

## My Grandparents

Of my four grandparents, the one who has remained most deeply lodged in my memory is my paternal grandmother. She had taken care of me since my birth and I had her company, through thick and thin, for far longer than with any of the other three. From a very early age, I had noted that a distinctive bodily fragrance was associated with her presence. Thus long before I could even articulate her name, I had this means of identifying with her. I had no idea whether the smell was inherent in her person or whether it came from some perfume she wore. All I knew was that I liked it. It seemed to bring a feeling of comfort and security which I could not find with anyone else, not even with my own mother. That distinctive fragrance signalled her approach even before she came into view.

I learnt at an early stage to address her as Ah Mah, in the Cantonese fashion. She was a dignified woman, with a matronly bearing and wore her hair in a chignon. The hair contained a few strands of grey which I think she tried to disguise. The whole arrangement was slicked down using a once-popular gel-like preparation known as "*pow fa*", made from soaking shavings of camphor wood in hot water. She was already in her mid-fifties when I came into the world.

Another feature of hers I soon discovered was that she invariably wore on her right wrist a bracelet of translucent green jade. That cool ring of stone my infant fingers soon discovered provided another means by which to identify her. Sometimes she would wear a pair of matching earrings in the shape of small jade balls. She looked the perfect picture of a benign and self-assured matriarch. Family members as well as servants deferred automatically to her.



Author at age of one being carried by paternal grandmother.

Before I had turned four, however, she suddenly disappeared from my life. It was a loss that affected me deeply. It felt as if I had been suddenly and incomprehensibly abandoned and betrayed. Neither Ah Mah herself nor anyone else explained why she had to go away. The closest thing to an explanation was a terse remark by some adults that she needed to go to Singapore to be with my father and my paternal grandfather.

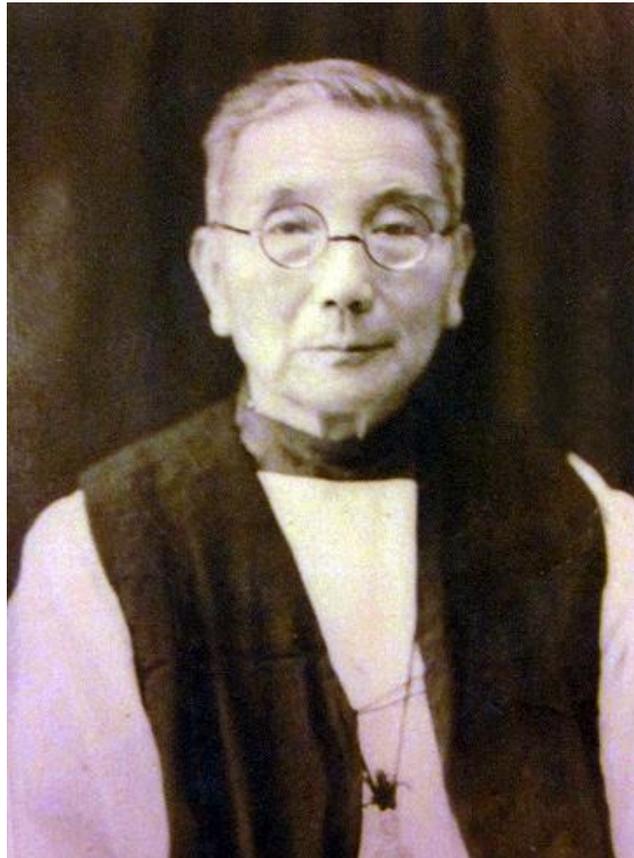
The vagueness of that information floated like dust motes in a beam of sunlight, something clearly visible yet beyond understanding. If she needed to be with my father and my paternal grandfather, did that mean she had no need to be with me? I struggled to work out my first tangle with reality.

Shortly after my grandmother's departure, my mother gave birth to my younger brother, Tzi-Choy. After an interval, she took both of us to Canton by train. No explanation was given as to why we had to go to another city,

leaving behind our accustomed home and its familiar household servants.

Canton seemed filled with strangers, chief among whom were my maternal grandparents. I was taught to address them as Kung-kung and Por-por respectively. Then there was a sizable assortment of maternal aunts and cousins whose names and designations I could not get straight. There were also assorted nondescript people who came and went, all connected in some way with activities at my grandfather's pastoral duties.

I had no recollection of having met my maternal grandparents before, though I must have done so as an infant. The information I have about them came much later, from narratives by elders and from some of the biographies about my grandfather. He was apparently an important personage in the Anglican Church though I only associated him with sermons, prayers, hymns singing and large congregations. He was a humble and kindly man, with short, greying hair and a pair of round, over-sized spectacles. The eyes behind the spectacles were meek and gentle. I noted some spots on his face and hands, which I later learnt were called liver spots. What stood out most clearly for me was his firm and fervent voice. He was already 67 when I went to live with him.



Portrait of Maternal Grandfather the Rt. Rev. Mok Shau-Tsang, first Anglican Bishop of Canton.

His name was Mok Shau-Tsang. He was born in 1866, into a well-to-do family in the small agricultural town of Tseng Sing in Kwangtung, not far from Canton. His family dealt in household provisions -- rice, salt, cooking oil and the like. He had received a conventional classical education until 15 before he moved to Hong Kong.

It was not clear what kind of horizons an adolescent like him might have thought of broadening. The colony had more than its fair share of sing-song houses, gambling dens, opium-smoking establishments and other kinds of diversion. In any case, after his arrival in 1881 he enrolled in St. Paul's Secondary School. The religious instructions there must have been very persuasive because he had converted to Christianity by the time he graduated. He then studied theology with a priestly calling in mind.

Meanwhile, he met a Cantonese woman from the Chung Shan district of Kwangtung Province who had come to Hong Kong to take up a teaching post at a girls' school. Her name was Wong Chung-Shun. She evidently shared his religious enthusiasms and they lost little time in entering into that state referred to as holy matrimony.

He was ordained as a priest in 1902 and was sent the following year by the Church Missionary Society to start a new ministry in Canton. He duly founded the Church of Our Saviour and subsequently started the Holy Trinity Middle School on the nearby grounds of the Holy Trinity Theological College. From then on, he and his wife devoted their lives mainly to the religious and charitable work of the Anglican Church.

My grandfather was made an archdeacon in 1927 and, when a new South China diocese was created in 1934, he was unanimously elected as the first Bishop of Canton. He was consecrated at St. John's Cathedral in Hong Kong in a ceremony conducted entirely in Chinese by the Right Reverend F. L. Norris, the then presiding bishop of the Society in China.

Following his consecration, he oversaw church work throughout Kwangtung Province which consisted of seven churches and a number of schools and medical clinics. His commitment to the Christian faith was such that he required all his eight children, once in work, to contribute a portion of their earnings to support church activities. The longest surviving of his children was my eighth maternal aunt, who passed away in Canton in 2013, at the age of 99.

Recollections of my Por-por are unfortunately very sparse. The only image I can evoke of her is a wrinkled and slightly sorrowful face. I have some photographs of her taken at different stages in her life but, try as I might, I cannot conjure up any impression resembling the woman in the pictures. The only other detail I can remember is the roughness of her hands, as if they had been frequently used for housework.

She passed away in 1941 and Kung-kung followed her two years later, while undertaking a war-time mission to Pak Hoi.

During the brief period I had lived with them, they had tried to inculcate into me various Christian beliefs, particularly the one about mankind being born with sin and needing the grace of God to save their souls. I could not grasp their concepts of God, soul and sin and they left me with a nagging fear of eternal damnation. I was also left with an enduring impression of their seriousness and their genuine goodness.

Before I could settle comfortably in Canton, my stay was brought to an abrupt end on the sudden reappearance of Ah Mah. Her arrival both delighted and perplexed me, filling me with both a wonder like seeing a rainbow after rain as well as a vague foreboding of something afoot.

A number of huddled discussions ensued between my mother and Ah Mah, the outcome of which was that I was told to go to Singapore with Ah Mah to see my father. I asked a number of questions but hardly any of them got answered. How long would I have to go for? Why could my father not come instead? Why was my younger brother not going with me? What about my mother? And so forth. Both Ah Mah and my mother had a way of deflecting queries with hugs or comments like: "Why don't you wait and find out?"

I grew to suspect untrustworthiness in all adults. They seemed bent on keeping children in the dark. What harm was there in telling a child what was going on? If they wanted a game of hide-and-see, then two could play at it. I decided to keep my thoughts to myself also, not giving a crumb away to any adult.

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The journey to Singapore came in two stages: first a journey to Hong Kong by train, then a voyage by sea. Being relocated in Singapore was even

more bewildering than my move to Canton. The tropical city seemed more strange and incongruous, filled with alien people, alien sounds and alien smells. The saving grace of being there was my re-connection with Ah Mah. She was like a talisman I had within reach, capable of steadying my nerves and stilling my apprehensions. I had not yet turned six when I arrived.

My new home was an agreeable two-storeyed terrace house located at No. 10 Blair Road. Its many inhabitants appeared as disconcerting as those I had met in Canton. There was a gaggle of women, many of whom were my aunts. There was also a beautiful woman, for whom my father was supposed to have deserted my mother. And she had in tow two children who were my new siblings.

There was, in addition, a bizarre hunchbacked woman who turned out to be an extraordinary family retainer.

My attention, however, was focused on my 59-year-old paternal grandfather, the head of the family, whose word was law. I had no recollection of him and was told to address him as Ah Yeh.

He was dressed in old-fashioned Chinese suit, with loose, wide trousers and a matching jacket. A row of cloth buttons ran all the way down the front of the jacket. His feet were shod in a pair of comfortable black cloth shoes. I was to discover that such was his normal mode of attire. Sometimes, as a concession to the tropical heat, he would forego the jacket and wear only a waistcoat over an inner garment.

Invariably, connected to a buttonhole of either waistcoat or jacket, there would be a silver fob-chain leading into a pocket holding a round silver timepiece. He had several such watches. Now and then, he would fish out the watch to wind it or to note the hour.

His name was Wong Wan-On. He was born in Hong Kong in 1876. According to the records of the Diocesan Boys' School in Hong Kong, he studied there until he graduated in 1893. He then enrolled the same year in the

Hong Kong College of Medicine. The college, founded in 1887 and now a part of the University of Hong Kong, was one of the first institutions in the Far East to teach Western medicine. He joined a class of only five students and graduated in 1900, the very year when the Boxers launched their attacks on the foreign diplomatic quarter in Peking.

He did not practise medicine in Hong Kong following graduation, however. Instead, he secured an appointment as a “Registering Medical Officer” with the British colonial service and was swiftly posted to Singapore, then a part of the Straits Settlements.

Why he should have agreed to serve Britain, a country that had waged serial aggressions against his country, remains unclear. It might have been because he was a married man with a daughter and needed to provide for his family or perhaps because the terms of employment were too attractive to pass up. It worked out as an extraordinarily good deal, for it earned him a generous expatriate pension for many decades.

The reason it came about was due to the great dearth of Western doctors in the Far East at the turn of the twentieth century. It was also an age of rampant discrimination, as much between male and female as between Europeans and natives. In most professions, local people were paid much less than Europeans were. Many locals therefore resented the unfair treatment and, if they could, they stayed away from government service.

In the case of doctors, however, the British Medical Council had secured a different arrangement because of its political clout. It persuaded the British Colonial Office to treat all doctors in colonial service on equal terms, regardless of sex or place of abode. Since British doctors working away from their homes received expatriate terms, my grandfather did too. In the days before air-conditioning, it was assumed that a white man could not last much longer than 20 years in the debilitating heat of the tropics, so a full pension became payable after that period. The pension provided for a reasonable

retirement within the British Isles or in some other salubrious part of the empire. For an Asian living in Asia, the pension was a princely sum.

My grandfather took full advantage of this and retired after 20 years. His pension came to 140 Straits dollars per month, but not indexed to inflation. A measure of its value can also be gauged from the fact that, even after World War II, the rental for No. 10 Blair Road was still only 40 Straits dollars per month. Today, the monthly rental for a property along that same road would stand well in excess of 10,000 Singapore dollars. To buy a tenement house there would run into a seven-digit sum.

But good pay is seldom the be-all and end-all of any job. Policies on non-discrimination were not always carried out in practice. My grandfather indicated he had more than once been on the verge of resigning, because his European superiors were constantly assigning him to disagreeable tasks his European colleagues did not fancy. He eventually assumed the duties of a pathologist and jokingly remarked that he preferred patients who did not talk too much!

By the time I arrived at Blair Road, my grandfather had retired. He spent most of his time reading newspapers, smoking on a great variety of pipes, caring for his pet canary and visiting friends and relatives. Soon after my arrival, he started to cultivate a scraggy, grey beard and at the same time resorted to spectacles to assist his eyesight. Both additions made him appear more sagacious and venerable.

I was to discover bit by bit that Ah Yeh was a very complex individual. Apart from being a doctor, he had a number of other personae. He had also been a Chinese revolutionary, a ship's surgeon, a polygamist, an opium smoker, a fervent nationalist, a sentimentalist and, somewhere towards the end of that tenuous line, a Christian.

I was also to learn subsequently, from the black and white photographs in the home, that he had a chameleon-like ability to alter his

appearance at different stages in his life. Changing weight was one factor but the transformation was particularly noticeable when he was in Western clothes. Then he came over as quite suave and handsome. His hair would be more luxuriant and more closely cropped. Only the lively twinkle in his eyes and the sardonic smile playing upon his lips remained the same throughout. It was as if he was frequently enjoying a private joke at somebody else's expense. He was often captured with a fat cheroot clasped between his teeth or between his fingers. That prop had him looking quite debonair, almost like a Chinese version of Clark Gable -except without that American matinee idol's moustache.



Author's paternal grandfather taken in his forties.

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My grandfather did not rest on his laurels after retiring from colonial medical service. He promptly began another career as a ship's surgeon which lasted for more than a decade, enjoying the while his government pension in

addition. He worked largely on vessels plying between Southeast Asia and Chinese ports like Chefoo, Foochow and Shanghai. Sometimes the routes extended as far afield as Rangoon in Burma. The ship he served on for the longest period was the 7,400-tonne *Siestan*, a British passenger and cargo vessel owned by Strick Line Limited of London and sailing under a British captain.

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Although my paternal grandparents regarded themselves as Christians, their daily routines differed entirely from those of my maternal grandparents. Religious rituals and practices hardly existed at Blair Road. Neighbours would be hard put to see our family as any other than a typical middle-class Chinese family. No grace was ever said before meals, no fasting during Lent, no prayers before bedtime. Easter and Christmas came and went, barely noticed. The house contained Bibles in both Chinese and English but no one ever wore a cross.

Because of the casualness over religious observances, I was spared further talk of original sin or of possible rewards in heaven and punishments in hell. My early religious training in Singapore was limited to attending a Chinese-speaking Sunday school at the nearby St. Matthew's Church in Neil Road. Later, after I had enrolled at a missionary school, I had to join religious knowledge classes.

My siblings, after they had reached appropriate ages, went to Sunday school at the English-speaking Bethesda Church at Balestier Road.

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My grandmother loomed as an impressive presence at No. 10. Her name was Chau Shui-Lin. She was born in Hong Kong in 1875 and was hence a

year older than her husband. She was the eldest of nine children from a long established family with records extending back over 26 generations. She was born a Christian because her father, Chau Chung-Park, was one of the earliest Methodist preachers to establish himself in Hong Kong. He and his wife ran a missionary school at Caine Road for a number of years.

The first I heard about Ah Mah's father was from one of the stories she told. He apparently was a man of uncommon sternness and rectitude, adhering strictly to honesty in all matters.

According to Ah Mah, during her own childhood many middle-class families used to get their daily provisions from itinerant hawkers who went from house to house. They would carry large rattan baskets dangling from both ends of a thick bamboo carrying pole filled with their specialised offerings, be they fruits, vegetables, fresh and preserved eggs, or cackling poultry.

Should a family want, for instance, a *cattie* (approximately 17 ounces or 0.5kg) of vegetables, the hawker would weigh it on a hand-held wooden scale. Such a traditional scale consisted of a long and slender piece of wood, with tiny brass studs for calibration marked along its length. A weighing pan would dangle from one end and a moveable counterweight would be used to fix the appropriate measure.

She said her father sometimes oversaw such transactions. After a bargain had been struck and weighed out, her father would insist upon re-weighing the purchase on his own scale before money changed hands. If the measure did not come up to the weight specified, he would seize the hawker's scale, snap it across his thigh and hand the hawker his own set to keep in replacement. Such performances had been awe-inspiring for her and her siblings.

Her story had me wondering what life might be like living with such a deeply principled man. I have no recollection of him and I regretted his passing at the start of World War II, before I was old enough to engage with him.

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I noted that Ah Yeh, unlike Ah Mah, seldom attended church and from that I deduced he was not an orthodox Christian at all. It took me some time, however, to grasp the full implications. According to family mythology, my grandfather had a total of nine wives. It seemed he did not accept the concept of monogamy followed by the Judaeo-Christian religion. He was in favour of the Chinese custom of his time, a custom sanctified by Ching dynastic laws, which allowed a man to acquire as many wives as he could afford or, at least, as many as he could put up with.

How my grandfather managed to persuade parents with such a religious background to give their daughter's hand to a medical student with such ideas remains a mystery. Moreover, he had neither pedigree nor prospects of inheritance. He must have been quite a good persuader and charmer. My suspicion is that his Christianity was merely one of convenience, to facilitate his wooing of my grandmother.

Although the Revolution of 1911 had extinguished the Ching Dynasty, British colonies nonetheless continued to accept polygamy among their Chinese populations. During the early decades of the twentieth century, Singapore courts, presumably sitting with European judges, had concluded in a succession of cases that "the Chinese are a polygamous race" and therefore their polygamous marriages ought to be recognised.

What had been frequently ignored in the debate was that concubines and their children had clear legal rights under Chinese customary law. Modern mistresses often had to fight costly and uncertain legal battles to establish theirs.

My grandfather and many of his friends made liberal use of inherited provisions. They took delight in pointing out that only three per cent of mammals were naturally monogamous. Their attitude was that if a chap could

afford only one wife, it stood to reason he could never amount to much.

Singapore did not de-legitimise concubinage till 1961, the year my grandfather died. Hong Kong banned it a decade later, after a considerable rearguard battle by traditionalists.

Of my grandfather's many wives, Ah Mah was the principal one. His polygamous inclinations were brought dramatically to my attention shortly after my arrival, when I discovered that I had another "grandmother" living just down the road, at No. 38 to be precise. And she had given him another son in April of 1935 when he was already 59!

I was initially all at sea over that situation, especially when Ah Yeh took me to meet my other grandmother. She was a thin, pleasant woman of medium height and in her thirties. Her name was Chow Siu-Hing, and she had the same surname as Ah Mah, although Romanised differently in English. I learnt later she was in fact younger than my grandfather's eldest daughter and only a year older than my own father!

My grandfather named his new son Wong Yan-Wing. Until his birth, my father, Yan-Chee, had been his only son.

I was too young at the time to appreciate how Ah Mah might have been affected by that startling development. She behaved, so far as I could tell, with surprising nonchalance, without any outward sign she had noticed what was going on. She acted as if my grandfather's regular strolls down the street, often accompanied by my sister Helen, his favourite grandchild, were for no other purpose than to take in a bit of air.

It was only after my grandfather had taken me to lunch at No. 38 that Ah Mah reacted adversely. She did not utter a word on my return. But I could tell from the cast of her features that she was displeased. I felt badly too because I realised she regarded my lunching there was letting her down. I soon began inventing excuses for not going to No. 38 with Ah Yeh. Helen, however, continued to accompany him to lunch there regularly.

After a few years, some form of *rapprochement* came about slowly, in a quintessentially Eastern manner. One day, Ah Yeh brought Yan-Wing to No. 10, where the child knelt and offered Ah Mah a cup of tea. My grandmother accepted the cup and on that basis Yan-Wing became as a bona fide member of the Wong family. Thereafter, the boy was required to turn up at No. 10 for dinner each evening, in order to bond with the rest of the family.

My grandmother, however, maintained that she knew nothing about any woman who might be taking care of the child at No. 38 during the rest of the time.

Yan-Wing's bonding experience unfortunately did not last very long. Within a few months of him starting his evening visits, the advent of war caused an enforced separation of the family, with some members escaping to Australia and the rest remaining under Japanese occupation.

Yan-Wing and his mother were among the latter. They were brought to live at No. 10 when the Japanese came but his mother died in November of 1944, before the occupation ended.

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Long after our grandparents had passed away, some of my siblings and I tried to identify our grandfather's many wives. We managed to trace only three in Singapore, in addition to Ah Mah.

Two of them had died relatively young, without issue. But Ah Yeh had adopted daughters to keep them company while he was away as a ship's surgeon. By the time I arrived in Singapore, most of those daughters had married and had started families of their own, providing my siblings and me with a plentiful supply of cousins.

One of those aunts was older than my father and there were still two unmarried adopted daughters residing at No. 10 at the time I arrived. Their

presence suggested that Ah Mah had been reconciled, as least partially, to the existence of some subsidiary wives.

Of the remaining wives, no lead could be found. After a lapse of almost a century, that was only to be expected. Since Ah Yeh had been a travelling man for many years, it was not beyond the bounds of possibility he had tucked away wives in Hong Kong, Penang, Amoy, Saigon and elsewhere. There had been the odd rumour of his having been accompanied by “a wife” on certain voyages. But which wife? Perhaps different wives for different voyages?

My grandmother must have been much more of a woman than anyone had given her credit for. She must have known in some blood-intuitive way that personal considerations had to be subordinated to family needs. She had probably accepted grandfather’s subsidiary wives as a package deal.

Somehow, my grandparents had managed to live together in reasonable harmony and without undue fuss for many decades, which is more than can be said for many monogamous marriages these days, particularly in societies where the divorce rate is nudging at the 50 per cent mark -- and rising. In America, it has been computed that the average length of a marriage is now only around seven years.

Some of my siblings and I, saddled with broken marriages ourselves, have often wished we had acquired some practical advice from our grandfather on how to cope with marriage. Most of us seemed to have made unholy messes trying to deal with just one spouse at a time!

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Living with Ah Yeh came with a flavour of unpredictability. A surprise or two could pop up unexpectedly. He could give my siblings and I, either singly or severally, sudden treats -- excursions to visit friends and

relatives, hunting parties for catching grasshoppers, *dim sum* lunches, trips to purchase smoking material or whatever. But he never talked much to any of us. Perhaps he expected us to be observant and to learn about life from what went on around us.

One fact struck me forcefully from the day I arrived at Blair Road -- my grandfather was a heavy smoker. He used a great variety of pipes, ranging from the curved type associated with Sherlock Holmes to a slender foot-long one ending with a tiny bowl, from an elaborately carved meerschaum pipe to a full-blown Chinese metal water-pipe, complete with gadgets and accessories. He sometimes smoked cigars. And opium too.

I was going onto seven when he took me for the first time to visit a friend and I watched them enjoying puffs of opium. That activity was quite legal at the time and was accepted as a form of social grace among well-to-do Chinese. Courtesy demanded that visitors be offered a smoke, in much the same way as they might be offered a cup of tea nowadays.

I noted how relaxed and unhurried Ah Yeh and his friends were when they settled down to smoking. They would talk about life and politics and anything else which might come into their heads. While they chatted they would heat small dollops of opium over a lamp before inserting them into the knob of the pipe. Then they would pass the pipe from one to the other. Occasionally, they would reminisce about the past or lament the state of the world. I would pick up from their conversations odd bits of information about wider realities I could barely comprehend.

After a few such outings, it dawned on me there was also a magnificent black opium pipe with an ivory mouthpiece at home. But Ah Yeh never used it. Gradually, I figured out the reason. For him, smoking opium was not a solitary activity. It had to be enjoyed with loquacious friends and there simply was no space at home to provide seclusion and to install a suitable smoking divan. Hence, whenever Ah Yeh had the urge for a smoke, he would

call upon one of his friends or else go to a public smoking den with a companion.

Later, my grandfather also took me with him to buy opium at a licensed depot near a police station, at the junction of Cantonment Road and New Bridge Road. He would then repair with his purchase to the home of one of his friends to enjoy smoking it.

I have never seen *Ah Yeh* or any of his friends drift into any condition that amounted to more than a sort of reflective mellowness. If they had experienced the “kif” described by bohemians or the *satori* referred to by Zen Buddhists, I had been too untutored to recognise it.

Opium-smoking apparently took root in Singapore after the arrival of large numbers of Chinese immigrants at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The colonial authorities hit upon the idea of setting up opium, alcohol and gambling “farms” to raise revenue for street cleaning and other urban amenities. Other colonies followed suit, resulting in many administrations becoming reliant on the sale of opium for public finance. In the Straits Settlements, for instance, its sale at the outbreak of World War I accounted for about half of government revenue. In Hong Kong, the retailing of opium, legalised in 1844, produced for decades 20% or more of public revenue. By 1929, the year of my birth, it had risen to a third.

In Indo-China, the French went one step further. They rewarded relatives of Vietnamese conscripts killed while fighting in Europe in World War I with licenses to sell opium.

It has amazed me how administrations everywhere, when bankrupt of better ideas, so often fall back upon taxing vices as a means of achieving some alleged public good. Gambling, alcohol and prostitution were among other activities licensed. It did not seem to occur to any of those administrations that by taxing them they might be indirectly promoting them as well.

The fact that Macau is today the casino capital of the world, with a

quarter of its working population currently employed in the gambling industry, is a situation in which the ordinary citizen ought to take much pride. But it is a catching trend worldwide, as an easy way of raising public revenue. The day will come when future governments will have to devote resources to undoing the harm being done, as they now have to do in respect of tobacco and alcohol.

How attractive aspects of certain vices can be is reflected in my own reactions to the opium-smoking. Through accompanying Ah Yeh to a number of his smoking sessions, I developed a fondness for the sweet, heady pungency of opium myself. I would greedily inhale the smell while sitting quietly at the foot of the opium divan, listening to the leisurely flow of their exchanges. It seemed a very agreeable way of passing the time.

After the war, just as I approached the age when I might try opium for myself, I became deeply disappointed to discover that the drug had been rendered illegal in 1943 by the Japanese. It seemed ironical that the British, who had taken such pride in their “civilising” mission, should have systematised the sale and consumption of opium in their colonies, whereas the brutal Japanese, out for naked conquest, should have ended the sale of drugs to their conquered subjects. Nonetheless, after the war, many illegal opium establishments still thrived in Singapore.

Oddly, I have never been tempted in subsequent years -- even at the height of the Flower Power of hippies or during the craze for Dr. Leary’s psychedelic chemicals -- to experiment with other mind-altering substances. Part of the reason, I think, was that I was rather straight-laced over breaking laws, even when such laws might appear stupid or misconceived. Another part of the reason was that other drugs did not offer as alluring an aroma as opium.

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One notable feature at Blair Road was the large number of black and

white photographs that used to hang on the wall above my grandfather's bed. They were mainly pictures of Chinese men, taken in twos or threes and sometimes in larger numbers. Apart from Ah Yeh, I did not know any of them. I assumed they must have been my grandfather's former medical colleagues or shipmates. They did not interest me much.

My grandmother also had a collection of photographs but she kept hers in a large cardboard box. Once in a while she would take the pictures out and flip through them. Most of those fading prints featured family members taken when they were young.

The first time any of them caught my eye was when I was about nine or ten, upon seeing pictures which turned out to be of my father as a little boy. In two or three of them he appeared in the company of an elderly gentleman. In one of them he was actually sitting on the man's knee.

I could not recognise the man. Yet there seemed something familiar about him. I thought he must be a relative. Otherwise my father would not be sitting on his knee.

“Who's that?” I asked. “He doesn't look like anyone I know.”



Author's paternal grandmother and her two children taken in Singapore at 1908.

“You should know him,” Ah Mah replied. “His name is Dr. Sun Yat-Sen. He was the Father of the Chinese Republic. You can also see him over there, on some of the pictures above your grandfather’s bed. Your Ah Yeh used to work with him, trying to make China strong. It’s a shame events did not turn out the way either of them had expected.”

If I had heard the name of Dr. Sun before, it had not registered. I also doubted if the man was as important as Ah Mah had claimed. If he were really important, my teachers would have talked about him at school, as they had done with Lord Nelson or the Duke of Wellington. Although I occasionally overheard elders speaking of my grandfather’s involvement in uprisings against the Ching Dynasty, I could not visualise my frail and constantly-smoking grandfather or Dr. Sun doing anything very exciting.

I suppose the reason was that by then I had formed some rather different notions of what heroes were supposed to look like from British comics

and magazines. The dash of someone like Biggles or the derring-do of spies in the Northwest Frontier informed my notions of how heroes were supposed to act. I had never witnessed Ah Yeh acting that way.

In any event, I was soon separated from him for more than four years due to the outbreak of World War II. The opportunity to learn more about him was lost until we were reunited after I had turned 17. Then some fortuitous remarks by Ah Yeh sparked in me an initial interest in modern Chinese history that influenced me throughout much of my later life.

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It took several more decades, however, before my interest reached the point when I felt compelled to piece together what I could of the relationships between Ah Yeh and Dr. Sun. By then most of my elders had passed on and most of the old family photographs had been lost.

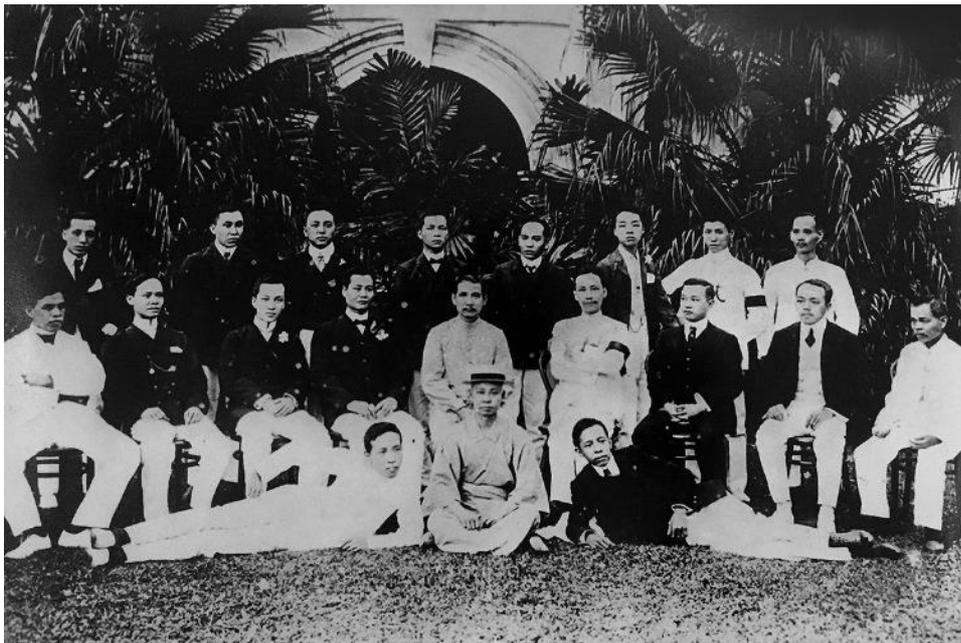
I began by trying to establish from available records such connection as I could find between the two men. I thought they might have first met as fellow students at the Hong Kong College of Medicine. But the records at the University of Hong Kong showed otherwise. Dr. Sun graduated in 1892, whereas Ah Yeh did not enrol till the following year.

Then I consulted books which might throw light on Chinese revolutionary activities in the Straits Settlements. One of the books was titled *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya* published in 1908 by Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Company Limited. It contained a photograph of my grandfather and its accompanying text merely stated that he was a "Registering Medical Officer" in the Straits Settlements government. There was no mention of revolutionary activities.

Another book I dug into was entitled *A Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, published in 1923. It estimated that in 1911 there had

been as many as 10,000 avowed Chinese revolutionaries in Singapore. That figure seemed surprisingly large for such a small island. Although it recorded the names of a few prominent Singapore supporters of Dr. Sun, my grandfather's name was not among them.

Having failed to unearth any documentary backing, I next trawled through whatever remained of the old family photographs. But the only picture I could find showing Ah Yeh with Dr. Sun was one at the home of my Uncle Yan-Wing. It was a group photograph involving 20 people arranged in three rows. Dr. Sun was seated at the centre of the middle row and a few seats away was my grandfather, clearly identifiable not only by his features but also by the silver watch chain dangling from one of his pockets.



Dr Sun Yat-Sen and supporters taken in Singapore in 1907.

The Author's grandfather is seated in the middle row, second from left.

Neither Uncle Yan-Wing nor any other relative knew what had happened to the rest of the old pictures, although they could all recall having seen some of them previously.

I later found a copy of that same photograph on display at the Sun Yat-Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall at Tai Gin Road in Singapore. The notation accompanying it stated that it had been taken in Singapore in 1907.

That information fitted in with other historical facts. Dr. Sun had led a couple of uprisings against the Ching Dynasty in Kwangsi Province in 1906 but their failures caused him to flee to the Straits Settlements. The pictures of him taken with my father must have been taken around that time. My father would have been aged around five then.

Though those photographs have been lost, their existence suggested that the relationship between my grandfather and Dr. Sun was not restricted to mere comradeship in a revolutionary struggle but also extended to an intimate family level.

But my searches unearthed nothing further. The motivations of my grandfather in the revolutionary cause and his relationship with Dr. Sun continued to nag me. If he had raised funds for Dr. Sun, from whom did he raise them and to whom did he send them? Was he involved in purchasing firearms? Did he smuggle them back to China and did he remain committed to Dr. Sun after the Revolution of 1911 had descended into factional struggles? I had to kick myself for not having asked those questions when I had the chance, thus missing out on learning about aspects of Chinese history straight from the horse's mouth.

What little I managed to discover also gave rise to fresh speculations. For instance, the photograph of Ah Yeh and Dr. Sun taken in 1907 meant that my grandfather was still a colonial civil servant then. To be photographed with a revolutionary with a price on his head meant adopting a political stance. Did he not care about violating colonial rules? Or did he feel, in the face of setbacks in Kwangsi, he had to rally his comrades by standing up to be counted?

The explanation was perhaps much simpler. British diplomacy could have been as duplicitous as ever, playing both sides in its own perceived self-

interest. It would not have been the first time that Britain had maintained correct relations with a government it did not care about while at the same time, through nods and winks, providing refuge and succour for its opponents. Ah, *la perfide Albion*, as the Marquis de Ximénèz has been recorded to have said.

Of course, no one now knows what my grandfather actually did or what precisely motivated him. What can the acts of any individual amount to within the great tide of history? It is unclear whether he continued to be associated with Dr. Sun while he sailed in and out of Chinese ports. He might have done one or two dubious things in support of his old friend and comrade until the latter's death in 1925. Otherwise there would be no explanation for his changing his name in the mid-1920's from Wong Wan-On to Wong Hong-Kui.

My grandfather died from a heart attack on 8 June 1961, at the age of 85, after the family had moved from Blair Road in 1956 into a new home at Serangoon Gardens. I was not there when it happened because I had left home early in 1947 to strike out on my own, although I did return there for about a year during 1958-59, to work as a sub-editor for the *Straits Times*.



Author's paternal grandfather at age of 81, taken at Serangoon Garden Estate.

By all accounts it was a beautiful death. He apparently woke up as usual early one morning, brushed his teeth and washed his face, and then went to his room to read the day's newspapers, while waiting to be summoned for breakfast when the rest of the family was ready. By the time someone went to fetch him, he was already gone, resting on his reading couch with an opened newspaper spread across his body.

Legend has it that he had predicted his own demise. He had, for a number of years, always been accompanied each month by one of his grandsons, Kan Fook-Chuen, to collect his pension. At the beginning of June that year, he told Fook-Chuen he would not need his company thereafter. Within days he was dead.

The Choa Chu Kang Columbarium in Singapore holds thousands of niches similar to my grandfather's. His original name of Wong Wan-On has been inscribed upon his. But I think he would have been just as relaxed if the label had merely stated: "Anonymous Dreamer" or "Secret Revolutionary".

The truth must now remain interred with his ashes in a little niche at the Choa Chu Kang Columbarium.