Love, Money and Friendships

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

When I was a child and not literate in any language, I felt very pleased with myself when I thought I had found a cunning short-cut to knowledge. That happened shortly after my parents had divorced and I was sent from Canton to stay with my paternal grandparents in Singapore.

My grandfather had been employed by the British colonial service as a "Registering Medical Officer". He had graduated from the Hong Kong College of Medicine in 1900 and was immediately afterwards and assigned to work in Singapore, which was then an integral part of the Straits Settlements.

By the time I arrived at his home in Blair Road in the early part of 1935, however, my grandfather had not only retired from the British Colonial Service but he had also ended a considerable spell as a ship's surgeon on vessels plying between the coastal ports of China and Southeast Asia.

He had many glass cabinets and cupboards filled with books in English and Chinese at his home. The stately leather-bound volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* stood out majestically among those collections. So too did the six volumes of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

It soon occurred to me, in that reckless and childish way of ignorance, that books had to contain knowledge. And the thicker the book, I reasoned, the more likely its store of knowledge would be greater.

Since I could not read, I began riffling through the tomes, searching for those with pictures or illustrations. Both the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and

Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* did not contain enough illustrations to retain my attention. So I turned to another thick volume which I later learnt had been used as a textbook by my grandfather during his medical studies. It was called *Gray's Anatomy*.

It was filled with fascinating pictures of bones, muscles and internal organs. With the help of some of my maiden aunts then living at my grandfather's home, I began to learn the names of some of those funny-shaped organs. I was told I had all of them, neatly tucked away out of sight inside my own body. That was a revelation.

After *Gray's Anatomy* I delved into some amazing books on anthropology. They were filled with pictures of naked dark-skinned peoples from different parts of the world. Some of the women had elongated necks while others had saucer-like lower lips. The men often had marks on their bodies and on their faces; some had spikes driven through their noses. They carried spears and blowpipes.

The pictures shocked and surprised me. Did such people really exist? If so, where could they be found? How come I never saw any of them on the streets of Canton or Singapore?

Subsequently, I did see a procession of ash-splattered Indians with metal spikes and hooks through their cheeks, chests and backs. I was told they were devotees of the Hindu god Lord Murugan, celebrating the Thaipusam festival and performing a form of religious penance.

Seeing the pictures and witnessing the procession gave me a sense of wonder over the diversity of peoples and cultures in the world. Their existence became a demonstrable reality, which was far easier to accept than the stories told at Sunday School about Jesus and his miracles. I could not visualise how anyone could turn water into wine at a dinner at Cana or how a person could walk on water across the Sea of Galilee.

As soon as I began to grasp elements of written languages, however, I realised how vast stores of knowledge could be opened up for those with the

ability to read. My efforts thus far had barely scratched the surface. So I began supplementing what I was being taught at school by dipping regularly into the books at home.

It was an altogether hit or miss affair, however. Sometimes I would stumble on a Sherlock Holmes mystery and would devour it in double quick time, fascinated over how the Baker Street sleuth had put simple clues together to make deductions to solve mysteries. That wonderful skill had me scouring for more accounts of how he had tackled other crimes.

His cocaine habit, on the other hand, got me wondering about its roots and whether it was related to my grandfather's and his friends' fondness for the opium pipe. After my grandfather started taking me with him to their homes to smoke, I rapidly developed a fondness for the sweet aroma of the burning drug myself. Would that cause me to become addicted later? That possibility worried me vaguely.

Sometimes, when rummaging among the dusty tomes, I would come across volumes way beyond my level of comprehension. It would then be like hitting my head against an intellectual brick wall. That had been the case, for example, when I tried to make sense of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*. It transpired that the book had been one of those my father had studied at the University of Hong Kong at around the time I was born.

My introduction to memoirs happened also in that same haphazard way. I found among the books the memoirs of Julius Caesar, detailing his military campaigns in Gaul. I had no precise idea of where Gaul was; many of the other names he mentioned foxed me as well. But I did gain the impression that Julius Caesar had done something highly commendable by his fellow citizens at that time.

Then I found the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine, that celebrated fourth century Algerian theologian, sometimes referred to as "the Christian Aristotle."

His memoir resonated with me, especially when he recounted how he had

stolen fruit from a neighbour's garden for no good reason. I too had stolen things for no good reason, sometimes just for the thrill of getting away with it undetected. The saint's revelation niggled my conscience a little and left me wondering whether my clerical maternal grandfather had been correct in asserting that all human beings had been born loaded with sin.

On the basis of those casual encounters I concluded that memoirs should be serious works, left to those who had actually done great deeds or those who wanted to recount experiences from their own lives in order to illustrate some moral purpose. People interested in such matters could then read them if they wished or else leave them as historical testaments. My own interest in memoirs thus faded away for a time.

* * *

The years seemed to fly by as swiftly as clouds driven by celestial winds. Before anyone knew it, World War II was upon us. When the Japanese invaded Singapore, I was forced to flee to Australia as a refugee. When the war ended, I found my way back to Canton in the spring of 1947, at the age of 18, to see my mother, with whom I had had virtually no direct contact for some 13 years.

I had undertaken the journey with an ulterior, not only to reunify with her but hoping that she would finance me in university studies in America. I figured that she owed me something, at least for those long years of separation and neglect. But I was soon to discover that rampant inflation in China had destroyed most of her wealth and savings. Financing a university education was out of the question. Furthermore, she did not seem to have a high regard for my academic potential. She thought I should just learn shorthand and typing, to secure some steady secretarial position in a Western commercial firm, as she had done herself. Her assessment dealt a crushing blow to both my pride and my ambition.

With the loss of hope for further education, I saw no point in remaining in a Canton, a city roiled by runaway inflation and the threat of civil unrest. Besides, my mother had remarried a Filipino doctor and had recently given birth to a baby girl. By remaining in Canton I would become one more distraction she could well do without.

So I headed for Hong Kong to see how I might salvage my dream of a foreign education. Although Hong Kong was the place of my birth, I was not familiar with it and I was fast running out of money. I was apprehensive over how I might survive. On the advice of my mother, I wrote to my Fifth Maternal Aunt and asked if I might impose on her hospitality for a while, until I could find suitable employment. On a positive response from her, I headed for the British colony.

There appeared to be jobs aplenty there but most of them were of a menial nature, openings as a *foki* or a menial live-in employee in a traditional Chinese enterprise or a clerical assistant in some foreign corporation. They were too lowly and without prospect to attract me, for I had already spent four years during my boyhood washing greasy bowls and dishes in a Chinese restaurant in Australia just so that I get enough to eat. But on the other hand, I was conscious that my lack of qualifications counted against me.

After failing to find suitable employment for a few weeks, I was forced to seek the help of the Right Reverend Victor Halward, the Assistant Anglican Bishop of Hong Kong. Bishop Halward had been a former close associate of my departed maternal grandfather, Mok Shau-Tsang, the first Anglican Bishop of Canton. Bishop Halward kindly offered me the hospitality of Bishop's House while he sounded out employment prospects for me.

* * *

It so happened that while my search for work was proceeding, I received news that my father had also arrived in Hong Kong from Singapore. He had

apparently been offered a post as headmaster of a traditional Chinese middle school and was staying at the home of my Eighth Granduncle and Grandaunt at Leighton Hill Road in Happy Valley.

Although I knew that my Eighth Granduncle and Grandaunt were close and important relatives, I had initially been reluctant to seek out my father at their home because I saw myself as a junior who had failed to call on them earlier, as courtesy and custom demanded. I had shied away from my duty partly because I was ashamed of my impecunious and jobless state and partly because I had no memory of what those elders were like. I did not want to give them the impression I was just another poor relative turning up for a hand-out.

My lack of memory about my Eighth Granduncle and Grandaunt was understandable because my mother had taken me to Canton when I was about three and a half and I have had no contact with those elders since. It seemed unbecoming for a scarecrow of a young man to insinuate himself upon them out of the blue after 15 years.

Moreover my relationship with my father had been rather anomalous over the years. I feared that he might regard my precipitous journey to Canton and my inability to find a job and stand on my own feet afterwards a reflection on my own inadequacies and lack of judgement. Neither of us really got to understand one another till much later in life.

When I was a child living with my grandparents in Singapore, for example, he had seemed remote and not very approachable. My siblings and I seldom saw him. He was then working as a sub-editor for an English newspaper called the *Malaya Tribune*. When my siblings and I got up for school in the morning, he would still be fast asleep. By the time we got back from school and had our lunch, he would be getting ready to leave for work. He never returned till long after our bedtime.

Such brief and infrequent engagements left me with the impression he preferred children to be seen but not heard. He rarely uttered more than a

word or two to any of us, though we could all note that he could be much more charming, witty and loquacious among adults. When in company he always appeared debonair and well turned out. His habit of smoking cigarettes with an ebony holder endowed him with an air of sophistication, like that of a matinée idol.

For a number of years during my childhood, even though I was completely ignorant of why my parents had split up, I secretly yearned that I might grow up to be like him. But sadly I never did.

For a start, I remained, even in adulthood, a few inches shorter than he. Secondly, I had failed to put on weight till I was in my twenties, no matter how much I ate. I therefore looked pretty much like an unappealing scarecrow and was shy, excitable and lacking in self-confidence. There was no way I could have acquired my father's type of *sang-froid*. I nursed a suspicion that my father must have regarded me at the age of 18 as a poor specimen for an eldest son.

World War II had further separated us. While my siblings and I — under the care of our grandmother and their mother, Anna — headed for the relative safety of Australia, our father had to remain in a Singapore under Japanese occupation, to look after the rest of the family.

The differences in experience during those traumatic years and our mutual reluctance to speak about what each had actually gone through made for further misunderstandings once we had been reunited.

During my adolescence, I had tried to construct for myself a framework of values and ideas through books and through what I had learnt at school. I thus arrived at rather idealised and overly simplified notions of right and wrong, curled around with a mishmash of ideals — patriotism, human courage, justice, truth and the rest.

I had been made aware, after my return to a post-war Singapore, of the massacres, rapes and random beatings that had taken place during the Japanese occupation. My grandfather and his friends had much earlier recounted tales

of Japan's crimes in China. Those subsequent happenings merely deepened my antipathies towards the Japanese, though I had never lived under their rule.

When I also learned that my father had opened a restaurant called the Blue Willow during the occupation which catered exclusively to Japanese military officers, I was thunderstruck. Why did he do such a reprehensible thing? My father did not explain his decision or tried to justify it. My grandfather and aunts also offered no explanation. In my eyes, their silences seemed tantamount to admitting that my father had acted dishonourably, like a traitor. Or at least he must have been a pliant collaborator. All of those possibilities bothered me.

I felt immensely ashamed of him. Ashamed of myself too for having such a father. I could not understand how he could have bowed and scraped before Japanese officers for so many years, especially after a trio of Japanese soldiers had broken into our home at Blair Road and had raped a number of my aunts at gunpoint. What had happened to the man I had once wanted to emulate? Had his human weakness been revealed or was he simply a coward? What had happened to his courage, his pride and the Chinese patriotism he should have inherited from my grandfather? My heart became filled with reservations and resentments I could not articulate.

A frostiness began to creep into my attitude towards my father. Fortunately, no permanent damage was done because other members of the family who had shared the hardships of the Japanese occupation spoke up for him and stemmed my rush to a flawed judgement. It was pointed out to me that I had no idea of how harsh life had been under the Japanese. Apart from the random brutalities and war crimes, food had been rendered extremely hard to come by. Almost everything in Blair Road which could be sold to buy food had been sold. Many unfortunates had to survive by foraging or by digging up tapioca roots to assuage their hunger.

My father's decision to open a restaurant catering for Japanese officers

had been in fact a stroke of genius, they explained. He had foreseen the shortages to come and had calculated that an eatery catering to the wellbeing of Japanese officers would be among the last to suffer from curtailed supplies. He had been proved right and throughout those lean years he had been able to sneak home remnants of food and leftovers to prevent the ten members of the family depending on him from starving.

"Sometimes when your father brought home even a crust of bread, it tasted like manna from heaven," my young Uncle Yan-Wing told me one day.

That remark struck me forcefully. I had impetuously wronged my father. The risk in passing hasty judgements on inadequate information dawned upon me. I realised that beneath his dandyish exterior, my father actually had a reservoir of courage, strength and responsibility I had never previously given him credit for.

* * *

My failure to land a job and the exhaustion of my slender financial resources eventually forced me to seek out my father at Leighton Hill Road. I wanted to report that my expectation of my mother financing me for university in America had come to nought. I also needed his advice on whether I should remain in Hong Kong to keep seeking employment or head back to Singapore.

When I told my father that my mother would not be in a position to finance my studies in America, he nodded understandingly, as if he had expected no other outcome. After a few moments of reflection, he suggested an alternative.

He said our family was not as well off as before but he could still scrape together enough to fulfil my desire to study overseas. However, there had to be a condition. If I were to be financed, he said, then I would have to undertake to support all my younger siblings through their university education after my graduation.

I instinctively declined his offer. I was conscious that my youngest brother, Tzi-Seng, was ten and a half years younger than myself. And there was no telling whether my father, then aged only 47, might not produce more children. After all, my grandfather had a son with one of his subsidiary wives at the age of 59!

To accept his offer could mean I might be paying for the education of my siblings till well into middle age. I thanked him and said I would find my own way of getting to a university.

As to whether I should return to Singapore, my father asked me what my financial situation was. When I told him I was almost down to my last dollar, he took out his wallet and gave me its contents. The amount came to exactly HK$600.

That sum was the only money I had ever received from him during my entire life. But he gave no indication as to whether I should use the money to pay for a passage back to Singapore or to use it to continue looking for a job in Hong Kong. Was he leaving me the choice of deciding or did he want me to discover for myself the validity or otherwise of Nietzsche's dictum that whatever did not kill a person would make him stronger?

I left Leighton Hill Road that evening with more money in my pocket than I had imagined possible. But the question of how I should use it continued to nag me.

* * *

The real achievement of that evening, however, was that I finally got acquainted with my granduncle and grandaunt in the flesh rather than merely through the abstraction of kinship.

When my father presented me to my grandaunt, a plump, elegant lady of around 50, she said: "Oh, my goodness; how you've grown since I last saw you years ago!"

Her remark took me by surprise, for I had not the slightest memory of ever having met her before. I offered my salutations and added: "I'm sorry, Grandaunt, but was it in Canton that we originally met? I can't quite remember, I'm afraid. I've only been in Hong Kong a couple of weeks."

My grandaunt gave me a kind and indulgent half-smile, "Of course you won't remember," she replied consolingly. "You were just a baby then." Her voice was soft and filled with understanding.

She then went on to explain that she used to visit my grandmother when she was looking after me at her home in Hill Road. I also used to to taken to Happy Valley occasionally to play with her children, until my mother took me to Canton.

"I see," I said, nodding with gratitude for that fragment of family history. That had hitherto been one of the long-missing pieces in the jigsaw of my early life. It occurred to me at once that my grandaunt might be able to help me find other missing snippets of information concerning how and why my parents' marriage had fallen apart. Most other elders had been reluctant to discuss that subject in my presence. The warmness and grace and the apparent willingness of my grandaunt to speak about such matters quickly drew me to her.

Her name was Kwok Yee-Hing. She was the mother of seven children, the eldest three of whom were all older than myself. She had a clear brow and gentle eyes and her smiles were very affecting. There was something subtle and mysterious in the way she conducted herself. It was as if she were a custodian of certain secrets which, on a good day, she might be persuaded to share. She seemed right up my street.

My granduncle too was a jolly and agreeable man. His name was Chau Wai-Cheung. He was a medical doctor with a flourishing practice on the ground floor of No. 33 Leighton Hill Road. He was portly and double-chinned and was a couple of years older than my grandaunt.

My Eighth Grandaunt and Granduncle

My grandaunt must have noted my lean and hungry look during the course of the evening, for she said earnestly upon my departure: "Don't stand on ceremony. We're all family. Come around for a meal whenever you feel like it. It will be just a simple matter of setting out an extra pair of chopsticks."

* * *

Within two or three days of my visit to Leighton Hill Road, Bishop Halward managed to arrange a job interview for me with Mr. Henry Ching, the Editor-in-Chief of the *South China Morning Post*. The upshot was that I was offered employment as a cub reporter for a probationary period of three months.

I jumped at the opportunity. I was placed under the wing of a senior Indian reporter who initially taught me how to cover the four courts at the Central

Magistracy and to report their proceedings. Gradually I was also sent out to cover traffic accidents, fires, natural disasters, funerals, social events and some sporting activities.

Such assignments were absorbing and exhilarating for they exposed me to life in the raw, to aspects of human existence I had never encountered before. For example, I had watched with bewilderment an endless tide of humanity brought before the courts day after day, charged with hawking without a licence, causing an obstruction, mendicancy, soliciting, pimping, larceny, smoking opium and so forth. Lines of incomprehension or resignation had appeared etched upon their faces as they listened dully to interpreters reading out the various charges.

Some assignments also took me into squatter encampments, where people lived without electricity, running water or latrines and had to endure the vagaries of the elements. Something in society seemed to be seriously awry. I wanted to stay with journalism, to expand my vision of society, so that I might gain insight into why things should be that way.

But there was one serious snag hampering me. My probationary salary was only HK$150 per month or five dollars per day, a sum barely sufficient for two modest meals. It was not a living wage. I soon discovered that other local journalists were just as badly paid and many had to take on additional work in order to make ends meet.

Well before I had received my first monthly pay, I already knew I was in serious trouble. Although I was living rent free at Bishop's House, I had already gone through a major part of my father's six hundred dollars for food, transportation and other daily expenses. There had been a promise of an adjustment in salary after my probationary period but what could that amount to? Certainly not to a living wage. And I could not possibly abuse indefinitely the hospitality of Bishop Halward.

I needed to secure a job paying well enough to support an independent life. But what better job could I get when all I had by way of qualification was

a Cambridge School Leaving Certificate? Stark reality stared me in the face. I had no means of getting into university and no qualification for landing a job with a higher wage. I felt totally trapped.

After mulling over my predicament for two or three days, I decided the only viable option was to ask my father to send me back to Singapore. There I would at least be assured of free board and lodgings at my grandfather's house even if I got a poorly paid job.

So thinking, I made my way to Leighton Hill Road to appraise my father of my insoluble situation. I got there late in the afternoon and found my father engaged in a leisurely conversation with my grandaunt. My granduncle had gone off on his hospital rounds at the Yeung Wo Hospital. I knew that as soon as he got back the family would be gathering for the evening meal and I did not want to explain my problem in front of too many people. So I immediately set out my predicament with my grandaunt present.

When I had finished my narrative, my Eighth Grandaunt was the first to speak. She addressed my father and said he should allow me to move into her home, where my father was already a guest. There was no point for a young man to give up a likeable job simply because of inadequate pay. That was when families should help out, she concluded.

My grandaunt's spontaneous invitation took me completely by surprise. When my father indicated it appropriate for me to accept, I thanked my grandaunt profusely and moved in.

The next two and a half years spent at the Leighton Hill Road address turned out to be among the happiest and most formative periods in my entire life. Beyond offering hospitality, both my grandaunt and granduncle shaped me and helped me in many other ways. I shall never be able to repay in full all the generosity, mentoring, affection and kindness they bestowed on me.

* * *

Memoirs are often exercises in vanity. Ex-politicians, celebrities and other public personalities frequently feel compelled to try their hand at it, if they could somehow string together enough sentences without too many grammatical mistakes. If they could not, there were always ghost writers willing to do so for a fee.

Human nature being what it is, a person who has a bad reputation is likely to do better financially with a memoir, for he would attract the readership of the millions of scandalmongers and subscribers to racy newspapers like the now defunct *News of the World*. Fidelity to truth remains only an optional requirement in the genre.

The market for such efforts is as fickle as that for any other commodity. Books nowadays are being churned out more or less like tins of baked beans. The average shelf life of a book at a bookshop is probably just a few months. Few over time have stood up as well as Casanova's *Histoire de ma Vie*. Fresh editions of it are apparently still being printed in different languages.

During the Victorian era, memoirs filled with pedestrian accounts of everyday activities did enjoy a certain vogue. That was at a time when many British city gentlemen took to retiring to country estates. They seemed to take to writing memoirs as readily as they might take to the bottle and probably for the same reason — the utter boredom and ennui of retiring in the countryside. After all, there was only so much riding to hounds that ageing bones could put up with. And the seasons for blood sports like shooting grouse or partridge and stalking stag or water deer were unsatisfactorily restricted.

Once in a while, however, an amusing parody of such memoirs would emerge to tickle the public fancy, like *The Diary of a Nobody* by the Grossmith brothers, George and Weedon.

* * *

In 2011, after the publication of my second novel, *The Embrace of Harlots*, I began toying with the idea of a family memoir. Both my grandfathers had led interesting and significant lives but neither had been inclined to pen a memoir. My maternal grandfather, however, did have two or three biographies written about him by other people, because he had been the first Anglican Bishop of Canton and had been responsible for carrying out a variety of charitable works. But that still left many holes in our family history. The thought that I might be able to plug a few of those gaps teased me.

I had no thought of writing anything about myself. I was just another Joe Everyman who had stumbled through a medley of mundane callings — journalism, teaching, civil service, commerce and fiction writing — and had failed to achieve distinction in any of them. No startling scoops or exposés, no elevation to high office, no spectacular commercial coups, no literary renown. Neither had I any particular attainment in sports, the arts or other spheres of human activity. With some stretching of the truth, I might just manage claiming to be an expert in the game of *mah-jong*. But that would be all.

The 50 or so short stories and the two novels I had published had been pretty ephemeral stuff, set in locations which seemed almost to be changing right before one's eyes. So too their long-established verities.

I first tried my hand at writing fiction when I was studying at Stanford. I had regarded that activity as essentially a private pleasure. Although as a young man I had once in a while entertained those secret and exaggerated dreams of one day attaining literary immortality, I never took those dreams very seriously. I considered how others might react to what I had written to be none of my business; I had already had my fun in writing the stuff and that seemed a sensible attitude to adhere to.

Some time back, when the internet was sweeping the world, I had set up a website so that my fiction could be freely downloaded by all who might be interested in it. Notwithstanding that my website had received more than

a million and a half hits within the last couple of years, I have maintained my original attitude. I have seen too many popular writers vanish from the scene without trace within a couple of decades, like tiny pebbles tossed into a boundless and indifferent ocean, causing hardly a ripple.

My peripatetic life had also left me with two broken marriages, a protracted period of trying single parenthood, frequent shortages of cash, plus the usual quota of missteps, misjudgements and missed opportunities. I imagined my life experiences must have been commonplace for millions of other ordinary Joes.

But one other thought did occur to me when I was reflecting on my past. It seemed that at every crucial juncture, whenever I had found myself in a tight spot with no discernible way out, a family member, a caring teacher, a bosom friend or a helpful colleague had appeared to offer kindness, support, illumination or some form of escape. I must have been truly blessed to have had so many instances of that happening so frequently!

As my memory reached back over the decades, I could visualise a teeming succession of exceptional teachers — Miss Nice, Miss Fox, Tutor Tam, Mr. Harold Lewis and Mr. Maurice Zines. Likewise other mentors — among them the twice-decorated war hero Jackie Wong Sue, who taught me how to live off the land and to catch poisonous snakes and butterflies, Mr. Henry Ching and Chan Hon-Kit, who drilled into me the ethics in the craft of journalism, and Sir John Cowperthwaite, the greatest Financial Secretary Hong Kong ever had, who adroitly separated out for me some of the humbug infesting common sense economics.

Sadly, all those decent, honourable and dearly beloved associates have gone the way of all flesh. Another few more years and I would be left willy-nilly as the sole custodian of the memory of their goodness. With my own demise, who would be left to remember their deeds, their kindness and their generosity?

That thought pierced me. They had all been sterling characters who should

be remembered, for they had lived their lives with simple dignity, humility and purpose. They had truly been the proverbial salt of the earth. It came to me that, apart from my two sets of grandparents, I ought to try to extend their lives a little also, by writing a few paragraphs about them and introducing them to a wider audience.

Excited by that possibility, I began planning a family memoir. It became obvious that I could not introduce any of my benefactors as mere caricatures. To do them justice I had to present them in the round and within their relevant settings, full-blooded and in chiaroscuro, with their strengths and foibles and even their prejudices and eccentricities accounted for. By metaphorically extending their lives, I could also acknowledge publicly the immense debts of affection and gratitude I owed to each of them.

But I immediately faced a problem. In order to introduce them properly, I would have to provide chapter and verse on how our paths had crossed and the circumstances under which we had interacted with one another. I hesitated over revealing all such details.

I had always been a very private person, possibly due to some unexpressed and unfulfilled yearnings buried deep inside my psyche during childhood. Perhaps, if I were to submit myself to the tender mercies of a headshrinker, I might even discover that I had been subconsciously repressing many of my urges and feelings. Could even a saint who had taken the three public vows of chastity, poverty and obedience to become a member of the consecrated life afford to lay bare his innermost thoughts and his darkest fantasies and desires before a headshrinker? And I certainly had been no saint.

In the end, however, faced with the simple choice of telling the stories of the kindnesses and human-heartedness of people who had so fundamentally affected my life or of remaining silent just to preserve my own privacy, I felt compelled to choose the former.

* * *

Let me begin by giving an example of how complicated my relationships with my Eighth Granduncle, Chau Wai-Cheung, and my Eight Grandaunt, Kwok Yee-Hing, had been. And how they had evolved over the years.

Who was Chau Wai-Cheung and how did we originally become connected? He was one of the eight younger siblings of my grandmother, Chau Shui-Lin. My grandmother was the eldest child in a family of nine children, with a recorded history dating back 26 generations. Her earliest known ancestor was a Hunan scholar and calligraphist of the Sung Dynasty, by the name of Chau Len-Ti.

After a couple of generations, an accident occurred in the Chau family home in Hunan when it was under renovation. A fatality resulted. Because of the family's belief in certain aspects of geomancy, it was decided that the entire family should move from Hunan Province to Kwangtung Province.

Thereafter, different branches of the family spread out all over Kwangtung, pursuing different callings. The head of my grandmother's branch of the family ended up in Tung Koon, where he practised herbal medicine.

During his practice, he befriended a Christian missionary. In those days, it was neither politic nor advisable for anyone to openly preach a foreign religion. Nonetheless, the missionary managed not only to do so but also to convert the son of the herbalist to the faith. That converted son was my grandmother's grandfather. From that point onwards, that particular branch of the Chau family became Christians.

One of the grandsons of the herbalist even became a Methodist priest and he was subsequently sent by his church to Hong Kong as a missionary. One of his sons, named Chau Chung-Park, later married a local girl and together they opened at Caine Road one of the first missionary schools in Hong Kong.

They gave birth to nine children, with my grandmother, born in 1875,

being the eldest. My Eighth Granduncle was their eighth child.

It has remained something of a mystery as to why Chau Chung-Park should have allowed his eldest daughter to marry my grandfather, because my grandfather was at that time still a medical student and the youngest son of an impecunious school teacher, without any substantial inheritance coming his way.

No oral history by any Chau elder has been found giving a reason for approving the marriage. It could be that the Chaus had spotted in my grandfather a common trait among the young of his generation — a burning idealism to restore the honour of the nation by ending the interferences of foreign powers in the affairs of China.

The willingness of my grandmother to marry an unqualified young man without clear prospects could be more easily explained. Back in those days, daughters were generally considered to be wasting assets, to be married off as soon as possible. My grandfather was, after all, a handsome devil and by all accounts had a charming way with women. His subsequent reputed acquisition of nine wives attested to that. Perhaps good looks and charm were about all that a young woman could reasonably expect back in those benighted times.

* * *

As to my Eighth Granduncle, he was born in 1894 and, like my grandfather, had studied medicine. He graduated from the University of Hong Kong in 1916 and soon established a flourishing practice. His waiting room was usually crowded with patients.

Unique among medical practitioners of his time, he did not fall in with the easy option of dispensing the "one-pill-suits-all" touted by the big pharmaceutical corporations. Instead, he employed a pharmacist to prepare medication with mixtures of ingredients he considered best suited to the

malady of each patient, in much the same way his herbalist ancestor had done.

He married my Eighth Grandaunt, Kwok Yee-Hing, in 1921. Her father had come to the colony from Chung Shan when he was in his early twenties to work as an interpreter. Unfortunately, he died of a tropical disease well before he could see out his twenties, leaving behind three young daughters, one of whom was my grandaunt.

When World War II came, my granduncle sent his family to the relative safety of the fabled city of Kweilin to escape the Japanese occupation. The city, located with its uniquely-shaped hills in the interior of China, was said to have inspired Picasso into his Cubist phase.

But my granduncle himself remained behind to look after his father, Chau Chung-Park, who was too frail to travel. However, as the war took a turn for the worse for the Japanese, the authorities threatened to draft him into the Japanese Army to attend to its mounting war casualties. He too had to escape into China.

* * *

My grandmother had been my only memory of any connection with the Chau family, at least until I called on my Eighth Granduncle and Grandaunt in the middle of 1947. The unexpected invitation to become a guest in their home was the real start of our relationships.

Over the next two and a half years, I noticed a number of eccentricities about my granduncle which I could not fully comprehend at the time. For example, although he was quite prosperous, he was dead set against purchasing any property for either professional or domestic use. He preferred renting.

Such a decision had seemed rather quixotic and impractical in my then jejune eyes. Property prices after the war were already on an upward trend and since he had ample means I could not understand why he insisted on

renting instead of buying. Later, I was given to understand it had been a matter of principle with him; he did not want to own property in a place already ceded to foreigners in perpetuity.

On the other hand, he did purchase a holiday bungalow called "The Abode of Butterflies" located on an outcrop on the island of Tsing Yee. The island was then little inhabited; all that was there were a couple of small villages engaged in fishing and small scale farming. The usual way of getting to the island was to travel by road to Tsuen Wan and then to engage a fisherwoman to row one across by sampan.

It was a delightfully rural place, with an abundance of bees, ladybirds, butterflies, dragonflies, grasshoppers, crickets and other insects. It also had no roads and hence was free of motorised traffic. Going there on weekends with my grandaunt and her children became one of my favourite treats.

Indeed, I was probably a more frequent visitor to the bungalow than any member of the Chau family because whenever it was not in use I would take a group of my financially straiten journalistic friends there for a picnic, a hike, a swim or dancing to some big band music played on a gramophone. It proved a thoroughly enjoyable and economic way of enjoying a day in the countryside.

My granduncle, however, always seemed too preoccupied with his patients and hospital rounds to indulge in the amenities of the bungalow. I imagined his rationale for purchasing the bungalow had something to do with his patriotism. The island was part of the New Territories, a slice of the motherland which had not been ceded, but only leased, to the British for 99 years.

Another puzzling aspect about my granduncle was his apparent appetite for acquiring antiquated Chinese books and ink rubbings from ancient Chinese monuments.

Above and overleaf: A day at the "Abode of Butterflies" in 1958 with journalistic associates. Among those pictured are Beatrice Greaves, Olga Tarvares and Chan Hon-Kit.

There had long been rumours of an underground cabal of dealers trading in questionable antiques, books and other Chinese imperial treasures stolen or looted from China over the decades. They often went to private collectors and museums in foreign countries, as well as to astute speculators. The trade began after the sacking of the Old Summer Palace in Peking in 1860, during the Second Opium War.

My granduncle never had any connection with that nefarious trade. After

World War II, however, large numbers of mainland refugees began fleeing to the colony to escape the rampant inflation and civil strife in China. They came with whatever they held dear. The parents of my first wife, for example, fled with a pair of antique vases. Others, if they had a scholarly inclination, brought out objects they might have treasured but they did not necessarily coincided with items that were most marketable. They might have consisted of out-of-print Chinese classical texts, personal seals or stone rubbings.

Somehow, one of those refugees found his way to my granduncle's medical practice and offered to sell what he had. I never discovered whether my granduncle was instinctively against ancient Chinese books of uncertain provenance falling into foreign hands or whether he just wanted to help out a person in obvious financial need. In any case, once he had bought the initial offering, word got around and others with similar offerings soon came calling.

In very little time, he had acquired so many antiquated books that the domestic quarters ran out of space for storing them. He then had cupboards put on the landings of the stairs to accommodate them.

* * *

It might be appropriate at this juncture if I were to sketch in some background about this questionable trade in looted Chinese treasures. It all began during the Second Opium War, when an Anglo-French expeditionary force of approximately 4,000 men was sent in 1860 to attack the Old Summer Palace or Yuan Ming Yuan, in an attempt to cower the Chinese authorities into submission.

The Yuan Ming Yuan was in fact a vast complex of palaces, pavilions, temples, halls, galleries and gardens covering some 860 acres, or approximately eight times the size of Vatican City.

Its construction began in 1707. After it had been brought into service, a

succession of Ching emperors used the facilities as both royal residences and their place for conducting affairs of state. The buildings therefore became filled with all manner of exquisite objects of art, copies of ancient classical works and other rare literary compilations scoured from all over the country.

When an Anglo-French delegation went under a flag of truce to demand the surrender of the Chinese, the delegation somehow got intercepted by Chinese forces and its members got some rough and rather undiplomatic treatment. Orders were then issued by the Western powers for their troops to loot and raze Yuan Ming Yuan to the ground. Palace maids and eunuchs who took shelter in some of the buildings were burnt alive. The place was so vast and extensive and its structures so scattered that it took the troops three days to complete the job.

The items seized by the soldiers were then sold off in auctions and the proceeds divided among them. That was how the first wave of Chinese imperial treasures fell into the hands of outsiders. It should be remembered that at the time looting was considered a normal part of the income of soldiers.

What was also evident by then was that the myth of white superiority had been firmly planted so that even its minions accepted it as a truism in the British imperial adventure. Racism extended even to the sphere of looting! The British troops sent to China during the Opium Wars included contingents of Indian soldiers. But after looting, the items they pillaged had to be sold in auctions and the proceeds distributed according to a scale based on the ranks of individual looters. In the case of Indians, however, they would receive payments not on their actual ranks like comparable European soldiers but one rank lower. A sergeant, for example, would be paid as if he were a corporal.

Victor Hugo, in commenting on the plunder of the Yuan Ming Yuan, had characterised it as akin to two bandits named France and Britain robbing a museum. He then expressed the hope that one day France would feel guilty enough to return the plunder.

In 1899, all the Western powers involved in China signed the Hague Convention outlawing looting. Nonetheless, when the Boxer Rebellion erupted in 1900 and foreign legations came under siege by mobs of Boxers in June, troops sent in by foreign powers to relieve them carried out widespread looting of private homes and public institutions in both Peking and Tientsin.

Among the latter was the Harlin Academy, the oldest and richest library in the world. It was a complex of courtyards and buildings housing the quintessence of Chinese scholarship. Unfortunately, it was located adjacent to the legation quarter.

When some Boxers attempted to start a fire near the dividing wall to smoke out some of the people seeking refuge in the legation quarter, a sudden shift in the wind caused the fire to ignite some of the Harlin buildings instead.

According to informed sources, some 23,000 plundered artefacts are supposed to be in the British Museum while UNESCO estimates that some 1.6 million stolen relics from that period can still be found in more than 200 museums around the world. Naturally, many additional antique items are also in the hands of private collectors.

* * *

My granduncle did not strike me as a serious collector of such material. I had never seen him studying any of his acquisitions or attempting to catalogue them. He was usually too busy with his practice to do much else, except that once in a while he would gather with a small coterie of friends for a meal and engage in composing Chinese poetry and exchanging couplets.

After I had moved out of his home to study at Stanford, I did not keep track of what eventually happened to those cupboards full of ancient books.

* * *

My relationships with my grandaunt had been infused with a certain mother-and-son flavour from the very start. Perhaps that had partly been due to wishful thinking on my part, because she had been so good-natured, welcoming and compassionately understanding of my ambitions and my predicament. She seemed to epitomise many of the qualities I had expected to find in my own mother but which I never found.

Long years of separation had estranged me from my mother. Although she had offered a perfectly logical explanation on why she had chosen to give me up when I was five while retaining custody of my younger brother, Tzi-Choy, I could not help being assailed by doubts as to whether she cared for me at all.

When I moved into the Chau residence at Leighton Hill Road, my Eighth Grandaunt's eldest daughter, Miu-Yee, had already gone to Peking to study at Yen Ching University while her second son, Yiu-Suen, was in America studying medicine. I was assigned a bed in a large dormitory-like room accommodating her four youngest children. The youngest one was Miu-Yan, who was eight years younger than myself.

My grandaunt's third daughter, Miu-Kwan, who was six months older than myself, was a jolly, self-assured and outgoing young lady. The war had interrupted her studies so that at that time she was still trying to complete her secondary education. She occupied a small cubicle outside the large dormitory-like room to which I had been assigned.

My relationship with my various cousins got off to a slightly rocky but not altogether unfriendly start. This arose because I addressed Miu-Kwan by her name. She quirkily got onto her high horse and declared that she, being an elder to me by family reckoning, ought to be addressed by her title as aunt and not by name.

"There are more than a hundred extended family titles," I replied. "Who has time to remember them all when extended families are in fact shrinking fast? In the West we would be considered merely as cousins and that seems a much more practical approach."

"But we're not in the West," Miu-Kwan retorted. "Hence we should follow customary Chinese practices."

"Yes, and we're all your uncles," some of her younger brothers chimed in.

"But Hong Kong is a British colony. So whether anybody likes it or not, Western systems of law and practices prevail," I said.

"You have spent too much time overseas; you've become a semi-barbarian," Miu-Kwan declared with finality.

My grandaunt looked upon our exchange with a sort of bemused nonchalance, probably regarding it as only a passing sibling argument which would soon be resolved without any outside intervention

* * *

Moving into the Chau household at once exposed the poverty of my wardrobe. I had left Singapore for Canton with only a small rattan suitcase holding a couple of shirts, two pairs of shorts, one extra pair of slacks, one change of undergarments and just the clothes I was travelling in. I had no jacket to wear for work in the magistracies and certainly no pyjamas suitable for sleeping in a room with several children. I was racking my brains over how I could squeeze enough out of my meagre salary to meet the most urgent needs.

But I needed not to have bothered. My grandaunt had identified my shortages and had fulfilled them without my having to breathe a single word. Later, when the Hong Kong weather started turning too cold for my tropical garments, she likewise supplied me with woollen vests and sweaters and a padded jacket of blue Chinese silk.

* * *

Miu-Kwan's put-down of my being a semi-barbarian hit me on a tender spot, however. I had been deeply conscious that both my spoken and written

Chinese had deteriorated during my years in Australia. Following the death of my grandmother, I had no one to speak Chinese to except Mr. Wong Sue, the restaurant owner who employed me as a dishwasher. And our conversations seldom extended beyond work schedules and food. Even my siblings, trying to navigate the Australian educational system, began automatically to speak in English.

After Japan surrendered in August of 1945, international shipping remained largely in military hands. By the time my family was allocated passages to return to Singapore, it was well into 1946. We did not reach home till the middle of that year, when the local academic year was already well advanced, What happened then was a frantic effort to get all my siblings into appropriate schools at the appropriate levels.

As for myself, I was anxious to complete my Cambridge School Leaving Certificate as soon as possible, rather than to wait for the start of the next school year. I therefore persuaded St. Andrew's to insert me into its first post-war School Certificate class, promising to make up on my own for all the missed lessons. I also got permission to take the examination for French, although no classes in that language was being conducted at the school. Those commitments prevented me from finding time to get my Chinese up to snuff.

* * *

Immediately after World War II had ended, the Chinese government issued an appeal to Chinese all over the world to return to China to assist in the reconstruction of the country. My grandfather mentioned that appeal to me when I was preparing for my School Certificate examinations. But he was scrupulous in not offering advice or urgings as to how I ought to respond.

By the time I got to Hong Kong, I had got myself in an emotional tangle of paradoxes and contradictions concerning my identity. Who was I and

where did I really belong? Although the colony had been the place of my birth, I had felt no real attachment to it. It seemed just an alienated fragment of a much larger and more significant whole. Yet I did not feel I had a place in that larger whole either.

Up to that point in my life, I had been a constantly rolling stone, driven here and there by the winds of Fate and by circumstances beyond my control. I had spent a couple of years of my infancy in Canton with my maternal grandparents, before being taken abruptly and without explanation to Singapore, to live with my paternal grandparents. Then came the war and throughout its duration I was in exile in Australia.

That peregrinating history had left me unsettled and adrift, with no sense of belonging to any particular place. Some of the conversations I had overheard between my paternal grandfather and his friends had steered me towards a vague but unstable belief that I was a Chinese, and, as such, should really belong somewhere in China.

But I had practically no real experience with that country. What connections did I have with it? A few remembered poems from my kindergarten days under Miss Nice; a few references by Tutor Tam to its fabled cities, majestic hills and mighty rivers when teaching me the Three Character Classic; and then the stunning reality of an untidy Canton plagued by runaway inflation and rumours of unrest during the visit to my mother.

Could I, on such a flimsy basis, commit my destiny to a virtually unknown country, as my grandfather had done during the Revolution of 1911? He at least knew a fair bit of Chinese history and culture and had seen many parts of the country before coming to a decision. I myself was helmed in by vast swamplands of ignorance.

For instance, I was not on top of its language, Often, when my granduncle and my father were talking about the Chinese secondary school they were both involved in, they would employ Chinese epigrams or archaic allusions I was not familiar with. That underlined the pathetic state of my command of

the language. I would then be forced to turn to my grandaunt for elucidation. Although I could tell that it pleased my grandaunt when I made such efforts to improve my command of the language, I could not help wondering whether I had really turned myself unwittingly into a semi-barbarian.

Before my very eyes, contradictory behaviours among the Chinese were taking place. Significant numbers were trying to escape from the factionalism and poverty in the country while at the same time others from Hong Kong and from overseas territories were returning to take up the call for reconstructing the country. Why was there not a unified heart or a common purpose? Had the nation remained as lacking in cohesion as the plate of sand as Dr, Sun Yat-Sen had referred to half a century ago? If so, then why was I struggling so hard to become a part of that disunity?

My upbringing had been quite mixed. I had developed no particular attachment to any of the places I had grown up in. Why not accept reality? I belonged nowhere. I was just a second class British subject living under colonial rule. I was bound to be discriminated against and considered inferior to any European. That was the future before me so long as I remained in Hong Kong. No possible change was in sight. Why not just accept it?

I imagined that accepting a subjugated identity would be far simpler than trying to make sense of five thousand years of recorded Chinese history. After all I had been taught many of the ways of the colonisers. I could intone English poems like a ritual or a prayer: "Oh, to be in England now that April's there." Though I had never had sight of England in April or at any other time, it was an easy abstraction to pay lip service to, an agreeable mirage conjured up by the words of others. But something in the blood stubbornly resisted my taking that route.

In my confusion and uncertainty, I sought the advice of Chan Hon-Kit, my friend and journalistic mentor. He was a university graduate and had much more working experience.

"Hong Kong seems pretty much a dead end for me," I said. "Should I go

to China to help in its reconstruction?"

Hon-Kit shook his head. "You should stick to your original plan to study in America," he said. "Acquiring knowledge is the best contribution you can make to China."

"But that is such a long way away. Finding the money is no joke. I feel I'm being left behind by everybody. You know, when my grandaunt was a refugee in Kweilin, she got a job making parachutes for the airmen in General Claire Chennault's Flying Tigers who were attacking Japanese forces to protect China. I also had a good friend in Australia who volunteered to be dropped behind enemy lines in New Guinea to ambush Japanese troops. He became a decorated hero twice. But all I had ever done during the war was to go on a few night patrols as an Air Raid Warden."

"Your turn to make a difference will arise sooner or later."

"Well, what would you suggest that I read in the meantime, to improve my understanding of China?"

"Proudhon."

And that was how I began exploring Proudhon's concepts of property being theft and why the great only appeared great because we were on our knees.

* * *

At the end of my probationary period, my pay at the *Morning Post* was doubled to the magnificent sum of HK$300 per month. When I had completed a year of service, my pay was doubled again. But it was still miles from a living wage. Those developments put an end to my illusion that I could somehow save enough from my earnings to finance a university education in America. My hopes rapidly dwindled.

My spirits were given a lift in the autumn of 1948 when Hon-Kit told me he was marrying his fiancée Frances and asked if I would be his best man. I felt immensely honoured and immediately agreed, before I realised I did not

have any appropriate attire for the occasion. As usual, my grandaunt came to the rescue.

My joy was short-lived, however, because Hon-Kit and Frances decided to head for China not long after the wedding in order, in their words, "to do some good". I was sorely tempted to join them by pulling up stakes in the colony. But they dissuaded me in the strongest terms possible. One pair of hands more or less in China was not going to make any difference, they argued. The country's greatest need was for well-trained minds and for that reason I ought to stick to my original plan for studying in America.

I sent them off by going by train with them as far as Lowu. I then watched them walking across Lowu Bridge with a heavy heart. I was not to see either of them again for another 40 years.

* * *

After the departure of Hon-Kit and Frances, my pessimism about my future took a nosedive. My work exposed me to the poorer sections of the community and it struck me that many of them and I were in the same predicament. It was as if we had all been placed into treading wheels inside a cage and no matter how fast we pedalled our dreams would remain forever out of reach. I had been working for two years and I was getting nowhere.

My grandaunt must have noticed the shift in my mood, for she said to me one day quite out of the blue: "Tzi-Ki, why don't you talk to your granduncle and ask him to give you a loan for studying in America?"

"I'm against loans, Grandaunt," I replied. "Loans have to be repaid and I don't want to start life saddled with debts or obligations. If I were not afraid of taking on obligations, I could have gone off under my father's proposal two years ago."

"What a silly boy, you are! Asking for a loan from a relative just falls better on the ear than asking for a gift. Do you think your granduncle will really

demand that you repay a loan if he sees you are in financial difficulties?"

"It's not so much what others might or might not do but what I myself would feel obligated to do."

My grandaunt shook her head and chuckled. "You're a good boy," she said, "one with backbone."

* * *

After that conversation with my grandaunt, I did some research and made some precise calculations. I discovered that the cost of a four-year undergraduate degree course at Stanford was so enormous that I could never in good conscience ask my granduncle for such a sum. At the same time I uncovered that many American universities had scholarships which they routinely offered to students with outstanding grades.

Over the next two or three weeks following my researches, the desire to get started on a university education niggled me like an itch which I could not quite reach to scratch. In the end, I formulated a strategy I was determined to stick to, come hell or high water. I arrived at a sum sufficient to pay for my passage to San Francisco by steerage on the American President Lines and the cost of the first year of studies at Stanford. I took it as read that I would secure grades good enough to land a scholarship for the following years.

Should I fail, then I would have had my chance to prove my worth and I would deserve whatever fate which might befall me. America, after all, was supposed to be a land of opportunity. I was confident it would be easier to make a living there than in China.

On that basis I asked my granduncle for a loan. He agreed to my request quite readily. "Are you sure that's enough?" was all he said. I assured him it was more than enough and thanked him.

I did not begin to repay his loan fully till after I had joined the Hong Kong civil service in 1961 and before he passed away in 1965.

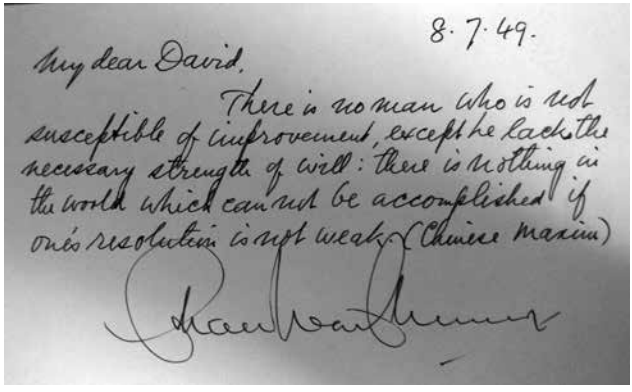
* * *

When the time came for me to set out for America, I became very conscious that I would be heading for a strange country without any family members or relatives to fall back on in times of need. It would be either sink or swim.

I remembered the years in Australia after the death of my grandmother when I had no one to go to for advice or guidance, After all the care and affection lavished on me by my grandaunt, I dreaded the possibility of having to be on my own again.

In 1949, it was quite common for young people to possess an autograph album into which they would ask friends and elders to write a message. I had one too. So I asked my granduncle and grandaunt to offer me instructions to guide my life abroad.

My granduncle wrote me a Chinese maxim in English, as follows:


8.7.49.

My dear David.

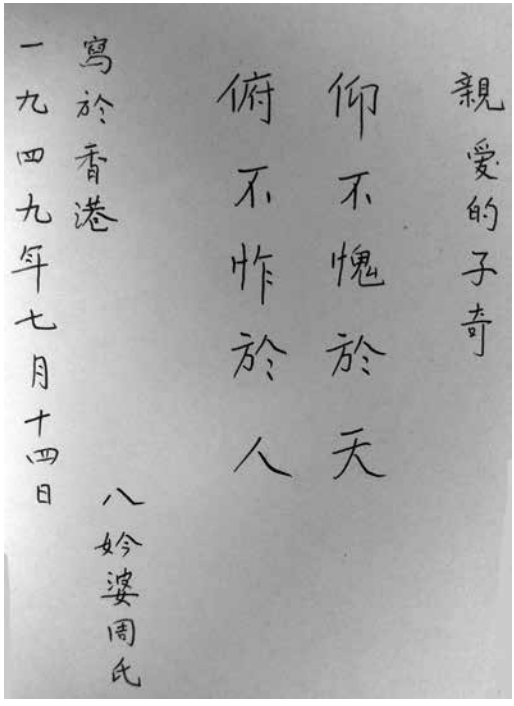
There is no man who is not susceptible of improvement, except he lack the necessary strength of will: there is nothing in the world which cannot be accomplished if one's resolution is not weak. (Chinese maxim)

My grandaunt wrote me a couple of lines in Chinese taken from Mencius. Mencius held that the Superior Man was blessed with three delights, though becoming the ruler of a kingdom was not one of them. His first delight would be that his father and mother were both alive and that the conditions of his brothers afforded no cause for anxiety.

His second delight would be the ability to look up at Heaven with no cause for shame and to move among his fellow men with no occasion to blush.

His third delight would be to secure from the entire kingdom the most talented individuals to teach and nourish them.

Through her writing as follows my grandaunt wished that I would enjoy the second blessing of the Superior Man:



Sadly, after I left for America in July of 1949, I never saw my grandaunt again. She passed away from a heart attack in Hong Kong in the middle of 1952, just as I was completing my first degree at Stanford. She was only 55.

Because of my great love and affection for her, I have tried throughout my entire life to live up to the expectations she had wished for me. It would be idle to claim I had always succeeded. But at least I did sincerely try my best.