

Seeds of Displacement

I was born on 7 April 1929. Going by the Chinese lunar calendar and its 12 zodiac signs named after animals, the year was that of the Snake. Like most things Chinese, considerable mythology is associated with the precise timing of births and zodiac signs.

The origins of this linkage have been lost in the mists of antiquity, but believers in astrological portents hold an expectation that a person born under the sign of a particular animal will acquire some of the dominant traits of that animal. Thus a person born in a Year of the Snake is expected to be endowed with wisdom, high intelligence and an inclination towards placidity, reflectiveness and solitude. He may also tend to be secretive, distrustful, poor at inter-personal communications and a sore loser.

Just as all snakes shed their skins, those born in the Year of the Snake are said to be prone to changing employment and life directions. Women born during such a year are deemed to be particularly alluring, graceful and loaded with an abundance of socialising talent.

But lunar years also have to be further considered in relationship to the five elements of Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water, each of which could either strengthen or weaken the influences of the basic zodiac signs. The year of my birth happened to have been ruled by the element Earth. Therefore the year became one of the Earth Snake. The special characteristics of Earth Snakes are said to be charm, caution and level-headedness. An amicable streak is also likely, which should gain them many friends, though how this would jibe with poor skills at inter-personal communications is uncertain.

The correlation between folk myths and reality is, of course, not an exact science. That task still awaits the attention of scientists brave or foolhardy enough to tackle it. But for what it may be worth, the following historical personages have all been born during Years of the Snake -- Brahms,

Casanova, Gandhi, Goethe, Mao Tse-Tung, Picasso, Sartre and Schubert.

My own birth took place in an unremarkable tenement flat on the second floor of No. 27 Hill Road in Hong Kong. It had been a run-of-the-mill home delivery by a midwife.

My birth added to the then population figure estimated at around 800,000. According to the Administrative Report issued by the colonial government for that year, population numbers cited were deemed “very variable” because of a large floating community of fisherfolk.

Those statistics did reveal, nonetheless, an interesting feature. They recorded an “incessant flow” of Chinese migrants to the Straits Settlements, known in the vernacular as “the Southern Ocean”. They gave a total of 146,516 people heading there that year, out of the 227,523 who had left the colony. Hong Kong was thus already a thriving entrepôt for the movement of people as well as for merchandise.

The British civil servants responsible for handling public finances had gone about their task with considerable prudence because the British Treasury had by then ceased to pay them and they had to be self-financing. They therefore operated for that year on a budget totalling HK\$21,278,000 for expenditures on actual revenue of HK\$21,618,000, excluding an additional income derived from land sales of HK\$1,916,000. They also clocked up an accumulated surplus of HK\$9,577,000. That might all sound very well until it is remembered that a very significant part of the revenue was derived from the opium trade.

But such statistics give only a partial picture. The activities of the lively black economy back in 1929 can only be speculated upon. Available evidence from six recorded seizures of illicit arms, for instance, suggests the colony was already playing host to a thriving underground transit trade. The largest of those seizures involved a cache of automatic pistols and ammunition

found on board a ship called the SS *Haiching*. The smuggling of dutiable commodities was also rampant.

The arms trade provided clear evidence that Hong Kong could not be isolated from political and other upheavals outside its borders. Many rebels, revolutionaries and dissidents sought refuge in the city. The best known among them was Dr. Sun Yat-Sen. Others of note included Ho Chi-Minh of Vietnam and José Rizal of the Philippines.

In the case of Ho, his visits were not always met with hospitality. In 1931 he arrived using one of his many pseudonyms and was quickly arrested, together with two other Comintern agents. A local barrister, however, secured his release on a writ of *habeas corpus*, claiming that the charge lodged against him of conspiring to overthrow the French authorities in Vietnam contained legal defects. It was discovered at around the same time that Ho was suffering from tuberculosis. He was persuaded by his friends to leave by boat for England to seek treatment.

But the Hong Kong Special Branch did not relish its man getting away so easily. It intercepted the ship at Singapore, re-arrested him and brought him back to charge him with leaving without proper papers, in contravention of immigration rules! He was given a gaol sentence but, because of his tuberculosis, was detained in a prison hospital instead.

After several months, Ho and his friends began planning an escape. By the time of the actual escape, he had endeared himself so greatly to the hospital staff that they simply reported he had died. His death was duly announced in the French and Soviet press and his file at the French *Sûreté*, under one of his pseudonyms, was closed with the notation: “Died in Hong Kong gaol.”

Broadly speaking, that cat-and-mouse episode concerning Ho typifies the kind of unequivocal, “do-what-one-can-get-away-with” culture

that has persisted in Hong Kong to the present day. The only difference is that the term “entrepreneurial spirit” is now being used to describe such behaviour.

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When I was born, I weighed a respectable eight pounds. I was the first-born son in a short-lived marriage between Joseph Wong Yan-Chee, a student, and Mabel Mok Eu-Chun, a sometime office worker and housewife.

In the days when the Chinese went in for large families, being the first-born son came with a few minor advantages. For a start, one was at the top of the sibling hierarchy. The younger ones would not be allowed to address an older sibling by name but had to refer to a male as “Elder Brother” or a female as “Elder Sister”. The word of the eldest, too, carried weight. Confucian tradition dictated that, during the absence of the father, the eldest son should act as the head of the family.

There would, of course, be no hand-me-downs for the eldest. Reusables were destined for those farther down the line. If there were goodies to be shared, the oldest one, especially a boy, would get his share first. Though some vestige of the ancient right of primogeniture still lingers today, changing times have caused most advantages to slip away.

My arrival immediately imposed upon my father the duty of giving me a name. He half-chose one consisting of two characters. I use the word “half-chose” because he had no say over the first character which was a generative particle set down long ago by dead ancestors for males of my generation. It was the character for “son” or “child”, just as that for my father had been the character for “grace” or “kindness”, and that for my sons “sky” or “heaven”.

Such particles used to be strung together to form ditties of 12 or

more words, for ease of teaching them to children in the family. Some ambitious families went in for ditties with dozens of words. Once all of them had been run through, they would re-start again. Most families favoured using a generative particle as the first character in a given name, although a minority preferred using it as the second character.

Such ditties are uncommon nowadays. Attacks by Maoists on all things deemed “remnants of feudalism” have taken their toll. They had deemed names with a single character as more proletarian. They then enforced a “one-child” policy which, together with urbanisation, led to more nuclear families and the slow demise of generative particles.

Thus my father only picked the second character in my name. He inexplicably decided on the word “strange” or “unusual”. On the face of it, taken together with my generative particle, my name could be read as meaning “strange son” or “unusual child”. That name quickly became the butt for jokes both inside the family and at school.

My father did not explain why he had made that choice till I was 18. I do not know whether my mother had been consulted. Once my infelicitous name had been fixed, the vagaries of colonial clerkdom at the Registry of Births transliterated it into English as “Tzi Ki”. Elders and teachers called me by my given name during the early years of my life. Sometimes they used the more affectionate nickname of “Little Ki”.

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My fortuitous birth in a place flying the Union Jack rendered me a subject of the British Crown. A number of my ancestors and all of my siblings had likewise acquired a similar status, through being born in places under British rule.

In theory, British subjects were supposed to enjoy certain rights and to assume certain obligations. One of those rights was the provision of consular protection while in foreign countries. However, that provision was arbitrarily withheld from all subjects of the Chinese race while visiting China. Since it was natural for most Chinese to want to visit their ancestral home, the caveat appeared illogical and discriminatory, implying a lower level of citizenship for those of the Chinese race.

Another right used to be the ability to take up residence within the British Isles. But that entitlement had been progressively stripped away, first under the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962 and then the British Nationality Act of 1981. Under those pieces of legislation, a subject had to demonstrate that he or she had Anglo-Saxon blood or, at the very least, to show kith and kin originating from the United Kingdom.

It has to be said that when the 1962 legislation was winding its way through the “Mother of Parliaments”, not many people in Hong Kong paid much attention. The explanation was simple. Large segments of the population were refugees from China and hence not British subjects. Among those who were, very few relished living under a high-tax regime in a cold and foggy land.

The situation at the time of the 1981 Act was different. More people had been born in the colony as British subjects and the prospect of Communist China resuming sovereignty over Hong Kong was a matter of considerable concern. Some wanted a bolt-hole and protests were made by Chinese with British nationality over being denied the right of residence. But their efforts were not sufficient to disturb the consciences of right-wing politicians fearful of millions of Chinese entering their sceptred isles. The doors were thus slammed shut.

At the same time, the People’s Republic of China reiterated the

country's long-held concept of race determining Chinese-ness, no matter where a person might be born. It followed logically that the Chinese government should claim to speak for all Chinese in Hong Kong, thus catching local citizens in a double bind. Most felt emotionally, culturally, psychologically and racially linked to China, though they might not fancy living under a Communist regime. On the other hand, with a few notable exceptions, they had rarely spoken their minds on such issues during nearly a century and a half of British domination. They could hardly declare at the eleventh hour their preference to be second class citizens and leave their destiny in the hands of the British.

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Later in life, after I had served the British Crown for 20 years, I did seek to retire in England. But I found the British passport I had did not entitle me to do so, precisely because of the provisions of the 1962 and 1981 Acts. I had to apply as “a person of independent means”, which required depositing a large sum of money in advance in Britain, to ensure I would never be a burden on the British tax-payer.

That being the case, it has puzzled me since why -- in an increasingly globalised world and when pregnant women resorted to all sorts of ingenious ways of getting their babies born in what their conceive to be an advantageous jurisdiction -- governments should still cling to a linkage of citizenship and residential rights to the randomness of a place of birth.

Given the praise so frequently lavished by governments on the blessings of privatisation and the free markets, why not be simply auction off citizenship or residential rights to the highest bidders? A growing number of countries are in fact virtually doing so. If further refinements were needed,

prices can be aligned with the levels of benefits or duties involved. For many governments, it must be a less painful way of reducing national debts than through joblessness and austerity.

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My infant years in Hong Kong left hardly an impression on me. Though many personages must have visited my home, their passages had been reduced to one long, hazy blur. People always seemed to be picking me up and setting me down, washing, clothing, feeding and poking at me, babbling away in ways unintelligible to a baby.

Those visitors had probably been relatives, family friends and Christian devotees and converts. It was customary at that time for “church friends” to visit each other for mutual religious support, in much the same way as the later generations of housewives gathered for tea parties or to sell Tupperware. Their activities left no more impact on me than raindrops upon an unopened bud.

I saw little of my parents. My father was living in St. John’s Hall while attending the University of Hong Kong. Though his residence was but a short walk from Hill Road, his evening visits to our home were sparing and irregular. I would usually be asleep when he turned up. He disappeared from my life altogether when I was about three. I did not get a good look at him until I was almost six.



Father of Author taken with grandfather
around the time of Author's birth.

My mother's absences were just as bewildering. I was told she left for Canton after I had been weaned in order to take up a position with the Chinese Maritime Customs. She probably did re-appear at Hill Road from time to time, during festivals and periods of leave, but those visits never registered with me.

What I have retained from that period are images of my paternal grandmother, who raised me with the aid of servants. I suppose she felt I deserved her attention because I was the eldest son of her only son. Her presence in Hong Kong, in spite of having a long-established home in Singapore, was not difficult to explain. It made little difference where she

stayed, because my paternal grandfather was by then working as a ship's surgeon which brought him to both colonies with almost equal regularity. Her own parents and the families of her many siblings were also rooted in Hong Kong. The key determinant was probably the presence of my father at university. She would have wanted more than anything else to be close to him.

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How my parents got involved with each other remains an enormous mystery. I know not where they first met. Nor indeed, why two people of such differing temperaments should have got married at all. Both had been extraordinarily uncommunicative about their own lives.

They could have met in Canton, where my mother had worked after finishing her secondary education. My father sometimes visited that city to see his elder sister, Cheuk-Yim, who practised medicine there. My aunt had been active in local Christian circles and so she might have even introduced them to each other. Or they could have met earlier in Hong Kong. All I can say with any assurance is that they married in a church in Hong Kong while my father was attending university. My mother's bridesmaid was a girl named Anna Wong Wai-Fong, who was distantly related to our family. She was three years younger than my mother.

According to my mother, Anna had been her best friend. Anna's father had died prematurely, leaving Anna and her mother. For a time, it was generally supposed that my mother's third brother, Tuck, was courting Anna.

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My father had graduated from St. Joseph's Institute in Singapore with a Cambridge School Leaving Certificate in 1919. Up till that point, he had enjoyed a comfortable, laid-back existence in an outpost of empire, a place dedicated to British commerce and to British military and strategic needs. He would have acquired at St. Joseph's the same values upheld at English boarding schools -- the need for obedience, duty, faith, progress, following the rules, and never letting the side down. He had probably absorbed a few less wholesome ideas as well, ideas purported to be modern and scientific, about the instinct towards self-interest, the power of market forces, and the survival of the fittest.

On the other hand, the Chinese part of his education, probably through a tutor, must have brought him an awareness of the Confucian imperatives for family piety, moderation, conscience and linkage between ancestors and the generations yet unborn. Lurking somewhere in the background would be the quiet Taoist influences about Nature and an insinuation of a nothingness beyond the fringes of infinity.

The extent to which my father had absorbed those two cultural streams is uncertain, though his command of the Chinese language was of a high order for someone of his generation. After his graduation from St. Joseph's, he went to China. According to family elders, he went there hoping to find work, preferably with the Chinese government. But what he actually did for six years remains a mystery.

The "Chinese government" had by then been reduced to largely a legal fiction, a convenient peg for power-grabbers to hang their ambitions. The country was riven by factional rivalries. Warlords with private militias were making their own rules. Dr. Sun himself was ailing and holed up in Canton, trying to hang on to his political base in the south. The Revolution of 1911 had simply failed to deliver solutions to the age-old problems of poverty,

hunger, corruption and injustice.

Ah Yeh would have wished to expose his only son to the chaos and divisions of their Motherland but how would my father have reacted to what he saw? Would the conditions have stirred him into the same sense of engagement that had animated his father? That was hard to imagine, from what little I knew of his character. My father was not the kind of man to make philosophical stands or to choose sides. He lacked passion. He was more prone to dream than to act.

The long interregnum he spent between school and university was likely to have been taken up visiting kinfolk on his mother's side of the family in Hong Kong and on calling on Dr. Sun and his elder sister's family in Canton. The rest of his time was probably devoted to chasing dreams he had cultivated from Chinese literature, of lute-playing beauties and hermit scholars, chivalrous heroes and lovable rogues.

His familiarity with several parts of China suggested that he did travel widely, either on his own or in the company of *Ah Yeh* when his vessel called at Chinese ports. From revelations dropped during conversations over subsequent years, I discovered that he had some familiarity with the gatherings of seal engravers on the bank of the West Lake in Hangchow, the protocol of the sing-song houses in Soochow and the attractions of the various fleshpots in Shanghai. It was evident that he had travelled in China and he was wont to behave in feminine company as if he were still living in the era depicted in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

His six years of mysterious and unrecorded peregrinations ended in January of 1925, when he began a degree course in Social Sciences at the University of Hong Kong, on a Loke Yew Scholarship. At that time the academic year commenced in January. It was not till about 1934 that the start of the university term shifted to the autumn.

Loke Yew, an overseas Chinese philanthropist, had established -- among his numerous charitable endeavours -- a scholarship for Chinese students in Malaya to pursue university studies in China.

In his third year, my father failed a history paper. The scholarship was withdrawn as a result. That failure would appear somewhat out of character, for he was a very intelligent man, quick on the uptake, not at all the type to stumble over some paltry essay -- unless he had been distracted. Maybe by his courtship of my mother? The time-frame appears consistent with such a speculation.

In any case, he successfully repeated his third year. But then, he failed again in his final year, the year of my birth. Did my arrival have anything to do with his losing concentration again? Unlikely. I imagine the further slippage must have been caused by turbulence in his married life. He duly repeated his final year and earned a degree in 1931.

When I finally became reunited with him at Blair Road, he struck me as tall for a Cantonese, about five foot ten. He had the same dark brown eyes and elevated forehead as my grandfather. But his handsomeness had a slightly effete quality. His hair, for example, appeared slicked down too perfectly with pomade and his presence often carried a whiff of cologne or aftershave.

I saw little of him even then. He was working as a sub-editor for an English newspaper called the *Malaya Tribune*. He left for work late in the afternoon and did not return till the small hours. He was to be no more familiar to me in the years that followed than if he had just been a neighbour living a few doors away.

I soon discovered, nonetheless, that he had a number of other affectations. He was always immaculately turned out. His shirts would be well ironed and his trousers razor-creased. He sometimes put on a cravat in

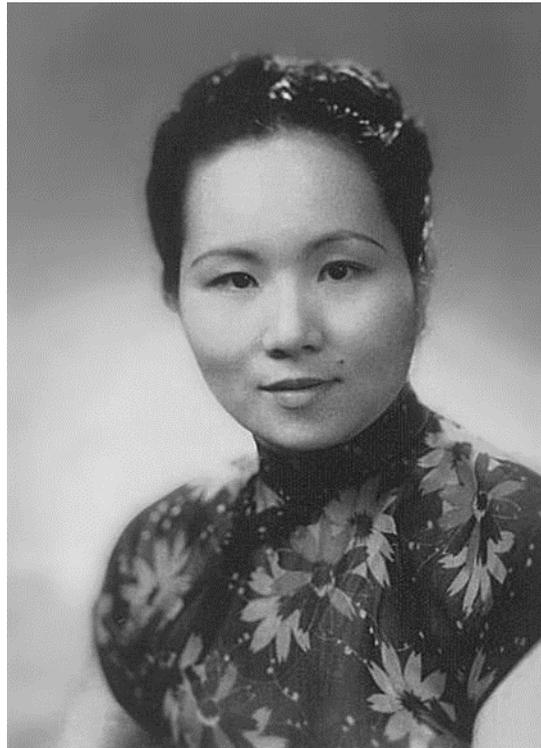
the spite of tropical heat and he usually carried an elegant golden cigarette case, filled with imported British 555 cigarettes. The golden case was also the repository for a four-inch long ebony cigarette holder. While conversing with friends or playing *mah jong*, he would fix a cigarette into the holder and smoke it with all the sang-froid of a Ronald Coleman.

I have to admit he had a certain romantic panache which I strove to imitate on the sly.

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Early memories of my mother are just as scarce. The ones dating from our period in Canton are the main ones I fall back on. They evoke a personality totally different from my father's. I remember her as dowdy, preoccupied and lacking in sparkle. Her clothes seemed to speak of economy and practicality rather than of smartness and feminine appeal. Her hair came over as poorly shortened, with a few large curls fringing the forehead like the hallmark of some low class hairdresser. Perhaps that also reflected the thriftiness of her nature and her lack of appreciation for the evolving fashions of her era. Her indifference to appearances also called to notice the shortness of her stature and the stolidness of her gait.

My mother, born in 1903, was two years younger than my father. After her secondary education at the Diocesan Girls' School in Hong Kong, she elected to attend a secretarial college to learn shorthand and typing. I suspect that her clergyman father's slender means and the number of children he had to support might have been factors in her decision against higher education.



Mother of Author taken in her late thirties

After her secretarial courses, she re-joined her parents in Canton. She was keen to find gainful employment and soon found it, for secretaries with a command of both Chinese and English were in great demand in many of the coastal cities in China. She was well-liked by those who employed her.

In spite of her lack of dress sense, she had a pleasant, roundish face and her gentle brown eyes shone with frankness. Dainty rosebud lips complemented her smooth, fleshy cheeks. The latter could dimple fetchingly when she smiled. Regrettably, smiles did not appear very often. When they did, they somehow appeared constrained, as if she was unable to surrender herself wholeheartedly to whatever might be tickling her fancy; a trait possibly inherited from her dour parents.

That lack of capacity for spontaneous joy spilled over into our relationship in Canton. I cannot recall many moments of playfulness with her,

moments of sheer fun and laughter, of whispered endearments and crushing cuddles of the sort a child might expect from a mother. We did share, *en passant*, the odd religious fable or Chinese poem. But that was about all I remembered, apart from her many softly delivered admonitions.

I have to accept part of the blame for that lack of warmth and intimacy in our relationship because I used to constantly get myself into all sorts of trouble. It was not that I had been exceptionally naughty or rebellious. It stemmed, I think, from my being too inquisitive and too anxious to grow up. I failed to understand many of the rules adults imposed upon children and breached them repeatedly. That must have been very trying for my mother.

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It was many decades after my mother had ceased working that she let drop one day she had once worked in the Canton office of Mikhail Borodin. My ears pricked up at once for I had by then studied a bit of modern Chinese history and knew that the Comintern agent had become one of the most highly regarded advisors to Dr. Sun Yat-Sen. I was also interested in the Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi-Minh, for he had been part of Borodin's team sent to China in 1923. For a moment I thought I had struck an undiscovered vein of historical gold, so I pressed my mother to reveal everything she knew.

But, as it transpired, my mother had done only office work and translations. There used to be many foreigners around Borodin, she said, full of ideas that did not all go in the same direction. She had no interest in politics and had no recollection of Ho, admitting that her impressions of those people had largely faded after more than half a century. So the seam of precious historical metal I thought I had stumbled upon turned out to be only fool's gold.

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In a nutshell, my parents had entirely different natures. I have often wondered whether their marriage had been meditated only by the chimeras of free choice and romantic love. Any matchmaker worth his or her salt would have spotted immediately they were an ill-suited pair.

My father was sharply intelligent but more than a little dandyish and with a strong epicurean streak as well. He was a man spoilt by family indulgences and trapped in daydreams. From my observations of him during the later stages of his life, I would hazard he had been born a few centuries too late. If he had been born into a gentry family at the height of the Ming Dynasty, he might have been in his element. He would be quite content to spend lazy hours with friends, sipping tea, delving into poetry and literature, arguing about painting and calligraphy, without ever having to bother with the dreary business of earning a living.

Strangely, he turned fairly religious and contemplative during his old age. He began attending church regularly and devoted time every day to sequestering himself in his room to engage in Zen meditation.

My mother, on the other hand, was in her adulthood filled with an awareness of life's economic constraints. Whether she felt Christian charity and hard work could alleviate poverty and suffering, I do not know.

An amusing story used to circulate among family elders about my parents.

It appeared my mother found smoking deeply offensive. My father, however, was a smoker, and my grandfather even more so. My mother could not have missed those traits when she began her relationship with my father. So why did she agree to marry into a family of smokers? Did she have

a reformist agenda? Did she expect to reform her father-in-law as well as her husband? Hardly realistic, given her subordinate position in a pretty traditional type of family.

Or had she seen herself and my father as a “modern” couple, aiming to form a nuclear family, free from the control and interferences of an older generation? After all, their romance had taken place during the heady days of the Eastern variant of the Roaring Twenties and the Jazz Age. The Great Depression had yet to strike. And Chairman Mao, while seeking to recruit disadvantaged females into the Communist cause, had been proclaiming that women had unrealised power because they held up half of heaven.

My father had only been a student at the time of their romance. Any fanciful thought of marital independence would have had to wait at least till after he had completed his studies and found gainful employment. In the natural order of things, that would have been quite some way down the road.

In any case, according to elders, once the marriage had taken place, my mother made it unambiguously clear that she was averse to smoking. She took deliberately to emptying the contents of my father’s cigarette case into the toilet in his presence and flushing them away.

Several aspects of that tale amazed me. Why did my mother not go the whole hog? It made no sense to do things by half. Why did she not snap the ebony holder or trample the golden case underfoot, till both were no longer serviceable? Those more symbolic items would have been much more difficult and expensive to replace.

My father’s reaction to those repeated demonstrations was just as puzzling. He did not try to stop my mother. Neither did he express any objection or alarm. He simply laughed and replenished his cigarettes the following day, indifferent to both wastage and cost.

That behaviour seemed at first rather quaint, until I subsequently got a better handle on his temperament. He was by nature unflappable and averse to confrontation. I have never seen him act in real anger. He had never ever raised his voice, except in laughter or banter. If a situation involving my siblings or myself displeased him, he would just give a disapproving glare. That would be sufficient to deter us from whatever mischief we might be engaged in. Where an unpleasantness involved adults, he would simply shake his head and walk away with a wry smile.

Could the performances by my parents over the cigarettes have been a pantomime of some sort, a kind of love-tease between them? Was my mother capricious and perverse or did she simply want more attention, more tokens of love from my father? If those were her intentions, her messages failed to be delivered.

It was an odd business altogether. My incomprehension over the story made me itch for the truth. But my generation of Chinese could hardly query our parents over such intimate matters. They must be allowed to retain space for their private demons and ghosts.

What I do know definitely, however, is that my father never gave up smoking and my mother never gave up her abhorrence of it. Up until I was in my fifties, I used to enjoy smoking cigars. But each time I visited my mother at her home in Vancouver, she would admonish me for not giving up “that disgusting weed”.

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Apart from that tug of war over smoking, other developments should have alerted elders that all might not be going well in the marriage of my parents.

The first was my mother's departure, not long after my birth, to work for the Chinese Maritime Customs in Canton. The conventional explanation was that she was used to working and that idling at home did not suit her. Besides, Canton was where her own family lived and she must have wanted to become independent enough to make some financial contribution towards the church work of her father.

For many years I did not question that explanation. Looking back now, however, my hunch is that there must have been other factors at play. An obvious one was that my mother had to live in the shadow of *Ah Mah* at Hill Road. Naturally, servants would only take instructions from the latter. My mother therefore could not mandate a change in household routines or in my care without the prior approval of *Ah Mah*. She could not even gain any priority from my father for the quality time she sought.

The last factor might have been the final straw. Whenever my father visited, it would be my grandmother who would have first call on his attention. If *Ah Yeh* happened to be in town, he would get priority as well. My mother would at best be third in the queue. To have to wait, perhaps for days, for a visit from my father, and then to have to wait further for him to be released, would not have been her idea of how a husband ought to behave. For a strong-willed person like my mother the whole situation would have been intolerable.

If she had thought that my arrival would make a difference, she was mistaken. My grandmother's experience with babies and her knowledge of the most appropriate way to handle them still counted for more than any suggestion from my mother.

Regardless of what caused her to opt for working in Canton, my mother made one tragic error before her departure. According to an account related to me by my mother when she was in her eighties, she said she had

anticipated my father occasionally finding himself at loose ends after her departure. She therefore urged her bridesmaid, Anna, to spend a little time with him, to take him out for a cup of tea or to watch a cinema.

She reasoned, from the perspective of a prim and proper clergyman's daughter, thus: Anna was her best friend; her own brother was wooing the girl. There was an ancient taboo forbidding people with the same surname, and hence within the same clan, from entering into any intimate relationship. That prohibition had been in place since before the time of Confucius, probably because the Chinese had some awareness of the dangers of in-breeding.

Therefore she thought nothing untoward could happen. What she did not take into account was her husband's persuasiveness with women and his appetite for romantic conquests. She probably overlooked also the risk of a young and inexperienced woman like Anna being swept off her feet by a charmer.

Anna did exactly what she had been asked to do. The result was not what my mother had anticipated.

According to another story by elders, after my father got himself sexually and emotionally involved with Anna, he went to *Ah Yeh* for advice. Without revealing the identity of Anna, he confessed that he had fallen in love with a second woman. He wanted to know how best to handle the situation. My grandfather had replied unequivocally: "Marry her as well."

Whether my father attempted to follow that option, I do not know. As an infant, I knew nothing of what was happening. I was completely oblivious to the drama unfolding around me, cocooned as I was in a world of my own. I noticed no change in the frequency of my father's visits nor the way he handled me when he was home.

Subsequently, I overheard mumblings about my father having

acted improperly in breaking of an ancient taboo, necessitating a gathering of elders. The outcome was that my father was instructed to apologise to my mother and to terminate his relationship with Anna. There were also rumours my father was made to kneel in making his apology. In that way the problem was supposed to have been resolved.

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Perception and reality are often two entirely different things. My mother continued with her job in Canton. She came and went and came again, maybe half-convinced that her marriage had been salvaged, for the family elders were on her side. Or maybe she remained niggled by anger and hurt and betrayal. I had no way of telling.

It came to her notice before long, however, that nothing had really been resolved. In spite of the injunctions of the elders, my father and Anna had continued their affair. Had that development contributed to my father failing again during his final year at university? Better than odds-on, I would say.

Anna duly became pregnant, for contraception was not widely known or practised in those days. Presumably the option of an abortion had been considered and ruled out.

Family elders would have regarded the convening of another meeting as too picaresque, given that the two disobedient juniors had acted in defiance of their instructions. They must have resented the turbulence generated in a more individualistic world, where their moral authority was exposed as empty and quite ineffective.

Once it became clear my father was unwilling to give up Anna, *Ah Yeh* was forced to take matters into his own hands. He arranged for Anna to

be sent to Singapore, to wait out her confinement at Blair Road. My grandmother's attitude was unknown, but I surmise she would have stood steadfastly by her only son, no matter what his sexual peccadilloes might have been.

Anna's arrival in Singapore initially caused some consternation among relatives. They jumped to the conclusion that *Ah Yeh* had acquired himself another young wife!

A responsibility left to my father was to untangle the crisis he had provoked. How he set about it has been lost in the mists of time. Did he attempt a "two-wives" solution? If so, how did my mother respond? With wifely disdain or Christian charity? Or with heartbreak and desperate bitterness? How much each had contributed towards the fiasco must remain known only to the high tribunals of their respective consciences.

I can imagine my parents facing each other, with burning anger on one side and shamefaced guilt on the other. Broken promises and past pledges would have stood between them like implacable enemies. They would have had to face as well the failings in each other's conduct. When did ancient taboos and injunctions from elders start to count for nothing? When, too, did marriage vows of Christian couples, joining for better or for worse unto death, turn so hollow?

Even as their aching exchanges and bumbling justifications were being tossed back and forth, another complication emerged. My mother discovered she had become pregnant as well!

How did either of them receive the news? Did either feel strengthened or weakened? No one knows. A number of different scenarios seemed possible. My mother could have thrown down a gauntlet in a fit of feminist hauteur. "Make your choice!" she might have declared. "Me and your children or that betraying vixen."

My father must have reached the conclusion then that the marriage could not be salvaged on terms which any of the three parties could live with. The polygamous genes he had inherited probably could not be subdued. At the same time, the knowledge that he had sired two children concurrently with two different women must have tested his equanimity and his resolve. The need to make a choice was upon him. He half-dodged it by heading for Singapore, without waiting for my mother to give birth to my brother in Hong Kong.

* * *

On 6 August 1932, Anna gave birth to a daughter, whom my father named Ho-Ling, or Helen in the anglicised version.

In November of that same year, my mother gave birth to another son. My father named him Tzi-Choy, which meant “talented child” or “gifted son”. The infant was baptised soon afterwards and, curiously, was given the Christian name of Joseph. I do not know who had selected it but the choice seemed puzzling under the circumstances, because my father also carried that same Christian name.

* * *

At some point during 1933, my mother bundled me and the infant Tzi-Choy to Canton, to take up residence with my maternal grandparents. I was too young to know much of anything, let alone the terms of disengagement between my parents. Things must have been left messily in limbo, with arguments re-surfacing later over the custody of myself and Tzi-Choy.

I staggered from one bewildering development to another, without comprehension of what was going on but sensing something amiss. Nobody seemed to want to explain anything to a little boy. They all took the coward's way out, laying responsibility for everything at the feet of a Christian God who was wont to act in mysterious ways.

* * *

While in Canton, I did catch the name "Wai-Fong" or "Anna" cropping up in a few conversations between adults. It rang a faint bell but I could not put a face to the name. She must have dropped by Hill Road often enough to see my mother in happier times. But I could not bring her to mind.

I had to wait until *Ah Mah* took me to Singapore in early 1935 before I got my first real look at Anna. By then she had given birth to another child, a son. My father named him Tzi-Kun, meaning "Diligent Son". The boy was also given the Christian name of Francis.

Francis was to grow to be the brother I felt closest to during the later stages of our lives, both philosophically and temperamentally. He was also to become one of the prime movers in an ill-fated attempt to establish an independent newspaper in the tightly-controlled political environment of Singapore.

The Singapore Herald hit the streets in July of 1970 and quickly found acceptance with the reading public. But the Singapore government closed it down in May the following year, for allegedly engaging in "black operations".

Francis and his top editors strenuously denied those allegations. But the newspaper licensing system -- conveniently inherited from the British colonial regime -- was too draconian to permit room for either appeal or

argument.

The saga of the birth and demise of the Singapore Herald might itself one day be worth recording in a book.

* * *

Another bizarre twist in family affairs surfaced before too long. The general assumption had been that my mother's third brother, Tuck, had a romantic interest in Anna. That turned out to be completely off the mark. Although my maternal uncle had frequently called at her home, it was Anna's *mother* he had his sights on. After Anna's relationship with my father had become public, Uncle Tuck promptly married the widow. That union caused Anna to become my mother's niece in the complicated web of Chinese family connections and, by extension, to be one of my maternal cousins!

The couple thereafter produced three more children -- two girls and a boy. They added to my growing regiment of cousins. My mother kept in close touch with her brother and his family for many decades but not, unsurprisingly, with Anna.