

## Destination America

The two years I spent at No. 33 constituted one of the happiest and most cherished periods in my life, in spite of my bewilderment over the many anomalous and jarring realities prevailing in Hong Kong. The real reason for my joy was the unfailing kindness and generosity my Eight Grandaunt extended me. The way she dispensed her attentions fulfilled my boyhood fantasy of what I had long missed -- real mother love within the bosom of a family.

Prior to my visiting to No. 33, my grandaunt's awareness of my existence had probably amounted to little more than dim recollections of an infant brought to visit the Chau household by my grandmother. My grandaunt would have then been just a young wife and mother within that family, though she would have heard of the breakdown in the marriage of my parents and of my being involved in a custody tussle. Therefore, when I turned up as a skinny adolescent, patently insecure and all at sea, her charitable nature and her own instincts as a mother must have been moved sufficiently to lavish care upon me.

I was at first slightly lost for a response. Her attentions went far beyond the requirements of hospitality or kinship. It was not as if she had no other demands upon her time. She had a large household to run, filled with growing children and long-serving servants. Her own health, I was to learn later, was in a worrying condition as well.

In my own eyes, I saw myself at 18 as neither lovable nor likable. I was certainly not someone to elicit natural sympathy. I was thin, pimply, tense, introverted, wary, deficient in social graces and over-sensitive. Why should anyone take to me? I had shown nothing in words or deeds to endear myself to anyone.

The kind and compassionate nature of my grandaunt manifested itself very soon. She was observant too. For instance, she quickly spotted the poverty of my wardrobe -- if the few items I possessed could warrant so elevated a description. She set about remedying some of its missing elements

within days, by producing an assortment of shirts, pyjamas and accessories. She passed them over with a casual: "You may find a use for some of these." She made it sound as if the items were inconsequential oddments which had come her way.

Her presents moved me in a strange way. For someone to note and to attend to any of my inadequacies was novel and extremely pleasing. Ever since I became a war refugee in Australia, I had to fend for myself where clothing was concerned. My gratitude overflowed.

One item in the collection immediately caught my fancy. It was a translucent plastic belt, smartly packaged in a cellophane-covered container. Plastics were then just coming into use in consumer products and such belts were being promoted as an amazing new invention from America, hailed as "glass" belts. I had seen them displayed in department stores, priced well beyond my reach. They drew a vast demand, however, and were avidly snapped up as a new status symbol.

When I received one so unexpectedly, I was overjoyed. It was as if she had read one of my hidden desires. I thanked her profusely. But within weeks of using the gift, the holes punched in it for fastening the prong began to tear. The belt soon became unserviceable and I regretted that both my grandaunt and I had been taken in by the hype. Within months the whole craze for "glass" belts evaporated.

The loss of use of the belt caused me to reflect upon other gifts I had previously received. No one had been as generous as my grandaunt before, indulging me without any precondition. My *Ah Mah* hardly gave presents. She conferred a great deal of love and care, but they were usually accompanied by reminders to be obedient, to study hard, and to fulfil my duties as the first-born son of my generation. My grandfather's gift of a silver watch had to be earned through superior performance at school and I only got to keep the timepiece for

a single day -- before it disappeared forever.

Where my mother was concerned, she had sent me one single parcel of toys when I was about seven. That was all. Uncle Jim, my English godfather, did better with his sweets. In the case of my father, a solitary gift of \$600 very late in the day was all I had received. Only Ah Sei, the old servant at No. 10, had really indulged me as a boy, with various titbits and those long-remembered slices of delicious liquorice.

My grandaunt's presents without strings were exactly the kind of tokens of love and consideration I had often dreamed of receiving from my mother but to no avail. My gratitude towards my grandaunt therefore grew exponentially.

With the approach of winter, she quickly anticipated another of my needs. I had no warm clothing. All my winter clothes had been surrendered at Perth, before returning to Singapore. She came forward in good time with sweaters, woollen socks and a Chinese padded jacket made of dark blue silk. She handed me those items no differently from her dispensations of similar clothing to her younger children.

The comforting sense of being looked after soothed me like a balm. Her mere proximity was a joy. Whatever dissatisfaction or discontent I might have scraped against during my working day disappeared after exchanging a few words with her. Psychologists might put it down to a belated mother fixation or a process of "transference". Whatever the jargon used, I can only say that I derived comfort in her company, just as I used to from my grandmother's. We exchanged very few words but an unarticulated awareness and understanding flowed between us.

The episode of the "glass" belt also opened my eyes further to the local economic system. I had already been made aware of corporations underpaying their employees and assigning them well-nigh impossible tasks.

But the ability to create through advertising a fad to unload rubbishy belts onto an unsuspecting public struck me as a scam too far.

Both my grandaunt and I had been taken in. Why should society be turned into a playing field for fraudsters? Waving that old flag of *caveat emptor* was hardly an excuse. But who was I to rant? I was being sucked semi-willingly into that dubious system myself, with my eyes wide opened.

Little did I foresee that much worse was in store. Out of the propaganda practices of World War II grew the twin leviathans of state misinformation and relentless consumer advertising. Both would slowly and insidiously mould our wants, our desires, our egos, our fears and, indeed, the very core values in each and every established society. A most disheartening shape of things to come.

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I had never been much good at cultivating bonds with people younger than myself. Sharing a large bedroom with four children was an awkward experience. It was not that I was unused to sharing a room with others; I had done so at Blair Road and when I was staying with my Fifth Maternal Aunt and Uncle. What was out of sync this time was that I was the oldest occupant in the room but also the most junior in terms of the Chinese punctiliousness for family hierarchy. I was sharing it with three uncles and an aunt. I was therefore in no position to really instruct them. My drawing attention to deployments of vowels and consonants at odds with BBC usage went largely unappreciated.

The aunt I was most keen to get on terms with was Miu-Kwan, for she was only six months older than myself. She came over as a very lively and engaging girl. She had fled with her family to Kweilin to escape the Japs and I

was keen to compare notes with her on the nature of our respective flights. I also wanted to learn about the legendary beauty of the hills and rivers of Kweilin which I had yet to see.

There was something wondrous and effervescent about Miu-Kwan. Her face was shaped very much like her mother's, with the same appealing nose and resolute chin. Her wide, mirthful mouth and her strong white teeth, however, had clearly been inherited from her father. She flitted around the home like some blithe spirit, filling it with sonorous laughter. But she was also inclined to be a bit stand-offish where boys were concerned. Perhaps even a little over-confident about her own attractiveness. She had numerous admirers among her male schoolmates but she hardly gave them the time of day.

I could seldom catch her alone. My job did not require me to be at the Central Magistracy till 10.00 a.m., so I normally rose after she and her siblings had gone off to school. After that, I would be absent from No. 33 till the evening meal. Dining with many elders at a big round table was, of course, not conducive to teenage conversations.

It was only on the rare occasions of an early return in the afternoon that I would find her at one of her activities, the most common of which took the form of gatherings of female classmates from St. Paul's Co-Educational College. The girls would be in their uniforms, a pale blue long-gown of conservative design, with a metal insignia pinned on the front. Their gowns, loose-fitting and shapeless, reminded me of Miss Nice.

Chief among those classmates was another aunt, Miu-Chee, the only daughter among the five children of my Ninth Granduncle and Aunt. Miu-Chee was smaller in stature and less well-fleshed than Miu-Kwan. She was also three months younger, which brought her very close to my own age. She and her family had remained in Hong Kong during the Japanese occupation and I was anxious to hear whatever horror stories she had to tell.

What struck me about my aunts and their classmates was that they all seemed unfazed by their education lagging two or three years behind mine. They appeared equally indifferent to the growing chaos in China or the grubby geopolitical horse-trading which left us as British colonial subjects in our own city. Their attachment to their nation appeared minuscule compared with mine. Could that be because they had taken their fate for granted? Or was forgetting the past and closing their eyes to the future an easiest option?

My experience in Singapore had taught me that occupiers wanted conscientious but politically-neutered pen-pushers to keep the wheels of commerce turning. Their policy in Hong Kong had been no different. The teaching of modern Chinese history was barred from schools, so wary were the authorities of history's potential for inciting unrest and discontent. Part of that approach might have accounted for the insouciance of the girls frequenting No. 33.

The way they played ping-pong was illustrative of their general approach to life. Their incompetence at the game was staggering. Squeals of laughter accompanied each appalling stroke, as they sent the ball flying into the net or beyond the limits of the table. It was all carefree fun. The only subject they treated with seriousness centred on learning to drive and gaining a licence.

It was possible that those gay creatures shared a desire to doll themselves up as well, as they teetering precariously between girlhood and womanhood. Speculating on the various beauty aids they might try could have been the subject of their furtive whispers, not to mention prospects of love and marriage. But none of their talk ever reached my ears.

I became increasingly worried about them nonetheless. They were around my own age and China needed people like us to contribute to the nation's renewal. I felt a responsibility to draw them out of their comfort zone, to show them some of the snares and booby-traps lurking everywhere. They

should come to grips with the conditions of the poor hawkers being squeezed by both the courts and the triads or of the under-educated people being gaoled for admitting possession of a screwdriver.

But an immediate stumbling block presented itself. How could I proselytise effectively on social conditions when I was a subordinate in the family structure? My words would hardly carry weight with my aunts, let alone among their friends. I had somehow to be accepted as an equal first. But that was a Chinese circle not easy to square. I was left vexed over the problem.

Some days later, however, I chanced upon my two aunts heading somewhere in apparent high spirits. On an impulse, I greeted them by name, instead of using their titles.

They reacted hesitantly, as if I were holding out to them a huge firecracker with a spluttering fuse. They exchanged glances between themselves before eyeing me. Their body language suggested they did not know whether to wait for the explosion or to take to their heels.

After an instant, Miu-Kwan gave me a baffled but not unfriendly look. She must have decided to play safe and to remain aloof, for she said: “Hey, we’re your aunts, you know.”

“Yes, too right,” Miu-Chee chimed in quickly.

“Of course, you are,” I replied, airily. “But don’t you think it’s time we did away with some of these Chinese formalities? It’s much too stiff and wearing on conversation. In the West, we would simply be cousins, free to address each other in any way we choose, without being the least bit hung-up on titles and generational trappings.”

“We’re not in the West, are we?” Miu-Kwan’s voice registered an altered tone, signalling a preference for the status quo.

I realised my initiative had been premature. I ought to have pulled back. But a perverse streak compelled me to press on regardless. I decided

instead to broaden the discussion. “Ah, but we are all colonial subjects these days, aren’t we? Sold down the river by our seniors and betters. Since we are forced to accept a lot of foreign ways, why not their simpler modes of address as well?”

My questions cut no ice. They gave me the kind of look meant for a nephew not only too big for his boots but also too stupid to avoid raising inconvenient issues. They went huffily on their way, without deigning any further response.

It was an inauspicious beginning. But it did not alter my determination to prick their bubble of happy indifference, to stir them out of the political apathy which had been for too long the curse of the Chinese nation. It was possible that I was also motivated by a feeling of loneliness, due to that rising sap of adolescence. I had no friends in Hong Kong, apart from Hon-Kit, and the company of a bunch of unripe though cheerful girls held a certain fascination. It was my first real brush with females of the species and I wanted to insinuate myself among them.

It quickly became evident, however, that my presence was not welcomed. It emerged I was regarded as a spoiler, a disruptive element, out to ruin their fun and carefree enjoyment of life. They resented my raising issues they had no wish to hear about, let alone to consider. Perhaps they thought me unattractive as well, too much of a scarecrow and devoid of any fashion sense.

It came to a head one day when I sought to join one of their gatherings. On my approach, Miu-Kwan cried out like a mother hen collecting her brood: “Quick, quick, let’s go elsewhere! That semi-foreign barbarian is about to descend on us again.” Her statement was delivered half-cheekily and half-playfully, like a six-year-old girl sticking her tongue out at a boy.

I reacted with equal childishness. My pride was hurt. My self-esteem took a tumble. My motives had been honourable but they had not been

appreciated. I started to retaliate by composing barbed ditties to mock them, delivering them superciliously, either directly or via Miu-Kwan. I cannot now remember how many I penned. The following would be a typical example:

“Modern maiden with ill-bobbed hair  
Set down needles to put on airs.  
Lute and poetry are both lost now.  
They have become just silly cows.”  
Naturally, boos and general outrage met my sallies.

“Grotesque!” Miu-Kwan exclaimed, pronouncing judgement with all the majesty of her superior family position. Her friends echoed her view. They jabbered over the meanness in my rhymes and soon settled upon me a nickname which meant “grotesque” in Cantonese. This they achieved by corrupting the pronunciation of the Cantonese equivalent of David. That awful nickname disconcerted me but, more annoyingly, they kept using it. (Even today, at the age of 86, Miu-Kwan still refers to me that way whenever we speak on the telephone.)

From that time onwards, a tussle for supremacy as juvenile as any occurring in a playground took hold between Miu-Kwan and myself. Each of us tried to score points over the other, through belittling remarks and teasing banter.

For example, when I wore a pair of trousers whose colour did not quite harmonise with the colour of my solitary jacket, she would compliment me excessively for looking like a perfect country bumpkin. I would exact my revenge by spoiling her preparations for a party by remarking that the crookedness of the seams or a run in her nylon stockings must be the latest fashion. Her seams might or might not have been crooked and certainly I had never seen a run. But such a remark would be enough to send her to the mirror to check the back of her legs. Finding a vulnerable chink in her gave me a kick.

Such verbal jousting continued between us till I left for America in 1949.

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During my stay at No. 33, I developed a long-running relationship with another member of the Chau clan. His name was Yiu-Hung and he was the eldest son of my Ninth Granduncle and Aunt, the older brother of Miu-Chee. He frequently visited No. 33 and he was more than two years older than I. He was a mild manner lad of modest height. Soft-spoken too. He was physically well put together, but without any overt evidence of his tensile strength and agility.

In a better-ordered world, with earlier nurturing of sporting talent, he might have enjoyed a glittering sporting career, for he excelled in soccer, badminton, snooker, tennis, basketball, gymnastics and ping pong. He was no mean Chinese chess player either.

He taught me to play both snooker and ping pong, as well as to keep up my interest in Chinese chess. On level pegging, I could never beat him in any of those three activities.

Years later, I was to learn he had also developed into a master *mah-jong* player, with an exceptional skill in handling defensive hands. I had by then started playing the game regularly as well, so we met from time to time across the *mah-jong* table for almost half a century. I much appreciated some of his defensive techniques and took to copying him.

His working life was spent in the clerical service of the Hong Kong government, assigned mainly to schools and clinics to keep tabs on inventory and to discharge other clerical duties.

He eventually married a very attractive woman who worked in a department store and they produced three sons. In spite of never achieving

fame or financial success in any sporting field, he appeared to be generally relaxed and at ease with life.

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My Eighth Granduncle used to own a pleasant holiday retreat on the small island of Tsing Yee, located just opposite Tsuen Wan in the New Territories. It consisted of a large bungalow with several rooms perched on top of a hillock. It was surrounded by modest but attractive gardens, with trees, bamboo clumps and flowering bushes. To gain access to the island one needed first to travel to Tsuen Wan by car or bus, before engaging a sampan to be ferried over. The rower of the sampan would usually be a fisherwoman.

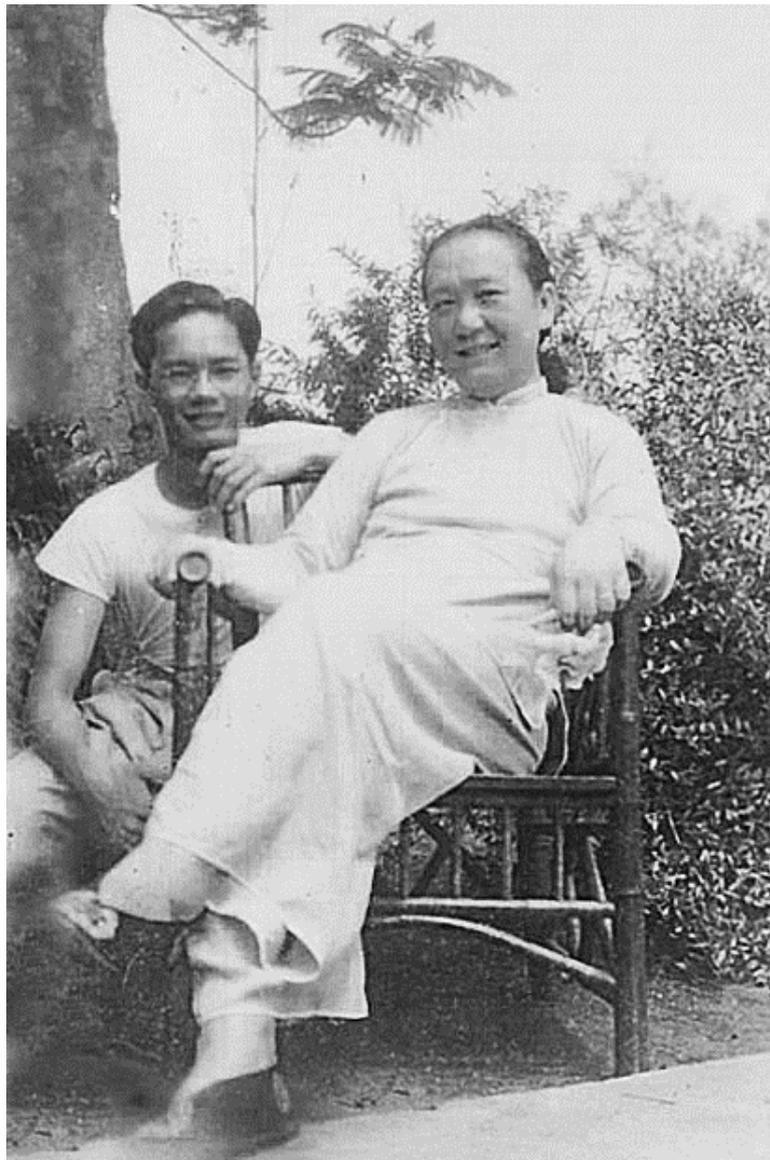
My granduncle aptly named the retreat “The Abode of Butterflies”. The two Chinese characters comprising the name were elegantly emblazoned on an arch at the main entrance. It was a superbly tranquil place, far removed from the din and hectic clamour of commerce. Butterflies were a common sight, as were dragonflies, honey bees, ladybirds and other winged insects. In the purple dusk of evening, however, less welcomed living creatures like mosquitoes would emerge. Anti-mosquito coils would have to be lit. But fireflies, moths, the chirping of crickets and the croaking of frogs would also add to the nocturnal atmosphere.



Two Morning Post colleagues accompanying me in a sampan heading for  
Tsing Yee Island in 1948

Visitors ferried across by sampan would be deposited on either a slab of concrete passing for a dock or else on some convenient patch of sand, depending on the level of the tide. The beach was not much to speak of even at low tide. But the sea was normally clean and unpolluted enough for a pleasant swim. A tall flight of cement steps had to be climbed to reach the entrance to the bungalow. The island was not connected to the electricity grid, so it was home to only a few scattered fishing villages. The sparse population provided ample scope for undisturbed rambling along ill-defined paths. A local village couple had been engaged as the bungalow's caretakers. They could rustle up quite a respectable seafood meal at very little cost.

During the two years I was at No. 33, I could not remember my granduncle ever taking time off to enjoy his fine retreat. He was always too busy attending to patients. My grandaunt, however, regularly used the bungalow, especially during school holidays when she, accompanied by servants, would stay overnight with some of her children. If I could wrangle leave from the *Morning Post*, I would join them.



Author at the age of 18 with his Eight Grandaunt  
at the Abode of Butterflies.

In due course, I was granted permission to use “The Abode of Butterflies” to entertain my newspaper colleagues. People went Dutch, because we were all short of money. Those events, usually on Sundays, became so enjoyable that they soon took on a popularity and regularity of their own. My friend Hon-Kit was one of the mainstays.

Young women working as journalists were almost non-existent during that era, except for a Eurasian girl in the *Morning Post* and a Canadian

in a rival paper. They soon joined the fun. Other girls working in accounting or advertising departments of local publications were roped in. We swam, hiked, explored, played cards, danced to gramophone records, drank a little beer, snapped photographs and plotted schemes for quick enrichment. For the less active, there was fishing or the contemplation of nature. The group remained manageably small, however, and most of those participating came away with snatches of that heady redolence of youth.

Neither “The Abode of Butterflies” nor Tsing Yee Island exists today. The younger generations would have no knowledge of what had once been there. Both the island and the hills had been annihilated long ago to satisfy Hong Kong’s insatiable hunger for land. The government first filled in the sea separating the island from Tsuen Wan and then developers flattened the hillocks to construct factories, housing and infrastructure. The gentle flowing harmonies of nature were replaced by the stark geometric lines of modern construction and the latter now stand like grotesque tombstones to what had once been there.

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Meanwhile, my friendship with Hon-Kit progressively deepened. Perhaps each of us had found in the other an appealing frankness of speech and a concern for the haplessness of our nation.

In my case, I regarded Hon-Kit as not only a close colleague and boon companion but also a divining-rod, as I stumbled across the unfamiliar intellectual and political territory awaiting me. His cool analytical mind and his unfailing commonsense steered me around many of the snares and pitfalls lying in my path.

At the beginning of 1948, he surprised me by announcing his

intention to get married. The bride he had selected was a very charming and good-looking girl by the name of Frances. I had met her once or twice when she joined the Sunday outings to Tsing Yee. The one thing about her that stuck in my mind was a big straw hat she usually wore to shelter from the sun. To the best of my recollection, she used to be a teacher.

Hon-Kit surprised me again later by asking me to become his best man. I was only 19 and felt immensely flattered.

I had no idea, however, what that role entailed. So I took my perplexity to my Eighth Grandaunt. Although she had never met either of the couple, she did not fail me. She suggested that I should first find out whether the wedding was to be Chinese or Western, traditional or modern, to be held in a temple, church or public registry, the projected number of bridesmaids, the ancillary functions associated with the wedding and so forth. When the relevant information had been gathered and presented, she said: "Looks as if you'll need a suit."

That statement gave me a start. I had no suit. I had only a single all-purpose summer jacket because the Hong Kong climate was such that for most of the year a jacket was not necessary. When one was required for a slightly formal function, I simply introduced the jacket to one of the three pairs of sturdy trousers I owned. I had given no thought to the kind of suit I ought to obtain nor the means of paying for it.

Again my grandaunt came to the rescue. She got a tailor to attend at No. 33 to take my measurements, to decide on the material and to note the requirements. Within two or three days I became the proud owner of an elegant white suit. The material went by the name of sharkskin. The bill for the suit was waylaid and settled long before it could reach me.



Best man at wedding of Chan Hon-Kit

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Hon-Kit's wedding went flawlessly. Once the ceremony was concluded, however, I realised how much I was stuck in a hole. Time was marching on and, after more than a year at the *Morning Post*, I was still drawing only HK\$300 a month. Even minor expenditures like buying a toothbrush or a comb had to be carefully weighed. The latter was a recurring nuisance because my hair was so stiff and unruly as to be thoroughly unresponsive to discipline. Ordinarily, a hot compress had to be applied before it would behave. As a consequence, the teeth of my combs, if not the combs themselves, frequently broke.

In spite of being spared the cost of board and lodging, there was no way I could put money aside for anything else. To eke out my pay till the end of each month was already an achievement.

The situation was difficult to swallow because the *Morning Post* was a quite profitable newspaper. There seemed no obvious reason why it should pay local staff so meanly, unless my own work was considered unsatisfactory. For me, money loomed as the centre of a man's freedom. Without enough, there was only anxiety and never-ending serfdom. Getting my hands on more became an imperative, even without thinking about a remoter future like getting married and starting a family.

Yet, remembering the many difficulties over landing a job even with Bishop Halward's help, I could not see any more promising employment. Local folklore had it that many had waxed rich as compradores in one of the Western trading hongcs. But my ancestors had for generations spurned commerce, in keeping with Confucian precepts. I saw no reason to break with tradition. The way "glass" belts had been flogged had added to my own distaste for commerce.

The government was the largest single employer in the colony but its staffing system -- like the one at the *Morning Post* -- discriminated against locals. I did not fancy working for occupiers, let alone under an unfair system. My grandfather had secured parity of treatment as a doctor in Crown service almost half a century ago and I saw no reason to tolerate continuing disparities so many decades later. It was one thing if Whitehall paid for the favourable treatment bestowed upon its own countrymen but quite another when local taxation was used to maintain those differentials. Local civil servants had already begun to object. Unsurprisingly though, their focus was concentrated on raising their own benefits to match those of expatriates rather than cutting down expatriate perks to their own level.

In the meantime, I had learnt from one of the old-timers at the *Morning Post* that Mr. Ching himself was not on full expatriate terms. He enjoyed free passages for himself and his family to and from Sydney every few

years, I was told, but he was not provided with the housing subsidy granted to expatriates. I would therefore have to be reconciled to unequal treatment if I were to continue to work there.

I was nonetheless reluctant to leave, for I was being exposed to many social realities I would not otherwise have been aware of. Yet I had been given no opportunity to voice my views in print on matters I considered worthy of public airings. I felt I was somehow being made complicit in fostering a distorted view of society.

After much soul-searching, I concluded I should seek an interview with Mr. Ching to find out exactly where I stood. It was impossible to continue indefinitely on my salary or avoid facing up to whether I was up to the job. Mr. Ching had told me that journalism was not everybody's cup of tea. Perhaps it was not mine either. If I could not fit into the *Morning Post* scheme of things, Mr. Ching would be the right man to make that plain. If it meant a return to job-hunting, so be it.

When the interview took place, I had hardly got out three sentences before Mr. Ching said: "You're coming along surprisingly well. Starting next month, your pay will be \$600."

Thus he completely took the wind out of my sails.

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I took Hon-Kit out to lunch to convey the good news but he gave every sign of being underwhelmed. "So you reckon you're now getting a fair wage?" he said.

"Well, I'm not sure what a fair wage ought to be, for someone with my minimum qualification," I replied. "Everybody's so secretive about pay. There's nothing to go by, no benchmarks, no union for journalists, no collective

bargaining. But can I really complain when my pay's been doubled for covering the same beat? Six hundred bucks should be about enough for an independent life, without relying on relatives."

"What kind of independent life would 600 bucks buy you?"

"A rented room in a hostel and enough to feed myself, if I don't become too much of a glutton."

"And what about saving for university?"

I sighed. "Yeah, not much left for that, I fear."

"So it's not an unmixed blessing, is it? Let me put another question to you. Would you be willing to go for another opening in a different calling for, say, \$300 or less a month?"

"Of course, not."

"There you have it. You know full well no other employer would pay anywhere near \$600 to train you in a new line of work. In other words, either wittingly or unwittingly, the *Morning Post* has placed you on a ledge up a cliff-face, too sheer for you to climb much higher and too far up for you to jump down from.

"You should come to grips with how newspapers function and what they can and cannot do. It is all very well to talk of a free press speaking truth to authority. What you have to take into account are the harsh realities. One of them is that independent newspapers are increasingly falling into the hands of corporations out for profit. To be profitable they must increase advertising income. Advertisers, also out for profit, are seeking to sell products or services. They want to advertise in publications whose readers have a propensity to spend, whose editorial thrusts and articles are friendly towards a consumer culture. The sub-texts have to imply that life would be fuller, merrier, if people went for new pairs of shoes, bottles of bubbly or whatever else which might strike their fancy.

“Readers go for such a narrative too. They also like to be cheered and entertained, and not be put off during breakfast by grim and unpalatable truths. Newspapers therefore have to adjust their contents to the predilections of readers. The competition for readers might spark a race to the bottom, with a loss of tenor and tone, until broadsheets turn into tabloids and yellow journalism. The truth then becomes whatever the proprietors want it to be. If you cannot adjust and accept some or all of those realities, the time to consider leaving the profession would be now. By hanging on, you’re likely to get stuck.”

Hon-Kit’s words, touching on aspects of the newspaper world to which I had hitherto given hardly a thought, pelted me like a sudden shower of hail-stones. I had no reason to doubt his assertions. They rang true. There was a certain logic to them. And yet, they appeared to add up eventually to something monstrous and horrible. Although I could see definite flaws in the way the *Morning Post* operated, I could not visualise it turning into any kind of monster under Mr. Ching. Nonetheless, I was a cog in that machine and soon to be much richly rewarded than before. The prospect filled me with misgivings.

And what of Hon-Kit himself? Why was he staying in journalism, knowing what he knew? What was I supposed to do? I needed time to work things out for myself.

Meanwhile, I could hardly keep my forthcoming salary increase from my Eighth Granddaughter. If I could persuade her to take all or part of it as my contribution towards board and lodging that would salve my conscience while I sorted out the tangle I was in. But she declined, in much the same way *Ah Mah* had turned down my offer of the first Australian pound I had earned at Mr. Wong Sue’s restaurant.

“You’re a good boy but don’t behave like a complete outsider,” she said, bestowing me with one of her warm, maternal smiles. “What would

others think of us if we took payment for putting up a young relative? Your pay increase shows you've done well in your work. That's very good. You must have plenty of other uses for money. Your father told me you are keen to study in America. Save up for that instead."

I could not bear to upset her by telling her of my conversation with Hon-Kit and my uncertainties over continuing as a reporter. University stood out as my only hope of coming to grips with the absurdities of the world. By my calculation, however, even if I saved like mad, I would be middle-aged before I would have sufficient to go.

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In the weeks that followed, I struggled without success for an alternative route to life. Every possible solution appeared to boil down to the availability or otherwise of money. The cash jingling in the pocket from my pay hike also clouded my considerations. It was exhilarating not to have to watch the pennies any more, to be able to treat colleagues and court clerks to refreshments as a matter of normal social intercourse. It was amazing, too, how quickly one got used to eating at restaurants instead of at roadside stalls, and to leaving an over-generous tip with panache.

But the very act of tipping raised a question at the back of my mind. Did it represent an assertion of some kind of superiority over the recipient or was it a left-handed expression of solidarity? I could not forget I had once worked at a restaurant in Perth. Was I just following another empty bourgeois convention? Staunch Socialists regarded tipping as an insult to the dignity of labour. If it was such a good idea, why was no one leaving tips for magistrates or surgeons or street sweepers? Such questions complicated the issue of deciding on my future.

As I became acquainted with a wider circle of press colleagues, I discovered that some met regularly after work to play poker, *mah-jong* or bridge. They played for modest stakes and I needed little inducement to join them. I did not take to the bluffing tactics necessary in poker, however. But I quickly developed a liking for both bridge and *mah-jong*.

The latter game captivated me particularly and was to become a fixture in my later life. I had seen it played since childhood but I had never previously tried my hand at it. It resembled gin rummy in some respects, except that it was normally played by four participants with basically 138 tiles. The tiles would be shuffled face down by the four before being stacked with one row in front of each. The game would be played on a one-against-three basis, with each player beginning a hand with 13 tiles. The race would then be on to assemble and win the biggest hand practicable with a 14th tile. The game melded human psychology, deceptive talents, patience and a mastery of both tactics and tempo. A dash of good old fashion luck always helped.

The *mah-jong* games with colleagues usually took place at two or three regularly patronised Chinese restaurants. The bridge games would be held at the Craigengower Cricket Club, which was located almost directly across the road from No. 33. The club happened to be one of the more cosmopolitan ones, open to both locals and Europeans.

My new interests, taken together with the Sunday visits to Tsing Yee Island, added spice, excitement and enjoyment to my life. They also pushed into the background the tedious business of mulling about my future. I soon had pleasant diversions to occupy me most evenings -- *mah-jong*, bridge, snooker or chess. Even if I did not participate in a game, I enjoyed kibitzing. My periodic attacks of pimples also magically faded away. On some fine mornings, my *joie de vivre* was such that I could not help breaking out in song in imitation of the emotive extravagance of Mario Lanza. Even belittling

remarks by Miu-Kwan like: “Does anyone know why there’s such caterwauling so early in the morning?” failed to dampen my spirits.

\* \* \*

Apart from my Central Magistracy beat, I was gradually assigned to cover social functions, like cocktail receptions and charity balls. Those assignments were always carried out in tandem with an excellent staff photographer who knew how to flatter his subjects. They offered additional insights into the stratified nature of Hong Kong society as its population ballooned to over two million with refugees from China.

The new arrivals were not always impoverished. Quite a number came with unquantifiable resources to invest in what they perceived to be a far safer haven than China itself. The colony also offered them a base for establishing fresh homes and fresh business empires. Covering charity balls and other evening *soirées* enabled me to rub shoulders with both the old rich and the new interlopers.

The people and settings I encountered appeared quite surreal at first. Clad in my white sharkskin suit, I stood out like a sore thumb among men dressed in black tuxedos and women displaying ornamental jewels, pollened cheeks, *coiffeured* hair and *décolletages* well past their prime. Most flashed rictus smiles as they exchanged gossip, or tripped over the pronunciations of the *châteaux* names of wines, or lunged into Viennese waltzes played by Filipino bands. No nostril, however, could be spared the random whiffs of French perfumes, American aftershaves and deodorants which failed to mask one of the more obnoxious of human secretions.

Surprisingly, I found myself, a novice reporter, fussed over and welcomed with civility by many attendees. I was often invited to join their

tables. I could soon observe, however, that the elaborate displays of courtesies in front of a person often hid malevolent tongues once his back was turned. It was a form of social-climbing, done over the reputational wounds of others.

I took due note of how they imparted in low voices, with nudges and winks, tales of pious Christian taipans steeped in the arms trade, smooth-talking bankers more adroit in handling hot money than cold wives, shipping magnates evading British maritime rules by registering vessels in Panama or Liberia, and expatriate bureaucrats more prone to the sins of alcohol and adultery than to petty bribery and malfeasance.

They would also recycle rumours and intelligence about lawyers selling shelf companies stretching from Liechtenstein to the Dutch Antilles, diplomats operating under bogus credentials, crypto-racists in positions of power, stockbrokers suspected of insider trading and a variety of others with skeletons to hide.

While I nodded knowingly as they unfolded their allegations, much of what they said went completely over my head. I did not seek to disabuse them, however, though I had to track down afterwards what they had been driving at. I was, for instance, entirely ignorant of what constituted a shelf company or how a ship registered under one administration differed from another registered elsewhere.

I was also considerably surprised to learn that insider trading was not deemed a crime in Hong Kong. Rather it was regarded as a commonly accepted means of rising from low birth to high income. Even the most wealthy indulged in it. If it was a failing at all, it was only taken as a minor professional one, the penalty for which was a public “tut-tut” and a gentle tap on the wrist.

Sometimes, one of the gossip-mongers would place a hand confidentially on my arm and say: “You know, everybody says journalists are

like kings without crowns. No one dares to offend a single one of them; they know everything that's going on. We must have a quiet meal one day, so we can talk more privately. I'll give you a ring."

"Lovely," I would reply, glad to be developing another contact but also knowing instantly that the speaker was not just seeking the pleasure of my company. Nevertheless, for a lad not yet 20, being courted by supposed pillars of society was heady stuff. I was all for hearing more squalid slanders and salacious half-truths than my education had prepared me for. It was like stepping into a swamp filled with poisonous snakes. It was another aspect of the profession that Hon-Kit had yet to elaborate upon.

After covering a number of such functions, it dawned on me that people were being nice to me for a reason. I had been instructed to include the names of a few notables attending each bean-feast, because names boosted circulation. Obviously, not everybody could be listed. Discretion had to be exercised. With discretion came utility value. I was able to deliver one of the things they all yearned for -- getting their names into imperishable print in the next morning's newspaper.

Everybody appeared to have a wheeling and dealing agenda, each playing his own game without regard for society or nation, let alone for the wider good of civilisation or the world. The panorama being painted was one of such money-intoxicated greed, knavery and shady undertakings that it took my breath away. Yet, even if I could verify half the stories from more reliable sources, I would still be in no position to write about them.

The antics of the upper crust gradually ceased to surprise me. In a free-for-all society, I supposed everybody was in symbiotic relationships, feeding off everybody else, each scratching the backs of others in order to be scratched in return.

I saw immediately how I could finesse the system to help myself

into higher education. After all, had I not already compromised my objectivity by using a free bus pass? Such a possibility sent a chill through me. How easy it was to slip into that mode of thinking, to lose one's scruples. When it came down to dog eating dog, it was easy to understand why an underpaid sod with a hungry family might give way to temptation. Yes, any man desperate enough could be bought. But the question that troubled me was: Would a man, once bought, remain forever bought? Was it like virginity -- once lost, never to be regained?

It became evident that Hon-Kit had been right about my being stranded on a cliff-face, with no way up or down, with no acceptable future I could embrace. I was morally and financially marooned and much too scared to chuck it all in.

It came to me suddenly that Miu-Kwan and her classmates might have chosen a better approach. They were grabbing random moments of joy, storing up memories of an unspoiled youth, whereas I was chewing over the resentments of dead yesterdays and wishing upon the hopes of unborn tomorrows. Where had that got me? Faint echoes of the repeated disappointments of *Ah Yeh* came back to me. Another war, another defeat, another national humiliation. Had he sought relief from opium or wives because of some unspeakable pain? Was I destined to live till old age as helpless and frustrated as my grandfather? The future could turn out to be just an illusion, a blank wall, against which hesitators and collaborators might have to face the imaginary firing squads of their own consciences. Why not live for the exigent and pulsating present, and be giddily happy like Miu-Kwan and her crowd?

On that rationalisation, I comforted myself by ordering a new suit of tuxedo in midnight blue, to make myself less conspicuous at evening assignments. The fact that covering such events enabled me to bring along a

dancing partner was not lost on me. One of the girls from the Sunday outings gladly did service, though unaccompanied by any grand romance on either side.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, my Eighth Granduncle and my father had been gathering around themselves a small coterie of half a dozen friends interested in the finer points of Chinese poetry and literature. They included a chief clerk from a firm of solicitors and a couple of college teachers, one of whom had been at university with my father. They would meet regularly -- occasionally joined by wives -- for literary conversations and for deciding on subjects for exchanging “echoing” poems which utilised the same rhyming words. It used to be a testing skill for scholars in former times.

My father, in keeping with his nature, would be at his most loquacious whenever wives were present, no doubt making stagey flourishes with a cigarette in his ebony holder. Sometimes, after a discussion, dinner or a short game of *mah-jong* would follow.

Although I had few dealings with my father apart from evening meals while we lived at No. 33, I believe the years he spent there also constituted one of the happiest periods in his life. He was largely without financial care and had virtually no responsibility for the upbringing and education of his other children.



Author at the age of 19 with his father at the Abode of Butterflies.

My father did bring my brother Francis to the colony to attend the University of Hong Kong in 1951, though the arrangement did not work out satisfactorily for either of them. Francis was sent back to Singapore after a year to begin a journalistic career at the *Straits Times*. A couple of decades later, Francis was to tell me that the most memorable thing about his year at the University of Hong Kong was that his aunt, Miu-Kwan, was there at the same time and she was “quite a dish”.

When the Chinese secondary school my granduncle owned

inevitably closed due to the shrinkage in student numbers, my father returned to work for a time as a sub-editor for a new English daily known as the *Hong Kong Standard*. After a while he ceased to work altogether. I suppose he was still psychologically trying to live out the self-indulgent bachelorhood of a bygone era. He remained in Hong Kong for almost 10 years, till 1957, much to the chagrin of Anna, who insisted upon his marrying her properly on his return. He did so at a registry office. Anna died of cancer in 1971, at the age of 65.

Following the passing of my grandfather and the scattering of members of my generation, the old extended family structure of my family faded away. After Anna went as well, my father became a nomad without a home of his own. He spent his remaining years in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong, living for varying durations with one or another of his children. The only one he did not stay with was Tzi-Choy, who had migrated to Canada. Helen, divorced and the least financially well endowed of all his children, was the one who looked after him longest -- for a period of almost 10 years.

When my father stayed with me in Hong Kong, he spent much of his time steeped in Zen meditation. From what little I knew of such practices, I suspected he was only at the initial stages of that Buddhist process. He nonetheless took the practice seriously, spending hours on it every day. He might have attained a higher state of enlightenment later on but he never said anything about it to me.

During his stay with me, he gave me a few of his personal seals. Two of them were made from those rare and valuable amber-like stones connoisseurs called "*tien wong*" or "field yellow". One of them had been engraved with his name by a celebrated master carver known as Fung Hong-Hau, who had been responsible for fashioning the national seal of the Republic of China. That carver also subsequently engraved a personal seal for my use

some decades later. Even long before the master's demise, seal connoisseurs were telling me that each character carved by him in a seal would add a hundred dollars to the seal's value.

Among the seals from my father were a couple of casual or "leisure" seals. Leisure seals used to be popular with scholars or men of letters to reflect their outlook in life. The inscriptions could be serious, humorous or whimsical.

One of the leisure seal was also a "*tien wong*" presented to him as a token of friendship by one of his closest friends. There was a side inscription recording the gift. Four characters had been carved on it. They were literally: cold, hot, self and know. They formed the second part of a Buddhist epigram to the effect that when a person drank water, only the drinker knew whether it was cold or hot. The saying implied that only a person experiencing joy or sorrow would know what either was like.

I do not know who had actually carved that seal. The craftsmanship was not of the best. I supposed my father gave me his seals because I was the only one among his children who had shown any interest in seal-carving and its evolution.

When I reached the age of 86, I passed the leisure seal with the four characters to my youngest brother, Tzi-Seng, to eventually pass on to his son as a family keepsake, for none of my three children had managed to produce a son.



The *tien wong* leisure seal engraved with the four characters for cold, hot, self and know

My father's final years were spent in an old people's home in Singapore because attending to his particular needs was more than any one of his children could handle.

When he passed away in 1994, at the age of 93, he left one of my sons a collection of unpublished Chinese poems. They were quite readable and not without merit. They carried whimsical and romantic overtones, which reflected well his basic character. So far as can be determined, most of the poems had been written during his stay at No. 33.

My understanding is that the Chau family has a collection of other poems written by him and by my Eighth Granduncle. The family intends to pass the whole collection to the University of Hong Kong's archives.

Among the poems my father left was an eight-liner commemorating the passing of his father, my grandfather. Roughly translated, the lines read as follows:

Treasured last words never taken lightly  
At final parting, sadness prevails;  
Beneath yellow earth lie husband and wife.  
Four fraught years father and son, soldier-like, stood.  
Drizzles dampen sleeves, like tears;  
A farewell wave ere form is lost.  
Moment of reflection, self-awareness:  
Old tree waiting to be fell by wind.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, some of my reporting assignments took on a more gristly nature. I covered a godown fire in West Point which took 173 lives, a fire on the river steamer *Kwangtung* alongside a wharf which took 30 lives, and two air crashes which also killed a number of people.

My slippery descent into a life of semi-suspended ideals and bourgeois indulgences, interspersed with death at close quarters, was brought to a shuddering halt on a gloomy spring day in 1949. Out of the blue, Hon-Kit told me he and Frances had decided to head back to China.

“Why, for heaven’s sake?” I exclaimed, dumbfounded. “Why now? It’s crazy and dangerous back there. Fighting and chaos everywhere. It’s much safer here.”

Hon-Kit nodded. “You’re right,” he said. “It *is* much safer here. But if everyone plays safe, who is going to help our nation?”

“Okay, we all have patriotic feelings, I agree. But what can any of us do in such a mess? People are killing one another and nobody’s even sure whether it’s being done for power or politics or the good of the nation. What can you and Frances hope to accomplish by putting yourselves in harm’s way?”

What can any individual accomplish?”

“Not much in this cock-eyed world of ours. Possibly the era for grand schemes and high ambitions is past. Frances and I just want to try and do a bit of good.”

“What kind of good are you talking about? And where exactly are you two heading? China is a damn big place, you know.”

“I’m not sure of a single thing. We intend taking the train to Canton first, then find out where we can make ourselves useful. Do you remember how the Burma Road got built in a single year a few years back, through sheer muscle and sweat of men, women and children, when all the experts said it could not be done? If everyone does a little bit, there’s no telling what can be accomplished.”

Hon-Kit’s reply, coming from a newly-wed of less than a year’s standing, struck me as incredibly altruistic and noble. They brought me a sharp twinge of guilt. Less than two years previously, I had stood on a bridge at Shameen, puffed up with patriotic fervour and determined to carry forward my grandfather’s broken dreams. I had half-boastfully confided that to Hon-Kit. Now I stood like a punctured balloon, emptied of hope and drained of passion, without even hot air.

Shame crept over me. I felt a growing desire to redeem myself, to escape from the comfortable cage I was in. “I want to go with you,” I blurted out. “I need to do a bit of good too. I have a little money; my mum’s still at Six Two Three Road in Canton. It’ll be no trouble bunking with her for a bit.”

While I was holding forth, Hon-Kit kept shaking his head slowly. When I had finished, he let out a sigh and said: “In one sense, you know too much for your own good. In another, you know too little about life’s limitations and false promises. You need tempering, like good steel. Go to university and get yourself tooled up first. You’d be more useful to your

country that way.”

“That’ll take too long. It’ll be too late,” I protested.

Hon-Kit sighed again. “Yes,” he said. “Sometimes life plays us foul, makes us hesitate too long over things we should have done earlier. But you’re young enough for a couple of hesitations.”

“I want to get involved *now*, together with you. I want to get off the ledge. I may not know much but I can be your assistant, your hewer of wood and drawer of water. I can learn. I owe it to my grandfather to do something.”

“From what I understand, your grandfather made a considered choice, but only after he had gone through university and had established a family. He understood the risks. He did not get involved simply because of a rush of blood to the head. Trust me; it’s for your own good and for the good of our nation. Get yourself more education first. China will need good men for a long time to come. Your chance’ll come soon enough.”

Though thoroughly deflated, I saw the soundness in his advice. What contribution could I make at the moment? I was a qualified air raid warden, I reflected, with bitter irony. Was one needed anywhere? None of the parties in the civil war was yet mad enough to bomb their own people. My level-headed friend had left me with little else to say.

Hon-Kit and Frances were gone in a thrice.

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Deprived of my friend’s sobering influence, I felt myself already a failure. I was of no use to anybody. I could not even earn my own keep. The future seemed devoid of hope or purpose, with no more meaning than that for a hamster, running endlessly inside a wheel. I fell into despondency, lying awake

half the night in the inhabited darkness, cursing my fate and listening to the snores of children who were my elders in untroubled sleep.

My grandaunt at once picked up the change in my mood. She asked what the matter was. I explained as best I could. I told her I was in a dead-end job and regardless of how hard I saved, I could not see my ever getting into a university.

“Why don’t you ask your Granduncle for a loan,” she said. “Going to university is a commendable undertaking for a young man. I’m sure your Granduncle will be happy to help.”

“I can’t impose further on either of you, Grandaunt,” I replied. “Neither can I contemplate loading myself with obligations and debts when I finish my studies. If I had been prepared for that, I would have accepted my father’s offer two years ago. I can’t even see myself earning a decent living afterwards, let alone pay off debts.”

“What a silly boy you’ve remained, at the magnificent and enviable age of 20,” my grandaunt chided. “And you call yourself a journalist and a man of affairs. Who can tell what lies ahead? Just look at the raging inflation in China. A sum borrowed today may not buy a box of matches a few years hence. We all have to live one day at a time and make the most of it. When I suggested asking your granduncle for a ‘loan’, it was only in a manner of speaking. The word ‘loan’ flows better off the tongue and falls more easily on the ear. Your granduncle can well afford to finance you and I’m certain he will waive repayment should you run into difficulties.”

I pondered my grandaunt’s advice for a few days. When I failed to come up with a better alternative, I approached my granduncle. But I requested a loan sufficient for only one year’s expenses. I had enough saved up to cover passage and a small cushion for the unexpected.

“That’s an unusual request,” my granduncle remarked. “You can’t

gain a degree in one year, you know. Are you intending to quit after one year?"

"I'm not sure," I replied. "I may not take to university or else university may not take to me. I'll come back if things don't work out. Maybe try something in China. On the other hand, if my studies go well, I might continue through part-time jobs or gain a scholarship. I hear there are lots of scholarships in America."

Without further ado, my granduncle agreed to the loan.

Even though the loan was relatively small, a series of mishaps, misfortunes and further travelling prevented me repaying that debt in full for another 10 years.

\* \* \*

The choice of university came about purely by accident, as in the case of many of life's decisions. It was made while I knew virtually nothing about universities and colleges in America in general and certainly nothing about Stanford in particular. A study of a catalogue in the office of the USIS revealed well over a thousand such institutions, compared with only one in Hong Kong. It struck me as simply too daunting to cull through so many.

My main concern was to avoid places with severe winters. Nearness to Hong Kong was a further consideration. I wanted to avoid the cost of further cross-country travel. California, widely known for its sunshine and fine weather, stood out as a sound choice. Once I had discovered that Stanford was also located close to San Francisco, a city with a sizable Chinatown, the selection was over.

In my naivety, I took no account of any difficulty over meeting admission standards at Stanford. My calculations had been fixated upon entirely different assumptions. First, there were not many applicants for the

places at the University of Hong Kong. Secondly, I had heard that America was a country wedded to free market forces. Since it had so many institutions for higher learning competing for students, each must be glad to grab every qualified applicant. Thus I did not bother to apply anywhere else apart from Stanford. Fortunately, I was accepted.

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In August of 1949, I made my rounds of farewell before setting sail on the *SS General Gordon* of the American President Lines. In doing so, I asked both my Eighth Grandaunt and Bishop Halward for a photograph of themselves. I was not sure why I had done so because I did not ask it of other people. Perhaps I simply wanted their pictures to look at while I was on the other side of the world. It turned out a perspicacious move, for I never saw either of them again. My grandaunt passed away in July of 1952, just after I had finished my first degree at Stanford. Bishop Halward left Hong Kong that same year on retirement to England.

On board the *SS General Gordon* I found a fair number of Chinese taking the three-week-long voyage to San Francisco. They fell into three distinct groups. The first consisted of members of a touring Cantonese opera company, out to perform in the various Chinatowns across the land. The second group was made up of people joining relatives, to work in restaurants, laundries and similar establishments. The third, numbering six or seven, comprised students from different parts of China seeking to deepen their knowledge in engineering, physics, medicine or other sciences. Most were heading for post-graduate studies. Every one of them expressed a desire to return to China afterwards to help build a new and modern nation.

I, as only one of two undergraduates in the group, was delighted by

that unanimous commitment to nation-building rather than personal advancement. But I also felt somewhat isolated and embarrassed because I was the only one who had not made up his mind on what to study. When the subject came up for discussion, I tried to explain it away by saying I had worked for two years in Hong Kong as a reporter but I was more or less convinced I could not contribute much to my country by pursuing that career.

“Of course, you can,” one of the post-graduate students said, emphatically, “so long as you remain a voice for the people and not a mouthpiece for exploiters.” He even wrote those words down in an autograph album which I had and which, at that time, was quite fashionable for young people to keep. Those encouraging words, uttered at a time when my mind was clouded with hesitations, have remained with me to this day.

Thus I set out for America, filled with unrealistic hopes of becoming another Zola or Lu Hsun one day.