To Elaine, my perfect wife

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This is an autobiography. The names of some of the characters have been changed to preserve anonymity. The telling of the events relies on memory which may mean that some names, organizations, places and incidents may not be totally accurate and some of the names and likeness of the story may have been changed and parts added to entertain; any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Front cover photo: the Suntec Board
Back row: Chow Chung Kai, the author, Tony Yeh and Li Dak Seng
Front row: W.H. Chou (deceased), Lee Shau Kee, Run Run Shaw, Frank Tsao, Li Ka Shing and Cheng Yu Tung

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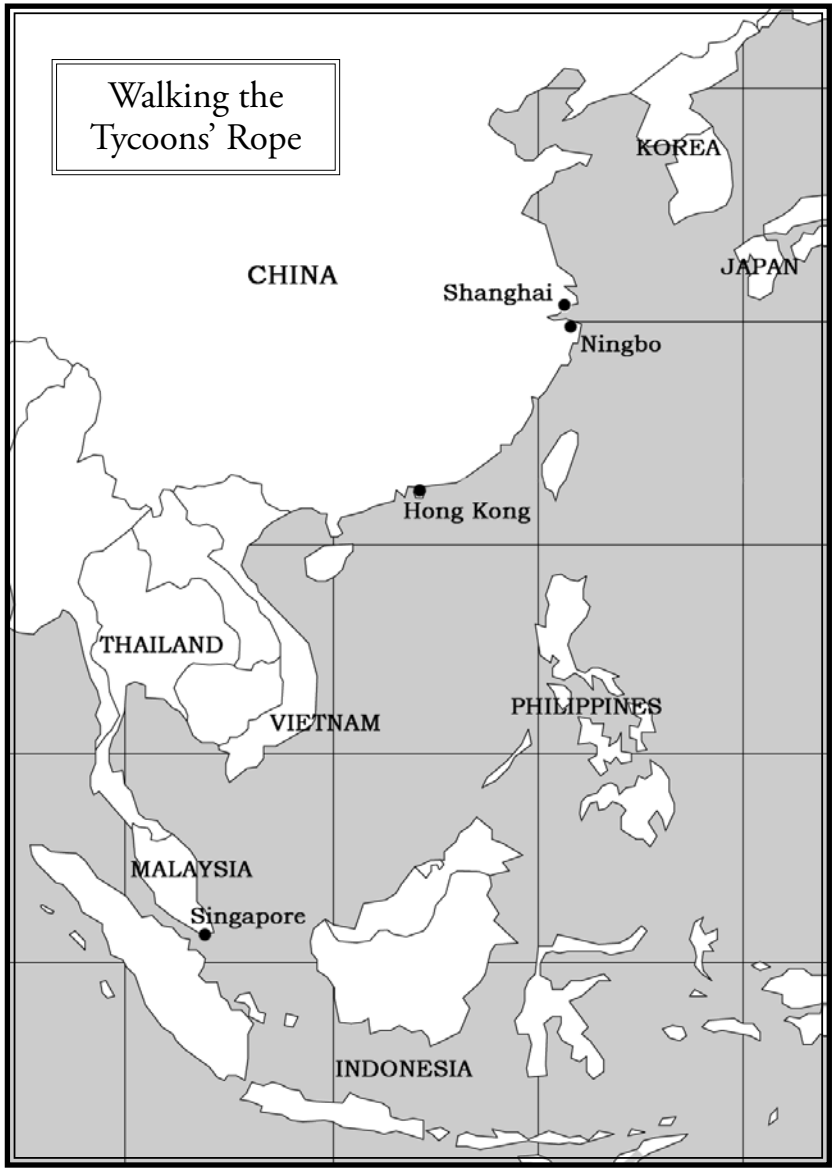

PART I

Reunions

"Where is Ningbo?" a foreigner asked his tailor in old Shanghai.

"Shanghai more far," the tailor replied.

Ningbo lies south of and separated from Shanghai by the Hangzhou Bay, at the mouth of the mighty Yangtze River.

I was born on the island of Zhou Shan which is located across the harbour from the mainland. The city of Ningbo is just a short ferry ride away. Zhou Shan is also known as Ding Hai, which means 'serene waves'. Zhou Shan means 'mountain of sampans'. It sits to the south of the bay. It is the largest island in the archipelago of some one hundred islands known as the Zhou Shan Isles, which is listed as one of the world's four largest fishing grounds. It is famous for its sea products.

Zhou Shan achieved some historical fame after the Opium War. As compensation for China's humiliating defeat, Britain asked for the island. The corrupt and inept Qing Government considered the island to be too important – China would be cut into two halves by the Western powers if it were ceded. China therefore refused. Instead, it paid war compensation of US$6 million and ceded 'that barren piece of rock' known as Hong Kong to Britain. Today, the first British embassy on Chinese soil still stands on the island.

Zhou Shan is close to Japan. The inhabitants of the nearby Japanese islands share common cultures and traditions – for instance, the way rice cakes are made. A bowl and a hammer are used. Two people work in

tandem: one hammers while, between strokes, the other flips the dough into the bowl. The only difference is that, in Japan, the utensils used are made of wood while in Zhou Shan they are made of stone. The Japanese islanders look more like natives of Zhou Shan than from the mainland of Japan.

Apart from fishing, the island lacks resources and therefore can ill afford to support a population of any great size. The harsh environment has created a people who are known throughout China for their hard work, trustworthiness and ingenuity. In business, the practice of 'my word is my bond' is strictly followed. Its people are high achievers, always striving for excellence.

'Giving a dinner is easy; inviting guests is difficult' is a saying which illustrates how high its people aspire. A disproportionate number of Ningbo's businessmen make it to the top. They become tycoons and earn such nicknames as 'king of textiles', 'king of banking' and 'king' of this and that.

I was born in dramatic circumstances during a time when China was ravaged by war and in chaos. Law and order had all but broken down. That night, in the spring of 1944, my mother was in an advanced stage of pregnancy – my birth was imminent and expected that same week – when the household was raided. Three teenagers broke into the two-storey house. After tying up and robbing the family on the ground floor, they proceeded upstairs where my mother lived with my grandparents. My father was away in Shanghai where he worked as a police detective. My grandparents were tied up and made to kneel by the knife-wielding young thugs and told that if they did not surrender money and valuables they would harm my pregnant mother. My mother had a small diamond ring on her finger, something she treasured greatly as it was given to her by my father when they first started courting. Despite my mother and grandparents giving them all they had, the robbers were far from satisfied. They demanded more. One of them had my mother in a stranglehold and placed the knife on her throat. My grandmother, in tears, reached out and gripped the arm of the knife-wielding robber, begging him not

to harm my mother. As my grandparents pleaded for mercy, my mother managed to twist the ring off her finger and, during a moment when the attention of the gang members was distracted, hid it by placing it in her mouth.

Meanwhile, my grandmother's move enraged the attacker and, in the ensuing struggle, my mother was hit on the head by a hard object – probably the handle of the knife. It knocked her to the ground. She choked on the ring before she swallowed it. Her face turned green. She lay on the floor rolling around, moaning and groaning in pain. Blood oozed from her head wound. In the glaring eyes of all present that night, she suddenly went into labour and the birth progressed quickly after her waters broke. The speedy succession of events took the would-be robbers by surprise and filled them with fear. The teenagers panicked and bolted, probably thinking that my mother was about to die there and then.

That was how I was born, at home and delivered by my grandparents. Shortly after I was born, the family left Zhou Shan to join my father in Shanghai.

In Shanghai it is said that 'without Ningbo there is no market'. It is an illustration of how much the market is controlled by Ningbo people who are clannish and strive to improve each other's lot, not dissimilar to the Jews who live in the West. Indeed, people from that part of China are often called 'the Jews of China'. It was drummed into the head of every native that our homeland was poor and if one was to make good in life he must never forget to return to repay his native land. Hence, over the years, if one saw a good bridge or road in Ningbo, one knew it was not built with money from taxes but was paid for by yet another native of Ningbo who had made it big outside and returned to benefit the land by 'building bridges and repaving roads'.

This obligation becomes the sacred duty of every son of the land. No matter where he is, he always remembers that one day when he succeeds he must return to the land, like a fallen leaf going back into the soil to enrich the root of the tree. Deng Hsiao Ping, China's paramount leader, once described the sons and daughters as 'Ningbo Bong'. (Phonetically

the word 'bong' in Chinese has a double meaning: 'a gang' or 'assistance'). Deng was talking metaphorically. He appealed to businessmen of Ningbo origin, wherever they were but particularly those in Hong Kong, to give a helping hand to Ningbo's modernization programmes.

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When Shanghai was liberated in 1949, the Red Army soldiers paraded triumphantly through the streets. As a boy of five, I was dressed up in a uniform complete with a red scarf around the neck – the standard issue to all families with children in the neighbourhood. The children were asked to line up on both sides of the streets to welcome the soldiers. They were told to bang a small drum tied to the waist to welcome them as they paraded into the centre of Shanghai.

At that time, our home was a 'stone cove' *lung tong* house, so named because of the stone thresholds at the entrances in the narrow alley-like streets. In a *lung tong* house, one crosses a small courtyard, in the middle of which is a stone well. Accommodation is spread over two levels: the kitchen and sitting room on the ground floor and the bedrooms on the upper. A *lung tong* house has no modern facilities to speak of: water is drawn from the well and the toilet is a wooden bowl that is used in privacy and placed outside the main entrance every night. The nightsoil, commonly called 'fragrance of the night', is collected in the small hours of the morning and is sold to farmers as fertilizer.

My grandparents originally rented it but when my father made good as a '*pao-da-tien*' – a detective who was supposed to 'guarantee he knows everything' – he bought the house for five sticks of gold. I don't know where my father got the money from. He could not have afforded it on his meagre salary and he was known to be a kind, upright and honest man – not the usual corrupt kind one would expect to find in the police force. As a child, I used to hear stories about my father helping detainees by giving them food, water and cigarettes while they were detained by

the police. While most of them were common criminals, others were political prisoners – Communists and their known sympathisers.

As a child the house seemed big to me but, when I returned as an adult, it looked small. Recently, it has been demolished to make way for Xin Tian Di, the famous night hub of Shanghai, a hip area where bars and restaurants abound. Today's Hotel 88 is where the old house once stood. The stone well however still remains from the original house and is displayed in the foyer.

My father knew he would be a wanted man if he stayed in Shanghai after the Communists arrived because of the time he had spent in the police force. He left the force in 1948 and joined a company solely for the purpose of escaping the advancing Communists.

In the autumn of 1949, hot on the heels of civil war in China, my mother took us to Hong Kong. I was five at the time and my sister was three. My father had already settled there a year earlier. He was part of the withdrawal plan of his then employer, known in the market as the 'king of eggs', a clansman from Ningbo, who had moved his cold storage business lock, stock and barrel to Hong Kong before the arrival of the Communists.

My grandparents were at the train station to see us off. It was a sentimental occasion. Everyone seemed to be crying when the whistle was blown and the call was made for boarding.

"Sau Chi, it's time to board," said Sou Yue, my grandmother, as she wiped tears from her face. "Please take good care of Bo Bo."

She made no mention of my sister. Bo Bo – meaning 'double precious' – was my nickname. I was always her favourite.

With my grandmother, I could get away with murder. She would bend to my every whim. For example, when I wanted to build a tram system in the sitting room, not only did she allow me to strip decorative wooden beams from the walls but she also helped me cut the wires from electrical appliances. The beams were laid on the floor as tracks and the wires were tied together to resemble an overhead cable. The tram was a chair that was placed sideways on the tracks. The overhead cable was connected to

the tram by means of a stick tied to the chair. "Do, do, do…move away," I shouted excitedly as I sat on the legs of the chair and pulled in the air with my clenched fist to resemble the action of the conductor pulling the tram whistle.

Carrying my sister in one arm and holding my hand with the other, my mother boarded the train. My grandmother started to cry even louder.

"I want Grandma." I turned my head and shouted again, "I want Grandma. Let me go." I cried as I tried to twist free of my mother's grip. "Let me go. I want to go to Grandma."

"My Bo Bo," my grandmother cried uncontrollably. "My heart is broken. Grandma loves you. When will I ever see you again? Oh, An Chai, you go and get Bo Bo back for me. I can't stand the thought of Bo Bo leaving us. How am I going to live without my darling Bo Bo? Go quickly!"

The whistle blew for the final call and the doors were slammed shut one by one.

Grandfather suddenly jumped on board. "Leave Bo Bo behind," he commanded as he snatched me away. "You can take my granddaughter. You can't take both of my grandchildren away at the same time."

"You can't do that," my mother screamed. "I beg you. Please let us stay as one family. How can I answer to my husband, your son, in Hong Kong, if I leave Bo Bo behind? Please be reasonable… please… please."

In the midst of the ensuing commotion, there were tears and screams as my mother fought desperately to fend off the intruder. But she was no match for my grandfather. I was taken off the train and reunited with my grandmother. In fear, I clutched her legs as tightly as I could. The train began to move.

Thinking that I was safe in their hands, Grandfather asked me to wave goodbye to my distraught mother who by then was hysterical. The train began to pick up speed.

Suddenly, at the last minute, my mother passed my sister to a passenger, a total stranger who had witnessed the incident. She instinctively took the girl under her care. My mother jumped off the moving train, took

my grandparents by surprise and totally unprepared and, grabbing me, jumped back onto the accelerating train and slammed the door, all in quick succession. Before my grandparents could react, the train had moved away from the platform.

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The journey to Hong Kong was fraught with danger. Under normal circumstances, it would have taken three days. But, after the defeat of the Japanese, China was in the grip of a civil war that was being waged between the two rival factions – Communist and Nationalist. The journey was constantly interrupted by aerial bombardments. The Nationalist army was retreating to Taiwan while the rest of China fell into the hands of the Communists.

The train had to traverse a vast coastal region, the control of which was all but certain. It was guarded by soldiers, and machine guns surrounded by sandbags were mounted on the roofs of the coaches.

One day into the journey, the train suddenly came to a grinding halt, jerking many passengers to the floor. It had happened before.

"Air raid! Air raid!" shouted a voice. "The train will be bombed. Leave the train immediately and run as far away as possible."

In confusion, passengers scrambled for the doors, pouring off the steps like cascading water, on top of each other, and ran like mad away from the target into the safety of the surrounding fields. A fighter plane swooped down from the sky and fired rapidly at the train. Clap… clap… clap… clap… the machine guns exchanged fire. Then a bomb was dropped. It exploded near the train, making a deafening sound and sending a cloud of thick smoke into the sky.

"Run… Bo Bo, run!" my mother shouted, still carrying her crying and panic-stricken daughter in her arms. "Run as far away from the train as you can. But make sure you stay close. Lie on the ground and don't move until I tell you to."

From the safety of the distant field, I saw the lone plane circle and swoop down to launch another attack. A fresh round of gunfire was exchanged. Then the plane turned, pulled up and disappeared into the distance.

When the attack was over, bodies of soldiers, many of them dead, could be seen sprawled on the sandbags. Those who were still alive were covered with blood, either their own or their fallen comrades'. One by one, the injured soldiers were lowered down from the roof and given medical treatment. The dead bodies, soldiers and passengers alike, were buried in a shallow grave that was dug beside the track. We all remained silently in the field waiting for the signal to board the train again.

When the 'all clear' was finally given, there was a frantic rush to get back on board. The train moved, gaining speed. Carrying my sister in one arm, Mother and I had to run frantically to catch it.

The attacks and consequential stoppages had meanwhile created a sense of camaraderie among the passengers, and people hung half out of the end coach with arms outstretched, shouting for my mother to run faster. My sister was literally thrown to a passenger and Mother pushed me forward. A passenger managed to catch my hand and lift me off the ground while my mother managed miraculously to find another outstretched arm. She stumbled, fell, managed to find her feet again, clutched tightly onto the arm and climbed back onto the moving train. The scene resembled a Hollywood movie!

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We arrived safely in Hong Kong. Father had waited at the Kowloon-Canton Railway Station clock tower but, when we did not show up two days after the scheduled time, he left the station, exhausted and saddened at the thought that his family must have perished.

Hungry and bewildered by the strange new environment, Mother took a handout of $5 from a passenger and went to a nearby store where,

unable to speak the local dialect, she pointed at the bread and handed the note to the shopkeeper. She returned to the clock tower, where we waited in the care of a passenger, with a basket full of bread. We had arrived.

Our first taste of Hong Kong was good.

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I was a man in my early thirties when I returned to Shanghai again in 1978, a successful solicitor – senior partner of a prominent law firm with offices in Hong Kong, Singapore and London, an honorary fellow of Queen Mary College, my alma mater, and the Institute of Advanced Legal Education, both of London University – and recently elected chairman of the Ningbo Association in Hong Kong. I was amongst a delegation of dignitaries who were invited by the government to see Shanghai shortly after China had opened up to the outside world. The visit had been organized in a style that is called, in the Chinese custom, 'beating a triumphant return in fine clothes', a traditional ritual reserved for the favourite sons who returned after successfully passing the imperial examinations.

A welcoming party was on the airport tarmac when the plane landed. A red carpet was rolled out and a band was in attendance, playing loud music as schoolchildren in colourful clothes and carrying flowers were singing, dancing, waving and chanting repeatedly: "Welcome, welcome, many welcomes."

Amid much fanfare, the delegation was ushered into a waiting room while the entry papers were processed. It was apparent from the beginning that the local government had gone to great lengths to plan and prepare for this occasion.

It was the time when China was waking up from its prolonged hibernation under Communism. The sky was still grey and so were its people. Shanghai was lifeless. The bamboo curtain had effectively shut

China off from the outside world. This was not the place for a young man.

We were whisked away to the city in a convoy of cars – including a couple of the prestigious Red Flag limousines – and checked into the Jian Jiang Hotel, the best Shanghai could offer at the time. On the way to the hotel, I noticed the roads were completely devoid of motorized traffic. Cyclists had to dismount on both sides of the road to wait for our convoy to pass. There were hundreds of them, all dressed in the same drab Mao uniforms. It was drizzling and it seemed as if it rained the whole five days we were there.

The rain matched the atmosphere that prevailed in Shanghai: dark, grey and miserable.

"I swear next time I'm in Shanghai, I shall bring my own lightbulbs," I complained to those around the table at the coffee shop at the Peace Hotel, the only place where anything close to nightlife existed.

"This is a horrible place," I remarked. "There is nothing to do here after dark except listen to this dreary old men's band. I tell you, they are really bad. Look at them. Everyone is at least sixty years old. I'm sure they have been playing together since the liberation. One would expect them to play more in harmony. Yet, listen to this rubbish. They play so out of tune that it's embarrassing. And look at this place. It has no life and it's dark and dingy. I can hardly see you from where I am. The people are dressed so drably in the same Mao uniforms. And where else on earth do you see such miserable colour sense… yuk! Blue tops and green trousers? How awful. It offends my artistic integrity. If I'd only brought my own lightbulbs, I could at least read after dark instead of coming here to listen to this cheerless crap!"

"Shut up, Robert," said Aunt Diana. "Be grateful. See how they have rolled out the red carpet for us. Count your blessings and stop complaining."

"Yes, relax and enjoy yourself," added Sau Chi, my mother. "The band is taking a break. Now, drink up and get the bill so we can leave. Tomorrow's going to be another long day."

"Ting Kuan, you must buy a house for my elder daughter in Zhou Shan," said my aunt Ting Hai to my father in a voice so loud that everyone present could hear. "She is applying to have her registered abode moved back to Ningbo from Tibet, to which, as you know, she was banished during the Cultural Revolution – on your account."

I noticed Aunt Diana turn her head the other way to avoid eye contact with her cousin. The two had hardly spoken to each other during the last two days and were behaving like strangers. There was something rather unusual, as if they shared a secret that no one else knew.

"On my father's account?" I came to my father's defence almost instinctively. I never quite understood this aunt of mine. I had no memory of her as a child. She gave the impression that she was resentful and even vengeful, as if she had a score to settle with my father. She was always on my father's back, picking on everything. "Are you mad? What's got into your head? This doesn't make sense. It sounds like blackmail. What on earth has my father got to do with your daughter being sent to Tibet? Why must he redeem his sin? What sin? You know, my father was in Hong Kong throughout the Cultural Revolution."

"Robert, mind your words," said Father. "Show some respect. Aunt Ting Hai is your elder."

"It must be the Cultural Revolution," I mumbled to myself. "Yes, the Cultural Revolution has distorted her mind into thinking so illogically."

"Had it not been for our overseas connections, my daughter would not have been banished to that godforsaken part of China and have to endure all those years of hardship in Tibet," Aunt Ting Hai continued defensively. "You are our only overseas connection. I suffered on your account. Therefore, you must pay back, Ting Kuan."

I was speechless; flabbergasted that anyone could think in such bizarre logic.

"I am sorry," my father replied quietly. "When I am back in Hong Kong, I shall arrange the money. Let me know how much it will cost."

"What?" I retorted. "Will you give in to her blackmail, just like that? Are you in your right mind, Dad? Shouldn't you rather say that you will consider her request and reply later? You're not exactly wealthy."

"No, my mind is made up," said my father. "I shall find the money when I am back."

I paid the bill and left in disgust.

"Why did you do that, Dad?" I asked my father on the way back to the hotel.

"Do what?" he asked.

"You agreed to buy a house for her daughter in Ningbo," I reminded him.

"Oh, you mean the house," he said. "My sister has suffered too much. Our family owes her a huge debt."

Shortly afterwards my father bought the house and gave it as a present to his niece. She successfully applied to have her abode switched back from Tibet to Zhou Shan in Ningbo.

The delegation of dignitaries was in town at the invitation of the government which wanted investments from Hong Kong to start off the open-door policy that China was introducing at the time. A hectic programme of talks and dinners with the top leaders coupled with sightseeing and other leisurely activities was organized. When our official business had finally been completed, our family business began.

A room at the old French Club, which was just across the road from the hotel, was booked as the venue for the first family reunion. The same menu for a table of twelve was quoted to us in three different prices: Y600 if Aunt Diana booked because she came from Singapore as an 'overseas Chinese'; Y400 for me because I was from Hong Kong and as such was a 'compatriot'; and a mere Y300 for a local as a 'comrade'.

No fewer than eight tables of relatives turned up for this first reunion.

It is difficult to describe how happy I was with so many of these relatives I was meeting for the first time – over four generations of them. It seemed as if everyone had a story to tell and, as we ate, we chatted happily and often emotionally and I could see tears on the faces of the elders among us, recounting and reminiscing about the past, oblivious to the occasional rats we could see scampering among the exposed pipes in the ceiling.

Aunt Ting Hai pulled me to one side. I felt kind of sorry that I had been unkind to her and was eager to be reconciled. After all, she was my aunt, my father's sister. I was glad that she took the initiative.

"Bo Bo, how old were you when you went to Hong Kong?" she asked me.

"Five."

"Ah… five. You know, I was abandoned by my mother, your grandmother, when I was that age," she continued. "I was left outside my grandfather's house in Zhou Shan. He was very, very rich when he died and Aunt Diana's father, my uncle, took over as the head of the House of Tai. I cried for three days but he would not let me inside. Later, an old servant took pity on me and I had to work as a servant in my own grandfather's house. I toiled from daybreak every day and was even badly treated by my very own sister.

"She had already been staying in the house a long time before me and had been raised as a Tai girl. She despised me and beat me often. I had to comb her hair every morning. There was a gap as wide as heaven and earth between us. Yet, we were sisters. She was treated as a princess and I as a servant. I did not return home until I was sixteen, when my parents forced me into a loveless marriage. My husband died early and I was widowed. It is not easy for a widow to raise her children. My life is still harsh. I am glad that life treats you well."

I listened with my mouth wide open. Like a jigsaw puzzle, the pieces were beginning to fall into place. No wonder she and Aunt Diana acted as if there was a huge secret between them. No wonder my father felt so guilty towards this sister. I knew my grandmother was a Tai. So was Aunt Diana. I was overtaken by a sense of guilt. I shouldn't have spoken those harsh words to Aunt Ting Hai. I wished a hole in the ground would swallow my shame.