Transitions

When my old friend and *mah-jong* partner, Ip Yeuk-Lam, learnt I had moved out of Palm Court to formally end my 20-year tenure as a civil servant, he immediately asked if he could drop by my new home to deliver a house-warming present.

"Oh, that's very thoughtful of you!" I responded in Cantonese, the normal language we communicate in. "But why stand on formalities when we're such old friends? Just the thought would be more than sufficient. Besides, although I've been a rolling stone, I think I've got most of the household essentials I need."

"Certain social conventions ought to be followed," Yeuk-Lam rejoined. "They provide social glue. I'm not saying we should stick to all the rites specified in the *Book of Rites*, but being conscious of them has given our nation a high degree of cultural cohesion. Imagine where we would be if we had long ago stopped sweeping the tombs of our ancestors at Ching Ming or gathering for family dinners during the Spring Festival. We would all be reduced to rootless and unconnected atoms, unlinked to our ancestors and unmindful of the generations to come."

"I take your point; but social niceties ought to be capable of reciprocity. There you have me at a disadvantage. You and Suze have settled so nicely at Bowen Road that you're unlikely to move again. So how can I ever give a house-warming present in return?"

"Don't worry, my dear boy. I've got reciprocity fully planned. You'd be giving me plenty in return. You see, I intend arranging a *mah-jong* game with our usual chums after delivering the present. That should give ample opportunity for cleaning out the wallets of weaker players like your good self."

"Hah, what an absolute fantasy! My father taught me from an early age that kinships count for nothing at the *mah-jong* table. That goes for friendships too, I surmise. So don't expect any quarter just because you've given me a gift. We'll soon see whose wallet's going to be emptied. I'm almost beside myself at the prospect of receiving two presents in a single day!"

"Your esteemed forebear has taught you well. I presume he has also alerted you to the fact that neophytes must pay hefty tuition fees before they can master even the most elementary points of the game. So you shouldn't count chickens before they're hatched."

With that, we broke out laughing. During our long friendship we had got used to ribbing each other relentlessly whenever the subject of *mah-jong* skills cropped up.

In my heart of hearts, I had to admit that Yeuk-Lam was indeed a superior player in defensive techniques compared with myself and the other intimates. But none of us would ever concede as much to him — even under extreme torture!

* * *

And so it was that Yeuk-Lam duly called on me one Sunday morning. But he did not come alone. Accompanying him were two hefty workmen carrying between them a magnificently sculptured horse set on an intricately carved ebony base. The fact that two men were needed to carry the object suggested it was probably made of stone. The carved animal was dark brown and captured in a rearing posture, with its mane flying and its muscles superbly defined.

The size and stunning nature of the gift took me by utter surprise. The rearing horse stood about 20 inches tall. It left me completely lost for words.

"Well, where would you like to put your present?" Yeuk-Lam asked nonchalantly, as his workmen stood on my threshold with the gift.

"There," I stammered, pointing to the only place that came to mind. It was the top of a large teakwood cabinet I had installed in my sitting room to house my collection of alcoholic beverages, glasses, cocktail shakers and ice buckets.

The top of that cabinet was already substantially occupied. A column of shelves rose from both its ends to reach the ceiling. They had been designed for displaying the few Chinese artefacts I possessed, as well as the collection of silver cups and trophies won by my race horses. Two of the shelves in both columns had already been requisitioned by the overflow of books from my study.

A four-foot gap of wall stood between the two columns upon which I had hung a large lithograph of a woman in a state of semi-undress. The lithograph was done by the modern French artist Bernard Cathelin. I had acquired it during a visit to Paris in the mid-1960s.

The spot beneath the picture was where I had directed the workmen to place the horse.

"Is that the right position, boss?" one of the workmen asked, after depositing the sculpture.

"Oh yes, precisely. Thank you," I said.

Yeuk-Lam then released his workmen.

After they had left, we both stepped back a couple of paces to assess the sculpture in its new setting.

"Your gift is magnificent," I blurted out, seeing how well it fitted in juxtaposition to the Cathelin lithograph. "I don't know how to thank you."

"You must have been very prescient," Yeuk-Lam remarked, "leaving that most suitable space for my humble gift. Yet, I see a pewter Tang horse already present in this room. Why didn't you put the Tang horse there?"

"I did try; but it didn't look quite right. It was too small for the space. Besides, the Tang horse's only a replica, cheap enough for me to afford but not magnificent enough to take pride of place. Your gift's far more suitable. I had no notion of what you had in mind so there was no question of reserving that space for it."

"Now your association with horses is unmistakably stamped in your new abode. It's a pity that the worthy citizens of our city can only regard horses as vehicles for racing wagers or, if they happened to be fortunate enough to own one or two, as status symbols. They've completely forgotten the importance of horses in the formation and protection of our nation against the marauding nomadic tribes from the north. It was only when we repeatedly overlooked the importance of horses that barbarians managed to invade and overrun our country."

"Ah, yes, the Tang Dynasty represented the glory days of equestrian skills and horse husbandry. The dynasty had started with only a few thousand horses, you know, having lost many during various wars. But it soon created a special department for importing and breeding all types of horses — for war, transportation, sports and even for dancing. It set aside royal pastures for them and their number soon soared to over 700,000. Those who oversaw those programmes all got elevated to high offices. The most popular sports at that time were hunting on horseback and polo. I think I wouldn't have minded living in the Tang era."

"It takes a history buff like you to have such esoteric facts at your fingertips. I was never taught any of that in my colonial school."

"Mine neither. I had to dig them out for myself much later, at an American university of all places."

"Well, with your attachment to horses I guess you would fit in rather well in Tang China. Look at where urbanisation has left us today. Most of us can't even mount a horse without falling flat on our faces. And if we wanted to see a decent horse race, we have to hire a bunch of foreign jockeys to put it on for us!"

Ip Yeuk-Lam's gift of a stone horse set on an ebony base.

"Let's mourn the passing of our ancient equestrian skills with a stiff drink. I can then also thank you properly for your spectacular gift. What's your poison? As we imbibe, you'll have to tell me where on earth you've discovered the gem you've brought. Surely not in Cat Street."

But as I made for the liquor cabinet, Yeuk-Lam put an arm out to restrain me.

"My dear fellow," he said. "This is Sunday morning, in case you've forgotten, and lunch is still a fair way off. If you're trying to ply me with drink to befuddle me during the game to follow, I'm not biting, although drunk or sober, I reckon I can more than handle players of your ilk. But for now, I'd rather have tea."

"Okay, if you think tea would sharpen your game any. I'm not a connoisseur and can't offer much variety. Only Dragon's Well and Iron Goddess of Mercy. And don't ask whether they're from fine pluckings or coarse or whether they're fermented, semi-fermented or not fermented. I'm now hooked on coffee because Chinese teas had been rarely available in foreign restaurants during my travels."

"Whatever you've got would be excellent."

"In that case, I'd better go and boil some water. I haven't quite settled in yet, as you can see. Why don't you have a look around and tell me what deficiencies I still have unattended."

* * *

The Chinese tea cups from the long-unused banqueting set came in handy. By the time tea was ready, I found Yeuk-Lam sitting in one of the two Queen Anne armchairs with winged headrests and cabriole legs in the sitting room. They had been placed at an angle to each other, each accompanied by a lacquered Chinese teapoy.

"Tea is served, sir," I announced. "I've selected Dragon's Well but I fear it has been brewed with ordinary Hong Kong tap water rather rather than spring water from the Tiger Running Spring that connoisseurs would prefer."

Yeuk-Lam half-rose to receive the cup before setting it down on his teapoy.

"Your armchair's very comfortable, just right for someone who wants to nod off after reading the morning or evening papers," he said. "Perhaps I ought to get a couple for my home. Where did you buy them?"

"They're fake Queen Annes, I fear, copied to order. You may not believe it, Yeuk-Lam, but they represent the first time in my entire life I've had a say over my choice of furniture. For the last ten years, for instance, I've had to put up with stolid government-issued armchairs in my quarters, manufactured by our local penal system. Before that, I had lived with my ex-in-laws and had to use their furniture. And so it has been ever since I can remember."

"Yes, I can see your character coming through in your new home. Books galore in every room. I see you have equipped yourself with the most basic necessity of life in your study — a folding *mah-jong* table! This place is obviously a pad for a well-read gentleman. There's something unusual about your bed, however, that I can't quite put my finger on."

"Ah, my bed of solid teak," I chortled. "You know, I've slept in beds all over the world but I've yet to find one which entirely satisfies my needs. Myths circulate endlessly about market forces responding to demand. But there must be thousands of singletons like myself who prefer the type of bed I've designed for myself. Yet no one is meeting that demand. Can anyone find a bed similar to mine on the market?"

"Your bed certainly appears unusual. Is it its width? What are its special features?"

"Well, first of all I dislike beds with springs. They do not wear well and springs are probably quite bad for the spine. Secondly, given the premium on domestic space locally, my bed has four large drawers built underneath, for storing bed linen, towels and the like.

"Thirdly, my bed is wide enough to accommodate a bedmate comfortably for the night and yet not be over-spacious when sleeping alone. I've therefore made the width of my bed half way between that of a single and a normal double bed.

"There's bound to be a host of items an average person would wish to have within reach in bed. For instance, items like books and other reading materials, an alarm clock, a cassette player, a box of tissues and the inevitable glass of water to quench the late night thirst. Possibly room for the odd bottle of medication. For me, space also to safely deposit my spectacles before turning in.

"In case anyone should seek to copy my design, let me sound a note of caution. It's far easier to find a furniture maker to make a bed to specification than to find a mattress-maker to produce a mattress of the appropriate size."

Warming to my exposition, I continued expansively: "Lastly, I cannot abide by the absolute impracticality of most standard headboards. Some are nothing more than decorative panels hung on walls. Where they are fixed to beds, they are often very shakily attached, for no real functional purpose. In my experience, there are inevitable moments during sexual congress when those engaged in it would wish to grab hold of something more solid than just each other's bodies. Hence the headboard to my bed is firmly bolted to the rest of the bed, with stout but artistically fashioned wooden bars, each strong enough to take many forms of stress.

"The Tang Dynasty, apart from being a golden age for poetry and equine husbandry, was also notable for its plethora of sex manuals. Frankly, I've found some of their instructions and their descriptions of positions for congress quite impossible to replicate. For the avoidance of doubt, I should state clearly that neither I nor any of the ladies who have shared my bed have been bizarre in our sexual habits. None had any yen for those weird indulgences in the form of bondage, sado-masochism or asphyxiation.

"You know, I've nonetheless discovered that women are fascinating creatures if men would only talk and listen to them more, rather than being in a hurry to bed them. Each of them may have very moving tales of joy or woe to tell. After a couple of nights with such a woman, one might find the bed of roses one had climbed into turning out to be a bed of neuroses."

A bed of the author's own design which he
still uses today in Malaysia

"I defer to your expertise on such matters," Yeuk-Lam said, tartly.

There was an insinuation of disapproval in his voice. “We’ve known each other long enough, David, so I hope you won’t take it amiss if I were to speak like an elder brother. Suze and I often worry about you. She and a number of your other friends have introduced you to many matrimonial prospects. Unfortunately, none has really clicked. Isn’t it about time you settled down?”

“Most of my friends know I’ve genuinely been trying for some time to find a wife for my children’s sake. But it hasn’t been easy at all. Someone suitable for my children might be unsuitable for me, and vice versa. There are simply too many conflicting issues to resolve among too many individuals — temperament, chemistry, ambition and so forth.”

Yeuk-Lam made an ambivalent sound. “Have you seriously thought of marrying again, if the right woman came along? You can’t keep escorting an endless parade of girls around, especially when many are young enough to be your daughters. This is a town filled with wagging tongues. You’re already acquiring something of a reputation as a libertine, trifling with the affections of the innocent and taking advantage of them.”

“Yes, there are risks all right. Idlers make up the most amazing stories. But every liaison I’ve had has been absolutely consensual, with eyes wide open on both sides. How much lower can I sink in Chinese esteem? I used to be a teacher. Then I traded that to become a running dog for foreign imperialists. Now I’ve surrendered myself to money-grubbing commerce, skimming a living off the labour of others, just for the sake of my children. Only the criminal classes remain below the level I’m at now.

“As for marriage, it seems utter ill luck that a right woman never presents herself at the right time and under the right circumstances. It has usually been the opposite. Now that my sons are finally off my hands, all the women I had previously been attracted to have also disappeared. That’s fate, I suppose. How can anyone fight against it? It has to be one of life’s crueler paradoxes that so much of what a person regards as precious often slips away between the cracks.”

Yeuk-Lam nodded, shifting into a more empathic mood. He picked up his cup of tea and took a sip.

I did likewise. As I did so, the torrents of memory concerning missed opportunities came rushing back — the stimulating evenings with Barbara, that sensual Canadian diplomat, and the stolen moments of adulterous love with C. Other times and other engagements also returned. Sharlee in Holland and the Jewish girl I had once danced with on a star-spangled

Californian night. Those bygone events all seemed so real, so freshly minted that they did not appear at all to belong to a distant past. The old extravagant dreams I had woven around many women had in fact all been dispersed, like morning mists under the harshness of sunlight.

Suddenly, I heard Yeuk-Lam's voice calling me back from my ruminations. "It's not good for a man to live too long alone," he said. "The ancients have consistently stressed the importance of getting one's *Yin* and *Yang* in balance. I think the Bible also has a reference to it being better to marry than to burn, although on present evidence you do not appear to be burning very much."

"Let's forget about my problems. They're insoluble, my friend. Just tell me where you found the sculpture and why you decided to acquire it for me."

"Aren't the answers quite simple?" Yeuk-Lam replied. "All your friends know how much you are attached to horses. You get up at the crack of dawn to clock your own gee-gees at training and you regularly visit them at their stables, bringing them carrots and lumps of sugar.

"For most owners, their animals represent no more than status symbols, something to show off. But you have real affection for them. So when I saw the sculpture at a national exhibition of Chinese arts and craft in Canton, I knew it would be just the gift for you. So I bought it, especially after the sculptor told me it had taken him two years to carve it and he intended never to carve another."

"You know my weaknesses, all right. When was this exhibition? Recently? You should have told me about it; I would have loved going to see it with you."

"Actually I bought the horse three years ago."

"What! Three years ago? Yet you haven't breathed a word about it till now! Where has the sculpture been all this time? Why did you wait three years before giving it to me?"

Yeuk-Lam chuckled. "Just think for a moment, my dear chap, before getting excited. Aren't the answers obvious? Three years ago you were still a hidebound civil servant, punctilious over regulations governing receiving personal 'advantages'. You've always been so fearful of conflicts of interest that you've consistently refused to touch any of the local stocks and shares friends have recommended to you. Or enter into our highly speculative property market either. Would you have accepted a gift from me which your British masters would be bound to question? Certainly not.

If you liked the gift, as I felt sure you would, you would have demanded to buy it from me. But such a breach of the etiquettes of friendship would have been unacceptable to me.

"What recourse would have been open to you then, except the one specified in civil service regulations? You would have to apply to the government for permission to accept a gift from none other than the Vice-President of the left-wing Hong Kong Chinese General Chamber of Commerce. How do you think the administration would have reacted? All kinds of alarm bells might go off. That would not have done your standing as a senior Chinese civil servant any good, would it?"

"No, I guess not. But I wouldn't have given a damn about that."

"Well, you had told me previously that the government had refused, allegedly on political grounds, to grant you permission to go to Taiwan for a holiday with a prospective bride. You swallowed that refusal. Could you swallow another should the British bar you from accepting my gift?

"What if the British authorities were to go a step further? They could not have been entirely ignorant of your being a regular *mah-jong* player at the General Chamber, playing with politically questionable characters like myself. What if they were to advance some security consideration for you to cease consorting with people like me? Could you have swallowed that as well? If not, you would have to deal with a crisis of identity, friendship, conscience and a whole lot of other issues. It was precisely because I did not want to put you in that position that I've stored the horse in Canton till now, before offering it to you after you had shed your civil service ties."

I nodded in reluctant agreement as Yeuk-Lam set out his analysis and reasoning. He was of course spot on about the situation I would have had to face.

"You know me too well," I muttered. "If you had offered me the horse three years ago, I might well have left the civil service that much earlier."

"That would have been a great loss to the community. Even now, your being with Li & Fung, represents a serious loss for the community."

"How so? I never had much power to influence fundamental issues; I was just a small cog in a great big machine. Now I am at least trying to generate some wealth for the community, if you subscribe to the economic myth of trickle-down effects. I fear in reality I might have merely sold out while in financial need, for thirty pieces of silver. In truth, I had always suspected I might just be creating wealth mainly for Li & Fung shareholders and its top executives rather than for society at large."

"Don't sell yourself short. You've many friends who believe you would always act in the best interests of the community."

"Alas, the same point of view did not exist in many of my colonial superiors."

"Not much can be kept under wraps in this place, you know. News gets around. People know you'd been a burr under British saddles and they're delighted. As a senior official, you did manage to do things your British superiors ought to have done but did not.

"The British, for instance, promised an expansion of the Western wholesale market right after the war, to cope with growing demand, but nothing happened till you intervened. You stuck your neck out to argue for the right of citizens to hold peaceful demonstrations, like during the Diaoyu Tai dispute. You laid the groundwork for the land-for-oil deal with Chinese interests during the OPEC oil embargo. You fought Whitehall for fair sharing of air traffic right for our local airline, Cathay Pacific. You scuppered the plot to build an expensive reverse osmosis plant instead of simply buying more water from Kwangtung. Need I go on?"

"But you don't know of the other occasions I have banged my head against stone walls to no avail. Such successes I had would not have been possible without help from people like yourself."

Yeuk-Lam took another sip of tea. "Come to think of it," he reflected, "our relationship must be quite baffling for people who do not know either of us very well, because we were obviously standing on different sides of a significant political fence. That goes as much for the British elite as for some General Chamber members. Such people probably regard you as either a British stooge or some kind of back channel fixer."

"That's the trouble with this fractured town of ours. There are too many people around with secret allegiances, fabricated loyalties and hidden enmities, living within their own private bubbles and cliques and seeking their own self-interest. Many cannot recognise a genuine friendship even when it hits them in the face."

"Part of the reason is that you confuse them by being too open and straightforward. You've got moral red lines but not political ones. You'd talk to whoever's sensible, even if he doesn't share your point of view. That makes people suspicious. They figure there has to be an ulterior motive somewhere, some personal benefit in cash or kind. Take for example your attempt to bring H.C. Fung and myself together. How did you go about it? You invited us to lunch at the Owners' Box at the Jockey Club on a crowded race day. It took place in front of half of Hong Kong's business bigwigs. People had to wonder what was in it for you to act as a middleman."

I sighed. "I was just trying to bring together two friends with different political persuasions but who could also pursue mutually beneficial economic interests. Chinese history tells us that whenever we are divided among ourselves, outsiders are bound to take advantage. I was just trying to frustrate that customary British tactic of divide and rule here."

"I'm sorry it didn't work between me and H.C.," Yeuk-Lam said. "As you saw, we were civil and courteous to each other, but the chemistry just wasn't there. I guess H.C had too much invested with the Kuomintang in Taiwan. If it had not been for your effort, H.C. and I would probably never have sat down at the same table to share a meal."

"Well, I'm not giving up on cementing relationships between friends. Better times may yet come."

"You're no doubt aware that what you're trying to do coincides neatly with the mainland's United Front slogan that those who loved their country should not be divided between the Left and the Right."

"Slogans are more easily shouted than given reality," I remarked dryly.

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Thus that morning chit-chatting with Yeuk-Lam passed swiftly and agreeably, as time usually did when bosom friends sipped tea and engaged in open-hearted exchanges of views. We both turned a little wistful at times when we touched upon matters beyond our power to amend.

After a leisurely lunch, we settled down to the pre-arranged *mah-jong* game with our favoured partners, Uncle Lau and Sixth Eldest Brother. By the end of the evening, both Yeuk-Lam and I left with our honour more or less intact, both managing to win a little while the others lost.

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In the week following Yeuk-Lam's delivery of his gift, I could not help mulling over the changes in life I would henceforth have to accommodate. My children were gone; I was all alone. In theory, I ought to be footloose and fancy free. But reality was quite different.

With the departure of my sons, I no longer had any need for a live-in maid. I therefore engaged only a part-time replacement for Ah Duen. She happened to be a chubby woman of about 40 by the name of Ah Seam. She only had to come three times a week, for a couple of hours each time to do cleaning and to take care of my laundry. I had decided to eat my meals out, so that she would not be involved in marketing or cooking. On the rare occasion I might be forced to eat at home because of, say, an approaching typhoon, I could simply make do with a cheese sandwich, a couple of boiled eggs or a bowl of instant noodles.

In respect of romantic affairs, I found myself in an invidious position. Although I could now initiate a relationship with whoever I fancied, without having to take account of the needs and proclivities of my children, what was there to choose from?

Unattached women looking for a long-term relationship were likely to be successful executives with lonely hearts, ageing spinsters, divorcees seeking a father-figure for their children, and the prematurely widowed, wanting a man to cuddle instead of a fidelity arch to be erected in her honour. And of course there would always be those liberated and street-smart young things of Ping's generation, probably playing the dual roles of innocent victim as well as predator, out either to snare a sugar daddy or get noticed by some movie or television talent scout. Not a very promising field.

I had told Yeuk-Lam during our Sunday conversation that my life had been plagued by the right woman always appearing at the wrong time and under the wrong circumstances. I might have claimed with a semblance of truth that our karma happened never to have been properly aligned. But that too would have constituted only a partial truth. Indeed, I might as readily try some hackneyed tale of star-crossed lovers as a face-saving evasion. When has the path to love ever been straight and smooth? Another partial truth might be my unwillingness to take tough decisions over responsibilities, either those already assumed or potential ones to come. Or perhaps it was simply a matter of cold funk. I could not really be sure.

Yeuk-Lam was a bosom friend of long standing, from whom I had no need to hold back personal secrets. Yet how could a person unfold his life before another, like a bolt of fabric, to point out the patterns and uniqueness in the cloth or to highlight its shifting colours when viewed under light or in the shade? What was more concerning were the insecurities, doubts, frustrations and other hang-ups buried inside myself.

If I were prepared to submit myself to the tender mercies of a latter-day Freud or Jung, I might perhaps, through the fog of their pseudo-scientific jargon and double-talk, gain an insight or two. But would any such diagnosis be meaningful or reliable? Headshrinkers had a penchant for ascribing present emotional problems to past childhood events. Some, like Freud and his followers, went in for interpreting dreams, believing that dreams would reveal repressed trends and wishes in the individual.

My own childhood had certainly been unconventional and unsettling. I had also been prey to an odd recurring dream too, lasting throughout my boyhood until well after I had finished university. What could any headshrinker make of that?

Perhaps the best approach might be to summarise here some of my more salient experiences of my childhood, so that readers can draw their own conclusions as to whether any psychological kinks, fixations, prejudices, phobias or resentments might be attributable to those events.

* * *

I shall begin my summary from about the age of three or four, when my parents' marriage collapsed spectacularly amidst much ado. Shortly afterwards, my mother took me and my younger brother by train from Hong Kong to Canton, where she had a job with the British-run Chinese Maritime Custom Service. My understanding was that she had to work in order to support herself and my brother and myself.

We went to live at the home of her father, an Anglican archdeacon who had some years earlier been responsible for founding the Church of Our Saviour at Wanfu Road in Canton. He was a humble, kindly and frugal man, though in my eyes he appeared rather serious and dour. His name was Mok Shau-Tsang and he was already 67 when we arrived. He had eight children of whom my mother was the fourth. He was, naturally, a fervent Christian and he, together with his wife and my mother, did their best to turn me into one as well.

They all seemed to hold the belief that people were born inherently bad and loaded down with sins. They explained that was why everybody needed the grace of their Christian God to save their souls from everlasting hell-fires. Their belief puzzled me. I could grasp neither the concept of hell-fires nor of people's souls roasting in them. What was a soul? I also did not feel I was really bad, just because I preferred playing games with other children rather than attending church and singing hymns.

Things came to a head one day when I hit one of my cousins on his head with a piece of wood, for taking a toy from me and refusing to give it back. He did suffer a scratch which drew blood but he wailed like a pig being slaughtered.

According to the Christian virtues taught to me by both my maternal grandparents and my mother, someone who had suffered at the hands of another ought to turn the other cheek. My cousin should therefore have allowed me to hit him again instead of kicking up such a fuss. Otherwise what did that teaching mean? He was in any case bigger than me. Moreover, I thought it right I should defend what was mine.

None of the adults who quickly gathered at the scene of the incident saw things my way, however. I was roundly scolded for being naughty and for using violence to settle disputes. Nobody tried to explain another way of getting my toy back.

Because my mother had to go to work and my grandparents were always too busy to keep an eye on me, I was soon passed into the care of a kindergarten. It was one administered by the church. I was put into a class run by a nice teacher whose name I have forgotten. But I remembered her well and gave her the name of Miss Nice.

Contrary to my adult family members, Miss Nice was quite willing to explain things. But I quickly got into trouble nonetheless. I got punished for disrupting her class by asking too many questions. After a while, it came to me that I was in a situation where I could not win. Adults must have thought processes entirely different from mine. Moreover, they often did not follow the logic of what they taught children.

In 1934, when a new South China diocese was created by the Anglican Church Missionary Society, my maternal grandfather was unanimously elected as the first Bishop of Canton. His religious teachings and his devotion to helping the poor, the sick and the dispossessed must have gone down well for so many to choose him to lead the flock. It was then that I began worrying more about the possibility that I might actually have some unaccountable form of badness or evil festering inside me.

* * *

Soon after I had turned five, a dispute arose between my parents' respective families over who should have custody of my younger brother and myself. Some to-and-fro bargaining took place among adults. My mother, to my chagrin, decided in the end that she would keep my younger brother but surrender me to my paternal grandmother, who would take me to Singapore, to a father I had hardly ever seen.

My mother did not explain why she had made that choice. She had never been much good at giving explanations, as I was subsequently to find out. But neither did anybody else explain why I should be the one to be given up. Neither did anybody ask for my preference. It did not seem fair that I should be disposed of in that way, like some inanimate object. I suspected the decision must have turned upon my alleged badness.

Once I had been handed over, it was to be more than 12 years before I saw either my mother or my brother again. In 1947, when I did meet up with them again in Canton, one of the first questions I asked my mother was why she had given me up but kept my younger brother.

Her reply was that it was a case of being pragmatic. The Wong family had wanted both of us but she was unwilling to agree to that. At the same time, she realised she was in no financial position to support and bring up two children. Since the Wong family insisted on having at least the firstborn, she thought that I, being three and a half years older than my brother, would be able to cope better without a mother. Thus a bargain was struck to split up my younger brother and myself between the two families.

* * *

After my arrival in Singapore, I discovered that my father was a journalist and was living with his parents in the old Chinese extended family tradition. The family home was at No. 10 Blair Road, a quiet and sleepy street. My father did not appear particularly pleased with my arrival, however. He struck me as more than a little aloof and distant. I put that down to my reputation of being bad and troublesome.

My paternal grandfather, the head of the household, was more welcoming, presumably because I happened to be the firstborn son of my generation. His name was Wong Wan-On. He was nominally a Christian too; but he had none of my maternal grandfather's fervour or adherence to Christian practices and doctrines.

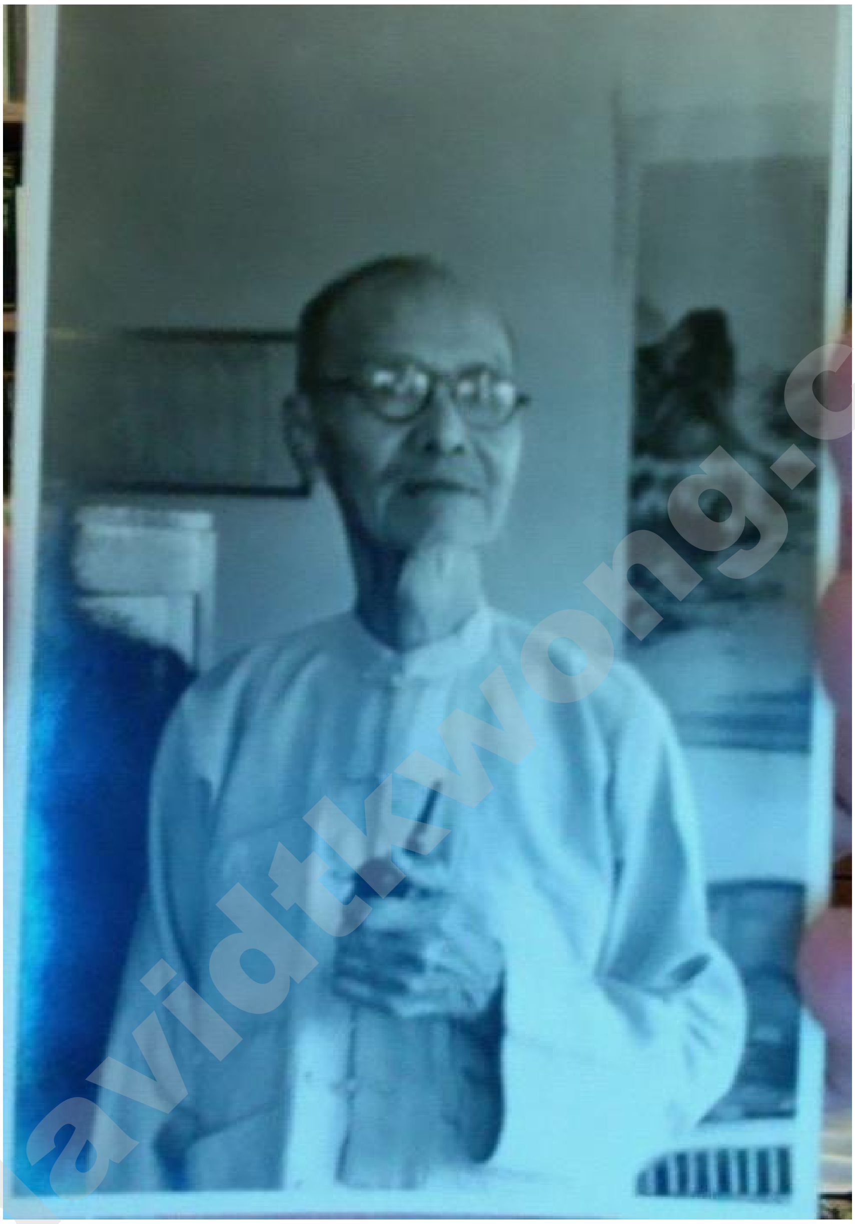
He was born in Hong Kong in 1876 and studied at the Diocesan Boys' School before enrolling in the then Hong Kong College of Medicine, graduating in 1900. He then immediately took up a position as a Medical Officer with the British Colonial Service and was posted to Singapore. By the time I arrived at his home at Blair Road, he was already 59 and had long retired with a generous pension.

He was a man of many puzzling parts. It took me a while to suss out the stories and characteristics associated with him. First of all, he was a polygamist, for he was said to have had a total of nine wives. The grandmother who had brought me to Singapore had been his principal wife. One of the implications of that polygamous condition was brought to my notice shortly after my arrival, when one of his concubines or subsidiary wives dramatically gave birth to a child who was to be my uncle!

What was more amazing still was to discover that the lady who had just given birth was also considered to be one of my grandmothers! She was living only a few doors away — at No. 38 Blair Road to be precise! I was subsequently also introduced to a gaggle of married aunts whom I never knew existed, all of whom were living in different parts of Singapore.

The second unusual feature about my grandfather was that he was a revolutionary. I had no idea what that meant or what a revolutionary ought to look like.

My grandfather was tall and thin. When I first saw him, he was dressed in a loose-fitting Chinese suit. He spent much of his time reading newspapers and smoking a variety of pipes. He came over more like an aged but genial school teacher rather than someone plotting to topple governments. Soon after my arrival, my grandfather began to grow a scraggy beard and to wear spectacles.



My grandfather Wong Wan-On, at the age of 81,
taken at his home in Serangoon Gardens Estate
in Singapore

It was only later, through photos hanging on the wall next to his bed and in the photo albums shown by my grandmother, that I discovered he was a friend of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, the father of the Chinese Republic. He had spent years not fighting as a revolutionary but raising funds among overseas Chinese to finance the overthrow the Ching Dynasty in China. It was not till 1911 that the revolutionaries met with significant success.

After my grandfather had retired as a Medical Officer from the British

Colonial Service in 1920, he began work as a ship's surgeon on vessels plying throughout the Far East. He did this for about ten years. I was told that he was accompanied on some of those voyages by another of his subsidiary wives. It could not be established, however, whether he had continued to support Dr. Sun's political activities after Dr. Sun had set up a government in South China after the revolution of 1911.

My grandfather was also an opium-smoker. That activity was quite legal back in those days. Indeed, he used to take me with him to a nearby police station to buy the opium, after which he would then take to the home of one of his many Chinese friends for it to be smoked while they engaged in congenial conversations.

From snatches of their conversations, I gathered that they considered the five ideal conditions for smoking opium to be a dark room, with a bright opium lamp, a pipe that could sing, rain on the window and a loquacious friend. All those strange refinements were quite beyond me.

So was much of their conversations. They seemed to centre largely upon a longing for China and developments there, both past and current, which also left me in the dark. My own recollections of China were merely those of my mother, my maternal grandparents and Miss Nice, my kindergarten teacher.

No one sent me so much as a postcard to Singapore after I had been given up. I had retained some vague impressions of a younger brother but I did not even have a photograph of him to remember him by. I could not help wondering once in a while why my mother and my folks in Canton did not fight harder to keep me there. The only reason I could come up with was my supposed badness.

When my paternal grandfather and his friends talked, I could sometimes detect a certain wistful longing in their voices, over being in a foreign place. Their mood triggered something similar in me. I too longed to be back at my native home with my mother, instead of being thousands of miles away in a sun-drenched tropical place. Why my mother did not cling to me more forcefully remained a disturbing puzzle.

Unexpectedly, hanging around the smoking sessions of my grandfather and his friends, I soon grew to love the pungent aroma given off by the burning drug. It was a smell I found attractive and I fantasised over puffing opium myself as soon as I was old enough. Unfortunately, well before I could attain adulthood, the world had declared opium an illegal substance to be prohibited from use on pains of fines or imprisonment.

* * *

While I was getting to know the nature of my grandfather and his exotic life, my father was busy raising an illicit second family with a beautiful woman named Anna. He and Anna had already created a sister and a brother for me by the time I reached Singapore. They were to produce two more siblings in the years ahead.

I had used the word "illicit" deliberately, because my father and Anna did not formally marry till late in the 1950s, about three decades after they had become lovers. And then only because Anna had threatened to leave him unless they got formally married.

How the two of them ever got together was a tangled tale of incredible naivety and outrageous innocence. Anna had in fact been my mother's best friend and bridesmaid. When I was born, my paternal grandparents had a home in Hong Kong as well as Singapore, because my father was a student at the University of Hong Kong and my grandmother wanted to be close to her only son. My father was living in a university hostel and came home only on weekends.

My mother was apparently restless and bored with living with her mother-in-law, where household decisions, including those concerning my care and welfare, were in the hands of my grandmother. She therefore decided to return to Canton to resume work with the Chinese Maritime Customs and to help her own father in some of his charitable church activities.

But she was conscious at the same time that after her departure my father might be at a loose end during weekends. So she asked her best friend, Anna, to have an occasional meal with him and possibly to take him to the cinema. Given my father's charm, good looks and romantic inclinations, the inevitable happened. He and Anna became lovers.

When my mother found out, there was hell to pay. A council of elders was convened and my father was ordered to apologise to my mother and to end his extramarital liaison. But their affair did not end. In fact, they continued furtively and Anna soon became pregnant.

My father's explanation for disobeying elders was that he loved both the women. My paternal grandfather, given his own approach to matrimony, was relaxed over the whole thing. He suggested that his son should marry both. But my mother, having been brought up as a Christian, would not hear of it. She forced my father to choose between herself and Anna.

Meanwhile, my grandfather took Anna to Singapore to wait out her confinement. For a while, relatives there thought my grandfather had brought home another wife!

As soon as my father graduated from university, he chose to decamp for Singapore. Thus the marriage of my parents came to an end.

* * *

After my arrival in Singapore, Anna was no more welcoming of my presence than my father had been. I gained an immediate impression she wanted to have as little to do with me as possible, preferring to keep me at arm's length. I assumed my presence must have reminded her of things she would rather forget. I had no problem with her approach and we remained for years on hardly speaking terms.

Staying out of her way was easy because she was a working woman, initially employed by Nestle and later by the British Special Branch. I did envy my siblings, however, whenever I saw them playing with their mother, whereas I had no memories of ever having played with my own.

Anna's career at the Special Branch eventually got her assigned to work in its Safe Care Registry, where all confidential and secret files were kept. That fact, in a roundabout way, led to my being evacuated from Singapore when the Pacific War reached Singapore. It was a last minute thing, being evacuated on the deck of a British minesweeper called the *Gorgon*.

My escape in 1942 was due entirely to the stubbornness of two strong-willed women — Anna and my paternal grandmother.

The circumstances, in a nutshell, were as follows: When the Pacific War broke out with the Japanese attack in December of 1941, the British severely underestimated the capabilities of their enemies. Because of that flawed assessment, they suffered one military defeat after another. They maintained that illusion even after the Japanese had sliced through British defences in Malaya like a knife through jelly. They did not seem able to abandon their mistaken notion that Singapore was impregnable.

The Japanese shattered that belief too, when they made a successful amphibious landing in Singapore on February 8 of 1942. By then it dawned on Anna’s superiors that the city would fall and that all British personnel would quickly become Japanese captives. Anna was a person privy to many secrets. They feared she might spill them under torture. So they decided to send her out of harm’s way.

But Anna was greatly devoted to her children. She refused to leave without them. Her superiors were forced to agree to evacuating her children as well.

My father then entered the picture. He knew there was no chance of any adult male member of the family being evacuated. But, being a filial son, he was anxious for the safety of his mother, then aged 68 and in failing health. He therefore asked Anna to persuade her superiors to provide for my grandmother to leave also, on the grounds that Anna, being an office worker, would be incapable of looking after so many children on her own. Anna’s superiors, with other more important things on their minds, readily agreed.

It now became the turn of my grandmother to dig her heels in. The fortunes of war were uncertain, she declared. The continuation of the family was paramount. If she were to flee without the menfolk, then she had at least to take the firstborn of the next generation with her. Otherwise she would rather stay and share whatever fate was in store. In the confusion, panic and urgency spawned by war, I somehow got included as one of Anna’s children.

While the adults wrangled over the composition of the family group to be evacuated, hostilities swept steadily closer to Blair Road and the heart of the city. Late on the afternoon of February 14, orders suddenly came for those earmarked for evacuation to go immediately to the quayside. No time was allowed even for packing daily essentials. Everyone had to go at once, in the clothes they stood in.

A permit of some sort was produced which allowed our party to board a waiting launch. It then took us alongside the grey hulk of the *Gorgon* in the harbour. The minesweeper, on loan from America under a lend-lease agreement, normally had a complement of 40. But by the time we boarded, it was additionally packed with some 280 expatriate women and children. Only a sprinkling of Asians were among them. Since all the comfortable spots on the ship had already been occupied, our family members had to split up at different locations on the deck, fully exposed to sun, wind, surf and possible enemy attack.

Under the cover of darkness on the night of February 14, the Gorgon set sail. No member of my family knew its destination. On the following day, the British surrendered Singapore.

* * *

After a six-day journey, the *Gorgon* reached Fremantle in Western Australia. By then everyone in my family stank, for we had to live throughout the trip in the same clothes we had on when we boarded. There was not even a toothbrush or a piece of soap between us. We disembarked at Fremantle and were then quickly transported as refugees to Perth, the capital of Western Australia. A number of the other evacuees continued on the *Gorgon* to Sydney, where they presumably had friends or relatives. I was then 12 years' old while my youngest brother, Tzi Seng — Anna's favourite child — was only two.

Finding ourselves filthy and almost penniless in a strange land was quite disconcerting. The fact that we had to deal essentially with white folk added to our discomfiture. Our former comfortable middle-class mode of life seemed to have evaporated for good. We had no idea how we would survive.

Happily, the people and the charitable organisations which helped us settle into our new environment were friendly and helpful. They took us in hand, got us kitted out with donated second-hand clothing and shoes and saw to our registration with various relief agencies.

The apparel we thus acquired looked outlandish on us, for we were not accustomed to having different clothes for different seasons. But the assurance of receiving a modest cash grant on a regular basis for food, housing and incidentals came as a great relief. We were also told that the law required all children above kindergarten age and below 16 to undergo compulsory schooling. That meant that all my siblings except Tzi Seng had to attend school. It proved a trial for my sister Helen to cope in a class of her appropriate age because her education had hitherto been largely in Chinese, which left her less than proficient in English.

Another problem soon manifested itself. The cash grants turned out to be insufficient to cover all our basic needs. Renting a house took out a big chunk. That meant we had to skimp on food.

It soon became apparent to me that my grandmother and Anna were both eating very sparingly, to leave more food for the children. Although I was thin as a reed, I had a voracious appetite. But I was now "the man of the house" as it were and I could not bring myself to devour a greater share of the limited food than my siblings. That left me feeling hungry and ravenous most of the time.

Since necessity was the mother of invention, I soon found a solution. I approached the owner of a Chinese restaurant, a Mr. Wong Sue, to ask if I could do odd jobs for him after school in return for food. He readily accepted, for he was shorthanded because of the war. Thus I began illegally washing dishes and doing odd jobs for him at the age of 13. I did that for a couple of hours each day, in return for all the food I could eat. Later on, Mr. Wong Sue also allowed me to retain any tips I found while clearing tables. I kept working for him for almost four years, until transportation could be arranged after the war to repatriate the family to Singapore. Before then, however, my grandmother had passed away.

Before I started work at the restaurant, I had volunteered for training as an Air Raid Warden because I wanted to help in the war effort. After completing the training, I was certified as an official warden and was sent out in the evenings with adult wardens to enforce the blackout regulations. I was also 13 when I began those unpaid nocturnal rounds of duty.

I have never figured out why it should be legal for governments to use a child for unpaid civic and community duties but illegal for that child to work for food to feed himself.

* * *

To round off these recollections of things past, it might be as well for me to record the recurring dream which had dogged me for more than 20 years. I first had that dream soon after my grandmother had taken me from Canton to Singapore.

The dream was an extremely simple one. It involved an encounter with an aged lady resembling my grandmother but not actually my grandmother. She held out to me a needle with a long thread running through its eye. I reached out to receive the proffered needle. But in the fraction of a second before I could capture the needle between my thumb and forefinger, she released it. The needle naturally fell to the ground, whereupon the old lady said: "There, you've dropped it."

That was all there was to the dream. Yet it kept coming back to me over the years, until well after I had graduated from Stanford. Then it stopped and did not recur again.

I never managed to divine what my sub-conscious mind was trying to tell me. No doubt psychologists and psychiatrists could offer up all manner of amusing interpretations and theories. But psychology and psychiatry are relatively recent disciplines and I would regard any analysis or theory advanced with a healthy degree of scepticism.

If the needle and thread had been symbols, then I supposed my failure to take hold of them must imply some self-assumed deficiency on my part. Or was my inner practical self trying to tell me to start repairing that ravelled sleeve of self-pity over my dispossession and want of care? Life had to have its ups and downs and one should just get on with it. I fear I shall never know for sure.

It had to remain largely a matter of speculation whether my boyhood experiences and my recurring dream contributed to shaping my habits of mind and heart. And if so, to what degree and to what end?

If I were later in life to be charged with some serious criminal offence, for example, a wily defence counsel could well draw upon those episodes to soften the hearts of both the judge and the jury hearing my case. To mitigate my wrong-doing further, he might also draw upon the mental and emotional scar left upon me by the public humiliation of being caned at a Chinese primary school at the age of six.

But that would not come remotely close to the whole picture. Human beings are complicated creatures. They are meant to be tested in the crucible of life, to see if they could rise in the face of adversity or merely sink into the depths of despondency and despair.

That is where the more positive influences in one's life come into play. Could it really be said that the love my paternal grandmother lavished upon me for years had left no effect on my character, that the food, shelter and care given to me by elders from both sides of my family evoked no gratitude, that my excursions with my paternal grandfather to Sunday *dim sum* lunches, to catch grasshoppers to feed his canary, to eavesdrop on conversations with his *confrères* while breathing in the fumes of opium had all been just water off a duck's back?

And what about that succession of exceptional teachers I had been privileged to encounter — Miss Nice in Canton, Miss Fox and Tutor Tam in Singapore, and Mr. Harold Lewis and Mr. Maurice Zines in Perth. Mr. Lewis had instilled in me the notion that libraries were "warehouses of ideas" from where everyone could draw intellectual nourishment for free while Mr. Zines taught me not only the French language but a variety of folksongs like *Ma Normandie* and *Auprès de ma Blonde*.

It was simply not possible that all those experiences left no effect upon my character. Every individual must choose what he or she wishes to take on the journey through life.

Now, 75 years after I had first begun learning French folksongs from Mr. Zines, I am still prone when taking my evening shower after a satisfactory day of writing to belt out in my cracked voice — to the consternation of my neighbours — a stanza or two of one of those French folksongs.

Dans les jardins de mon père,
Les lilacs sont fleuris.
Dans les jardins de mon père,
Les lilacs sont fleuris.
Tout les oiseaux du monde,
Viennent y faire leurs nids.
Après de ma blonde
Qu'il fait bon, fait bon, fait bon,
Après de ma blonde,
Qu'il fait bon dormir.

The lyrics would inevitably bring back memories of France, of Paris and of the blondes who had once entered my life before slipping away like shadows.

* * *

The second transition I had to face after leaving public service was to turn myself into a hustler for profits based on the labour of others. It was an activity which filled me with apprehension. It was not that I had not previously sold my services like a mercenary, out of sheer financial necessity. But this time it would be on an unprecedented scale, to justify the large payment I had already received in advance, and with myself deeply involved in calling the shots.

My first experience of the effects of a dominantly profit-driven system in Hong Kong was in 1947, when I was on the receiving end of it, upon taking up a job as a club reporter with the *South China Morning Post*. My starting pay was HK$150 per month, which was less than 10 pounds sterling at the then prevailing rate of exchange.

HK$150 per month worked out at five dollars per day, a sum hardly sufficient for two reasonable meals. I was 18, however, and had only a Cambridge School Leaving Certificate to my name. But still, a workman ought to be worthy of his hire. Although I had not made any comparative study, I suspected that my wage must be pretty close to what convicts got for prison work. But convicts at least had the advantage of free food and lodging.

I managed to survive on that unsatisfactory sum only because the Right Reverent Victor Halward, the Anglican Assistant Bishop of Hong Kong, and a colleague of my maternal grandfather's, had invited me to stay as his guest at Bishop's House. Later, my Eighth Grandaunt came to the rescue by offering me the hospitality of her home at No. 33 Leighton Hill Road.

It did not take me long to discover that fellow scribes working for other newspapers were drawing wages as derisory as my own. Virtually all of them, particularly if they happened to be married, had to take on additional jobs to make ends meet, selling advertisements or insurance, ghost-writing speeches, giving private tuition or doing some other evening chores. It seemed that the starvation wages in "grub street" commented upon by Samuel Johnson in the 18th century were still very much alive in Hong Kong in the middle of the 20th century. And still being ladled out!

Admittedly, my own pay might have been geared to my lack of experience and my being on probation. When the probationary period was over, my pay was doubled to the magnificent sum of HK$300 per month or ten dollars per day.

It was natural that when journalistic hacks gathered for a drink after work, they would bemoan the inadequacy and unfairness of their wages compared with the contracts given to expatriate journalists, complete with housing and other perks. Many felt they were as good as the expatriates or even better. At least they spoke the local language and knew the local customs and practices in greater depth.

But there was little that they could do to alter their plight. They were all locals, on month-to-month terms, and all expendable. Plenty of other job-seekers were anxious to join the ranks of the supposedly glorious Fourth Estate.

After a while, someone suggested the formation of a journalistic association so that some collective bargaining for better terms could be initiated with newspaper publishers. The spark of rebellion was thus lit. But countervailing forces soon came to the fore. No threat of any sort was ever openly made, no ultimatum ever delivered, but word quickly got around that should a journalist association come into existence then some of its prime movers were likely to lose their jobs.

A pall of helplessness and despondency descended upon the frustrated locals in the profession. Those with other options mulled them seriously. One of my closest friends and mentor, Chan Hon-Kit, left Hong Kong to pursue his calling in China. I was not to meet up with him again for close to 40 years.

Another colleague, Raymond Chow, abandoned journalism to take on a job with a film-maker named Run-Run Shaw. Later he was to set up his own film company, Golden Harvest, to launch the *kung fu* star Bruce Lee upon the world. A number of others settled for the iron rice bowl of the civil service, to become government press officers or other bureaucratic executives.

As for myself, I chanced at that time upon a copy of the *Book of Mencius*. Its opening pages, which described a meeting between that famous disciple of Confucius and King Hui of Liang, captivated me. When the king asked Mencius what suggestions he had for profiting his kingdom, the sage answered with a rhetorical question. “Why must Your Majesty speak of profit when there are issues such as benevolence and justice?” The sage then went on to argue the futility and danger of relying on profit-seeking.

That exchange got me thinking in a fresh direction. All enterprises had to make a profit to survive. But surely it must be self-defeating for the owners of newspapers to put the survival of their reporting staff at risk for the sake of enhancing their own profits? And where did benevolence and justice come into that essential relationship? There had to be a contradiction somewhere.

There was another aspect of the teachings of Mencius that pleased me enormously. He held that the nature of man was good, being born with a sense of compassion, righteousness and modesty. That inherent goodness needed to be cultivated through education. Only a bad environment or bad company could pervert his original good nature.

However, Confucius also had another celebrated disciple by the name of Hsun Tze who took a different view. Hsun Tze believed, like my maternal grandfather, that man’s nature was evil, filled with greed, jealousy and sensual desires. Left to their own devices, men would soon become enemies of one another. They therefore needed a strong rule of law to curb their evil nature. But Hsun Tze also believed that education and training could turn them into good men.

Regardless of whether I had been born good or evil, those ancient sages indicated clearly a path to goodness. My eagerness to rush along that path, however, was stymied by my lack of resources. I therefore had to continue working for the *South China Morning Post* for two and a half years before I could embark upon further education. But that period turned out to be a valuable form of education in itself.

My formal education at Stanford was eventually made possible by my Eighth Granduncle, Dr. Chau Wai-Cheung, who noted my restless desire to soak up knowledge. He therefore kindly granted me an interest-free seeding loan.

And I have been on a never-ending quest ever since to learn as much as I possibly could about the many paradoxes and contradictions besetting an unstable world.