This pleasure was so infectious that his younger brothers shared his enthusiasm, often pestering him with questions. Thus it became a family wish to want to help him, and the best way they could think of doing that was to buy him a Chinese-English dictionary.

But to do that, they needed money.

Granddad decided that one way to earn this extra money was to allow his two eldest sons to take part in the bimonthly examination of *tongsheng*₁. Participants whose essays were deemed good enough would receive one or two strings of coins from the city's Scholars Bureau.

This seemed an easy enough way to earn money to Granddad. Since he had always encouraged his sons to write good essays, saying that the purpose was not for them to pass the Imperial Examination but for them to train their minds to be logical, it was no problem for them to take the writing test. His only worry was how to turn in their compositions in time to the Bureau.

The regulation of this contest specified that the topic of the essay was to be posted early morning on the Bureau's front gate, and the essay had to be submitted by the evening of the same day before the gate closed. This time limit posed no difficulty to students who lived in the city, but for those who lived in the countryside, the logistics and expenses of traveling was a great problem.

If his two sons were to enter the city the night before in order to have the time and energy to write good papers the next day, they would have to spend money to stay at an inn and to buy their meals. Their expenses would be more than the prize money. If they were to save money, they would need to rise at dawn to arrive in the city early, obtain the topic of the essay, borrow a table in a busy and noisy eating stall, and then try to write. They tried this a couple of times, but the boys found they were so tired and hungry, and so distracted by the noises at the unfamiliar work place, that they could not write properly. Both methods seemed unsatisfactory.

Granddad was feeling down and disappointed when he happened to see my father running up and down the mountain chasing after a flock of sheep. An inspiration came to him. Why not let the boy help by running? He could run to the city to get the topic of the essay, and then run home to give it to his two well rested brothers, who would write at ease in the quiet of their home. When the writing was done, he could hurry back to the city to hand in the essays. Even if none of the papers his sons wrote was awarded any money, there was nothing to lose. Once the plan was formed, Granddad put it into action. He even registered my father as a *tongsheng* to increase the family's chance of winning.

"How could he do that?" I interrupted my father. "You were still underage!"

"There is nothing about being underage!" My father cupped his hands behind his neck, leaned back and laughed. "Anyone could technically be a *tongsheng* as long as he could hold a pen. Whether he was six or sixty years old made no difference to the Bureau. When your Granddad registered one more name, it meant that he had one more chance at the award money. What did it matter who wrote the paper? We vegetable growers had always been true entrepreneurs because we know how to calculate and make a profit from our vegetables. Ha ha."

My father was about six or seven when he was given this grave responsibility. Fifty years later, recalling his childhood memories in the kitchen of his Long Island home, his voice vibrated with pride.

"I always dreaded the day of the contest," he said. "Your Grandma would wake me before dawn broke, shove a ball of cold rice into my hands and tell me to start running. I would run with my eyes half closed, still munching on my rice ball. I would reach the Bureau just in time to copy down the topic of the essay and then immediately run home to give it quickly to my brothers. Mother would feed me lunch, but I often fell asleep even before I finished eating.

"I couldn't sleep long because soon it would be time to run back to the city to hand in the essays. This was even more crucial. I had to run as fast as I could, because if I didn't, I might not arrive at the Bureau before its big door slammed, and then all our efforts would have been in vain. I always did arrive in time, though. Afterwards I could relax, but sadly then it was time to run home again."

“How many miles did you have to run a day?”

“I didn’t count in miles. I only knew that back and forth twice each day was a total running time of twelve or more hours, if each journey took three hours. The morning and the afternoon runs weren’t so bad; at least I could see where I was going. What I hated most was the night run, because by the time I was going back, it was already dark. To save time, I had to take shortcuts through the fields. Do you have any idea how many graves there are in those deserted fields? In that darkness, just the thought of all the ghosts coming from the graves was enough to give me goose pimples! Your Granddad told me, ‘Don’t be afraid, there is no such thing as a ghost.’ He was a student of Confucius, so of course he would say there was no ghost, but I thought, ‘What if both he and Confucius were wrong?’ ”

He chuckled. “Do you know a ghost did catch me once? It held on to my sleeves so tightly that I could not get away. I was so scared that I didn’t dare even breathe. My throat was so constricted that I couldn’t even scream ‘Help,’ so I just stood there trembling. After a long time of nothing happening, I gathered enough courage to make negotiations with the ghost. I said, ‘I am only a little boy. If you hurt me, you are just a bully.’ I waited for it to respond, but it paid me no attention, so I turned around to argue with him. It was only then that I saw the ‘ghost’ was the branch of a tree.” He smiled wryly. “Some people told me that after such an experience, one would know better than be afraid of ghosts again. But I admit, I still am uneasy about them.”

My father died in 1961. Only after his death did we find out that he had already purchased his final resting place, which looked more like a park than a cemetery, with no tombstones jutting from the ground and no trees with ugly branches to tug any sleeves. I wondered if his choice had anything to do with his early experiences as a little boy.

1 *Tongsheng* (童生). This term literally meant “child-students,” but students of any age who had not yet passed their first Imperial Examination were included.



I DON'T KNOW HOW MANY ESSAYS MY UNCLES WROTE FOR THE Scholars Bureau, nor do I know how many times my father had to do his nerve-wrecking midnight runs, but in any case, more than three years later, the family finally collected enough money to send for the long-awaited dictionary from Shanghai.

Fifth Uncle had already, from his three years of immersion in diagrams and formulae, figured out the principles of geometry. I was always secretly amused that he had been lucky because the vocabulary used in explaining geometry was comparatively simple and repetitious so that he could more readily grasp the theories. Had it been algebra, the pursuit of it would have been many times more difficult!

Blessed with the new dictionary, Fifth Uncle could now finally confirm the meaning of each word, while still paying no attention to how it might sound. Laboriously he wrote the Chinese translations over the English text in minute strokes. It took him a year or so to check all the words and to review what he had previously guessed. When he confirmed that his understanding of geometry was correct, it was probably the greatest gratification he had ever experienced.

It also meant that he could now tackle the problems at the end of each chapter which had been impossible for him to solve before as he could not guess what was asked of him. Solving these problems with his soft brush-pen on thin rice paper gave him confidence. It also improved his English. Though he did not speak it, he had learned the meaning of most of the words.

It took him almost six years from the gift of his book to the day he completely mastered geometry. This self-taught process was, to me, unbelievable. Had he not been born with an extremely logical mind, this feat could never have been accomplished.

Fifth Uncle was about twenty-three years old when news suddenly came from the city of Changsha that its newly opened Technical High School was in need of a mathematics teacher. I suppose this was another one of the inscrutable *yuanfen* my father talked about because its timing was so exactly right for Fifth Uncle.

Many years later, after Fifth Uncle suffered his first stroke and was tutoring me algebra at home, I asked him how he had secured the job. He laid down his soft brush-pen, which he still preferred, looked out the window and smiled whimsically at his youthful memories.

“The principal came into the conference room with four books, and he asked me which one I should teach first. I looked at them. On their covers were written geometry, trigonometry, algebra, and calculus. I had only studied geometry. I had never even heard of the other three. But I knew that if I admitted the truth and said I only knew one of them, it would mean goodbye to the job. Then, the dream of my whole family would evaporate into thin air.

“At the same time, I didn’t want to lie, nor was I very good at telling lies, so I hesitated and told a half truth. I said to the principal: ‘Since none of the students have studied any of the four subjects, it is best to begin with the simplest which in this case, is geometry.’ At the same time, I prayed fervently to God that if he would give me this job, I promise to study the other three subjects while I taught geometry. I swore I would study them so well that I could teach them.

“Luckily for me, the principal didn’t seem to know much about mathematics and did not detect the lie. He kindly took me in as a teacher and from then on, I taught unabashedly.”



IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR ANOTHER TEACHER PLAYING AWOL, Fifth Uncle might not have been a teacher at all.

At that time, the educational policy of China was undergoing a drastic change because the government had finally realized that Chinese schools had to be modernized. Although the Imperial Examination system was not abolished until 1905, modern and technical schools were being opened in various parts of China to educate the young. The provincial government of Hunan, which always acted more slowly than that of Beijing and Shanghai, did not set up its Technical High School until 1899. Even then, it had to employ teachers in English, mathematics, athletics, and other subjects (except classical Chinese), from other provinces of China.

However, when it was time to open, the school found it was short of one mathematics teacher. The one it had hired from Shanghai was so used to the material comforts of modern civilization that he had taken one look at Changsha, found it had little to offer, and reneged on his contract, leaving behind a vacancy. Otherwise, the principal of the Changsha Technical High School would not have hired Fifth Uncle in such a hurry.

The school environment, though crude enough to frighten away the teacher from Shanghai, seemed like paradise to Fifth Uncle. When he moved into his room in the staff dormitory, his eyes almost jumped out of their sockets in delight. Imagine, he had a room all to himself, and that was not all, it had a bed that he didn't have to share with his brothers. There were also a table and a chair! He had never enjoyed such luxury. In all the more than twenty years of his life, he had never had his own room, nor had he ever slept without one or two of his brothers in his bed! He was so excited that he couldn't sleep.

Every aspect of the school was excellent, he thought, except the dormitory food was too expensive. How could three meals a day cost so much? He knew for sure that if he were to cook his own food, he could save a lot of money which he could send to his parents, but would the school allow him to cook for himself? He watched silently for several days and found that not all the staff ate at the school dining hall. Many of his colleagues, as a matter of fact, complained that the school fare was

inadequate, and actually ordered meals to be sent in from outside restaurants. So he reasoned that if he found the food not bad, but too expensive, he should have equal right to solve the problem of his own meals.

He went to the dean and asked to set up his own stove under the kitchen eaves. The dean thought it unfitting for a faculty member to cook his own meals at the school, but he could not think of any adequate reason to refuse such a request, so he gave his approval with the proviso that the cooking be done discreetly.

But who was to cook for him? He really had no time to spare because, after his daily chore of teaching, he still had to study algebra etc. to fulfill his future obligations, especially when his English was so weak that he needed to consult his dictionary all the time. Then an inspiration came. Why not make one of his brothers a student in the same school? This brother would get the benefit of modern schooling, and could cook for both of them at the same time. With this in mind, he gathered all the necessary information and proceeded to consult his father back in his village.

If Fifth Uncle was about twenty-three, my father should have been ten or eleven years old, but everyone in my family seemed to have a blind spot about their ages, probably because China, at the time, had no registration of birth so we were all a little vague about how old we were. My father, for instance, often told a different age for himself in his different reminiscences, but in this story, his age was of utmost importance, because what Fifth Uncle and Granddad had to decide depended on the ages of the brothers. At that particular time, Eighth Uncle₁ was eighteen, my father eleven, my Thirteenth Uncle ten, and the youngest, my Fourteenth Uncle, was about four or five.

Fifth Uncle started to tell Granddad a little about the school system: “Because the school is just beginning, there are only three classes – the high, middle and low, depending mainly on the ages of the pupils. The highest grade consists of boys above fourteen years of age, who have some knowledge of classical Chinese and so they will be taught mostly English and mathematics. The middle grade is for boys above and below fourteen whose Chinese and other subjects are all rather poor so they need to be taught until they can be classified again. The lowest grade is for ten to

eleven-year-olds. They will be the school's basic class. This class will be taught the standard method until they graduate."

He paused for effect. Then he moved on to what he had come home to discuss. "If we are to send one of my brothers to school, then this lowest grade will be ideal."

"What about tuition?" Granddad asked anxiously. "You know our financial difficulties."

"We need not worry about that. I've already made inquiries. If this brother can do exceptionally well at the entrance examination, he will be given a scholarship. Whether he can get the scholarship or not depends on his own effort, but with your teaching of Chinese, my coaching in arithmetic, and his experience in helping me with the English-Chinese dictionary, I think this brother – whoever is chosen – should have a good chance to get the scholarship.

"The only thing is the dormitory fees, which are impossibly high for us to pay, but I have also checked with our dean, who agrees with me that my bed in the staff dormitory is my own affair, and that I can share it with whoever I please, so my brother will stay with me and be accepted as a non-boarder."

Granddad sighed with relief. "It's such a golden opportunity! We shall let your Eighth brother try it."

"But he is too old, I'm afraid."

"Then the next in line is your Eleventh brother, what do you think?" Eleventh brother was my father.

Fifth Uncle hesitated. He said, "I was thinking more of Thirteenth brother because he will be less likely to cause me trouble. He is ten, just right for the beginning class, and his temperament is more docile and he will listen to criticism. Besides, he will stay in my dormitory and help me in many ways."

"What sort of help do you need?"

Fifth Uncle explained that the food in the dorm was too expensive and how he intended to buy his own groceries and do his own cooking. Before he could finish, Granddad laughed: "No need to say more. If it is to save you money, by all means take your Eleventh brother with you. He is a devil of a buyer! No matter what you want, he can get it better, quicker, and

cheaper. He will save you money. Besides, he is a better cook than your Thirteenth Brother.”

“But I worry about that wild-horse temper of his. If he cannot be controlled, I don’t know what kind of trouble he will bring me!” Fifth Uncle said. Then, letting out a long sigh, “But as you said, saving me money is probably more important than any potential trouble. I’ll worry about it when it happens.”

And that was how the golden opportunity of going to Changsha Technical High School fell effortlessly into my father’s lap.

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- 1 Sequence of brothers. Because it was considered impolite in China to call a person by his name unless the caller was someone superior, such as his father or his teachers, many Chinese families had adopted the method of addressing their children, not by their given names but by the order of their sequence in births, such as First Brother (大哥), Second Brother (二哥), etc. For instance, the fourth son of Emperor Kang-xi (康熙), later known in history as Emperor Yong Zhen (雍正), was called Fourth Brother (四阿哥) or Fourth Master (四爷) by the general public before he ascended to the throne. My uncles and their cousins were all to be addressed according to their order of birth, in this case, not to their fathers, but to their grandfather. In other words, my Fifth Uncle, although he was a first-born to his father, was number five among his cousins, thus he was Fifth Uncle. In the same manner, my other uncles and my father were called Eighth, Eleventh, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth because that was the order of their birth to their grandfather. I am not very certain about their age gaps, or their exact ages for that matter, but there is no mistake in the sequence of their births, thanks to this system of addressing them.



WHEN MY FATHER REPEATED THIS APPRAISAL GRANDDAD HAD MADE of him, nearly sixty years after the event, as we lingered after supper in the kitchen of his house in Glen Cove, Long Island, N.Y., he was so pleased with himself that his round face beamed and his big eyes sparkled with delight. He seemed to be eleven years old again.

“You were lucky to have been chosen to be the one to attend school,” I said.

My father shook his head and replied that he had not been at all pleased, because he was just then having great fun with his one hundred lambs. I told him I didn’t believe him.

“What’s so difficult to believe?” he answered. “I was already a shepherd at the age of five. By the time I was ten, I was the king of shepherds.”

“Diedie,” I said, “I don’t doubt your being a shepherd boy, but I don’t believe you had one hundred lambs. Even if I believe that, you were just a little boy running wild in the hills with your hundred sheep. That did not make you a king!”

“Of course I had my ways,” he said with a big grin. Then he suddenly changed the subject. “Do you know what *zhezixi*₁ is?”

“Of course I do,” I said. “Whenever an opera troupe cannot put the whole lengthy opera on stage, they will play only certain portions of it, and these isolated episodes are called *zhezixi*. Am I right?”

“Yes. And that was one of my tricks to be a king! Just think, if the first skit the troupe put on was ‘Beating the drums to scold Cao Cao’₂, showing Mi Heng₃ furiously beating the drums while naming the sins of Cao Cao, and then the second skit was ‘Fourth Son visited his mother’₄ in which Yang Si-lang₅ sings to his wife about how much he misses his mother. How on earth would the audience know why and what these characters were doing to warrant such actions? Not only did they not know why Cao Cao was being scolded, they also wanted to know whether Mi Heng would be punished. And would Yang Si-lang return to his barbaric wife as he promised?

“My fellow shepherds seldom got a chance to see an opera, but when they did, they were enchanted by what they saw and tortured by what they

did *not* see. Naturally they were dying to know what the drama was all about, and that was my big moment! What they did not know, I could tell them, because I could read, thanks to my father who drilled me to study Confucius and Mengzi, etc. On top of that, I knew how to flatter the village teacher into lending me novels which my father forbade me to read, but as I was out on the hills all day, how was he to stop me? I had read all the books from which the operas borrowed their stories, such as *Three Kingdoms*, *The Family of Yang Warriors*, etc. When my companions saw an opera and wanted to know how it ended, they had to listen to me.”

“You just told them stories. That didn’t make you their king!”

“Ha, you don’t know the half of it. Such story telling was merely part of my grand design. I always chose the crucial moment of my story to say ‘oops, sorry, I’ve got to go because I have this and that chore to do’. Do you think they would let me go at a moment like that? There were always volunteers who promised to do those chores for me so that I could finish the stories. These promises went from one to many. When all my chores were done by my supporters, was I not their king? The more stories I told, the more interesting my stories became, the more they fought to do chores for me. By then, I could make them do whatever I wished. If that was not being a king, what was it?”

“It was blackmail! And extortion!”

“Nonsense, that was what Wall Street calls ‘seizing the golden opportunity’!”

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- 1 *Zhezixi* (折子戏). A dramatic form very popular in China; a performance consisted only of short skits from famous operas. Most of the audiences in the city usually know the whole story already and they only go to the opera to appreciate the acting, the singing and the orchestra. Only country boys who only knew sheep need to be told.
 - 2 Beating the drums to scold Cao Cao (击鼓骂操). It is a story taken from Three Kingdoms. Mi Heng (弥衡) was well known for his skill at the drums. He dared to challenge the all-time powerful dictator Cao Cao (曹操). In this skit, he stripped his shirt and was beating away on his drums while naming all the sins of Cao Cao. Cao Cao was too smart to kill him outright; he sent Mi Heng to someone whom he knew could not tolerate Mi Heng's insolence. Mi Heng was subsequently killed.
 - 3 Mi Heng. See above.
 - 4 Fourth Son visited his mother (四郎探母). A skit taken from a popular folk saga set in the Sung Dynasty about the Yang family whose grandfather, grandmother, sons, daughters, daughters-in-law and grandsons were all warriors.
 - 5 Si-lang (四郎) was the number four son of the Yang family who was captured by the enemies and later married the enemy princess. When he heard his mother had come to the front line, he asked his wife to let him cross the border to visit her The story is only fit to entertain little shepherd boys!



ALTHOUGH MY FATHER CLAIMED HE WAS MORE PLEASED TO BE the King of Shepherds than to study in the Changsha Technical High School, I felt it was merely bravado. If he really hated to leave his kingdom of shepherds, all he had to do was fail the entrance examination. On the other hand, his regret at leaving the shepherd life might have been genuine but, being competitive by nature, he simply had to pass whatever test was put in front of him, and he passed it well enough to secure his scholarship.

He was immediately admitted as a first year pupil. But lacking Fifth Uncle's gentle temper and tolerant understanding of human frailty, he soon realized that his status was different from, if not inferior to, that of the other pupils. It never occurred to Fifth Uncle that it might seem odd for a pupil not to sleep or eat in the same dormitory with the other boys, but my father, even at that early age, was conscious of his own image. He sensed that he was looked down upon, or even pitied, because he was sleeping on his brother's narrow bed and eating meals prepared on a charcoal stove which he had installed under one of the doorways of the staff dormitory. To him, this descent from a powerful king to a penniless scholarship student was a disgrace.

The only way to win respect, he decided, was to turn their pity into envy. How many times did he tell me, while we were sipping tea in his pantry, about the stories he used to feed his schoolmates! He capitalized on his role as a purchasing agent and boasted of his morning trips to the market as if he had been granted a special privilege to leave the campus, without mentioning that, since he was a non-boarder, he was not restricted by school regulations as the others were. Nor would he admit how harsh it was to wake up near dawn, run to the market on an empty stomach, rush back in time to prepare breakfast and still be in the classroom before the class bell rang.

He knew that if he had told them the mundane truth, the best he could hope for from his fellow students was pity, and pity was not the stuff the image of a hero was built on. Instead, he told them about the excitement he encountered in the market, such as seeing a live turtle being carved up, or a

rabbit with only one ear being sold for soup, as if his morning trips were all enjoyable adventures.

In the meantime, he studied harder than he had ever done before. “I had to be the best,” said my father, with a wry smile, “not just because I needed to retain my scholarship, but because it was the only way to make the boys respect me.”

His school work was already better than his classmates because his Chinese and mathematics had been taught by Granddad and Fifth Uncle. For him to be the best was as easy as breathing. But what satisfaction was there in being the best? He still could not sleep at the dormitory, nor could he eat at the school canteen with the other boys. It didn’t make him feel more important; it didn’t make his mates envy him. Then he remembered his old trick as the king of the shepherds. He would make himself indispensable. So, every day when he was done with his own homework, he would correct the essays of his classmates, or let them copy his answers in arithmetic.

“But that’s cheating,” I interrupted.

“Of course it’s cheating,” he said, without raising an eyebrow.

“But it was they who cheated, not me. Before long, those lazy rich kids came to depend on me just like the shepherd boys used to. They would do whatever I wanted them to. If I said I wanted to eat something more than vegetables, they would take my hint and brought back chickens and ducks from their homes.

“I graciously accepted all their presents. You must realize that I was only eleven at that time. We didn’t even have enough cooking oil to stir-fry our vegetables. We could only cook them boiled in water. If we had a piece of bean curd simmered in soy sauce, we considered it a treat. With our food so dreary, can you blame me for yearning for some chicken and duck meat? Your Fifth Uncle knew nothing about these delicious morsels which the boys bribed me with; he thought I had somehow saved enough money to pay for them.

“Soon after, the summer vacation came upon us. Your Fifth Uncle told me to go home, but he said he had to remain at school to study his math. That was my first vacation and I really wanted to go home to eat my mother’s food, but who was to cook for your Fifth Uncle? Seeing how hard he worked for our whole family, how could I leave him alone?

“So I stayed. Everyone had left and the campus was deserted except for your Fifth Uncle and me. He could bury himself in his books, but what was I to do? I was bored stiff. Of course there were the marketing and cooking, but, with not much money, there was little I could buy and even less to cook. I went to the library to read but I got sick of those silly romantic stories. Your Fifth Uncle suggested that I could start to study the arithmetic course for the next term. Since I really had nothing better to do, I looked around and found a textbook discarded by an upper grade pupil and also some tattered exercise books. I started to study.

“With a private tutor for a brother, who shared my three meals every day, it was not difficult to learn math. Within two months, I had worked out all the problems for the next term. When I was congratulating myself for my great achievement, I suddenly saw the finished exercise books in my hands, and asked myself what was there to cheer about when I could not even afford a new exercise book? When one is young, one is very vain. The minute I had to face the fact that I was poor, all my ambitions evaporated.

“In the midst of my depression, I suddenly reminded myself of my dream to become an entrepreneur, so I thought: Why should I let an opportunity to make money slip by? Why did I allow those people to copy my answers just for the sake of a few scraps of meat when I could openly sell them my answers? The more I thought about the idea, the more I thought it tenable; the only trouble was that I did not know if selling the answers was morally acceptable and legally permissible.

“I asked your Fifth Uncle. He thought for a while and answered: ‘I think it will help if you let your classmates know the correct answer but do not show them how to arrive at it. So, after they finish working out the problem and find they have arrived at the right answer, they will feel happy, confident and ready to work some more. If they find that their answers are wrong, they will have another chance to work it again. Yes, I think it may be helpful.’

“His opinion encouraged me. Then I went to look for the dean. But instead of saying yes or no, he just stared at me coldly and then said he did not believe I had solved all the math problems. I gave him my exercise books to inspect. He was finally convinced they were my own work. Then he asked me: ‘How do you wish to sell them?’

“I said: ‘Two answers for one cent.’

“He said: ‘What if the total of the answers is an odd number, let’s say, if there are nine problems?’

“Even if there is only one answer, the price is still one cent. Nine answers will be five cents.

“He threw back his head, roared with laughter and told me: ‘I think you’ll get rich.’ And he was right. That was how I began to make money.”

I had to smile to see him so pleased with himself. “You were lucky that the textbooks in your days didn’t provide you with answers. Had they been like ours today, with answers printed at the back of the book, you couldn’t get rich at all.”

“What nonsense! All your textbook writers are copying me! What kind of businessman do you think I am if I can’t see the trends of the future?”



“WITH YOUR GRAND INCOME DERIVED FROM THE ONE-CENT-FOR-two-answers,” I laughed, “your life in school must have been very comfortable from then on.”

“Don’t look down on that income!” replied my father. “It really helped your Fifth Uncle and me a lot. I did it every year and made quite a bit of money. Then I added other ways to make money, so our daily life improved bit by bit. As your Fifth Uncle taught more subjects, his salary almost doubled, so after deducting what he sent home to support the family, we still had enough to buy an occasional duck or chicken. By then, I was so busy applying for the government scholarship to go abroad that I had no more time to sell the answers.”

Talking about going abroad made my father sigh. But with a tinge of pride, he added: “People criticized the Qing government for being corrupt and how students had to bribe their way through any examination, but it really wasn’t as bad as all that. Otherwise, how could someone like me, who had no money and knew no one influential, ever pass that? Yet I did. Not just me. Look at the others, like Liu Bu-chan¹, and Hu Shi-zhi². Which one of them is not truly qualified? It’s not the same as what we have today...” His voice trailed off.

That my father won the scholarship due to his own doing was beyond dispute. How else could my Granddad, poor as he was, have the means to send him? But there was one thing I could not understand. How could his English have been good enough to have surpassed the other candidates from Shanghai or Beijing?

Changsha, unlike Shanghai the sea port, or Beijing the capital, was only a hinterland city of China. Therefore her residents’ standard of English, especially their ability to speak it, was never as accurate or as fluent as those coming from Shanghai or Beijing. My father was a student of Hunan and had never left home, so his English was naturally home-grown. How was it possible for him to beat the others?

When I put the question to my father, he replied with smug composure. “Didn’t I tell you? My private tutor was Su Man-shu. What? Again, you disbelieve me?”

I really did not believe him. Su Man-shu (1884–1918) was a genius of the late Qing Dynasty. His life, his many talents and his writing career, as brief and brilliant as a shooting star, had long been admired by my generation. When I studied in primary school, the style of using *baihua*₃ in writing had already been popularly adopted, so when I read his essays, poems and romances written in *wenyan*₄, I was captivated by his ethereal style. And now, there was my father casually claiming that Su was his private tutor. I absolutely disbelieved it.

“You think I’m boasting again just because Su was so famous,” my father continued. “Actually his fame came to him only after his death. When he taught at our school, he was just over twenty years old, a young fellow no one knew anything about. It was because our principal thought he was good in English that he was hired as a teacher. The general staff didn’t think much of him, saying he was too arrogant.

“He didn’t mingle with them either, but just stayed in his own room as if he had a lot on his mind. But I was young. Compared with the other staff in the dormitory, my age was closer to his, so we got along in our own way. Sometimes when I happened to have cooked a tasty dish, I would take some of it to his room. What he loved was little snacks. Since he seldom left his room, I volunteered to do his shopping for him and bought him I don’t know how much dried olives, preserved plums and cloud-layer cakes₅. Sometimes, I even did his laundry and swept his floor. The attention I paid him was not in vain. One day he asked me: ‘What do you want as repayment? All I can do is to teach you English. That will make you stand out among your friends, which is exactly what you want most, isn’t it?’

“So I became his special pupil! When he was bored, he would teach me English. He would give me poetry and stories to read aloud and he insisted on me conversing with him in English. He even told me his story of being a monk. I thought it was to excite my knowledge of English that he concocted such tales, never dreaming they were really his own experiences.

“He stayed with our school for only a year. After the summer vacation, he got a job with another school, but he continued to see me. Like a child, he would munch on the goodies I brought him while insisting on my oral recitations, saying that it was the only way I could improve my enunciation. Then, he disappeared from Changsha but he kept up his friendship with me. My trying out for the scholarship to go abroad was his idea.”

I thought my father was just telling another of his fantastic yarns. His luck had been good, but it couldn't have been that good as to have a famous genius like Su Man-shu as his tutor!

However, many years later, I got hold of *The Complete Volume of Su Man-shu* and read his biography; I was shocked to find that everything it said coincided with what my father had told me. Could it be that my father was not always in the habit of spinning tall tales?

The book said that Su Man-shu's mother was a Japanese maidservant of his Chinese father, but soon after giving birth to Su in Japan, she quit his service, leaving Su to be raised by his father's other Japanese concubine. When his Chinese father returned to China with his Chinese wife and family, his Japanese mother chose not to accompany them, from which point Su grew up practically as an orphan, unloved by his father, and shunned by his father's Chinese wife and other children.

The biography went on to say that he was a born linguist. Not only was he well versed both in Chinese and Japanese to write poetry and novels, but he knew also English, German, Sanskrit and various Chinese dialects, as evidenced by his compilation of dictionaries of Cantonese and Sanskrit. He had translated poets like Byron into Chinese and he had also written many essays in English.

The following excerpts from his yearly account matched what my father had said: "In 1903, when Su was twenty, in winter, he entered monkhood because he despaired of life, but had to leave the monastery in April 1904 when he could no longer stand the deprivation of not eating candies. ... In June, he went to Changsha to visit the principal of the Hunan Technical High School, Qin Yue-liu⁶ who invited him to teach English there. ... When Hunan's revolutionary plot failed, Qin had to escape since he was a member of the revolution, but Su remained. ... In 1905, he continued to teach. He treated his students kindly and sincerely but, except when he was in class, he preferred to closet himself in his room all the time. ... After that summer, he put on a monk's robe, carried a cane, and went, as free as a cloud, to Heng Shan⁷. ... 1906, in the beginning of spring term, he returned to Changsha and taught at Mingde⁸ High School as a drawing master."

So it was true that Su Man-shu was in Changsha from 1904 to 1906, and he did teach at Hunan Technical High School after he had once been a monk. While he "closeted himself in his room," it was entirely possible that

he should befriend a youngster who lived in the same dormitory and that he taught the boy English, especially when the boy bribed him with candies. When Su came back the next year, he might well have welcomed the frequent visits of that same youngster and continued to teach him more English, even encouraging the pupil to take part in a scholarship contest.

So it was true that, after all, Su Man-shu was really my father's tutor! When my father told me his story, I hadn't believed him. By the time I did, he had passed away and any apology from me was in vain.

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- 1 Liu Bu-chan (刘布蟾), 1853–1895. He was one of the commanders during the naval battle of 1894 against Japan. In 1876, he studied in England.
 - 2 Hu Shi-zhi (胡适之), 1891–1962. He was the great educator who advocated the use of *baihua* in China.
 - 3 *Baihua* (白话). The everyday spoken language of the people.
 - 4 *Wenyan* (文言). It was the traditional language used in classical essays but was gradually abandoned by the common people. However, it was still considered the only proper way to write even in late Qing Dynasty, such as taking the Imperial Examination. It was only in the beginning of the Chinese Republic when Hu Shizhi and his group voiced strong opposition that it was disused. However, *wenyan*, though more difficult to write and to understand, is still considered by some as more beautiful than *baihua*.
 - 5 Cloud-layer cakes (云片糕). These Chinese cakes are made from ground rice and sugar, and spread out in thin sheets about one-tenth of a centimeter thick. The sheets are then stacked up to form a cake. One can bite the whole cake and eat all the sheets in one gulp or, if he is a connoisseur, he can peel off the sheet one by one and eat it at his leisure. It is called cloud-layer because it resembles the layers of white cloud. If Su Man-shu loved this candy, it must be the way he ate it, with poetic appreciation.
 - 6 Qin Yue-liu (秦毓璠). At one time, the principal of Hunan High Tech.
 - 7 Heng Shan (衡山). One of the five great mountains in China. It is situated in Hunan province.
 - 8 Mingde (明德). A famous boys' school in Changsha.



THAT MY FATHER GRADUATED FROM THE LONDON ROYAL SCHOOL of Mining was beyond any doubt, because he had his diploma to prove it. Besides, in his later life, whenever newspapers wrote about him, they always said he was one of its graduates. That couldn't have been idle boasting.

He studied hard in England for about four years, but I did not hear many stories from him about that period. Perhaps, as he grew older, he was less naughty and therefore had fewer interesting tales to tell. Even if there was any, I am sure it wouldn't have been the sort where he could emerge the winner or the hero, otherwise he would have gladly told it.

There was one anecdote, however, that illustrated his character.

Before he left for England, he was in Shanghai with Su Man-shu, he said, to buy some Western suits so he would not look ridiculous to the English. At that time, Su Man-shu had already advised him to cut off his queue, but since it was then still the late years of the Qing Dynasty when a man without his queue could be given the death sentence, he did not listen to Su's advice. He was not just afraid of having his head cut off, he was also very fond of his thick, black queue.

Yet, it was because he had not cut off his queue that he was insulted.

As he went to school in London, he was in the habit of winding his queue into a knot and hiding it under his cap. He hoped that as long as he did not remove his cap, no one would know about the queue-knot. But as the days grew into weeks, some of his young schoolmates were not pleased to see him wearing the cap indoors. One of them was a tall son of a miner with the girth of a bull. When my father walked by him, this English boy would 'accidentally' knock my father's cap off, causing the cap to fall on the ground. My father was enraged, but he would remember the words of the Chinese Counsel General: as a foreign student representing his nation, he must bear any insult. So he would pick up his cap and walk on without making any protest.

That son of the miner continued to have his fun, not once but many times, until my father found it unbearable. He told me later: "I raised my fist to hit him. He did the same, dancing around me in circles, as if in a

boxing match. Even though he was six feet two in height, I wasn't a bit frightened, because I had learned some Mongolian wrestling back home and believed I could win. However, I did not expect my queue to slip down my head when the cap was knocked off. He immediately grabbed hold of my queue. How could I continue my fight when my queue was in his hands? He and his cohorts all broke into uproarious laughter.

“I fumed all that night. Next morning, I didn't care if my head was to be chopped off, but rushed to a barber to have my queue snipped. Then I raced to the school and challenged my enemy. Ha! He was big and cumbersome but I was agile and nimble. In two rounds, I had him pinned on the ground. He respected me so much after that that he made friends with me. We are still writing each other, even to this day.”

Of course I did not believe his story totally. How much salt and vinegar did he put in to spice it up? First, he never went anywhere outside of Hunan before he left China, so how did he learn Mongolian wrestling? Second, although he said he wasn't scared of his opponent's stature, my father, though not a dwarf, was only five feet three inches tall. Could he beat someone who was six feet two?

At the same time I knew, from my own experience, that my father's stories always had a grain of truth in them, otherwise he wouldn't tell them to me. I think the first fight was true, as was his second fight, but to say that he won so easily was highly doubtful. Very likely, the miner's son was not a six-footer, and the technique my father used was nothing Mongolian. What he used was his spunk and his agility. With him fighting like an angry bull, the English boy might have admired his courage so much that they called it an even match. No one won and no one lost. And that was the beginning of the long friendship my father talked about.

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- 1 The queue. When the Manchu conquered China, it was imperative that all men shave off the front portion of their heads and save the remaining hair by braiding it into queues and wearing them hung behind their backs, like tails. The people resisted it, but those who did were killed by the thousands. The infamous Ten Days of Slaughter was one of the results. And yet, after nearly three hundred years of Qing rule, the Chinese people were reluctant to cut their queues off, not only because they feared the capital punishment but also because they had grown so fond of them, as in the case of my father.



I THINK MY FATHER MUST HAVE SUFFERED SOME, IF NOT A GREAT deal of racial prejudice in London. In those years, China had been defeated in so many battles, and lost so much of the sovereignty of her territories, that nobody in any country respected the Chinese people. I very much doubt that my father had a delightful sojourn in England (this was around 1900 to 1904). Perhaps that was why he did not have any half-real stories to brag about. With his temperament, if he could not brag about something, he would rather keep silent about it. Whatever was unpleasant, he would just swallow.

I did, however, find a photo of a young girl among one of his old books from his days in London. I don't know where or how he got it. Was it given to him or did he pick it up from the streets? Although my father never looked like a movie star, he did look fairly presentable, judging from his early photos. So it was not impossible that some young English girl might have been interested in him. At the same time, I have read enough novels describing love between Chinese boys and Western girls to think that whatever he felt about the girl in the photo was only wishful thinking. If so, did he suffer? He never talked about it, and I never asked.

Ever since his schooldays when he was unable to share the dormitory with the other boys, my father had suffered a certain amount of inferiority complex, and to over-compensate for his slight stature, he had also developed a kind of Napoleon complex. These two complexes made it difficult, sometimes, for others to know what he really was like. He would tell tall tales and glorify his own encounters with names of highly placed people for no apparent reason. At the same time, living with Fifth Uncle among a group of older men in the same dormitory had also given him a childlike sincerity and taught him to be honest, humble and kind-hearted. All I can say is that, with his good and bad traits, he was offensive to some but extremely likeable to most that came to know him.

Anyway, his England days drew to a close and he returned to Changsha, probably around 1905. He thought his bitter days were over. He had come through the mill and he was fine.

When he came back, the Qing government was in its last throes although the revolution had not yet exploded. Students returning from abroad were as rare as diamonds. The Mining Department of Hunan immediately gave him a job, and he naturally was full of ambition, planning to change the world overnight.

He was at the height of fashion. With his queue cut, his Western-looking hat on, dressed in his foreign suit, vest and pants, puffing a pipe and wearing a walnut-sized, gold pocket watch on his chest, he must have been a sight to behold. A friend of mine in Singapore told me much later that her father happened to live in the next village to my father's. He had heard so much about that gold watch that he made a special trip to our village just to see it. Actually, I think it was most likely a gilded watch because I doubt that my father, at that time, could have afforded to buy a real gold one.

At about that time, an old uncle remotely related to us had just died, and Fifth Uncle wanted my father to accompany him back to the old village to attend the funeral, partly to obey the customs of the days and partly to show off his brother, the returned scholar, in his new finery. My father was reluctant, but since he had always obeyed Fifth Uncle, he went along. It would only take a few days anyway, he thought.

Although he was back in the village, he still retained some of his English habits. At the funeral, he talked with various people, puffing on his pipe. However, a pipe smoker has the bad practise of knocking his pipe here and there to empty the ashes, which my father did, but he forgot he was at a funeral. As he happened to stand next to the coffin, he casually, without thinking, knocked his pipe on it.

That was blasphemy! The family of the dead kowtowed *en masse* in front of the coffin of their dearly beloved and wailed, howling that they had no more face to live since so-and-so's son had come home and had insulted them by knocking on the coffin. Such disrespect for the dead! Since they had been so looked down upon, they could only commit suicide right there in front of the coffin.

The whole clan was in uproar. My father, red-faced with fury, was rendered speechless. Fifth Uncle had to bow here and bow there, apologizing on my father's behalf. In the end, my father was forced, by way of apology, to provide a feast for everyone in the village. He was so furious afterwards that he threw away his pipe, never to smoke it again.

That was the only story I heard of my father where he did not come out as a winner. I learned it only from my Fifth Aunt and not from him. When my father knew he was in the wrong, even though he never shirked his responsibility, he nevertheless hated to admit it. He loved to quote his favorite proverb: “A true man must shoulder the consequence of his own deeds.” He always accepted the consequences of his misdeeds, but still could not tolerate being criticized.

My father told me countless stories of his youth, not just once or twice but repeatedly, many times. Those were probably the most bitter days of his life, and yet they were also his proudest. Of course the racial prejudice he suffered in the U.S. and in the U.K. and the harsh competition he experienced in his career were all etched deep in his mind, but it was his childhood experiences that had the greatest impact on the development of his personality. His envy, his sense of inferiority, his strong urge to survive and his will to excel, all combined to forge his early success but, as he matured into adulthood, they also led him to acquire a wry sense of humor.

In the business world, he was a man of his word. I have often heard it said: “A handshake from Mr. K.C. Li is as good as a contract signed.” Indeed, as a man, he was impeccably honest in all his dealings. And yet he would sometimes tell outrageous tales to our dinner guests, either about Chinese history or his own youth, especially if they questioned him and acted as if they knew China. When I confronted him later, he would laugh and say: “Just like the stories of Arabian Nights.” To hear him make fun of the culture he loved made me sense his loneliness in a foreign land.

A few days after his feast for the relatives he had insulted at the funeral, he returned to Changsha to begin his job at the Mining Ministry. It was at this juncture of his life that he met my mother.



NOW I SHALL TALK ABOUT MY MOTHER.

Although Wai-gong₁ did not have many ancestors who wore red beads₂ on their official caps the way high Manchu officials traditionally did, he could certainly boast that his forefathers were a hundred times more illustrious than my father's, who were nothing more than tenant farmers.

Did this difference in my parents' social-standing affect their marital relationship? I could not be certain, but I think it must have caused my father some uneasiness. Mama never suffered any kind of deprivation from the day she was born, so she was not in the habit of appraising the importance of money, and did not think much about my father's lack of it. It was not the same case with him. Somewhere, hidden in his subconscious, was the envy as well as a little perverse contempt for those who enjoyed good fortune. To him, anyone who was born rich had won half the battle in daily life, and since he always hated to lose, he resented those who had beaten him merely by birth. And yet, in his mind, there was the entrenched idea that it was an honor to be married into a scholar-landlord family. Thus, their union must have had its positive and negative effects.

Wai-gong definitely belonged to a scholar-landlord family. His family name was Luo and his home was in Ningxiang, a city near Changsha in Hunan province where his family had enjoyed for generations the rent from the land they owned. Although I do not know how many of his ancestors were honest officials of the government, I can be certain that none of the wealth he owned was his own making. To his credit, though, he was not entirely spineless like many other rich men's sons.

At least he was an earnest student who took his Examination seriously and became a government official early on in life. I do not know how high he later rose in his career, but Man-yi, Mama's younger sister, used to say that when she was a little girl, she had ridden in his sedan chair to a public execution. If an official was responsible for an execution, surely he must be of a magistrate's rank or above. Mama also said that when she was young, she always went about in sedan chairs, but that did not signify Wai-gong's rank of officialdom since all wealthy families provided sedan chairs for their daughters. Anyway, even if Wai-gong was never a high-ranking

government official, one would think that since he worked in the government, he would hold some kind of political ideology. Alas, his political ideology was vague.

It would be amusing to compare the political ideologies of my two grandfathers. Although they lived in the same era, they would probably quarrel if they were to meet face to face. My Granddad was a land-owning scholar just as my Wai-gong was, but he was a farmer-scholar, whereas my Wai-gong was a landlord-scholar. Politically, Granddad never forgot his father's pride in the Taiping Rebellion, and his own promise to disobey the Manchu regime. If anyone wanted to get rid of the Emperor, he would not have objected and might even have rejoiced, but he had no revolutionary zeal. He did not approve of the uneven distribution of wealth, but he wasted no time and energy dwelling on it; all he cared about was the inadequacy of the educational system. His worry was that if China did not catch up with the technical advancement of the West, China would perish. He did not care what else could be gained from politics.

Wai-gong was an even more ardent student of Confucius than Granddad was and wanted more than anything to be an honest, uncorrupt official. Thus he never complained about the Imperial Examination. He even upheld it as the only fair means to get into officialdom. His political philosophy was ultra-traditional. His fondest dream was to be like a judge as incorruptible as Bao Long-tu³. His dream was that, if the Emperor could be 'saintly' and with he, Wai-gong, helping at the helm, China would be peaceful and prosperous. As for the Taiping Rebellion and their ideas, they were preposterous! He wouldn't even think about them.

Both Wai-gong and Granddad were contemporaries of Dr. Sun Yat-sen⁴. Although I am not certain of their birth years, I should guess that Granddad was born around 1858 and Wai-gong around 1865, whereas Sun Yat-sen's birth year was known to be 1866, only one year after Wai-gong's. But in terms of their political awareness, Sun Yat-sen was way ahead. When Sun wrote his doctrine of *San Min Zhu Yi*⁵, neither Granddad nor Wai-gong had heard of him. When Sun first organized his revolutionary party, Granddad had retired, hoping only to see his children well-educated in the sciences, and Wai-gong was working for the Qing government. They belonged to different camps: Wai-gong was a loyal subject of the emperor, Granddad couldn't care less about the emperor, while Sun Yat-sen was the dedicated

rebel against the emperor and the empire. The three, like fire and water, could not have co-existed.

And yet, things were changing swiftly.

Before he worked for the government, Wai-gong had concentrated on the study of the Classics. Almost all the books in his library were for the preparation of the Imperial Examination. He had never read anything that was written by a revolutionary. In other words, he had never had any contact with anyone who had anti-government thoughts.

When he became a government magistrate, he received orders to seize and destroy all anti-government pamphlets and books. But when the printed materials were collected for him to give the command to burn, he suddenly became curious about them, and since curiosity is the one temptation that an intellectual finds most difficult to resist, Wai-gong thought to himself: “Each word in all these papers will soon turn to ashes, so why not let me read them just once?”

He became so shocked when he started to read one of the books that he threw it down on the floor. But he picked it up again. After he had thrown it down and picked it up several times, he found that the book was saying what he had wanted to say but never had the sense or courage to express. From then on, not only did he read what he was supposed to burn, but he also came to agree with what he should have burned, that reforms could not possibly come from the top, but had to come from the people below.

Wai-gong realized then that the revolution could not be stopped. But he had also been taught that “no one should serve two masters.” Since he had been on the payroll of the Qing regime, it would be treacherous of him to work for its downfall. Yet at the same time, he believed so much in the Republican doctrine that he refused to be a part of the oppressing force which prohibited its growth. The only way out of his dilemma and to keep his conscience clear, was to resign as a magistrate and retire as a gentleman of leisure.

It is difficult to judge him and say that what he did was right or wrong. Perhaps it was just his *yuanfen* not to be a rebel.

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- 1 Wai-gong (外公). Maternal grandfather. In China, when a man marries, his wife's family is known as his "out-side family" (外家), to show it is as intimate as his own. Thus an old man (公) and an old lady (婆) of the in-laws are known as 外公 and 外婆. Wai-gong was my maternal grandfather; Wai-po was my grandmother.
 - 2 Red beads (红顶). The official garments of Qing Dynasty were very specific in their decorations. A red bead on the tip of a hat, or a plume hanging on a queue, were both insignia denoting the rank of the wearer.
 - 3 Bao Long-tu (包龙图). Bao Long-tu was the legendary judge in Sung Dynasty who gave just and fair punishment not only to all living creatures but also to souls of the dead, as in the case of "Ghost hidden in a clay pot." He was said to have been brave enough to execute the husband of a royal princess for murder.
 - 4 Sun Yat-sen (孙逸仙). A name so spelled by early revolutionists based on its Cantonese pronunciation of Sun's old name and has been in use ever since in the English language. The Chinese knew him as Sun Zhong-shan (孙中山), the Father of the Chinese Republic. He was responsible for the revolution of 1911 and was its first President.
 - 5 *San Min Zhu Yi* (三民主义). The doctrine which proclaimed that the people have their three prerogatives: their livelihood (民生), their race (民族) and their rights (民权).



I NEVER KNEW MY WAI-GONG. I WAS TOLD THAT HE LOOKED LIKE my Jiu-jiu¹, my mother's brother. If that was the case, then he must have been fairly tall in stature, with a long lean face, large eyes, high and straight nose and strong white teeth. Not an ugly man at all. His first wife, whom he married when he was a young man, was said to have been a beautiful girl. Unfortunately she was also fragile, like the famous but sickly Lin Dai-yu². She died from tuberculosis and left behind a baby girl, my Da-yima³.

Wai-gong swore that if he was to marry again, he would not care whether the lady was beautiful or not, but she had to be healthy, kind-hearted, and capable of running a household. When the matchmakers heard this request, they were said to reply: "It is not difficult to find a beauty, but a girl with all these three conditions will be extremely hard to locate." Hard though it might be, they did locate the right one. Not long afterwards, Wai-gong married my Wai-po. She might not have been the kind of beauty that "a little breeze could blow down"⁴ but she was indeed healthy, intelligent, capable, kind and polite to everyone, including the servants.

Shortly after marriage, Wai-po gave birth to my uncle Jiu-jiu. After him came my mother, and then Man-yi. "Man (满)" means "full" or "enough," and in our context, it also meant "we have enough baby girls." It was a favorite "milk-name"⁵ given in the hope that the next baby would be a son. But quite a few years later, another daughter arrived, so she was named Zhao-yi⁶ (meaning "same as before"). I think Wai-gong did not really detest having daughters; he just wished for more sons.

The formal names he gave to all his daughters had the word "Bu" in them: my mother was Bu-ge, my aunts Man-yi was Bu-lan and Zhao-yi, Bu-e⁷. I had always thought that Wai-gong, in naming his daughters, was carried away by the poetic pleasure of "walking" ("Bu") in the moonlight, until I was enlightened by someone whose mother had also the same "Bu" in her name. The reason, explained this friend, was that her maternal grandfather had been very proud of his daughter's natural unbound feet. It was then that I realized how courageous a deed it was, in my mother's days,

to disallow the binding of a daughter's feet. In that case, it showed my Wai-gong's love for, and pride in, his daughters.

Unlike the fairy-tale stepmother, Wai-po was devoted to Dayima. No one knew whether her love was genuine or an act to win approval. Perhaps it was both. When Wai-po married she was eighteen, and Da-yima was a three-year-old toddler who was not only pretty but enchanting in her childish prattles, so much so that Wai-po might never have felt the toddler was not her own child. She pampered Da-yima in everything. In later life, as the age gap between the two became less obvious, they seemed more like sisters. In many ways, she cared more for Da-yima than she did Mama.

Thus, Da-yima was so spoiled that she never matured into a sensible woman, while Mama was more or less neglected. Mama never said she was neglected, but when she talked of her childhood, she would smile fondly and speak casually of her being a fat and rather stupid thing whom nobody bothered to fuss over. By the time she slowly learned to speak, she was no match for her half sister who was seven years older and a born chatterbox. When I was young, I found Mama's description of herself highly amusing. Then when Man-yi joined their ranks, it was like having a little Zhu Ge-liang⁸ in their midst. Mama, born between these two articulate sisters, was content to let them do the talking for her.

As a child, I did not pay much attention to Mama's story of her youth. I merely thought she must have been a lovable and dumpy baby who preferred to speak little. But now I wonder if having these sisters was the reason she was always silent. Her temperament had always been docile, and when she habitually allowed her two sisters to do the talking for her, she seldom argued or insisted on her own viewpoints. Even when she was wronged, she felt the others must have their reasons to wrong her, so that there was no point in trying to make matters right. Gradually, over years of being the middle child wedged between these sisters, she became the taciturn person I knew her as.

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- 1 Jiu-jiu (舅舅). The brother of one's mother.
 - 2 Lin Dai-yu (林黛玉). The fictional beauty in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a novel written in Qing Dynasty and very popular with the Chinese. Even those who have never read the book know of Lin Dai-yu.
 - 3 Da-yima (大姨妈). The eldest of mother's sisters.
 - 4 "A little breeze could blow down." (风吹得倒.) It is a disruption used in the book *Dream of the Red Chamber* to describe how delicate Lin Dai-yu was, meaning that just a little breeze could blow her away.
 - 5 "Milk-name." (奶名.) The name given to a baby when still at the suckling age. The formal name would be given later, but the "milk name" was the more intimately used within the family.
 - 6 Zhao-yi (照姨). The phrase "zhao jiu" (照旧) means "like before;" therefore Zhaoyi means "to follow" her sister. It also means "enough" girls.
 - 7 The names of the sisters. In Chinese, their names in sequence are 步歌, 步兰 and 步娥.
 - 8 Zhu Ge-liang (诸葛亮). The very famous prime minister in the Three Kingdoms period who is well known among Chinese people for his extraordinary intelligence and debating ability.



BY THE TIME MAMA WAS FIVE, HER MOTHER AND GRANDMOTHER considered it time to have her feet bound. But Wai-gong would not allow it, saying he was wrong to have followed the tradition and let his eldest daughter's feet be mangled for life. He had regretted his decision ever since, especially after he had read the revolutionary pamphlets denouncing the binding of feet as inhumane. He told his wife that he would never condone such a shameful deed again.

Normally obeying every whim of her husband's, this time Waipo refused to listen. "You've got to think for your daughter's sake," she said. "What family would let their son marry a woman whose feet looked like a duck's webbed feet?"

"I *am* thinking for her sake," countered Wai-gong. "Fashion will change; you wait and see. Natural feet will be more welcomed than bound feet. The day will come when matchmakers will trample our door down just because our daughters have natural feet."

How could Wai-po believe him? Bound feet had been "a must" for six hundred years; surely it was not to change just because Wai-gong said so. How was she to know that someday Chinese girls would win world championships in fencing, diving, volleyball and other athletic sports on their natural feet? But since her husband had so commanded, she dared not disobey him. Her mother-in-law then advised her to use the time-worn strategy of "kill first and report later"¹. They would bind Mama's feet when Wai-gong was away and when he returned, it would be too late for him to rectify what had already been done.

The day finally came: Wai-gong was to be out of town for a few days. So they acted.

According to Mama, the foot-binding operation was sometimes performed by the mothers of the girls, but more often the job was entrusted to a professional foot-binder who had more expertise and whose heart was more hardened to the wailing and moaning of little girls. A group of these professional foot-binders would pin down the child while their leader would take one tiny foot and press the arch of the foot hard for the toes to meet the heel, so hard that the arch would break in the process. They would then

bind the toes as tightly as possible against the bottom of the heel so that the little foot would be doubled up on itself. Sometimes, jagged bones even protruded from the skin. To prevent infection, lime powder was packed around the foot, especially in the cleft that had just been created between the toes and the heel. Finally, yards and yards of white cloth, about four inches in width, were strapped tightly around the much shortened foot to keep it from growing.

After one foot was thus incapacitated, with the poor girl often fainting from the pain, the team of women would work on the other foot.

Mama had fainted by the time both of her feet were bound, and they would have been permanently damaged if Wai-gong had not come home earlier than expected. As soon as he heard the news, he did not waste any time scolding his wife, but took a pair of scissors and marched straight to his daughter's bed. With the scissors he immediately ripped off the bandages, bathed the injuries with warm water to wash away the smarting lime, separated the toes gently from the heels and reset the arches as well as he knew how, while praying fervently that nature would mend the bones and mend them well. (He later asked a physician to look after her feet.)

He was afraid his wife might repeat this tortuous treatment, so in the next ten days he stayed at his daughter's side every minute. Those ten days would remain one of Mama's sweetest memories of her father.

Even though her feet had been saved, life was not all bliss for Mama. She still had to suffer the pitying looks from many of their female relatives, who would whisper: "Poor thing, who would want to marry her *now*?" Added to these quiet lamentations were the boisterous chants from the street urchins who followed Mama's sedan chair whenever she ventured out of her father's official residence. "Weep, weep, big feet, weep," they clapped their hands and sang in unison, "for the husband you'll never get to keep!"

Mama was only five, so naturally she did not understand all that talk about husbands, but she knew the urchins did not mean well, so she ran to Wai-gong for solace. Wai-gong said: "Silly girl, what's wrong with big feet? When one must run for dear life, who can run faster, the one with strong big feet or the one with weak tiny feet?"

Mama thought for a while, and felt that the big feet weren't so bad after all. From then on, she never regretted her big feet.

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- 1 “Kill first and report later.” (先斩后奏.) To execute a man, it was required by law to have received official orders before the execution. However, when the matter was urgent, many generals had killed before receiving such orders. Although it was illegal, it had been done so often that the saying “kill first and report later” has become commonly used by the Chinese, even for inconsequential matters.



BOUND BY THE WEALTH SHE WAS BORN INTO, AS A CHILD MAMA could only stay at home and placidly enjoy her comfortable life. One highlight was that her father often took her along when he made his rounds with his gardeners and, from their conversations, she learned the names of flowers and grasses and the best way to grow them. This wealth of horticultural information would enable her to become an excellent gardener in her later life, but it did not cultivate any story-telling skills, and she never could tell wild stories like my father.

However, she had one tale that was so packed with excitement that it far surpassed any turtles and rabbits my father boasted of: the story of how Wai-gong stopped smoking. It was not just ordinary tobacco that he stopped smoking, but the devastating opium.

Why would a sensible man from a respected scholar family smoke opium? Wouldn't he know that opium was detrimental to one's health? My Granddad, who was only a lowly *muliao* and whose job was only to assist government officials, knew already the harms opium could do, and even wrote poems to warn his children of it. How could my Wai-gong, a properly designated government magistrate, fail to be aware of the curse of opium?

In the fifty years since Lin Ze-xu¹ burned opium in 1839, the Opium War (1840-42) had forced China to condone the British import of opium into China. Ironically, the British colonialists grew this addictive drug in India to sell to the Chinese so they could afford to keep buying another "addictive" plant – tea – from China. The crucial difference, of course, was that whereas opium was a narcotic, tea was a stimulant. So while the Chinese were doped down by opium, the British were hyped up by tea. Simplistic as this equation might seem, it does account for much of the huge divergence in the two countries' social and political history in the 19th century.

Many influential personages had demanded that the government strengthen its ban of opium, but the profit margin in the opium trade was too great. Under the remorseless pressure of the British government, who were secretly aided by corrupt Qing officials and pushed by greedy Chinese merchants, the ban was ignored and opium was openly available.

It was so widely used that it was even accepted as a social grace by most of the government officials and the rich. Their offer of smoking a puff or two of opium was as commonplace as cigarettes being offered to guests in China today. Some parents even called it “Paste of Fortune and Longevity” and gave it freely to their sons, because they believed that its temporary pain-relieving power would bring the smokers peace and long life, and keep them safely at home instead of wasting their money in the gambling joints and whore houses.

When Wai-gong first entered the government service as a fresh and inexperienced official of low rank, he refused the offers of opium only because he was not accustomed to its taste, not because he knew it was harmful. Eventually, as pressure from his friends mounted, he took an occasional puff or two just to be polite. But opium being opium, he soon became a regular smoker.

However, as he began to read those revolutionary pamphlets, he was told that opium smoking was not only ruining his health, but it was also causing the wealth of the nation to be depleted drastically. So he decided he had to stop his habit.

Mama was only six years old at that time, but she remembered the whole incident vividly. “Your Wai-gong was so naïve,” she said. “He thought all he had to do was to throw away his pipes and his supply of opium pellets, and then just sit back and wait as the yearning for opium faded away. To his horror, he found he was already so addicted that relying on determination alone resulted only in repeated failures.

“In those days, China had no medical facilities to cure such habits, so your Wai-gong had to find ways and means for himself. He consulted some books and finally came to a method. He built a wooden hut right inside our assembly hall. It had three solid walls and a ceiling. The fourth wall had a door, but it was fitted with a lock that could only be opened from outside. There was a small hole at the bottom of one of the three walls to allow food and water to be sent in. To prevent the patient from hurting himself, he was to strip off all his clothing so that he might not tear his garments into strips with which he could braid into a rope to hang himself. Neither was there to be any furniture with sharp corners in case he would hurl himself against them. To avoid cutting himself with metallic or porcelain utensils, food was

to be placed on pieces of paper and water to be served in wooden jugs, both to be passed to him through the small hole.

“For him to succeed he could not be allowed to leave the wooden hut before he was completely cured, so it was essential to entrust the keys to someone who could be depended on to hold onto them even under very trying circumstances. Your Wai-gong chose your Wai-po to be that trusted person.”

He explained carefully to her the importance of the precautions he had taken and the role she must play in them. Knowing his wife was too kind and too concerned with his welfare not to succumb to his entreaties, he emphasized to her the need to obey the instructions given to her now, before he locked himself in the hut. Nor was she to allow herself to be persuaded by any of his colleagues, relatives or friends who might implore her to free him.

To remove any lingering doubts she might have, he told her a story from the Classics. “There was in the days of Warring States² an old duke,” he said. “He owned a beautiful slave girl whom he loved very much. As his health declined, he told his son that, in the event of his death, the girl was not to be buried alive with him as the ancient custom dictated, but was to be freed so she could marry and be happy.

“However, just before he died, he was so frightened of making his journey to the underworld alone that he reversed his order and demanded the slave girl be killed and buried with him. After he died, his friends and his relatives were all of the opinion that the slave girl should be killed because they believed a man’s last wish was sacred and must be obeyed. But his son, the young duke, refused to do so. He argued: ‘My father was confused when he was ill, so I’ll follow only the wish he made when he was sane.’³ In spite of mounting accusations that he was not filial to his father, he set the slave girl free and had her married to a nice young man, exactly the way his father had wished it when he was still in his right mind.

“Years later, this son was appointed by his Emperor to lead an army in a military campaign. On the eve of the decisive battle, he dreamed of a stately old man with a flowing white beard, who came into his tent and said to him: ‘Remember your father’s slave girl whom you had set free? I’m the ghost of her father. Because of the decision you made on her behalf, despite the disapproval of all the others, you’ve found favor with the gods who have

instructed me to show you the strategy you must use tomorrow so you can win.' How could the son fail to win when the gods were on his side?"

Casting his eyes upward, Wai-gong concluded his story, knowing the part about winning favors with the gods had gone straight into his wife's heart. Then he added gravely, "Now you see why I am entrusting the keys to you. You must not open the door till I am completely cured, or listen to anyone who urges you to do so. Like that old duke, what I say now is what I really want because my mind is clear. But when I am taken over by the drug, I will cry, beg, threaten, and say things that may be unbearable to you. That 'I' is the delirious 'I', you must not listen to that 'I'. No matter how long it may take, twenty days or thirty days, you must not pay that 'I' any attention until my senses have completely come back."

Having thus prepared his wife, Wai-gong went into his hut with studied composure as if he was a martyr going to his execution. He strode into the room, stripped his clothing and shoes, threw them outside, and then he told Wai-po to lock the door. At first, he could still talk with Wai-po through the little hole, and he even ate and drank the food and water. But his composure soon disappeared. He turned into a frantic beast who raved and cursed. He pulled his hair out, tore his skin, and smashed his head on the walls until he bled.

My six-year-old Mama kept her mother company next to the small hole. She heard her father threatening to divorce her mother and then to kill her. At that point, he was only yelling and screaming, and throwing all the food and drink violently through the hole, but gradually he had no more energy to throw anything. His shouting became weak and he could only groan.

In the following days, many of his friends and colleagues came to see how he had progressed. Seeing him thus tormented, they shook their heads and urged Wai-po to stop such dangerous foolishness before Wai-gong died of starvation. They said: "Call it quits and let him out. What harm is there in smoking a little opium? It's not as if you can't afford it." But all Wai-po would do was to sit next to the little hole with tears streaming from her eyes. Some of the relatives were so enraged by her composure that they accusingly asked her whether she intended to murder her own husband. Even her children could not bear to witness their father's suffering. Led by Da-yima, they knelt in front of Wai-po, begging for her to show mercy to their father.

Yet all Wai-po would do was sit on the floor, with her head leaning against the small hole on the wooden hut, holding on tightly to her key, without saying a word.

Wai-gong's furious shouting turned to helpless sobbing, and then his piteous groaning turned to alarming silence. Finally, one morning, he drank some water delivered through the small hole. From then on, he took more water and even some food, but was still too exhausted to answer questions. Only when he had recovered some of his vitality was Wai-po ready to open the lock and let out a naked and filthy Wai-gong. He was finally done with smoking opium, and had regained his life.

Mama forgot to say how many days Wai-gong was imprisoned in that wooden hut. I suppose she could not bother with time while the cold-turkey cure was going on, but the whole treatment must have left such a deep impression on her that she remembered it all her life. I wonder how much the memory of her parents' courage and determination would eventually help her to overcome her own difficulties in the days to come.

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- 1 Lin Ze-xu (林则徐). The great statesman of Qing Dynasty who openly burned 20,000 cases of opium in Canton and sternly prohibited the sale of opium.
 - 2 Warring States. The Zhou Dynasty was said to have lasted from 1122 bc to 221 bc but after the Zhou empire declined, all the dukes fought among themselves. The period, called Spring and Autumn (春秋), refers to the time when more than sixteen dukedoms were at war. The Warring States (战国) period refers to the time when only seven large dukedoms were left. The duke of Qin (秦) unified China in 221 bc and titled himself Qin Shi-huang, First Emperor, but he and his son ironically lasted only fifteen years after the unification, whereas the Qin dukedom under his ancestors before the unification, had lasted nearly 500 years, if not more.
 - 3 “Wishes during sickness.” (疾病则乱, 吾从其志也.) A man becomes confused when he becomes ill, so one should only listen to the wishes he made when he was normal and sane.



AS A CHILD, MAMA NEVER MADE DESPERATE RUNS THROUGH A graveyard, nor was she a happy-go-lucky king of shepherds. She was, after all, the daughter of a magistrate. All she needed to do was open her mouth when food was served. When she was able to walk, Wai-gong would place her on his knees and teach her to recognize some words, or let her play with his brush-pen, or coach her to recite some Tang poems as if they were nursery rhymes. It was at this time that Mama began her love affair with literature. After she grew a little older, she was allowed to join the private class that her brother Jiu-jiu studied in under the family's private tutor. When the lessons were over though, her father would read some of his favorite poetry to her because she was able to appreciate it. Although she never had the kind of freedom my father had, she had the luxury of roaming in her father's library which housed more books than my Granddad could imagine.

Wai-gong was the kind of man who thought of knowledge as wings to fly with, and since he would never prevent anyone from flying, Mama had the liberty to read as many books she liked, with no one to tell her what she should or shouldn't read. She read what she could understand. The books she didn't understand she would just return to the book shelves until she could understand them. In this way, she read many books, not only the Classics but also romantic novels such as *The West Alcove*¹ and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which were usually considered taboo for young maidens because of their 'lurid' contents. If she was to have told stories to the shepherd boys, she could probably have outdone my father.

The reason Mama had the freedom to read all of these books was not due to any special love Wai-gong had for her, but because she had no rival in his affection. She was the only one of her siblings who loved reading. Da-yima did not care for books and wouldn't enter the library even if she was invited. Although Jiu-jiu was best loved by his father because he was a son, Wai-gong adhered to the traditional discipline of "embracing a grandson rather than a son," meaning one could show love for one's grandson but not one's own son for fear of spoiling him. Thus Wai-gong refrained from overtly showing his love for his son. Since Man-yi and Zhao-yi were too

young to read or to be read to, Mama was the only one Wai-gong could indulge as a young child. To Mama, this period was the happiest time she spent with her father, and that happiness was to color her lifelong interest in literature. It was also this period of her childhood she talked most about.

Other than her studies and her love of books, she had very little to tell me. When she grew a little older, Wai-gong invited a learned scholar to teach her and Jiu-jiu. Since Mama did not have the special privilege Da-yima had of not having to go to school, she at first attended it unwillingly, but soon she became very fond of school, putting in more and more effort and becoming more and more interested in her studies. In time, she became quite a scholar. Her calligraphy was especially praised by her tutor and her father's friends.

Her essay compositions also received many compliments. When Man-yi told me that the tutor had said that it was as good as a man's, Mama only smiled and commented: "That's not saying much. If a girl's essay is judged to be good, the tutors always say 'it was as good as a boy's, as if the best a girl can do is be as good as a boy. They never say it is better than a boy's."

I have not seen any of Mama's essays and do not know whether they were good or not, but at least it proved that Mama had a mind that was logical and systematic, although it also betrayed a bit of bitterness in being compared with boys this way.

Mama was intelligent and very hardworking. She had read so extensively that her Chinese was better than most girls her age. Wai-gong was very proud of her. When he heard that a school especially for girls had been opened in Changsha, he decided she should enroll there and be exposed to a different kind of education.

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- 1 *The West Alcove* (西厢记). A romantic novel written by Dong jie-yuan (董解元) of Jin (金) Dynasty, based on a story written by Yuan Zheng (元稹) of Tang Dynasty. The love story doesn't seem very dramatic to us today, but it was considered 'lurid' to the readers one hundred years ago because the hero and the heroine dared to love without their parents' permission.



DA-YIMA HAD JUST GOTTEN MARRIED AND LIVED IN CHANGSHA with her husband Liang He-fu¹, the fourth son of a very wealthy family by the surname of Liang. He was also the fourth brother to Liang Huan-kui², Wai-gong's good friend. Since the Liang and Luo families were now in-laws, it was only natural that Mama, as a relative, should stay in her sister's house whenever her new school in Changsha was on holiday, because her hometown of Ningxiang³ was a whole day's journey away from Changsha. That was why she got to know the Liang household as well as she did.

At that time, the Liang family was in its heyday. I had heard many stories in my childhood about the Liangs. Theirs was a good example of Chinese capitalists in the period between the late Qing Dynasty and the early Chinese Republic. Their fate also had a lasting influence on my family. My uncles were always telling us not to follow the example of the Liang children, with their lack of self-discipline and their mistaken idea that life would always be sweet, etc. Instead, we were always told to be frugal, not to spend more than we earned, and not to be smug when fortune smiled upon us. It was a pity that not all of us heeded this advice.

The Liang family's prosperity began with Liang Huan-kui who was a man as remarkable as he was talented. Born in 1868 into a family which was studded with government officials as ancestors, he was an excellent student and became a *xiuca*i and later a *jure*n at the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. In 1895, he was appointed by the government to develop the mining industry of Hunan, but he was soon tired of being an official and journeyed to Japan to learn new techniques of mining. He wrote a poem then in which he said: "How I want to pour the water of the pool so as to wash clean all the shame of China." From this poem, one could see how patriotic he was. Because of the corrupt Qing politics, he returned from Japan to explore ways in which to help China. Even though he was a scholar well versed in Confucian-type doctrines, he still hungered after modern technical knowledge. Not only was he well informed in the many international developments in business and in technology, he was also aware of China's need to modernize.

In 1899, the thirty-nine-year-old Liang Huan-kui obtained the rights to develop Hunan's Yiyang antimony mine (益阳锑矿). However, because his factory used the old traditional methods, the quality of his antimony was poor. It did not improve until his third brother, Liang Ting-fu⁴, who was studying in London's Royal Physics School, learned that the French had invented a new process of antimony refining. He hastened to Paris to buy the process but the seller wanted 70,000 piculs⁵ of silver, a sum that the Liang brothers could not afford. By then, their friend Yang Du⁶, the famous student leader, had learned of their predicament. He went straight to then powerful Zhang Zhi-dong⁷ and Yuan Shi-kai⁸, and persuaded them to grant 160,000 piculs of silver to the Liang brothers to pay for both the process and machinery. With the acquisition, the quality of antimony at Yiyang soared, and it was sold all over the world. Liang Huan-kui reorganized his family business in 1908 and called it Wah Chang Antimony Smelter Company⁹. He made even more money when the First World War broke out as antimony was a strategic mineral.

Da-yima's marriage into the Liang family had taken place just at the right time. When Mama went to school at eleven years old, she remembered the Liangs already had their own generator to light up their house when the rest of Changsha still depended on oil lamps.

I was two years old when Mama took me back to Changsha. We stood in the outer courtyard of their house to watch the Spring Festival. There in the performance was a skit, which Mama told me later was called "The Fisherman and the Pearl-Spirit." She also told me later that the Liang family was then already on the downhill, and didn't have much of their original glamor left. However, in my memory, their house was enormous and their people were all attractive and beautiful. People say children's memories are always exaggerated so I do not know how much of what I remembered was embellished by my childhood impression, but it did seem that the courtyard was as big as two football fields. The girl who acted as the Pearl-Spirit wore a pink pinafore, twisting her body this way and that way, while the boy who played the part of the fisherman wore a blue tunic and black trousers with a bright red waistband, and beat loudly on his drums. I felt it was all so brilliantly gorgeous.

At the time when Mama was a student and lived in their house, the Liang family was as extravagant in their lifestyle as the characters in the book, *Dream of the Red Chamber*. All five Liang brothers lived in the same compound, but they each had their own houses, their own gardens, and their own serving maids and household staff, in addition to the managers and the other employed personnel for their common compound. Like an imperial palace, there was a big kitchen that provided their three meals, but they also had their own small kitchens that cooked whatever they might fancy. Even for their sedan chairs and horse carriages, there were the ones designated for common use and others for their own purposes.

Their garments and other personal items were paid for individually, but each Liang family member was given a small accordion-like book. When a Liang son or daughter wanted, say, a fur coat, all he or she needed to do was to wave this book at the shopkeeper, and the money for the fur coat would be recorded in it. The shop would then debit their account with Wah Chang Company and be paid accordingly. The system was rather like our use of credit cards today, except that with our credit card, we still have to eventually pay our bank, while the Liang son or daughter was simply spending the money deducted from the Company's dividends. With this easy method of buying things without having to pay cash, no one in the Liang household ever bothered to ask the price of things.

Each Liang brother, whether he had been married for a long time or was not yet married, enjoyed the same privilege. Even the grown-up sons of the brothers were given separate houses to live in with their own families and credit-books to wave around while shopping. The money all came from the dividends from their shares of Wah Chang Company. The Chinese word for "communism" literally means "sharing the communal property;" in that sense, I think no one is more communistic than the Liang brothers.

The fourth Liang brother, Liang He-fu, was the husband of Dayima. He and his younger brother Liang Shuo-fu¹⁰ were both very young and obeyed their elder brothers implicitly without question. Since their eldest brother Liang Huan-kui was a Confucian in the sense that he insisted the family property should never be divided, and since this communal property idea worked well when Wah Chang Company was going full steam ahead, no one seriously considered the question of dividing the property, and therefore there was no obvious conflict. As long as all the money made by Wah

Chang went to the Company and theoretically the dividends was evenly distributed among the five brothers, there was no dissention. Since all their needs were taken care of by the Company and the money they spent was deducted from their income without their bothering to pay cash, it was very easy for them all to be happy.

But this policy of not dividing the family fortune was to be one of the factors that led to the family's eventual downfall.

Before there was any sign that the family fortune was faltering, Da-yima was enjoying marital bliss. Loved by her husband, blessed with two children, a boy and a girl, and living in that vast compound with her own garden, her own servants, and her own kitchen, she found life extremely enjoyable. At that time, Wai-gong had already warned her not to be like her in-laws. He told her that she should live constructively and frugally. Da-yima heeded her father's advice for a while, but she had become too used to her extravagant lifestyle to change. She thought that she owned a mountain of gold and her parents were worrying over nothing.

Mama stayed with her elder sister on her school weekends, and soon their younger sister Man-yi also did. Da-yima was naturally very happy to have her sisters' company. The other in-laws were also pleased to have them because, while Mama was docile and quiet, Man-yi was often amusing and flattering. So it seemed all was peaceful and everyone good-natured. Actually, with a family that size, there were, invariably, stories of bickering between the in-laws which Man-yi used to tell me, but Mama never gossiped. Had it been my father who stayed in the Liang house, there would have been a string of fantastic stories.

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- 1 Liang He-fu (梁和甫). The number four Liang brother.
 - 2 Liang Huan-kui (梁焕奎). The number one Liang brother.
 - 3 Ningxiang (宁乡). A town in Hunan, not too far from Changsha.
 - 4 Liang Ting-fu (梁鼎甫). The number three Liang brother.
 - 5 Piculs (两). A measurement of currency, said to be about 133.33 pounds, according to Webster.
 - 6 Yang Du (杨度). A man of literature with some importance.
 - 7 Zhang Zhi-dong (张之洞). The man who controlled Nanyang affairs during late Qing Dynasty.
 - 8 Yuan Shi-kai (袁世凯). The Second President of Chinese Republic but actually a warlord who attempted to be Emperor of China.
 - 9 Wah Chang Antimony Smelter Company (华昌锑矿).
 - 10 Liang Shuo-fu (梁硕甫). The number five Liang brother.



EVEN THOUGH MAMA SELDOM TOLD STORIES ABOUT HERSELF, there was quite a lot of ghost stories in which she somehow played a major role.

With a compound as enormous as the Liang household, there was bound to be isolated huts and small sheds which were rarely used. Such neglected places, looking gloomy and dark, would often become associated in people's minds with ghosts. Ghost stories were not strange, since people in those days were all rather superstitious, but what was unusual was that all the Liang servants swore that these ghosts would disappear whenever Mama made an appearance.

Stories like that were numerous, like the one about a washerwoman up in the attic of some building who was just folding the clothes she had laundered when she suddenly saw a big-headed ghost coming toward her. She stood up to run but the ghost backed her into a corner. She could only scream, "A ghost! A ghost!" The others under the stairs heard her scream, but they could only tremble. Mama was about twelve at that time. She had heard the cry, so she rushed over to see what a ghost looked like, but when she reached the top of the attic, the ghost had disappeared.

Where did the ghost go? "When it heard Second Mistress₁ coming," explained the washerwoman, "it began to shrink. By the time Second Mistress came upstairs, it had shrunk into a ball and then completely disappeared." There were many other similar stories with slight variations. Sometimes the ghost would appear in the corridor, sometimes it would take the form of balls of fire running on the garden path, but no matter what they looked like, they would all vanish as soon as Mama came into view.

For instance, one of them involved a young Liang master taking a stroll near the lake. He saw a little girl about eight or nine, smiling at him. When he was just about to playfully knock on her head with his fan and ask her whose child she might be, Mama walked up behind him, and immediately the little girl, frightened, jumped into the lake and could not be found again. People said the little girl was the ghost of someone who had drowned in the lake and true to common folk belief that a drowned ghost must find a substitute before it could be reborn, the ghost had hoped to drag the young

master into the lake, but because it was scared of Mama, it had to return to its watery grave.

Another story was even more ludicrous. It was said that one of the Liang girls was sick with fever and started yelling that ghosts were everywhere in her bedroom: there were ghosts of all shapes, with huge heads, short necks, green faces and what-not, and all of them were threatening to suck her blood and drag her to the Underworld. They frightened her so much that she couldn't sleep for a single second, so she asked Mama to be brought to her. Mama didn't believe in ghosts, but since the girl was one of her friends, she obliged.

According to her sick friend, the minute Mama walked into the room, all the ghosts, who were poised to drink her blood, quickly retreated to a corner, afraid to move an inch. Mama told her friend that she saw no ghost, but her friend insisted that as long as Mama was with her, the ghosts dared not attack her because they were afraid of Mama, but whenever Mama was about to leave her room, they would jump around again, threatening to throttle her and to kill her. Day and night, she demanded Mama's presence. Fortunately her sickness lasted only two weeks. Poor Mama kept her company all these nights without getting much sleep.

That was why the servants all came to believe that Mama could overcome ghosts. When I was a child, I used to ask Mama why, since she said she didn't have any power over the supernatural, was she so brave and unafraid of them? Mama laughed and replied: "Who said I was brave? It was only my ignorance. Since I had never seen a ghost, I wouldn't know how to be afraid of one even if I tried. I honestly wanted to see them, but I didn't seem to have any *yuanfen* with them. Wherever I went, the other people would cry 'the ghost is gone!' So what could I do?"

These ghost stories were only idle gossip to be talked about over tea or wine, but they still made me wonder why all the Liang servants claimed that ghosts were afraid of Mama.

According to Chinese folk beliefs, people often thought virgins were so sacred that their purity could overcome evil, but with so many young girls in the Liang household, why did the servants pick Mama who was a guest of the house? And if it must be a guest, then why didn't they pick Man-yi, who could talk so eloquently that even a ghost would obey her? Why pick

someone who hardly ever said anything, who could only smile and not get in anyone's way?

Man-yi said it was because Mama was kind and easy-going, so the servants took her to be a *zhengren*₂, and since *zheng* was always believed to be able to conquer *xie*₃, they concluded that the ghosts, which were as *xie* as *xie* could be, must have been afraid of Mama who was *zheng*.

Mama interrupted us. "What's all this nonsense about *zheng* and *xie*?" She said, "I didn't know how I'm *zheng*. All I know is that they said the ghosts were scared of me, but since I've never seen a ghost, how would I know whether they were more afraid of me, or I of them? So who's to say who is *zheng* and who is *xie*?"

But I think Man-yi was correct. I don't think that people's belief was totally random. Submerged in the servants' subconsciousness was their feeling that Mama had a rare streak of honesty and straightforwardness. She never lied or pretended to be someone she was not. She was genuinely kind. Sometimes her ways might seem a bit unusual but she possessed a kind of special *zhengqi*₄, and it was the *zhengqi* that made the servants feel that Mama could overcome *xie*, so that even ghosts were afraid of her. Perhaps the servants did instinctively see something about Mama that had gone unnoticed by the rest of us.

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- 1 Second Mistress. The Liang servants, to show proper respect, followed the example of those maids who had come with Da-yima's marriage, who still addressed Mama the way she was called back in her own home: Second Mistress.
 - 2 *Zhengren* (正人). A 'proper person' in a moralistic sense.
 - 3 *Xie* (邪). Anything that is not straight. Morally it means anything or anyone that is evil.
 - 4 *Zhengqi* (正气). A spirit that is straight or upright. Wen Tien-xiang (文天祥) the patriot-statesman of Sung Dynasty wrote the song, *Zheng Qi Ge* (正气歌), while in jail and waiting for his execution. That song embodies this spirit.



ONE PARTICULAR STORY ABOUT MAMA WILL ALWAYS REMAIN IN MY mind. Mama did not tell it. It was Man-yi who told it to me, long after Mama had died.

It was a few days before Mama was about to graduate from her high school. The principal called her to the office and told her that since she had earned the highest grades in the whole school, she was to go to the podium the next day to receive her award. Mama, after she heard the news, rushed home to Da-yima. Dayima asked her what had gone wrong, but Mama, in seeming distress, kept her silence. Da-yima thought of this and that but in the end, she still could not figure out the reason, so she was forced to go to the school and ask the principal, only to be told that Mama had won the top prize.

Da-yima thought it was too ridiculous for words. It should be a thing to be proud of, so why was Mama reluctant to go up on stage to receive what was rightfully hers? But no matter how both she and the principal persuaded Mama, Mama still shook her head. She said studying was her duty which she ought to do, and didn't do extraordinarily well, thus she felt it was dishonest to receive such an award. Finally, Da-yima and the principal had to agree to announce that the prize had been given to Luo Bu-ge₁, but that regrettably, Luo Bu-ge could not appear in person to receive the coveted award.

Da-yima and Man-yi were both used to Mama's reluctance to appear in public so they both assumed Mama was just too timid to go up on stage. But I question why a girl, who was not afraid of ghosts, would be too timid to climb up a few steps to reach the podium?

Was Mama really so timid?

Or was what she said true, that studying was her duty and she didn't even do her job as well as she should have, so it would be cheating to receive the award?

I think she meant what she said. It was not false modesty. She was only being unbelievably honest.

Why can't we believe that what she said was the truth? Was it because so honest a person could not be understood or appreciated in a world where

everyone was so used to hearing lies?

Furthermore, I wonder if Mama suffered all her life because she was too honest?

1 Luo Bu-ge (罗步歌). Mama's name.



MAMA HAD TURNED EIGHTEEN. SHE HAD JUST GRADUATED FROM her high school. If she was asked what her plans were, she would say that she wanted to go to Beijing for a university degree. She already had a schoolmate who had just gone to the United States for further studies, and another who had run away to Shanghai as a protest against an arranged marriage, even though it meant she would have to make her own living. Mama knew the world was changing. Thus she wished for more education to enable her to work for the future of Chinese women.

That was all very well to dream about. Realistically, however, apart from those in her academic circle, very few girls pursued university careers. Thus her parents, including her siblings, were not paying any real attention to what she said she wished, especially when Mr. Liang Huan-kui, Wai-gong's best friend and Da-yima's brother-in-law, was proposing a match for "his favorite little friend," the name he had given Mama.

Ever since his success in match-making Da-yima to his much younger fourth brother, Liang Huan-kui had found that Mama, the second daughter of the Luo family, who had taken to spending her holidays with her sister in his house, was so intelligent and charming that he used to discuss literature with her. He got along so well with her that he called her by her first name Bu-ge, as if she was his own niece. He joked that, since he had stolen Wai-gong's eldest daughter to be his sister-in-law, it was only fair that he would be responsible for finding an excellent match for Wai-gong's second daughter too.

By then, my father had returned from London and was working for the Ministry of Mining. Liang Huan-kui was once the principal of Hunan Technical High where my father had been a student. Mr. Liang was also a prominent miner, while my father was a new employee in the mining ministry, and a mutual respect and friendship had sprung up between the two. Mr. Liang was unusually fond of my father and praised him to Wai-gong. "His future is limitless!" he exaggerated when he suggested Wai-gong meet his future son-in-law. For this purpose, he invited both men to dinner.

The dinner took place, but Wai-gong was not impressed. He thought my father was a bit too short, not much taller than my mother, and so full of confidence that he was annoying. Otherwise, he admitted that he did not find much fault in the young man to disapprove of. According to Man-yi, he had added: “The young man is too smart for his own good, whereas Bu-ge is too simple and softhearted. I worry that she may not be able to control him.”

But Wai-gong did not refuse the match right away because he had just then lost confidence in the matched marriage of Jiu-jiu, and couldn't be sure whether marriage should be as it had always been, decided by the parents or, if it should be decided by the children themselves.

Before Jiu-jiu went away to study in Japan, Wai-gong had already arranged a marriage contract for him, following tradition and what the matchmakers recommended. They had reported that the girl's father was a scholar well known to Wai-gong, so he had assumed the girl must also be well-educated, like his own daughters were. He found out only after the contract was agreed that the girl was illiterate, because her father was such a complete Confucian that he had taken to heart the advice that “a woman without learning is a virtuous woman”¹. Thus the girl knew not one single written character, although she was an expert in embroidery. It was then too late to back out of the contract, so Wai-gong could only suggest to the girl's parents that the future bride be sent to the same school that Mama attended in the hope that she would learn to read and write at least a few words by the time she married Jiu-jiu.

But my future Jiu-ma₂ had never been exposed to the world outside her boudoir, so how could anyone expect her to adjust to the kind of community living in a school dormitory? Clutching onto her delicately embroidered pillow, she cried for her parents day and night while tearfully stroking her bound feet that resembled the requisite “three-inch Golden Lily”³. Eventually, her parents were forced to withdraw her from school when she lost weight rapidly. They sent a simple ultimatum to Wai-gong: “Do whatever you wish. If you want to back out of the contract, so be it. But she is not going to school.”

Wai-gong was so enraged that he screamed at his wife: “What a silly girl this is! I sent her a pair of wings so she could soar to the sky, but she did not want to fly!”

Wai-po answered: “Why are you so insistent about flying? Look at the chickens and ducks, they pick and peck at worms and grains as they walk about the grounds, and they are just as capable of laying eggs as your flying swallows!”

How could Wai-gong back out of a contract just because the girl was not fond of studying? Besides, Jiu-jiu had returned from Japan and the marriage couldn't be further delayed. So the marriage took place. After the wedding, the bride seemed to have harbored a grudge against the ill treatment she had suffered, and was cold toward her husband as well as to all her in-laws. Wai-gong still would not admit defeat, so he engaged a teacher to coach his daughter-in-law at home, but Jiu-ma used a cold-war strategy. Like Da-yima, she never openly objected, but she also never attended any class. She simply sat in her room working endlessly on her embroidery. She did not communicate with anyone, not even with Jiu-jiu. They brought three sons into this world but they seemed no more intimate with one another than before the children were born.

No matter how one analyzed this marriage, one couldn't honestly say that it was a successful one.

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- 1 “It is a virtue for a woman not to be learned.” (女子无才便是德.) A famous saying of the great sage Confucius that is often quoted but, taken out of context, it can be misleading.
 - 2 Jiu-ma, 舅妈, my Jiu-jiu’s wife.
 - 3 Three-inch Golden Lily (三寸金莲). A saying usually used to describe the bound feet of women, as if the feet are as beautiful as a lily of three inches long.



FROM THE LESSON OF JIU-JIU'S MARRIAGE, WAI-GONG COULD NOT decide whether it was better for him to choose his children's spouses the traditional way, or to let the children adopt the new trend and make their own choice of a marriage partner. This would mean allowing his daughter to find her own boyfriends, which, even to Wai-gong, was quite unthinkable.

Oddly it was Jiu-jiu who helped solve the problem. Jiu-jiu had come back from Japan where he studied education and was busy establishing his very own private school in his home county. He had known my father in their Hunan Technical High schooldays, where they had even exchanged name cards₁ to be sworn brothers₂. He knew my father had come from a poor family but was a person of respectable character and capability, and was highly suitable to be his brother-in-law, so he urged Wai-gong to grant the marriage proposal.

“What's the use of being capable,” answered Wai-gong grimly, “if he cannot make your sister happy? No matter how successful he is to be, if she is not happy, it will not be a good marriage. Somehow I feel he is as brave, as proud and as uncontrollable as a lion. But our Bu-ge is like a lamb. What lamb will not be slaughtered by a lion?”

Jiu-jiu laughed. “Sometimes a lamb likes the roar of a lion. Why not let her decide for herself?”

Wai-po overheard this and quickly protested. “I won't allow it! Isn't that what people call 'free love'? What would our relatives say? If she does not like him, who would want to marry her afterwards?”

Jiu-jiu saw the horror on his mother's face and hastened to explain: “I learned a new trick in Japan. They have a way of letting the young people meet without arousing gossip. Let me go to see Li Guo-qin₃ and tell him that my sister, who wishes to study in Beijing University, needs some private tutoring in English and mathematics and ask him whether he would want to make some extra income as her tutor.

“If he says no, then my whole scheme is off. But if he agrees to teach her, then we'll let the two of them meet in their private classroom. We'll give them enough time to get to know one another. After a certain period,

we will ask her how she feels. If she likes him, fine, let them marry. If not, we'll just say she has learned enough and so there's no more need for tutoring. And that's that."

Wai-po still thought that having a man tutor her daughter was not quite right, but Wai-gong was eager to try this.

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- 1 Name cards, not ordinary calling cards of today, but cards with one's birthday, birthplace, etc., to be exchanged in a brothers-swearing ceremony.
 - 2 Sworn brothers (结义兄弟). In the old days, like during the Three Kingdoms Period, sworn brotherhood was a serious ritual. People who were not brothers by birth took an oath in a ceremony to be as close as real brothers, assuming that brothers were closer than friends. But this ceremony has, over the years, more or less lost its meaning, probably from over-use. In my father's days, students who wished to cement their friendship with others still practiced it, but it was more a fashion than real pledge of brotherhood. Nowadays it is probably only practiced by street gangs.
 - 3 Li Guo-qin (李国钦). My father's name in Hanyu Pinyin. All his life, he spelled it as Li Kuo-ching, thus he was usually known as K.C. Li.



WHEN MY FATHER HEARD THAT THE LUO FAMILY WANTED TO engage him as a private tutor for their daughter, he immediately suspected she was the one Mr. Liang had told him about. Thus he was a thousand times willing, and agreed to be the tutor even before Jiu-jiu could finish speaking.

Mama, on the other hand, said she didn't need a tutor since she felt she could get into the university on her own merit, but after Jiu-jiu's persuasion, she too agreed. I think both my parents understood that, although it was said to be only tutoring, nevertheless it was a golden opportunity to meet the opposite sex, so it was at least worth a try, no matter how things might work out.

It was decided their lessons would be in the house of Liang, as my father lived in Changsha anyway, and since my mother was used to staying with her sister during the holidays, so it was convenient for both parties.

When they first met, what did they see?

Mama at eighteen must have been a lovely girl. Her eyes were big, her nose straight, her mouth sensual, her teeth even, and her demeanor gentle and sweet. She was every inch what a young lady from a highly respectable family should look like. She did not often speak, preferring to hear others talk. She smiled shyly at my father's jokes, just as a beautiful and modest maiden should. She was like the gentle lamb who was thrilled by the roar of a lion.

And what did Mama see in my father? He was energetic, full of vitality, with an air of Western debonair, his large eyes piercing, and his boyish grin could melt the hearts of grandmothers. He could make flattering conversation that pleased whoever listened. He was slightly taller than she was. The minute he opened his mouth to speak, he reminded her of a lion roaring. She was instantly attracted to him by his knowledgeable air, his infectious cheerfulness, his self-mocking sense of humor, and his unfailing optimism.

They must have been pleased by what they had seen.

As time went on, my father was impressed by Mama's understanding of Chinese literature, and especially by her calligraphy. Her intelligence and

her talent in poetry and in classical essays were superior to his. On the other hand, after having listened to many of his stories, Mama admired his quick wit and his perseverance in life.

To avoid gossip, Mama needed the presence of a chaperone, and the job fell on Man-yi, her younger sister, who acted as the only other pupil tutored at the same time by my father.

Remembering those old days, Man-yi mused as she told me: “They never even noticed my presence. Your father would give me the assignment of the day, and then he would move to your mother’s side and talk and talk. Their conversation seemed never ending. With no one to talk to, I would get so bored that I would go away to play. They were so engrossed in each other that they never even noticed I was not in the classroom.”

Even my Fourteenth Uncle, who was about the same age as Man-yi and living with my father at that time, told me that as soon as my father returned home, he would practice his calligraphy because Mama had better handwriting than he did, so he had to drill himself until he would not be ashamed. “I think he was, as usual,” laughed my Fourteenth Uncle, “unwilling to admit defeat.”

Had they fallen in love? What was love anyway?

Three months went by. Wai-gong asked Mama what her impression of my father was. Mama blushed but did not answer. He asked again, and again, yet Mama would not answer. Wai-gong let the matter rest, but after some weeks, he asked her again. This time, Mama only looked down but still would not say anything.

Wai-po laughed and said to Wai-gong. “She doesn’t shake her head, nor does she nod. For a maiden, that means she consents a thousand, or a hundred thousand, times!”

With his daughter’s silent consent, Wai-gong told Mr. Liang, who had originally proposed the match, that if my father was willing, there might be hope for the marriage. When my father learned of this, he rushed home for my Fifth Uncle to send a proper matchmaker to Wai-gong. Wai-gong then asked Mama a last time, and Mama blushing still said nothing. Wai-gong finally made up his mind to marry off Mama to my father.

The wedding day was to be the year after, in 1912, on the fifteenth of January.



ON OCTOBER 10, 1911, JUST A FEW MONTHS BEFORE MY PARENTS' wedding was to take place, the first bullet of the Xinhai Revolution¹ was heard in Wuchang². Twelve days later, on October 22, Changsha followed the call of revolution and also declared independence from the Manchu government.

My father told me that, on the eve of the independence, he was one of the Kuomintang comrades who stormed the residence of the provincial governor in Changsha with guns and hand grenades. I did not believe what he said, knowing his love for boasting. But at the same time, what he said usually contained some truth, so I looked up the historical records and found that on that night, hand grenades were indeed thrown at the residence, causing the governor to flee, which thus liberated Hunan. My father was not listed as one of the heroes, but luckily for him, there was an "etc." at the end of the list, so I cannot rule out completely his participation.

Whether or not my father was a patriotic hero, Changsha was considered unsafe in case the Manchu government should retaliate. Before the revolution took place, Mama had been taken back to her home in Ningxiang to prepare her dowry and trousseau. She was to return to Changsha in January for her marriage. But as the wedding date approached and the political situation in Changsha remained unstable, Wai-gong proposed to hold the wedding at his house in Ningxiang instead of at my father's house in Changsha. My Fifth Uncle, always sensible, readily accepted the proposal since it meant that only my father, his widowed mother and his four brothers needed to travel to Ningxiang.

This decision to marry in the house of the bride, however, caused some of the Luo family relatives to belittle my father, placing him as a son-in-law that was known as *ruzhu*³, a rather demeaning status as any child born from this kind of union must take the surname of his mother instead of his father's. In a society that was male orientated, to lose one's family name was humiliating. Men of means would never descend to that unless there were some extraordinary reasons for it. Thus, men who were *ruzhu* were considered to be very poor and usually socially unacceptable.

As it happened, the Li family was indeed poor and had no influence of any kind to speak of. And the fact that my father was willing to be married in his in-laws' house made the whole situation seem as if the marriage indeed fit the conditions of *ruzhui*. The relatives were thus busy with gossip. According to Man-yi, when the gossip reached the ears of my father and his family, Fifth Uncle paid no attention to it but my father was enraged and was heard to have roared, "I refuse to get married!" Luckily Fifth Uncle reasoned with him and the wedding took place as planned.

Man-yi was the one who told me this story; neither of my parents ever mentioned it. Perhaps they did hear such talk as Man-yi claimed they did, or perhaps they never heard such talk because there wasn't any. Man-yi, being very young and imaginative at that time, could have misunderstood the relatives. Whatever the case, the discrepancy of the financial status between my parents must have been quite apparent to all.

On January 15, 1912, the first year of the Chinese Republic, my parents were married in Wai-gong's house in Ningxiang, Hunan. More than a few hundred guests attended, most of them men of letters and intelligentsia. Their congratulatory couplets⁴ hung all over the wedding hall. Of them all, the pair from Liang Huan-kui stood out and won much praise. In their original Chinese:

君子好求, 民国国钦真国士
绸 今夕, 纪元元月庆元宵

Roughly translated, it means: "Courting his lady, Guo-qin of the Republic is truly a national hero. Tender is the night, this first year and this first month, celebrating this first lantern festival."

It was thought to be marvelously composed. It began with expressing the festive joy of the wedding, coupled with the hope of the people who looked forward to a splendid future for the new Republic. The first four words of both lines, about "courting" and "tender love" were well-known quotations for such occasions. Then it skilfully employed the repetition of words and phrases for a different meaning in the subsequent lines. The word "guo" in *Minguo* (民国) means the People's Republic, in Guo-qin (国钦) it was my father's name, and in *guoshi* (国士) it means a national hero; the word "yuan" (元) in *jiyuan* (纪元) means first year, in *yuanyue* (元月), it means

first month, and in *yuanxiao* (元宵), it means the first full moon in the lunar calendar, or the Lantern Festival. They were almost perfect in their poetic context and their position in the couplet.

This couplet, which praised my father as a national hero, was to my mind, a little too exaggerated! Neither did it impress me with any true feelings. However, there was another couplet that I thought very appropriate. It said in Chinese:

新郎新妇双第一
元年元月庆元宵

In translation, it reads:

The bride and groom both stood as number one,
First year and first month celebrate the first fifteenth day.

Anyone who reads the couplet would know that both of my parents graduated first in their classes, and that they were married on the fifteenth of January in 1912. What better reminder can I have of my parents' wedding date?

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- 1 Xinhai Revolution (辛亥). The first shot that brought in the Chinese Republic was fired in 1910 which, by the Chinese traditional calendar, was in the year of Xinhai. Thus the revolution is always known as the Xinhai Revolution.
 - 2 Wuchang (武昌). A city on the Yangtze River, and where the first shot was fired.
 - 3 *Ruzhui* (入赘). It is a term used for a man who marries into a girl's family and which means he is more or less a male daughter-in-law.
 - 4 Congratulatory couplets (贺联). The Chinese men of letters loved to give their congratulatory messages on paper scrolls with rhyming words so the receivers could hang them up in the halls for all the guests to admire. These scrolls are called *helian*, or congratulatory couplets.



ON JANUARY 1, FOURTEEN DAYS BEFORE MY PARENTS' WEDDING, Dr. Sun Yat-sen became the first president of the new Republic. On February 12 of the same year, the last emperor of the Qing Dynasty gave up his throne, and Sun Yat-sen transferred his presidency to Yuan Shi-kai. Although he did it for the unity of the republic, it brought forty years of continuous civil war to China. However, this chaotic future was not yet known to the newlyweds.

After the political situation in Changsha became more stable, my parents returned from Ningxiang. The change in dynasty did not seem to affect them. My father resumed his job at the Mining Ministry, and even received a raise. He moved out of the staff dormitory and rented a small house. While he went to work every day, Mama taught as a tutor in her alma mater. They were happy.

When Fifth Uncle heard my father had been given a raise, he rushed from the school where he still taught and suggested to my father that they could now move their mother from the village to a new home in the city of Changsha.

Ever since Granddad died, that small patch of land he owned had not been properly tilled because the men in the family had all left and gone their different ways: my Eighth Uncle had gone away to make his own living in other parts of China, and even drifted to Japan and the U.S., my Thirteenth Uncle had finished his cook-cum-student job left vacant by my father and was working somewhere in the city of Changsha, and the youngest brother, my Fourteenth Uncle, was living in Fifth Uncle's old room like his two older brothers once did. Thus there was not one able-bodied young man home with Grandma.

To help Grandma, Fifth Uncle had taken a wife, a tailor's daughter. While Fifth Aunt was illiterate, she was extremely capable in cooking, washing, and raising chickens and ducks, and had borne a son and a daughter for her husband. She was also a filial daughter-in-law and a good mother.

Fifth Uncle thought it would be wonderful if he and my father could manage to bring their mother, his wife and his two children to the city of

Changsha and live harmoniously with his two other brothers and my parents.

It seemed like a simple thing to do, as if all Fifth Uncle had to do was to bring his family to town and ask his brothers to move in, but in reality, he would have to buy or rent a house big enough for three generations. How could he manage it? He and my father did their calculations over and over, and could only conclude that even if they sold the land Granddad owned and combined their salaries to pay the daily expenses of the family, they still could not afford to buy a new house and pay for the moving expenses and the new furniture they would need. The only other way was to go to a bank for a loan, but what bank would allow two salaried men, who had no other assets, to have the sum without some guarantee? No solution could be found.

But Mama solved their problem for them.

Man-yi, who seemed to know everything, told me years later that the money had come from part of Mama's dowry, but I think she was mistaken in the sense that the money was not part, but the total, of Mama's dowry.

When Da-yima married, Wai-gong was still quite wealthy. He could afford to give her a large dowry, and since the Liangs were rich, his dowry for Da-yima had to be plentiful to match the wealth of her husband. When Mama was to marry, Wai-gong had already invested a great deal of money into the school Jiu-jiu had proposed and thus he couldn't and didn't spend as much money on his second daughter. By the time it was Man-yi's turn, Jiu-jiu's school was showing all kinds of mistakes which Wai-gong was trying to rectify by selling his properties in the hope of saving the school, so he had little left to spare for Man-yi. That was why Man-yi, a little jealous, thought Mama's dowry must have been so big that just part of it was enough to buy the house for the Li family.

But I am sure that Mama used all her dowry in the purchase of the house, because she obviously had no money left when a few years later, she wanted to pay to travel to the United States to join her husband. How else could she have exhausted the dowry since she had no extravagant habits? Furthermore, the fact that my uncles treated her with such respect all their lives has convinced me they were deeply grateful to her for having given all she had for the common good of her in-laws' family.

Man-yi argued that their respect was due to the fact that in the later years, the Li family totally subsisted on the money my father sent home, and thus my uncles felt obliged to behave in such flattering manner. What she said might be true, but I didn't think she understood the temperament of our family. My uncles were not the kind who shook their tails like dogs at any rich man. Especially not my Fifth Uncle. He had practically raised my father and knew my father would support him throughout his life, so there was no need for him to cater to Mama, and yet he behaved toward Mama as if she had been his benefactor. True, his concern for her was mainly like a brother toward a sister, but it is also because he felt she was like "coal in the snow"¹ when he needed warmth. Besides, he had acted like a big brother to her long before my father made any money, so it could not have been because my father had become rich later in life. My Fifth Uncle was grateful to my mother for the house she bought with her dowry.

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- 1 Coal in the snow (雪中炭). A well-known phrase describing much-needed comfort received in bitter times, like a man who is given coal to burn so he can warm his limbs when he is freezing in the snow.



SO THE HOUSE WAS BOUGHT AND EVERYONE MOVED IN.

Grandma had feared that Mama, who was born a lady from a rich family and who had purchased a house for her and all her offspring, might be someone difficult to deal with, but after living together for a while, she found Mama to be gentle, docile and well-mannered. She was so happy that she decreed that Mama was the kind of woman who “held a brush-pen” and should not be permitted to do any housework or else she might dirty her hands. That meant the housework, including the cooking, washing, and laundry, all fell on the shoulders of my Fifth Aunt.

Luckily for Mama, Fifth Aunt was kind and so used to doing the work that she didn’t complain at all. Besides, she could see that Mama was so young and inexperienced that she wouldn’t be much help even if she tried. Furthermore, she was pleased when Mama volunteered to employ a maid to help her.

What really made Mama dear to Fifth Aunt was not the gift of extra help but Mama’s talent in telling stories. Every afternoon after lunch, Mama would tell stories from *Shan Hai Jing*¹ to *History of East Zhou*², from *Dream of the Red Chamber* to *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, and from the Monkey God to the Enlightenment of Buddha. She enthralled both Fifth Aunt and Grandma and introduced them to a wonderful make-believe world that held their interest like TV dramas hold ours today.

Mama didn’t like to gossip, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t talk. She just did not like to talk about herself. However, when she was telling a story, not only was she fluent, she had the imagination to fill in the gaps left in the original story. That was a trick of hers which I knew only too well. I remember I was about eight years old when I was recuperating from dysentery and the doctor had told me to refrain from any physical exercise. To keep me in bed, Mama sat next to me and read to me the whole volume of *Legends of Heroes and Heroines*³. She read it so vividly, even today I can remember how the ineffective hero and his stupid “Thirteenth Sister” knew less about love than I did. It was a rather poorly written book, and the only reason I can remember its ‘heroes’ is because Mama had made them so lively. One always got the feeling that one couldn’t have enough of her

stories. Imagine such a talent discovered by my Grandma, who was starved for a little excitement. She immediately elevated Mama to an important personage in the family.

During that period, Mama's life must have been delightful. Not only was she respected and admired by everyone, from Grandma down to all the relatives, but what made her happiest was the concern her husband showed her. Man-yi was perhaps the best judge, since she was Mama's sister and also her best friend.

Before Mama was married, Man-yi was the only other pupil in my father's tutoring class, and after Mama married, she chose to stay in Mama's humble home for her school holidays instead of Dayima's elaborate residence. She got along with Mama's two younger brothers-in-law who were about the same age as she was. Once, during her stay, my Thirteenth Uncle sneaked up on her when she was napping on a rattan chair, and poured a bucketful of cold water on her and then ran away laughing his head off. Yes, she knew the Li family well.

About the relationship of my parents, Man-yi said: "I will just tell you one episode. Once, your father went to Yue Lu Shan⁴ to give a lecture and couldn't come home on time. Yue Lu Shan was only across the river from Changsha and not far away enough to cause any anxiety, but your father tipped a fisherman to row over to our side during the night just to deliver a letter to your mother. In those days, very few men would show such concern for their wives, so the others all teased your mother.

"But I was only interested in the envelope of his letter, because on the back of it was drawn an arrow piercing through two red dots that looked like two pieces of rocks. I thought then that your father might be imagining himself as Li Guang⁵ shooting at rocks but even Li Guang could pierce only one rock, not two. I really couldn't think of an appropriate explanation, so I went to your mother, but she only blushed and smiled.

"I didn't know the answer until much later, when I went to Shanghai and saw a similar design in a French cake shop. I was told that those two red dots were not rocks but were almond-shaped hearts and the arrow piercing them was love! Ha, for such a silly letter, your father wasted money and energy to have it delivered to your mother, just to tell her he loved her!"

My father had cause to be concerned, because Mama was then carrying my elder sister Lien-ming⁶. But even if she was not pregnant, he would still

have been concerned about her because he loved her. After all, there was no reason for him not to love her. He was young, he was a man of passion and he didn't have many experiences with the opposite sex. For him to have a wife so intelligent and so gentle that he could have total communication with her, why would he not love her?

As soon as the baby was born, my father took Lien-ming to a photo studio and had her picture taken. On the back of the photo, my father wrote in his favorite bravado way: "This is the beloved daughter of Li Kuo-ching, Foremost Industrialist of China." I saw this photo when I was only a child, but unfortunately it was lost during the war. In this picture, Lien-ming was a happy fat baby whom everyone loved, but what my father wrote on the back left a deeper impression on my mind even though I was a child then. From the pronouncement, one could see how his ambition had already been formed: He did not boast of how lovely his daughter was, but that he was to be China's foremost industrialist.

Even so, he did love Lien-ming and gave her as her milk-name one word: *lin*, meaning "unicorn," from his own *zi*⁷, which was Bing-lin⁸. That was why my sister was always known in our family as Lin-jie, or Lin-mei, or Lin-Yazi⁹, whereas for unlucky me, when I was born, Mama conveniently picked the word *feng*¹⁰, meaning "phoenix," as a companion to "unicorn." Later, when I went school, she made "Feng" my official school name. I had always hated it because it was so common – every girl in China was named Feng.

When the First World War started in 1914, and my sister was about one-year-old, the Liang family wanted someone to sell antimony in the United States. The first person they thought of was my father because he was now considered, after having married Dayima's sister, to be a relative of theirs, or what they called "our own people." My father, who was then employed by the Hunan Mining Bureau and had hopes of being promoted to a higher post, was reluctant to go. But as "our own people," he had no choice but to leave behind his wife and baby after only three years of married bliss.

No one could have predicted that in the next few years, the situation of the Liang family would be drastically changed. These changes directly and indirectly affected the fate of our Li family, particularly that of Mama.

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- 1 *Shan Hai Jing* (山海经). A novel dated from early Qin (秦), about 200 bc, but with added materials from later years. It talks about all kinds of real or legendary animals, spirits, and preserved many ancient oral histories.
 - 2 *History of East Zhou* (东周列国志). A novel written in the Ming Dynasty by Feng Meng-long (冯梦龙) about the historical events in East Zhou (ca 780 bc – 230 bc).
 - 3 *Legends of Heroes and Heroines* (儿女英雄传). A novel written in Qing (清) about a girl nicknamed “Thirteenth Sister” who finally avenged the death of her father and married a weak and spineless scholar.
 - 4 Yue Lu Shan (岳麓山). The mountain next to Changsha where the historically famous academy of Yue Lu (岳麓书院) was located.
 - 5 Li Guang (李广). A Han Dynasty warrior who reputedly shot at a rock and pierced it.
 - 6 Lien-ming (廉敏). My sister, whose name in Pinyin should have been Lian-ming, but since she had always spelled it as Lien-ming, I am writing it her way.
 - 7 Zi (子) The term 名子 (*mingzi*) which a Chinese literate man or woman uses, can be split into two: “ming” (名) and “zi” (子). A man can have only one “ming” and it should not be casually used, but he may have as many “zi” as he wished, which can be used by anyone and even by strangers.
 - 8 Bing-lin (炳麟). My father’s *zi*. People can address him as Kuo-ching (国钦) on formal occasions, but he was called “Bing-lin” (炳麟) by his family or friends.
 - 9 Lin-jie, Lin-mei and Lin-Yazi (麟姐, 麟妹, 麟伢子), meaning elder sister Lin, younger sister Lin and the child with Lin as a name, are all familiar ways in our Hunan dialect to address a child.
 - 10 Feng (凤). Feng is a phoenix that traditionally appears in mythology with a unicorn. Since my sister’s milk-name was “unicorn,” my milk-name naturally was “phoenix.” “Feng” is spelled in Hanyu Pinyin, but I have always spelled it as “Fung,” thus my name stayed as Li Lien-fung.



HOW COULD A FAMILY AS RICH AS THE LIANGS, WITH SO MANY intelligent and capable family members, ever collapse so quickly?

The main cause was the end of the First World War, which dropped the price of antimony like a rock down a cliff, from US\$900 a ton to US\$90 a ton. But Wah Chang, whose net profit before 1915 was reported to be more than US\$3 million (equivalent to about US\$70 million today), could still have survived such a short-term setback.

According to Liang Huan-kui who tried to analyze the situation many years later, there were three major difficulties their Wah Chang Company had to confront: one, there were the Western companies with their government support that made it difficult for Wah Chang to compete. Two, there were the Chinese gangsters with their huge numbers and ruthless behavior that made it difficult for the company to maintain a proper working order. Three, there were the numerous warlords with their endless civil wars and their insatiable demands for money that made it difficult for the company to maintain financial balance. With these three difficulties, Wah Chang was indeed facing a dismal future.

And yet, in spite of these difficulties, Wah Chang might have survived if they did not lose, in quick succession, three of their five directors. The first was the eldest brother, Liang Huan-kui, who lost his eyesight. Next were the deaths of the second and third brothers¹. Wah Chang was left with only brother number four, who was Dayima's husband, and brother number five, as its directors, to take care of the affairs of the company. Both these men were young, inexperienced and greedy.

Had they tried harder, they might still have stemmed the tide of unfavorable events, but they were hopelessly incapable and too greedy to work hard. They did not think of ways and means to fortify their company, only of how they could utilize their position as director to grab whatever wealth the company had left.

By that time, the family's next generation had also splintered into small warring factions. There were children whose fathers were directors against the children whose fathers were no longer directors. Even children of different mothers were fighting and plotting against one another. They were

all bound by the policy laid down by Liang Huan-kui not to divide the family-owned company, but they could still use their given privileges, such as their buying-on-credit-books to hasten the fall of the company.

Their wives, concubines, sons and daughters all vied with one another to outspend each other. They competed to see who owned the most expensive clothes, jewels, cars and even houses, as if he who could squander the most would win the battle. If the wife of brother number three bought a diamond necklace, the wife of brother number two would rush out to buy a sable fur coat. If the son of brother number one went to the U.S. for flying lessons, then the daughter of brother number three would go to Paris to study fashion. Some of them, I was told, even resold what they had bought on company credit in order to fatten their own personal bank account.

Thus, the family members, some forty or fifty of them, all resorted to stealing or grabbing what they considered as their own share of the common property while suspecting the others of getting more from the common pile. But none of them did an ounce of work to help the company. The situation was like a pot of boiling water bubbling over when the lid was tossed aside.

It was like a rebellion. The children of non-directors complained that they received no dividends, knowing full well that the company had no more profits to declare as dividends. What they demanded was the capital itself. At the same time, the wives and children of the two brothers, who were directors, insisted that their husbands/fathers who did the hard work were underpaid, and thus demanded more reward in cash.

Meanwhile, as the family squabbled, Chinese politics had gone from bad to worse. Civil war was looming all over Hunan, and in fact, all over China. Changsha was no longer considered good enough for rich men's sons and daughters. The two directors, brother number four and brother number five, were the first to run to Shanghai, using the civil war as an excuse, but their real desire was to enjoy the luxurious life of the big city. Of course their nephews and nieces followed suit.

As they each settled down to live in Shanghai, they naturally could not share the same compound the way they used to do in Changsha, but they still asked indiscriminately for money from Wah Chang for their support.

Man-yi told me that Da-yima's husband was the first to buy a gigantic villa in the French Concession. He paid no attention to the company mines

in Hunan, but concentrated on his own business in the Shanghai branch, investing in the stock market with the fortune he took from Wah Chang. His younger brother, who was also a company director, did the same. They both needed money to invest in stocks, to loan out at high interest rates, and to drink and frolic with women. Naturally they had no intention of dividing the family-owned company.

The wives and children of the other brothers were aware that things were not going their way, so they insisted on dividing the family property, while they too busily hid away their own wealth which they had ‘stolen’ from the company. It was indeed a mess and no one knew what was what!

The Chinese have a proverb which says that “a centipede with its hundred feet might be dead without every foot being stiff yet”², meaning that it takes a long time for a huge establishment to be completely dead. Wah Chang was that huge centipede. It was being torn apart, but there was still money to be taken from it. The centipede was being killed by the inefficiency of its management. With the two ‘working’ directors only occasionally dropping in at the Shanghai branch office to demand cash from the mines while leaving the mines uncared for, the managing staff at the mines took matters into their own hands. Why couldn’t they rob a little here and steal a little there? Even the largest mine in the world cannot survive when there is corruption at every level. Within a short time, around the 1920s, the world’s largest antimony mine became worthless.

Liang Huan-kui died in 1930, in Little Heavenly Pool, Lu Shan³ where Mama also owned a house. With his death ended the largest antimony mine in the world.

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- 1 I assumed that they had both died of natural causes, but I could not be certain since these tragedies took place long before I was born. I had only the gossip I heard as a child to go by.
 - 2 A centipede with a hundred feet (百足之虫, 死而不僵).
 - 3 Little Heavenly Pool, Lu Shan (小天池, 庐山). That was also where my mother's villa was located. She must have bought it at the same time Mr. Liang bought his.



MY FATHER WENT TO AMERICA IN 1914. BY 1917, HE HAD BEEN the sole representative for Wah Chang for three years, selling antimony ore.

He was very disturbed by news from China about the ugly deeds of the Liang family. Then he heard of the death of my Wai-gong, which grieved him, and the resignation of Zhou Zi-jian¹, which unsettled him. Like him, Zhou Zi-jian was a mining engineer by profession. He had graduated from Columbia University and also, like my father, was a man whom the Liangs considered as “our own people” because he too was related by marriage to the Liangs since he married Da-yima’s other sister, Man-yi. My father had always liked and respected Zhou and found him an honest and a straightforward man. With Zhou’s resignation, my father reasoned that the affairs at Wah Chang in China were really as bad as rumored. It made him also want to quit Wah Chang, but he couldn’t do so as yet because there was still some unsold antimony ore under his care.

He had met with much resistance at the beginning of his work in America. The office clerks at most of the New York firms ridiculed him. They thought it extremely funny that a Chinaman should carry a briefcase and not a brown package of laundered shirts. What annoyed them even more was that, instead of speaking pidgin English, my father spoke with what they suspected to be an affected British accent, never dreaming that his accent was acquired in a London school with “Royal” as part of the school’s name. Thus my father was often left to cool his heels in the waiting rooms for days, even weeks, because the clerks refused to send in his name card to their bosses.

When he was finally granted interviews with the bosses, he was looked upon with suspicion, distrust and contempt. They did not believe he could understand the significance of contracts, letters of credit or bank guarantees, and they doubted that he had legitimate ores to sell. My father could not afford to lose his quick temper, so he patiently set out to convince them that he did know the fine points of business, that he was genuinely the representative of a Chinese mining company, and that he did have large amounts of minerals to sell, but these businessmen would terminate their

discussions by saying they preferred to deal through their own European or American agents who lived in China and were white-skinned.

My father gritted his teeth and swallowed his pride, but his persistence paid off and he gradually won the confidence of his business clients and gained a foothold in the mineral market. He made some good friends and even managed to sell antimony for prices better than what Wah Chang in China could get through foreign agents. The Liangs were pleased and spoke highly of him.

But as time went on, the two inexperienced younger Liang directors, one of whom was his brother-in-law, did not understand how business was run, nor did they care. All they demanded was that the proceeds from the sales should enable them to meet their extravagant lifestyles. My father's decisions on when to sell were never questioned as long as the profits he brought in were fairly high. However, as the market moved downward it had become increasingly difficult for my father to act in New York, .

Now, as he made up his mind to resign, he had this last batch of antimony not yet sold. If he should resign abruptly, he felt he would be letting his company down. He felt he ought to sell the ore before he quit. But since the price of antimony kept on dropping, he had to advise his bosses to hold on and wait for the market to rebound, which was why he still had that batch of cargo on hand.

But his bosses insisted that he sell because they needed the money to use in China. My father repeatedly sent cables to explain why it was not a good time to sell, but to no avail. The brothers needed the money badly to play on the stock market and to buy the pleasures of wine, women and song, and that was that.

It looked as if he would have to make the sale under such sacrifice. My father discussed this regretfully with his friends, who had come to admire him for his honesty and integrity. They said that if he must sell, then he might as well sell it to himself instead of to any stranger. Since my father had no money, these friends jointly put up the sum for him.

It so happened that Wah Chang had never set up a branch office in New York, but only designated my father as a representative, so my father registered a new company, calling it Wah Chang, New York, since that was the name he had been identified with in America. At the same time, he sold the antimony of the Chinese Wah Chang at the low price the Liang brothers

had insisted that he sell and remitted the entire payment promptly to the Liangs. After this last task was done, he sent in his resignation.

Was his action ethical? It later became a court case fought in both China and in the United States, and my father won both suits in the two countries. I think that, with my father's thorough understanding of business, he would not have allowed any legal loopholes.

Man-yi told me that the Liang family accused my father in court of malpractice. They claimed that it was underhanded for an employee of a company to sell the goods to himself. In other words, it accused him of stealing. This accusation did not stand up legally either in China or in the United States.

My own Li family repeated to me what my father's lawyers argued. They said that, in the first place, my father only did what his employer ordered him to do. And secondly, since he sold it at the price his bosses had approved of, and since he had remitted every penny of what he sold to the said bosses, there was nothing amiss. It was an honest sale. What was the difference between selling to an employee of the company and to a total stranger? In what way did the sale betray the employer as long as the price sold and the payment remitted was all proper?

When my father discussed the affair with me some fifty years after the event, all these data were ironclad facts. He had many cables to prove the Chinese Wah Chang's determination to sell, in spite of his many cables to persuade his bosses to wait. There were cables to prove the price to sell was approved by the Chinese Wah Chang, and there was the receipt from the Chinese Wah Chang to prove the payment had been received.

The one arguable point was that his company was almost a duplicate of the mother company. But was it a crime? The Chinese Wah Chang never registered itself in the U.S., probably for fear that my father would become too independent. In any case, even if they did register and thus rendered it impossible for my father to use it, my father could have picked any other name, say K.C. Li Co., and it would have served as well.

In other words, there was no wrongdoing by my father or Wah Chang New York.

But was it morally right?

In my opinion, speaking from the point of morality, my father, at the time of the sale, was still an employee of the Chinese Wah Chang. In that

role, should he or shouldn't he have the obligation to inform his bosses who the buyer was? Furthermore, should he have resigned before the sale and then bought the ore? Did he deliberately avoid telling his bosses he was the buyer for fear the bosses would not have sold it to him? Would his telling the truth have made any difference to the sale? I do not know.

What I do know is that my father was lucky. When he first bought the antimony ore, its price was still going down. If it had gone down further, my father would have been broke and probably landed in jail for the money he owed his friends, and the Liangs might have pitied him and forgiven him. But as it happened, the price of antimony ore rebounded, and he could return what he borrowed with a little nest egg left over to invest in his new company. Of course my father denied it was luck; he claimed it was his expert perception of the antimony market.

Whatever it was, it was a gamble. The Liangs had lost and my father had won. There was really no right or wrong about it.

However, the Liangs would not see it that way. They did not blame their own demand for cash which made them insist on selling, no more than they blamed themselves when their employees at the mines took the antimony ore home with them. They only blamed my father, asking how he could, as one of "our own people," take advantage of the company?

Unfortunately their fury could not travel across the ocean and be aimed at my father, so instead they vented their anger on my mother, who had just then moved to Shanghai.

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- 1 Zhou Zi-jian (周子建). He was the husband of Man-yi, Mama's younger sister. After he left Wah Chang, he went to work for China's largest iron mine in Hankou, and was later promoted to Chief Engineer. People had dubbed him King Hanzhi or 汉冶王.



MAMA'S RELATIVES HAD MOVED TO SHANGHAI ONE BY ONE. THE first batch was her older sister Da-yima and her family, and then it was her younger sister Man-yi, whose husband Zhou Zi-jian had resigned from Wah Chang to work in Hankuo's Iron Mines. Uncle Zhou was a native of Shanghai, so it was only natural that Man-yi should buy a small piece of land in Shanghai's Chinese territory for his stepmother and her children to live on.

In the meantime, the warlords in Hunan were spreading havoc everywhere they went. The unrest they created was so threatening that my father urged his family to also go to Shanghai. His reasons were, firstly, it was safer; secondly, being a metropolitan city, it had more medical and educational facilities for the children; and thirdly, it would be more convenient for him to visit us should he come back from the United States. With these three reasons waving temptingly in front of them, my Fifth Uncle and Mama sold their house in Changsha and with the proceeds, bought the passage for the whole family to Shanghai. Of their Luo family relatives, only Wai-po, Jiujiu and Jiu-ma remained in Hunan.

We moved into a three-storied house in a so-called "alley estate"¹ named Min Hou Nan Li². The house was recommended by the Liang family because, at that time, not only were we related by marriage, but my father was their trusted employee. Whenever Mama visited Da-yima, she always took Lien-ming along and paid their respects to all the Liangs. So far, their relationship was harmonious because they were old acquaintances from Hunan, and also because most of them had yet to make friends in the new city.

What soon followed was my father's establishing a Wah Chang in New York for himself, independent of the Wah Chang Company owned by the Liangs in China. This was seen by the Liangs as an act of treachery. The Liang attitude towards Mama changed. They made scathing remarks in front of her. They also regarded her sister Man-yi as treacherous because her husband had also resigned from Wah Chang, but since Man-yi's attitude was one of unconcern, it was not as much fun baiting her as it was baiting Mama. Thus, they poured their sarcasm mostly on my poor mother. Even

so, Mama continued to visit her older sister Da-yima, partly because she loved her sister and partly because she felt apologetic that her husband might have wronged her brother-in-law.

Then, before she knew how to explain her husband's "misdeed," news came that my father had taken another woman in America.

The news came so suddenly that not only was the Li family shocked, but even the Liangs found it unbelievable. After their initial disbelief, they felt that they had been avenged. They laughed at Mama for having lost a loving husband and at Da-yima for having lost a capable brother-in-law. Because Mama, as well as Dayima, were still regarded as their relatives, they did not openly make fun of Mama's misfortune, but their thinly veiled conciliatory words were brutal.

One of them would say: "Whatever is new is always better than whatever is old. We all know it's common with most men, so don't feel too bad about it. Besides, that other woman, I heard, is younger and prettier than you. *Aiya*, it is too bad! We women just have to get used to this kind of suffering when we grow old and ugly. Isn't that right?"

Another would say: "I have always suspected that your husband is ambitious, now I know it for sure. See how he used you? In the old days when he was nothing, he needed you and your rich connections, but now that he feels his wings have grown strong, he throws you off for another woman who is more useful to him. What of it? I say it is good riddance. You should show him that you still have influential friends. You should divorce him to show him that you cannot be jilted so easily."

And all of them would follow suit and say self-righteously: "Yes, yes, divorce him and make him pay. Let him know that, even though a woman has grown old and ugly, she cannot be so easily abused." That they would continuously exclaim how Mama, at the age of twenty-three, was old and ugly showed how much they hankered for revenge.

Man-yi told me how she had seen with her own eyes the way they thrust these verbal knives into Mama. "To kill without drawing blood" was her assessment of their treatment. Life for Mama under this kind of abuse must have been hard to bear.

Lien-ming was then six years old and she only half understood these leering words, but she said she had seen Mama, when no one was around, sob as if her heart would burst. Lien-ming did not know how to comfort her.

She told me that to see Mama crying was like having emptiness and darkness enveloping her.

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- 1 Alley estate (弄堂房子). A very popular sort of residence for the middle class. They can still be seen even today in some corners of Shanghai although their numbers have dwindled. 弄堂 means alley and thus 弄堂房子 means houses built inside alleys. These houses are rarely visible from the main streets; what can be seen is usually a narrow opening between the shophouses which will lead to the so-called estate-house hidden behind the shops. Once inside the estate, however, one then sees a great many houses lined with narrow pathways. People who live in these alley houses usually know everything about their neighbors. It has its own kind of charm and I still visit them whenever I have a chance.
 - 2 Min Hou Nan Li (民厚南里). To give it an individual flair, each alley estate has its own name, and the one we lived in was called “The Southern Alley of Min-Hou.” It is more poetic than to be called the 114th or the 245th alley.



HOW DID THE NEWS OF MY FATHER'S SECOND MARRIAGE REACH Mama's ears? Was it disclosed by the Liang relatives, by my Li uncles, or was she told directly by my father? I don't know. I had not even been born yet, so I can only guess.

I think my father wrote my mother of it himself. This guess is based on a suitcase full of letters written by him to her, which my sister found almost fifteen years later, in June of 1937.

That was the summer when my male classmates at Nanyang Middle School in Shanghai were all required to attend military training by government regulation, leaving just the three of us girl students in our huge classroom. The arrangement was not only ludicrous but highly uneconomical for the school, so our principal decided to give us girls a long vacation from May to September.

Mama decided the long vacation was a good opportunity for us to take a river cruise, visiting first Man-yi in Daye¹ and then proceeding, as we had originally planned, to Guling² where the family were all to meet in July. We sailed accordingly.

Lien-ming was then studying at Shanghai Medical School and would not have her vacation until June, so she remained in Shanghai. When it was time for her to leave, she looked for a suitcase to pack her things in and found, under Mama's bed, a small suitcase just the right size. However, when she opened it, it was not empty but full of letters my father had written.

Lien-ming only had time to glance at some of the letters briefly, but that didn't worry her as she thought she would have plenty of opportunities to read them at her leisure without Mama's knowledge when she returned to Shanghai after her vacation. How was she to know that the Japanese war would explode and destroy our house in Shanghai and everything in it, including those letters?

Since she only glanced at the letters, and since the letters were all written in *wenyan*, with which she was unfamiliar, she understood only the gist of what she read, but what she read was enough for her to guess at the essential facts. She was excited by what she had found, but when she

arrived at Guling in July, where I was waiting, she thought I, at fourteen, was too young to share her secret with and thus she did not tell me about it.

In any case, there was no time for her to confide in me because, on July 7, the Japanese War broke out. In that one day, our lives were suddenly turned upside down and she thought no more of the letters.

Events moved even more swiftly after that. A month later, in August the same year, we all left Guling, not to return home to Shanghai, but to new schools in Hunan. In the winter of 1937, Lien-ming followed her medical school to Chongqing³ where there was Japanese bombardment almost daily, and she did not know whether she would be alive the next day. Immersed in the war, she forgot all about the letters. We did not meet again for nine years, because I left for Hong Kong and then the United States, while she stayed on in China. And it never occurred to her to confide in me through her letters.

We only met up again in the autumn of 1946, nine years after she discovered the letters under Mama's bed, and we met not in China but in Boston. She and her husband had come to the United States to study at the Massachusetts State Hospital and I, a young married woman of twenty-three, was living in Cambridge while my husband studied at Harvard.

After so many years apart, we naturally had much to talk about, especially when the two of us took to touring the nearby countryside on our bikes and shared leisurely afternoon teas together. It was only then that the matter of the letters in the suitcase was finally brought up.

Lien-ming said that in the suitcase were many letters; some were written in the days when they were happily married but many were after he had taken "the other woman." Since she had read these letters nine long years ago, she could not remember clearly what they said, but she did recall one in which my father explained his wrongdoing and begged Mama for her forgiveness.

In it, he first blamed his loneliness which made him seek the company of his secretary, a Chinese girl, who was a daughter of a church minister, but when the girl became pregnant, he felt he had to marry her. Then he went on to tell Mama that this girl was, to him, no more than a concubine. Some day, he wrote, when he came home, he would bring her to kowtow to Mama as a concubine should and to call Mama "Elder Sister." He added that he loved Mama and would always recognize Mama as his legal First Wife.

I had by then lived in America for eight years under my father's care and had dined with him countless times, listening to his numerous tall tales. I felt I understood his complex nature. When Lien-ming told me what she had read, I sneered and retorted: "Our Diedie knows how to please whoever he wants to please. What he said to Mama was just his way of deception to placate her. Look at what he promised Mama! What was all the business about that other woman being only a concubine? What about his bringing her home to kowtow to Mama? Did that ever happen?" "

Lien-ming thought with her head lowered for a long while. Finally she said: "But I feel some of what he said could be true." A few minutes later, she added: "I also think Mama believed him."

"Mama is so honest that she can be easily fooled," I said. "She believes everything anybody tells her."

Lien-ming was not convinced. "Well," she argued, "after all, he did live as a bachelor for three long years, and in those three years, he did ask for Mama to join him in New York, so it proved that he did love her, didn't it? If Mama had gone at the time he suggested, all this would not have happened. That's why I think what he wrote to Mama did have some truth in it. It wasn't all a lie."

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- 1 Daye (牯岭). A mining city near Hankou.
 - 2 Guling (牯岭) A popular summer resort in Jiangxi (江西) where everyone went including Jiang Kai-shek (蒋介石) and Mao Tse-tung (毛泽东).
 - 3 Chongqing (重庆). The war-time capital of China.



MY FATHER DID WAIT FOR MAMA. AT THE END OF HIS FIRST YEAR in New York, he sent her his savings to buy her ocean passage. However, Grandma complained that it was improper for my father to think only of his own wife and child while forgetting his younger brother, my Thirteenth Uncle, who did not have the means to go to university. “All this son of mine can think of,” she grumbled, “is to be happy himself. He doesn’t care if his own brother should become a beggar!” Mama, forever the Good Samaritan, gave the money she received to my Thirteenth Uncle, who then went to study in Berkeley, California.

The same thing happened again the next year. When my father remitted the fare to Mama, Grandma interfered, saying my Fourteenth Uncle should also get a university education, and again Mama gave up the fare. Grandma consoled her and told her: “Never mind. It is only for another year. You two are such a loving couple that he’ll soon send money again. Just wait.” But Grandma was wrong. After two unfruitful remittances, my father sent no more money because he had by then taken a new wife.

The day after my father’s funeral, my Fourteenth Uncle was so remorseful that he tearfully mentioned this past event with shame and guilt, and said he should not have taken the money, but what was the use of his guilt and his shame then? Both my Thirteenth and Fourteenth Uncles eventually became successful businessmen and made plenty of money; the one who paid for their success was Mama.

Mama must have regretted that she had used all her dowry in buying that house in Changsha, which had to be sold even when prices were extremely low because of the warlords and their armies hovering over Changsha. And then there were the traveling expenses to Shanghai for the whole family. If she had only kept a little of her money, then she wouldn’t have needed to wait for my father to remit the fare. Did she rebuke herself for being foolish to have done what she did? Had she made the mistake of putting too much emphasis on other peoples’ good opinion? Had she overlooked her duty as a wife in order to fulfill her duty as a daughter-in-law? Whatever it was, she concluded that she had only herself to blame.

She must have felt sad and lonely. She had so many grievances but no one to share them with.



HE HAD BEEN HER HUSBAND, HER FRIEND AND HER CONFIDANT – how Mama must have wished she could consult my father himself! But knowing that it was now impossible, she tried to think her way out of her own problems. Of all her doubts, the uppermost in her mind was whether or how much of her husband’s confession was true?

Was it all a lie, or did it have some truth?

The Liangs said that my father’s motive for his marriage had been a matter of personal benefit, and that he never had any feelings for Mama, so now that he was free of Wah Chang, he could afford to abandon her because he no longer needed her as a bridge for wealth or success. If that were the case, Mama asked herself, why didn’t he simply ask her for a divorce, because he would not have cared if he hurt her feelings? Why should he lie and write such a pathetic letter asking for her forgiveness?

But he did write such a letter. If he wrote it knowing it was a lie, there could be only two reasons: one was his gratitude because she had been a good wife, had given him a daughter, was filial in taking care of his mother, and had once used all her dowry to buy a house for the family. Thus although he no longer loved her, he might have felt that she deserved at least to have the truth kept from her.

Secondly, believing in the proverb that “fallen leaves should drop at the root of the tree”¹, my father would want to live in China eventually. With his knowledge of Chinese social structure, he knew that the status between a wife and a concubine could never be altered, and so he made those promises without even consulting the “concubine,” to make the whole affair morally acceptable to the wife. As far as he was concerned, if he could be like other famous men who could have a church wedding with an American-educated girl, without divorcing the wife he had married according to Chinese custom, he would be quite content. Therefore, telling a lie was a small price to pay if he could maintain the status quo.

However, against all odds, there was another possibility: he was really contrite and had been truthful about still loving her. Dared she believe that? Faced with the reality of the situation, the answer was she dared not.

Mama, like my father, lived in the period of transition from the Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, and was the ambivalent product of both the new and old schools of thought. She wished to believe in monogamy, but she could not entirely refute the existence of polygamy. In a way, she could go along with what my father suggested, as long as he did not ask her to relinquish the position of first wife. After all, many other women had accepted this compromise, so why couldn't she?

At the same time, she had been educated in the new revolutionary thoughts. Before her marriage, she had admired heroines like Qiu Jin² and had wished to become a "New Woman"³, who advocated that wives could be self-reliant and not rely on their husbands. In that case, shouldn't she leave her husband and live that way?

Was a divorce what she must choose? But then what would happen to her daughter? Even if she could make enough money to support herself and her child, would it mean that little Lien-ming must be taken away from the grandmother who doted on her and be deprived of the pleasure of being a member of a big happy family? If that should happen, would Lien-ming continue to be the cheerful girl she was? Would she someday resent her mother for having ignored her own needs?

What should Mama do? Which way should she go? How should she resolve her problem? There were swarms of advisers around her, all trying to tell her what she should do.

Those from the Li family begged Mama to be patient. When Grandma and Fifth Uncle first heard the news, they were both too shocked to speak. Grandma, who had insisted the fare-money be given to her sons, naturally felt guilty and thus she banged the table and scolded her son for having committed such a heinous act. She announced indignantly to one and all that she would never allow the "Cantonese hussy"⁴ to be "admitted through our door"⁵, a threat that was both ludicrous and meaningless since "the Cantonese hussy" was American educated, wouldn't even know what that phrase meant and cared less. What Grandma said might sound ominous, but her threat meant nothing at all. Besides, like others of her generation, she thought it was only a frivolous offense for a man to have taken a concubine and thus it was nothing catastrophic. She merely ranted at her son a little in a show of sympathy for her daughter-in-law, telling her to be patient and that things would improve.

As for Fifth Uncle, although he felt his brother had not been fair to his sister-in-law, as a man, he had always been told that “any country bumpkin was entitled to a concubine if he ever made enough money to afford one,” so why not his brother? After all, it was only a matter of concubines, so there was no need to talk of divorce because things would calm down eventually and revert to normal.

The Liang family, on the other hand, screamed for her to take action. They who hated my father and had wanted to flay his skin and eat his flesh at the time when he established the New York Wah Chang, were now delighted that he had taken another wife, so they could nudge my mother into filing a lawsuit against my father for bigamy. Outwardly, they said that they wanted to see justice done, but, inwardly, what they really wished was to see Mama fight him legally, either for a divorce or for bigamy, so that he would have to pay compensation, the more the better. They hoped a legal battle would ruin him, land him in jail, destroy his career, or at least never allow him to lift his head up in American or Chinese society again.

Of them all, Da-yima was probably the most perturbed. She had bought a house when she and her husband first came to Shanghai. Lien-ming said that she remembered the house was so huge that it had at least twenty bedrooms. There were also numerous servants, cooks, drivers and gardeners. But poor Da-yima was not happy in her big house; her husband had taken to living with an opera singer by the name of Yan Fu-qiu⁶, and hardly ever came home anymore. Whenever Da-yima felt depressed, and that was almost daily, she would invite her relatives and friends to play mahjong, to sing Beijing opera and to wine and dine, as if there was nothing wrong in her marriage.

Since most of her relatives lived in mansions, rode in automobiles and had nothing better to do than to gossip, they were secretly happy to learn that her marriage was about to break up, because they had been unhappy with her husband for not relinquishing his hold over their company. They now pretended to be sympathetic, coming every day to whisper in her ears details about his dalliances, hoping Dayima would satisfy them by staging big quarrels, and even calling for a divorce.

Da-yima suspected as much. Since she had always been proud, she deliberately ignored what she heard. Instead, she tried to pretend that nothing had happened between her and her husband by spending his money

wantonly. Fluctuating between such complicated feelings of pride and disgrace, she could not help to solve Mama's problems in any sensible way.

She felt she was obliged to hate my father for wronging her in-laws. Thus, although she herself would not divorce, because that would be admitting defeat to the "other woman," she demanded that Mama get a divorce, as if she had never heard the famous Confucius saying that "what one doesn't wish to happen to oneself, one shouldn't wish it to happen to others"⁷. She acted as though if Mama got a divorce, it would be like getting revenge on all men, including her own husband. How did Mama feel toward all these "sympathetic" advisers?

Man-yi told me that, one night, when Da-yima was sitting on her bed, smoking her water-pipe while she lectured Mama about going to New York to get a divorce, Mama rested her head on the bedpost as she listened but was so tired that she fell asleep. Da-yima became furious. She poked Mama repeatedly on the forehead with the copper stick she used to shovel the tobacco into her water-pipe and shouted: "I told you to go to America! Go! Why don't you go!"

Mama must be quite stoic to be able to fall asleep under that kind of circumstance! Because of this, Man-yi often mocked Mama, saying Mama was too timid even to react. I used to agree that Mama was indeed too timid, but I wondered later whether she was really that timid, or whether she was just pretending to be asleep in order to avoid direct confrontation with her beloved elder sister? Mama had adored Da-yima since her early childhood. That was why she continued to visit Da-yima in spite of the nasty remarks from the Liang family. She knew these people hated my father, so there was no other easier way to ignore them than by falling asleep.

What about the Li family? What did they advise her to do? Even though they were sympathetic to her, she knew that they had more of my father's interest at heart than hers.

She thought only Man-yi and her husband, who had already resigned from Wah Chang and was no longer under the influence of the Liangs, could help her to make up her mind. But Man-yi and her husband advised against a divorce. Their reason was that Mama's marriage had taken place in China and had only eyewitnesses but no official registration to prove its legality, so it would not be recognized by American law, whereas my

father's second marriage had taken place in America and been properly registered, and was thus under legal protection.

Even if Mama had found and trusted a lawyer to fight the case in a U.S. court, she could not possibly have won the case, nor could she hope to have my father be taken to jail for bigamy. If Mama believed the Liangs and personally went to America to fight, she would not only be met with failure but would have to face the isolation of being abandoned in a strange land where she knew no one and didn't speak the language well. If she wanted a divorce simply in China, it could be easily done, but she would only lose a husband and gain nothing.

Who else could she consult?

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- 1 “Fallen leaves should drop at the root of the tree.” (落叶归根.) An old saying that everyone must return to his birthplace like the leaves of a tree must return to the ground where the roots are.
 - 2 Qiu Jin (秋瑾). A famous female revolutionary martyred during the 1911 revolution.
 - 3 New Woman (新女性). A term used in my mother’s day to mean women who demanded women’s rights.
 - 4 Cantonese hussy. That was what my family nicknamed my father’s new wife simply because she was reputed to be from Canton.
 - 5 “Admitted through our door.” (入门.) In old China, a woman was not considered a family member unless she had been admitted through the door by the elder members.
 - 6 Yan Fu-qiu (宴福秋). An opera singer. She was not very famous but somehow, for reasons I do not know, her name stuck in my mind, probably because Man-yi and Mama talked a lot about her after Da-yima died.
 - 7 “What one doesn’t wish to happen to oneself, one shouldn’t wish it to happen to others.” (己所不欲,勿施於人.) It was probably some of the best advice Confucius gave to the world.



BESIDES MAN-YI AND HER HUSBAND, MAMA HAD TWO OTHER friends whom she could trust. They were her old schoolmates from Hunan. One of them my sister and I used to call Er-young¹ Xiansheng², and the other we did not give the title *xiansheng*; she was just plain Wang Bi-yuan³ to us.

I had always liked Er-young. We children gave her the title of *xiansheng* as a token of our respect, it was not something we gave to many of Mama's friends. I remembered her, in 1937, already in her mid-forties with peppered short hair. She never used any cosmetics, and yet she was a natural beauty. Her manners were casual and open. When she heard anything funny, she would throw her head back and laugh, and her peals of laughter would fill the room, while her hair would swish like grass in the wind, reminding me of carefree warriors of ancient times.

As for Wang Bi-yuan, Lien-ming and I did not respect her very much even though she was Mama's good friend. She was about the same age as Er-young, but she still regarded herself as young and pretty, a sin which we, as teenage girls, would not forgive. Her eyebrows were plucked to two thin arches and her cheeks were always red with rouge, which reminded Lien-ming of the behind of a monkey. This cruel joke made me clap and laugh, because I too was then quite heartless.

By the time Mama got married, Er-young had gone to America for her university degree. When Mama was having her marital troubles, Er-young had just returned. According to Mama, Er-young had married a fellow student in the U.S. but on the voyage home, he confided in her that he had a wife back home whom he had been told to marry under parental pressure but he intended to divorce her as soon as he arrived home. Er-young said nothing but slammed shut the cabin door.

A week later, she emerged from her cabin and told him that she would ask for a divorce. "I went abroad to study," she said, "so that I could help the downtrodden women of China. I cannot for the sake of my own happiness cause misfortune to an innocent woman."

Her husband argued that he was to get rid of his wife in any case, so Er-young's divorce could not help the woman. Then why should Er-young

throw away their love? Er-young was said to have replied: “I have my own principles. If I harm an innocent woman, then I would not only be letting down the ideals I set out to pursue, but I also won’t be able to face myself.”

Wang Bi-yuan, on the other hand, was holding forth to Mama in 1937 about the importance of sex education in schools, and even suggesting, in my hearing, that it would be best if sex could be demonstrated by models in class. I was quite young but even I thought her idea was ludicrous. I blurted out: “Perhaps you should be the model.” For that remark I was severely scolded by Mama, but one could see how avant-garde Wang Bi-yuan was. According to Mama, Wang Bi-yuan eloped with a boy to Shanghai, and began teaching at a girls’ school after her marriage. It was said that she supported two young daughters as well as her husband who had gone to Paris for further studies.

Both Er-young and Bi-yuan were “New Women.” When Mama consulted them, of course they waved their banners and told Mama to get a divorce. They did not hate my father, nor did they accuse my father of being greedy. They did not want to see my father in jail or bankrupted. They just wanted Mama to stand up and be counted among the ranks of “New Women.”

Both of them were professionals, which was a class of women seldom found in their days, and they were both able to make enough money to support themselves, which meant that they were ardent supporters of feminism, believing that women must be independent, must be free, and must be equal with men! They naïvely believed that once a man made a mistake, the woman had to divorce him because divorce was a woman’s tool of rebellion against the ills of society. As for how the divorced women were to live, although they had briefly thought about this problem, they felt it shouldn’t be an issue if the women were willing to work. For instance, a villager could grow vegetables, a forester could sell the wood she chopped, a city woman could open a small shop, and so on. And if a woman was as well-educated as Mama, she could easily find a job as a teacher and support herself and her daughter.

They were probably too naïve. They thought the resistance of the patriarchal society was easy to overcome. As long as they tried hard, they sincerely believed that they could solve all the problems in life. They hoped

to create a new world in which women could be equal to men and would be able to select their own futures. Why should Mama be otherwise?

With these two close friends urging her to divorce for the sake of upholding the dignity of women, and the members of her own household counseling her to be patient and accept the concubine, Mama must have really struggled with the decision of what she should do.

Lien-ming said that from her fragmented childhood memories, she could piece together what Mama must have been going through at that time. On one hand, she still had tender feelings for her husband. On the other, what was even more important, she worried how a divorce might affect the happiness of her daughter. Every time Mama saw Lien-ming mingling happily with Grandma, uncles, and her many cousins, she was reminded that children needed not just ample food and clothing, but also their acceptance in family activities which would have given them their sense of security. Of course they needed parental love, but they would also need the reliance and support of their uncles, aunts and cousins. She feared that if Lien-ming lost the big family she grew up in, she would be as lonely as a bird without a flock.

She worried about the future of her child, and she could not foresee the future awaiting her two “liberated” friends. If she had been able to see the future, she would have found it much easier to make up her mind.

Er-young, although a beauty, never remarried. Career-wise, she only muddled along. The highest position she ever reached was Minister of Education on a provincial level, while watching helplessly those men with less expertise and experience climbing higher than she did. In the end, she found that what she had to face was still a male-dominated society. The supreme irony is that she eventually adopted two daughters and insisted on having them call her “papa.”

In the case of Wang Bi-yuan, her husband, whom she always claimed to have supported to study in Paris, ungratefully returned to China with a French wife on his arm, a sight that made Wang nearly faint as she stood at the pier waiting for him. Of course she divorced him, but she never remarried. She went on living simply with her two daughters as her companions.

As it turned out, the decision was made for Mama.

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- 1 Er-young (欧阳). Er-young, or Ouyang in Hanyu Pinyin, is one of those double-barreled surnames quite common in China. There are people who are called 欧, and there are people who are called 阳, and there are people who are called 欧阳.
 - 2 Xiansheng (先生) meaning “Earlier Born,” the opposite term of “Later Born” (后生) which a younger man would call himself in the old days. As a child, we used to call our school teacher *xiansheng*, but the term has taken on many other meanings since the Chinese Republic and even more in the People’s Republic. It now means simply “Mister.”
 - 3 Wang Bi-yuan (王碧缘). Her name in Chinese.



BEFORE MAMA COULD MAKE UP HER MIND ABOUT HER MARRIAGE, my father blithely returned from America. His sweet talk was like taffy, soft and gluey, and it turned Mama around. From then on, her feelings for him were like the proverbial arrowroot silk₁ which she kept on cutting but never succeeded in severing.

What she knew next was that she was pregnant.

I was not aware that Mama had an additional pregnancy, between Lien-ming and me, nor did I know that the baby was miscarried. It was only in 1969, during my visit to Taipei that Man-yi revealed this piece of information which she thought I already knew. When I heard it, I wanted to hold Mama in my arms and weep her tears for her, but she was then in Shanghai, too far away from me to reach.

Why did she never tell Lien-ming and me? Did she think we were too young to know, or did she think the knowledge would only confuse the issue about our father?

She didn't tell anyone except her sister of her pregnancy. When she first found out she was with child, she felt it was a sign of her weakness which would be mocked by her Liang relatives who would say that she had been played like a fool by a man whom she should have divorced. They would say that she, just to please a man who no longer cared for her, had given up her body, like a prostitute. How was she to explain that she still loved him?

The worst of it all was that he didn't love her enough to stay in China. After sweet-talking her into forgiving him, he had left to go back to America. Of course he said that he needed to do so for the sake of his business, and she just looked on numbly without protest. She didn't know whether she should love him or hate him; she only knew she hated herself, for not being young enough or pretty enough to keep him with her.

She hated herself so much that she did not care for the life that was in her, thus she was careless with herself and caused the miscarriage. Man-yi explained that, though Mama had always been a careful woman, she was so distracted by events that she climbed on a chair to fetch a suitcase from the top of a cabinet, slipped, fell down, and bled. It almost seemed that she was deliberately careless.

When I realized the turmoil she must have gone through, I felt my heart would burst. I was sure that it was the bitterness in her that caused her to climb up the chair in a fit of self-destruction.

But remorse and sorrow must have come right after the accident. Seeing the blood seeping out from her body, she must have wondered how, as a mother, she could harm her own unborn child? Thus, despite being so depressed that she might have wished for death, she decided to keep on living for her daughter Lien-ming's sake.

And if she was to live, then she would live like a woman whom her child would not be ashamed of. She got herself a teaching post in the same school Wang Bi-yuan taught, and made up her mind that she would brood no more on her divorce or on her depression. Life had to continue.

She was very popular with her students because, compared to the rest of the staff, most of whom were men and elderly, she was young and more approachable. Her job was teaching Chinese, so she taught the girls poetry, classical essays and creative writing, but she also became their best adviser because, although she did not say very much, she was a very good listener. The girls came to her with their problems, big or small, not necessarily for advice but just to air their thoughts.

I was not surprised that she was a good teacher. What surprised me was that no one in the Li family objected. In her day, a young woman of twenty-seven was not usually permitted to run around town without a chaperone, and yet, none of my uncles interfered. Grandma even took care of Lien-ming during Mama's absence. Upon consideration, I think there were many reasons for this odd situation. One, Grandma felt guilty and was determined to help Mama have her own way. Two, my father still treated Mama as his wife, so there was none of the syndrome of "people rushing to tear down the wall that is already falling"². Third, Fifth Uncle and Grandma were both grateful for the purchase of the Changsha house and wanted to defer to Mama when she needed them to. Mama did not say much and never gossiped, but when she was bent on doing things her way, no one interfered.

What she did not expect was that, after a year or two, my father came home again. With him as charming as ever, Mama found she was soon once again pregnant. I was on my way to being born.

When she knew she was with child, there was no more fear of idle gossip from the Liangs and no more resentment of my father's leaving

again for America. Mama had changed. She felt she could let the others jeer all they wished, but she was now beyond their criticisms. All she wanted was to protect her baby. Nothing else mattered.

However, when the unborn child was about six months in coming, God gave her a warning through an accident, to tell her that life was fragile as well as precious.

How did the accident happen?

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- 1 Arrowroot silk (藕丝) from the proverb “藕断丝连.” Arrowroot is a kind of fruit which always yields silk fibers between its sliced pieces, which prompts the Chinese poets to write the famous line “arrowroot is cut but its silk is still connected,” meaning the kind of love that is cut but never wholly disconnected.
 - 2 “People rushing to tear down the wall that is already falling.” (众.) A proverb meaning people will take advantage of another’s misfortune to cast their own stones, like those who hasten to pull down the wall when the wall is already broken. In other words, my father was Mama’s protecting wall. When people saw that he still honored her, no one dared to mock or criticize her.



THE ACCIDENT INVOLVED A RICKSHAW.

In 1922, the Shanghai streets were full of automobiles, electric tramcars and horse-carriages, and yet the most popular means of transportation used by ordinary people was undoubtedly the rickshaw, called *huangbaoche*₁ because of their color, which was always yellow. I was told that they originated in Japan and the name translated from Japanese was *renliche*₂, which the residents of Shanghai found too much of a tongue twister, so they changed it to *huangbaoche*. These rickshaws are no longer seen in present-day Shanghai.

A rickshaw looked like the sedan-chair that was used in China in ancient days, except that it had two wheels attached to the seat, raising it about three feet above the ground. Unlike the old sedan-chair which had, in front and behind the chair, two long poles for the bearers to carry the passenger, a rickshaw only had two short poles extending to the axis of the wheels, needing only one rickshaw boy to pull the chair forward with his two hands instead of two people lifting the chair between them.

When Mama wished to go anywhere, all she had to do was stand in front of her house, and one of the many rickshaw boys would approach her. They would agree on the destination, negotiate the price, and the rickshaw would take Mama to anywhere she wished to go. It worked like a taxi but was powered by a man instead of an engine.

On the day of the accident, Mama was returning home from teaching at her school in a rickshaw when they came to a bridge. The bridge was shaped like a half moon, with an arch in the middle to accommodate the height of canal boats which were rowed under the bridge. When Mama and the rickshaw boy were on the middle of the bridge, they were suddenly suspended like the two heavy weights hanging down from either side of a balance. At that point, if the rickshaw boy had used a little more strength, he could have had the rickshaw, with Mama in it, safely across the bridge. But as it happened on that fateful day, the rickshaw boy suddenly lost his grip. The rickshaw overturned and went crashing down to the other end of the bridge. Mama was thrown out of the rickshaw chair and on to the ground.

Whenever she talked about this accident, Mama always looked alarmed as if it might happen again. She said: “*Aiya!* I said to myself, this is the end! How could the baby take such a heavy fall? I struggled to my feet and could see the rickshaw boy running toward me with a greenish face, asking me how I felt. You know how Shanghai people always like to meddle in others’ affairs, so there was a huge crowd surrounding us, all talking and criticizing. Luckily one of them said: ‘Over yonder is the Red House. Why don’t you go over there and let them look you over?’ That reminded me that I needed help. Since that overturned rickshaw could still function, I told the man to take me there.”

Red House was a hospital probably established by some European missionary since Mama said that all the people in charge were White nuns. When I returned to Shanghai in 1975, I asked about the “Red House” and was told by an “old Shanghai hand” that in the early days, its real name had been too foreign for Shanghai people to pronounce, so they simply nicknamed it “Red House,” because it was built with red bricks. It was continuously in use and had served many patients until Shanghai was liberated by the People’s Republic, and the name Red House was forgotten. But on the day of Mama’s accident, Red House was buzzing with patients.

Mama had been given injections before by Western-style doctors, but she had never been to a women’s hospital, so she was quite nervous when she got there. Her first impression was “*Aiya*, it’s so clean! The bed sheets are so white that they can serve as tablecloths.” She felt it was as if she had sneaked into a church, so she made a bargain with God: “If the doctor says the baby is alright, I promise to have it delivered here.”

And the doctor did say the baby was alright. She asked again and again, not believing what she had been told. After the doctor smilingly and repeatedly assured her, she couldn’t help saying to herself, rather admiringly: “This little fellow really has tough bones!”

Returning home, she told Grandma that she would not teach anymore at the school, but would stay home and wait for the baby.

Grandma was delighted and said Mama should have done so long ago, but when Mama said that she planned to have the baby delivered at the Red House, Grandma jumped up and shrieked: “No, no, you cannot do that! That place is well-known as the place where foreign devils eat babies!”

Mama laughed and replied: “If they really eat babies, then let them eat this one. It has been thrown this way and that way and yet it is alive. I am sure its bones are so tough they would crack the foreigners’ teeth.” When I was a child listening to Mama tell this story, I always giggled so much that I doubled right over and looked like a cooked shrimp.

So Mama stayed home. Without a husband’s company or his concern, she waited calmly in her loneliness. When the first birth pain started, she called for a rickshaw and went to the hospital by herself. But, after five days, when the baby still would not come, she was so bored that she sneaked out of her sick room to visit Da-yima, because she knew Grandma would not have tolerated such bizarre behavior. At Da-yima’s place, she was asked to take her sister’s place at mahjong. She was playing merrily and about to win a big hand, when the baby kicked her stomach viciously. Complaining “this stupid child just doesn’t have the sense of winning all-one-color₃,” she hastened back to the hospital where she promptly gave birth to me.

As a story, it was quite amusing. It said nothing about her solitude and anxiety during her pregnancy and delivery, but it showed how, for the sake of the baby, she refused to be depressed and tried to keep herself happy. This determinedly upbeat attitude may have been her prenatal education of me, because I seldom think of depression or death except when I try to be poetic while writing second-rate poems.

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- 1 *Huangbaoche* (黄包车). The name rickshaws were known by in Shanghai because their color was usually yellow.
 - 2 *Renliche* (人力车). Man-powered cart.
 - 3 All-one-color (清一色). A winning hand of tiles all of one suit, a very big win in mahjong.



WHEN LIEN-MING WAS BORN, EVERYBODY PRAISED HER, SAYING she was beautiful, meaning she was a typically normal baby, all rosy and white like peach blossoms, plump and fat like a little ball, and soft and warm when held in one's arms. Lien-ming was so used to such flattery that she thought all newborn babies should be as "beautiful" as she was. When she, at the respectable old age of ten, visited Mama and demanded to see her sister, the first thing she said as soon as she saw me was "Oh, how ugly she is!"

I never for a minute blamed her for saying I was ugly, because I really was. First, I was skinny, so skinny that I was just skin and bones. Second, I was dark. Only the small patches at my soles were pinkish, but the rest of my body was like a piece of dry charcoal. Third, I was so small that apparently I looked like a shaved little monkey. When Mama first saw me, she did not say I was ugly as Lien-ming did, but gave a long deep sigh with motherly concern: "*Aiya*, how am I to bring her up?"

I never knew how much care and love she showered on me in bringing me up, I only knew that she succeeded and I have grown up. I know no words to describe her love, because ever since I was born, her love was there for me to bathe in. But I know how warm it was. If anyone should insist that I define a mother's love, I would say it was the feeling of purely giving away.

I was an infant when I began the game of "sit in the well." The "well" was the empty space created when Mama sat cross-legged on the bed so that her lap formed a circle. I would sit in that "well" and feel her all around me. There would be her feet, her thighs, her abdomen, her breast ... all surrounding me. Although I knew not at what age I stopped playing the game, in my memory I always have the sensation of Mama being everywhere, all-encompassing, encircling me and protecting me.

When I sat inside my "well", playing whatever I happen to play with, Mama would quietly read her books or converse with relatives. One day, I took a pair of scissors and started to cut the minute hair on Mama's arm. And naturally I was careless enough to cut off a piece of her skin. Mama was furious. While she shrieked and pulled away her arm, she asked me

what in God's name I thought I was doing. I said self-righteously: "I'm cutting grass the way Ah-Huang does." Ah Huang was our gardener. I must say I was rather heartless. That Mama repeated that story to me showed how tolerant she was, being amused by my antics even when I hurt her.

My timely or untimely birth did not improve the marital relationship between my parents. If anything, the relationship seemed to have gotten worse. However, in 1923, as a newborn baby I knew nothing, and was happy as I suckled contentedly on my mother's milk.



TWO YEARS AFTER MY BIRTH, MY FATHER CAME BACK TO SHANGHAI again, but this time he brought along his wife Grace from New York. They stayed at a hotel and my father did not come to our house. It seemed there would be no more of that arrowroot-silk sentiments.

I could barely walk at that time but nevertheless I have this vivid picture in my mind: I had burst into a room and was standing in the doorway, stopped by a startling scene. I saw Lien-ming with her head buried in Mama's lap while Mama stroked her hair, and both of them were weeping. I didn't understand what I saw. I could only look on in amazement, but that fragment of memory has stayed with me. I guess a little girl, suddenly seeing the two people in the world she most relied upon so helplessly weeping, was something she could never forget.

Lien-ming later confirmed what I saw. She said the scene must have taken place at the time when our father, upon returning home, had invited the whole family to a reunion dinner in some restaurant, and Mama had foolishly joined the crowd. At the dinner, my father was busy acting as an interpreter for Grace and did not even once nod at Mama, as if she didn't exist. Lien-ming was so pained that she wrote a short note and tucked it into my father's jacket, pleading plaintively "Please be a little kinder to my mother." Lien-ming was then probably twelve years old and had naïvely hoped the note would bring our father around, but there was no response.

She was telling me this short story long after our parents were dead, and we ourselves were in our forties and fifties driving on our way to Southern California. Suddenly Lien-ming, this middle-aged woman, broke down and wept. With tears streaming down her face, she had to pull the car to a stop on the roadside, where she leaned her head on the steering wheel and sobbed and sobbed. I could only stare at the tall yellow grass of San Fernando valley in front of the car, while silently cursing my father. Even today, when I think of how Lien-ming told me this story, I can still see the tall yellow grass swaying in the air.

She was weeping so pathetically, and I was so gripped by fury, that I did not think of asking her the questions which I should have asked if I had been calmer. What I wanted to know was what she thought, as a logical

grown-up, were the reasons Mama went to the dinner and why Mama never complained about our father. By the time I remembered these questions, Lien-ming had died from lung cancer and I had only myself to question, and only myself to listen to for answers.

This I do know: Mama was never foolish or stupid. She knew the circumstance under which the dinner was arranged, and yet she went to it. Why? Fifth Uncle had always been protective of Mama, then why did he, knowing she might be ignored, still agree to let her go? And being a student of Confucius which emphasized the importance of etiquette, why did my Fifth Uncle not intervene when he saw Mama being so coldly and inconsiderately treated?

And then there was my father. Normally speaking, one would give a nod even to a stranger, not to mention a spouse of nearly twenty years. So why didn't he acknowledge Mama, especially when Grace spoke no Hunan dialect and would not have guessed who Mama was from any oral exchange?

All these unanswered questions made me wonder whether my father was acting for the benefit of Grace and was deliberately demonstrating his intention of not wanting anything more to do with Mama.

If so, if he only wanted Mama to know their relationship was finished, all he needed to do was to send a stern and firm denial for her to go to the party, and Mama would not have gone. There was no need for him to go out of his way to add insult to injury by not acknowledging her. But then again, he might have thought that maybe if she had been excluded from the dinner, she would have felt disgraced and even worse.

But if he was acting for Grace's benefit, then what made him, a man who was not even afraid if the sky should fall on him, be so afraid of Grace? From what I had seen of their living together in New York, his feelings for Grace seemed to be one of careless tolerance, never fear. If it was not fear, then what else could there be to make him so unreasonable?

Lien-ming confirmed that Mama was weeping when the two-year-old me peeked in the doorway, but Mama, in all the years I lived with her, never mentioned this episode to me. Since Lien-ming confirmed that Mama did weep, it meant she was broken-hearted, but was she enraged? If she was enraged, then why did she never complain of my father's attitude toward her?

The question I found most difficult to answer had always been the one I just asked: Why did she never complain about my father? To be as forgiving as she was, she must have her own reasons, and one of them was that my parents had their own way of communication, their own understanding of each other. I think that it is because of this mutual understanding that she attended the party, suffered the cold shoulder treatment, and was sad afterwards – though, through it all, she still understood him enough to forgive him.

Is my conjecture correct? Am I right in my interpretation of what I saw as a two-year-old? All this happened more than eighty years ago, and everyone I could have asked about it is long dead. So who is to say if I am right, or wrong?



THE FIRST TIME I MET MY FATHER, I WAS NOT YET THREE YEARS old so naturally I have no personal memory of the encounter, but I was told by others, who were present, of my first meeting with him.

It seemed that my father was holding court in the family's big living room, when Xin-pei, my cousin who was six months younger than I was, had for some reason gone into that room, whereupon my father took out a gold coin and gave it to him as "gift of meeting"¹. As soon as Xin-pei left, I stepped in. My father fished in his pocket but could not find another gold coin, so he gave me a silver one instead. I shook my head and said: "I don't want a white one, I want a yellow one."

The people surrounding him all laughed and applauded me for knowing gold was superior to silver, and awarded me the title of genius. Many years later, my other cousin Lien-jun² who was six years older than I was, pooh-poohed my title of genius. He jeered: "What nonsense! You and Xin-pei were at that time always playing together. Whatever it was that one of you had, the other wanted exactly the same thing. If it had been a silver coin your father gave to him and then a gold one to you, you would have refused the yellow and asked for a white, and in that case, you would have been laughed at for being an idiot who did not know that gold was more precious than silver."

I thought he was absolutely correct, so I just laughed and dismissed that too-easily won title of genius. But thinking back on the incident, I wondered why the men surrounding my father were so foolish as to take the words of a two-year-old seriously, even praising her as a genius? The only reason I could think of was that they wanted to flatter my father. But why would they think that to praise me was to flatter him? Was it because my father, when seeing me for the first time, showed some sort of special emotion? Could it be that I reminded him of some intimate memories? I'll never know.

Throughout my childhood, my father came and went.

Our life went on as usual until suddenly, Grandma died. According to the people who could remember it, I was taken in a servant's arms to Lien-ming's school to inform her of the news and I was said to have cried out:

“Quick, come and see Grandma in a large box,” which was said to be brilliant for someone who had just learned to talk.

Grandma’s death was a blow to Lien-ming. Everyone knew Grandma doted on Lien-ming and always saved treats especially for her. Fifth Aunt’s explanation was simple. She said it was because Grandma had taken care of Lien-ming when Mama went to teach, and thus she had developed a special bond with this particular granddaughter of hers.

But Lien-ming told me another reason. She said that Grandma had felt Lien-ming was the greatest casualty from the break-up of Mama’s marriage. Mama, after all, was an adult and could at least think for herself, whereas Lien-ming, aged about five when all the trouble started, did not know what was going on and yet had to face the pitying looks and malicious snide remarks of the grownups. It saddened Grandma to see Lien-ming not knowing how to cope with what she did not understand. Therefore, Grandma tried to shield Lien-ming in whatever way she could.

Not only did she shield Lien-ming, she also taught her how to protect Mama. She told Lien-ming never to repeat any disparaging remark she might overhear concerning Mama, never to ask Mama about what happened with my father, and never to complain about not having a father. All this advice, after Grandma died, Lien-ming passed on to me. “Since I will be away in school, don’t you ever let Mama grieve,” the thirteen-year-old Lien-ming said, laying down the law to her three-year-old sister. But what would grieve Mama, she couldn’t explain and I didn’t understand. I simply jumped to the conclusion that what might grieve Mama would be anything that involved my father. Lien-ming was then my idol. Anything she said, I obeyed. Since she told me to never make Mama grieve, I learned to keep to myself everything that I thought might be hurtful to Mama. Thus, I asked as little as possible about my father.

In this way, I muddled my way towards adulthood.

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- 1 Gift of meeting (见面礼). A gift presented to a person the first time one meets him or her.
 - 2 Lien-jun (廉均). My cousin, and son of Fifth Uncle.



I HAD A GLORIOUS CHILDHOOD. I PLAYED IN MY KINDERGARTEN where I was entrusted with distributing the biscuits and learned how to save the largest piece for myself. Together with my cousins, I acted out plays in our attic, using as our costumes the embroidered garments from the garbage pile my Eighth Uncle had collected. I slept with my head resting on the laps of either my sister or of Xing-jie¹. I quarreled and squabbled and even had fist fights with my cousins Xin-pei and Lien-yan. I listened to Lien-jun explain the comic books to me as I leaned my head on his shoulder.

To please Lien-ming, Xing-jie and their school mates, I walked on the red carpet with a little boy called Tommy while they sang the wedding march, not only once but many times as long as they gave us candies. Following my sister and my cousins, I climbed up to the roof of our house, sat on the ridge and quietly listened to the bells coming from the Bund in Shanghai. And I visited my Zhou cousins, Man-yi's children, in their house in the Chinese Territory and played games such as 'eagle and little chickens'. All these and more, I did with the innocence of youth and under the loving supervision of Mama.

This idyllic childhood ended in my sixth year when my Eighth Uncle suddenly proposed that all of us move to Lushun². Lushun was situated on the shores of north China. It was a strategic naval port taken by the Japanese since 1894 from the Russians, who had themselves seized it from China. At the time my Eighth Uncle suggested for us to migrate there, it had been under Japanese rule for some thirty years. It was so far away from Shanghai that none of us would ever have thought of moving there but for my Eighth Uncle who had his own agenda for the move, I learned many years later. So to Fifth Uncle and Mama he painted a picture of how well Lushun, under the Japanese, had maintained civil order, how its populace lived simply and humbly just like the ancient Chinese did in the days of Confucius, how its education system was more advanced than any city in China, and so on. Lushun, from what he described, was the best place on earth to bring up children. The idea behind this was that if Fifth Uncle and Mama were convinced, they could persuade my father to buy an orchard for

us to live in, and thus appoint him as the manager. Eighth Uncle knew that if he were to approach my father himself, his proposal would not have carried any weight.

Unknown to us, Eighth Uncle worshiped Japan and everything Japanese ever since he had gone there for a short duration, working on some of his wild deals. He used to tell us that even Japanese flies were cleaner than those we had in China. Because he had such an abusive temper when scolding people, no one dared to protest, except to say behind his back that he talked utter rubbish.

He was well known for being unreasonable. For instance, it was he who match-made my cousin De-jie³, daughter of Fifth Uncle, to marry a banker's nephew. My father, when he heard of the proposal, had objected strongly because he knew of the banker's family's notorious reputation with women, but Eighth Uncle spoke so persistently about how De-jie would be rich all her life that he badgered Fifth Uncle into consent.

When it was time for De-jie to come home after the wedding, to visit her family as a bride, she tearfully complained in Fifth Uncle's room about how her groom's family had invited prostitutes to entertain the guests even at the wedding banquet. Eighth Uncle broke into the room and berated De-jie for making her parents unhappy. De-jie retorted bluntly: "If it hadn't been for your matchmaking, I wouldn't have any unhappiness to tell my parents." This provoked Eighth Uncle so much that he slapped her face! I was told that De-jie wanted to strike back but was stopped by her father. All my other cousins would have leapt into the fray and struck out at Eighth Uncle if our Fifth Uncle had not stop them.

And there was also the incident of Xin-pei's coughing. It had nothing to do with Eighth Uncle, but he would insist on meddling. Although he never had any children of his own, he told Fifth Uncle that only a certain kind of Japanese plaster could cure the cough. When the plaster was hurriedly bought at his order, he said the plaster must be thoroughly heated before it could be applied. When the plaster was heated, he touched it with his hand and pronounced it not hot enough. When finally the plaster was judged by him as hot enough, he told Fifth Aunt to strap it around Xin-pei's neck. At this, Xin-pei screamed out in pain, yelling repeatedly, "It's scorching me!" while struggling to tear off the plaster with his little hands. His mother rushed to help him, but Eighth Uncle pushed her aside roughly, ordering

Lien-jun to hold down little Xin-pei's hands while saying: "You see, it's all because you people have spoiled him so that he doesn't behave!"

Poor Xin-pei wailed all night. The next morning when the plaster was finally removed, his cough was not any better but, thanks to Eighth Uncle, his neck was covered with huge ugly blisters which scarred him for life.

Mama too disliked Eighth Uncle for the way he refused to dress appropriately. We were then living in the Min Hou Nan Li house in Shanghai, where most of the doors were left open because the house was small. Eighth Uncle would walk in and out of the rooms without his upper garments, exposing his bare chest and stomach. Also, he thought nothing of wearing his pants halfway down on his hips. How could Mama, a daughter of a scholar and a government official, tolerate such an obscene sight?

Besides, he was always telling crude jokes to provoke Mama, implying that she only knew how to give birth to girls. According to Xing-jie, she overheard Mama politely reply once to his 'jokes' saying, "Yes, it is far better to have no baby at all so that life can be quiet and restful." Since Eighth Uncle had no children, what Mama said was sarcastic, even though it sounded as if she was praising Eighth Uncle for his good fortune. Mama was the sort who seldom made any nasty retort; for her to have made such a barbed comment showed how much she had been goaded. But Eighth Uncle seemed not to have understood and continued to make his crude jokes.

And now he wanted everyone to move to Lushun! When Fifth Uncle consulted Mama about whether they should do so, Mama objected, not because of her dislike for Eighth Uncle but as a matter of principle. She argued that Lushun was no longer a part of China, so no matter how clean its flies were, they were still Japanese flies, whereas our children would always be Chinese citizens. There was no need for them to go to Lushun to be loyal to Japan.

Eighth Uncle coldly baited her: "Isn't the British Concession in Shanghai British? What's the difference between our children learning the British ways and their learning from the Japanese? At least in Lushun, the Japanese model is based on Chinese Confucianism."

Fifth Uncle had been worrying about what he regarded as the gangster culture of Shanghai, so he was impressed by what his younger brother said about Confucius. He agreed to move to Lushun. Mama thought for a while. It occurred to her that a change might be interesting, and even if it should

turn out to be a mistake, she could always move back to Shanghai, so she did not object any more.

No one asked for my opinion.

As De-jie was married and couldn't go with us, the family that moved to Lushun included Eighth Uncle and the woman he said was his wife, as well as Fifth Uncle and Aunt, Fourteenth Uncle, Mama, and their various children, Ying-jie, Lien-ming, Lien-jun, Lien-yan, Xin-pei, and I. There were also two maids. A little army of fourteen on the march, we all boarded a Japanese vessel, nearly taking over all their first-class cabins. Eighth Uncle ought to have been pleased because this idea of staying in first-class cabins was his. He had said to Fifth Uncle: "Since we are going as the owners of a big orchard, we must act in the style of big orchard owners."

Because that was the first time we rode first-class on a sea voyage, my family members all acted like country bumpkins coming to town, looking at and touching every item, including the window panes. Then, we were in the salon, waiting patiently for the ship to move. The ship didn't move, but the steward in a white uniform came along with his gong and announced that dinner was served. What we were given to eat was not the Chinese food which we were used to, but large slabs of semi-raw meat. Mama ate a piece of lamb chop and even said it tasted good.

The ship finally moved. Lien-ming urged Mama to go on deck to see the night scene of Shanghai, and the rest of us followed. We were just then leaning on the railing and admiring the lights when Mama suddenly sent her chewed bits of the lamb chop flying out her mouth. Soon, all the grown-ups were vomiting and had to rush back to their own cabins, leaving me alone on the deck.

They vomited non-stop. Fifth Aunt complained to Mama: "Had we known, we would never have come on first-class! This way, we can't even get any congee like the third-class passengers do. They could at least eat salted fish and pickled cucumber." True to her word, we never rode first-class again. Eighth Uncle did not mind by then, since he had already enjoyed his status as a big orchard owner.

That trip to Lushun seemed to be specially designed for me because, with all the grown-ups vomiting in their beds, who was there to tell me what not to do? What a pity that the voyage to Lushun did not last long. Within a day or two, the grown-ups had slowly recovered and could get out

of their beds, but they were still wobbly on their feet and did not care what I did. As for Mama and Lien-ming, who *would* care, they were still groaning in their beds. They couldn't supervise me even if they wished to, so I had the run of the whole ship.

The crew were all Japanese men who spoke no Chinese, but one didn't really need language to coax a child. The sailors who mopped the deck would lay their mops aside to lift me to the rope ladder, those who stoked furnaces would use their kerchiefs to wipe my brow, and those who cooked would use their sweets to bribe me into singing my kindergarten songs on their kitchen table. Even the Captain and his mates would lead me into their gallery so that I could play with their instruments. I still remember how it felt, sitting in the Captain's huge chair while looking at the endless sea. I think my life-long fascination with the sea began at that moment.

Even though I had many memories of the sea, they were not the results of one but numerous trips, because we went to Lushun every summer in the following years for our summer vacations. I could not say which event happened when, but I distinctly remember how I sat on the ship's prow and watched the green sea splitting into two streams of white foam, how my cousins and I leaned on the prow and ate peanuts while carelessly throwing the shells overboard.

I even remember how I watched our ship ram into another boat in a heavy fog and how a sailor on that boat walked onto ours, simply by taking one single step forward exactly where our ship had rammed into his. Unfortunately, none of my cousins would substantiate my story. They all claimed that I dreamed it.

Finally the voyage ended and we were in the orchard my father had paid for. It was indeed huge. Unless I was mistaken, there were two or three medium-sized mountains right inside the orchard, with a great many small hills in between them. Land must be cheap in Lushun for us to own such a large orchard! On one of the hills was our house which was built by the orchard's previous owner, a Japanese who had returned to his homeland with his family. There were also many Chinese-style cottages spread over the orchard for the tenant farmers and their families to live in.

Oh, there were fruit trees! We had all kinds of apples, pears, peaches, cherries, and others whose names I can't recall. In the valley were melons of different species, long, round or striped. Every year when we came for

our vacation, the chief caretaker of the orchard would save a few trees especially for us to pick, giving us the pleasure of climbing the trees and savoring the sweetness of freshly-plucked fruits. What I loved most were the cherry trees, because we could sit on the branches, pick any cherry we liked, and spit the stones out to see who could spit the furthest.

It was a paradise. If it wasn't for the Japanese, our orchard would have been the ideal playground for us children to grow up in, but we soon learned that it was the Japanese who were the rulers. A few days after our arrival, my cousins discovered that Lushun had no Chinese schools. They investigated and found out what Eighth Uncle did not tell us: there were only two kinds of schools in Lushun – one for the Japanese and one for the Chinese. Not only were the ones for Chinese children inferior in every way to those for the Japanese, but the so-called schools for Chinese were also taught in Japanese, except for only one subject a week which was taught in Chinese. My cousins refused to go to that kind of school. They added that even if they were willing to, they could not have followed the curriculum because they knew no Japanese. Fifth Uncle did not believe them until he went to the schools and saw for himself. He then realized that what his younger brother had told him were all lies or at best, wishful thinking.

Fifth Uncle seemed always to feel guilty toward my Eighth Uncle, probably because, in the early days, he had by-passed him in choosing my father, who was the third brother, to go to the Hunan Technical High School. Eighth Uncle had left home shortly after he was not chosen, to make a life of his own, but he had not made a success of it. Instead of accepting the reason he hadn't been chosen to attend that school was because he was overaged, he always implied that it was his older brother who had been unfair to him. Made to feel guilty, Fifth Uncle hardly ever blamed his brother. And now, even with the lies from Eighth Uncle staring at him in the face, he brushed them aside, and merely announced his own intention of returning to Shanghai when summer was over. In September, when the school term started in Shanghai, he promised that all the children of school-going age would go back there with him.

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- 1 Xing-jie (杏姐). She was my cousin, daughter of Fifth Uncle, who was only a few days older than Lien-ming.
 - 2 Lushun (旅顺). A seaside city on the Liaoning peninsula (辽宁半岛).
 - 3 De-jie (德姐). She was Fifth Aunt's eldest daughter, and much older than all of us cousins.



WHEN AUGUST CAME TO AN END, AND THE OTHERS WERE ALL preparing to leave Lushun, Mama suddenly declared that she would stay on until the spring to see the cherry blossoms. Lien-ming was of school-going age, she said, and so should leave with all the others, but Lien-yan and I could stay behind with her because Lien-yan was only in second grade, and no school in Lushun could do him any harm, whereas I was not even in first grade and thus any school would do for me. As Lien-yan was Mama's adopted son, she had the right to keep him with her. She even joked and said the two of us could be called "students studying abroad"¹.

No matter how Fifth Uncle and Fifth Aunt tried to persuade her, Mama stood firm, saying laughingly that the cherry blossoms were so famous that she really didn't want to miss the opportunity to see them. Fifth Aunt wanted to leave behind one of the two maids we had brought with us, but Mama said that she needed no help since she had only two kids to care for, whereas Fifth Aunt had a big crowd with her. So the matter was settled.

After they had left, Lien-yan and I went to study in the primary school as Mama had told us to, and we actually stayed for a few months. I have no idea what I learned except for the half phrase which we recited everyday in the 'national language'². It went: "*whata gui si wah, ga go dai...*" I did not know what the phrase meant until a Japanese friend who heard me repeating it years later explained it. It meant: "Today I go to school..." Only God knew what I went to school for!

But I remembered the Sports Day. Our teacher told me to run the 50-meter, the 100-meter and the 400-meter, the 150-meter hurdle, the high jump, the distance jump... and for each of these, I was given an exercise book with a colorful cover for being the champion. I cradled about ten such books home to show Mama, feeling triumphant, but Lien-yan coldly pointed out to her that I was the only girl in our school whose feet had not been bound. No wonder Lien-yan mocked me. It was no great feat to win races against girls who could hardly walk.

The weather turned cold after the Sports Day. Shelley once wrote something to the effect of, when winter is over, how can spring be far behind? That line was full of hope and worthy of admiration, but Shelley

never went to Lushun and did not know that winter could stay forever and spring would never come.

Between October and November, the farmers on our orchard began to stash their fresh vegetables into the caves which they had dug into the mountain side. Mama was so impressed that she took us to watch the activity while explaining to us how important it was to anticipate cold weather when it was not yet cold. She should have taken her own advice, but then, she thought she didn't need to worry because our house was well protected by our radiator.

This type of radiator was popular in the old Shanghai I knew. It consisted of a network of pipes throughout the house so the steam from the tank in the cellar could carry the warmth to all the rooms. To do so, the tank of water was boiled by a stove until it turned into steam. The former owner of our house had the radiator installed and had told Mama that he had successfully used it for years. Mama had no reason to doubt his words.

The radiator worked but one night, alas, Mama forgot to add coal to the stove. The weather was so bitterly cold that whatever steam there was in the pipes turned into water; the water turned into ice, and the ice burst open the pipes! In one single night, Mama had killed the radiator.

Mama invited the technician to repair the radiator but the reply was that no spare parts were available until the next shipment from Japan. Mama was calm in the face of disaster. She got a carpenter to nail off all the rooms except the two next to our kitchen, so as to use them as our living room and our bedroom. In this new living room, she installed an old-fashioned stove with a chimney leading the smoke out through the window. I rather enjoyed staying in the room next to the cozy stove while the wind blasted the trees outside the house.

But that did not last long. Snow came. The first snow was only one inch thick, but it was followed by a night storm that deposited snow four feet deep that completely blocked our doors and buried us in the house. Luckily Ah-Huang, who was responsible for taking us to school, came by as he usually did and immediately understood what had happened. He rounded up several able-bodied farmers to help dig us out.

Spring still did not come. What came was more blizzard and more snow. Even the tap water froze. Mama had to walk 100 meters to fetch water from

the well. It was only a distance of 100 meters, but Mama was not used to hard labor. The last straw was the incident of my precious ears.

Our routine every evening had been that Ah-Huang would walk us home from school. One particular evening, when Ah-Huang came to fetch us, the sky had darkened with a blizzard, so he carried me on his shoulders while holding Lien-yan by the hand. Lien-yan of course stumbled and reeled as he walked but at least the walking kept his blood circulating, whereas I, hanging motionlessly on Ah-Huang's back, was so frozen that I lost all sense of touch. As we neared our house, I suddenly thought I had no ears. I tried to touch them, but I could not feel them. I was so frightened I cried out that we had to go back to look for my ears. Ah-Huang couldn't understand what I was fussing about, so he continued on his way till we reached home. All this while, I was wailing for him to go back for my missing ears. Mama asked me what was wrong, but I was not at all coherent. Ears? What ears? Whose ears? Not until she cradled me and calmed me down was I able to tell her about my ears.

Mama decided then and there that cherry blossoms were not as important as her daughter's ears. She would not wait for spring to come, and sailed with Lien-yan and me on the next boat for Shanghai.

And, it seemed an amazing coincidence, just at that time, my father had bought a large mansion in Shanghai, waiting for Mama to move in.

When I was young, I was just happy because we had a new house. But now that I am much older, I wonder whether the purchase of the new house was just purely coincidental or well-planned out and very well-timed?

Why was Mama, whom Man-yi always described as timid, so insistent on staying behind in Lushun by herself with two young children? Did she really wish to see the cherry blossoms so badly that she was willing to fight the storm? Why was she bold enough to live alone in Lushun without her in-laws whom she had come to rely on for so long?

She went through a lot before the incident of my ears took place. When snow damaged her house, she was not discouraged but calmly planned to repair the wreck. When the tap water froze, she was willing to walk a distance to fetch the water. Since she had lived through all those calamities, why did she decide to leave simply because of my ears?

Was my wailing over my frost-bitten ears that important? Or did she already know that a new house was waiting for her back in Shanghai?

Why and when did my father purchase the new house? From my calculation, the house must have been bought some time between 1929 and 1930, just when the world was going into the Great Depression. If so, why did my father buy it at that crucial period when money was scarce? And where did he get the money to buy the house? I clearly remember him telling me once how hard-pressed for money he was during the Depression, and that he had been tempted to jump out of the window. Why, instead of doing that, had he bought a house instead?

What I don't know, I can only surmise, especially from a remark I heard some forty years later.

It was in 1972, during my visit with Xing-jie in New York. We were reminiscing about our bygone days when she said: "During our Min Hou Nan Li days, you know whom we all detested? Yes, Eighth Uncle! The way he walked around with his tunic wide open and his pants about to drop! He had no respect for anyone and he was too arrogant to notice anyone's distaste. My mother said that he just swayed his bare torso and his fat stomach everywhere he went. If my mother can talk like that about him, you can imagine how your Mama must also abhor the sight. My mother always said that the reason your Mama remained in Lushun was to avoid seeing Eighth Uncle and his fat belly."

What Xing-jie said alerted me. If what she said was true, then the real reason Mama stayed alone in Lushun was because she could not stand her brother-in-law any longer. Since she couldn't get away from him as long as they stayed in the same house in Shanghai, her only escape was to live in Lushun by herself. If Fifth Aunt had detected the truth, then Fifth Uncle must have known of it also. Was it he who told my father? Or did Mama tell him herself? In that case, the reason my father bought the house was because he wished Mama to have independence, a thing so vital to her that only his money could save her. So he gritted his teeth and bought the house.

All this is just my speculation, of course, but who can prove me wrong?

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- 1 Students studying abroad (留学生). The term meant those men and women who studied abroad. They are usually prestigious people. Mama was only mocking us.
 - 2 National language (国文). Since it was in Japanese-occupied Lushun, the national language was of course Japanese.



THE DISTRIBUTION OF ROOMS IN THE NEW HOUSE SEEMED TO prove me right that my father had bought the house mainly for Mama.

It was a three-storied mansion. On the first floor were the large dining hall and drawing room, among others, while on the second and third floors were the bedrooms, including two huge suites on the second floor which were truly impressive because each had its own bedrooms, living rooms, verandas and bathrooms. The rest of the rooms, large and small, were just rooms. My father, of course, couldn't very well say that he had bought the house for Mama, but she, as his wife, even if in name only, had the right of choosing one of the second-floor suites.

Instead of doing so, she politely pointed out that her brothers-in-law, Fifth and Eighth Brother₁, being the two most senior members of the family, should be given the suites to save them the trouble of climbing one additional floor, especially since Fifth Sister had feet which were once bound. This suggestion automatically let the children of Fifth Uncle live on the same floor with their parents. As for herself, she would take the seemingly inferior bedrooms on the third floor.

In this way, allowing the rest of the family to have the 'better' rooms, she would humbly and diplomatically take the less prestigious but more private space on the third floor. Actually, the arrangement was as if she had a separate apartment of her own where she could enjoy the breathing space and privacy she had yearned for.

As it turned out, that was exactly how the space was divided. Fifth Uncle and Eighth Uncle, with their wives, occupied the second floor while the rest of the smaller rooms on that floor were each assigned to my cousins Xing-jie, Lien-jun and Xin-pei, with an extra room specially reserved for Fourteenth Uncle. In other words, there were eight people who lived on the second floor.

By contrast, the third floor had only four people: Mama, Lien-ming, Lien-yan and me. It was a great improvement from the alley house all twelve of us had squeezed into. Mama was no longer forced to watch Eighth Uncle with his pants on the verge of dropping off; in fact, she did not need to see him at all except during meals. After acquiring the third-

floor space, she had the walls of some of the rooms on the third floor removed so that she could have a large study and a spacious living room for herself. When her relatives came to visit, she could put them up in the two extra bedrooms next to her children's.

As a child, I did not realize this arrangement was Mama's own choosing. Simply because the ceiling of our rooms was not as high as the ones on the second floor, and did not have the cherubic angels around the corners the way the second-floor rooms had, I was under the impression that Mama had been given the less attractive rooms to live in.

Even so, I accepted it, because I vaguely felt it was only fair since we were dependants of Fifth Uncle. I was content to live in the new house, caring little about who owned what. It went on this way until I was about eight years old, when Xin-pei and I were playing in the dining room, and for some reason, we got into an argument. Since I was older, I was winning whatever we had been arguing about. He was so enraged at losing the argument that he suddenly screamed at me: "Get out! This is my father's house and you are just some trash even your own father did not want!"

I stared at him for one split second, and then my fist flew out. It landed on his face and down he went to the floor. I could only hear the servants shouting: "Miss Fung! What's the matter with you?" I ran out without saying a word. When I reached the Wutong tree in the garden, I wrapped my arms around its trunk and wept. "Just the trash even your father did not want," I repeated bitterly to myself. "Why? Why didn't my father want me? What did I ever do to him?" I wanted badly to run to Mama for an explanation, but I remembered what Lien-ming had told me.

Ever since she went to the boarding school and couldn't come home as often as she liked, Lien-ming had passed on to me her job of "protecting Mama" as Grandma had taught her. "Because our father doesn't live with us," she warned me, "don't you ever dare mention anything concerning him to Mama, or else she will grieve." I didn't understand why the fact our father didn't live with us would "grieve" Mama, but I had kept true to what Lien-ming had commanded me.

Thus I knew I couldn't repeat to Mama this last incident with Xin-pei. In the darkness of the night, I lifted my face toward the third floor window behind which I knew Mama sat. I repeated my promise that I would never "grieve" her even though I desperately wanted to know why my father

didn't want me. A sort of pride suddenly surged in my eight-year-old heart: I would be Mama's protector! I vowed if Xin-pei should ever say that again, I would give him another whack on the face, but I would never tell Mama why I did so.

However, Xin-pei's words had ignited my hatred for my father.

Thinking back now, as an adult, I am rather amazed that both Lien-ming and I had been so foolish as not to have guessed that it was actually our father's money which was used to purchase the house, and it was our father who paid for our household expenses. But also thinking back, I understand the reasons for our ignorance.

Children, as a whole, are usually not aware of the flow of money, especially when they do not have to deal directly with it. Besides, our family, being Confucian disciples, never discussed money. So how were we to know it was not Fifth Uncle who bought the house? He never claimed he did, nor did Fifth Aunt, but we saw how our household was run: Fifth Uncle seemed always to have the final say on everything in the house and Fifth Aunt always paid the servants. Therefore, like the servants, we concluded that Fifth Uncle must be the provider and that he owned the house.

Both Lien-ming and I misinterpreted what Grandma had said. Grandma only wanted Lien-ming to protect Mama by not asking painful and embarrassing questions about our father. Yet, ironically, she knew better than anyone else that it was her third son, our father, who was the good provider and that the eldest son, our Fifth Uncle, never made any income since he left his teaching job in Changsha. She never dreamed that we would, in our childish ignorance, make the mistake of assuming that it was our Fifth Uncle, and not our father, who was the real provider for the household.

As I think back on it, I realize that I should have known that not only was Mama the one my father wished to provide for, but that she even had her own source of money. For instance, I had seen, almost every month, my Fifth and Fourteenth Uncles come respectfully to lay their white envelopes on Mama's table, and in the envelopes there was ready cash. I thought at that time that they had given Mama spending money from the kindness of their generous hearts, never imagining it was the interest on Mama's own deposit which she had entrusted them to invest.

Also, I remember how there were always some relatives of Mama's who had come to 'borrow' money. At that time, I was usually angry with Mama because I felt that she had no right to squander what the uncles had kindly given her.

And then there was the land in Hunan. I remember there was a man nicknamed "Huang the dwarf" who came to Shanghai every half year or so to bring Mama news of 'the land.' Years later, I heard the communists had shot him in one of their uprisings for being a rent collector. Why did he come to see Mama so often if he had not been one of her rent collectors? And even later, in 1952, when she told me how she regretted that the farmland she had designated Lien-yan to inherit had been taken by the new regime; it seemed a joke to me at that time since the whole of China was being revolutionized. I had even teased her for being partial to her adopted son instead of to her own daughters, not realizing that she really had owned some land.

I also recalled the holiday cottage in Guling that was hers. I spent so many days there, enjoying the pines, the wind, the pebbles in the pool, but I had never wondered how she came to own it. How did she have the money?

How did she get her huge deposits of money and her fairly large tract of farmland, the house in Guling, and other assets when in 1922, she was said to be unable to purchase the passage for herself to New York?

None of these did I know when I wrapped my arms around the Wutong tree and wept in the darkness. I couldn't reason with what had taken place. All I knew then was that my father was responsible for making Mama, Lien-ming and me the objects of mockery and jeers. I didn't know what he had done or why he had done it, but from that moment on, I just knew I hated him.

Luckily, at least for me, I had a father-substitute in Fifth Uncle. To him, I was like one of his own children. We were a big family. We played well together, even with the youngest one, Xin-pei, who was a cry-baby and whom we all had to humor lest his father came and disrupted our playing. I was happy as long as no one mentioned my father, and, since he lived so far away from us, no one did, and I was allowed to live in peace.

When I think back about this period of my life and the memory of our big family together, I am thankful that Mama did not get a divorce, after all.

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- 1 Fifth and Eighth Brother (五哥, 八哥). In our Hunan family, a wife always follows the way her husband addresses his family members, thus my mother called Fifth Uncle the same way my father called him, which would be Fifth Brother, (五哥). She also addressed the other relatives such as Fifth Aunt and Eighth Uncle as Fifth Sister (五姐) and Eighth Brother (八哥) .



OUR NEW HOUSE IN SHANGHAI WAS SITUATED IN THE VICINITY OF Ti Lan Qiao¹, which in Chinese means “The Bridge of Carrying Baskets,” which reminds me of the childhood rhyme I used to sing: “The moon walks. I too walk. I am following the moon carrying a basket of flowers...” It was not a particularly attractive district where the rich built their luxurious mansions; in fact, except for the street on which ours stood, the houses nearby were mostly ordinary dwellings of the middle class.

Our house was situated at the junction of a crossroad, which meant that it had two exits: one magnificent front door which opened onto the pavement of Bao Ding Road², and another door around the corner that opened onto the adjacent street. The back door was just an iron gate that led to the driveway which circled our garden. Strangely enough, I can still remember the name of the road at the front door, but have forgotten the name of the street that faced the back door. It seems even stranger considering that I never used the front door, but always went through the dilapidated back gate when I went to school.

A few years ago I visited the site where our house used to be. In its place I saw a big bank, gleaming with gold and granite. I stared at it and thought I could still hear the sound of us children happily playing. Then the illusion faded and I left the place without a backward glance. Realities and memories should never mix.

In my memory, the house is surrounded by a red brick wall, which extended from the front gate and curved all the way to the back door. It was said that the house and the wall were built by an Englishman who wished that, with the wall, he could banish all the noise he considered foreign to his English haven. The house, also in red brick, took up about one fourth of the land. Its front gate, which opened onto Bao Ding Road, was a majestically carved mahogany door, on which was a copper doorknob and a small opening with a flap that could be pulled aside to view the caller. The only pity was that it was hardly ever used by our family, because no one ever knocked on the door and therefore we seldom had the opportunity of looking at anyone through that small opening.

In fact, we did that only once. When Tian Yi₃ Film Studio, which used the vacant land across the street from our house, borrowed the use of the front portion of our house as a backdrop, we got to watch secretly through that small opening. We saw a girl holding a small suitcase waiting outside our door, looking at her watch and seemingly uncertain of what to do next. Just that one short scene, that was all. We never found out who she was, whom she was waiting for, nor what our house was supposed to be, because no one in our family had the good fortune of seeing that film.

Our house, three floors with a basement, looked like a neat layer cake. From the outside, each floor had a veranda with sliding doors that led to the rooms. Two chimneys jutted from the red tiled roof. There were some windows that were tucked in or protruded out from the house, giving it a vaguely European look, but otherwise, the house had nothing particularly European or Asian in design. Although it was built by an Englishman for his family when we moved in, we brought with us Fifth Uncle's own style of peasant thriftiness, scholarly rationalization, and a large dose of mercantile utilitarianism. Not knowing any better, we were content to live the way he wanted, making the house into an edifice of "four-no-like."⁴ Seriously, what did our house look like? Some parts of it could pass as utilitarian, such as the passage hall leading from the front door, with a few high-backed wooden chairs, a coat rack and a curved staircase that led to the floors above. The dining and the drawing rooms were on its right, with tall, glass sliding doors to a common veranda that was paved with marble. Three steps down from it was Mama's garden. Opposite the dining room was a toilet, a small study and an even smaller bedroom.

I think when the house was in its English period, there must have been many social gatherings, with the guests assembled in the drawing room, exchanging eloquent nothings, and when the uniformed butler in white gloves announced that dinner was served, they would file into the dining room through the connecting door, which could be pulled open like an accordion.

From the day we bought the house, that huge drawing room had not been changed at all because no one in our family ever thought of using it. Fifth Uncle felt the room was unnecessarily large and its furniture too formal and luxurious for us to use just for meeting our friends and relations, and yet he was reluctant to sell those tables and sofas because selling one's furniture

was taboo – to a peasant it was equivalent to selling off one’s own landed property. He figured that it would be better to keep them as antiques, leaving the deep green curtains never laundered or taken down; so they served only as excellent hiding places for us children to play hide-and-seek.

Therefore, the connecting door between the two rooms was hardly ever opened, probably because no one liked the sight of an unused drawing room. Our dining room had a ring of ceiling lamps which spotlighted the seats around a long dining table. Fifth Uncle had taken one look at the table and disapproved. “When does a Chinese ever use a rectangular table for his meals?” he cried. “How can the people who sit at each end reach for their food?” As a result, a new round table took its place. Whenever we had more diners than our round table could seat, we just added one more round table and more seats. Even if we might feel a squeeze, it did not matter as long as we were squeezed at a round table.

But what about the lamps now that the long table had been removed? Fifth Uncle felt that since they were illuminating the dining room well enough, there was no point in changing them. I used to sit at the table and watch how the light fell on some of us and not on others, and was intrigued by the dappled play of shadows under which we sat.

The original long table was removed but it was too good a piece of furniture to be discarded. Since the dining room had an English-type fireplace with a black marble mantelpiece, Fifth Aunt turned the mantelpiece into an altar by placing our ancestor plaques on it, and that long table was dragged in front of the altar-mantelpiece because it was just the right size for placing the fruits and other offering to our departed forefathers. When it was not actually used for the worship ceremony, it served as a storage area for incense, candles and “Underworld paper money”⁵, as well as our schoolbags, books, newspapers and anything else we happened to toss there.

On the days when the ritual of ancestor worship was to take place, Fifth Aunt would tell us to clean up that long table to make room for all those delectable dishes which were cooked supposedly for our ancestors. In front of the table, she would place a red rug, on which we, with Fifth Uncle in the lead, would each kowtow three times. Such a solemn ceremony I dare say the house’s previous English owners could never have dreamed of.

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- 1 Ti Lan Qiao (提蓝桥). Apart from its name, there is nothing remarkable about the place.
 - 2 Bao Ding Road (保定路). The street name of our house, and No. 8, Bao Ding Road, was an address I would always remember with nostalgia.
 - 3 Tian Yi (天一). This studio used to be one of the foremost film makers in China, but had since been bought over by others, probably the Shaw Brothers. They, at that time, filmed their shots in the open air, using lead plates to reflect the light, and I used to watch them avidly from our third-floor veranda.
 - 4 “Four-no-like.” (四不象.) It used to mean a mythical animal which “looked like a deer but without a deer’s horns, like a camel but without a camel’s hump, like a buffalo but without a buffalo’s hoofs, and like a donkey but without a donkey’s tail.” Colloquially used, it means “like nothing in the world.”
 - 5 Underworld paper money (冥纸). The Chinese believe the dead, like the living, also need money and it is the descendants’ duty to support their dearly departed by remitting them this essential commodity through burning the money. But practical as ever, the Chinese do not burn any real money. Instead, they buy a special kind of silver or gold-coated paper and fold them into the shape of ingots, and then burn them. As a child, I must have helped Fifth Aunt fold enough ingots to support a whole bank.



IT WAS IN 1936 THAT AN ENGLISH GIRL OF ABOUT SIXTEEN CAME TO our door and said something incomprehensible to us, while gesturing with her hands. We didn't know what she wanted, but luckily both Lien-ming and Xing-jie were home, and through the English they had acquired at their missionary school, Fifth Aunt and Mama finally came to understand that this English girl used to live in our house as a little girl, and was asking to see it now that she was back in Shanghai.

After we had given our consent, the girl ran about the house, touching every corner, fondling every piece of furniture. Finally she thanked us and left with tears in her eyes. Even though she and I did not speak the same language, our ages were similar, and from her expression, I could feel how disappointed she was. I could imagine how she wept to her mother and sobbed: "What did they do to our beautiful home!"

From the viewpoint of that girl, the house must have experienced a worse fate than flood and earthquake combined. Of course things were always changing. From it having been her home to my home was certainly a big change, but what was that compared to what we would have to face when it was burned down by the Japanese who used it since 1937 as one of their military headquarters? Our home at Bao Ding Road was completely gone. It lived only in my dreams.

Sometimes, I live in that dream. I walk on the long veranda next to the drawing and the living rooms, and wander between the marbled columns, and step on the marbled tiles. I think how, in its British days, there were guests who strolled on this long veranda, or even danced on it in the moonlight. After we took it over, there were only us children playing ping-pong and practicing our roller-skating on it. Except for me, not many came on to this veranda. I would sit there and listen to the rain splattering on the leaves in the garden, enjoying a quiet moment or two in a busy day.

Originally there was a kitchen in the basement, but because none of our elders liked Western cooking, it was scrapped to become the sleeping quarters for our maids, while a row of wooden huts were added outside in our garden, most of them for storing the fresh fruits which were shipped to us from Lushun, but the one nearest our house was a complete kitchen for

cooking Chinese cuisine. It was equipped with different sizes of charcoal burners and woks, as well as ladles and frying pans. On its walls were hung strands of garlic, onion and ginger which our cook had dipped in sulfur-wine on every May 5th Festival¹.

I would never forget the day when I was woken by a centipede bite near my lips. The centipede was probably lured there by traces of candy I hadn't wiped off the night before. My lips immediately swelled. Mama was frantic and called for a doctor, but Liu Shifu² the cook, who had been specially brought to Shanghai because Fifth Uncle loved his cooking, casually smashed some garlic and onion, still with dirt and cobwebs on them, with the blade of his kitchen knife, and applied the whole mess to my face. Miraculously the swelling disappeared even before the doctor arrived.

Unless I was specially summoned by Fifth Uncle, I seldom entered any of the rooms on the second floor. I normally took the stairs three steps at one stride and ran into Mama's territory. On our floor, other than that the ceiling was not decorated with plaster angels, the space occupied by the rooms was the same as the space on the second floor, the exception being that our veranda was not covered; it was open air. It was about six feet wide and fifty feet long. In the day, I could idly watch the people on the street below rushing about in their daily business. I especially loved the traveling troupes who came to perform in the empty space across the street. Magicians would spew out arrows of fire from their mouths. They could even cut a man apart in the middle, wrap up the lower portion of his body, throw it into a jar, stir the inside of that jar vigorously, and then, to the banging of gongs and drums, have the man who had been split into halves spring up from that jar, smiling and waving his hands!

At night, when I was tired of doing my homework, I would step onto the veranda and gaze at the twinkling stars. On special days, such as the Mid-Autumn Festival³, or the Asking for Wish Day⁴, Mama would place a table and some chairs on the veranda, and on the table she would put mooncakes, arrowroot, watermelon, water chestnuts, peanuts, sunflower seeds and our other favorite tidbits. Our cousins and friends would drop in to share the food and enjoy the moonlight. We would play games and sing songs, and of course, gossip and argue. On Chinese New Year's Eve, we could even see fire-crackers brightening the sky from our veranda.

Mama's bedroom was next to the veranda, as was her study and her living room. There were three other smaller bedrooms that were Lien-ming's, Lien-yan's and mine, and an extra one for any visitor we might have. I had been so used to sleeping with Mama in her bed that when we moved into our new house, I insisted on continuing to sleep with her, and a bed was placed in the corner of her bedroom even though I, in name, had my own room.

When I entered third grade, a small fancy desk was added. It faced a window, through which the broad leaves of a Wutong tree would drift in and land on my desk. Mama once pointed to the seeds clinging to the leaf and explained how the wind could blow the fallen leaf to any remote place on earth, but the leaf could still nourish the seed by rotting on the ground. I remembered I had remarked at the time, "Oh really? I thought it was the seed that refused to let go of its Mama!" Little did I imagine how my fate would be like that seed, and Mama's like that leaf.

My desk was one of my childhood treasures. It was built in the style of what was commonly known as "secretary." It had two collapsible panels to shield the writing top. Behind the writing area stood many vertical shelves and some drawers, and behind them was an empty space which I used to think of as a secret compartment. Often I would dismantle the shelves and the drawers with mounting excitement to see if anything had been hidden in the compartment. Even though I never did find anything, it was exciting to look.

Mama also had her desk, shaped very much like mine but larger. Whenever she pulled the panels apart, took out her book of Buddhist sutras, and lit one single stick of incense, I knew she was not to be disturbed. After she had finished reading silently, she would close the book of sutras and the desk without a word, and her expression would be once more serene as if she had just put down a heavy load.

The incense and the sutras were her only ceremonial equipment. She never seemed to ask God for any blessing, but when she passed by a statue of Buddha, she would put her hands together and lower her head, as if she and Buddha were friends, or daughter-and-mother. Today, although I know relatively little about Buddhism, when I light a single incense stick in front of a Buddha image like Mama did, and start to read the sutras silently, I feel close to Mama.

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- 1 May 5th Festival (端午). This commemorates the day when the great patriot-poet Qu Yuan (屈原) drowned himself some 2,500 years ago. Ever since then, people have made rice dumplings to throw into the river to feed his soul as a mark of respect. It is also said that May 5th is a day to subdue evil spirits. Wine with sulfur in it is said to help drive evil away, hence we, as children, were dabbed with sulfur wine on our foreheads on that particular day to ward off evil. And that was also the day our cook soaked his garlic and onion, which saved me from the centipede-bite.
 - 2 Liu Shifu (刘师傅). It is customary to address a skilled person in one's household as *Shifu*, like that of a teacher, and our cook was well deserved to be called 刘师傅.
 - 3 Mid-Autumn Festival (中秋). The fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month. Since the seventh, eighth and ninth months together make up the season of autumn, the day naturally is known as the mid-autumn day. The moon on that night is said to be the fullest and brightest in the whole year.
 - 4 Asking for Wish Day (乞巧). It falls on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month and honors the mythical characters of the Cowboy and the Heavenly Weaving Maid. It is said that this is the only night that the cowboy (牛郎) is allowed to visit his beloved weaving maid (织女). This day is believed to be particularly auspicious for young maidens and whatever wish a girl asks for on this day will be granted.



MY MATERNAL GRANDFATHER WAS A SCHOLAR AND A GOVERNMENT magistrate. Being his daughter, Mama had her own concept of what was nice and appropriate. However, she rarely expressed her opinion concerning the arrangements on the two floors below her, usually deferring the discussion to Fifth Uncle and Fifth Aunt. But when it came to the third floor, she was her own mistress.

Behind her grave and sober attire, I guessed that she yearned for a dash of cheerful color. She did not like blank spaces, so she plastered wallpaper all over her rooms. In her bedroom, the wallpaper was a design of green forest with trees and birds perching on the branches. I remember seeing, each time I woke up, a robin with its characteristic red chest next to my head; it would look askance at me and I would lovingly finger his scarlet spot. The living room walls had different colored stripes that fell like raindrops in the sunlight. Mama's study was done in small yellow strips on light blue paper but I can't recall the walls of the other rooms.

For some odd reason, I remember the lamp shades in her living room. They were made of multi-colored glass panels swirling together like so many candy stripes. They even had pink tassels! This type of lamps is quite popular in the bars one sees in 1930's cowboy movies. If I should see them today, I would probably say "ugh," but nostalgia gave them charm.

Then there was her garden.

The land on which our house stood was very large. I was told that behind the curved wall there used to be a long row of tall trees overlooking the luxurious green lawn where the English ladies of the previous house owner's days probably drank tea and played croquet, but Fifth Uncle and Mama divided the lawn for their own different purposes. The house occupied one-fourth of the land while the rest of it was portioned equally to Mama for her flower garden, to Fifth Uncle for his vegetable farm and to the rest of us children for our athletic training.

Mama told me something with that wry smile she always had whenever she spoke about things over which she felt helpless. According to her, after the land was distributed between them, Fifth Uncle took advantage of Mama's absence when she visited Man-yi to cut down all the majestic trees

behind the wall. His explanation to Mama, who had listened with exasperated rage, was that it was so that sufficient sunlight could fall on his precious vegetables as well as on her flowers.

Perhaps Fifth Uncle loved his own memories as much as I do mine, and that was why he clung to his love of vegetables the way his father had taught him. For a retired mathematics teacher, he behaved more like a hardworking peasant than an intellectual. He planted spinach, *baicai*, *tunghancai*, winter melons¹, pumpkins, beans, and I don't know what else, neatly in rows, all properly weeded and fertilized. He even had two huge ponds dug on his portion of the land and told my male cousins to defecate into them so that he could have organic fertilizer, a feat which the boys nodded their mute consent to, but then still used the flush toilets in our house. It was funny to see those two ponds gaping at us even on the day we left Shanghai, with only frogs jumping in and out of them.

Mama designed her own garden. She used red bricks to separate it into four smaller portions, with a circle in the middle. There was a pebbled footpath that led to the various flowers which seemed to bloom everywhere, not only on the ground, but also on the walls. I don't know how she managed to have her garden always look so beautiful, perhaps she had learned from her father and his gardener when and what flowers to plant so that they would bloom in succession. There were roses, violets, rhododendron, hydrangeas, peonies, cyclamens, and a row of white jade-like gardenias, with a fragrance as strong as musk, which she used as a border barrier to mask the smell from what Fifth Uncle did with his vegetables.

When I was in primary school, my teacher told us to keep a diary. Every day I would start my page with: "When I arrived home, Mama was busy sweeping up the fallen leaves.....". Mama read it and sighed. "Why do you always say I was sweeping the leaves? Can't you spare a word or two on the beauty of my flowers?"

The remaining one-fourth of the land was not actually given to us children but it just happened to be there and we made use of it. We were all growing up, with Lien-jun turning into a strapping youth and the rest of us following close behind. All we daydreamed about was how we would excel in sports and win a gold medal at the Olympics. We believed that as long as

we trained ourselves hard enough, the gold medals would all fall into our laps.

So we trained ourselves for that eventual day. We trained so hard and kicked up so much dirt that not a single blade of grass was left on our field.

Sometimes, especially in the winter, Fifth Aunt would also smoke her fish and meats on our field. After she had cut the raw materials into neat square pieces, she would soak them in deep jars of herbed wine. All this work was done outside our house, next to the wooden kitchen. The open jars would be left around our playground, making the area look and smell like a small vineyard, filling the air with the aroma of wine, soy sauce and herbs.

When smoking and air-drying the fish and meats, Fifth Aunt had wires strung up on our playing field. She would then hang the food on the wires for the winter wind and sun to cure them. This sight of dangling fish and meats was denoted by some of our friends as being a famous scenic spot for any visitors!

For a long time, I could not understand why it was that I remember so clearly almost all the details of our Bao Ding Road house. Why did my memories linger on every flower, every blade of grass? After all, they were things that happened eighty years ago. Why did I still think of them with such longing and affection? I did not know the answer until I came across an article by Feng Zikai, a famous Chinese essayist and cartoonist well known for his Buddhist leanings. Called “Give me back my Yuan Yuan Hut”², the article was about Yuan Yuan Hut, a little house he owned that was destroyed by the Japanese. In it he wrote: “Whenever I closed my eyes, I could see the furnishing in every room, including what book was on what shelf in which room. ... It was because that house had been wiped out by fire and it gave me no time to bid farewell forever.” Then it dawned on me. My parting from our beloved house was equally irrevocable and abrupt. The fire had wiped out everything, leaving nothing except our memory of it.

Since 1937, when I left our home at Bao Ding Road, I have lived through many changes. Sometimes when I wake up in the night and cannot go back to sleep, I will look for my robin, with his scarlet spot, singing to me on the wallpaper. Bao Ding Road house was where I grew up. When I think of the house, I think of Mama. During the years I lived in it, I went

through primary and secondary schools, made many intimate and casual friends, and even took part in numerous political protests and demonstrations. But as the proverb says, “Back to the roots and the ovary”³, everything I did was done under Mama’s love and protection – only I was not aware of it at that time.

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- 1 *Baicai, tunghancai*, winter melons (白菜, 东汗菜, 冬瓜). These were some of the vegetables my Fifth Uncle planted.
 - 2 Yuan Yuan Hut (缘缘堂). So called because Feng Zi-kai meant for his little cottage to represent his philosophy of 缘缘, meaning “follow what comes naturally,” or “let it be.”
 - 3 “Back to the roots and the ovary” (归根结蒂). Since the root is where the tree has sprouted and the ovary is where the flower is nursed, this famous quotation means “to trace everything back to its beginning.”



OUR LIFE AT BAO DING ROAD SEEMED TO BE CONTENTED AND worry-free, but Mama was soon confronted by the question of where to send me to school.

She deliberated over whether she should send me, as everyone suggested, to the same school my sister went to. Lien-ming was then studying at St. Mary's, a prestigious missionary school for girls which did not allow their students to go home except for a few days a month. I heard Mama complain mildly to Man-yi about this rule. "Are they afraid," she asked, "that letting their pupils stay home longer will jeopardize whatever Christian beliefs they have crammed into the girls?" Mama did not object to any kind of teaching, religious or otherwise, but she did not feel that learning of any sort could be achieved by force. She also complained that the teaching of Chinese at St. Mary's, as judged by Lien-ming's standard, was inadequate¹.

Man-yi retorted that Mama's real reason against St. Mary's was that she could not keep me home. Mama laughed and told Man-yi not to speak such nonsense.

She surprised those of our relatives who praised St. Mary's for its spacious lawn and luxurious dormitories by enrolling me in an obscure little school situated in the alley estate next to our house. It was called Huiqun², and was the kind of school every alley estate in Shanghai had.

Mama's own Chinese was excellent. Whenever she read the essays Lien-ming wrote in school, she would complain that Lien-ming's teacher was not up to standard, but it didn't mean she wanted to teach me herself. She taught me in the same way her father taught her, by simply letting me read whatever took my fancy. I would browse aimlessly in her study. When I came upon some books I could not understand or did not like, I simply gave them a miss and went on to search for something else. Sometimes she would leave around the sort of books which she thought I might like. These books would disappear after some days if I did not show any sign of interest while, in the meantime, others would appear on the table. It was her strategy of encouraging me to read, but of course I did not know that at the time. I was just glad that she had such a large and interesting library.

In this way, although I was very young, I had the opportunity to be acquainted with books for readers far beyond my age. When other children were reading comic strips, I was already into reading such books as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, although I did have difficulty understanding some of its words and phrases. This was probably why I was told by my teacher to skip two grades in my primary school.

By sending me to the alley school, she had also chosen my schoolmates. Although on Bao Ding Road there were a few other mansions like ours, the streets next to us were mostly alley estates or houses which were even humbler. Their owners were ordinary city folks. Therefore, my schoolmates, who were mostly from these homes, were ordinary children, compared to the rich children who went to St. Mary's. Thus I learned from my little schoolmates, without knowing I was actually learning, the joys of simple friendship without going through the jealousy and envy which often marred the relationships of the rich.

What else can I say about the difference between missionary schools and my little Huiqun? Ours was an ordinary school with no campus to speak of, except a small concrete plot about the size of a basketball field where we raised the national flag and sang our national anthem. We did not say our daily prayers to Christ or listen to Christian sermons the way Lien-ming was supposed to in her church. Instead, we were told by our principal, every day at the school assembly, of the aggressions by the Japanese which the students of the missionary schools seldom discussed. We swore loyalty to our country, pledged to defend it and paid special attention to China's history. We were patriotic under the shadow of war. Of course we were too young to do more than sing and salute, but we knew we were Chinese, body and soul. We were taught Chinese literature by teachers who knew no English, which did not mean they were better teachers, but at least it meant their Chinese was not corrupted.

At the same time, I learned from my little schoolmates that both wealth and poverty were a mere phenomenon of life, and nothing to be ashamed of or proud about. They were only something to build one's hopes upon. I learned from them to "follow the *yu* and be content"³, and not to be frustrated by what we could not obtain. In other words, I learned the traditional morality of the Chinese middle class. After more than seventy

years, I haven't changed much. Mama should be pleased with her choice of a school for me.

My friendships with my schoolmates grew with the years until I completed mid-secondary and went to study in Nanyang Middle School⁴.

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- 1 I do not think that Chinese was as poorly taught at St. Mary's as my mother thought. The famous novelist Zhang Ai-ling (张爱玲) was a schoolmate of Lien-ming's at St. Mary's and she wrote in Chinese. It was probably because Lien-ming was more interested in studying medicine that her essays were not excellent, and not because the quality of teaching was poor.
 - 2 Huiqun (慧群). It was the name of my first school. The name meant "to give wisdom to the masses."
 - 3 "Follow the *yu* and be content" (随遇而安). The *yu* (遇) in this case means "happening" or "fate" or circumstances, 境遇. The phrase means one follows (随) whatever one meets (遇) in life and stays content (安) with it.
 - 4 Nanyang Middle School (南洋中学). It was my second school in Shanghai.



SOME PEOPLE GET TO SEE THEIR FATHER EVERY DAY DURING THEIR childhood, but the total number of times I saw my father, in my first fourteen years, can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

I was called a genius the first time I met him. The second time I met him was when I, at the age of eight, lay in a hospital room and was having a fit of anger.

Because I usually ran around heedlessly, I failed to notice a blister on my right ankle. At the beginning, it was itchy and I scratched it, but I soon forgot about it. After a while, it seemed to have healed by itself, leaving only a small scab, giving me even less reason to worry about it. However, a few days later, I developed a fever and the doctors, while giving me medicine to bring down the fever, were at a loss as to the source of infection. This was before the days of antibiotics and any fever, with its source unknown, could be dangerous.

The doctors examined me thoroughly and finally discovered that the infection came from a little blister under the skin. They re-opened the wound and treated the pus they found inside. After that, my fever went down easily. All that remained to be done was to push sterile strips soaked with medicine into the little hole. It was something anybody could do, but the dressing had to be changed every two hours, and since I hated to bother Mama and had always wanted the experience of living in a hospital, I insisted on being cared for by the nurses. Mama indulged me and let me have my way.

However, on my second day in the hospital, a middle-aged woman, with her hair tied back in a knot, suddenly burst into my room, holding a big thick, black Bible, which she banged down next to my pillow. "Repent!" she said to me commandingly. Then she described how hell and brimstones were waiting for me if I didn't repent right away. I argued with her that in my short eight years on Earth I hadn't yet committed any crime, except for a few harmless lies, which I doubted would warrant me being thrown into hell. Therefore, I said, I refused to repent.

What I understood about hell was the usual Chinese version which said only the genuinely guilty ones, like murderers, will be punished. But the

woman insisted that I had sinned ever since Adam met Eve. I asked who Adam and Eve were and what they had to do with me. She repeated herself many times without adding anything new to make her sermon interesting. I finally lost my temper. Picking up her Bible, I threw it out of my window, yelling at her not to enter my room again.

Just then, Lien-ming came into the room with a man I didn't recognize. The man asked the nurse what was going on. But I didn't wait for the nurse to explain, for I knew from experience that I could be more sure of victory if I could lay down my case first. Thus, I rattled out my story, paying no attention to Lien-ming who was trying to tell me that the stranger was my father. When I finally realized that, I was so embarrassed that I couldn't utter a single word. I thought he would be like Fifth Uncle and scold me, but he only smiled and commented, "Ha, that nasty Hunanese temperament, uh?" After that, he asked the nurse some questions about my wound, and then left with Lien-ming. All the time, I did not dare to even open my mouth.

A few days later, Lien-ming came and told me that my father had visited me once again in the hospital, but because I was sound asleep, he had told Lien-ming not to wake me. According to Lien-ming, he had just stood over my bed and looked at me silently for a long time. Then he left. I did not see him, but I will be generous with myself and count these meetings as the second and third time I saw my father.

About this father whom I saw when I was eight years old, I had only a vague impression and no feelings one way or the other. The only thing I was sure of was that Mama was not with him.



BEFORE I WAS TO MEET MY FATHER FOR THE FOURTH TIME, another episode took place when I was ten.

At that time, my father was living in the United States and Thirteenth Uncle was living in Hankou. Because they were both living away from us, we of the younger generation were always forced by Fifth Uncle to write to them during our vacations. That was one of our “traditions.”

Ever since I had learned to hold a pen, I had copied phrases from the “Autumn-Water of Letter Writing”¹ just to put something appropriate on my paper. Mama considered these sorts of letters meaningless and never bothered to help me. As I grew older, I copied a little more, and soon was writing “To the respectful father at whose knees I am writing...” As long as each letter averaged fifty words, I considered the great feat accomplished, without me ever putting in one single drop of feeling.

But I was growing up. By the time I was ten years old, I was studying *The Proclamation of Wu Ze-tian’s Guilt*² by Lu Bin-wang³. I didn’t quite understand the essay but I found it exciting to fling accusations around, without caring whether they might be true or not. So I imitated its style and wrote a letter to my father in that vein. My composition was actually very poor, it was as bad as “a dog farting”⁴, because after all, I was only ten years old. However, I thought I was a great writer, especially when I wrote these lines in the style of the original presentation: “Woe it is to abandon a wife of ten years; there was no loyalty and no kindness. Woe it is to discard a babe in her cradle; there was no pity and no mercy.”

After I had finished it and admired it myself, I gave it to Fifth Uncle, because he was always the one who collected our letters to mail them out in a bundle to the recipients. When I handed him my letter, I sneered in my heart: “Let’s see if you dare to send it!” As I expected, he did not dare to do so. Not only did he not dare to, he handed my letter to Mama. I guessed he wanted to see how she would punish me.

Mama didn’t do anything. She only asked me to write another one.

“Why should I?” I snapped. “What did I say that was not true?”

Mama was measured in her reply. “What happened to your father has never been your concern. I don’t need you to right any injustice. Some day,

perhaps after you are married, you will understand. Until then, even if you don't understand, it doesn't matter. Right now, all you have to do is just put your mind to your studies and mind your own business."

As far as I could remember, that was only the second time she ever mentioned my father. The first time was when she was mad at me for some reason I no longer remembered. She said then: "You have the temper of a buffalo, just like your father." After that, she never mentioned him again.

Hearing her short lecture suddenly alarmed me because I realized then that I must have "grieved" her, in spite of what I had promised Lien-ming, who had promised Grandma, not to do. I didn't dare say another word more, but quickly looked up my "Autumn-Water of Letter Writing" and copied another meaningless letter.

For years, I used this letter to boast to my cousins about how daring I had been in rebelling against the "tyranny of our uncles." Sometimes I even felt a tinge of regret that my father did not get to read my masterpiece. All the time I was thinking only of myself and how brave I had been.

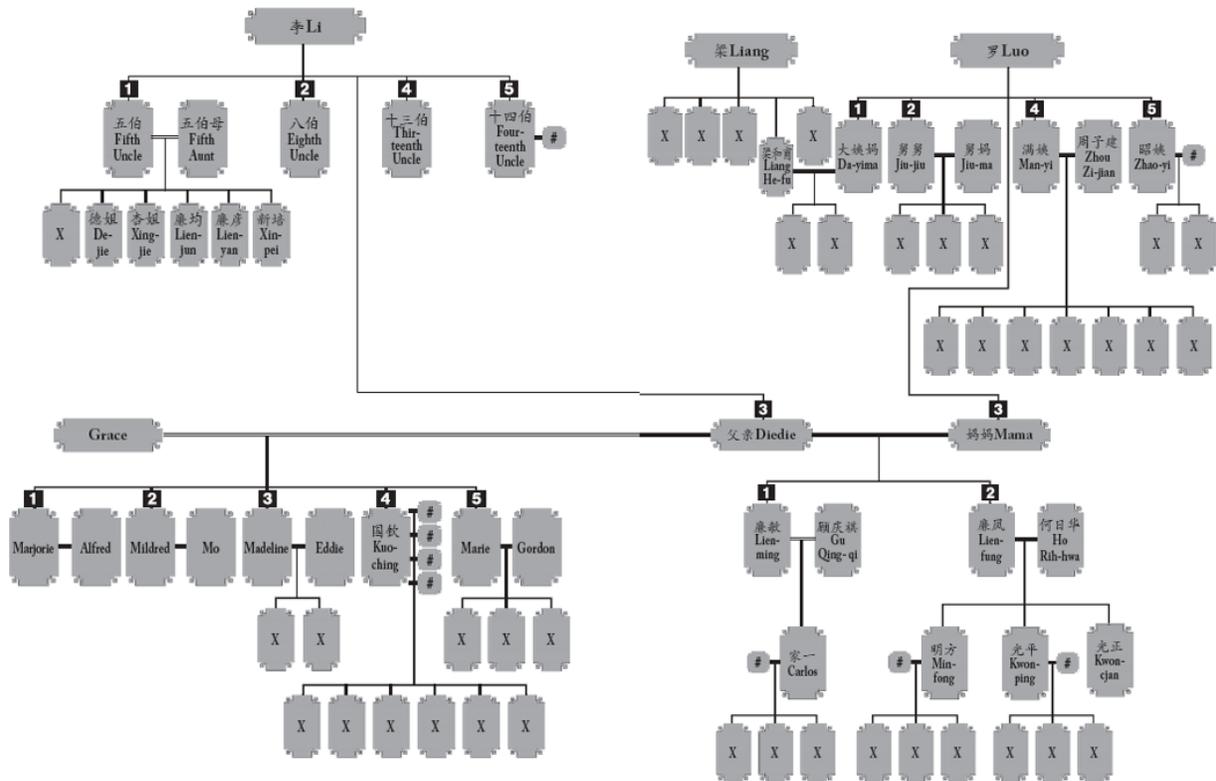
It was only when I was less proud of myself as I grew older that I wondered why Fifth Uncle did not simply scold me, directly, for not being filial. He had scolded me hundreds of times, surely once more wouldn't have mattered. So why did he, instead of scolding me, hand my letter to Mama? Was it possible that he was so impressed with my writing that he thought it might flatter Mama to see it? Even an egotist like me must admit that to be highly unlikely.

If it was not to please Mama, then why did he do it? Fifth Uncle had always been protective of Mama. If he thought my letter would grieve her, he could have easily tossed it aside and ordered me to write another one the way Mama in fact did. There would be no chance of her ever knowing it. Why then did he let Mama read my letter?

There could be only one reason, I concluded. Was it that he found I had sadly misjudged my father and felt that Mama was the best person to explain away this mistake? But, if this 'mistake' could be explained, then why did not Mama explain it?

I was only ten at that time, and later I left home far too early for me to mull about such things, much less ask Mama about them. There were many things I did not know and would never find out about.

FAMILY CONNECTIONS



Numbers indicate the sequence of birth in the family
 # — Spouses who are not mentioned in the book
 X — Offspring who are not mentioned in the book



From right to left: The one who thinks he is so handsome in the dark jacket and white trousers is my father; on his right in a white Chinese robe is my humorous Thirteenth Uncle; sitting in the center with a kind yet stern expression is my Fifth Uncle; leaning behind Fifth Uncle is my romantic Fourteenth Uncle; and sitting on the arm of the chair is our most-disliked Eighth Uncle.



My mother, with her four sisters-in-law. From left to right, sitting in the front row: My Eighth Aunt and my Fifth Aunt. Standing behind them: Mama, my Fourteenth Aunt and my Thirteenth Aunt.



My father in his young and earnest days.



A picture of my father showing the technical side of him. Here, he is in the laboratory at Glen Cove, Long Island, N.Y. His book, *Tungsten*, is still considered an authoritative work today.



Mama disliked having her picture taken, and when she had to have it done, she always looked as solemn as she could.



The almost two-year-old me, who hadn't yet read *Don Quixote* but was already anxious to ride against the windmill.



My most precious picture. Mama is holding me with Lien-ming clinging on her shoulder, probably one of our most intimate moments.



My cousins and me on the rooftop of our house in Shanghai. From left to right: Xin-pei, me, Lien-yan, Lien-jun, Lien-ming and Xing-jie. We were looking at the sunset and listening to the bells of the famous Bund.



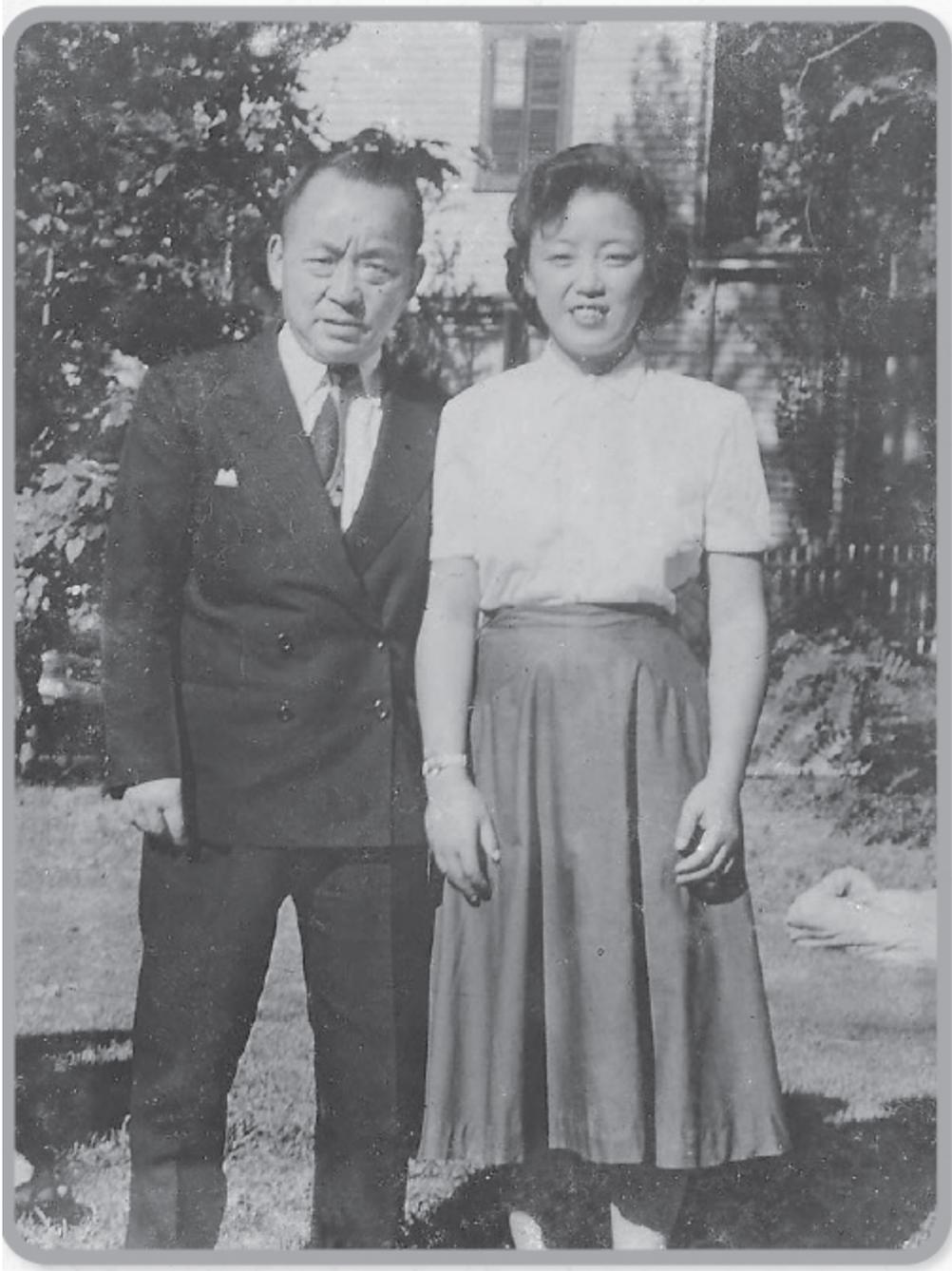
This photo was taken around 1930. I am sitting on the veranda at the Bao Ding Road house which was later burned down by the Japanese. I have only this photo to remember all the happy nights we spent on this veranda.



Lien-ming and me, in Hong Kong, 1938. In this photo, I am fifteen but look much older than my years, and that was why no one thought it outrageous when I claimed to be twenty-five for the test to get into the New Fourth Army.



Lien-yan, Mama and me, resting on the driveway to our Hong Kong residence. I was sixteen.



My father and me, when he visited me at my work place in New Jersey, 1943.



Sitting by the Cambridge Bridge, 1943.



At Harvard University campus. Since boys at MIT sneered at us female students for being not feminine enough, I had to befriend Harvard boys.



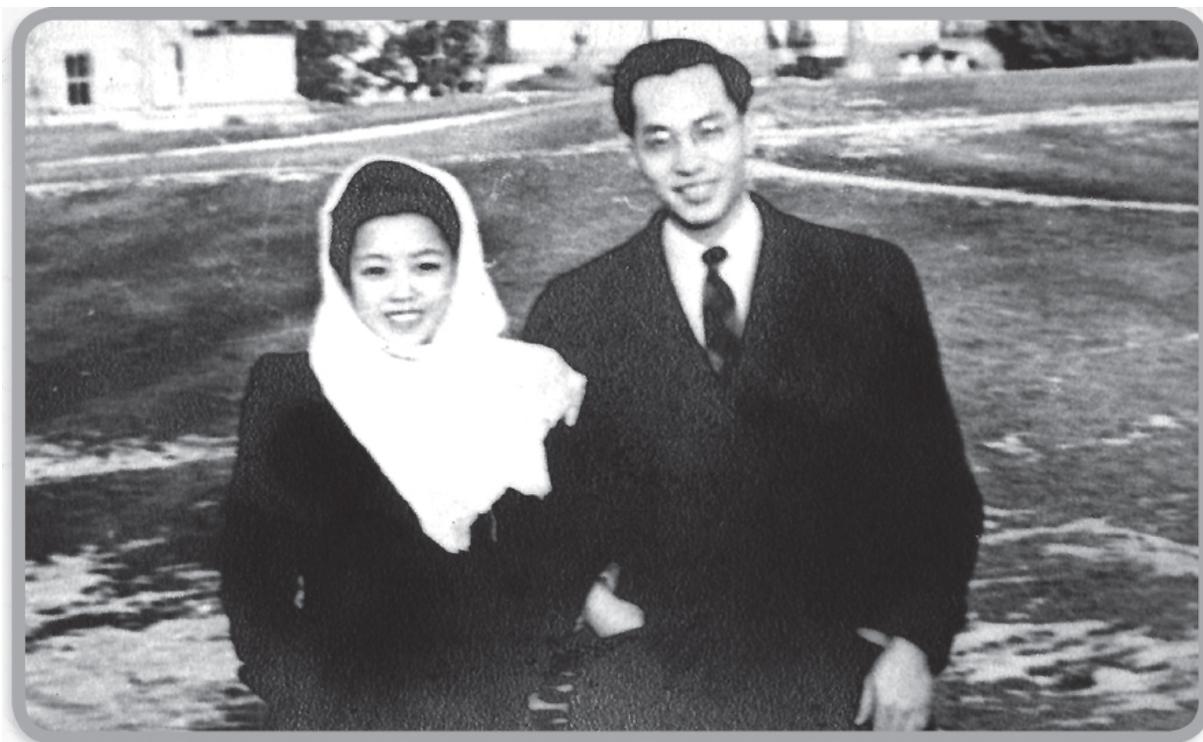
1943 at Harvard University campus, with several boys. The only thing I remember about this photo is that I was wearing the fur coat that my father had just given me.



1943, at MIT. I am with Anita and Betty, two girls also from MIT.



1943, when I studied at MIT. Since MIT had no dormitory for girls, we women students had to live in nearby rooming houses. I rode a bike to school every day and luckily, despite my careless riding skills, I suffered no accident.



1943, at Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., soon after I met R.H. Ho.



1946, a traditional wedding picture of R.H. Ho and me.



On our honeymoon at Black Island, 1946, with two bicycles.



1946, Black Island. I wonder who took this photo?



1947, I was washing dishes at our New York apartment. In the cabinet above the sink are dozens of canned meat cooked and canned by us.



My reunion with Mama, Lien-ming, her husband and son in Shanghai in 1948.



My father holding his granddaughter, one-year-old Minfong, on his knees with R.H. and me standing behind, in 1951.



1952. Our first family reunion in N.Y.C. not counting the children. From left to right: (seated) Grace, my father, Fourteenth Uncle and Aunt; (standing) Xin-pei, Marie and her husband Gordon, Marjorie and her husband Alfred, me and R.H., Mildred and her husband Mo, Madeline and her husband Eddie, Kuo-ching, Lien-yan and his wife, Dorothie. I did not bring my daughter, Minfong, along on this trip.

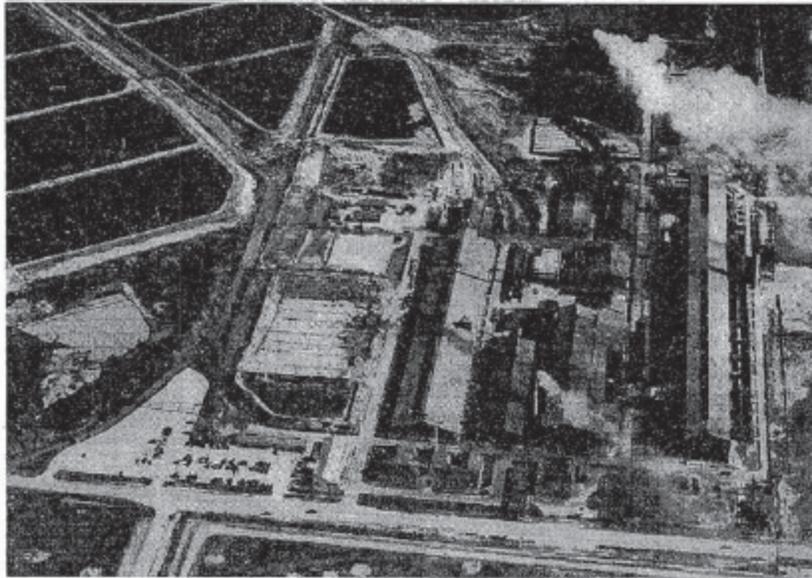


1952. Mama at the house in Deep Water Bay, Hong Kong, while I was waiting for my son Kwong-ping to be born. Mama is seen in this photo smilingly holding a bud in the garden, and telling me what flowers she used to grow in Shanghai.



When this picture was taken, Minfong was looking at Mama from outside the veranda. Mama appears so happy looking at her granddaughter.

U. S. Sells Only Tin Smelter in Nation to Wah Chang, Tungsten Concern



Tin smelter at Texas City, built by the Government during World War II and sold yesterday to the Wah Chang Corp.

WASHINGTON, Jan. 3 (AP)—The Government today sold its tin smelter at Texas City, Tex., to the Wah Chang Corporation of New York, for \$1,339,000 plus a sum not to exceed \$2,500,000, based on future production. [The Government was reported to have invested about \$13,000,000 in the smelter and related facilities originally, but the depreciated value by this month was estimated at \$3,600,000.] Wah Chang is a major refiner of tungsten ores at its refinery in Glen Cove, L. I., and has tungsten mines in California, Nevada and Brazil. It also fabricates tungsten into wire used in electronic products. K. C. Li, president and chairman, many years ago developed tungsten mines in China. The Government will receive a 10 per cent down payment

when title is transferred, the Federal Facilities Corporation said, and the rest in ten annual installments. The buyer will pay 4 per cent interest on the deferred balance. Wah Chang has advised the Government that it plans to make "substantial" outlays to adapt part of the plant, which is known as the Langhava Smelter, to tungsten operations and the manufacture of tin alloys.

However, a substantial part of the plant will be maintained for the smelting of tin, dependent upon economic considerations, the corporation said.

It added: "The sale will result in the establishment at Texas City of a private business enterprise by a well known, experienced firm, which eventually will afford employment in fields important to the national defense."

The only other bid for the plant was submitted by Ellis M. Paterson and S. Fahlender, both of Los Angeles, but was withdrawn Dec. 20.

The plant was started by the Government in 1941 to lessen this country's dependence on Malaya as the source of tin.

In line with the Government's policy of stepping out of business enterprises that compete with private industry, Congress ordered the plant sold. The law provided that Government operation of the plant, whether or not disposal was completed, should cease Jan. 31.

Tin an 'Economic Failure'

In New York, a company spokesman said it would be "some time" before Wah Chang could determine how much of the plant would be devoted to smelting tin, or how much tin would be turned out.

He did comment, however,

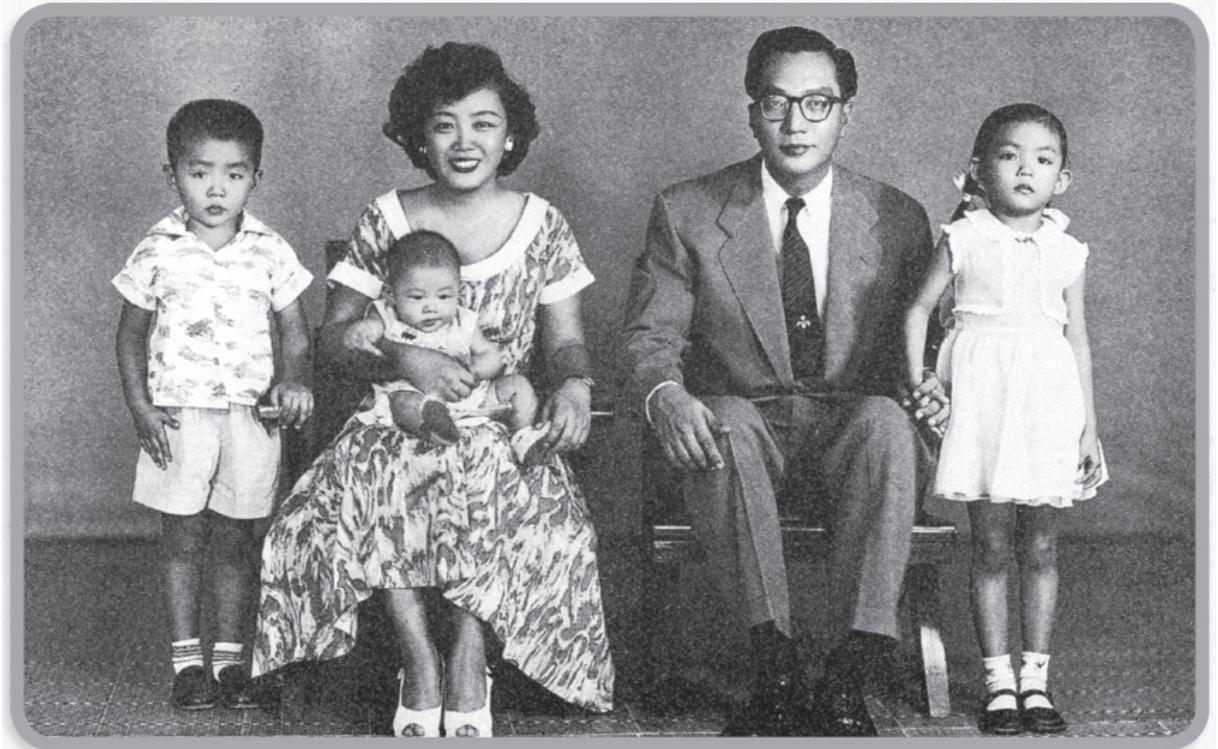
that the plant "was an economic failure before as a tin smelter exclusively and probably would be again."

The spokesman also was unable to say how many employees would be needed, "since quite a bit of conversion" is necessary. He said several company engineers would leave today or tomorrow to study the availability and condition of equipment at the plant.

The spokesman said he thought the smelter's purchase by a private company would have no effect on world prices of tin, although he commented that ores coming onto world markets instead of going to the smelter for the Government stockpile might depress prices.

The tin smelter is the only one in the United States and the only one of substantial size in the Western Hemisphere. About 450 persons have been working there in recent months, although as many as 800 have been employed in the past.

A newspaper article about Wah Chang buying Texas Smelter, the only tin smelter in the U.S.



Kwon-cjan was just two months old when I returned from Macao after visiting Lien-ming. This picture was probably taken for Lien-ming. From left to right: Kwon-ping; me holding Kwon-cjan; R.H. and Minfong. I am smiling because Kwon-cjan had just chosen that moment to wet himself.



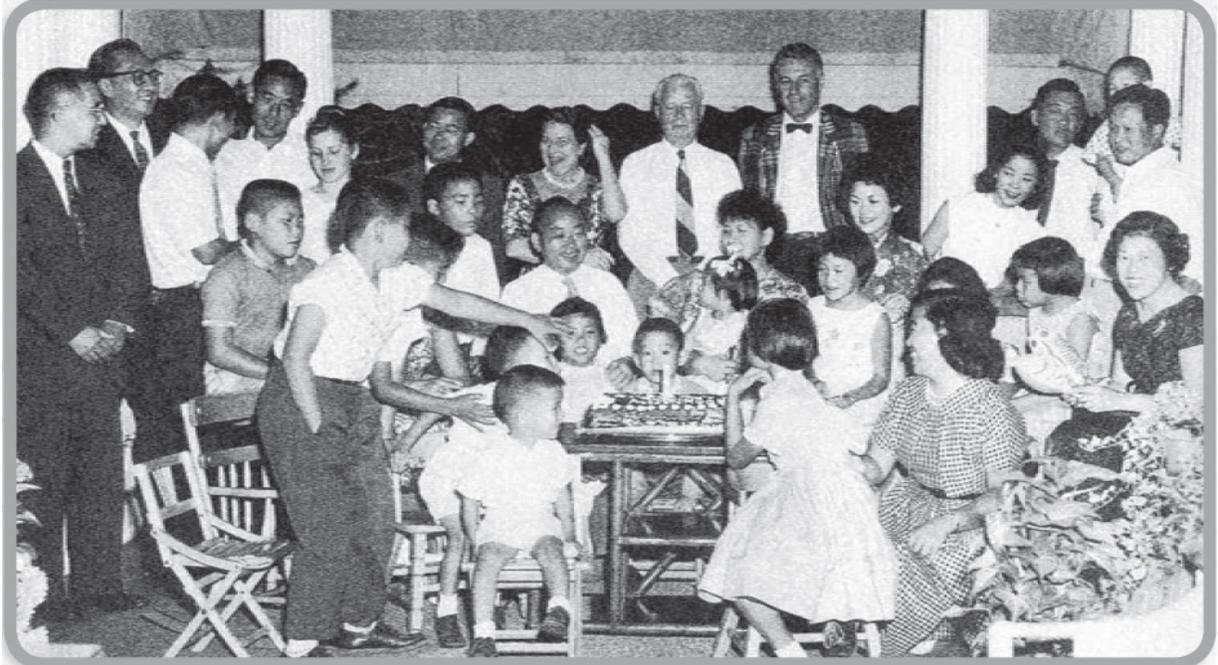
In Hong Kong, 1957, with Lucy, my Fourteenth Aunt, and my three children. Lucy used to be a college beauty and loved to be photographed.



Under Lucy's influence, I had a photo taken alone in 1957.



My father, surrounded by five of his daughters at our second reunion. Front row (kneeling): I am on the left and Madeline is on the right. Back row (standing): Mildred, my father, Marie and Marjorie.

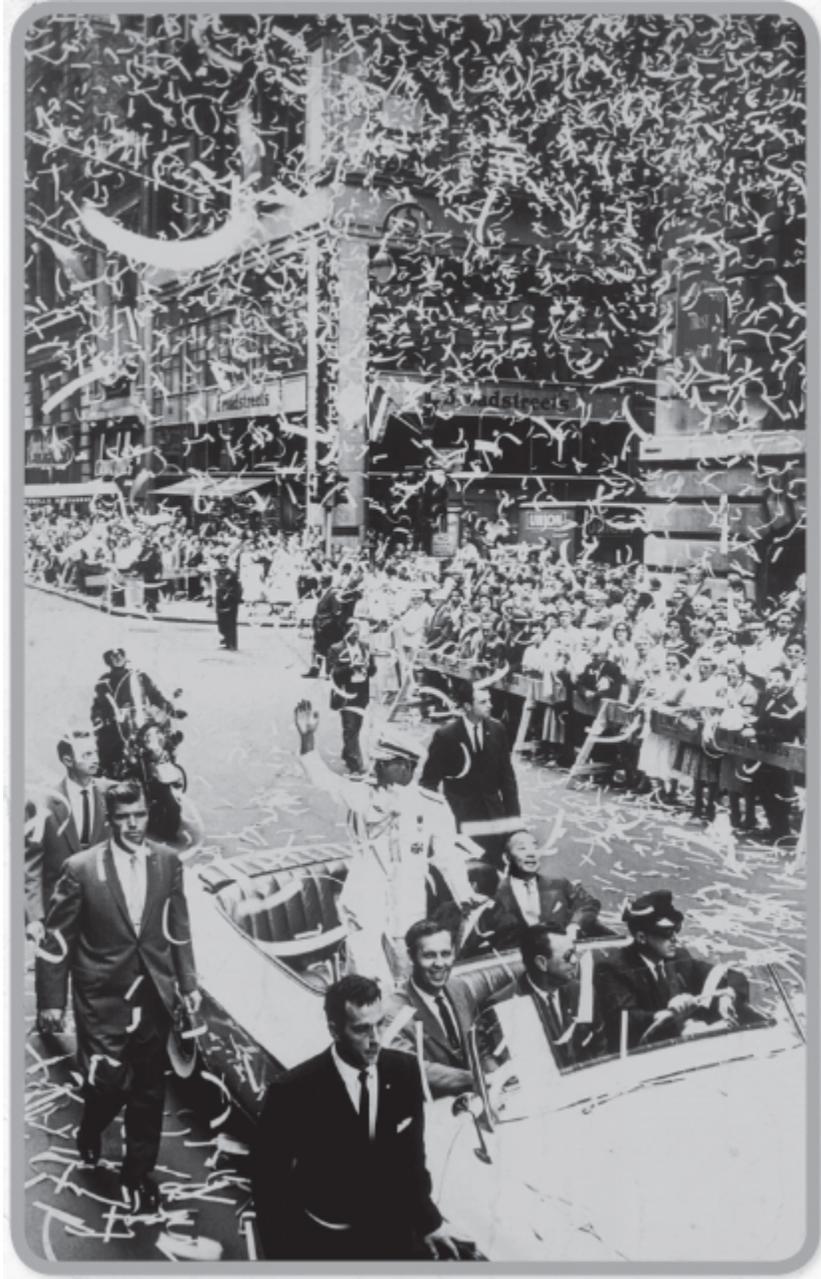


The second family reunion. Except for my father and Grace who are the two sitting, all of the family are standing or kneeling.

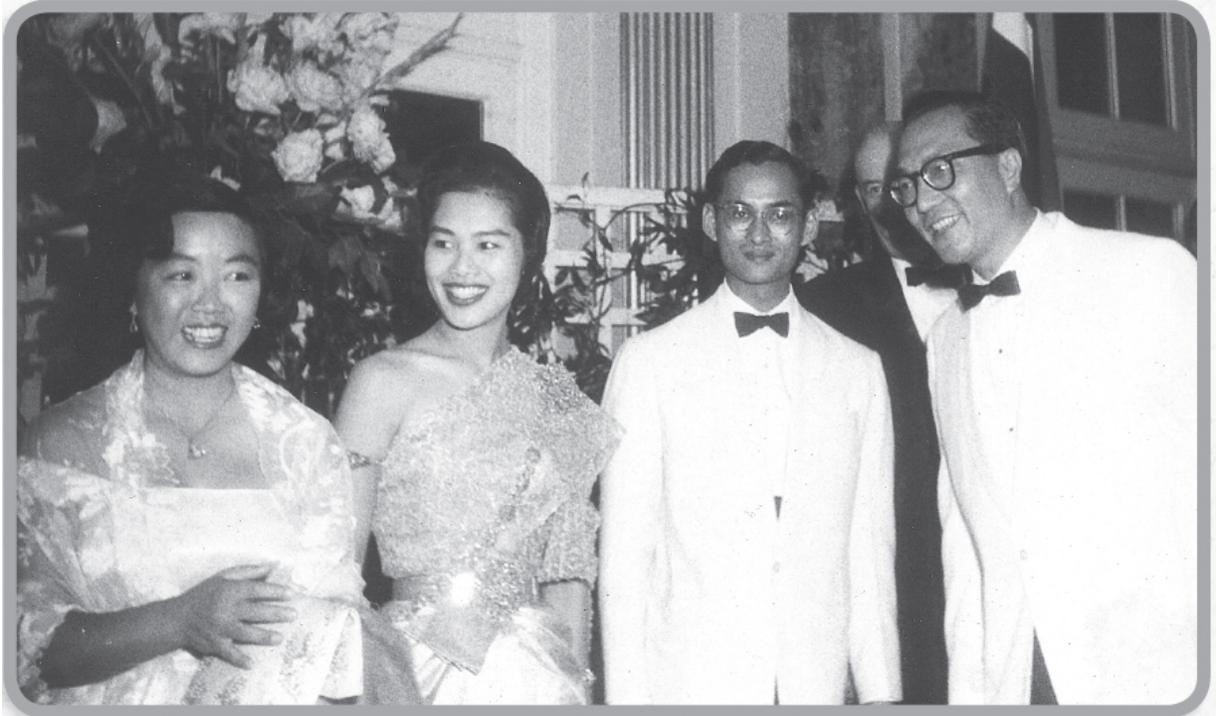
The girl my father is holding is Minfong; on her left is Kwon-cjan and the boy pointing his finger at Minfong is Kwon-ping.



1958, the second reunion at N.Y.C. Standing in the middle in a dark suit is my father and on his left is Grace. Standing around them are children, grandchildren, nephews, nieces, and in-laws. Kwon-ping and Kwon-cjan are just next to my father; on his right, Minfong is third from Kwon-ping's right, with her hands folded. I am at the far right corner, in a checked dress and R.H. Ho is right behind me. The rest are too many to identify.



1960. A ticker tape parade down Wall Street in N.Y.C. In the car, the King of Thailand is standing and waving. On his left, my father, K.C. Li, is sitting and watching the parade.



1960. With my father's blessing, my husband R.H. Ho and I got ourselves into a picture with the King and Queen of Thailand! at a cocktail reception.



1967, five years after my father passed away. A family photo taken at the Singapore Embassy after R.H. Ho was appointed Ambassador to Thailand. From left to right: ten-year-old Kwon-cjan, sixteen-year-old Minfong, fifty-year-old R.H., forty-four-year-old me, and fifteen-year-old Kwon-ping.

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- 1 Autumn-Water of Letter Writing (秋水轩尺牘). A compilation of letters which are so beautifully written that both children and adults use them as a guide to letter-writing.
 - 2 Wu Ze-tian (武则天). The only Empress in Chinese history that ruled in her own name, and she was a very capable Empress. This proclamation was written for Xu Jing-ye (徐敬业) who raised an army to revolt against her, detailing all her supposed crimes. The uprising lasted only a few months, but this proclamation was read by successive generations because it had such a compelling style – concise and yet poetic.
 - 3 Lu Bin-wang (骆宾王). Tang Dynasty essayist (640-?). After Empress Wu Ze-tian read his proclamation of her guilt, she admired his talent and said to her prime minister: “How was it that you didn’t use this man?” Lu Bin-wang died unknown in exile.
 - 4 “A dog farting.” (狗屁.) A common saying which means to sneer at words that are as unsavory as a dog farting.



THE FOURTH TIME I MET MY FATHER WAS WHEN HE CAME BACK TO China in 1935. I was about twelve. Fifth Uncle sent me word that I was wanted in the hotel room where my father was staying. His American wife was probably with him, I thought, but no one said anything about her. I was then studying at Nanyang Middle School which had no girls' dormitory, so I had to board in my aunt Man-yi's house which was near the Nanyang campus. When I received the message I didn't want to go, but in the end, curiosity got the better of me.

I went straight from my school to the hotel and found a woman waiting for me and speaking a language I did not understand.¹ I guessed she must be "the Cantonese woman" my family referred to, but since I didn't know how to address her, I simply said nothing. She politely invited me for tea and cakes. Not long after, my father came in and said something to her. Then he took me to dinner somewhere.

The two of us, one old and one young, practically strangers, started to dine. I suppose my father was no more than in his forties, but to me, he seemed very old. I wasn't shy but I was reluctant to talk, thus I just sat there silently as he ordered the food, nodding whenever he asked me whether I liked the food or not. After a while, however, I was back to my usual talkative self as I found our new surroundings so strange that I had to ask questions. One question led to another and before long, we were in a conversation. I don't remember what we talked about, but I am sure that neither of us spoke of Mama, as if there was some mutual understanding between us.

When the food was served, he began to ask about my school, such as what my favorite subjects, were, etc. That was exactly what I liked to talk about because I knew I was not doing too badly in my courses. I started to discuss the pros and the cons of every subject as if I was the Minister of Education fielding questions from the press. After I had criticized all the subjects, he asked me what my favorite sport was, and I said swimming. He asked what sort of books I liked, and I said anything which I didn't need to take an examination in, but I added, after some hesitation, especially historical novels such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. He said he too

loved the book, and then we debated who in the book were the most worthy warriors. We talked cheerfully and at length about our favorite heroes until it was time for him to send me back.

In the car, he continued to ask me questions such as what my favorite song was. When I said: *Man Jiang Hong*², he laughed and said “Aha, that is my favorite too.” Then he began singing it. Of course I didn’t wish to be left behind, so I joined in. There we were, the two of us singing loudly and spiritedly until our lungs were about to explode. After we had finished our singing together, he said he regretted that he did not bring his flute along with him, otherwise he could play his flute to accompany my singing. Of course that made me extremely happy because, at home, I was always singing *Man Jiang Hong*, even when brushing my teeth, and Mama would tease me and say: “Don’t you know anything else?” But she never sang along with me, thus to have my father singing alongside made me feel as if life had a great deal of zest.

When we neared Man-yi’s home, my father stopped at a fruit-seller and bought me different kinds of fruits, all of which were the kind I normally wish I could eat but couldn’t afford to buy, such as mangoes and cherries. I was so happy that I forgot my hatred of him. After saying goodbye at Man-yi’s house, he left. As I walked into the house, holding my armful of delicious fruits, an unspeakable sense of melancholy and forlornness fell upon me.

For days afterwards, I wondered why my father had been so agreeable to me. Was he just trying to bribe me? But why should he bribe me? What did I have that he could possibly want? When I realized that there was nothing he could want that I could possibly offer him, I felt like a traveler in a desert who had just seen a mirage.

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- 1 Actually Grace knew both English and Cantonese. I later learned both of these languages but at that time, I didn't know either of them.
 - 2 *Man Jiang Hong* (满江红). A poem by Yue Fei (岳飞1103–1141), the great warrior of Sung Dynasty, it was later made into a song and became one of the most popular songs during the war years of the 1930s.



A YEAR LATER, IN 1936, I BRIEFLY SAW MY FATHER FOR THE fifth time. I understand from family gossip that he had come back to China because the Nationalist government wanted him to be a Minister or something, but I was also told that, after he conferred with Fifth Uncle for a few days, he changed his mind about the job and went back to America.

Of course I didn't know anything about that maneuvering. All I knew was that we were later all told to wait at the dock for his arrival from America. Since large ocean liners in those days could not berth at the Bund, all the passengers had to be ferried by small boats to where we stood waiting. As we waited and waited, we heard that some big-shots had sent a special envoy to pick up my father, so we had nothing to do but to wait some more. Finally, the boat came into view, and my father, smiling for all the world to see, came down the gang-plank, and was seen to give every sailor on the boat an envelope as a tip. I had no idea where Lien-yan got his information, but he whispered to me that each envelope contained one thousand U.S. dollars! It was all we could do to gulp down our envy.

When my father had said his hellos and goodbyes to all the friends who had come to greet him, he led us to the hotel where he was staying. There were six or seven of us cousins, and he talked to us about how China was facing a national crisis. I was thirteen and at the height of my patriotic fervor, so I impatiently grumbled to myself: "Heck. I don't need you to tell me all this." As a result, I did not pay him much attention.

Then he changed tack and told us that in these times of crisis, we must all be prepared to take care of ourselves in case war separated us from our family. I sat up and listened. Therefore, he wanted to give us each some cash which we must hide, as soon as we reached home, by sewing it in the hem of our clothes. It was of utmost importance that we should never reveal the cash to any strangers.

Lien-yan and I looked at each other. We knew what the other was thinking. If he gave the sailors one thousand dollars each, how much was he going to give us to save our lives in case of emergency? If not a thousand, at least it would be five hundred? Or, three hundred? One hundred? Our palms got sweaty as we waited.

He gave us each five U.S. dollars.

Even today, I couldn't figure out why he gave us only five dollars. Was it because, after he had tipped the sailors, he had no more cash on hand? Or did he think that as refugees running for dear life, we would not get hungry and therefore had no need for food?

Solemnly, we each took our five dollars, a single piece of green paper, and left his hotel, not knowing whether we should laugh or cry. Not long afterwards, I heard he went to Nanking and then back to the United States.

I never saw my father again, at least not in China.



THE FOLLOWING YEAR WAS 1937, THE YEAR EVERYTHING HAPPENED.

That was the summer Lien-ming found my father's letters under Mama's bed. That was the summer we all assembled in Guling for our vacation. And that was the summer the war started on July 7 at Marco Polo Bridge.

From that summer onwards, our lives were never the same. We never again saw our house at Bao Ding Road. We learned only after the war ended that it had been occupied by Japanese soldiers and that it was burned to the ground when they left. All our childhood photos, toys, books, clothes ... were now ashes. Even our beautiful villa deep in the mountains of Guling, where we vacationed for many years, was burned by the Japanese invaders after we left. My cherished pine pavilion and my beloved little pool where I stored all my pebbles were no more.

When the war made it impossible for us to return to Shanghai, we had no home, and so we had to make a home anywhere we could. Fifth Uncle and Aunt and their son Xin-pei were taken by their eldest daughter De-jie to Hong Kong. Eighth Uncle and his wife thought Hangzhou would be safe so they went there. The rest of us also left Guling for Changsha, not because Changsha was where our forefathers had come from, but because practically all the good schools in Shanghai had moved to Changsha during this emergency. First it was Lien-ming and Xing-jie whose school, the Shanghai Medical School, borrowed the facilities of Xiangya Hospital¹ in Changsha. Then Lien-jun and Lien-yan found places in Mingde², and I went to Mama's alma mater Zhounan³. Of the older generation, only Mama stayed behind in Changsha to look after us.

I was not very happy at Zhounan. First, I could not easily forget my old pals in Shanghai, and, in the second place, my new schoolmates rather awed me. They were a serious lot. They did not talk, they made speeches. They did not joke and laugh, they only wanted to be patriotic. They petitioned the government to let us students fight the Japanese. Finally the government was forced to stop our lessons and proclaim that all students would be Civil Defenders. As such, we all wore army uniforms and had to undergo some months of training before we were sent to the countryside to teach the

villagers the so-called “Scorch the land” strategy⁴. I realized only in retrospect that what the government really wanted to do was disperse us so that we would not be caught in the city in case the enemy came, but we did not know their motive then and went to our training with gusto.

One day, my two new friends from Zhounan, Song-qin and Jialian, informed me that the New Fourth Army was recruiting new soldiers. At that time, the Nationalist Party and the Communists had just agreed to cooperate, and in the eyes of us students, the New Fourth was a ‘good’ army. Thus we three were all anxious to try and be recruited for it. We got hold of the application forms and filled in our names, ages, and other particulars. But on the day of the examination, when we were only fifty yards from the entrance, Jialian suddenly pointed to the regulations posted on the wall, which stated that all applicants had to be at least seventeen years of age.

My friends were seventeen, but I was not yet fifteen. Jia-lian looked at me and laughed: “It seems you are out.” I turned toward Song-qin and she too was giggling.

We were then about twenty feet from the entrance of the examination hall. Why should I give up at this very last minute? I took out a pen and added a stroke on the “ten” of the Chinese characters “ten-five,” to make it “twenty-five”⁵, and handed my form to the man who was collecting them. He was so busy that he did not bother to look at me, but only waved me on.

Since I knew then it was impossible for me to be accepted, I felt very relaxed and light-hearted, and looked with amusement over all the hopeful applicants wondering what chances they had. According to the news the next day, there were two thousand of us, but I didn’t see so many applicants in the hall, nor did I find the hall so huge as to contain them all. They all sat quietly, and I did the same.

The first test was composition. The subject was “My Life.” I swore when I saw it. What rubbish that was! With so many glorious things I could talk about, they want to know about my life? What was there in my life that I could talk about?

Then I recollected that I had put down my age in the application form as twenty-five. Alright, I would give them the life history of a twenty-five-year old woman! So I used all that I remembered from the novels I had read. I wrote that I was an orphan and had been sold by my uncle to be a

child-bride⁶, of how I was cruelly mistreated by my mother-in-law, and how I ran away after my boy-husband's death, only to be tricked into working in a brothel where I was forced into being the seventh concubine of an illiterate army general, who, in order that he could boast to his fellow generals that he owned a student as his concubine, dispatched me off to study at Zhounan School. I also described how I had to work day and night at my studies so I could be an apt candidate for the Great Revolution... I might have elaborated more if the bell didn't ring. By the time I exited the hall, I was laughing at the prank I had played. I suppose I did inherit some of my father's shameless tendency of telling tall tales.

The next day a physical check-up was scheduled, followed by an oral test. Song-qin said: "The minute they see you, they'll know you aren't twenty-five, so you'd better not go." I insisted that since I had asked the school for two days' leave, I might as well make use of it. Besides, I said, I had no intention of taking the physical check-up. I merely wanted to keep them company and have some fun.

When I heard the check-up was to be done at Xiangya Hospital, I hesitated a bit, because Xiangya was where Lien-ming's school had relocated and I might run into Lien-ming who would spoil my fun. But then I remembered that the hospital was usually so crowded that, in the past, I had failed to find Lien-ming even when I looked for her. In that case, the chance of meeting her was very slight. I decided to risk it.

Just as the proverb says, "It's easy to avoid the emperor but difficult not to be caught by his eunuch." I did not meet Lien-ming, but a nurse who knew her saw me. She must have informed Lien-ming because Lien-ming came to see me immediately and dragged me out from the line of waiting applicants. She took me home and insisted that Mama punish me for trying to join the army.

It was much easier to deal with Mama than with Lien-ming. I said: "I was merely having some fun. They only wanted those who were seventeen and above, so I said I was twenty-five just to see if I could pass their test. I even concocted a wild story for that purpose. That should prove I had no intention of joining the army."

Mama frowned as she listened to my story. At the end of it, even though she scolded me for my naughtiness, she smiled. I thought the tempest had

died down. I did not dream that the little nonsensical essay I wrote for the New Fourth Army would get me into more trouble.

Two weeks after the entrance examination, the newspaper listed the names of all the successful applicants for the New Fourth Army. Song-qin and Jia-lian were both on the list, which was not surprising, since they were talented. What was surprising was that I too was included. The three of us could not think of a good reason why I too was admitted when I wrote only that one absurd composition and hadn't even attended the physical check-up or the oral test.

But soon the answer came in the shape of our dean, who sent for me to see him at his office. I was nervous but he was full of smiles. He told me that someone at the New Fourth Army had specially asked him to convey a message to me, telling me I must not hesitate but must take this opportunity to be a new woman because, said his informer, "This girl has gone through so much hardship that she will prove useful to our revolution."

I stuttered: "But... but... I didn't even... take the physical..."

He assured me. "They knew your circumstances and understood there were obstacles to prevent you from taking the other two tests. That is why you must stand up and..." I was so grateful for the trust the New Fourth Army had shown me that tears came to my eyes. I promised to join right away.

The minute I walked out of the dean's office, I was accosted by Lien-ming because she and Mama had both read the newspapers. She dragged me home where I saw Mama resting on her bed with pillows propped up behind her. A little tin can lined with crude yellow paper lay by her side, a sure sign she was having another of her asthma attacks. "Kneel!" said a ferocious Lien-ming, "and confess what you have been up to."

I was always afraid of Lien-ming so I was about to kneel when Mama patted her bed, signaling for me to sit next to her. I quickly stole a glance at Lien-ming, and then sat down. "I don't have anything to confess," I muttered, "because I didn't go back on my promise about joining the army. It's they who want me."

"Why would they want you?" said Lien-ming. "You must have done something crazy."

"Heaven knows I haven't." Then I told them every encouraging word the dean had said of me, including how I could be useful to the Revolution.

“What nonsense,” spat Lien-ming. “You useful to the Revolution? It’s only because they took your word for it, that you are twenty-five! If they know you are just a kid not yet dry behind your ears, they will throw you out before you can yell ‘Mama!’”

“Not necessarily,” I shouted back. “You don’t have the ability to judge people, but they do. They can see how I am full of possibilities!”

Mama started to have a coughing fit. We both looked at her in alarm. When her cough slowed down a bit, she said, “Don’t fight with each other. You said the dean told you to join. When will that be?”

“He said the day after tomorrow.”

“That settles it. You’ll stay home and not go to school until they have left.”

“No, I promised that I will go with them.”

As soon as I said that, Lien-ming jumped up angrily, and Mama fell backward. I thought she had fainted so I rushed forward to help, but Lien-ming pushed me away while yelling: “Go away! Haven’t you harmed her enough?”

But Mama didn’t faint. She had only lost her strength and was in a crumpled heap. She looked at me and started to cough again. Lien-ming shouted at me: “Quick. Make it clear to her that you were only joking.”

I hesitated for a second. Then I forced myself to tell the truth. “I wasn’t joking. I really promised.”

Lien-ming snorted: “Who are you to make promises? Any so-called promise by a little unripe onion like you doesn’t count.”

“Why doesn’t my promise count? You are always asking me to promise you this and promise you that, and I have been true to all my promises, haven’t I? So why can’t I make promises this time?”

Mama raised her hand. We had to quieten down and listen. She coughed in between her every word: “Of course you can make promises, but sometimes one’s promise can be right and sometimes it can be wrong. If it is wrong, then the promise should be corrected.”

“I promised to save my country. What’s wrong with that?”

“Saving one’s country is not wrong,” Mama continued. “But it also depends on who is saving it and under what circumstances it is saved. You are young, you’ve had no training, you know nothing about the world, and you can’t even take care of yourself. If you should join any army, you

would only be a burden to others. Your joining is of no benefit to your country. That is why your promise to join is wrong and can be honorably withdrawn.”

“How am I too young?” I protested. “Since I study in the same class with the seventeen-year-olds, it means I am as capable as they are, so if they can join the army, so can I.”

Mama shook her head. “Studying is not the same as soldiering. Studying needs only intellect, but soldiering needs more. It needs the physical ability to combat all sorts of adverse conditions which you do not even know exist.”

“But I do.”

Lien-ming laughed. “If Mama says you don’t, then you don’t.”

I turned around and looked at Lien-ming. “If I don’t try, how will anyone know whether I do or don’t.”

“Nonsense!” said Lien-ming. “You can’t just ‘try’ to be a soldier. If you don’t study well, the worst that can happen is you’ll be kept back one year, or be kicked out of school, but if you should fail as a soldier, it means you will lose your precious fifteen-year-old life.”

“But the New Fourth Army will train me. I’ll only be sent to the battlefield after I’ve been trained. Look at the Long March, didn’t they have little comrades?”

Lien-ming was about to say more when Mama cast her blanket aside and struggled to get up from her bed. Both Lien-ming and I hurried to help, but she pushed us aside with a strength I did not know she had. She went to her bureau while continuously coughing and wheezing and puffing. Then she opened her drawer and took out a large kerchief and a few items of clothing. Lien-ming and I didn’t know what she was going to do. We could only stare at her dumbly.

Finally, she put her little pile of pants, tunics and socks on to the big kerchief and knotted its ends. Then, like the hero in the classical novels, she flung the wrapped kerchief over her shoulder and said to me, “Well, let’s go. I’ll follow you wherever you go.”

“Mama, don’t be silly,” I said. “How can you go with me? I’m going to the army to be a soldier.”

Mama continued her coughing and puffing: “I know you are joining the army. That’s why I am going with you. It’s your duty to save your country.

And it is my duty as your mother to care for you. No law in any country can deny a mother that duty when her daughter is still a minor. Therefore, I'll go wherever you go. Say no more. Let's go."

Lien-ming and I both shouted our protests. Mama did not answer us. She just stood at the door, coughing and wheezing, waiting for me to make a move. Lien-ming guessed Mama's intention, so she sank into a chair and sighed: "You two fight. It's beyond my control."

Needless to say, I lost this battle.

After a few days, the deadline for joining the New Fourth Army passed and I was allowed by my mother to go back to school. By then, Jia-lian had gone with the Army, but Song-qin was said to have been forced by her sister to stay home until she was taken to Chongqing. I never saw either one of them again.

Now that I am old and nearly seventy years have passed, I often smile when I think of Mama, with her little cloth-bundle over her shoulder, standing almost erect by the door, waiting to march into war, and I wonder where Mama got this idea of blackmail from? She must have known I would never allow her to go with me, so she check-mated me. But at the same time, she also knew I had a stubborn streak. What if I had called her bluff, and said "Mama, I'm going, it's no use blackmailing me." Would she really go with me and be a Mama-soldier?

Her pretend decision to leave with me could have caused her some danger. Could it be said that she was brave? Could it be said that she was quick in making decisions? Whatever it was, Mama's strategy decided my fate for the years to come.

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- 1 Xiangya Hospital (湘雅医学院). Shanghai Medical School, where Lien-ming studied in, borrowed the grounds of this hospital for emergency use during the war.
 - 2 Mingde (明德). A school for boys.
 - 3 Zhounan (周南). A school for girls. The names of both Mingde and Zhounan were taken from quotations from the book *Si Jing* (诗经).
 - 4 “Scorch the land strategy.” (坚壁清野.) A classical war strategy used in China to trap enemies into no-man’s land. The Russians also did it to trap Napoleon.
 - 5 The character for “ten” (十) in Chinese is a simple cross. When there is a number after it, say a “five,” the two characters together mean “fifteen.” For “twenty,” another vertical stroke is added to the horizontal bar of the “ten,” so that it looks like a double cross. When this double cross has a “five” after it, the two characters mean “twenty-five.”
 - 6 Child-bride (童养媳). The peasants in China have a custom of arranging marriages between baby boys and girls aged ten years or more, so that the older girls can take care of their in-laws, as well as their infant husbands. Such a girl is called a child-bride. When her husband grows to maturity, she is often then too old for him and past her child-bearing age. Her usefulness is then over and she is cast aside.



WITH THE DEPARTURE OF THE NEW FOURTH ARMY, I MISSED MY chance of becoming a member of the great Communist Party. I felt deprived but I had no time to indulge in regret, because the departure of the New Fourth Army was followed closely by a government order that we were to be dispersed to the countryside to carry out what we had been trained to do as civil defense workers.

My various cousins of the Li and Zhou families left Changsha one by one, while only I, as luck would have it, was told to go to the weaving factory at Yue Lu Mountain¹ supposedly to teach its workers. Because Yue Lu was right across the city of Changsha, all my friends were envious of me, saying that although it was only a small town, it had all the advantages of being close to a city. They said that I could continue to go to my favorite restaurants, theaters and, most importantly of all, my home, whereas they had to live in mud huts and eat vegetable roots and worm-ridden rice. I didn't pay much attention to their complaints, but I was very happy, for I thought, by going to the weaving factory, I would have a chance to meet the heroines in all the leftist novels I had been reading.

Thus, seven or eight colleagues of mine assembled in the factory. The management had provided us with a big house to live in and an even bigger one for our classrooms, which made us feel, more than ever, how useful we could be, and very anxious to do well. But after a while, we found the management was only helping us to enjoy ourselves. They had no intention of letting us get close to their workers. Although we didn't know exactly why, our guess was that they simply didn't want any interference from a bunch of youngsters who thought highly of themselves. Some of us still tried to work, to teach some of the workers that the management had specially sent us, but most of us were discouraged. One of my colleagues, Li Yuan-fang², who later came to Singapore and taught at Nanyang Middle School in the seventies, recalled how I whiled away the time by teaching her and some of her friends to play bridge. I can't recall the bridge games, but I can still remember how despondent we had all felt.

It was about this time that the Japanese bombers began their attack on Changsha. Since we all had taken a dislike to the management on principle,

we also disliked the air-shelter they had provided for us. Instead of taking shelter, we would all climb to the top of the hill and lie face-up to see how the bombs were released. Each time a bomb dropped, some place in Changsha would burst into flames and smoke, but we couldn't tell the exact spot the bomb had struck and would anxiously ask one another. Not until we each went back to our homes would we know that our families had been spared.

After the bombing of Changsha had gone on for several weeks and we had been on top of the hill some twenty times, with a few of the bombs sometimes dropping right into the river near where we were lying, I went home on a Saturday afternoon with a book I had borrowed from a boy in our group. It was his copy of *History of the Chinese Communist Party* by Chen Du-xiu³, a book he treasured because he said it was banned and had told me to be extra careful with it. I thought I would have time to read it on the coming Sunday. But as soon as I reached home, Mama said: "Pack your things. We're leaving tomorrow for Hong Kong."

I had known that ever since Fifth Uncle had gone to Hong Kong, he had been trying to persuade Mama to join him there, but Mama had stayed because she wanted to take care of us, the younger generation, especially me. Now that Lien-ming had left for Chongqing, and Lien-yan and the other cousins had all gone to their civil defense jobs in the country, she only had me to worry about.

However, the successive bombings in the last months had made her nervous. She had already talked to me several times about going to Hong Kong to join Fifth Uncle, but I had pointedly refused, protesting that I loved my country and wished to live or die in it.

Now that she brought up the subject of leaving again, I firmly said "no" again, and talked about how I couldn't leave my comrades-in-arms, meaning my group at the factory, when the bombs might drop on them anytime. I wouldn't leave a sinking ship like a rat. Besides, I said, I still had a book which I had to return to its owner. My reasons seem childish today, but they were very real at the time.

I only remember I battled against Mama that whole afternoon and that whole night, but in the end, I lost the fight. In the early morning, entrusting a friend to return the book, I followed Mama to Hong Kong with a heart full of grievances. Why did I yield to her? Was it because I loved Mama? Or

was it that I had relied on her too much and had to obey her? Or, was it because she said we would take a flight and I was curious to know how flying would feel since I had never taken a plane before? I really had no idea why I did what I swore I didn't want to do.

That first plane I ever rode in my life did leave a very deep impression on me. I didn't know how big the plane was, but I remembered clearly it had two long rows of seats facing each other. The passengers sat across from one another, and in between us were our suitcases, strapped securely by ropes.

Thinking back, didn't it seem like the kind of plane used only by the military? Mama had told me that she had been given two tickets and, in my state of confusion at that time, I had assumed they were like tickets bought at a theater. Only many years later did I realize that army planes did not sell their seats. I also found out that, in 1937, there was no such thing as a commercial airline between Changsha and Hong Kong. In that case, what did Mama mean by "two tickets?" And where and whom did she get them from? She was a plain housewife, with no influence to speak of, and she wasn't so important that the government had to evacuate her. Then how was it, at a time when Changsha was under constant bombing, when many families of illustrious officials were wrangling for seats to fly to a safe haven, that Mama had secured her two tickets?

My family had only one person who had some influence with the government, and that person was my father. Only he could have asked for and been able to obtain two tickets.

But how did he know Mama and I needed the tickets? Did Fifth Uncle tell him about it, or did Mama? Now that I am in my old age and have enough time on my hands to think about the past, it is much too late to ask my father. He has been dead for a long time and I have no one to tell me what happened.

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- 1 Yue Lu Mountain (岳麓山). The same place my father lectured at before Lien-ming was born.
 - 2 Li Yuan-fang (李元芳). The only girl from my Changsha days who came to Singapore. How glad and surprised I was when I met her again, but unfortunately she passed on sometime later.
 - 3 Chen Du-xiu (陈独秀). An early party member of the communists. For reasons too complicated for me to comprehend, he was looked upon as an enemy of the people.



I ARRIVED IN HONG KONG IN THE SPRING OF 1938 AND STAYED UNTIL the summer of 1940, a period of almost two and a half years.

When I first came to Hong Kong, I felt that, being a Chinese, I should be in China with my compatriots at our time of national crisis, and my escaping to the British Colony was an act of treachery, even less honorable than that of a rat, because the rat was certain the ship was sinking whereas I did not feel my country was losing the battle. As a result, I hated myself. As time went on, I realized that I could still go back to China, to places like Chongqing and Chengdu¹, for example, if only I could leave Hong Kong. Therefore I hated Hong Kong just as much as I hated myself.

I was sent to study in a so-called Chinese school for girls with the presumptuous name of Xinan². Its textbooks were in Chinese but the teaching language was Cantonese. I really didn't find Cantonese too difficult to learn, but I pretended not to understand it to spite my classmates, not that they cared whether I talked to them or not. All they talked about, it seemed, was their favorite Cantonese opera actors and actresses, while I wanted to discuss affairs of the world. Naturally, we had nothing in common. I spoke only Mandarin to them, and they did not bother to listen to me at all. I was so used to being alone that I even took to lunching by myself in the nearest coffee shop, eating my lonely plate of fried rice with egg.

Luckily, the textbooks were in standardized Chinese so I could do my lessons without the assistance of my teachers or classmates, but the fact that I could teach myself only helped to accentuate my reputation as a haughty loner. However, a year later, there came another student whom I could befriend. She was also born in Shanghai, but was a Cantonese by parentage. Her father used to work in Shanghai but was now a manager of some Hong Kong bank. Her mother was an over-aged social butterfly, who demanded her daughter be 'dolled-up' at all times, whereas my friend, like me, used to be a political demonstrator in her schooldays in Shanghai and therefore disdained frivolous dressing up. She was always quoting the famous song about how "the women of Shang³ knew not the sorrow of losing their country." She complained more than once that her mother did not look a bit

like a mother. I laughed and ask: “Is there any particular way that a mother should look?”

She scratched her head and couldn't define it. After a long silence, she replied: “Well, like your mother.”

I said I didn't know what she was talking about. Mama was just Mama. There was no such thing as what she should or should not look like.

My friend paused for words. “Well,” she said, “my mother forces me to dress in the latest fashion and insisted that I take up ballroom dancing, much against my wishes. She doesn't care at all about what happens to China. But your mother lets you wear whatever you like, allows you to read whatever you want to read, is concerned with the direction you turn in your political beliefs, and discusses with you the war news, and

“What nonsense!” I could not help laughing.

She shrugged and said no more. The subject was dropped. But what she said at that time planted a seed in my mind even though I didn't think she made sense. Mama was just Mama. Did she work at being a mother?

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- 1 Chengdu (成都). A city in Sichuan (四川) province which is full of the history of old China and was the place where other Chinese universities moved to, to form the famous Xinan University which I wanted to attend.
 - 2 Xinan(西南), West South. The name of my school in Hong Kong. As the term “west-south” was used geographically for the area of Southwest of China, I thought it was rather presumptuous of our little school to use it as a name.
 - 3 Women of Shang (商女). This refers to a quotation from the poem that said that the “women of Shang know nothing about the pain of losing a country; they still sing happily from across the river.” (商女不知亡国恨，隔江犹唱後庭花.)



WHEN IT WAS TIME FOR METRICULATION, I WAS THE ONLY ONE IN my class to be admitted to both the Xinan United University¹ and Lingnan University². An old schoolmate wrote me from Shanghai to ask why I only loved schools with the word “nan” (南) in their names, and I replied with a little ditty:

身在南中不由己, 只得周南又西南,
有了西南还不够, 更想岭南再西南.

Translated, it reads: “When I studied in Nanyang, I was forced to leave for Zhounan, and later Xinan. Now I feel it is not enough to have finished with one Xinan, and I want to go to Lingnan then again to Xinan.” It was pure nonsense, but it did show that my ultimate goal was to go to Xinan United University in Chengdu.

There was one school I applied to that did not have “nan” in its name, and that was Hong Kong University, but I couldn’t pass its entrance examination. I was not at all surprised that I failed because my English was really very poor. What did surprise me was that I received a letter from Prof. Xu Di-shan³, who promised me an opening in his Chinese Department if I was willing to change my major from engineering to Chinese. I had to say no to him, as politely as I knew how, saying that I wanted to study science, not Chinese, so that I could save China. But such a kind letter from a complete stranger was so memorable that I could never forget it.

Xinan United University was my first choice, but I had a tough time with its entrance examination. When I went to take the examination, I found none of the subjects tough except mathematics, in which I didn’t know how to answer even one question. I looked at the other students who were taking the same test and saw them also groaning and scratching their heads. By then, that bull-temper of mine got the better of me, and I wrote aggressively on my paper: “You don’t want to know what we do know; you only asked us what we don’t know. That’s not fair. I will write down what I do know, to show you that we are not all the idiots you think we are.” And then I

proceeded to write down all the irrelevant mathematic equations I could think of.

When I came out of the hall, the others were all complaining how hard the test was. I was the only one smiling. I told the others that I had a good time scolding the schoolmasters, even at the expense of failing the test. That was why, when my name was listed among those who were admitted, I could not explain what happened. Was it because I wrote enough equations to prove I was not an idiot? Or was it because I scolded the school board so appropriately that their conscience was shamed and thus they felt obliged to let me pass? I never found out because I never had the opportunity to go to Xinan United University and ask the question personally.

The matriculation for Lingnan was easy. Lien-yan had by then come back from his civil defense job in Hunan and he took the same three tests with me. He failed at the other two universities but passed at Lingnan and was placed on the reserve list. He was later accepted as a regular student. I was not at all humble about it; in fact, I was very proud to have proven to Fifth Uncle that I, a mere girl, was a better student. Lucky for me Lien-yan was a tolerant brother. He never listened to my bragging, and only studied on stubbornly. When we went to the U.S. together, he took excellent care of me like a big brother should. I found out after years of association with him that, although he depended on his memory for his studies, he never forgot what he learned, unlike me, forgetting all I had learned as if my brain was a broken sieve.

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- 1 Xinan United University (西南联合大学). This was a university that was set up in Chengdu by six famous universities that had to evacuate from the war-torn areas of China. My husband, though I didn't know him at that time, studied and graduated from this university.
 - 2 Lingnan University (岭南大学). One of the best universities in Guangzhou (广州) that had to relocate to Hong Kong.
 - 3 Xu Di-shan (许地山). I did not know at the time I received his nice letter that he was the well-known writer with the pen name of Luo Hua-sheng (落花生).



I DID NOT WANT TO GO TO LINGNAN. WHAT I WANTED WAS TO GO to Chengdu and study at Xinan United, but Mama would not hear of it.

It was 1939 and I was sixteen. I felt I was fully capable of leaving home for my university career. Nearly every day I was having a fight with Mama. Fifth Uncle stood on her side, saying that since there were many universities where a patriot could go and study, there was no need for me to go specially to Chengdu.

Just then, some old schoolmates of mine from Shanghai who were going to China by way of Hong Kong invited me to join them. I of course said yes, but even though I argued with Mama that, since I now had traveling companions and she need not worry about me, she still said no. My friends left without me.

I made a scene and threatened to go to Chengdu on my own, but as it turned out, my knowledge of geography was poor and I was not even sure if the best way to get to China was by land or by sea. Worse than my ignorance was my lack of money. I couldn't buy any ticket for rail or for ship, never mind tuition fees and living expenses if and when I did reach Chengdu.

Weeks passed while I argued with Mama. And before I knew it, Lingnan was open for new students, so I enrolled, although most unwillingly.

At Lingnan, my major was chemistry. When I applied at the school, I had wanted to take engineering as my major, but Lingnan accepted me as a chemistry student. It didn't bother me because I figured that anything in the line of science would help me to build up China. But Fifth Uncle objected, insisting that I study history or literature, saying that my temperament was closer to these two subjects than to anything scientific.

I refused.

"I watched you growing up," he said. "Do you think I don't know what you're like?" He lectured me some more.

I lost my temper. I blurted out without thinking: "You object only because you don't think girls are capable of studying science! I'll prove to you that girls can do just as well as the boys, if not better."

Fifth Uncle, who had already suffered two strokes, needed a cane for support when he walked. Hearing me speaking so rudely, he raised his cane as if to strike me. I should have known that he didn't really mean to hit me, and that, even if he did hit me, it wouldn't hurt much since he was a feeble old man, but I was so mad that I thoughtlessly grabbed his cane and flung it aside.

He shouted: "What? You dare to raise your hand against me?"

I did not trust myself to answer him, so I simply ran away. I did not go home that whole day for fear he would punish me. But when I finally sneaked home, he seemed to have forgotten all about the incident and only told me to eat my dinner quickly before it got cold.

After I left Hong Kong in 1940, I never saw Fifth Uncle again. When I learned of his death while I was at M.I.T.¹ and on the verge of quitting chemistry for literature, I thought my heart would break. How could I ever repay an uncle who loved me, cared for me, and who understood me even more than I knew myself?

During our first-year courses at Lingnan we studied basic subjects such as Chinese, English, mathematics, physics and chemistry, but we had a difficult time because Lingnan had no campus of its own and we had to borrow that of Hong Kong University. Thus we could only have our lessons when the classrooms were vacant. This shortage of rooms was especially hard on us science students because we had our laboratory work to finish. Very often we had to work till later than 10pm. Since my home was in Kowloon, a two- to four-hour ride away on buses and ferries, I usually reached home long after midnight. Then, the next morning, I had to rush to the library to compete for reference books. All these meant that if I wanted to study quietly by myself, I had to look for some quiet corner on a campus that had to serve two universities, and that was not easy.

It was all very tiresome but I somehow survived it. My first year at Lingnan finally ended, and it was time for me to do battle with Mama again about going to Chengdu.

Since the enrolment for Xinan University was good for two successive years after passing the entrance examination, I said to Mama that I had to make use of it this second time. "I want go to China to join the other Chinese students," I screamed, "instead of staying in this British colony. I

cannot study in peace while my country is being burned and ravaged. I must go!”

Mama did not argue with me; she had not forgotten her old tactics. One day when I came home after a busy day of exploring with my friends all the possible ways of going to Chengdu, she calmly told me: “I’ve already packed your trunks. Tomorrow, you’ll go to the U.S. consulate with your Fourteenth Uncle to get the visa.”

I was flabbergasted. I had made no preparation for leaving, not even for Chengdu. “Don’t be funny, Mama. What trunks?”

Mama pointed at the two trunks in her room. They were heavy ones with metal corners. In them were neat piles of *qipao*, underwear, socks, and all kinds of clothing, including even several pairs of shoes. There was enough of everything and it would take ten years to wear them out! There were also my favorite books, all neatly stacked in piles. I was speechless.

“Your father wrote and he wants you to go to America for school,” Mama continued. To my surprise, she had mentioned my father. “Well, I think it’s a good idea, at least it’s a better one than having you killed by Japanese bombs in Chengdu! Your sister is already under daily bombardment in Chongqing, so I think I have done my patriotic duty in giving one of my two daughters to the service of my country, therefore I have no intention of losing the other. You’d better listen to me and go. Lien-yan will go with you too.”

“No! I won’t go.”

“Your father said you were to go.”

“I don’t have to listen to him,” I yelled. “I’m not a dog; I won’t go wherever his finger points! Tell him that the place I want to go is Chengdu, not America. Tell him to pay my fare for Chengdu!”

“Don’t be childish,” Mama said wearily. “I have been busy the last few days, preparing for this trip. Look, here is your ticket for the steamer. It will sail next week. After you get your visa tomorrow, you can leave.”

“I don’t even have a passport,” I said, clinging on to any excuse.

“I sent for the forms and had them filled out for you. The Chinese Consulate has approved it and here it is.” She opened a drawer and took out a little greenish book and handed it to me.

I flung the book on the floor. I couldn’t contain my temper any longer and exploded. “You and my father have thought of everything, but both of

you have forgotten me! What do you take me for? I'm not a cat or a dog or a sheep! I don't go anywhere unless I want to. I'm not going anywhere just because you say so. What I want is to go to Chengdu. You know that and you'd better tell him that!"

Mama softened. She said coaxingly: "I know you want to go to Chengdu to serve your country, but what makes you think you cannot do the same in America? What you should do now is to save your life so you can complete your studies, and then you can come back and give your country what you've learned abroad. What's wrong with that?"

"It's not the same."

"Why isn't it the same? At your age, your duty is to study. After you have finished your studies, you can do anything you wish, but where you should go now is for your studies."

"It is not! I don't care. I don't want to go to America!"

"What's wrong with America? Others are fighting to get there."

"But..." I could not tell her why, so I went back to my past grievance. "Why do you always do things behind my back? It was like this when you forced me to leave Changsha. It was so mean..."

"Don't I know you?" Mama smiled. "If I had told you earlier of my plan, you would have run away."

"I wish I knew how to leave, then I would be gone by now!" I continued to argue, even resorting to pleading, but Mama would not relent. The next morning, my Fourteenth Uncle came to take me to the American consulate. Seeing it was the uncle I usually didn't dare to argue with, I sullenly obeyed. At the consulate, he seemed to be on good terms with the Consul General. They chatted for a while, and then my Fourteenth Uncle took me to a room outside the office, to wait for my visa.

While waiting, I felt so miserable that tears came to my eyes. Once I started, the tears came gushing out. Fourteenth Uncle was alarmed and kept on asking me why I was crying. His concern only made me weep even more. I could only shake my head to his comforting words.

He thought he knew the answer and said laughingly: "You are only going to America. That's nothing to weep about. Look, it's not so far away and you shall come back. Didn't I also come back after my studies there? Did I die from the experience? As all the heroes say in the novels, if one

doesn't die, then there is nothing else to be afraid of. You know that, don't you?"

"I'm not afraid to go," I said in between sobs, and putting the emphasis on the word "afraid." "I just don't want to go."

"Why not? Is it because you still want to go to Chengdu?" I nodded. He then said: "What a silly girl you are! Do you know how dangerous Chengdu is? It is because it's dangerous that your parents don't want you to go there. Your father wants you to go to America to study. Studying is studying no matter where you go. What is the difference between studying in America and in Chengdu except one place is safe and the other is dangerous?"

"Of course there is a difference!" I sobbed.

"I know what you are going to say. But do you know the government actually wants the students to go to America? One student more in America means one more precious life is saved from the bombs. The only pity is that the government doesn't have enough money to send more abroad. Now that your father is paying for you to go, you're saving money for the government. Isn't that also serving your country?"

Listening to him, I wept even more. He did not know what else to do so he just hugged me and let me cry over his shoulder. I felt him lightly tapping me. I could not hold my unhappiness any longer and blurted out: "Because of my father, I don't want to go."

"Why is that?" he pushed me away from his arms so he could look at me.

"I don't want to have a father like him!"

Suddenly, the truth dawned on him. He pulled me closer and said softly: "Alright, we don't want him and we shan't have him. How about taking me for a father? You will go to America for my sake, won't you?"

I thought for a while about how wonderful it would be if I could have a father like him. Slowly I stopped my sobbing.

Four days later, Lien-yan and I boarded the freighter.

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- 1 M. I. T. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a famous school for science. I never liked to say its full name. Nobody I know likes to pronounce all the long words.



ON THE DAY WE LEFT HONG KONG, IT WAS FOURTEENTH UNCLE who came to fetch Lien-yan and me and take us to the ship. The rest of the family, Fifth Uncle, Fifth Aunt and Mama only saw us to the door. With no fuss, we left.

I went on board dazed and confused, feeling not quite myself. Fourteenth Uncle introduced us to the Captain, and hugged me once more, telling me to behave myself and not waste time on idle thoughts. He also told me to write him often, whether or not I had anything important to say. Then he went ashore and disappeared into the crowd.

I stood on the deck looking at the sea. Not until the ship set sail did I realize that it was the first time since the September 18, 1931 incident when we stopped going to Lushan, that I was at sea again. As I looked at the white foam cresting wave after wave, my heart gradually grew calmer. I thought back to what had happened just before I left home as if I was reliving a nightmare.

Silently I cursed myself. Why hadn't I insisted on going to Chengdu? The day that Fourteenth Uncle brought me home from the U.S. Consulate, I had known that I had only four days left in Hong Kong, and so I had put up a last-minute struggle. I protested, I cried, I refused to eat, I was furious, I screamed at everyone – but I did not run away. That I had no money and no place to go to were reasons that I used to justify for my not leaving home, but at the bottom of my heart I knew it was because, ever since I was a little girl, I had been told it was my mission in life to protect Mama, and that my way of protecting her was to obey her. For me to disobey her now, so totally, was something I could not do. In the end, I obeyed her, but it also meant I obeyed everyone including my father.

Although I had obeyed them, I still blamed myself for not being courageous enough to run away from home. But then, I asked myself, where could I have gone? Except for my cousin Dejie and my Fourteenth Uncle, I had no relative or friend in Hong Kong to shelter me, and even if I had, under the circumstances, they wouldn't have taken me in. Oh, why was I so useless and so gutless? Here I was, a fully grown seventeen-year-old girl; I should have the wit and courage to manage my own life, and yet I

was like a completely pampered and spoiled child shouting slogans that echoed the other protesters' at a rally, but with no experience of dealing with real life! In the face of a crisis, I had lost all sense of direction! Oh, I really was hopeless.

Although I was blaming myself, it also occurred to me that Mama and my uncles wouldn't have lied to me deliberately, so what they had advised me to do must be for my own good! What reason did I have to distrust them?

My mind was running in circles. One minute I was chiding myself for being useless, the next minute I was telling myself that Mama was Mama and, as her daughter, I just couldn't bring myself to defy her, although I knew it would be a stretch to call myself filial. Oh, useless, I was just useless! No matter which way I looked at it, I had only myself to blame.

After rebuking myself for being useless countless times, I was suddenly struck by a thought that had not occurred to me before. All the time I was rebelling against Mama for wanting to send me away, why was it that Mama never showed any sign of grief, never shed a single tear? I remembered her stroking my hair to comfort me, holding my shoulders to encourage me, wiping away my tears to soothe me, but I couldn't think of a single time when she herself sighed or wept. Instead, she had always smiled, saying, "Going to America will be good for you, you will learn so many things... ."

Could she have already achieved the supreme state of Buddhist sainthood by rising above ordinary emotions? But no, Mama was no saint. Then how could she be so calm and unfeeling about my leaving home? Seventeen years ago, because of me, she had mustered enough strength to start her life anew, and now, again because of me, she had swallowed her pride to ask my father to wrench me away from her. During these seventeen years, she and I had lived our lives as one. And now, how could she not wonder how many long years she must wait before she could see me again? How could she be so composed and calm at my leaving?

It was then that I realized why she was like that. She was teaching me to cultivate the kind of strength in the face of sorrow that she had faced. Like the Buddhist sutras she had once explained to me: "In our lives, we must learn not only how to hold on, but also how to let go."

Let go? But how? As her daughter, I had lived with her day and night for seventeen years. Now that I was actually leaving her, I could not help but think of the famous verse: “In this world, the only emotion that can shake the roots of our souls is the pain of parting.”¹

However, as I thought of Mama’s stoic example, I drew support and encouragement from her, and because I had her support, I was gradually able to put aside thoughts of Mama. As the ship sailed to America, I learned that as long as I did not think about her, I could control my fear and sorrow at leaving China.

I started to take an interest in my surroundings and learn how to deal with the new world around me, so that I could set myself on a new path in life.

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- 1 “The only emotion...is parting.” (黯然销魂者，惟别而已。) A line from *The Ode to Parting* (别赋) by Jiang Yan (江淹).



THE SHIP WE WERE ON WAS A FREIGHTER, BUT SINCE THERE WAS no cargo to unload in any of the ports along the way, and since the ship's captain wanted to avoid any possible military interference from the Japanese or German navy, we sailed straight for San Francisco. In those days, freighters were very slow, so it took us three weeks to get to our destination. Luckily, that gave me time to play deck tennis with the ship officers, to befriend some of the more friendly sailors, and allowed me a chance to learn some basic English from them.

When our ship docked in San Francisco, my cousin Lien-jun was there to meet us. He had arrived in America two years before, but because he had developed tuberculosis since then, he had been hospitalized for most of that time and had been discharged only recently. He brought Lien-yan and me to the University of California in Berkeley and registered us as residents at the International House there.

He also hurriedly gave me a letter from my father. In it my father instructed me to proceed to New York immediately because, according to him, the universities on the East Coast were about to start their new semesters and, if I did not arrive in time, I would not be able to get into a good school.

I asked Lien-jun where Lien-yan was going to study, and he replied, "I've already registered him at my school, UC Berkeley."

"Fine!" I exclaimed, "I'll study there with both of you."

Lien-jun frowned. "No, you can't. Your father said you were to go to New York."

"Tell him I'm not going."

"Tell him yourself," Lien-jun retorted, shrugging. Lien-yan interjected with a laugh: "But don't you forget who's paying for our school fees."

Coincidentally, I had gotten to know the girlfriend of one of Lien-jun's schoolmates, a girl called Velma, who took me to the college she was attending – Mills College. Located in Oakland, on the outskirts of San Francisco, the Mills campus was set against blue mountains and jade-green lakes. Its five dormitories were shaded by countless tall eucalyptus trees in the meadows. On its grounds also stood a Grecian-style outdoor

amphitheater, a huge gallery of art, many outdoor athletic fields, an indoor stadium with basketball courts, a swimming pool, and other amenities. As soon as I saw this beautiful campus, I immediately decided that this was where I wanted to study. Actually, my decision was not so much based on my liking for the Mills campus, but because I wanted to avoid meeting my father in New York. I therefore diplomatically wrote to my father saying that Mills had already accepted me as a sophomore, whereas if I should rush over to New York, I might be already too late to enroll into any of the schools on the East Coast, so it would make more sense for me to stay put in California. He wrote back to urge me to rush East, saying that he wanted very much to see me. In as regretful a tone as I could muster, I answered him saying that alas, there was no time to dither because I could not afford to miss starting school altogether.

That was the first time I challenged his authority. He seemed to take it quite well, even sending Lien-jun US\$5,000 to pay for my tuition and other expenses. With that large a sum, equivalent to almost US\$80,000 in today's currency, I was able to tell Lien-yan triumphantly: "No need to worry about my school fees anymore!"

Since I had already completed my first year at Lingnan University, Mills accepted me nominally as a second-year student, but because my English was so poor, I had to take a freshman English course. There was also a beginners' German course which was a prerequisite for all chemistry majors. Since I had never taken any German as a freshman, I had to study it as a sophomore. Thus my first year at Mills was pretty rough, with these two courses added to my normal five courses. Thank God that I managed to complete all of them with passable grades. I was especially pleased with my English grade because I had the good fortune of having a wonderful and kindhearted teacher, which made my progress in that language as rapid and smooth as if I had taken an elevator!

In order to avoid going to the East Coast and seeing my father for Christmas, I had deliberately accepted, way ahead of time, an invitation from an American schoolmate to spend the winter holidays with her. Thus when the letter from my father came telling me to go to New York, I used the time-honored Chinese proverb as my excuse: "One must need to know the customs of a nation before one can understand the nation."¹ I argued that I must familiarize myself with American customs as part of my

education, therefore I regretfully could not go to New York. So again, for that Christmas, I avoided seeing him. This was the second time that I had resisted his orders. I feared that I would not be as lucky the third time.

After Christmas, back at Mills, I thought of yet another strategy.

Luck was with me. A Girl Scouts summer camp in Southern California was looking for a volunteer counselor to help with their little campers, and their chief counselor asked my English teacher to find somebody suitable. I had just then written an essay describing the joys of nature, borrowing liberally from famous poets like Li Bai² and Du Fu³, to impress my American professor. My teacher read it and was duly impressed. She introduced me to the summer camp counselor, and a job was offered. I jumped at the chance to work for two whole months of the summer vacation.

As soon as I had posted my letter of acceptance to work at the camp, my father's instruction arrived, telling me again to go see him during the summer. Jauntily I replied that I had just been hired to work at the camp, and therefore could not possibly go to New York since I couldn't split myself into two halves.

This time my father was less polite in his response. He said that he had studied my school calendar carefully and knew that after my summer camp was finished, I still had three weeks of free time before school started. So he said in no uncertain terms, I must appear in New York to see him during those three weeks. This time, there was no doubt about it: he sounded good and mad.

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- 1 “One must need to know the customs of a nation... .” (入境问俗.) A well-known proverb.
 - 2 Li Bai (李白). The great Tang poet whom people called “The Fairy Spirit of Poetry.”
 - 3 Du Fu (杜甫). Another great Tang poet whom people called “The Saint of Poetry.”



HIS LETTER ARRIVED A WEEK BEFORE I WAS TO LEAVE FOR THE summer camp. I took his letter, and went off by myself to the lake on our campus. For a long time I sat alone under a pine tree hugging my knees to me, and tried to figure out what to do. Should I go? Or should I not go?

Just go!

But I didn't want to go. I told myself: "Alright, fine, if you don't want to go, then don't go." What could he do to me? He wouldn't sever our father-daughter relationship, would he? And even if he did, so what? He was the one who paid for my tuition, yes, but there were plenty of students who paid their own way by working part time. Besides, I still had most of the \$5,000 he had given me. So what did I have to worry about? If I didn't want to go, I didn't have to go.

But then I thought of Mama. I didn't know why she had so patiently put up with this empty relationship between my father and me for so long, and I guessed that she would be sad if I was the one to cut him off. Would she blame me for being impudent and willful if my father and I became totally estranged?

My heart ached.

In one of the translated novels I had read long ago, a certain character was described thus: "He preserved his moods, all his wounded feelings, his sorrows and regrets, as if they were fruits in so many jars, to be put aside on a shelf. Only when he had some free time, would he take down the jars and carefully taste them." Was I like that character in the novel?

On the whole, I was an optimistic person, busy rushing about, engrossed with my everyday activities without thinking too much about deeper issues. What frustrations I did have, I was able to store away into little jars and set aside.

I remembered how it was when I first arrived at Mills. No student had yet moved into the dormitories, but because I wanted to save money, I moved out of International House and secured special permission from Mills to move myself into my room. For one week, living alone on a deserted campus, sleeping in a deserted dormitory, going to the store every day to buy food, wandering around the campus by myself, I never felt

lonely, nor did I think of Mama. I spent the whole week in peaceful solitude simply because I could store my feelings of homesickness into a jar, and put it aside.

But now, sitting under that tree by the lake, with the letter from my father in my hand, and thinking about how Mama would feel, I couldn't control the hot tears that cascaded down my face. Why, why was it that I was so unwilling to see my father? Was it because I hated him so much that this hatred had carved itself deep into my bones?

Suddenly I thought of something which had lodged deep in the back of my mind. It was something Zhao-yi had said when I lived in Changsha.

Zhao-yi was my mother's youngest sister. When she was born, Wai-gong was overjoyed because her birth coincided with the birth of his first grandson from Da-yima, and everyone was teasing him about competing with his own son-in-law. After Wai-gong died, Zhao-yi preferred to live with her sister's children, who were of the same age as she, and soon she had picked up all the bad habits of the rich Liang household. Not only did she learn to do nothing, but she also spent a lot of money that did not belong to her. Mama and Man-yi often chided her for her habits, but she never listened. Using the hard-earned money of her betrothed, she gave a lavish wedding party just because she wanted to keep up with her rich Liang cousins. Even though she was not a Christian, she wanted a church wedding and told me and my cousin Jin-sun₁ to dress up as her flower girl and ring carrier, and for that she earned our eternal dislike!

When in 1937, my cousins and I met her in Changsha, we saw her only as a silly woman who played mahjong all day long, and neglecting her own children. She was never properly dressed, always shuffling around in her slippers and with her collar unbuttoned. We didn't like what we saw of her, and I suppose our attitude towards her showed, because she seemed to dislike us too.

One day, for no good reason, she suddenly said to me: "Did you know that when your father returned to Shanghai, he refused to go to your Mama? It was your grandma who literally pushed him into the bedroom, and that was how you were conceived." Having said that, she held her hand over her mouth and giggled coyly.

I was fourteen when she told me that story. Fuming inside, I had quickly replied: "Funny that something which supposedly happened in the middle

of the night in Shanghai was known by you, living hundreds of miles away in faraway Hunan!” She only smiled and looked as pleased as a cat playing with a mouse, with me presumably being the mouse.

Even though I thought that she had deliberately told the lie to spite me, in retaliation for my contempt of her, nevertheless her words left a deep wound. Now, as I sat under the pine tree and recalled her words, I became so furious that I stopped weeping.

I did not move for a long time. “Of course Zhao-yi made up that taunt,” I told myself.

But then, what if what she said was true? Didn’t Xin-pei once shout at me, saying that I was such trash that even my own father didn’t want me? I did not believe him then because I chose not to believe him. But was it possible after all? Deep down in my heart, I suspected that what they said was true. Was that the reason I hated my father so much? Hadn’t I penned that nasty letter when I was only ten, accusing him of “abandoning an infant in her crib?” Those were words I had borrowed from the essay I was trying to emulate, but didn’t those words express a grudge I instinctively felt to be true?

1 Jin-sun (锦荪). Man-yi's son, one of my childhood playmates.



I SAT THERE, WITH THE LETTER IN MY HAND, THINKING OF ZHAOYI's taunt, hating my father, as ripples broke through the smooth surface of the lake, even though there was scarcely any wind blowing. Then, in the silence, I saw a little ant, slowly moving on the ground. It approached my foot. It paused as if it wanted to climb up my shoes. I wondered where this little fellow wanted to go. Did it really know where it wanted to go? I looked at it closely. It climbed slowly up my shoe and then crawled onto the leg of my jeans. There it stopped to look left and right, with its antennae twitching, as if it was thinking. Then it continued to climb upward.

I knew ants did not have any parents. Their so-called 'mother' was only a gigantic egg-laying machine capable of producing countless eggs. Their fathers were even less relevant. And yet, look at it now! It did not care who its mother and father were. Indeed it did not even care whether it had any parents! It only looked around, and decided in which direction it would crawl. Yes, it could crawl, with all its might! Did it not mean that God, or whoever created living things, had bestowed on a creature, even as small as an ant, a life completely its own, without ever bothering whether it had any parents?

And I? Could I be less than an ant?

Confucius taught us that it was the spirit of the father, meaning the sperm, and the blood of the mother, meaning the egg, that gave us life. He was saying that every life was derived solely from his or her parents. But if we were to think of it more carefully, and from a strictly biological viewpoint, then we would know that, without a little gentle push from God, then no matter how many thousands or millions of "spirit and blood" there were in the uterus, bumping into one another, nothing positive could have resulted.

When I thought of that, I started to laugh. I told myself: Fine, since my life came from God directly, why should I care if my father had or had not wanted me? So what if I did go to see him? After all, could he devour me? That thought reminded me instantly of what my mother had said when, before I was born, my grandmother had feared the foreign priests and nuns

might eat me up. She had replied: “Let them try! This baby’s bones are really tough!” At the thought of my bones being tough, I laughed out loud.

When I got back to the dorm, I immediately wrote my father a letter. I said: “New York is, after all, the most famous city in the world. Of course I will go there to take a look. Even though there isn’t much time between summer camp and the school, I promise that my cousins and I will do our best to be there.” The underlining meaning, as far as I was concerned, was that I would go to visit the famous city and only incidentally would I drop in to see him. Very proud of the context of my words, I mailed off the letter, packed my bags, and went off to summer camp.

I felt relieved. I had somehow diluted my hatred for my father. Furthermore, by that time, I had received a letter from my sister Lien-ming, saying she had left Chongqing for Hong Kong to take Mama to Shanghai, where she could look after Mama as well as complete her studies in the hospital for Shanghai Medical School.

Summer camp was a happy time for me. I had always liked the great outdoors. In the camp, we sat on bare ground, slept in sleeping bags and watched the sun rise, took long hikes during the day, and sang songs by the campfire at night. How could I not be happy? My work was not heavy either. With two other counselors, we took care of about thirty kids, aged seven to ten, taking part in swimming, mountain climbing, archery and fencing, among other sports. In my happiness, I only feared that summer would end too soon.



SUMMER CAMP DID END. AS I HAD PACKED MY LUGGAGE BEFORE leaving for camp, my cousins Lien-yan and Lien-jun hurriedly loaded my pre-packed bags in their car and came all the way to the camp to pick me up so that we could leave directly for New York.

Ordinarily, a trip by train from the West to the East Coast would take two or three days, but we were on the road for ten days because the three of us had agreed that we should take in all the sights along the way, whether they be the Great Canyon, Yellowstone Park or the gambling joints of Reno. Without our saying so, it seemed that none of us had any strong desire to reach New York.

Lien-jun was not as disturbed by the prospect. Unlike Lien-yan, he was only a nephew who hadn't yet met his uncle, and not an offspring, like Lien-yan, to greet his father. So Lien-yan was as nervous as I was. He was Fifth Uncle's son and had been adopted by my parents, so he was to call my father "Diedie" too, but he knew my father even less than I did. What was to happen when the two of them met face to face?

With only about ten days left of our vacation, we finally reached New York City, with trepidation and unease.

Strangely, I now have no memory of the details of our arrival. I have thought long and hard about it, but cannot remember that first meeting with my father. At what time did we arrive? Was it in the morning, or was it in the afternoon? Did we go directly to his office, or did we meet somewhere else? Did he leave his office to meet us? Or did he sit in his office waiting for us? Was he happy when he first saw us, or did he reprimand us for taking too long on our journey? Did he take us out for lunch? For that matter, did we have any lunch? When did he bring us out to his Long Island house? When did I first meet my half-sisters, the daughters of his second wife? What were my feelings when I saw them?

All these things left no impression on me, I suppose my mind was too confused. I do not understand how this father-daughter reunion, anticipated and dreaded for so long, could leave me with a blank. Was there a hole in my brain, into which I subconsciously dumped these troubled memories,

even more efficiently than the way I stored my feelings into jars and put them away?

This kind of reunion is often dramatically described in sentimental novels as “the moment of truth,” and is supposed to be forever etched in the mind of the character. But I have no recollection of it at all. I was like a person who had fallen into the river and was half drowning, but upon being rescued, could only remember how his foot had slipped. Everything after that was a blank.

However, all other later events were vividly retained in my mind, in little bits and pieces.



I DID GET TO GO TO MY FATHER'S HOME ON LONG ISLAND, IN A little town called Glen Cove, supposedly inhabited mostly by wealthy folks. I never saw any of them, probably because they were all secluded behind their thickly wooded estates.

My father's house was not big, not even as big as our Shanghai house in Bao Ding Road, but then his house was occupied by only his one family, unlike ours, which had to squeeze in four or five other sets of relatives. There was a living room and a dining room downstairs, and a main kitchen and a smaller one next to it. On the second floor were a master bedroom, two smaller bedrooms shared by the four girls and another bedroom for the son.

I was told that their mother, Grace, was in the hospital, where she was so comfortable, my half-sisters said, that she refused to come home. Although she was not at home, I made a special note of her bedroom. There were two beds evidently meant for a couple but separated by a small table. Of the two beds, one had neat piles of bed sheets and blankets on it, whereas the other was heaped high with newspapers and books, as if it was used as a library of some sort.

Where, then, did my father sleep? I wanted to know, but did not wish to ask. My half-sisters volunteered that no matter what the weather was like, their Daddy always slept on the veranda behind the study on the second floor, which was glassed in on three sides, with a tiled roof, but it still felt like being in the open air. Laughingly I asked if, like me, he preferred to camp outdoors? My half-sisters shrugged and said all they knew was that he had always slept that way. However, some years later, when my father learned that I could knit, he asked me to make him a special woollen cap that extended from his neck right to the top of his head, leaving only two holes for the eyes and one hole for the nose. He said that sleeping with that was most peaceful. I did not ask any questions, and just gave him the cap when I had finished knitting it.



HIS DAUGHTERS WERE NAMED, IN ORDER OF THEIR AGE: MARJORIE, Mildred, Madeline and Marie. Except for Marie, who was younger than I was by half a year, the others were all born after my sister Lien-ming and before me. Madeline had a twin brother, Kuo-ching₁, who was younger than she by just a few minutes.

When I visited New York that first time, Kuo-ching was not at home, and I was not told where he had gone to. I knew that when he was eleven or twelve years old, he had been sent by our father to live in Hankou with my Thirteenth Uncle, but only for a short while, and then he had returned to America. On his way back home, he had stopped in Shanghai for a few days and met Lien-ming whom he had gotten along with pretty well because she spoke some English. As for me, I was told that I'd met him once but I had no recollection of it whatsoever.

Right after meeting my half sisters, I maliciously concocted a story, telling them that the reason their names all started with M was that my father had named our eldest sister "Ming," so he gave all his other daughters names beginning with an M, just to keep up the tradition which he started with Lien-ming.

To my surprise, they all believed me, and even asked me why my own name did not begin with an M. I tossed my head, and said proudly: "My name was selected by my mother. It was done according to the time-honored tradition of ancestral ranking," implying that their names were not honored by any tradition. Actually, only the "Lien" in my name follows the so-called ancestral ranking, but since they did not even understand what ancestral ranking was, they did not feel the sting of my remark. In my mind I instantly nicknamed them "The M-girls," which was not without a sense of belittling them. Unfortunately for me, they were all lovable and pretty creatures, with big eyes and round faces, like the cute dolls in Japanese cartoons. They were experts at make-up so that what was red became redder and black became blacker. Their eyes, eyebrows and lips were all painted so beautifully that they made someone like me, who did not even know how to apply any face powder, feel insecure and – had I been able to admit it to myself then – a little jealous too.

After seeing them that first time, I wrote a letter to Fifth Uncle, describing them as looking like prostitutes in Shanghai, and then deliberately left the letter on the desk in my father's study, fully intending him to read it. I do not know if he ever saw it or not, but the letter disappeared. I never asked him about it, and he never mentioned it. I was determined to be malicious towards my half-sisters and didn't care if he knew.

It is not hard to understand the resentment I harbored against these half-sisters of mine. Their mother had snatched away my mother's husband, and they had snatched away my father, so that Lien-ming and I had become "trash that even our own father didn't want." How could I have felt kindly towards them? Although I told myself that they were in the same situation I was in and should not be blamed for what our father did, still there was no way that I could accept them as sisters at that point. Ordinarily, I was a gregarious person, and made friends easily but I could not regard them as friends, not even as casual friends.

I remembered a photograph kept in Fifth Uncle's study, back in Shanghai, which showed a sweet family portrait: there was one little boy surrounded by four laughing girls and they all wore neat coats, and had on smart scarves, sitting in a row on the front steps of a house. They all looked so confident and happy. I was told that they were the other children of my father's, and I knew they were the ones who had robbed us of everything that rightfully belonged to me and to my sister. Even though I had known of their existence for a long time, I had never bothered to think about them nor whether I should hate them or not. But now, meeting them face to face, I felt a surge of anger I could hardly suppress.

One day, Marjorie invited me to the beach. Accompanying us were all my half-sisters, as well as Lien-yan, Lien-jun and Alfred, Marjorie's new husband. Alfred was a nice young man who was born and bred in Tianjin² and perfectly well versed in the English language because he had studied with American children in Tianjin International School. Like those American children, he could barely read any Chinese beyond his own name. However, he did know how to speak his native language, something that I did not give him credit for. Thus, I said in his hearing to my cousins, Lien-jun and Lien-yan: "Look at how those girls are made up! Just like a flock of

call-girls!” Alfred repeated my comment to his wife Marjorie, who in turn told our father.

Strangely enough, my father not only did not scold me; he didn’t even bring up this matter with me. Instead, he took Alfred aside and berated him. I learned of this incident later from Marjorie. She said that Daddy told Alfred: “Can’t you see how hard I am trying to smooth relations between these sisters? Lien-fung is still a child, but you are a grown man. Don’t you have better things to do than to stir up hostility between the girls? Are you a man, or aren’t you?”

Marjorie told me this several years later, when the M-girls and I had, by then, developed a warm, loving and intimate relationship. Since it happened so long ago, Marjorie might not have been totally accurate in her recollection, but the story was essentially true.

Whenever I think of it, I realized that my father went through a lot of trouble to keep me from feeling lost.

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- 1 Kuo-ching (固钦) My half-brother's name. We all called him Kuo.
 - 2 Tianjin (天津). The sea port next to Beijing.



BEFORE I WENT BACK TO SCHOOL, MY FATHER BROUGHT ME TO SEE Grace. Whether it was my showing up in New York that made her go into a depression, or whether it was something else altogether, I did not know. While I was visiting their home in Long Island, my half-sisters had said that their mother was in the hospital because she had had a nervous breakdown. I remembered that I, with my rudimentary English, did not understand how a person's nerves could break down and was puzzled by it. At the hospital, a nurse asked us to wait, saying that the patient had wanted to apply some make-up before she saw visitors. I was wondering why, if a person's nerves were broken, she would need make-up on her face before meeting anyone? Could it be that after her face was made up, the broken nervous system would somehow be repaired? But since it was Grace who was sick, I did not ask any foolish questions.

While we waited, my father told me that when I met Grace, I should call her "Auntie." This was because, he explained, Fifth Uncle had arranged to have my father adopted as a son to some distant relative who had been long dead without leaving an heir, so that my father could then marry two wives in order to provide that distant relative a line of heirs to carry on his bloodline. In such cases, it was absolutely proper for me to call Grace "Auntie." I started to laugh and said: "No wonder the Chinese intelligentsia has always favored Confucianism! It is so useful. It can be used to blur and distort any human relations! If you could be adopted by three or four uncles, then you'd be able to take on wives the way cobblers on the streets take in old shoes to repair!"

I could tell Diedie was so angry that he was about to yell at me, but luckily, just then, the nurse came to tell us that the patient was ready, so he clenched tight his jaw, and together we went into the patient's room. The room was so big and spacious that I could see why the half-sisters had said Grace didn't want to go home.

Of course I immediately recognized her as the woman I had seen in the hotel in Shanghai years ago. This time, however, my English was fluent and I could reply to her questions easily, making me feel as if I had succeeded in getting some measure of revenge. After some polite questions, she

suddenly adopted a maternal tone and said she would always take good care of me, and that I should call her “Mother.” I don’t know whether this was her own idea, or whether it originated from my father, but without a second thought, I blurted out loudly, “As long as I live, I will only have one mother.”

As soon as I said that, both my father and Grace stiffened. At that moment I felt very proud of my obnoxious talent for making other people feel truly uncomfortable.



ON THE DAY THAT I WAS TO LEAVE NEW YORK, MY FATHER CALLED me into his office, and sat me on his knee, as if I were still an eight or nine-year-old child. He held up my hands and examined my fingernails to see if they were clean. I felt I was already a grown-up and was rather embarrassed. Hastily saying that my cousins were waiting for me and that I should be going, I started to get up.

But as I stood up and walked away, I suddenly thought to myself, “If I don’t ask him now, I may never have a chance to do so.” Abruptly I turned around, gathered my courage, and looked him squarely in the face. “Mama is so good,” I said, “why did you abandon her?”

My father looked stunned. He stared at me without saying anything. My courage abandoned me as quickly as it had come. I did not dare ask again, but I stood my ground and mutely waited for an answer. The room was quiet. After a while, he said, “Was that what your mother told you to ask me?”

“Not at all,” I retorted. “Mama is too straightforward. She doesn’t even mention your name; she only suffers in silence. I’m the one who’s asking. If you want to get mad, get mad at me. And don’t blame Lien-ming either because she has nothing to do with it.”

My father said nothing. He stood up, walked to the window and looked outside. Finally he returned to his chair, and said very slowly, “You are still too young. You would not understand. In a few years, after you are married, you can come to me and ask the same question again.”

What he said was almost exactly what Mama had said. It was as if the two of them had agreed beforehand on what to say. I was so surprised that I couldn’t say anything more.

He then stood up again and hugged me, but this time he held me as gently as if I were a grown-up, no longer a child. He kissed my left cheek lightly and said, “Alright, it’s time you must take your leave. Remember to write often, at least a letter every five days. Don’t forget!”

That was how I left, and that was how I ended my first trip to New York. My cousins were already in the car, waiting impatiently. As soon as I got in, they started the engine because this time we had to drive cross-country in

four days to be back in time for school. Along the way we laughed and chatted as usual, but my heart was heavy. On the one hand, I was glad I had finally gotten over the hurdle of meeting my father, but on the other, everything he did and said only increased my confusion. Why was it that his words were almost identical to what Mama had said? Had they really planned beforehand what they would say to me? And why must I wait until I was married in order to understand? I was already eighteen years old at that time and had read and seen my share of love scenes from romantic novels and movies. Although I did not understand all of it completely, I knew what was involved. Could it be something about “sex?” I thought I understood, and yet I did not understand. One could say I knew what it was all about, and yet I truthfully knew nothing.



UPON STARTING SCHOOL AGAIN, IN THE AUTUMN OF 1941, I WAS promoted to a junior. Life was even busier, and I put aside thoughts about my father. After all, I had already developed the habit of shelving things that frustrated me.

That Christmas, Pearl Sun, a very good friend of mine, agreed to share an apartment with me in San Francisco so that we could gain some retail sales experience at the Dollar Department Store where Velma's father was the general manager. Thus, I did not go to Long Island for a vacation as my father had wished.

Next thing we knew, Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor and the war in the Pacific Ocean had started in earnest. I tried to focus on studying, but everything around me was in an uproar.

What happened first, on the day of the bombing, was that many of my schoolmates who were from Hawaii rushed to my room, weeping because they were worried about their families. It reminded me of the bombing in Changsha when I lay flat on the hilltop and worried if Mama might have been harmed. I listened to the radio with them and kept them company, but I could not think of any way to comfort them.

What comforted me most, however, was now that Japan was formally at war with the Allies, her aggression on China would have to be lessened. But, at the same time, now that Japan had occupied the foreign concessions in Shanghai, I worried about the safety of Mama and Lien-ming. With Shanghai in chaos, news and letters from my loved ones were impossible to get. I was worried, but my father wrote me and told me not to fret, because he had already sent large sums of money to Shanghai, so Mama and Lien-ming would not need to worry about their livelihood.

What my father did not know then was that the person in Chongqing whom he had entrusted with the money for my mother, had invested it for his own greed and purpose, and did not remit it to Mama at all. We only found this out after the war. Poor Lien-ming had to depend on the meager salaries she and her husband made as young doctors to support my mother and their child for the duration of the whole war. They never received the money my father sent. Thank God nothing tragic happened to Mama during

that period, otherwise she might have died thinking she had been abandoned by my father.

With such important events taking place around me, I had no time to mull over the past relationship between my parents. At the same time, I was ashamed to admit that I had become increasingly engrossed in sports. I had always studied hard and played hard, and had always been an active and energetic person. As the warm and sunny weather in California was just right for physical activities, I took up fencing, horseback riding, swimming, basketball, and other sports. There was nothing that I did not try my hand at.

Thus, except when I had to write my father as he requested, I hardly ever spared a thought on my resentment of him or on his flock of pretty daughters.



THE SUMMER OF 1942 SOON FOLLOWED. I WORKED AT THE SUMMER camp again as I had agreed to, but I obeyed my father's summons and visited his home at Long Island, even though it was only for a short period of three weeks. The M-girls, as I had named them collectively, were all home. Even Marjorie, the M-1, newly married, came back about three times a week. Mildred, the M-2, and Madeline, the M-3, were both home from school, and had little to do except lounge around. Marie, the M-4, had not graduated from high school and had been living at home all along. Sharing the same house with them and being about the same age, it felt like they were my dormitory schoolmates. Gradually, through chatting and laughing with them, I almost forgot my hostility towards them. If I didn't remind myself occasionally who their mother was, I could almost think of them as friends.

I did not like to ask too many questions for fear that I might be accused of overstepping our boundaries, but I could not help observing that although Marjorie was a graduate from Wellesley College, Mildred and Madeline were both studying in secretarial schools, taking courses in bookkeeping, typing, and the like.

Of course there was nothing wrong with secretarial schools, but I had naïvely thought that girls who went there were usually from families who could not afford to send their daughters to college, or they were academic under-achievers whose grades did not qualify for university. With the M-girls, obviously their parents could afford their tuition and it was equally obvious that they were intelligent. Why then were Mildred and Madeline wasting their time in secretarial schools? I was told that many wealthy American debutantes often went to what was known as "finishing schools" before they entered into society. Could that be what Grace, in her emulation of the lifestyle of the rich, had in mind? Back in China, Fifth Uncle and Mama had always told us to study hard. Even though I was younger than the M-girls, I was already a junior in college so, accordingly, shouldn't they be sophomores, if not already graduates, instead of studying accounting and typing? Theirs didn't seem to me a 'proper' education.

Years later, I was told that the M-girls did attend college at some point or other but since I wasn't aware of that fact in the winter of 1941 when I visited them, I, with my resentment still high against the woman who had snatched away Mama's husband, was delighted to have the opportunity to deliberately belittle her and her children. I smiled with spiteful glee when I speculated what Fifth Uncle would say about his precious American nieces! Thinking back, I am amazed at how childish I had been.

With my father leaving the house every day to go to work and Grace never getting out of her bed until seven in the evening, there was nothing else for the five of us to do except shop or gossip among ourselves over cups of coffee. They were all better-natured and more easy-going than I was, and would often ask me questions about China, her history, geography, customs, habits, and so on, which gave me an excellent chance to show off my 'superior' knowledge. Subconsciously, I felt that I had scored some sort of victory, as if I was saying "my Mama is more educated than your Mama." Since it was always easier to forgive from a position of greater strength, I found that I could almost forgive them.

Still, the more I got to know them, the more questions I had. There was one particular incident that struck me as strange. Just as I was sitting around, chatting and laughing with them, Grace suddenly came into our room, wearing a really gaudy dress and asking all of us how she looked. There was an immediate chorus of effusive praise from her daughters, saying how lovely the dress was. Pleased, Grace beamed and said: "Fine, I'll tell the dressmaker that." With that, she returned to her own bedroom.

I was bewildered. That dress was obviously tasteless. Even I, who did not know anything about fashion, could see that. So how was it that these M-girls, who were devotees of fashion magazines like *Vogue*, could praise that awful dress? Marjorie saw the puzzled look on my face, and explained laughingly: "You think that dress is ugly, don't you? Actually, we all do, but Mom never likes to hear the truth. If we had told her honestly what we thought, she would sulk for days and get irritated at us, so we've gotten used to telling her only what she wants to hear." Maybe that was filial piety, but I thought it very strange that between mother and daughters there could be such insincerity.

Because we were always together with nothing to do, there was almost nothing that we did not talk about. Once, when I was describing how I used

to play with my cousins, and enjoy activities such as flying kites and catching crickets, they listened enthralled. I could not resist asking, "Don't you have any cousins to play with?" Nobody said anything, their faces guarded. Finally, it was Madeline who replied: "There are cousins, but we never have anything to do with them."

"Why?"

"Grandpa..." Madeline started to explain, but Marjorie suddenly broke in, saying, "What? Why is the gardener here? Didn't he say he wasn't coming?"

Whether she interrupted our conversation deliberately or not, I never found out, but the subject of this grandfather was never brought up again. Much later, it was Auntie Lucy, wife of my Fourteenth Uncle, who told me that Grace's father was a minister of the Church, and had cut off his ties with Grace after her wedding, because he thought Grace had somehow dishonored his name.

I also remembered Madeline asking me once, when there was nobody else around: "Do you understand the Chinese custom of kowtow?"

"Why? Do you want to kowtow to me?" I teased.

"No, I'm just asking you, when a person kowtows to another, what does the gesture mean?"

"Obviously it's a sign of defeat. When two ruffians get into a fist fight in China and one of them says: 'Kowtow to me, and I'll let you off,' that's like saying, 'if you will admit defeat, I won't hit you anymore.' "

"I'm not talking about two men fighting. I mean if a person just quietly kowtows to another, what does that mean?"

I laughed. "If two people are getting along, why should one of them kowtow to the other, unless he was paying his respects to someone of an older generation or a higher rank? Why do you ask anyway?"

"My mother told me once that she had to kowtow to your mother. And it was because of this that my mother suffered a nervous breakdown. Why did your mother want mine to do that?"

"What are you talking about? As far as I know, the two of them never even met, let alone did any kowtowing. Besides, your mother would never agree to kowtow."

"But my mother said she did, and it was the kowtowing that brought on her nervous breakdown." (Only recently have I been told that a possible

cause for her nervous breakdown was a fire in her house, and/or the fact that she had to take her children out of their prestigious private school to study in a common public school. If that were true, I think her nerves are easily affected, regardless of my mother.)

“How could that be? I’ve never heard about that. Maybe your mother already had a nervous breakdown and then blamed it on my mother.”

The two of us were on the verge of having a fight, but then Marjorie came into the room and used her status as Big Sister to calm us down. As for whether what Madeline said was true or not, I never found out. Perhaps she misunderstood her mother, or perhaps her mother had a hallucination.

Or, perhaps, Grace did once upon a time kowtow to my mother. If so, when was it?

Years later, in 1948, when I saw Lien-ming again in Boston, she told me of the letters she had found under Mama’s bed. In one of them, she said, my father did offer to bring his concubine to kowtow to Mama. I told Lien-ming that if he said that, it was only to placate our mother. He never meant it. He may have mentioned it to Grace but never actually asked her to do it.

If Grace did do it, I would have heard of it, if not from Mama, then certainly from Man-yi. No, I assured Lien-ming that I didn’t believe it ever happened. For Grace to have kowtowed to Mama, it would have meant that she was acknowledging my mother as the legal wife while she herself was only a concubine. How could Grace, with her American and Christian upbringing, ever make such a concession? Unless, of course, she didn’t know the full meaning of that gesture.

But, at the same time, if she never kowtowed to Mama, then why did she tell Madeline so? Did she really want to pin the blame for her nervous breakdown on my mother?

There was much about my parents that I did not know.



WHAT KIND OF PERSON WAS GRACE, ANYWAY? OF COURSE I WAS VERY curious about this person who had ‘snatched’ my father away, but I did not often get to see her. In a way, she reminded me of my mother’s friend, Ms. Wang, because her cheeks were also heavily rouged. She must have looked quite striking when she was young, but by the time I knew her, she had already become a bit of a recluse, and looked it.

She always wore a pair of blue pajamas, over which she would drape two light blue sweaters, one short-sleeved and the other long-sleeved. She hardly ever left her bedroom. When my father came home from work every evening, he often, if not always, trotted upstairs into her room to give her a bouquet of fresh flowers which one of his secretaries had picked out for him. He never even looked at the flowers before handing them to her, nor did she pay them any attention after she accepted them and put them aside. I really felt sorry for those flowers! After this little rite, he would come down without her to join the rest of us for the evening meal. And that would be their only encounter for the day.

Only after everyone in the house had gone to bed did Grace shuffle downstairs and mope around by herself. No one seemed to have any idea what she did. I only saw her busy one time; it was when she was preparing for her annual exhibition of azaleas.

From what I know, in the years I knew her later, she would appear in the garden briefly to arrange her azaleas. She did not grow them. Every year, two weeks before the flower show was to take place, she would call up the nurseries to send her countless pots of azaleas. At the same time she would summon thirty or forty gardeners, many of whom were wives of our own Wah Chang employees who were eager to collect the extravagantly high overtime pay. It seems that when gardeners were employed by the day, they were paid regular wages, but if they worked late, they would get paid overtime rates. Since Grace only asked her gardeners to dig and plant at night, which was the only time she was up and about, the gardeners were paid not only their regular day wages, during which they did nothing but sleep or wait around for Grace to get up, but they also collected double-time when they worked at night. Who could resist a job like that?

Thus these gardeners would hang around during the day, sleeping or reading or even going home to take care of their personal affairs, until it was about nine in the evening, when Grace, in her pajamas and sweaters, rose from her bed and went out into the garden.

She would stand, pointing and telling her gardeners where to plant her azaleas. Every few minutes, she would tell them to dig up this or that azalea, and transplant it to another spot which she thought more attractive. Her head tilted to one side, as if she were an artist musing over her own painting, she would say: “No, this color doesn’t match, move it to that corner,” and the gardeners would do what they were told. And then she would muse some more and say: “There’s too much pink there, add a bit of violet,” and the violet would replace the pink. In this way, it seemed to me that the flowers were kept moving all night long.

Once, I went out to the garden to take a look. One of the gardeners was a friend of mine, and she said to me with a sigh: “Poor flowers! It’s a wonder they don’t all die.”

This flower show took place for two days every spring. After the first day, the azaleas already looked tired. After the second day, they wilted. But that didn’t really matter, because not many people came to admire it anyway, and Grace lost interest after the local newspaper had publicized it. I frankly did not see any point in this flower show since she did not plant the flowers nor nourish them herself. They had come straight from the florist like so many pigments for her to arrange. What gardening talent did that take? My father never paid any attention to it, nor did he bother to go to the garden during the show. But he honored her wishes and never criticized her.

I couldn’t help but think of Mama in her garden at Bao Ding Road and her joy at nurturing the flowers which she herself planted from seed.

In this summer of 1942, when I stayed with them, Kuo-ching, Grace’s only son, was not home. He had taken flying lessons the year before and had been accepted by the U.S. Air Force to fly fighter jets. I heard that he was soon to be sent to China.



I WENT BACK TO MILLS AS SOON AS SUMMER ENDED. IN THE blink of an eye, it was winter holidays again. I followed Diedie's instructions to go to Long Island. This time I realized that instead of dreading it, I was actually looking forward to visiting my father and his other family. I had grown rather fond of them because of the warmth shown towards me.

On this occasion, he did not want me to waste my time just chatting at home on Long Island so he had me assigned to work in his office as a secretary to Arthur Young, who was his personal secretary cum ghost writer. That was a totally extraneous job. My father was the kind of man who took work so seriously that he felt that his children should also work rather than relax, even during vacations.

I conveniently used my having to work in the morning as an excuse for not having to live in his Long Island home. I said I could not get up in the morning as early as he did to get to the office in New York City. My father would not allow it but, without his permission, I reserved a room at the International House on Riverside. I promised to go 'home' to Long Island on weekends. I would keep him company on fishing expeditions and have long chats with him in our Hunan dialect after dinner, which, I knew, among all other things was what he enjoyed most.

He wanted me to have dinner with him at home every night, but I negotiated it to every Tuesday and Thursday evening at some restaurant or other in New York, and, if he did not have a lunch engagement during the week, I agreed to keep him company. This way, I had at least three free evenings a week to meet my own friends or to go to the theater.

As a result, I met the M-girls only briefly on weekends. As for Grace, since our waking hours did not coincide, I hardly ever saw her. If by chance we did meet, there would only be a polite exchange of "How are you?" However, she did 'scold' me once, and she did that in her own special style. Because she did not usually meet with people, she would communicate with them by writing notes. One day, I was rushing off to go fishing with my father when I suddenly saw a piece of yellow paper stuck on to some dishes that I had washed the evening before. I was about to read what was on it,

when my father said impatiently, “Never mind that. It’s only a note from Grace. Probably finding fault with somebody.” After I got in his car, I looked at the note, and sure enough, it reprimanded me for not having washed the dishes thoroughly. I said, “Oh dear! Maybe I should apologize to her.” My father said, “What for? She has forgotten all about it.” And apparently Grace did forget all about it, and I never apologized.

As for the girls, only when I arrived at the Long Island house did I learn that Mildred had contracted tuberculosis, and so had been sent to a sanatorium in upstate New York. I could not understand how she could have been exposed to TB. I remembered her as the girl who was adept at applying make-up to dramatically enhance her eyes so that she looked more like a Spanish beauty than a Chinese one. She always dressed very stylishly, often in a pure black dress with a bright red sash. How brightly she had stood out – she was like a movie star! How could she have TB?

From what I knew in China, TB was a disease that was only prevalent in poor places, like the slums. I did not know, as I learned many years later, that there was a TB epidemic in New York and many others had also contracted it. At that time, I was just shocked that a lady of leisure, who was raised in a wealthy family and in a country as rich as the U.S., could be sick with this disease.

Could it be, I wondered, because she was malnourished? I remembered how she ate very little because she was always dieting, and for lunch would eat only one tomato or one mushroom. How could that little bit of food be enough? Why didn’t her parents intervene? Weren’t they concerned to see her weak from starvation? I suppose I was subconsciously adding one more charge of misconduct to Grace, to glorify my image of Mama.

While Mildred was sick, Madeline was in Washington DC, where she had found a job as a secretary and could not come home for the holidays. Marie was busy with friends of her own age, and did not pay much attention to me. So most of my days were spent in Marjorie’s house, listening to her many stories of her childhood.

She said that when she was sick, her mother never came into the sickroom to see her, and it was only in the evening, when her Daddy returned from work, that she would have anyone to comfort her and say a few nice words to her.

I could not help but exclaim, “What? You must be joking!”

“Would I be joking about a thing like that?”

“Why didn’t your mother come herself to look after her own daughter? Especially one who was sick?”

Marjorie shrugged. “Probably because she didn’t want to catch whatever germs I had.”

“No mother in the world could think like that!” I was speechless.

She continued, “When I was little, I thought all mothers in the world were like my mother. It was only later when I read in books that I learned that there were mothers who loved their own daughters enough to sacrifice anything for them.”

I thought of my own mother, and suddenly said, “My mother loved me like that.”

Marjorie sighed: “You are lucky!”

Silently I wanted to add “But I have no father!” but I did not say it because I did not want Marjorie to feel sorry for me. She could tell me her pain of not having a loving mother, but I would not tell her the bitterness and heartache I felt for not having the presence of a father.



IT WAS AS IF OUR LOYALTY TO OUR MOTHERS PREVENTED MARJORIE and me from bringing up the subject of our mothers again, but we both loved to gossip about our father, especially about his talent for telling tall tales.

Once she pointed to a piece of jade *ruyi*₁ behind a glass case in the dining room and asked me, “Have you ever heard the story behind that jade piece?”

I asked casually. “What story? Where was it bought? Was it in Hong Kong?”

“How could it be bought? Daddy said this was given to him by the Empress!” She struggled to pronounce the name of the Empress.

“Was it the Empress Dowager Cixi₂?” I guessed because most Americans seemed to know only of this Empress.

“That’s it, Cixi! I heard Daddy telling our dinner guests how really brilliant he was when he was a little boy, a child prodigy in fact, and how he was brought to the palace to meet the Empress Dowager. The Empress loved him, held him on her knees and gave him tidbits to eat. And then, just before he left, she gave him this piece of jade.”

“Oh, really?” I said, thinking of the six-year-old boy, running barefoot through the graveyard. If only he’d had such a piece of jade then, he needn’t have done any running.

“Do you think this story is really true?” Marjorie asked, full of curiosity. I answered with a rather non-committal smile. She then laughed and continued: “I asked Alfred about this and he said the Empress Dowager was known to give away prized jade pieces, so this story wasn’t all that impossible.”

“I have no problem believing that the Empress Dowager gave away jade pieces, but I’m not sure how Diedie ever got past all those guards in the palace and even less how he climbed on her royal knees.”

Marjorie laughed. “I know Daddy likes to brag! There is another story Mom told us. She said, up in the attic of our house, there is the original manuscript of *The Three Principles of the People* in Dr. Sun Yat-sen’s own handwriting, which Dr. Sun had personally given to Daddy. That is why we

have to be careful never to lose it or sell it. Do you think it's worth a lot of money?"

"Of course," I agreed promptly, suppressing my laughter. "A handwritten manuscript by the Father of the Chinese Republic should be treasured. In fact, it should be presented as a gift to the Government of the Chinese Republic. How could anyone ever think of selling it?"

"So you don't believe this story either?" Marjorie looked at me with suppressed laughter.

"I haven't seen the manuscript, so I cannot say whether it is genuine or not. But from what I know, Sun Yat-sen wrote it long before you and I were born, say in 1890, and if he had met no one in his life more deserving than our father to give this original manuscript to, I think it was indeed an incredible gift."³

Marjorie shook her head and laughed together with me.

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- 1 *Ruyi* (如意). A jade ornament that symbolized good wishes. A genuine antique piece is quite rare, but replicas are commonly sold in Hong Kong souvenir shops.
 - 2 Empress Dowager Cixi (慈禧太后). The mother of two Qing emperors. She ruled China in their name, between 1861 and 1909. Some people believed it was she who ruined China.
 - 3 *The Three Principles of the People* was written long before it was proclaimed officially in August 1905, when my father was a sixteen-year-old schoolboy, so how could the original manuscript be given to my father unless he had done extraordinary deeds for the Republic, which he did not? Only someone with the sort of brazen imagination like my father would tell that to someone as gullible as Grace.



ON THE OTHER HAND, THERE WERE SOME STORIES MY FATHER told me which I believe were definitely true.

He said that once, as a member of an elite club whose membership was limited to the very rich, he was holding a barbeque party for quite a few famous guests. Before the guests arrived, he was looking over the barbeque being set up when two American old ladies, seeing that he was Chinese, assumed immediately that he must be the cook. They grabbed him by the arm and asked him to prepare a barbeque party for them the next night, even promising him a generous tip. My father not only accepted their offer but even asked these old ladies for their room number at the club so that he could be on time to serve them.

He said to me, “To be mistaken for a cook in this country is nothing to be ashamed of. It’s because we’ve been able to cook so well that we Chinese have been able to survive in America. Besides, I could use the extra money.” He was quite prepared to offer his service.

The only pity was that the next morning, when he was having breakfast in the club’s dining room with other members, the two ladies saw him and realized that he was a club member and not a cook. Embarrassed, they hastily retreated to their rooms, packed, and checked out. So my father never did earn that big tip.

It was not the first time that he had been mistaken for a cook or a waiter. On another occasion, when he was hosting a dinner party in a famous restaurant, he arrived early in order to greet his guests. As he was waiting in the lounge, an American couple came in. They apparently had made no reservation and therefore could not be seated. The man came up to my father, mistaking him for a waiter, and slipped some money into his hand, telling him to get them a good table. Smiling, my father put the money in his pocket and signaled for the head waiter, a white man, whom he knew well. In front of this couple, my father instructed the head waiter to seat them.

I laughed and said, “You should have at least passed the money to the head waiter.”

“Why should I?” He countered. “I did the man a favor, didn’t I? So why shouldn’t I keep the tip?”

Yet another time, I witnessed an incident in which he was snubbed right to his face. That day, a group of us had gone from our office to Chinatown for lunch, but because my father’s chauffeur was on leave, we all went by a taxi. Returning to the office after lunch, we took another taxi. As we were getting out of the car, my father gave the driver a half dollar as a tip. At that time in 1942, fifty cents wasn’t worth very much, but it could still buy a decent hotdog. However, our driver was not happy with it. With his thumb, he contemptuously flicked the fifty-cent coin out the window, saying, “You need it more than I do, buster.”

We were shocked at his rudeness, and were just about to argue with him, when my father quietly bent over and picked up the coin from the sidewalk. “You’re right,” he said, “I’ll have better use for it than you do.” As he pocketed the coin, he led us up to his office.

That made a deep impression on me.

A few years later when the King of Thailand came to New York on a state visit, he was given the traditional welcome of the City: a ticker-tape parade down Wall Street, with the police lining the boulevard on both sides and the tapes fluttering down from the skyscrapers like snow. On that occasion, sitting in the convertible next to the Thai King, was the official representative of New York City, my father. He had been chosen from a committee of well-known businessmen whom the City had considered to be worthy representatives to welcome royalty and important guests. I personally think that he was chosen for his appreciation of a fifty-cent coin and his knowledge of how to use it more than that taxi driver who flipped it in contempt.



SUDDENLY IT WAS THE SUMMER OF 1943, WHEN I FINALLY graduated from Mills College. With diploma in hand, I hurriedly left California. I did not even stay for the summer-camp counselor job, because I had already been offered a well-paid job, working for an aluminum smelter in New Jersey.

At a time when it was often difficult for a Chinese to find a job in America, I was lucky enough to graduate in the middle of the Second World War, when most of the American boys who studied sciences had been drafted into the military, leaving their jobs vacant and to be filled by female students, even foreigners. We, the chemistry majors at Mills, became a valuable commodity to many factories. Even before graduation, I had three different offers from factories which desperately wanted me to work for them. The one that I chose to work for had their chemist about to be inducted and urgently needed a replacement. Without consulting my father, I accepted the job.

With an introduction from my employer, I applied to stay at the dormitory run by the Salvation Army, which was located on the southern part of Manhattan, in Greenwich Village. It was more pleasant than most hotels, and was even more attractively priced than the International House, which was a favorite with my cousins Lien-yan and Lien-jun. Also, it was close to the harbor, which would cut down the commute time from New York to New Jersey. There was an added benefit for living there, which my employer was not aware of: the dormitory I had chosen was quite close to my father's office. I had finally, to some extent, taken my father's preferences into my consideration.

When my father found that I had already made arrangements for my own job as well as my own living quarters, he was rather peeved because he had not been consulted, but there was little he could do since everything was all settled. He still insisted that I should stay with him in Long Island, but when I pointed out that it would be too much trouble to do that since I would have to make the daily commute twice, between Long Island and New York, and then to New Jersey, he reluctantly agreed.

Still, he wanted to have me set aside blocks of time for him, as I had done before when I worked for Wah Chang. He suggested that I go back with him to Long Island on Friday nights to spend time with him and keep him company through the weekend when he went fishing and to help him cook. I would then return to New York City on Sunday nights. In addition, I was to keep Tuesday and Thursday evenings free so we could have dinner together in the city.

When I heard this, I protested strongly. I said that his schedule would leave me only three free evenings a week, which would limit my social life. In the past, while I was on winter holiday, I did not object to this constraint but now that I was to live the whole year on my own, I wanted to have my freedom, or else I might become an old maid – just like Marjorie had teasingly said I might become!

My father then threatened that if I didn't agree to what he had proposed, he wouldn't let me live outside Long Island at all. I retorted that since I was already making enough money to support myself, I deserved my freedom. It was my declaration of independence, as if I was saying: "I don't need your money now, what can you do about it?"

After much negotiation and arguing back and forth, we agreed to call off the mandatory Tuesday night dinners, to give me one more day of freedom. It was rare that this kind of bargaining should take place between father and daughter, about how much time they should spend together. At that time I thought it was merely his nonsensical parental interference, but now, forty years later, I realize that he had needed me to converse with him in the dialect he had grown up with, and which he had missed, since none of his other daughters knew any Chinese, least of all the rather obscure dialect of Hunan. His stubborn insistence was actually his way of expressing fatherly love. Thinking back, the memory of our heated arguments still tickles me.

When I left California in 1943, I felt a wave of regret, not knowing when, if ever, I would return to my beloved Mills. For the next few years, I lived only on the East Coast.



MY NEW JOB WAS NOT DIFFICULT, BUT IT WAS DEMANDING AND monotonous. After only two months, I wanted to quit.

My work at the factory began smoothly. The basic chemistry that Mills taught me must have been quite good because, as soon as I started work at the smelter, I learned what to do quickly and precisely. After one month on the job, I finished the backlog of work that had accumulated over the past few months.

Just when I felt that I could relax a little after achieving this, another technician from the physics lab left for the army, and so I was told by my laboratory chief to temporarily fill his gap. According to her, the job did not need much intelligence. All I had to deal with was the splitting apart of a metal rod by machine. She was right, the work definitely did not require any brains, but it almost caused me to lose my hearing.

Our factory smelted aluminum ore, but in the process of smelting, we had to determine whether the product was up to our standard, so we needed to test its quality regularly. Thus, at short intervals, an aluminum sample, in the shape of a rod, was extracted and delivered to the physics lab for analysis, so that various factors could be immediately amended by the production line when necessary.

Basically, it was very simple work. Before the rod was stretched, it had to be marked in about ten places and measured exactly. Then the rod was mechanically stretched until it broke, and these same spots had to be measured again, also exactly. It needed no intelligence at all to do that, but the repetition and the exactness in measuring were tormenting.

And that was not all. The worst thing was that, each time the rod broke into two halves, there was a sudden 'bang' as loud as a clap of thunder, causing my heart to almost jump out of my chest. If this happened only once or twice a day, it would still be fairly tolerable, even if my heart jumped wildly. But with the steady stream of rods coming through, so many of them that I lost count, the 'bangs' they produced were truly deafening.

After a week of listening to this roaring sound, I decided I could not bear it any longer. The only way out of it was to resign from my job. I talked it over with my father, but he did not want me to resign. Firstly, he was proud

that I had gotten the job so soon after my graduation and felt that I should not toss it away. Secondly, he was a friend of the smelter's owner, who sang my praises, probably just to please him, but the praises had made my father think that I was doing well, and thus I should not quit. No one paid any attention to my complaints about my hearing loss.

Since my father objected, I hatched another plan. I would use psychological warfare and play a trick on his weakness which was that, behind all his Western façade, he still had the traditional Chinese respect for education, thinking that the more one studied the better one became. Therefore, in order for me to quit my job, what I had to do was to tell him that I wanted to go back to school for more of that wonderful knowledge.

I acted according to plan: I applied to Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a graduate student and, as soon as I was accepted, I reported that to my father and quit my job.

In this way, I earned some free time in the remaining portion of my summer vacation to explore the New York theaters and museums, before I had to return to school.



I ENROLLED IN MIT IN THE SUMMER OF 1943. THE SCHOOL WAS located at Cambridge, Massachusetts, and has always been one of the most elite universities in the United States.

I'm not sure how I managed to get in. It seemed incredible that I had been accepted into MIT because my grades from Mills were not all that outstanding. Maybe it was because the student enrollment was down due to the war, and the school was so short of funds that it welcomed even people like me, as long as I could pay for myself. So what, I told myself, what did I care? As long as MIT would let me in, I would go just to quit that blasted factory job.

But as a graduate student at MIT, I was not happy. The courses themselves were not really that hard; I could get through them as long as I was willing to spend all my time studying. The problem was I realized that, for the first time in my life, I was not as totally dedicated to a life of pursuing pure science as I had thought I was.

While studying chemistry at Mills, my school life was wonderful and well rounded. We could sit in the shade of trees and listen to the professor lecture, and we could lounge around after classes and gossip about movie stars. As long as I turned in the required reports and did my homework, I could always squeeze time out to read novels and poetry. In this way, I felt that I, as a science student, had achieved an emotional equilibrium with literature.

Once I got into MIT, however, I saw how my male counterparts studied. Unlike the way I read chemistry, which was like fighting a guerrilla war, snatching knowledge here and there just to get through the course, they totally immersed themselves in their 'Quest for Knowledge,' as if their lives depended on it. I marveled at the way they could talk incessantly, and with great excitement, even during meals, about the beauty of a spark plug or a catalytic converter. I doubted that I had the same kind of keen interest. In the final analysis, I realized, it was not a matter of intellect that defined a true scientist, but of interest.

I managed to scrape through that first year with mediocre grades, but I knew I really did not want to study chemistry anymore. I admitted to myself

that Fifth Uncle had been right: what I loved was literature and philosophy, not science. That being the case, I told myself that I could nab a Masters degree in chemistry if I tried hard enough, but since my heart was not in it, the best I could hope for in life was to be an unhappy chemistry professor. But if I should change my course of studies to literature, I would perhaps also be a professor, or maybe a mere teacher, but I would be happy. If both courses led to a teaching job, then why shouldn't I choose to teach something I love?

But how was I going to explain this to anyone? If I had failed my courses, I could at least say that I couldn't do the work. But it would be a lie since I had not failed any of my subjects. My father would look at my report card and urge me to continue, saying since I had already invested so much time and effort in chemistry, I should prod on. Without my having realized it, what my father thought had become important to me

When the summer vacation began, I returned to my Long Island home. This time, my father not only wanted me to keep him company eating and fishing, he also made me work in the laboratory of his tungsten plant, analyzing all sorts of mineral ores. With my Mills training, I could do this kind of work blindfolded. If I had told him then that I did not want to go back to MIT, he would definitely not agree to it, especially since his colleagues had been flattering him with praises of me, so that he was convinced I was a science whiz. If I should insist on changing schools, he would scold me as being capricious and naughty. No, I said to myself, it was not a good time to bring up the issue of transfer.

I knew my father was unreasonably proud of me. He had a total of eight children if I was to include my cousin Lien-yan who had been adopted. Among us, Lien-ming was a medical doctor and Marjorie was a graduate from Wellesley, whereas Lien-yan and I were not only college graduates but we were pursuing further studies at the prestigious MIT. On the mental scoreboard where I kept score of such things, it meant that all of Mama's three children were college material whereas only one of Grace's five children had accomplished as much. Naturally my father held high hopes for me even though he would never admit it. How, then, could I let him down? My transfer would also disappoint Mama, who was always anxious for good news about me. I did not dare bring up the topic.

After the summer vacation, I returned disheartened to Cambridge and resumed my classes at MIT. Just then, I saw an announcement in the newspaper that Dr. Hu Shi was in town to give a talk at Harvard. I jumped for joy! He could be my savior. I would go seek out Uncle Hu. There were two good reasons for my asking him for help. First, during his own school days, he had switched mid-way from medicine to philosophy, so he of all people would sympathize with the conflict in my mind. Second, he was a good friend of my father and I was sure my father would listen to his opinion.

Just as I had expected, after having tea twice with Uncle Hu and on the strength of two essays I wrote for him, which he marked mercilessly with countless red crosses, he agreed that I should switch my major, and promised to talk to my father about it when he returned to New York.

As soon as I received the news that my father had agreed to my changing courses, I went straight to Cornell University in Ithaca, and began my studies anew. "Changing from chemistry to literature," said my Cornell advisor, "will not be tough, but it will take you a great deal of time because you will have to make up a lot of undergraduate courses which," he said apologetically, "might take two years." Then, he went on to add time allowed for graduate school courses, preparing and writing a Masters thesis, etc. All in all, my professor estimated that I could emerge with a degree in literature in six or seven years.

I did it in two years. During the two years, I did not feel I was under any pressure to work hard. In fact, I felt I was indulging in some form of literary gluttony, taking undergraduate and graduate courses together in great gulps. Shakespeare, Milton, 20th century poets, I absorbed them all with great enjoyment, and I finished the course requirements and wrote my thesis to earn my Masters, though shabbily, in two happy years.

Strangely enough, I never felt I was cramming or even studying. I felt free and happy. My mood and personality changed as well. Before I switched to studying literature, I would often pick fights and lose my temper like a spoiled brat. Now I had become calmer and steadier, simply because I was learning what I loved.

Perhaps there was a change in my personality, but I fell in love with a nice young man.



HIS NAME WAS HO RIH-HWA¹. HE WAS A SINGAPORE BOY WHO HAD studied in China's Xinan United University at Chengdu, the very school where I had wanted to go. He graduated with what he called 'the golden key,' a sort of Chinese Phi Beta Kappa, and remained in school to work as an assistant to Professor Buck, whose reputation seemed to depend on his being the husband of Pearl Buck, who wrote *The Good Earth*. Rih-hwa came to the United States with his own two thousand dollars in 1944, around the time I was fed up with chemistry at MIT.

His study at Cornell was agricultural economics, and while he was busy courting me, he still found the time to obtain his Masters degree in one year. According to him, the reason he did it so rapidly was that his former job as an assistant teacher had helped. Another reason, he said, was that his funds were getting so low that he was compelled to finish his work in the shortest time possible so he could move on for his PhD at Harvard.

During his first year at Harvard, an old schoolmate of his from Cornell had gone to Guangzhou, China, to prepare the opening of a sugar factory. Hung-he Ching², this schoolmate from Hawaii, must have been very fond of Rih-hwa, because he wanted to hire him even before the factory was in operation. Rih-hwa replied that he had not yet written his PhD thesis, but Hung-he insisted, saying he would offer Rih-hwa a monthly salary as a retainer so that Rih-hwa would not be poached by another employer.

With the salary offer, Rih-hwa felt like he had won the lottery and could now afford to support a wife. So he rushed over to my father and asked him for my hand in marriage.

Years later, my father told me about his first conversation with Rih-hwa during which he said: "You are a Cantonese, and my daughter comes from Hunan. Both these dialect-groups are notorious for their nasty and ferocious tempers. Aren't you afraid that you two might not get along?"

Rih-hwa frowned and sighed deeply. "Well, nothing can be done about our tempers. We'll just have to live with our tempers."

Diedie laughed heartily when he told me this story. It seemed he had taken a liking to his future son-in-law right from that beginning.

During the two years I was studying at Cornell, the Second World War had come to an end, and I had re-established contact with Mama and my sister Lien-ming. I knew Lien-ming had given birth to a son. However, by the summer of 1946 when Rih-hwa got his job offer, I knew that Mama could not come to the United States to attend my wedding. Since Rih-hwa and I did not want to wait until we returned to China, we decided to be married in July after my graduation.

Although I was the daughter of a Buddhist, I did not wish to bother Buddha with such a mundane matter as a wedding, yet I felt that a simple civil service at the City Hall was not quite dignified enough. Even though I was not a Christian, I liked the vows exchanged in a Christian ceremony, so I went to a neighborhood church in Long Island and asked the minister if he would marry us. He was very kind and said, as long as we were not atheists, the church did not mind whether we were Buddhist, Taoist, or Hindu. He would be glad to perform the wedding ceremony for us.

The wedding ceremony that I decided on was to begin with my being dressed in my father's house, from where he would take me to the church. Then, in front of the minister and all our guests, he would hand me to Rih-hwa. The ceremony would signify to all present, that my father had officially married off his daughter. After the wedding, I planned to adjourn to my Fourteenth Uncle's house, where we and our guests were to have dinner, so that everyone could see what a loving and gracious uncle and aunt I had. I thought the whole arrangement was very diplomatic.

This arrangement was my way of side-stepping Grace's insistence that the wedding dinner should be served at her and my father's house. I would not agree to that. His house was also Grace's house and if the wedding dinner was held in her house, it would mean that I had acknowledged Grace as my mother. How could I face Mama if I did that? On the other hand, if the dinner was at Fourteenth Uncle's place, then my Fourteenth Uncle was the host and his wife Lucy would be the hostess, not Grace, and that would side-step the whole issue of whether or not I had accepted Grace as my mother.

I thought this was the best compromise which took into consideration everyone's feelings.

My father must have understood my line of reasoning and did not urge me to change, nor did he scold me or say anything about it. He simply

deferred to my wishes. However, when I saw my mother in Shanghai years later, she expressed some regret that I did not have the wedding dinner at my father's house. She said that since I was his daughter, I should have invited my guests to his house, so that everyone would know I was his daughter, whereas having the guests in my uncle's house made it seem as if I had not been acknowledged as my father's daughter. Was it, she asked sadly, because he did not want to acknowledge me as his daughter? I honestly did not know how to explain. I just shook my head and smiled and let it go at that.

That I was his own daughter, my father had acknowledged not only in all official documents, but he had proudly introduced me to his friends and colleagues as his bilingual daughter, who could speak both Chinese and English fluently. Since I could speak Chinese, the listeners naturally inferred that I was born in China and was raised by a mother in China.

How much more recognition could he give? Publish an announcement in the newspaper to that effect? But might not an announcement like that suggest that all his children born and bred in America were not legitimate, especially when I was younger than most of his American daughters? Might not people speculate that he was a bigamist who had taken a new Chinese wife after he had married in America? No matter how one tried to settle the score somebody would be hurt, so why try to settle it?

No matter what went wrong with my parents' marriage, nobody was in a position to blame any of those involved. It had happened so long ago and I was so muddled that I had no wish to break open an egg to look for bones³. In the spirit of letting bygones be bygones, I had carefully planned the wedding to please Mama. I never dreamed that she would be disappointed.

With a relationship so complex, how can anyone know how to explain it? However it was explained, there would always be others to contradict it. And vice versa. As my father's favorite saying goes: "A man must be responsible for his own actions"⁴, meaning no matter if he was right or wrong, he must own up to himself that he did it, and that no defending of himself or laying the blame on others could change that fact. So, why defend yourself or blame others?

It was then that I began to understand why my parents never explained their marriage.

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- 1 Ho Rih-hwa (何日华). That is my husband's name as he always spelled it.
 - 2 Hung-he Ching (陈庆和). This is the name of our Hawaiian friend whose Chinese name I never knew how to spell in Hanyu Pinyin. What I have written is his own way of spelling it.
 - 3 "Break open an egg to look for bones." (打破了鸡蛋找骨头.) This common saying means that even if one breaks an egg shell, one will not find any bones. Or, one cannot find an answer even if one takes apart the whole problem.
 - 4 "A man must be responsible...for deeds he did." (大丈夫一人作事一人当.) A half boast to mean that a great man must be responsible for whatever actions he has taken, no matter the consequences, and therefore he needs no explanation of any kind.



SHORTLY AFTER MY WEDDING, LIEN-MING LEFT HER SON CARLOS in Mama's care and came with her husband Qing-qi₁ to the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, the United States, for further studies. It was during this period that Lien-ming told me how, in 1937, she had stumbled across my father's letters under Mama's bed.

Not long after that, Fourteenth Uncle asked me to go to New Jersey to help him as a chemist in his pilot dye-making factory. It just so happened that before I had decided to accept the job, Rih-hwa's friend, Hung-he, had written to say that he was disenchanted with the greed and corruption of the Chinese government officials he had to work with. Being an American Chinese from Hawaii, he could not tolerate these things and had decided that he would give up his dream of setting up the sugar factory. He told Rih-hwa apologetically that since he was leaving China, he could not afford to pay Rih-hwa a salary anymore.

In short, Rih-hwa had become unemployed. We had three paths to choose from: One, we could live on air₂ while Rih-hwa continued to study at Harvard. Two, I could go to work as a chemist in New Jersey while supporting Rih-hwa who would go on studying. Three, we could both go to live in New York where I could commute to New Jersey to work while Rih-hwa continued his research for his doctorate paper at the New York public library. We were newlyweds after all, so we chose the third path and moved to New York.

We found an apartment on Central Park West. The address sounded nice, but the rooms were pathetically small. You couldn't even let out a long sigh because there would be nowhere for the air to go! But my half brother Kuo-ching chose this time to visit us regularly.

He had already left the Air Force and was idling away his time. Our father scolded him for not getting a real job, but he couldn't care less. If he had money, he would spend it. If he did not, he would come over to our little apartment for a meal and talk till late at night and then lay down on the floor to sleep. His sisters all said that he had seen so much death and destruction during the war that he was disillusioned with life and angry with

the world. They urged me to be patient with him, especially since he was the only son in the family.

I listened to him telling his stories, most of which were colorful and vivid like those of my father's. One story in particular made me wince.

He said that once he was given a furlough to return to America, a circumstance rare to him while he was in China, but when he reached home, there was nobody there except the maid. He was hungry, and opened the refrigerator, where he saw a piece of steak. At that time, with America still on rations, it was very difficult to get any meat, so he was about to cook it for himself when the maid who looked after Grace objected, saying he could not touch it because that steak had been especially reserved for his mother. Even in his hunger, he waited.

And he waited. As Grace never got out of bed before noon, he was so hungry that eventually he ignored the maid and went ahead and grilled the steak himself. When Grace finally came downstairs and saw that the steak was gone, she was furious, and gave him a scolding that reminded him of his superior officer.

"What did you do then?" I asked him sympathetically.

"I didn't do a thing," he said, tossing back his head and laughed. "I just grabbed my bag and rushed off. I had a grand time during that leave, staying here and there with friends, until I had to leave for China. I never went home again during that whole trip."

It was hard for me to imagine this. If it was I who went home to Shanghai, and wanted to eat some meat when there was none, I think my mother would have cut off a piece of her own flesh to feed me.

1 Qing-qi (庆麒). My brother-in-law's name.

2 My father did give me \$5,000 for my dowry but Rih-hwa refused to use it.



NOT LONG AFTER WE MOVED TO NEW YORK, MY FATHER SAID TO Rih-hwa that since I had to go to work, he, Rih-hwa, could go to the Wah Chang office to rest, or at least to have someone to talk to, if he got bored at the library. He even added that he had already assigned a small office to be especially reserved for Rih-hwa.

Upon hearing this, Rih-hwa agreed that it would be pleasant to see people every now and then, instead of burying himself all day in the library, so he took to going to the office often where he met many of our friends and my former colleagues.

Not only did he meet with personal friends, but my father would also drop in sometimes to have chats and occasional lunches with him, and sometimes he would ask Rih-hwa to run little errands. One of these errands which Rih-hwa thought highly amusing was to deliver my father's calling cards to his out-of-town visitors, but only after making sure they were not in their hotel rooms, so that it would seem that my father had actually dropped by but 'unfortunately' had not found them in.

"These businessmen are so tricky," Rih-hwa said to me. "In the academic world, we would never think of doing something like this." Little did he know he was soon to leave his academic world for that of the tricky businessmen!

What happened, I learned only years later, was my father had already felt that Rih-hwa was good material for business and wanted to recruit him to work for Wah Chang, but thought that Rih-hwa, with his PhD thesis to be finished, was only interested in academia and would refuse any job offer from his father-in-law. Thus he lured Rih-hwa little by little until he was hooked. After all, my father was an excellent fisherman!

I worked in Fourteenth Uncle's factory for a year until the summer of 1948, while two of the M-girls and their husbands had already been sent by my father to work in China. Then my father asked Rih-hwa if he too would be willing to join Wah Chang, telling him that, since he was from Singapore, he might be sent to Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia. By then, Rih-hwa had already been separated from his family during the long years of war, and was homesick for them. Reluctantly putting away his

books and bidding goodbye to his dream of becoming a professor, Rih-hwa joined the company.

After he was officially employed, he was sent for training in various offices, while Lien-ming and I sailed for Shanghai together.

Even after having been apart from Mama for eight years, she still seemed much the same to me. Actually she had aged from a healthy forty-seven to a much older fifty-five, but to me, because I was still young, I did not think about how Mama had aged, only how I myself had matured.

One day, as I was ironing a skirt, Thirteenth Aunt saw me and mocked me in her soft Hunan dialect: “*Aiya*, gone overseas to study and now has learned how to iron clothes!” Without thinking, I responded with the American way of acknowledging praise by saying, “Thank you.” She laughed, and chided me: “*Aiya*, no sense of shame! I praise her and she thanks me!” Everybody joined in her laughter.

I suddenly remembered how, when I first went to America and my schoolmates would compliment me on my dress, I would modestly reply that the dress was plain and not really nice. They were offended and accused me of being a hypocrite. They exclaimed: “Don’t lie! If you really don’t think it’s nice, why do you wear it?” Now the reverse had happened. How often, I wondered, had my father encountered this kind of cultural contradiction?

I lived in Shanghai with Mama for nearly a month during which Rih-hwa flew in for a two-day visit to see his mother-in-law. He left for Bangkok in a hurry, after witnessing a great many bizarre happenings due to the hyperinflation, such as paying a full box of cash for a bowl of noodles. Mama and I talked very little about ourselves because our apartment was too small and too crowded. There were Thirteenth Aunt and her daughter, as well as Lien-ming and her husband and son, and Mama and me, all of us squeezed into such a tiny space that there was little chance for Mama to ask me about my personal affairs.

It was only when I took her on a trip to Hangzhou for about a week that she asked me about the details of my wedding. Even then, I felt that the relationship between mother and daughter had been turned upside-down by the years I had spent away from her. I was no longer the unruly yet deferential daughter, and she was not the same authoritative yet forgiving mother. We were still mother and daughter but we had also become friends,

discussing our life experiences with a mutual understanding that had not been there before I went away. Except for that little misunderstanding about my wedding arrangement, she talked with me openly and pleasantly like a friend on equal footing.

Although she still kept quiet about her relationship with my father, I did not feel as if she was hiding anything from me, but rather that the past did not matter to her any longer.

Because I was, officially, only stopping in Shanghai on my way to Bangkok where both Rih-hwa and I would be taking up jobs, I had to leave shortly after our Hangzhou trip. At that time, I thought that since I had already made it back to Asia, I would have many more opportunities in the near future to see Mama again, so there was no sadness at our parting.

But, what I couldn't foresee was that China would change her color shortly after I left. In the blink of an eye, the bamboo curtain dropped! The political barriers between China and other nations resulted in countless obstacles for people trying to enter or to leave China. My hopes of going back to China in the next ten years never materialized.



DURING OUR FIRST YEAR IN THAILAND, RIH-HWA LEARNED HOW TO buy and sell mineral ores, while I worked in the laboratory analyzing these ores. Before long, however, my father summoned Rih-hwa and me back to San Francisco to accompany him as he attended the National Mining Conference, where he would deliver a speech. Then we went with him to Nevada to inspect one of his mines.

My father must have been in his early sixties at that time, but to me, he seemed to be bursting with energy. He had the bravado of a hero. When I was young, I did not think one way or another about his looks, but watching him at the mine, I could see how he might have looked heroic in Mama's eyes.

I remember going with him to a casino in Reno. I was afraid of losing money, so I said I did not dare to gamble. He then took out a wad of money and handed Rih-hwa and me \$300 each, telling us that we, including himself, could gamble with this amount until it was all gone, then we should quit and go up to our bedrooms. Rihhwa was not very enthusiastic about gambling, so he went up to his room as soon as his money had been lost, while I stayed near the roulette table for most of the time doing my so-called 'research.'

By the time I had enough of the game, I went to look for my father. When I found him, he was standing next to a large green table, rolling dice. He was shouting and exclaiming, his left fist clutching a wad of bills and his right fist holding a pair of dice. The crowd around him cheered him on. I did not know whether the money he held was his winnings of the night, or whether he had lost the \$300 and was using another stash of cash. It did not really matter. In his excitement over the gambling, he really seemed to shine, and was as magnetic as a Clark Gable! As we left, he gave me all his 'winnings' which seemed to me like a small fortune.



ONE YEAR LATER, WE WERE SENT TO RANGOON, BURMA, TO BUY tungsten ores for Wah Chang. It was a mom-and-pop type of operation, with Rih-hwa doing the business with occasional side trips to Tavoy, a mining town in Burma, while I managed the laboratory. Even then, I was beginning to get interested in the production of mung bean vermicelli, and was just about to start my own research when I found myself pregnant. When my father heard of my pregnancy, he reacted as if he had, as the Chinese proverb says, “received a chicken feather in place of an arrow for military command”¹, and immediately wanted me to return to the United States. The M-girls, who had by then left China because of the regime change, also followed with letters trying to persuade me to go to New York saying that the Burmese medical services could not possibly be as advanced as those in America. Lien-ming too urged me to leave Rangoon for Shanghai, adding that she and Mama could help me during and after the delivery, not realizing China had already forbidden me to enter.

The only person who remained calm was Rih-hwa. He said, “There are so many Burmese women giving birth right here in Burma, and I haven’t yet seen them all die from childbirth. What makes you so special? Why can’t you just stay here to have your baby?” I had always tried to be ‘proletarian,’ and thought what Rih-hwa said was politically correct, so I made up my mind to stay in Rangoon.

As it turned out, it was not that the Burmese hospitals were inferior, but that I, as a woman, was utterly useless. On Friday, my water-bag broke and the contractions started. It took me two whole nights and one whole day to get Minfong out into this world, while my pain never stopped for a minute. My doctor told me that I practically screamed down the roof tiles of the hospital. Rih-hwa also said that he waited sleeplessly outside my hospital room for two nights, and was chewed alive by mosquitoes. As for me, I shuddered at the mere mention of childbirth, and vowed, “Never again!”

The following winter, my father came to Rangoon, and even held a struggling Minfong on his knee for a family portrait. After he returned to the U.S., he suddenly summoned me to bring baby Minfong and Rih-hwa to New York to attend our first grand family reunion.

I did not want to bring Minfong because the reunion was scheduled for the summer of 1952 for just one month. If we went, it would be a very hurried trip and it would be hard on the baby. So I took Minfong to Singapore for my mother-in-law to take care of her. After that, I went with Rih-hwa to London.

Why London?

Because we had been denied visas to enter the United States! For reasons unclear to us, the U.S. embassy in Rangoon would not grant us the visa, even though we had been in and out of the United States before.

Most of our friends in Rangoon were Americans, because with them we shared a common language and similar customs, so we could get along with them more easily than we could with the Burmese. In fact, we had more friends who were U.S. citizens than Burmese, and among our American friends, there were a few who worked at the U.S. embassy. So why were we rejected?

It was only much later that I was told that some of those American ‘friends’ of ours were special agents for the U.S. government. The year was 1952 and the Korean War was raging, while the United States was in the midst of the virulently anti-Communist period under Senator McCarthy. But I didn’t know better. As a product of the U.S. system of education, I had been taught to believe in the freedom of speech so proudly proclaimed by all Americans, and therefore I often opened my big mouth to criticize U.S. foreign policy. For that, I was branded a “Fellow Traveler” and “a Communist Sympathizer.” In this context, it was not surprising that the United States would not let me and my husband enter their nation.

When I didn’t get my visa, I did not really care. If I could not go there, so be it. I could still eat and sleep, so what was the big deal? But when my father learned of it, he was extremely offended, probably because he felt that since he was an important personage in American society, how could the government deny his very daughter a visa into the country? Wasn’t that a slap in his face?

Since he did not know yet that the reason for our visa denial was political, he told us to go to London because the American ambassador to the U.K. was a good friend of his, and would definitely give us the required visas.

I was only too glad to comply. Since I had studied English Literature, I really wanted to explore the country which I had only read about in books. Besides, it was the Coronation Year for Queen Elizabeth II, and there would be a national celebration for us to watch. As my Chinese passport had been replaced by a British one the day I married, there was no question of visas. As soon as we arrived in London, Rih-hwa called on the American ambassador, but His Excellency was not in town, and would not be back for several days. We could only wait. One night, when we went to the theater to watch a play, we ran into the U.S. ambassador to Switzerland, who was also a good friend of my father's. He asked what we were doing in London, and we explained the situation. He promised to look into it as soon as he returned to Washington DC the next day.

After a few days, the visa for Rih-hwa came through, but there was none for me. Even my father's good friend could not find out why. Rih-hwa laughed at me and said: "It looks as if you have become a full-fledged communist by now."

My father did not think it was funny. He told Rih-hwa to go on to New York first, while he continued to work on my visa. Another two weeks went by, during which I had a great time exploring London and its neighboring counties. Following the tour guides, I saw whatever palaces, homes of poets and other historical sights they led me to. Finally my U.S. visa came through. Apparently, my father had to call on all his friends in the Foreign Office, spending a lot of time and energy, and going through countless procedures before finally obtaining my visa.

Why did it take so long for it to be issued? One simple word: Mother. The logic of the agency was quite unfathomable. They evidently thought that even though I had been cleared of the charge of being a 'pink,' I still had a mother living in communist China, so I must be far too dangerous to be allowed to enter America. Did they really think I would start a revolution in the name of all mothers?

That was the first time I realized how much communism was feared by other nations.

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- 1 “Received a chicken feather...for military command.” (鸡毛当令箭.) In the old days, the military command was usually delivered with a special kind of arrow and when one saw the arrow, one took action promptly. Some ordinary people however, would also react the same way when they receive a message with a feather attached to it. People like that are said to be foolish, or at best very worried.



WITH A FATHER LIKE MINE IN AMERICA, I GUESS THE IMMIGRATION office must have finally agreed that a communist daughter like me probably wasn't going to be much of a threat to U.S. society. When I finally made it to New York, I rushed to the family reunion, but it was already coming to an end.

Our family reunions included not only my father's own children, but his various nieces and nephews as well. He had rented a big house and moved all of us into it, including his grandsons and granddaughters, which made the house rather noisy. The two three-year-old sons of Madeline and Marie were always bickering, and Madeleine's infant daughter slept in the top drawer of a bureau, howling all day and all night long. Lien-yan's children were quieter. I thought I did the right thing by not bringing Minfong along.

By the time I arrived in New York, the family reunion had only one event left, and that was the one designed personally by my father. To each of his seven children attending, he had given US\$500 so that we could each take our turn to host the whole family for one night. The understanding was that if the \$500 was not enough for the meal, the host had to subsidize it with his own money, but if any of the \$500 was left after paying for the meal, the host would get to pocket the extra money.

I could only remember what Kuo-ching did. When it was his turn to provide dinner, he invited all of us down to the beach below his house for a clambake. He urged us all to dig for clams with the shovels he provided. Then he asked us to bake the clams in a big barrel full of seaweed and seawater, which he had collected. Everything was ready-made and cost no money. He didn't even provide any plates. We all ate and played on the beach and had a wonderful time. And the host made \$500! That was typical of Kuo-ching.

After a few days of such fun, the gathering dispersed and everyone left. It was time for Rih-hwa and me to leave too. My father sent us to the airport, and casually asked if we had enough money on us. Rih-hwa said we were flying directly to Rangoon, and so the \$200 we had on us should be plenty. My father shook his head and sighed. He was probably about sixty-three years old at the time. "Children, children," he said in English, "the

world is full of sudden surprises. If you don't have any extra money on you, whom can you rely on then?" As he spoke, he took out all the money he had in his wallet and shoved it at us. There was about \$800. "That will have to do," he said.

Sure enough, a surprise awaited us at the Rome airport. The airline told us that we needed a visa for Saudi Arabia even though we were only in transit. And since we didn't have the Saudi visa, we couldn't be allowed to leave Rome. We argued that we had no intention of landing and that we could remain in the same aircraft and proceed straight to Rangoon. But when did anyone ever win an argument with immigration officers? In the end, we could only mutter curses at the travel agent and the airline for not having told us when we left New York, and grudgingly disembarked from the plane in Rome. Now we would have to stay in a hotel and eat in restaurants. Our lack of funds worried us.

As soon as we left the airport, we went to get a Saudi visa. After that, we went to see what flights eastward we could connect on, only to discover that all flights from Rome were fully booked for the entire week and possibly longer. It meant that we had to check into a hotel which we reluctantly did, while peeking into our wallets. Then, we spent days making the rounds of all the other airlines, including the small local ones. With great difficulty, we found an airline whose office was about the size of a sesame seed, belonging to Egyptian Airlines. They would not accept the airline ticket we were holding, and insisted that we must spend over \$300 each for new tickets to fly to Cairo.

Rih-hwa said: "Rome is such a center for airlines! If we don't get out of Rome, we might not be able to get on any flight for a week or more. Better just head for Cairo and see what flights are available there."

Fortunately we had the \$800 that my father had given us so that we could, with the \$200 we already had, buy the tickets to Cairo, pay off our hotel bills, and send a telegram to our Rangoon office to wire us some money in Cairo. After that, we didn't have a cent left on us.

In Cairo, Rih-hwa told the taxi driver to charge our fare to the hotel, and then bluffed our way into staying at the hotel for three nights, telling the staff to put all expenses on credit. I never felt so hollow inside, but Rih-hwa acted very confidently. He was so confident that he even got our local guide

to lend us some money while taking us to see the Sphinx and the Giza pyramids.

At the pyramids, we asked a fortune teller to forecast the health of Rih-hwa's father in Singapore as we knew he had been ill. The fortune teller traced circles and lines in the sand and replied that the patient was doing fine, which made Rih-hwa smile.

After receiving the money wired by our office and finding an airline that would take us to Rangoon, we hurriedly left Cairo. When we got to Rangoon, Rih-hwa's secretary met us at the airport, but she waited until we were home to hand Rih-hwa a telegram from Singapore. His father had died three days before!

Rih-hwa cried like a baby. He didn't sleep that night. Just the year before, he and his brother had held a party to celebrate their father's sixtieth birthday, never expecting that their father would be gone only one year later. This was the first time that either of us had faced death, and we were overcome by sadness, not understanding death's power until it had descended so closely on us.

The next day we rushed to Singapore to comfort Rih-hwa's mother and siblings. But after only a few days there, and after the funeral was over, we had to return to Rangoon, taking Minfong back with us, because we had already been away from the office for too long and had left too much business unattended.

Immediately after our return, I discovered that I was pregnant again. I felt comforted that a birth could replace a death. I did not know then that the barrier that separates life from death is only paper-thin.

Even though I had sworn never to have another baby after Minfong's difficult birth, I had to face the fact that a new life was growing within me. That was reality, and the way I faced reality was to head for Hong Kong in search of a doctor who could guarantee me a pain-free childbirth. I managed to find one who told me of a new kind of anesthesia that could render childbirth absolutely painless.

I was overjoyed. Not only had I found this doctor, but I had gotten consent from Fourteenth Uncle and Aunt to let me use their beautiful big house in Deep Water Bay in Hong Kong. I telephoned Lien-ming with the news. I said that before the baby was born, I could go to Shanghai to bring

Mama to Hong Kong and then I could take her to Bangkok where I would have a chance to take care of her.

Lien-ming said that she wouldn't object, if Mama agreed. I told myself laughingly: "Of course she will agree."



BY THE TIME I WAS DUE TO GO TO HONG KONG TO GIVE BIRTH to Kwon-ping, we had already moved from Rangoon to Bangkok for both political and economical reasons. In the first place, Rih-hwa had been promoted to General Manager of Thai Wah and I was reassigned as its Chief Chemist, a job that had been left vacant when I went to Rangoon. Our residence should, therefore, logically be in Bangkok. Secondly, the political situation in Rangoon had become more and more anti-non-Burmese, and my father thought we had best get out when we could. Thirdly, since I had already completed my research in mung bean starch while in Rangoon, we thought it would be ideal to set up a factory to make bean noodles in Bangkok.

I was therefore kept very busy looking for a site, supervising the construction of new buildings, ordering and designing machinery, solving problems in the laboratory, and so on. Bangkok was very hot in the month of May and I remember how, one day, standing under the corrugated tin roof in sweat-soaked jeans over my protruding stomach, I looked all around me and burst into tears.

When the due date for the baby neared, I took Minfong and her baby *amah*, Ah Ping, to Hong Kong. But I did not succeed in going to Shanghai to fetch Mama personally, because I could not obtain a Chinese visa. I could only stand at the Hong Kong side of the railroad terminal to await her arrival. I saw her as she embraced Lien-ming, who had accompanied her all the way from Shanghai, before she made her way towards me, lumbering awkwardly across the train tracks. She was walking like an old lady. I felt happy and sad, happy because she was still healthy and sad because I knew that she was already fifty-nine years old, about the same age as my recently deceased father-in-law.

It must have been difficult for her to leave her familiar Shanghai, where she not only knew her surroundings and understood the language, but was also under the careful medical care of two good doctors, Lien-ming and Qing-qi, not to mention the loving company of Carlos, her eight-year-old grandson, whom she had practically brought up by herself. But because of

me, she was still making this trip to Hong Kong, where she didn't know the Cantonese dialect everyone spoke.

I looked at Lien-ming. She stood on the other side of the train tracks, gazing at Mama's back. She must be wondering when she could see Mama again, since our mother would move to Thailand while she herself had to remain in China. Looking at Lien-ming, I couldn't help but ask, how had it come to pass that two sisters could only look but not touch each other, and could only send their mother, all alone, to shuttle between them?

After waving to each other, I watched Lien-ming disappear into the crowd, and I brought Mama back to Fourteenth Uncle's mansion in Deep Water Bay.

The first thing I did wrong was to give Mama a bowl of chicken-ginseng soup. I never take ginseng myself, but I had heard of its benefits for old people, so I had bought quite a lot of the best quality ginseng to make chicken soup for Mama. But when I reported this to Lien-ming over the phone that night, she scolded me angrily and said, "Are you mad? Mama's blood pressure is so high that sometimes it is more than the machine can register, and you feed her ginseng? Don't you know that ginseng sends blood pressure up even more? You better throw away all the ginseng into the garbage."

Only then did it hit home how Lien-ming had taken care of Mama all those years! She knew every detail of how to treat her, whereas I had no idea how to care for old people, and had merely assumed that as long as they could eat well and sleep well, they could live to a hundred.

I really had to learn. So over the phone, I took a lesson from Lien-ming and noted down everything that Mama should and shouldn't eat, should and shouldn't do, and so on. After hanging up the phone, I turned to Mama and asked her in exasperation, why hadn't she told me that she wasn't supposed to take ginseng? Like a little child, Mama smiled and said, "*Aiya*, after only one good meal with chicken soup, must I go back to my vegetarian diet?"

Actually, what Mama loved to eat most was the Hunanese fermented chili beans stir-fried with bitter melon, something that I thought ranked among the worst tasting food in the world! But Lien-ming had said that this dish was too salty, and therefore taboo. Poor Mama! I wished I could feed her everything she most enjoyed eating, just once, just to make her happy. But of course I could not do that. She had to be content with eating bland

food. Luckily, Hong Kong was well known for having plenty of different kinds of fresh fish, so at least I could buy her that and make her happy.

I was determined for Mama to enjoy herself. At that time, my pregnancy wasn't too advanced yet, and I could still move quite freely, so I borrowed Fourteenth Uncle's car and driver, and took Mama, with Minfong and Ah Ping, for meals at the small restaurants that served simple and tasty food. We also went shopping and sometimes even to the movies.

However, with one old, one young, and one pregnant woman, the places we could go were limited. Most of the time, we just stayed at Fourteenth Uncle's house and sat on the veranda, sipping tea and chatting. The house was built on a hillside overlooking the ocean, so that by day, there was the blue sea and its silvery waves and, by night, there were the sparkling dots of light from fishing boats. Sitting there, between the sea and sky, Mama and I would chat about the small things that happened in our lives. That was, for us, an intimacy and quiet pleasure we had not enjoyed for a long time.



WHEN MAMA CAME TO HONG KONG, SHE USED A CHINESE PASSPORT, but she didn't know that Thailand, like many others countries, would not accept any communist passport. Thus, after talking it over with Rih-hwa, I agreed with him that it might be wise to listen to those who had experience in such matters and to go to Macao and 'acquire' a Portuguese passport for her. I knew that as long as she could show a non-Chinese passport, getting into Thailand would not be a problem. Of course I was aware that buying a passport was illegal, but I justified it by rationalizing that since I was doing it out of filial piety, God would not condemn me to Hell. Maybe, after all, I was a little bit like my father in dealing with matters outside the law. In any case, I didn't brood about getting a false passport.

Since I was heavily pregnant by then, going to Macao wasn't convenient for me, so I waited until Rih-hwa came to see me and asked him to go in my place. When he returned and handed the fake new passport to me, I showed it to Mama. Thinking back, that was my second mistake. When Mama examined it, she was so shocked that she went ghastly pale, because in that passport, except for the photo of Mama, all the other personal details, such as the birth year, did not fit Mama at all. They had been lifted, I supposed, from the records of the Macao government. Since Mama could read a little English, she noticed those 'mistakes' immediately and protested to me. She said: "This isn't me!"

I thought with frustration how convenient it would be if only Mama was illiterate. I could easily fool her then, but, as it was, all I could do was to assure her by saying: "The numbers don't matter, Mama. The photo shown is that of you and that is enough. I can take this passport to the Thai Immigration Office and apply for a visa, and they will let you enter the country. Don't worry about it." Telling Mama not to worry was probably harder than persuading her to fly to the moon.

My third mistake was that I didn't explain to her fully the complexity of international travel. The only times Mama had flown was when she left Changsha for Hong Kong with me in 1939 and when she hurriedly left Hong Kong for Shanghai with Lien-ming in 1940. Both trips, as far as I

knew, were like commuting between cities within the same country, and I did not remember anything like passports being involved. This time, when she came to Hong Kong, she did have a Chinese passport, which Lien-ming had helped her secure. She did not really understand how passports worked between countries.

One day, some Hong Kong police came to our house for a routine check. It was more like a courtesy call, since our house was in Deep Water Bay, which was located quite far away from the city and a very quiet district. I answered the door and stood there, exchanging a few pleasantries with the policemen, and they soon left.

But when I went back into the house, Mama was missing.

Alarmed, I waddled around with my big stomach and searched all over for her, calling "Mama, where are you?" But there was no sight or sound of her. The others, including little Minfong and Ah Ping, as well as the two maids, a cook and a gardener, all of whom were employed by my Fourteenth Aunt, joined me in my search, spreading out inside and outside the house. Finally, in one of the unused bedrooms, behind the thick, floor-length curtains, I saw her protruding feet. Apparently, thinking the police had come to arrest her, she was so frightened that she had hidden there.

Why did she think she was wanted by police? Because she thought she was an illegal immigrant. But why did she think that her entry was illegal? Coming to Hong Kong, her Chinese passport plainly stated that she had entered the territory legally, thus she was definitely not an illegal immigrant. However, in her fake Portuguese passport, there was no record of her ever entering Hong Kong and, thus, by the new passport, she would be regarded as an illegal immigrant. But she didn't know that the police was not even aware she owned a Portuguese passport, and that, in any case, having a Portuguese passport did not invalidate her having a Chinese passport. The police would not have questioned her, but even if they had, all she had to do was to show her Chinese passport, which would prove beyond any doubt that her entry was legal.

My original plan of using two passports was quite simple. She was to use her Chinese passport to leave Hong Kong. Since her entry into Hong Kong was in order, she wouldn't have any trouble at immigration. Then when we arrived in Thailand, she was to use her new Portuguese passport for entry. The Thai immigration wouldn't care where she came from, as long as she

had a legitimate entry visa for Thailand, so she would again have no difficulty. I thought it would be such a smooth transition as to be worthy of being deemed “a heavenly cloth that had no seams”¹.

Too bad Mama was literate and knew what was said on the passports, but she did not understand the intricacy of using two passports while traveling between countries that didn’t recognize each other! She was very intelligent, but her mind did not have the craftiness that dealt with the quick twists and changes in life that my father’s brain could.

After finding Mama, I hugged her tightly and wept, thinking how much she was suffering for my mistakes, but it turned out that it was she who comforted me. She patted my shoulder and repeatedly said: “Don’t cry, don’t cry, crying will hurt the unborn baby. Look, I’m fine, aren’t I? Don’t be afraid, they won’t catch me.” She bravely thought she had eluded those who had wanted to ‘catch’ her!

My fourth mistake was that I did not realize how crucial a role language played in one’s life. At that time, Minfong was not yet two years old. Since the *amah* who took care of her was Cantonese, and since her grandmother and her aunts and cousins with whom she had lived in Singapore were all Cantonese, Rih-hwa and I naturally spoke to Minfong in the same tongue because she hadn’t, as yet, picked up any other language. In addition, these last few months in Hong Kong, interacting with Fourteenth Aunt’s various Cantonese servants, she had become fluent in the dialect.

One day, as Mama and I sat watching Minfong playing with the servants and seeing how they all laughed and chatted with her, Mama suddenly said to me in our Hunanese dialect, as if struck by a new thought: “I don’t know what they’re laughing about. I wonder if it’d be better for me to learn Cantonese or to teach Minfong Hunanese? I suppose it doesn’t matter much anyway because by the time she and I can communicate, I wouldn’t have long to live.”

I felt uneasy at the way our conversation was turning, so I quickly changed the subject. I laughed and hurriedly said: “You taught Carlos to speak Hunanese, didn’t you? Was he a good student?”

Mama laughed so wholeheartedly that my heart melted. “Although Qing-qi’s father is a Shanghainese²,” she went on to say, “he used to work in Hunan and so Qing-qi grew up speaking our Changsha dialect perfectly. That is why we all speak the Changsha dialect at home. Carlos learned from

all of us, so I wasn't his only teacher. But since it was I who was with him during the years when Lien-ming went to America, the little rascal even picked up my Ningxiang accent. Lien-ming teases me that he speaks as funnily as I do."

The difference in dialects was emphasized when my mother-in-law came to Hong Kong after Kwon-ping was painlessly born, to see me and her new grandson. The two old ladies sat politely opposite each other in our living room, trying to make polite conversation. In her accented Mandarin, Mama asked: "What language (话) do you have in Singapore?"

My mother-in-law replied in her even more accented Mandarin: "We plant every kind of flower (花)."

Mama said: "Then you must have Indian language (印度话)?"

My mother-in-law was prompt in her reply: "Oh yes. We have lilies, hibiscus, frangipani, oleander..."

By then, I could not refrain from laughing, and when I explained at length that the word *hua*, with a different accent, could mean either flower or language, both of them were also laughing.

But their temporary misunderstanding made me even more anxious. When Mama went to Bangkok, she would hear the totally unfamiliar Thai language, as well as the Hokkien and Teochew dialects. How would she handle that?

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- 1 “A heavenly cloth has no seams.” (天衣无缝.) A common saying that means any garment made by Heaven will have no seams, unlike the ones that are sewn together by human tailors. This saying also applies to good plans.
 - 2 Shanghainese. A word I coined to mean one who is Shanghai-born for many generations, like Chinese and Hunanese.



WHEN RIH-HWA WAS VISITING US IN HONG KONG, I CONVENIENTLY gave birth to Kwon-ping. The experience was really painless. Too bad I was later informed by other doctors that this kind of anesthesia could be harmful to mothers and was thus discontinued. What a pity!

That night, while I was resting at the hospital, Rih-hwa, who hardly ever touched alcohol, got good and drunk while celebrating with Mama and some friends. I suppose he was thankful that he did not have to feed the mosquitoes.

After a brief period of rest, I made serious preparations to take Mama back to Thailand with me. Over the phone, Lien-ming urged me to take Mama for a complete physical check-up before the trip. I got my obstetrician to recommend a doctor who had come originally from Thailand. After he examined Mama, he told me: “With your mother’s blood pressure so high, she should be on medication. What? She’s already on medication, and yet it’s still so high? You must be very careful. She could easily have a stroke.”

I asked him whether Mama, with her health problems, could tolerate Thailand’s hot climate or not.

“If you have air-conditioning, maybe she could,” replied the doctor, “but you know as well as I do that Bangkok doesn’t generate enough electricity to supply the demand, so it is difficult to install an air-conditioning unit at home. Without one, she definitely won’t be able to take the heat.”

I said: “I could buy a small generator, especially for the use of the air-conditioning unit.”

“Yes, of course you could, but would you want to have your mother cooped up in a room all the time?”

“She does love to stroll in the garden, but I could let her go out to the garden towards dusk, in the cool of the day. Couldn’t I?”

He looked at me. “Looks like you really want to bring your mother to Thailand with you. In that case, why don’t you bring her to live in Northern Thailand where the winters are as cool as that of a temperate zone? But the summers are still hot. Anyway, if you must live in Bangkok, I think that the

hot weather there will be a bad joke for any elderly person with high blood pressure, especially one who isn't used to the heat."

The doctor and I were speaking in English, and I thought Mama would not be able to understand what was being said, but she had remembered enough English words from her school days to get a gist of our conversation. That was my fifth mistake – to have spoken to the doctor in front of her, because as soon as we came home, she said to me: "Fung-fung, if it's that hot in Bangkok, I'm quite certain I'll develop prickly heat. That would be a real bother to you."

Prickly heat! Only then did I remember how I too developed a rash from prickly heat all over my body when I first arrived in Bangkok. It was so terribly itchy that I couldn't rest for a week and had to have a doctor administer several injections before the rash went down. If someone as young and healthy as I couldn't tolerate the heat in Thailand, how could I expect my mother to take it, when she was considerably frailer, older and fatter?

I was so obsessed with my dream of bringing her back with me that I continued to pursue the paperwork. When I was finally given the visa for Mama to enter Thailand, I felt as if I had won a major victory.

Nevertheless, I felt less and less confident about taking her to Bangkok. Having been without my mother for so many years, the prospect of having her loving company was sweet, almost a luxury. But what would be the result? Would Mama be happy? Would Mama be healthy? I began to think not just about me, but about her.

Even though I had paid good money for the immigration officers to let Mama enter, how could I be certain that she would not faint at the sight of those uniformed officers while holding a passport which she knew to be false? How could she defend or explain herself if she was separated from me and questioned in a language she had never heard before? And even if she managed to survive all that, would she be happy in her everyday life in Thailand? Would she miss Carlos and the familiarity of Shanghai, its streets and language and climate? Most importantly, would she be healthy? Could she take the heat which the doctor had warned me would be a real threat to her well-being?

I was scared to think it but I had to ask myself, would Mama die because of my stubborn insistence? How could I gamble with Mama's life?

It so happened that Velma, my old school friend from Mills, had married her boyfriend and was also living in Deep Water Bay. I often went to her house to confide in her, telling her all my anxieties and worries. One day, while I was talking to her about all my doubts, I couldn't bear it anymore, and started to cry.

Poor Velma didn't know how to comfort me or to help me decide what to do. She hesitated a while, and then finally said, "I think you should consult Lien-ming. This is a responsibility that you shouldn't bear alone. After all, your mother is her mother as well. She has a right to know."

I didn't dare go home to use the phone for fear Mama might hear us, so I used the phone at Velma's house and got hold of Lien-ming. She listened quietly, asking a few questions as I went on. Then there was a long silence.

Finally Lien-ming said: "The political situation here is very unsettled, and may become even more chaotic. Originally I was glad that Mama would not be here to witness it, and could live a more stable life with you. But you're right, her health is not something we can treat lightly. I had worried that the Bangkok heat might not suit her, but I didn't expect it to be that devastating! Yes, do send her back to us. No matter how bad the political situation here becomes, I trust that it wouldn't harm an old lady."

I did not know then that the instability Lien-ming mentioned was the beginning of the Great Leap Forward, which would lead to widespread famine and unrest throughout China.

When I got home, I carefully explained to Mama how hot the weather in Thailand was, and how the doctor had warned that, with her high blood pressure, she might not be able to adjust well to the heat. Before I could finish, Mama interrupted me. "Fung-fung, I know you are a loving daughter, and a filial one at that, but I also know that if something should happen to me in Thailand, you would forever blame yourself. So why don't I go back to the weather I'm familiar with? I'm already a bit homesick for Shanghai."

Rih-hwa came from Thailand and we discussed it at length. I also wrote to my father, asking him for his opinion. He replied that even he personally had been afraid of the Bangkok heat, so how could it be suitable for Mama?

I could not think of any better idea, so in the end, I phoned Lien-ming to ask her to come to the Hong Kong border where she would meet Mama and take her back to Shanghai. When Mama heard of my decision, she broke

out into a broad smile and said: “This house of your Fourteenth Aunt is like a gilded nest. For us to be able to enjoy this period of time together in it is already greatly satisfying. But like the proverb says: ‘Be it a nest of gold or a nest of silver, it is still not as homey as one’s own nest made of straw.’ I had dreaded not being able to see Carlos and Lien-ming again, so now that I can go back, I am really happy. The only one whom this will be hard on is you, because I know you will be so disappointed.”

Even at that point, what concerned her most was me!

We returned to the same train depot where Mama had arrived in Hong Kong. When I saw Lien-ming waiting at the other end of the train station, I sent Mama off to her. Smiling a little, Mama walked off steadily, stepping over several train tracks until she finally stood beside Lien-ming. I watched as the two of them laughed and hugged each other, and my eyes were moist. There were so many people between them and me that we only had one last chance to wave goodbye before they disappeared from my view.

That was the last time I saw my mother.



BECAUSE OUR NEWLY-OPENED VERMICELLI FACTORY PRODUCED noodles which stuck together and therefore did not sell well, Rih-hwa had been urging me to hurry home for quite some time. However, I had been delaying my homecoming since I was preparing to bring Mama back with me. Now that I had failed to do that, I hurried back to Bangkok with my two children and our one *amah*.

Rih-hwa and I were both very anxious about our bean starch factory because we had invested every cent we owned into it, not to mention what we had borrowed from my father. But since Rih-hwa did not study chemistry, and since his time and energy were taken up by the trading business of Thai Wah, the main responsibility of improving the quality of the vermicelli thus fell on my shoulders. I worked on it day and night, which was just as well, since it took my mind off my grief at letting go of Mama.

A few months later, my father came to see us and saw our factory. He came to the conclusion that my work had apparently failed. He sighed and said: “Fung-fung, give it up. You’ve already done your best. Don’t dig a big hole to bury a small one.”

Perhaps my personality was like that of my father’s, with the same Hunanese bull-headedness. I refused to give up, but with good reason: I knew there was nothing wrong with my theory. It was just that I had not figured out a viable method to produce good vermicelli. I was convinced that the starch our factory produced by machine was purer, whiter and better than what was made by hand, so there was no reason that I couldn’t produce good thin strands of vermicelli that could be easily separated. I must have overlooked some small detail. It could have to do with the temperature or humidity at some stage of the production process that was making the noodles not ‘good’ enough to come out as separate strands.

I redoubled my efforts, until finally the gods took pity on me and rewarded my hard work. The vermicelli I produced not only looked like beautiful silvery threads, but I could also produce them in strips and in sheets. At that point, my father came back to Bangkok to look over our factory. He said with delight: “Well done, Fung! You’ve discovered a gold

mine!” And with that, he gave me all his shares of the factory which we had made Thai Wah invest in his name.

After that, he also gave his shares of Thai Wah to me and to Rihhwa, saying laughingly to us: “Compared to Wah Chang, Thai Wah is of course just a little tree, but though it is the smaller tree now, with good care, it may produce even more shade than the big tree.”¹

It struck me that his voice sounded a little strange, and so I looked at him. His smile seemed a little forced. What was all this talk about big trees and small trees? What was he thinking of? Was he becoming a little senile? I never thought of him as being old, and he himself would never admit that he was old. Whenever the subject of his age came up, he always skirted around it. Sometimes he would even deduct a few years from his age. But after he had given me those shares, I had a premonition. I carefully calculated his age. He was already sixty-six years old, older than when Rihhwa’s father died.

But I still didn’t think of him as old. What made him say these things?

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- 1 树大遮荫. A Chinese proverb which means that a tree is a good umbrella under which one could rest in its shade.



THE NEXT THING WE HEARD WAS THAT THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT wanted to buy over the X-ray machine Lien-ming had bought in the U.S. and shipped to Shanghai for her clinic. Lien-ming insisted that the machine was bought with money loaned to her, not given her, by her father; the proceeds she said should be sent to him as the lender. The government graciously agreed to her request, and the money was remitted to my father in the U.S.

When my father received the money, he seemed a little sad, as if he would rather Lien-ming have kept the money instead of returning it to him. He sighed and told me: “How could I accept this money from her? What if she might eventually need this money? What if I’m not around when she needs it? What is she going to do then?”

“What’s this talk about your not being around?” I grumbled. “You’re going to live to be a hundred!”

He only laughed wryly and replied: “Then wouldn’t I be like some kind of demon?”

He deposited this sum of money into a U.S. bank under Lien-ming’s name, but insisted that I sign the account, using the name of Lien-ming, so that if need be, I could take out the money and somehow send it to my sister. Furthermore, he told me to write a letter to Lien-ming explaining what kind of preparation he had made for her. I said I could explain it more easily on the phone, but he said that since Lien-ming had already stated that the money belonged to him, it might be dangerous for her with the government if the conversation was overheard.

Therefore I wrote a letter according to his instructions, but since I couldn’t come right out and say it for fear it might be read by censors, I could only use little clues and devices I had picked up from reading detective novels to hint that should Lien-ming ever need something, it would be provided for. How hard it was to write such a letter; it was worse than writing my Masters thesis. I wrote and rewrote the letter more than ten times, fretting over the phrasing of it, and I sent this kind of letter more than once to make sure Lien-ming got the message. Yet she never understood it. It wasn’t until years later when she had left China for Macao that I told her

about this incident. She sighed: “And all along I thought that you’d gone mad, talking complete nonsense. Never did I think that you were referring to such a serious practical matter!” If that was an indication of my writing ability, my Masters thesis was a joke and I had wasted my father’s money.

After Lien-ming sold her X-ray machine, we didn’t receive anymore news from China. We learned only what we could from the newspapers and feared the worst.



IN 1955, MY DOCTOR SUDDENLY TOLD ME THAT I HAD AN ECTOPIC pregnancy. I was thirty-two years old at the time, and felt young and strong, but my father was worried half to death, and wanted me to go to the U.S. immediately for surgery. Right after his telegram arrived, Marjorie called long-distance to say that her gynecologist had told her that under no circumstance should I leave Bangkok, because if the fallopian tube should burst while I was on a plane, I could bleed to death. Only then did I realize how serious it could be and immediately checked into the Women's Hospital in Bangkok to have one of the fallopian tubes surgically removed.

Shortly afterwards, my father wanted Rih-hwa and me to visit him in the U.S. with our two children, saying that he had some business matters to discuss with Rih-hwa, but in my heart I knew it was because he had learned that I was somewhat depressed after the operation and wanted to cheer me up.

After I had my fun in New York and was about to return to Thailand, I found, in a toy store, a model kit of plastic pieces to make a sailing ship. Since I had a lot of experience assembling little models of houses, I bought this kit and pieced together a sailing ship. On its main sail, I playfully wrote a little poem in red ink, whose last line had the bravado of Mao Tse-tung's poem₁:

*“Who is the greatest hero of them all?
Laughing, I point at the rascal Li of Hunan!”*

When I presented it as a parting gift to my father, he laughed heartily as he read my so-called poem. His laughter was what I had hoped to hear because, for some reason, he had not laughed as much as he used to.

The next morning we left New York, and my father came to send us off. We were all seated comfortably in his Cadillac limousine, but when we reached the front of the United Nations headquarters, he hurriedly got out of the car without saying a word of goodbye. That night, when he returned home from his office and saw the little sailing ship I had given him, he wrote a poem back to me.

儿兴君华作壮游, 联合国前亦绸缪,
一生最怕离别语, 下了卡车不回头.

莫夸千古风流事, 窗前斜看小白舟,
何以文星满天下, 老妻麟女赖人愁.

The poem itself was nothing much, since we often wrote such non-poetical rhymes to each other. We never expected them to be appreciated by literary critics, but only meant them for each other.

A rough translation of it is:

“You, my child, are about to embark with your husband on a long journey. In front of the gate to the U.N. headquarters, I felt the urge to linger but I only kept quiet and said nothing, because, all my life, I had feared to utter parting words and that was why I left the Cadillac without a backward glance.

“Tease me not of romantic heroes. I am now lying in my bed and looking askance at your little white boat which I have placed next to my window. Why do the stars of catastrophes shine in the sky? Oh how the fate of my aging wife and my daughter Ling makes me worry!”

In the entire poem, only the last line was significant to me, because he had so affectionately called Mama “my aging wife.” In Chinese poetry, the term “aging wife” is very poignant. The word implied many feelings, including affection, tenderness and deep mutual understanding. This was the first and only time I had ever heard my father refer to Mama like this. I thought about how my father, who must be already sixty-eight years old at that time, had for the past forty plus years, faced that other woman every night, giving her fresh bouquets straight from the florist and yet he had called Mama “my aging wife” in his heart!

How could this be? Wasn't it said that he had abandoned her? Weren't my sister and I said to be the trash he didn't wish to have? Was there or wasn't there a divorce? Was my championing for Mama, my hatred for my father...all a mistake?

The more I thought about it, the more confused I became. Could it be that despite having lived so far apart and for so long, my mother and my father still had feelings for each other as those of a married couple? What, after all, was the nature of their silent and mute bond?

I was more confused than ever.

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- 1 The original Chinese version is: “天下英雄谁第一，笑指湖南李风流” which was terrible as poetry went but very flattering to my father, especially as I had called him 李风流, a term used to mean, more or less, Casanova.



I THOUGHT ABOUT IT FROM EVERY ANGLE, BUT COULD NOT FIND an answer.

While I was still mulling about this, my doctor suddenly surprised me by telling me I was again pregnant. He had told me when he removed my first fallopian tube that my chance of getting pregnant again was very slim, since I only had one tube left to do the job. That was what had depressed me so much that my father had invited me to New York. And now here was the same doctor blithely announcing that I was pregnant. I had a good laugh. I must be so strong-willed that even with half the plumbing other women had, I could still get pregnant.

That was how, in 1957, my son Kwon-cjan was born.

Right after Kwon-cjan was born, I received a letter from Lien-ming in Shanghai, saying that her son Carlos had been stricken with rheumatic fever. Because he was their only child, both Lien-ming and Qing-qi were so worried that they refused to leave his bedside. When the hospital realized that their two top doctors had determinedly become unavailable to the public, they were forced to concede to Lien-ming's request to take Carlos to another country where the climate was drier. Whether that was the real reason or not, I couldn't tell, since I wasn't in China. Later someone hinted to me that it could have been the government's way to lure my father, one of the "overseas industrialists," back to work in China. Since there was no evidence of it being true, I think it was more reasonable to believe the government was being kind. What concerned me was that Lien-ming and her son could now go to Macao.

Since I had just given birth to Kwon-cjan and could not travel easily, Rih-hwa went to Macao to meet them and help them settle down temporarily. At the same time, since they both had Chinese passports and we knew they would not be easily accepted by most countries, Rih-hwa also helped them to obtain fake Portuguese passports. Naturally they told Rih-hwa they wished to emigrate to the United States to be with my father. When I heard of it, I was not optimistic about their entry into the U.S., after my own "Mama in China" experience with U.S. immigration but I didn't tell Lien-ming, for fear it might upset her needlessly.

After Kwon-cjan was a month old, I too went to Macao, but without the baby. My sister and I had not seen each other for years; we had so much to catch up on, but our conversations kept coming back to the subject of how hard it was to leave Mama behind.

According to Lien-ming, after Carlos became sick, she had to move Mama to another apartment with a maid because Mama being old, had a weak immune system and she could easily pass any germs she might have to Carlos in his weak state if she remained in close contact with him. Lien-ming had felt that moving Mama away was wrong, but Mama had brushed aside her guilt, saying: "Since it's all for Carlos' good, why should I mind?"

Later, when Lien-ming was to take Carlos abroad, she went to Mama to take leave. Lien-ming wept, but Mama did not shed a single tear. She only comforted Lien-ming by repeating, "Whatever you do for Carlos' sake, it is also for my sake. If Carlos is fine, I too will be fine. Why should you cry?" Mama at that time was about sixty-four years old, frail and aged, and she must have known that this leave-taking was to be the last, and yet she did not let herself show any sign of sadness. It was just like the way she had been when I left her in Hong Kong years ago.

Hearing this, I felt sad. At the same time I also wondered whether Mama's reading of Buddhist sutras all these years had enabled her to detach herself from the sorrow of parting? How would she face death when it came? Would she be graced with a calmness that approached Enlightenment, through her practise of Buddhism?

Because I was anxious about my new-born baby, I hurried back to Bangkok after one week. Later I learned that Rih-hwa did acquire two Portuguese passports for Lien-ming and her son and that not long after that, they used these new passports to go to Brazil where my father had one of his mines. Luckily for them, they escaped the backlash to the Thousand-Flowers-Blooming Movement in China, as well as the Red Guards.



FOR SOME INEXPLICABLE REASON, AFTER KWON-CJAN WAS BORN, I had another ectopic pregnancy. I remembered that when I graduated from Mills, a friend had written about me in our Year Book: “Whatever it is, most people are satisfied with doing it once, but Lien-fung has to do it twice to be happy.” She was right. Even with an ectopic pregnancy I had to have it twice.

My poor doctor complained. “With other people,” he said, “it was always both fallopian tubes taken out at the same time during the same operation, but for you, I had to take them out one by one. So much more trouble! Luckily, in between, you had a proper pregnancy; otherwise the Medical Association would accuse me of deliberately leaving a tube behind just so I could charge you twice!”

And so it was that I had to be admitted into the hospital again for yet another operation.

After that period of hospitalization, I was easily tired and constantly in pain since I was, after all, several years older than when I had my first operation. My father told me to go to New York for a thorough physical check-up. By then, Lien-ming had already lived in Brazil for a year, so I bargained with him, saying that I would go to New York as he wished, but only if I could stop over in Brazil to see Lien-ming.

So in the fall of 1958, Rih-hwa and I took our three children, together with their *amah* Ah Hoe, and left Thailand. That I brought Ah Hoe, and even had her sit with us in the first class cabin during the flight, was at my father’s insistence. He said, “When you are here, I will definitely want you to come over to my house for dinner and to chat, and it would be very late every night. This wouldn’t be good for your children, nor would it be convenient for me, so you should bring a maid to look after them. Also, since long-distance travel is hard for children, you may as well all travel first class. I’ll pay for all the expenses. After all, I can’t take it with me when I go.”

Every time that I traveled with Rih-hwa when summoned by my father, my father always insisted on our flying first class. He was frugal in every other way except for travel expenses. He often said that if one traveled a

long way but arrived too tired to function well, then one might as well not go. I can't really vouch for his theory from my own personal experience, but since it was his money, I was willing to concede that he was right. As long as my father took care of the expenses, I was willing to go anywhere, but if I were to pay for myself, I would just as soon stay home.

Just as I was about to accept his generous offer, I noticed the last sentence of his letter: "After all, I can't take it with me when I go." I felt a sudden panic. I made a mental calculation. My father was seventy years old, but he had hardly ever made any fatalistic comment like "not being able to take it with him." What was happening to him?

Still I didn't think much about it, and started packing. In the name of preserving my health, our whole entourage swept through Germany, Holland, England and Spain, before finally arriving in Brazil, spending my father's money along the way. He never said a word to rebuke me which made me a bit uneasy. How was I to know that this would be the last time that I spent his hard-earned money?

Rih-hwa had also come to Brazil to see Lien-ming. The two of them had similar temperaments, being usually calm, steady and good-humored, so they really appreciated each other. We maximized this special time together and talked from dawn to dusk, and often through the night. Because my father often requested Rih-hwa to keep him company on his trips to Europe and Asia, Rih-hwa had a good many funny anecdotes to tell, to which Lien-ming would listen, fascinated. Lien-ming confessed that she seldom saw my father because when he came to Rio to look after his mines, he was often busy, but he would always ask Carlos to spend the night with him in his hotel room.

I was curious how a thirteen-year-old boy and a seventy-year-old man, who never admitted he was old, could get along so well. Carlos said: "Granddad likes me to sit by his bathtub when he's taking a bath, so I can scratch his back and tell him stories from *The Three Kingdoms*."

"*The Three Kingdoms*?" I said, "That's a book he could recite chapter and verse from, if he wanted to."

"I wouldn't know about that," Carlos said, "but I do know that he particularly likes to hear the story of the Red Cliff, especially the part about Zhou Yu beating Huang Gai₁. Even when he got into bed, he'd want me to keep talking."

That brought me back to when I was thirteen years old, in Shanghai, and my father had asked me to sing *Man Jiang Hong*. How lonely my father must be! After listening to and speaking English all day long, he must have been so homesick for his native Hunan dialect that he urged Carlos to recount an episode he already knew word for word. When the young boy spoke in that dialect, did he remind the old man of that Ningxiang accent which he had once been so familiar with? I thought of the old man being put to bed with a familiar bedtime story told by his young grandson, and wondered what dreams of home he had while drifting off to sleep.

I would never know.

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- 1 Zhou Yu caning Huang Gai (周瑜打黄盖). A popular episode in the Battle of the Red Cliff, well-known in *The Three Kingdoms*. In order to convince the enemy that Huang Gai was not a spy, Zhou Yu had to publicly cane and humiliate Huang Gai.



LIEN-MING ALSO TOLD ME THAT SHE HAD GOTTEN A SHORT telegram from Qing-qi that Mama had suffered a stroke but that it wasn't serious. He told us not to worry. When I arrived in the U.S. and passed on this news to my father, he didn't say anything but heaved a long sigh as if, on this long road that he had been walking on, the end was now in sight.

After we had rested for a few days, and my father still hadn't said anything yet, I asked him: "Diedie, what is it? Didn't you sleep well?" I could see how drawn his face was.

He looked at me rather warily and replied: "No, ...hmm, well, actually, there is something that I want to talk to you and Rihhwa about." Seeing how serious he was, of course we gave him our undivided attention, while he talked slowly about the matter that was close to his heart.

To summarize what he said: There was an American mining company of equal size and financial power as Wah Chang that wanted to merge with us. They suggested buying up half of Wah Chang's share, while using the other half of our shares to exchange for shares of the new merger company. In this way, we could receive cash for our half of what Wah Chang was worth, and still retain the other half of the shares of the new company, although we would have to give up direct ownership and control of Wah Chang, as well as our machinery and products. The cash paid out to us would be more than enough to divide among our family, and, at the same time, if this new company made good profits, our shares of this new company would become a source of income which we could just sit back and enjoy.

In other words, my father would give up the managerial power of Wah Chang to some outsiders and play only an advisory role in the new company. Wah Chang's personnel would be retained but the new company would exert control over them. This way, my father and his family would not only get a large sum of cash now but could eventually receive dividends from the new company's shares. With my father feeling he was getting old, this plan seemed to offer great advantage.

I didn't have anything to say and could only sit there and stare at the man who had sheltered me all my life. Rih-hwa was silent. However, after a while, he asked, "What do Kuo-ching and his sisters think of this?"

My father laughed drily. “Kuo-ching? As long as he has money to spend, what opinion does he have of anything? Anyway, I haven’t told anyone yet, because I waited for you to come and to ask you both for your views.”

“This issue,” Rih-hwa said, “concerns the whole Li family. Shouldn’t you call a meeting of all the members and ask them to come to some decision?”

My father hesitated for a long while as if he was debating the pros and cons of such a meeting, but finally he said: “Alright, I’ll do that and have them all come for a meeting.”

Within a few days, his secretary had notified each member of his family and outlined the merger option so that they could think about it before the meeting commenced. Except for Lien-ming and Carlos, who needed time for their visas to be processed and thus couldn’t come immediately, the others all replied by letter to say they would be in New York in time for the meeting.



WITH SO MANY PEOPLE INVOLVED IN THE MEETING, IT OBVIOUSLY took some time before everybody could convene. During this time, Rih-hwa went to the Wah Chang office every day with my father, and I, since I had nothing else to do, rented a house in Long Island, settled my children and *amah*, and sent Minfong to the local grade school, as if we planned to be long-term residents. My father liked this arrangement because he had fallen in love with Minfong. Every day, after returning home from the office, when I was cooking in the kitchen at his house, the first thing he would do was telephone the seven-year-old Minfong and chat with her for over half an hour. With one so old and one so young, who knew how they found so much to talk about!

Once, when he was out of town attending a conference, he mailed a postcard back to his granddaughter, on which he had written in ink four large words in Chinese: 公公爱你, “Gong-gong loves you.” Each word was carefully scripted, with the pen outlining each stroke so that the strokes looked hollow. In this way, each word looked as if it was carved from wood. But when Minfong saw it, she could read the name and address but not the message. I had to read it aloud to her and she broke out in a wide grin when she heard it.

I don’t know why he wrote it in Chinese and in such an elaborate way. Although Minfong knew how to speak Cantonese, she could not yet read any Chinese because she attended an English-speaking school in Bangkok. Thus when they were talking on the phone, they communicated in English. My father even admired Minfong’s slight British accent. Minfong was told to address him as “Gong-gong,” and that was the extent of her Mandarin then. Since that was the case, why didn’t he use English to write her? If he had, Minfong could have read it and would immediately understand and feel gratified. Wouldn’t that be simpler? Why then did he write it in a way that he knew his grandchild couldn’t read it, and even write it with such care? Did he perhaps feel that the words in Chinese meant more to him than in English?

Increasingly, I felt my father was a mystery, especially as he got older. It was as if he was a warrior with several layers of armor, and now that he was

gradually shedding the armor layer by layer, I couldn't tell which was the man, and which the armor. At the same time, I felt that although I thought I understood him better, I didn't know whether it was because I saw the man without his armor, or whether it was because I was looking only at the armor which he had taken down.



DURING THE WAITING PERIOD BEFORE THE FAMILY REUNION began, whenever we met Marjorie and Alfred for dinner or for tea, we naturally talked about this merger option.

Marjorie said: "I don't want the company to merge, I want us to manage it ourselves. But Kuo-ching is no use; we have to have Rih-hwa as the leader. He has youth and ability. Only if Rih-hwa will come to work will the Wah Chang company have a chance." At that time, Marjorie was already forty-three years old, and she spoke with the authority of an adult.

Alfred, her husband, mouthed agreement, but his attitude seemed to say: "Why can't it be me?"

Dutifully I insisted that Rih-hwa shouldn't be considered because Rih-hwa and Alfred, and all the other sons-in-law, were not my father's natural heirs, thus it would be 'wrong' for them to take charge, not to mention how awkward it would be for Kuoching to be so overlooked. But Marjorie refused to understand such Confucian subtleties and kept on insisting that only Rih-hwa had the ability to manage the company.

Rih-hwa said: "Lien-fung is right, I can't do it, nor should I do it. If and when Kuo-ching needs me, I will pitch in to help to the best of my ability. But..." He hesitated and then went on to add: "Frankly, in my opinion, without your father to manage Wah Chang and without his expertise in the mineral industry, it would be difficult for anyone to run the company as smoothly as it has been done. I think that perhaps a merger with another company, with the family retaining some control of it, may be the best option for the family in the long run."

Marjorie protested. "Do you mean you are willing to see everything that Daddy has worked for his whole life handed on a platter to someone else?"

Rih-hwa said: "Of course that's not something I'd like to see, but decisions shouldn't be made entirely on an emotional basis. You'll have to rationally consider every facet before making a decision that is so very important. That is all I have to say. This is a decision only those who are your father's children should decide. I am an outsider, I can say no more."

The family members gradually came to New York, and their unofficial discussions were soon heard. It seemed that everybody had an opinion. I

listened to them all, and felt that Lien-yan might be a sensible choice, but I knew none of my sisters liked him and would never choose him. Since the final say rested upon the girls, who outnumbered the boys, it would be useless to consider him.

Madeline's support for her twin brother was unconditional, so of course she wanted Kuo-ching to take over. But Marjorie and Mildred both asserted their authority as older sisters, and pointed out the many instances in which Kuo-ching had been irresponsible to prove that he could not provide the right leadership. Madeline did not agree, and insisted on her choice of candidate.

Marjorie again raised the suggestion that Rih-hwa should be the chosen one, saying that my father also shared this opinion, but Rih-hwa only continued to shake his head, not because he doubted his own ability, but simply because he felt that as a son-in-law, he had no right to usurp the son's position. Mildred also said that since Kuo-ching was only thirty-six years old, and hadn't really had any business experience, she couldn't trust him and didn't dare have him head the company. Might as well, she said, let Rih-hwa take the leadership role first, and then see what happened afterwards.

Only Marie was as sensible as Rih-hwa for she said: "As I see it, you're all talking about wanting to manage Wah Chang ourselves, but you aren't really being sincere. You're saying so only to flatter Daddy. I think that the merger is good, because we can all get some inheritance now." Mildred scolded her, saying that she must be saying this because her husband liked money. Marie's husband laughingly shook his head, saying that he had never said a word about the merger, whereupon Mildred demanded to know why he had said nothing. Was it because he didn't give a damn about Wah Chang? And so they continued to bicker and argue.

Everybody talked, and everybody had an opinion, except the most important person concerned: Kuo-ching. He hadn't yet showed up at any of our gatherings.

I was also of the opinion that Wah Chang should be managed by my father's children, as our way of validating our father's life work. Yet when it came to selecting a good leader among us, I could not speak frankly for fear of it being said that I was biased towards my own husband. Besides, as I looked at all my siblings, I said to myself that Rih-hwa would find it

extremely difficult to be accountable to so many of them. It was just as well that he did not try – with all the bickering afterwards among the siblings, it would have been a futile effort. I then thought, if we couldn't find anyone suitable, then maybe Marie and Rih-hwa were right: Let someone else do it. Perhaps my father had felt the same way.

They continued to argue, and yet despite all this discussion, nothing was resolved. I thought I might as well save my energy for the official meeting.



AS THE MEETING STARTED, MY FATHER DELIBERATELY ABSENTED himself, so that we could discuss things freely. We were all present, with Kuo-ching being the last one to arrive. As soon as he came, he said that he should be the one to take over the management of Wah Chang.

Marjorie immediately objected, and listed several reasons why.

Kuo-ching did not refute any of them, but only said that he knew he had been wrong in the past, but he would change and become a new man. He wanted to be a good son and a good brother. In the past, he said, when he was fighting in China, he had always thought of himself as a Chinese, so that for his father's sake, for the sake of the Chinese in China, for the sake of the Chinese in America, he would work hard for the future. He would learn from the top managers of Wah Chang so that he could eventually steer the course of the company towards greater success, and bring honor to China, and prove himself worthy to his family. Lastly, he asked us all not to accept the merger.

"If we accept the merger," he continued, "of course we will get a lot of money. Among us here, I'm the one who is most short of money, so why would I not want it? Yet, I've thought it out. If we all become rich, when we can buy whatever and whenever we want, we would lose any sense of self-respect and our pride. What would be the meaning to life then?"

After that, he said a lot more other high-sounding words.

We all knew that Kuo-ching was highly intelligent and emotional, but he lacked determination, and often lost his enthusiasm and momentum after a short while. Still, nobody's perfect. When he spoke with such sincerity and fervor, we couldn't help but think, "Maybe he really has matured." Since he was basically our own brother, how could we not forgive him for his past errors, and hold out high hopes for his future? Moreover, if Wah Chang was really going to manage on its own, he was the only legitimate heir to do it. And so, despite deep misgivings, I did not voice any protest.

After hearing how Kuo-ching was going to change this and that about his behavior, the rest of the sisters had nothing to say. Only Marjorie kept shaking her head. So we reported back to my father, saying that we had

come to a decision: we wanted Wah Chang to continue on its own and we wanted our brother Kuo-ching to manage it.

My father heard us out without saying a single word.



WITH THE MEETINGS OVER, WE ALL STARTED TO DISPERSE AND MY own family also prepared to leave for Bangkok.

I remember one night, in the car with my father on our way back to Long Island, we heard John Kennedy making a speech on the radio. It must have been the fall of 1960, just before the presidential election. It was then that my father suddenly said to me: “You just wait. After this, everything is going to be chaotic.” He didn’t elaborate further and I was too stunned to ask.

Later I thought about his words. What did he mean by them? Where did he think this chaos was going to be? Since we were in the midst of listening to a presidential campaign speech, could it be something to do with the change of leadership and election of a new U.S. president? Or, had my father been thinking more about the possible change of leadership within his own company? Was that what he was warning me?

The night before we left, I noticed that my father looked as if something was weighing heavily on his mind. I wanted to lighten his mood by telling him a joke, but, before I could begin, he stopped me. He said: “I do worry a lot. Who knows a son better than his own father? Wah Chang cannot depend on Kuo-ching and you know it.”

“Diedie, nothing wrong will happen. Didn’t he say he would change?”

“Him, change? I’ve heard him say he’ll change a thousand times, no, a hundred thousand times!”

“I know you have doubts,” I said by way of trying to comfort him. “People always want their son to be as strong as a dragon, but that may be expecting too much. He may not be a dragon but he is all right. You have only one son, how could you not want him to take your place in the company? And yet you worry that he won’t be able to manage it, that your lifetime of work will disintegrate under his care. But there is no guarantee in life. We can only take it one step at a time, and see what develops. You’ve heard him speak in such a responsible way. It looks like Kuo has really matured. So, why worry?”

My father sighed. “I have heard the Ancients’ advice: ‘Let the wiser one take over.’¹ Maybe I too should let the wiser one take over.”

“What are you talking about? The Ancients also said: ‘If one is not in his proper place, then whatever he says will not be obeyed by the others.’² Kuo-ching is the rightful heir, so he should definitely take over the task of managing the company. You’ll see, he will prove himself worthy and responsible.”

“I’m afraid I won’t see that day. Fung-fung, promise me. You and Rih-hwa must help Kuo-ching.”

I felt a stab of despair, but I had to laugh it off. “Help? The only thing I do well is to eat a lot, so how can I help anyone? But still, if Kuo wants me to do anything, I will definitely do all I can.”

Rih-hwa also nodded.

When my father seemed satisfied, Rih-hwa and I left him. Right after we left his house, on our way home, while we were still driving, I heard my father distinctively calling in a loud voice: “Fung, Fung!” I begged Rih-hwa to turn the car around and go back to the house. Rih-hwa said: “How was it that I didn’t hear him? You’re just imagining things.” I insisted that I had heard my father calling for me, and Rih-hwa deferred to me and turned the car around to head back to the house. We stopped at the driveway, but the lights were out and it looked like everyone had gone to bed. Feeling a little silly, we drove back to our own rented house nearby.

The next morning, we took an early flight to San Francisco where we spent the night at Madeline’s home. My father telephoned, and Madeline told him that I was resting because I had been feverish the whole day during the flight. He called me to the phone and told me that I should not risk the long trip to Bangkok but must return to New York for more rest. I laughed and said: “I’m not a Lin Dai-yu! What’s a little fever? It won’t kill me, and as soon as I get home, I’ll sleep it off. In two or three days, I’ll be as good as new.” My father urged me several times to return, but Rih-hwa and I both felt that with a family of six, including the *amah*, to fly back and forth from coast to coast was just too much trouble. So we did not agree to change our travel plans.

Thinking back on it now, I wonder why I didn’t just listen to him? If I did, I would have been able to see him one more time.

Not too long after we returned to Bangkok, we received a telegram from my father. He said he would be in Rome for business, and used the cathedral there as bait for me to go there and keep him company. I replied

by telegram saying: "I'm a worthless daughter because I don't have my father's strong stamina. Since God has just got me over the fever, I think He will forgive me for not going to his cathedral." Without realizing it, I had tossed away my last chance of seeing my father.

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- 1 “Let the wiser one take over.” (让贤.) It is said that in the ancient days, King Yao and King Shun (尧舜) passed over their own heirs so as to let (让) a wiser (贤) man be the next king. Here, my father was thinking of ignoring his own heir for one he thought was wiser.
 - 2 “If one is not in his proper place...will not be obeyed by others.” (名不正则言不顺.) This is a line from Confucius. For example, a man who is not legally appointed a policeman cannot control the traffic, or a man who has not been appointed a judge cannot sentence a criminal. Or a man who is not the heir cannot expect his words to be obeyed by the rest of his family.



JUST AS I WAS FEELING RELIEVED AT NOT HAVING TO TRAVEL TO faraway Italy, we got the news that Rih-hwa's younger brother, Yat-wing, had suddenly died from a heart attack. His wife did not even have time to call a doctor. He just fell onto the floor and was gone. I couldn't believe that a healthy man of just forty, who had been very athletic, could have hidden heart problems and die so abruptly. He left behind a wife in her mid-twenties who was pregnant, and two young children.

I had never seen Rih-hwa so grief-stricken. I prepared to accompany him to Singapore as usual, but he suddenly said: "From now on, the two of us should not travel together as we have been doing, because if something should happen, there ought to be at least one of us alive to take care of the children, not only our own but those of my brother." In the few minutes after he learned his brother had died, Rih-hwa at forty-three, had felt the full impact of how short life could be.

Many years before, when we were living in Rangoon, there was a fortune-teller who insisted on telling Rih-hwa's fortune. He said that when Rih-hwa was forty-three, two men most close to him would die. Although Rih-hwa had said he did not believe in fortunetelling and even joked about it, now part of the prophecy had come true. He was forty-three and his brother who was close to him had suddenly died. How could we not wonder who would be the other close person? I brushed away the premonition that suddenly came to me.

After Rih-hwa left for Singapore, I wrote a letter to my father at his hotel in Rome saying I regretted not going to meet him, and also told him the news of Yat-wing's death. A few days later, I received a letter from him, but not as a response to my letter since there was no acknowledgment of Yat-wing's death. He said he had cut short his trip to Rome but had gone to Spain, and now he would be returning home with his secretary.

Like all his letters, it was dictated by him in English to his secretary, who typed it out before mailing it off to me. But this time, he had written some Chinese words at the end of the letter, which said: "Kuo-ching has reverted to his old ways. It has been ten days since he has come to the office. What a pity! What a shame!"

A surge of sadness, as well as alarm, swept over me as I read it. This was what my sisters and I had decided. Were we wrong?



AFTER YAT-WING'S FUNERAL, AND WHEN RIH-HWA HAD RETURNED to Bangkok barely a month, we received a telegram with the dreaded, unexpected and yet expected news: My father had died.

As if in a dream, I felt nothing. Rih-hwa hurried to help me pack a small suitcase and sent me to the airport. Anxiously I asked: "Aren't you coming?"

He said solemnly: "If your father was merely sick, of course I would go with you, but since he is already dead, there's no point for both of us to be there, when there are the children we must think of. You must rush off for his funeral, and I must stay. Your father had always trusted me and understood me; I believe that, this time, he would forgive me for my reasons for not going."

In a trance I boarded the plane. In those days, airplanes were slow, and I don't remember how long I sat in the cabin or in the transit lounges. I kept thinking that this was all a bad joke, and that when I arrived in New York, my father would be there to meet me at the airport. I would pretend to be very angry at him, and tell him his joke was not funny at all.

During the flight, without Rih-hwa, without my children, and without any friends or colleagues, I felt as if I didn't exist, that there was only this airplane which couldn't think and couldn't feel, so therefore I could not think or feel. But when we touched down at the New York airport, and I saw only Lien-yan waiting for me, I finally acknowledged that my father was really dead.

Lien-yan brought me directly to the funeral home, and I was taken to the coffin. Without thinking, I knelt before it, and kow-towed three times, as if I was the little girl kowtowing to my ancestors back in China. When I got up, my face was streaked with tears and then I knew I was weeping. That was the first time I had wept since I learned of my father's death.

All my sisters were there and they took me into a little room reserved for the family. Except for Lien-ming, who could not make it there in time, the rest of my father's children were all there, drawing comfort from one another.

They told me that on the day my father died, he had seemed fine in the morning, and even went to the office and had lunch with his friends. When he returned to his office to take a nap in the little bedroom next door which he had reserved for just that purpose, he had taken off his clothes and laid them down neatly. He had gone to bed and he had died peacefully in his sleep.

Diedie, even when you die, you manage to do it in comfort!



THAT NIGHT, LIEN-MING CALLED FROM RIO. SHE SAID SHE WAS STILL held up by her visa. We exchanged a few words but neither of us knew how to comfort the other by phone. After a brief silence, I asked: “Have you asked Qing-qi to tell Mama?”

She did not answer. I repeated my question.

Then she said quietly: “No.” I did not ask her why, but she added: “Qing-qi told me she doesn’t recognize anyone anymore.”

“Shouldn’t we tell her, anyway?”

Lien-ming hesitated, and said almost rebelliously: “No, I don’t want to.” Then another silence, before she added softly: “Maybe she already knew.”

I said no more.

The next day was the burial. I felt numb, as if without my father there, nothing had any meaning. I looked at my sisters. Like me, they too seemed lost and bewildered. We were all like a swarm of bees buzzing around the hive, but the hive had lost its queen bee and none of us knew where to fly.

That night, after the funeral, Grace asked Fourteenth Uncle to come and open the safe deposit box in the Long Island home. I did not know why it was he and not Grace or any of my father’s children who had the key. Grace took me aside and told me to watch Fourteenth Uncle carefully, because she said I was the only one among the sisters who could read Chinese, and so I must make sure that he did not take away any important documents written in Chinese. I hadn’t realized that her distrust of my uncle was that deep, and I had no idea what I was supposed to look out for.

Still, I remained on high alert, but I only saw Fourteenth Uncle taking out several envelopes, on which were written the names of us children, including my sister Lien-ming in Brazil, and there were even envelopes for his nephews, his nieces, and his grandchildren. What I didn’t understand was that the envelope for Lien-yan was empty with no money inside. Fourteenth Uncle distributed these envelopes carefully among us. I did not check with the others but I knew the sums of money contained were not the same. It seemed that my father had randomly put in and taken out money from these envelopes whenever he had any cash on hand and when he had need of some cash.

Then there were some useless checkbooks, as well as a large book, about eighteen inches long and eight inches wide, with a cover that was wine red. Inside the book were English words in my father's own handwriting. Fourteenth Uncle leafed through it and then put it, with some other things from the safe, into a briefcase he had brought along with him. Since Grace did not object, I didn't think it was my place to say anything.

That night, after Madeline and Marie had left for their homes in California, I went to Lien-yan's house because he was unhappy at finding nothing in his envelope. I felt I needed to comfort him. He had become a changed person since coming to New York, as if he was aware only that he had been adopted by a rich father but had forgotten that he was also adopted by my mother who had raised him. It was because of this that I was quietly angry with him, feeling that he had no more human feeling than a blade of grass which only grew towards the sun. But that night, as I saw how distressed he was, I felt bad for him, and so I said to him: "Diedie did give you an envelope, which showed that he all along had you in mind. You saw how all the envelopes were all not sealed, which probably meant he sometimes put cash in and sometimes took it out. It was only bad luck that just before he died, he had taken some money from your envelope, but didn't have a chance to put it back. It wasn't as if he had forgotten you. Here, I'll gladly split my share with you." But he still sulked, said nothing and went off to sleep, leaving his wife to keep me company. I too was exhausted and went to bed, but how could any of us really sleep that night?

Early the next morning, Mildred telephoned me at Lien-yan's house, saying that last night, after Marjorie and Alfred had gone to sleep, Alfred suddenly woke up around midnight and found that Marjorie had driven off in her car by herself. He had called my father's home and woken up Mildred, and together the two of them had gone to look for Marjorie. Finally they found her on the new grave site, weeping by herself, holding a peeled pomelo, our father's favorite fruit. They managed to coax her home, gave her a sedative and watched over her the rest of the night, so neither Mildred nor Alfred had gotten enough sleep. She wanted me to hurry over to take care of Marjorie, so they could get some rest.

I left Lien-yan's house and hurried over to Marjorie's. She had taken the sedative and was still asleep. That afternoon Lucy, my Fourteenth Aunt, telephoned me at Marjorie's and said she had heard about what had

happened last night, but reminded me that I had promised to spend a night at her house. Since both Marjorie and Mildred had some rest now and didn't need me, I kept my promise.

Among all my father's children, Lucy probably liked Kuo and me best. She liked Kuo for obvious reasons, I presumed, but she was fond of me because we both spoke the Shanghai dialect and could gossip with ease. Also, she knew Mama and the rest of our family in Shanghai and thus felt closer to me than any of the M-girls. Moreover, because Lucy was childless, whenever I visited New York, she would always urge me to let my children play at her house.

But as time went on, I began to feel that both my Fourteenth Uncle and Lucy were somewhat envious of my father's position, especially Lucy, who probably felt that since she was prettier and more sophisticated, she should have been the one who married a rich and powerful husband instead of the dowdy Grace. No wonder she often bad-mouthed Grace. Her jokes used to tickle me at one time, but I gradually realized that she did not say such things because she was sympathetic to Mama but because she was jealous of Grace, a jealousy which I wouldn't have dreamed of telling even to Rih-hwa.

I had for a long time nursed a grudge against Grace because of Mama, but as time went on I found that between Grace and Lucy, Grace was more straightforward whereas Lucy was devious. In spite of all Grace's bizarre behavior, there was a streak of sincerity in her, whereas Lucy, with all her sophistication, was superficial and hypocritical. I liked to talk to Lucy because she was witty, charming and sometimes so flattering that my ego could fly high, but despite myself, I had come to respect Grace for her honesty. Thus I usually listened silently to Lucy when she gossiped about Grace and would not contribute any opinion of my own.

That evening, after I moved in to Lucy's house and was helping her prepare dinner in the kitchen, she said to me softly: "Last night I took a look at that red book. Did you know that it was your father's diary?"

I was listlessly chopping vegetables, but when I heard that she was sneaking a look at my father's diary when his body was barely cold in the ground, I couldn't help but feel a wave of revulsion and anger. I said nothing. She didn't sense my emotion and kept on talking. "Did you know

that he had a big fight with Grace, and even kicked her? Then he ran off to be alone.”

She paused, and when I remained silent and didn't seem to take her bait, she added: “You know what the fight was about?” She sounded as if she had just won a lottery and was laughing in delight. “It was all because of you!”

At that point, Fourteenth Uncle came out from his bedroom, and Lucy winked at me, saying quietly: “I'll tell you more in a little while.” The three of us then talked about other things. Fourteenth Uncle saw how tired I looked and asked how I had been sleeping the past few nights. I laughed mirthlessly, so he took out a sleeping pill, and told me to take it. In no time at all, I was sound asleep on the soft bed in their guest room.

When I was sleeping soundly, the telephone rang. It was Grace looking for me. How was it that I had suddenly become so sought after? Grace told me that she was sending the driver over early that morning to pick me up. It was three in the morning. I remembered that I had told her I was leaving for Bangkok that morning, but I had never said it was that early. She then said she had something important to tell me. I really couldn't tell what it could be, but did not know how to refuse her. So I hurriedly said goodbye to Lucy and returned to my father's house at four in the morning. Mildred hadn't yet woken up and I thought it strange that Grace was awake this early in the morning, since she didn't usually get up until the afternoon or later. Then I realized that it must be she hadn't been to bed yet and was just preparing to do so, when she suddenly remembered that there was something she wanted to say to me.

She was lying in bed. Telling me to sit by her side, she began to make some small talk. I was still groggy, and told myself: “What nonsense! For this she woke me up?” But she chattered on.

When I finally said I had to go, she suddenly clutched my hand, and said: “You are still going to come back, aren't you?”

I didn't know what to say, and so I didn't reply.

Then she went on urgently. “You must come back to see me. Don't think that because your father has passed away that you won't be returning. This is still your home. I know Kuo-ching is worthless, but your sisters are your sisters, and I have always treated you as a daughter. You must come back.”

I could say nothing. That this woman, who never seemed to have any feelings, was saying these things to me, was so strange. Despite myself, I started to weep. She hugged my head to her, patted me on my shoulder and said consolingly: “Your father loved all his children, but I know that the one he loved most was you, and so you are the one I worry most about. You must go on to live a full life, the way he wanted you to live. Do you hear me?”

She waited until I had finished crying, and then said she was tired and wanted to sleep. She told me to get on my plane. I left her bedroom, and found that Mildred was waiting in the kitchen for me. I packed my bag, and was just about to get into the car, when I suddenly remembered that the wine-red book was still at Lucy’s house. I said to Mildred, “That book was your father’s diary. Lucy just told me. She might use it to hurt your mother, so remember to get it back from her.”

But Mildred never managed to get the book back from Lucy, just like Lucy never finished telling me that story about the fight between Grace and my father which was allegedly over me.



ONE OF THE REASONS I HAD TO RUSH HOME WAS BECAUSE MY presence in Bangkok would release Rih-hwa to set forth for New York, where he was to attend the directors meeting of Wah Chang. It was going to be an important meeting because the board members would choose the next Chairman, a position my father had left vacant.

The day after he left, I received a letter postmarked Spain. I was shocked to see that the envelope was addressed in my father's own handwriting. It was probably written just after he had received my letter with the news of Yat-wing's death, but the post office in Spain had taken its own sweet time in mailing it to me. That was why I received it just then.

The letter was hand-written by my father to Rih-hwa, and it was in English. He said that when he was a teenager in China, after one of his brothers had died, he was so grief-stricken that he had run away from home and roamed the hills, screaming at the Heavens. Finally his father found him, but he refused to go home. His father then said to him: "Son, you'll always mourn him and feel the pain, but life must go on." Then, my father repeated to Rih-hwa the same words. He said: "I am telling the same thing to you now. Son, you will always mourn him and feel the pain, but life must go on."

It was as if my father had reached out from his grave to comfort Rih-hwa. And it was as if he was reaching out his hand to tell me not to grieve for him any more, because "life must go on."

I sat there alone in my office and wept inconsolably.



WHILE I WAS CRYING IN BANGKOK, RIH-HWA WAS ATTENDING THE board meeting in New York. It was he who told me what happened at that meeting.

Fourteenth Uncle had always been a board director, so his presence at the meeting was expected, but that his wife, Lucy, should also be there was remarkable, to say the least. And Kuoching, as the heir presumptive elected by the sisters, should be there was also expected, but the presence of Lien-yan, who had left Wah Chang some ten years ago to work for another company, was rather unexpected. However, the rest of the board directors, including Rih-hwa, made no comment but allowed the meeting to proceed.

Right off the beginning of the meeting, Fourteenth Uncle criticized Kuo-ching for all his irresponsible actions during my father's life. He then revealed, as part of his accusation, what my father had privately confided in him about Kuo-ching. In other words, he argued that Kuo-ching was not fit to be the next Chairman, whereas he himself, as the brother of the previous chairman and a man who had led his own company successfully, was.

Then Lien-yan aired his own opinion, pointing out that he was my father's eldest son, that he was older than Kuo-ching, and that he had many more years of work experience than Kuo-ching, and thus should be more qualified to become the next Chairman.

The rest of the directors were stunned. They were aware that my Fourteenth Uncle had been a man of business, but the fact he had moved into my father's office right after my father died, without consulting any one of the staff, had struck them as disrespectful and hasty. The gossip about his bad temper and bad habit of opium smoking had further alienated him. With only one exception who seconded Fourteenth Uncle's nomination of himself, the board members were all loyal to my father's memory and felt the job should go to someone younger and closer to my father. They were bewildered by this struggle among the three family members and didn't know what should be done.

Rih-hwa thought how close I had been to both Fourteenth Uncle and to Lien-yan, but he had given his word to my father that he would help Kuo-ching. "My vote," he said calmly, "is for Kuoching." The other directors,

realizing that Rih-hwa was more or less representing the sisters who, in the end, held the majority shares of Wah Chang, were all too happy to do what they thought my father wanted them to do. And so they too backed Kuo-ching.

Lien-yan left the meeting in a morose mood, but Fourteenth Uncle lost his temper over what he thought was Rih-hwa's betrayal. He started to berate my husband mercilessly. Rih-hwa had no chance to defend himself since Fourteenth Uncle raved on and on. Finally, my uncle shouted: "Your father-in-law died and yet you didn't rush here for his funeral. Was it because you were doing some shenanigans for Kuo-ching behind my back?"

Rih-hwa briefly explained that he didn't rush over because he had just buried his own brother. "Between Lien-fung and me, we've six young children to think of," he said, choking with emotion over his own words, "and we felt we should not both fly at the same time so that if there should be an accident, at least one of us could be alive to take care of these children." He paused. Then he added coldly that he was not aware that Kuo-ching had any "shenanigans" that had to be done.

By then, Fourteenth Uncle had lost all sense of reason. He continued to rant, using nasty language, hinting that Rih-hwa was covering up for Kuo-ching in some irregular business dealings until he finally aroused Rih-hwa's Cantonese temper. Rih-hwa stood up and said: "All my life, I've nothing to be proud of, except my integrity. You have no right to insult it. If I didn't have to respect you as Lien-fung's uncle, I would beat you to a pulp." He then pounded the table and said: "My vote is for Kuo-ching. No one can make me change it." With that, he walked out of the meeting room. It was not an idle boast. Rih-hwa was a six-foot giant compared to the sickly Fourteenth Uncle and he could, if he wished to, really reduce the much older man to a pulp.

But Lucy had to get into the act. She hurried after Rih-hwa and stopped him at the lift. She tried to smooth over Fourteenth Uncle's accusation. Rih-hwa, who was fond of her as my aunt and remembering that it was at her house that he married me, said politely but steadily: "Unless he apologizes, I have nothing more to say." The doors of the lift opened and Rih-hwa left. Perhaps he felt then that he had done his part to fulfill his promise to my

father, to take Kuoching's side. As for helping him out later, Rih-hwa felt he would have to wait and see if Kuo-ching would actually ask for his input.

When he came home and told me all these ugly details, my heart felt as if it had been cut by a knife.

Probably because of this fight and the fact he was not elected Chairman, I was told that Fourteenth Uncle no longer came to work at Wah Chang. Since we did not live in America, we had no opportunity to see them. Nor could we see for ourselves what unfolded in the Wah Chang office that soon led to the dissolution of the company.

As for that wine-red book my father had used for his diary, I had no more chance to hear Lucy sneeringly explain why my father had kicked Grace and then run off to the woods.



AFTER KUO-CHING BECAME THE CHAIRMAN, HE BEGAN TO FULFILL the bad dreams my father had feared.

I was not in America, thus what I knew of him in this period was only what was told to me. I was told that he paid little attention to the business at Wah Chang. He cared not a bit about the mines. He did not even spend any time over official, or for that matter private, correspondences.

The first chance he got, he opened an Italian restaurant for his artist friends in the art world. However, it must be said that he worked very diligently at this job. Everything in that little restaurant had to be just right. The flowers on his tables had to be freshly bought, as did every fish and shrimp. He would personally go every morning in my father's old limousine to the pier to see the sailors coming in with their catch, and he would rush to the florists to see if any new exotic species had arrived from Amsterdam. What he did might be good for a restaurant owner, but as the Chairman of one of the largest mining companies in the world, he was sadly ineffective.

Gordon, Marie's husband, told me that once, because Kuo could not be found in his Chairman's office, he had to go all the way to the restaurant to see Kuo. When Gordon got there, Kuo was sitting at the bar, scolding a line of waiters and telling them how to behave, as if the restaurant was all that mattered. The busy man had no time to spare to listen to what Gordon had come to consult him about office business. Gordon left in disgust.

His restaurant did become famous for its exquisite food and cheap prices, and clients came in droves, among them rich bankers. Apparently what happened next was that Kuo took a look at these bankers and decided to close his restaurant, saying that he disliked serving the rich. Kuo-ching was probably the only Robin Hood among restaurant owners. All the money he invested in his restaurant had slipped away like so much water under a bridge but Kuo spent it all without blinking an eye.

This was a small potato compared to what he was about to do. The next thing he did was to buy a yacht, not some casual yacht that one took out for a spin on weekends when the weather permitted, but a huge yacht that came with a captain and a crew. He took the yacht to fish in the sea, often staying for a week or so. When he was tired of the East Coast, he would tell his

captain to sail the yacht to Florida or California, and then he would follow by air. *Look* magazine came out with a six-page article interviewing him about his exploits.

They pulled down a panel on the ceiling on his yacht, which revealed his array of various fishing lines and hooks, a picture that made his sisters only sigh with emotions they did not know how to describe. And that was not all. The magazine also showed how his yacht went chasing after some Russian freighters. When he came close to one of these freighters, he would order boxes of food and wine to be sent aboard the freighter, while he looked on like Eisenhower visiting the Russian front.

After he got tired of the yacht, on which he had lavished a great deal of money, he sold it at a loss, and started the marriage game. He married three or four times, and all his wives were tall, blond and blue-eyed beauties. Each time he wedded a new wife, he bought an expensive house for her, and each time he divorced, he gave the house and a seven-figure sum to his ex-wife as alimony. I must say that he was good to his women! And they were to him. His first wife never re-married and his last wife even supported him when he had lost his fortune.

I asked him once: “You’re not good looking and you’ve no style to speak of, then what makes any girl want you?”

He fingered his three-foot-long black hair and answered nonchalantly: “Well, some people got it, and some people don’t. I’ve got it, so what can I do?”

Talking about hair, I remember the year when Rih-hwa went to New York for an operation of a tumor on his throat. Kuo came to see him at the hospital. He did not say more than two words to the patient but was anxiously asking my sixteen-year-old daughter what she had done to keep her long hair so beautifully smooth and shiny, while he could not. Minfong teased him: “Perhaps it’s because I am younger than you are.” Kuo burst out with laughter.

If it were merely opening and closing a restaurant, buying a yacht and selling it, marrying new wives while paying alimony to old ones, Kuo could not have squandered all the fortune Wah Chang had. His principal talent was selling the various companies Wah Chang owned to pay the banks. Whenever he couldn’t repay an outstanding loan, he simply sold a subsidiary of the company to raise the money. To this day I do not know

exactly what he sold. I think first it was the two smelters of tungsten ores, and then it was the Nevada scheelite mine and the Texas tin smelter which my father had been so proud of. After that, the sell-off went even faster. For example, the Brazilian columbite mine, the Mexican silver mine, and the Albany Teledyne were all struck off the list of companies my father owned. They were all sold, together with the other companies, big or small, with names I could not remember.

Not only were they sold, they were sold quickly, before anyone had any time to intervene.

The Chinese who believe in the theory of reincarnation have an old saying: "The man you owed money to in your previous life is usually reborn as your son in this life." My father must have owed Kuo-ching a great deal in his previous life! Within a short interval of a few years, Kuo had sold everything my father had taken a lifetime to build.



WHEN KUO STARTED TO NEGLECT HIS WORK AT WAH CHANG, Madeline was still defending her twin brother. She had a loyalty towards him that was as strong as steel. But as things got worse and worse, Marjorie would get furious at her sisters whenever Kuo's name was mentioned. She would say: "Well, you all voted for Kuo to take over, so now you should be happy. Why aren't you? From now on, I don't want to have anything to do with him!"

Mildred wanted to intervene but she didn't know how to. Besides, she lived in a remote part of northern New York, and was too far away to do anything effective. Marie, the baby sister, whose husband had told her all the things Kuo did and did not do for the company, could only look aghast.

Before they could think of anything to do, Kuo had sold everything.

At least he was dutiful enough to divide what he received from his last sale with his sisters. With one million for each sister and two for himself, Kuo dusted his hands off all responsibility and went home to his wife. I was told that his two million did not last him long. When it came to spending money, Kuo was truly a genius.

While Kuo was having a wonderful time turning things upside down, he never once asked us to help. Had he asked for help, Rih-hwa, with his work ethic and business acumen, might have been able to help reorganize the company and kept it going, but that is something we will never know.

As it was, Rih-hwa and I, living in Bangkok, did not know exactly what Kuo was doing. We could only sigh and tell each other the famous Chinese proverb that "the horse whip was long but it was not long enough"¹. Thus we concentrated in nurturing our own business.

Since my father was no longer there to instruct us about the wolfram market and Kuo simply couldn't care less about it, Rih-hwa did less and less of his wolfram buying, but concentrated on what he knew best – agricultural products. With his keen business sense, he knew how to guide our Thai Wah Company in doing tapioca, jute, and other such commodities.

I had already built up our bean starch vermicelli factory and I was more and more equipped first to analyze and then to produce other kinds of commercial starches, especially that of tapioca. Since we found we could

easily fulfill the quality requirement to satisfy the users, we built our first factory to make tapioca starch. One factory led to another and soon we had more than twelve factories to our name across Thailand. We even made what the market called Alpha Starch, for use in fish feeds, which was sold widely in rural areas, especially in Taiwan.

Then we got involved in wheat starch, and invested in our own wheat flour mill. The mill was on the bank of the Mekong River, so we built a series of go-downs next to our mill for the storage of our own cargo, as well as for the goods of other companies which came via the river from up-country to Bangkok. With these and our export of jute, seedlac, and other agricultural products, our businesses flourished.

Rih-hwa then became the head of several trade associations and led a revolt against European shipping companies. At that time these shipping companies monopolized Thai shipping by withholding the rebates of exporters, so that the exporters had to continue using them. Rih-hwa defied them, at the risk of losing Thai Wah's own rebates, and encouraged two other large exporters to do the same. He assigned all their goods to be shipped by a Hong Kong shipping company. After months of struggle, and much time and effort spent by the exporters, the European shippers finally capitulated. Rih-hwa laughed and joked that it had helped vindicate the anger he harbored against European aggression when reading Chinese history in his student days.

Five years after my father's death, Rih-hwa was appointed by the Singapore government to be its ambassador to Thailand. That was at a time when Singapore, as a nation, was very young and so short of diplomats that even Rih-hwa, who had no such experience, was drafted to serve his country. With the consent of the Singapore foreign ministry, he was allowed to carry on with his old job at Thai Wah while also serving as a diplomat. He was even busier than ever.

I carried on as the chief chemist at Thai Wah, but had to attend diplomatic functions, including such crucial and important activities as playing international mahjong with the wives of other diplomats.

In 1973, Rih-hwa was asked to be the Singapore ambassador to Belgium, the E.E.C., Germany, and Switzerland, and we had to go to Brussels. Again, with the government's permission, Rih-hwa could travel between Europe,

Bangkok, and Singapore for our own business. I had to go wherever he went.

All in all, we were too busy to inquire after what Kuo was doing in New York.

At the time my father gave me the shares of Thai Wah, he had said: “Of course Thai Wah is a small tree compared to Wah Chang, but it may produce more shade than the big tree.” Unfortunately, and fortunately, what he said came true.

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- 1 “The horse whip was long but it was not long enough.” (鞭长莫及.) A popular proverb meaning one cannot interfere while one is far away, just like the whip, although effective, is not long enough.



MY UNCLAS HAD ALWAYS TAUGHT US: “DON’T BE LIKE THE LIANG family children.” They never thought that, to ruin the Liang family, many Liang offspring were needed, but to ruin my father’s empire, we needed only one man. In that way, the Li family was even more remarkably talented than the Liang children.

I have never complained about Kuo. With him, I only shook my head, sighed and hit him lightly a couple of times on his shoulder.

My father had sired seven children, of whom six were girls and only one was a boy. Just look at his name: “Kuo-ching Li, Jr.” From the name, one could see what expectations my father had for his son. In Chinese, Kuo-ching’s name was 固钦, of which, 固 means “more,” so he was expected to be “more so” than his father, whose name had the same word 钦 in it. My father might have loved his daughters more, but his expectations had always focused on his son.

And yet, my poor father made many mistakes in bringing up his only son. To answer that, I must ask first in what sense did Kuo do wrong?

Kuo lived to an advanced old age and died without leaving a fortune to his sons. Except for his self-indulgence in spending money which he did not earn, he did not do anything drastically wrong. When he was in China, he fought for years with the American Air Force and survived. After having witnessed the death of so many of his fellow comrades, enemies, and even strangers on the streets, he did not feel there was anything really important enough to be worthy of achieving. Thus, after the war, he was happy and contented to live on the small pension he received from the U.S. Air Force. He was never greedy. He spent whatever little he had. If the sisters gave him some extra cash, he would use it, but if we did not have any to give, he did not mind either.

When our father wanted him to work for Wah Chang, he obliged, but when he got bored, he left. He was not the kind of go-getter my father was. He was more the sort who would get drunk if he had wine today and refused to worry about tomorrow because if there was no wine, then he’d feel water was just as good for quenching thirst.

I believe he was sincere when he expressed his reasons for rejecting the merger. As he said, the merger could have given him a large sum of money without him lifting a finger. And yet he really wanted to do his duty as a son. It was only after he took over Wah Chang and discovered that he did not have the capability or the drive his father had, that he became disillusioned. And then, the old irresponsible Kuo resurfaced. Instead of generating hard-earned income to pay back loans, he found that the easiest way to appease bankers was to sell a company, and so he proceeded to do just that. The rest was history.

He was only one year older than I was. Our characters were very much alike. And that was probably why I felt I understood him. The difference between us was how and when we matured. When he was young, he needed a father's understanding and a mother's love, neither of which he received. What he did get was cold indifference from one and stern discipline from the other. His war experience came too early in life. Seeing that life was so fleeting made him older than his years, and yet he was still very much a young man, with the insolence of youth, thinking: "If I try it, I'm sure I can do it." That was why he dared to try running the company, but did not have the persistence to try harder, as other men might have if they had learned their hard lessons early in life.

Although he lost much of the money my father could have left me, I never hated him or begrudged him for losing it, since I felt my father's money was not mine anyway.

I remember instead what he did when Minfong was born in Rangoon and I did not have enough breast milk to feed her, due to my extreme fatigue after the difficult birth. When I used milk powder, Minfong would vomit because the milk powder was not compatible with breast milk. I would have to stop milking my baby entirely to let her get used to the baby powder and I hated to do that. As I was on the verge of stopping the breast-feeding, it was Kuo who searched the market in New York and airmailed me Similac, a milk powder that was similar to breast milk, so that I could continue breast-feeding my daughter. An unsolicited gift from a kind and concerned brother would not be readily forgotten.

To probe deeper, I think my father should be blamed for Kuo's failure as a businessman. The Chinese have an old saying: "When the son has not been properly taught, it is his father's fault."¹ If my father expected his son

to succeed him, he ought to have spent more time with the son, but my father was too busy pursuing his own worldly success.

My father did not seem to understand that a youth, growing up in comfortable America, would not appreciate what a poor peasant boy had to go through in China, no matter how many tales my father might have told him. Besides, even if he did tell those stories, my father typically only glorified himself in his stories, without revealing the heart-wrenching hardships behind his boasts. So Kuo never knew how hard life was, or how hardship had taught his father to work harder.

Perhaps if our father had chosen to live in Chinatown, Kuo might have grown up differently. He would have friends from the poorer families in the neighborhood who could have told him what it was like to have to earn an extra penny. He might have absorbed a lot of folk wisdom of the ancient Chinese. He might have been more self-assured at being a Chinese. Not that Kuo was ever ashamed of being Chinese, but he did confide to me once, that when he was young and going to the prestigious Quaker School, he often wondered why he was not blond and blue-eyed. If that did not breed a sense of insecurity, then at least it made him feel he had nothing to be proud of. It was also true that Kuo never had a close friend who was Chinese. I don't blame him because he felt at ease only with the Americans, but what a pity that he did not feel a real sense of belonging.

Instead of living in Chinatown where his mother felt was degrading for their wealth, Kuo-ching lived in the wealthy area of Long Island and was sent to the elite, completely English-speaking school. This elite school did not have any other Chinese pupils, thus Kuo and his sisters grew up speaking perfect English, but without the pride of being Chinese and without the usual wisdom of the Chinese people. Like a duck growing up on a chicken farm, he did not know that a duck could swim beautifully, so he learned only to peck at the dirt like the rest of the chickens.

Perhaps my father should have insisted that he graduate from a university, or at least that he should learn some skill, or some art, or some interest, or some moral values which would serve him well during his life time...What a lot of "perhaps!"

All in all, genes can be inherited, but life experiences cannot. That is why the Chinese say "wealth and fortune never last for more than three generations."

I cannot help but also think that all of Kuo's faults could have been remedied if my father had had a good wife to help him raise his son. What can one do with a mother who makes more fuss over a piece of steak than over her only son who had just returned from war? In saying this, I'm not belittling Grace. Her character remained a mystery to me, and she must have had her own childhood issues to contend with. What I mean is what a 'good' son Kuo would have been if he had had a mother like mine.

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- 1 “When the son has not been properly taught, it is his father’s fault.” (子不教, 父之过.) Another convenient Chinese proverb that can be applied to any son. I used to scream this at my young children when I was not happy with them.



NOT LONG AFTER MY FATHER'S DEATH, QING-QI WROTE IN 1962 from Shanghai that he had been given permission "to go abroad" to see his wife and child, and would be in Macao on a certain date. I was with Lien-ming in America when she received his letter, but since it would take her some time to get her papers in order, it was agreed that I should fly to Macao first to receive him.

He came on the date he said he would, but he had lost a great deal of weight, and looked very fragile. He had only one tiny black hand luggage with him, which opened to reveal one shirt and one blood pressure measuring machine.

I asked him earnestly how life was in China. He kept on nodding and replied: "Good. Good. Everything is good." After we checked into the hotel, we went into his room, and he closed the door behind him, then he poked his head out of the windows to see if there was anyone outside, before carefully closing all the windows. Next he opened the cabinet doors and checked each drawer to see if anything was hidden inside. Even that was not enough. He turned down all the blankets and lifted the bedspread to peer under the bed. Only then was he satisfied. He sat next to me on the bed and whispered: "Not good."

That was 1962. What had China been through?

I stayed in Macao for about two weeks, listening to him talk about how Shanghai had virtually become hell. He also reported that Mama had been moved back to the old apartment where she used to live with Lien-ming and Carlos. He said that before he left for Macao, he had told his sister and my cousin Xing-jie to take care of Mama, but he warned me that Mama was not doing well. She had suffered two strokes already, and did not seem to be very clear in her head. When he showed her the picture I sent her of my children, she did not register any emotion.

I knew all this already from his letters, but when I heard him say so, I was still saddened beyond words. All I could do was to look down and stare at my shoes. What could be done? What, indeed?

After Lien-ming's arrival in Macao, I returned to Bangkok. Qing-qi, with the help of Madeline and her husband Eddie, was eventually offered a job

as a lab technician in a California hospital. For Qing-qi, one of the most prestigious pediatricians in China, the laboratory technician job was a come-down, but at least it enabled him to go to the U.S. where he could work. After a few years as a technician, he passed his test as a medical doctor and could practice again.

When I got back to Bangkok, Xing-jie's letter was waiting for me. She said she had gone almost every day to see Mama. From then on, she kept up her correspondence.

Finally, the dreaded news came. Mama was dead.

Xing-jie said Mama died peacefully: "She just closed her eyes and then went away as if she had not a care in this world." I thought that was the same way she had let go of all of us, each of whom she had loved dearly. When we were leaving her, she was without tears, without sighs and without even the slightest gesture to prolong the departure. I thought of the Heart Sutra she used to read: "...No intellect and no wanting. And because there is nothing to want... the heart has nothing to fear...no terror of parting, no dreams of fantasy...And eventually Nirvana..."

If there really was a Nirvana, had Mama gone there? She was a Zen Buddhist; she must have aspired to have "heart without fear, no terror of parting, no dreams of fantasy..." In that case, even if death had not led her to Nirvana, it was at least a release from all worldly sorrow.

My daughter Minfong suggested that the tranquility of her grandmother was due to the repression of her feelings all her life and that was why she died of a stroke, which was evidently the result of her repression. I disagreed. We argued. When psychoanalysis meets religious faith, who can say which is the correct answer? So, we each claimed to know the right answer, but I really think that Mama practiced what she believed, that because she desired nothing, she had no fear of losing anything, not even life. That was not repression. It was the recognition of truth. Between my father and my mother, the one who had found peace was Mama. At least, that is what I would like to think.

But I feel guilty because I wasn't there when Mama breathed her last, because, according to traditional Chinese belief, a child should always be at the death bed of a parent. But how could I have been at her death when I could not be with her even when she was alive?

Then I thought: Didn't my father also die without any of the family present? Wasn't death always a lonely affair, just like being born? Didn't a Buddhist monk once describe his life and death by saying: "I come and go from this world completely naked, without a shred of earthly anxiety"¹? If that was so, what did the presence of family members matter to the dead?

Then I remembered the Wutong tree which I had watched from my bedroom window in my childhood. Mama would finger the seed embedded on its leaf and tell me that when it was blown away to some faraway land, the leaf would bury itself into the mud and become nourishment for the seed to sprout and grow from.

I was the seed that had sprouted from the strength given me by the leaf. I had been blown thousands of miles away and had grown from what Mama had given me. All I could do, to repay Mama for the nourishment she had given me, was to make myself also into nourishment so that my seeds will grow as tall and as strong as so many Wutong trees.

Beyond that, what else can one do?

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- 1 “I come and go completely naked to and from this world.” (赤条条来去无牵卦.) A saying that roughly means: “When I was born, I came (来) naked (赤条条), and when I die, I would also go (去) naked without (无) a single strand of anxiety (牵卦). It has always been my favorite proverb.



TIME WAS MERCILESS, THIRTY YEARS HAD PASSED.

In 1998, Marjorie suddenly sent me a package. She explained that after Grace had died, the house at Glen Cove had not been occupied, but now that it was to be sold, she and her daughter Lisa had gone to the cellar to clean up whatever old junk there was before the house was taken over by the new owner. Among great piles of litter, she found two pieces of *lingzhi*, with Chinese characters inscribed on them. Since she did not read Chinese, she thought I might be interested, so she mailed them to me.

Each of those two pieces of *lingzhi* was about the size of a small book. There were tiny words etched on the surface of each fungus. Upon close inspection, on the corner of one of them, were the words “Haines Fall, Catskill, N.Y. Sept. 9, 1923.” Just one glance, and I recognized my father’s handwriting.

Below those brief words in English were lines and lines of Chinese, also in my father’s handwriting. I smiled when I saw them. It was probably on one of his hiking trips to the Mountains that he had found the *lingzhi*, pried them off the trees and then carefully etched in the words, thinking what a clever and charming idea it would be to bring them home as a souvenir.

That was what I thought at first, but after I examined it again, I recognized it was a copy of Li Ling’s¹ letter titled “An Answer to Su Wu.”² Then I began to be intrigued.

Why did he pick this particular piece? Of the thousands of classical essays which I was sure he knew, he could have chosen Su Dong-po’s “Ode to the Red Cliff”³ which was both poetic and philosophical, or something short and gay like the preface Li Bai wrote on “Spring Night in the Peach Garden”⁴. Anything would be more appropriate than what he had selected because this “An Answer to Su Wu” was well known for its bitter sentiments.

Li Ling, the grandson of Li Guang⁵, the great general under Han Wudi⁶, was sent to repel the invading *xiongnu* (匈奴) or Huns, in 100 bc, with five thousand soldiers against an army of eighty thousand. He and his men initially met a few successes and killed several thousand enemies, but when the Huns, who were on the verge of retreating, discovered that there was no

army sent to relieve Li Ling as they had feared, they regrouped around the Chinese troops. Li Ling and his men fought valiantly, but finally, when there were only four hundred of his soldiers left, Li Ling laid down his sword and was captured.

In March of the same year, before Li Ling was ordered to battle, Su Wu had been sent as an envoy of Han Wudi to the Huns who, for some reason, asked him to surrender. Su Wu refused and was thrown into a dungeon without food for days. He kept himself alive by sucking on snow and gnawing a felt rug. Finally the Huns sent him north to tend sheep. After twelve years of captivity, he was released back to China in 81 bc. He wrote to Li Ling after he returned home, persuading Li Ling to do the same. Li Ling's reply was his famous "An Answer to Su Wu."

What made my father choose to copy a letter like that on the *lingzhi*?

The Chinese characters were painstakingly etched on. It must have taken my father a great deal of effort to etch as many words as he did. He had covered the face of the two *lingzhi* completely and yet he had written only less than half of the original 1,340 words. Why did he stop copying? Marjorie didn't mention any more *lingzhi* in the cellar, so it could have been because he ran out of material to write on. Or was it because he had lost interest? What was his original interest anyway?

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- 1 Li Ling 李陵 (? –74 bc). He was well known as an archer like his grandfather. A brave fighter, he surrendered when outnumbered. His saga was widely known in China and even rendered into songs, such as “Li Ling thinks of Han.” (李陵思汉.)
 - 2 “An Answer to Su Wu.” (答苏武书.) It is Li Ling’s reply to Su Wu, (143 bc – 60 bc), who was a contemporary of Li Ling. When Su was sent as an ambassador to the Huns, he was arrested by them and forced to tend sheep. He did so but never surrendered. In many traditional portraits of him, he is seen with his tattered staff, the symbol of his Imperial mission, braving the storms of the wilderness with his sheep.
 - 3 “Ode to the Red Cliff.” (赤壁赋.) A poetic essay written by Su Dong-po on a boating trip to Red Cliff.
 - 4 “Spring Night in the Peach Garden.” (春夜宴桃李园序.) A short essay written by Li Bai.
 - 5 Li Guang (李广). He was the great Han general who was famous, among other things, for shooting an arrow through a big rock.
 - 6 Han Wudi (汉武帝). A Han Dynasty emperor who ruled between 149 bc and 67 bc.



I LOOKED AT THE DATE AGAIN. IT SAID “SEPTEMBER 1923,” AND MY heart suddenly leapt with excitement because I was born in May, 1923. Egotistically, I began to wonder whether it had anything to do with me. I counted the months carefully on my fingers: May, June, July, August, September. Yes, four months seemed to be just right for Grace to find out what my father had probably taken pains to hide from her. Then, all at once, memories and conversations of the past rushed to my mind, especially the incomplete story Aunt Lucy told me after my father’s funeral. She had told me, with her special crooked smile, how Grace had picked a fight with my father and how he had been goaded into kicking her in the stomach before running off into the woods. Could the “woods” she mentioned be the very Catskills my father found his *lingzhi*?

It was possible that Grace had somehow found out about my birth and had accused my father of making love to his first wife after he had promised her that he would never do so again. Grace could have been in a jealous fit and might have said a lot of things she shouldn’t have said. She probably threatened him with a divorce and insisted on taking away her four children with her. Could it be, at this point, that my father had lost his temper, kicked Grace and, while still distraught, had taken off to the Catskills?

But the Catskills was not where one could just ‘take off’ to. It was a good five hours drive from Long Island. Perhaps he had already planned a trip with some friends to go to the Catskills and, once there, he roamed the woods and regained some of his equilibrium. Up until then, he had probably not been seriously bothered by his marital status, thinking he could get away with having two families, just like many famous men in China did, but now, Grace was forcing him to make a choice.

After some long and serious considerations, he had to concede that his marriage in America was of more advantage to him. His business, his four young children of whom one was a precious male, his daily routine, and everything else, all seemed indispensable to him. He had no choice. As Grace demanded, he must give up the family he had in China.

To decide between one of his two families was as hard as the proverbial choice of the fish and the bear's paw.¹ He felt fate had been unfair to him to make him so miserable. Wallowing in his self pity, his thoughts naturally turned to Li Ling's letter.

What did Li Ling's letter say?

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- 1 “The fish and the bear’s paw.” (鱼我所欲也, 熊掌亦我所欲也, 二者不可兼得.) This parable comes from Mengzi (孟子) describing a necessary choice between a fish and a bear’s paw, both coveted delicacies. Mengzi says one cannot have both.



ALTHOUGH I USED TO RECITE LI LING'S "AN ANSWER TO SU WU" as a schoolgirl, as many others did in my days, still I searched my bookshelf until I found my pocket edition of *Selected Essays from Zhou to Ming Dynasty*¹ and read over his letter carefully for fear I might have overlooked some important clues. In it, Li Ling described at length how he had fought valiantly, how cruelly he had suffered the brutal execution of his mother, his wife, and his children by the Order of the Emperor, how unjustly warriors like Su Wu and he had been mistreated in history, and how he longed for the life he could not return to.

With special care, I read the passages for which his essay had been noted. From the 1,340 words of Li Ling's original version, I have selected the following:

"... From the day I surrendered to this day I write, ... I sit alone in my misery with no one to talk to and nothing cheerful to see, except people who are not of my kind... I lift my head and wish to laugh and talk, but whom do I have to share my loneliness with?... Woe is me! When two hearts meet, it is most precious that they know what each other thinks and feels... Ah, what more can I say? ...Between you and me, there lies a distance of ten thousand miles. When we are alive, we are people of different worlds. When we are dead, we will be ghosts of different zones. You and I, dead or alive, will never meet again. Your children will be fine, don't worry over them. Do your best to love and care for yourself ..."

Perhaps I was mistaken, but they seemed to me remarkably like what my father might have wanted to say to Mama. Wasn't there a homesickness similar to what my father must have felt? Wasn't there the same sort of longing for someone who could understand him? Especially the lines which said: "When we are alive, we are people of different worlds. When we are dead, we will be ghosts of different zones. You and I, dead or alive, will never meet again." Didn't they sound like his own bitter sadness in bidding farewell to someone whom he loved but whom he knew he could not love again? He wanted her to know how desperately lonely his life had been, and yet now he must think no more of her. He probably sincerely felt all the emotion he was pouring out through Li Ling's letter.

That must be when he thought of the two pieces of *lingzhi* which he had collected on his walk. Why not send the *lingzhi*, with his own handwritten copy of Li Ling's words, to Mama, who with her excellent understanding of Chinese literature, would have known it to be a token of his love?

If so, then why were the *lingzhi*, so painstakingly inscribed, never sent? Why were they left, apparently untouched, unnoticed and uncared for, in the cellar, for seventy years until both my father and Mama were dead when Marjorie discovered them from the pile of discarded litter and sent them to me?

Was it because, after he had let out his pent-up emotion by inscribing on the *lingzhi*, the very emotion had evaporated into thin air and thus he no longer felt the same way? Or was it because he feared that the passionately pathetic language he had borrowed would be unbearable for Mama? Was that why, for her sake, he dared not send the *lingzhi*?

I think I know why.

From what I know of my father's character, he had a sharp mind that could swiftly turn to solving practical problems once he was no longer burdened with emotion. He must have calmed down after he was halfway done with the *lingzhi*. He must have begun to laugh at his own self-pity and reasoned rationally: "I will just muddle along carefully so Grace will not know." He knew Mama was always the more tolerant one. Mama would not complain. Nor would she threaten the way Grace did. He could depend on her ability to suffer any injustice, as long as it was said to be for his sake and could further his career.

Thus, instead of the passionate language of Li Ling's letter, he sent her something gentler and smoother, begging for her understanding and telling her that, due to Grace's interference, he could no longer make love to her, but would always remain her loving and trusting husband all his life. He then said that since both of them could write, they would keep on communicating, as heart to heart, soul to soul. Oh, my father knew how to say sweet words, pouring honey over sugar. And Mama had always been the fly caught by the sugar.

As for deceiving Grace, what could be easier than to lie to someone who could not speak, read or write Chinese?

That being the case, if my speculation was correct, there was no more need for the *lingzhi*.

And all my questions about that ignoble banquet which my father invited the whole family to, to meet Grace, that took place when I was two years old, also seemed solved. What must have happened was that, before they were to dine, my father and Mama already had a mutual understanding. That was why Mama, though feeling sad and depressed, still went to the dinner, just to show him that she understood. Seeing it in this new light, I could understand why Mama attended it like a stupid fool and why Fifth Uncle had allowed Mama to be ignored without any protest. They were all part of the farce.

To my surprise, I found this discovery which I thought was new, actually confirmed by the contents of my father's letters which Lien-ming found under Mama's bed, back in 1937. Lien-ming had insisted, from her brief look at them, that my father had sincerely begged Mama to forgive him and had repeatedly told her of his love for her. However, at that time when Lien-ming told me, I was so headstrong in my belief that my father was telling lies that I ridiculed it as a fantasy which could be believed only by someone as gullible as Lien-ming was. As I recalled our heated dispute, I wished I could call Lien-ming back from her grave and ask her for her forgiveness.

It also made me understand why Mama never wished to mention my father, because she could not explain why they still loved each other. If she did, others would only laugh at her. Anyway, she probably thought it didn't really matter, because their love was the kind as Li Ling said: "... a heart knowing another heart."

My father did love Mama in his way, but I think, in his way, he also used her. He did use her. He built his own well-being and his own happiness, such as they were, on her unconditional support of him. Because of this support, he could hold on to two women and the children they bore him and could enjoy the success he made for himself. But in the end, what happened to his so-called success?

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- 1 *Selected Essays from Zhou to Ming Dynasty* (古文观止). It is a textbook used since the Qing Dynasty by both old and young.



I HAVE A LARGE EXTENDED FAMILY. SOME OF THE FAMILY MEMBERS, who either loved my father more than I did, or who were more in awe of his reputation than I was, have suggested that the emotion that prompted my father to inscribe on the *lingzhi* was nobler than I had just postulated. They said that he could have been more patriotic or political in his yearning to return to China, instead of thinking only of his own private life.

Perhaps they are right. I certainly think they have just as much right as I do in guessing what his thoughts were, but I can write only what I remember of him.

What the two pieces of *lingzhi* did to me, however, is that they shamed me.

I had hated and also loved my father, in my own way, but I had never really tried to understand him.

All those childhood stories he told me seemed like jokes. I did not realize his overwhelmingly strong self-esteem and his stubborn sense of inferiority, both results of his turbulent childhood, had made him into a man who would rather lose love than endure any failure in career.

His quick mind, which had enabled him to turn most of his misfortune into possible success, could not prevent the catastrophes that came after his death. What he paid for his success was his own loneliness. The *lingzhi*, and what was copied on them, showed me a man sensitive but lonely. I am ashamed that I did not explore that man's mind when I had my chance.

They also shamed me towards Mama.

When I was a baby and sat in the 'well' that she made for me with her arms and legs, I had so much of her love that I grew up with so much egotistic self-confidence, so much so that I did not spare time and energy to inquire what troubles other people might have, including the one who gave me life. I never knew how much Mama paid for the well-being of not only my father, but also my sister and myself. I loved her but I misjudged her. The *lingzhi* taught me to appreciate her patience and her unspoken suffering.

I have been endowed with so much from my parents, how can I not feel ashamed of my ingratitude? But life is so short, how can one ever pay so vast a debt?

With this little book, I hope they will forgive me, even just a little bit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Li Lien-fung 李廉凤
(1923-2011)

BORN IN SHANGHAI IN 1923, LI LIEN-FUNG GREW UP WITHIN AN extended family, with a loving mother and an absent father. From childhood, she spoke the Hunanese dialect at home, Shanghainese on the streets outside, and Mandarin in school. Even at the tender age of thirteen, she showed literary promise, as her essay about walking to school was included in Mao Dun's (茅盾) groundbreaking book, *One Day in China* (*Zhong Guo De Yi Ri*, 中国的一日), a collection of essays culled from all of China.

In 1937, during the Japanese invasion of Shanghai, she and her family moved 'back' to their home province of Hunan, where she attended Zhounan Girls' Middle School (周南女子中学) for a year before relocating with her mother to Hong Kong. There she finished high school and enrolled in Lingnan University (岭南大学). In 1940 she left her mother, who returned to live in Shanghai, to study at Mills College in California, and then at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, graduating with a BA in Chemistry and an MA in English Literature (in 1943 and 1946 respectively). It was during this period in the U.S. that she reconnected with her father in New York, and grudgingly grew to understand and love him.

She married Cornell schoolmate Ho Rih-hwa (何日华) in 1946, and shortly afterwards they were sent by her father's company, Wah Chang, to

work in Burma (Myanmar) and then in Bangkok, Thailand. At a time when women were not even allowed on the factory floor, Lien-fung started a vermicelli factory with her husband, successfully producing “glass noodles” from mung beans – an industrial first in a tropical climate. Today a modern version of the factory, employing over a thousand workers, is still operating as the Thai Wah Food Products, a publicly listed company in Thailand. Lien-fung was also instrumental in starting up and operating several factories making modified starch from tapioca in Thailand.

A few years after Singapore’s independence, when her husband was appointed Singapore’s ambassador to Thailand, and later to Belgium and Germany, Lien-fung switched her lab coat for sequined ballgowns, to attend diplomatic functions with as much diligence and aplomb as she had conducted her chemistry experiments. During this time, she was also a fun-loving disciplinarian to her three children, Minfong, Kwon-ping, and Kwon-cjan.

In the early 1970s, Lien-fung and her family settled in Singapore, where her husband had been born and where most of his relatives still lived. It was within the bilingual culture of Singapore that Lien-fung’s writing found an eager audience. Always a prolific but a private writer, Lien-fung began writing a weekly English-Chinese column for the *Straits Times*, ‘Bamboo Green’ (竹叶青), which spanned a total of eleven years. She was also a columnist for *Lian He Zao Bao* (联合早报). Among her books in English are *A Joss Stick for My Mother*, *The Sword Has Two Edges*, *Only a Sandpiper*, and *Burning at the Red Cliffs*. Her books in Chinese include *Da Bao Bu Ping* (打抱不平) and *Wan Lai Feng Ji* (晚来风急). As a lively patron of the arts, she also chaired the Arts Fund, and later started the Lien-fung Colloquium.

This book, *A Daughter Remembers*, is her own English translation of her memoirs in Chinese, *Lian Pian Ling Zhi* (两片灵芝).