

## chapter

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## **MY CHILDHOOD (1927–1937)**

One day shortly after the New Year, 1936, there was a crisis in the Ho family in Ankara, Turkey. Father discovered that money had disappeared from the inner pocket of his suit coat which was hanging over a chair in the living room. At first, he and Grace, my stepmother, suspected the maid. They quizzed her, but got nothing but denials. Then they started asking me, a nine-year-old boy. I, too, denied knowing anything. They then looked in my drawers and discovered that I had a new fountain pen, which had not been there before. When they asked me where I got the pen, I said I bought it at a store. Since I received no allowance, and had no recourse to cash of any kind, I finally admitted I stole the money. Upon hearing this confession, Father became in turn furious and supplicatory. When furious, he took the poker from the fireplace and beat me violently on my behind and legs. When supplicating, he got on his hands and knees and begged me not to steal again. Stealing is such a horrible crime! His anger and humiliation overwhelmed me. His beating hurt me, as this was first time he had ever used a metal poker. Ordinarily he would use his belt to spank me. But seeing him before me on his hands and knees was devastating. During all this time, Grace stood by without saying a word or moving a muscle.

What surprised me was that in addition to this physical punishment, Father further ruled that I would be shut up in the upstairs of the house for a week, during which I was not allowed even to go downstairs. When my punishment was finally over, I felt dizzy and disoriented after descending from upstairs to downstairs, like I was seasick. This surprised and upset me.

Still, being punished for one's transgressions, even physically, was acceptable. I knew I was wrong. Father did what a "strict father", according

to Confucian ethics, was supposed to do. My submission was also part of “filial piety”.

My mother had died in Changsha, Hunan when I was five years old. I was in the room as she drew her last breaths. She made a long whining sound which frightened me. They had brought her from the sanatorium to my eldest uncle’s house to die. I saw them dress her in a funeral costume. I was numb, partly from grief and partly from fear. My father was far away, getting his Ph.D. in Germany. Still, he was a famous man, being one of perhaps half a dozen Ph.D.’s in the entire province. My uncles arranged an elaborate funeral. Mother’s coffin was placed in the living room of my uncle’s house for a few days. I was dressed in a rough hemp costume in white, the Chinese color for mourning, and led the funeral procession as the sole surviving son. The procession, unlike Western funerals, was noisy and boisterous. At the head of the procession, there were several individuals with poles on which hung strings of fire crackers that were going off. In addition, a band of musicians playing horns and drums added to the clamor.

Honoring one’s mother and father is the major commandment of the Chinese moral code. It is also part of filial piety. Mourning appropriately for the death of a parent is part of being filial. As an unknowing small boy, I had to be helped in fulfilling this obligation — at least I was made to understand its solemnity.

In olden China, Confucian ethics decreed that one mourned for the death of a parent for three years. Officials left their offices for their homesteads and remained in isolation. Even though this rule is no longer observed among the Chinese, the vestiges of the old mourning rites remain. I witnessed Chinese mourning practice while I was in Taiwan. In 2000, I was invited to the memorial service of Ken Wu’s father. Ken was president of the National Health Research Institutes (NHRI) of Taiwan, who had recruited me to do medical research in Taiwan after my retirement from the University of Pittsburgh. The service was an elaborate affair that lasted almost a whole day. It took place in a large auditorium, around which there was so much traffic that a corps of policemen were recruited to direct it. The place was packed. The center of activities was a shrine, a tablet on which was written Ken’s father’s name. On each side of the shrine, amidst an array of flowers, were standing separately about thirty male and female — direct descendant relatives with their spouses — clothed in black. On the walls and scaffolding above the shrine were hung framed calligraphies written

for this occasion by notables of Taiwan, including the President and of other highest officials. They were placed in graded positions of prominence, in accordance with the rank of their donors. The main event of the ceremony was groups of individuals; anywhere from a dozen to forty or fifty in number, whether relatives or professional associates of Ken from various social and political organizations in Taiwan; who approached the shrine successively. An official master of ceremonies would announce each group and tell them what to do. They first greeted the relatives standing on both sides of the shrine, and then honored Ken's father by bowing three times reverently in front of it. The number of organizations represented and the social stature of the individuals participating were a measure of Ken's position in society. It took more than a morning for all the groups to pay their respects. I sat quietly among the audience waiting for my turns. I was a member of several groups that went forward. I was a member of the memorial service preparatory committee. This was an honorific committee of about twenty individuals who were socially prominent. I belonged to the Academia Sinica group, and also to the NHRI group.

While waiting, I read Ken's father's biographical sketch, which was in the announcement of the service that I had received. His father was born in Taiwan when it was occupied by Japan. He initially peddled charcoal for a living. Gradually, he covered an area in Taipei full of governmental buildings that included the Japanese governor's mansion. By hard work, he eventually became a wealthy merchant. Although uneducated himself, he was able to send all his children to college, and many of them obtained graduate degrees. Thus I learned the moving story of Ken's father, whom I had never met.

In fact, I would expect that most of Ken's friends and acquaintances in attendance had never met his father. He was a man who died in his eighties. He had been bed-ridden for eight years in Ken's house, after having suffered a stroke. In the West, they would not have attended his memorial service, which would have been considered a private affair. But among the Chinese, this type of service is very much a public affair. Why is that so?

Other questions may be asked. Why is it that among Ken's siblings, it was mostly Ken's associates and friends that attended? I could not get away from the thought that in coming to his father's service, we were really honoring Ken, the most famous of his father's children. Why should the son be honored when the father dies? I cogitated over this while sitting in the audience. It goes back to filial piety. A son's achievements

are an expression of his filial piety. The higher and greater they are, the greater the filial piety. And the greater is the honor that can be given to the father.

My mother, Hu Gin-lien, was born in Yiyang. If our family had anything resembling an old homestead, it would be Tau-Hwa Lun in Yiyang, Hunan, China. Yiyang is in northern Hunan, on the shores of the river Tse, which together with the river Yuan flows into the river Hsiang to form a major tributary of Yangtse River. This area is part of the rich farm lands of the Yangtse valley, China's rice bowl. Yiyang is also close to Tungting Lake, one of the largest lakes in China, and full of romance and history. Tau-Hwa Lun was a village across the river Tse from Yiyang, consisting of verdant hills interspersed with rice paddies, but now it is unrecognizably urban and part of the city of greater Yiyang. The name "Tau-Hwa Lun" means "Hills of Peach Blossoms". During the end of the 19th and early part of the 20th century, the Norwegian Lutheran Mission established in Tau-Hwa Lun a campus of western buildings that included a church, a hospital, a primary school and a middle school with separate campuses for girls and boys, a school for the blind and deaf, and an orphanage. During the 1930s, the Swedish Lutheran Mission joined this campus by establishing on it a college called Sin-Yi College. ("Sin-Yi" means "Lutheran" in Chinese.) It was closed down during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). The main building which housed this college was later used by the Sin-Yi senior middle school and it still exists. In 1942–1943, I studied at this senior middle school. The relationship between the Norwegian Lutheran Mission and our family was a close one. I was born in the mission hospital. Yiyang was also the place where my father was born. Father was educated in the primary and middle schools of the mission. He then went to the Yale in China College in Changsha, the capital of Hunan province.

While in college, father married my mother. They were betrothed while both were in high school. Hu Gin-lien attended the Yiyang Lutheran girl's school, which was on the Yiyang side of the river Tse. It was apparent when they were married in Yiyang that she was suffering from tuberculosis, as it was a common disease among young adults, but Father went ahead with the marriage. They kept house in Changsha. Father moved his widowed mother and sister Shau-hua from Yiyang to their new house. Although he and his widowed mother had always been poor, now in college he was relatively well off because he made money teaching English in middle schools in Changsha. He and my mother had a few happy years together. She gave birth to me and then to my sister Man-shia. In the few family pictures that

survived which later disappeared during the war, she dressed me and my sister carefully, in expensive western outfits. My mother was a petite, gracious, kind and forgiving person. This is what people tell me about her, but I feel it is true. Shortly after moving from Yiyang to Changsha, my grandmother died. Then my aunt Shau-hua married a provincial civil servant, Wong Tao. She left the household and established one of her own. Throughout their lives, Father, even though he was only three years older, was highly protective of his younger sister, especially after grandmother's death. He considered that part of his filial duty. The "elder brother" is sometimes considered like a father in the Chinese familial scale of values. She worshipped him to her dying day, when she was eighty. One day, Shau-hua went to Father's house and stripped it of all her mother's belongings without warning, and moved them into her own house. My father was furious at her gross covetousness, but my mother placated him, and refused to complain. She said, "Let her have them. They were not that important".

Aunt Shau-hua probably thought that those belongings were hers; she was the beloved youngest child of her mother. Property rights within a Chinese family are fuzzy. The idea is that everyone shares while the family is intact. However, when a daughter marries, she is automatically outside of the family. She belongs to her husband's family. The only way the belongings could be hers was if her mother had explicitly given them to her. Since she was dead, there was no way to determine her wishes. My aunt probably thought that her mother would have given them to her if she were able to. So she just took them. The sad thing is that, had she asked my parents, they probably would have gladly given them to her.

My appearance is overall very much like my father, but the lower part of my face, including my chin resembles my mother. I find myself feeling like her in moments when I am at peace with myself, or when I wish to be at peace with another individual. Both Shao-hua and Father had tempers that could erupt.

A number of calamities shook our family around this time. My younger sister, Man-shia died of diarrhea when she was only two years old when my mother was in the hospital. This was and is a common cause of death in young children in under-developed countries, as China surely was at the time. My father tried to keep the news away from my mother and did not mention her death. One day she told him that she dreamt of Man-shia and she seemed far away. "Is she dead?" she asked. Father had to tell her the truth. Mother could no longer keep house and was confined to a sanatorium at Hsiangya hospital in Changsha for the last year of her life. I went to live

with the oldest of her three brothers, my uncle Hu Yi. He taught physical education in Ru Tsai High School in Changsha. His two younger brothers were also frequently in the house.

My mother's funeral procession wound through the streets of Changsha. Finally we arrived at her burial plot in the outskirts of the city. My young mother could not be honored after her funeral like Ken Wu's father. Her son had no accomplishments. Still, she did leave a small son who might yet in the future fulfill his duties of filial piety. That is why they made me lead the funeral procession.

One and half years after my mother's death, my father brought back an American wife to China. He met her in Chicago, where he represented Governor Ho Chien's Hunan province at the Chicago World's Fair of 1933. Grace Lee was a Eurasian, born of a Chinese father and a German-American mother in Chicago. She was a high school graduate and had worked at sundry jobs in Chicago. She was young and beautiful. It was rumored that she had won beauty contests in America, although I had no confirmation of this from my father.

In Father's autobiography which was written in 1990, 55 years after his permanent separation from Grace, he described Grace as "a beautiful woman, with a gentle disposition". This is a 713 page book in Chinese published by the Chinese University of Hong Kong Press. It is called, *A Diplomatic Life of Forty Years*<sup>2</sup>. The book is full of human interest, particularly of people involved in his work. I believe that his description of Grace essentially explains why he married her. I would say that Father was a gay blade in his bachelor days. He was attracted by physical beauty and a gentle disposition in a woman. I know he was not overly interested in intellectual achievements in his wife. I remember before he remarried, he was attracting a number of prospects in Hunan. There was a Miss Liang, who was Hunanese and a graduate Yenching College in Beijing, probably the most prestigious Christian college in China at the time. She visited Hunan one day in 1932 when Father was abroad. There were rumors that she and Father would marry. She visited me and took me shopping. My memory is of her tightly holding my right hand while we were walking in the street. I felt very uncomfortable. I felt the sweat in my hand and I wished to extricate it but I dared not. I did not welcome the prospect of a successor to my mother. Years later, I found out she had become a famous history professor in Taiwan. But we never met again. It is also possible that

Father was attracted to Grace because she was a foreigner. Adulation of the West was part of the culture of China's modern intellectuals. Perhaps he was tired of what was available at home.

Bringing an American woman to live in inland China was a trial, even if valiant efforts were made to ease the way. Hu Ren, my second maternal uncle, took me to Hankow to my father and Grace on their way by boat up the Yangtse River from Shanghai. Hankow was a Westernized international city with foreign settlements about two hundred miles from Changsha. They stayed in a hotel with plumbing and western amenities so there was no problem of acclimatization for Grace there. Before our arrival in Changsha, Father had rented and readied in its suburbs a large two story house in the vicinity of his old alma mater, Yale in China, and engaged three servants to run the house. One of them was Li Ho-sen, who was known for his know-how. It was considered luxurious by local people.

However, there was a crisis the day we arrived in Changsha from Hankow. The servants who prepared the house did not anticipate the fact that westerners are used to sit-down toilets, even if there was no running water. Grace would not stoop down in outhouses like local people. It was apparent after we arrived that she would soon have to "go". She had no way of explaining her problem to the servants, so Father immediately asked Li Ho-sen, to go into town and buy a portable sitting commode. These were available in China for bedrooms of well to do people. They had to be emptied every day in outdoor privies by servants. However capable he was, Li could not have brought back the commode in less than three or four hours. My impression of the afternoon was Grace pacing frantically back and forth in her bedroom, agitated by her urinary urgency while impatiently waiting for the delivery from town. I, a seven-year-old boy who had known her but a few weeks, could not communicate with her either. I could but stand in the corner of the room, watching her speechless and helpless. Fortunately, the crisis evaporated with the arrival of the commode.

After their marriage in Chicago, and before bringing her back to China, Father wrote ahead to my three maternal uncles with whom I was living after my mother's death, that he wanted Grace and me to have a real mother and child relationship. I was to be told by them the story that Grace was my real mother who had been away, and that my deceased mother was just a governess who just took care of me. This they dutifully did. But I was not convinced.

Why did he do this? Confucian ethics do not specifically address the problem of step-parents. Still, like in the West, step-parents are not the

same as parents. The filial piety due to a natural parent is not automatically transferred to a step-parent. Father probably thought that as a young child, I needed a “real” mother, not just a step-mother. He was hoping that Grace would play that role and that I would respond as a dutiful son. Perhaps he was hoping this would be possible in view of her “gentle disposition”. In addition, he probably felt that as his filial son, I had the obligation to treat his wife as my mother, at least during the time that their marriage lasted; even if I was not convinced about the story of the governess.

One immediate consequence of this fairy tale was that after we arrived from Hankow, all contact with my maternal uncle was cut off by Father. One day, several months later, when I was alone at home with the servants, my second uncle, Hu Ren somehow discovered this fact, surreptitiously arrived in the house and “kidnapped” me for the afternoon. Of the three uncles, Hu Ren was especially fond of me. He was overly affectionate, kissing me and caressing me to the extent that I was at times embarrassed. That day he whisked me away from the house, and took me for a long rickshaw ride in town.

“Monto, your mother died two years ago. Your present mother is not your real mother”.

Then he continued with a torrent of verbiage about my mother and her family, the Hu’s. He told me that he and my other uncles were my real mother’s brothers. This was an attempt to “brainwash” me and disabuse me of the role of Grace. I thought the whole exercise quite unnecessary, as I was quite aware of the facts. My view at the time was that I must be completely loyal to Father’s wishes. He wanted me to treat Grace as my real mother. This was what I intended to do, even though I was fully aware that my real mother was dead. I was actually resentful of Hu Ren’s behavior, and considered it as shenanigans.

Grace did not know a word of Chinese and I did not understand any English. She would talk to me constantly in English, hoping I would pick it up. A few days after her arrival, I wanted a peach from the dish in the sitting room. At that time any communication with Grace had to be translated by my father, as he was the only other person who could speak English. So I addressed my request to him. He wanted Grace to take charge of such requests, as a mother should. He taught me how to ask Grace in English, which I did with some effort. I asked Grace, “May I have a peach?” copying my father word for word and pointing to the dish of peaches on the table. I eagerly awaited her answer, which I assumed would be either “yes” or “no”, words that I had just learned. Mysteriously, she said, “Go ahead”. I

had no idea what she meant until Father translated these enigmatic words for me. However, progress in learning English was rapid. In a few months, I was able to communicate with her in English.

Grace was not mean. Her attitude toward me was determined by her labile mood, which I found frequently unpredictable. One day she would be gay and solicitous. She would sing her American songs and smile at me. But other days, I felt I did not exist. As we were together much of the time, I would simply follow her around, or play alone in my room. Over time, this detachment was what was hard to take. It was the opposite of love. I tried to overcome this attitude and please her, but in my heart, I felt little affection from her or for her. Two human beings were just co-existing. By trying to predict how she would react, I became good at gauging people's moods and mind sets. I felt I was trained by Grace. She did teach me how to speak English. She taught me the prayer to be said before going to bed, "Now I lay me down to sleep". I always thought the part about possibly dying in one's sleep before awakening somewhat morbid. It actually frightened me.

Life was difficult for Grace in China. The most serious problem was the language barrier. Father was at home in Changsha. He was the prominent secretary general of the provincial government. He had many friends in government and academe. He and his wife were entertained a lot. She should have enjoyed her social status, but she could not feel happy in inland China. To enable her to communicate in Chinese, Father engaged for her a teacher who came once a week. But her progress was pitifully slow. Grace was not good at learning foreign languages. He decided to try for the Chinese foreign service. That was one way for him and Grace to get out of inland China. In 1937 he was offered a job as the second secretary in the founding legation of China to Turkey, which started his career of forty years in the diplomatic service. He was personally recruited by the new ambassador, Ho Ya-tsou, who was a famous general from Hunan in Chiang Kai-shek's army. Father reluctantly left Hunan, where he had worked for Ho Chien, the governor and his mentor, ever since finishing his education.

We lived in Ankara, Turkey, from 1935 to 1937. It was the remote, newly-founded capital city in the center of the inland Anatolian highlands, established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), the "Father of the Turks" (Atatürk), a title given by edict of the Turkish parliament in 1933. He was the founder of modern Turkey after the Ottoman Turkish Empire was defeated and dismembered after World War I. He intentionally moved Turkey's capital from Istanbul (originally Constantinople) in order to get away from Istanbul's "decadent" cosmopolitanism. When we were there, Ankara

literally had only a single modern, paved road. We lived in an apartment house on this road. At the origin of the road, “downtown”, there was a square with a huge, heroic bronze statue of Atatürk in military uniform astride a horse on a high pedestal. Living in inland Turkey was difficult not only for Grace but even for my father. No one knew Turkish, furthermore no one was interested in learning it. Ankara was a small provincial town, except for the foreign legations and embassies. The educated Turks and the foreigners spoke mostly French and some German, languages entirely foreign to Grace. There were two movie houses in town. One could visit each one alternately to get all of one’s recreation. There were no other amusements. One movie I remember vividly was “Frankenstein”. It imbued in me a fear of darkness that remained with me until I was twelve years old. I looked under the bed for Frankenstein or his relatives every night before I went to sleep.

As I grew older, Grace would divert to me more and more household chores. She cooked when the servant was off. I would do all the dishes after our meals, both the washing and drying. One day, when I turned on the hot water heater for a bath, the excess gas around the stove exploded and singed my eyebrows and hair. I was left shaken. When things like that happened, I kept them to myself and did not tell anybody. I was the convenient errand boy. This was especially the case after I became the only one in the family who had learned to speak Turkish. I accomplished this after three or four months in Turkey, by playing with the kids in the neighborhood. Grace would make a list of vegetables and groceries for me to buy in the weekly bazaar of country produce which was held on Wednesdays. At other times, she would take me shopping in the Turkish stores. There I was needed as an interpreter. Grace continued to teach me English. We progressed to the point of her giving me word lists to spell. But her active teaching only lasted a few years. She did not order any books to teach me. I don’t recall her reading a single decent book. I don’t know whether she lost interest or she didn’t have much more to teach. By the time I was a teenager, I had probably exceeded her in English. Her written English was mediocre, and she made frequent spelling and grammatical mistakes.

I had not realized when I lost my mother what the loss really meant. It was only after many years spent with Grace that I began to understand. The love of a mother is the love of a woman; a woman who looks after and fusses over the child’s needs, whether meals, clothing, or appearance. A mother is someone who may intervene when a child is severely punished by the father. A mother cares whether or not the child is happy and having

fun. A mother looks forward to her child's birthday. A mother sees to it that her child has toys. Even though we could afford it, my childhood after the death of my mother was devoid of toys. A few that I did have I got from my father's friends during holidays, not from my stepmother or Father. And my birthday was never celebrated. There was even some confusion as to when it was. When all these expectations are missing in a family, it is dysfunctional, at least from the point of view of the child. My father might have realized the situation, and he tried to cope with it by having Grace assume the role of my real mother. But it was hopeless.

What I was missing was brought home to me by living with a real family when I was thirteen years old. In the first half of 1939, I attended the American School in Berlin while I lived with an Austrian family, the Prelingers. They had two boys; Kurt was ten and Ernst was fifteen. My age was between them. For the first time, I felt I had two brothers and a proxy mother. The three boys slept in one room and were inseparable companions. Mr. Prelinger was an electrical engineer working with Siemens, the giant German electrical concern, existing to this day. He brought home for his boys scientific toys, like a toy accumulator, a toy electric motor and a generator. They had other marvelous toys that all boys love. They had precision models of warships of the budding German navy in battle gray. The Germans were so good at making attractive toys. There were the battleships, the "Scharnhorst" and "Gneisinau". The famous 52,600 ton "Bismark" had not yet been launched. But there were models of the three famous "pocket battleships", that later became well known to the world. The most famous one was the "Admiral Graf Spee" that fled to Argentina in 1941 or 1942, and was trapped and sunk by three British cruisers as she tried to return to Germany. There was a model of the cruiser "Emden" and models of German war planes, including the huge, four-engined "Condor". I first became familiar with the transoceanic flying capabilities of this gigantic bird through knowledge of this model. The three of us played numerous games, including chess, and I was chagrined that I could not beat little Kurt consistently. Mrs. Prelinger was a fantastic cook; her Viennese family dinners were a daily delight. She would also make my lunch to take with me when I traveled by subway from our house on the Richard Wagner Street to Charlottenburg, where the American School was. Around nine o'clock, we would go to bed. Mrs. Prelinger would go to each of our beds and say good night to us separately. She would sit awhile on each bed and have a little conversation with us. Then she would give each of us a kiss. How I treasured her little kiss! I don't remember being kissed by any of

my stepmothers, ever. We lost touch with the Prelingers after World War II and I often wonder what happened to Ernst and Kurt. I fear the worst, for so many perished during the war.

What I did not tell either Father or Grace was the motive for my stealing that day in Ankara. On the New Year's day, 1936, I was walking along the street when I suddenly came upon Ambassador Ho. He lived close by, and was taking a walk in our neighborhood. He knew me well from the parties that he as head of the Chinese mission in Ankara had given. He stopped to say hello to me and wished me a happy new year. Then he dug into his inner coat pocket and took out a fresh ten pound note (a Turkish pound was equivalent to about three American dollars). He gave it to me as a new year present. I thanked him profusely. After going home, I told Grace what happened. She promptly held out her hand to collect my present, saying that she would take care of it for me. I heard nothing more of the money. There were no promises or further plans. The money just disappeared. I felt that I was entitled to the money that I took from Father. I knew I was doing something wrong, because I had a guilty feeling when I went to the store to buy the fountain pen. Still, there was an extenuating circumstance for what I did. At least to me, it was part of the whole scenario. There was no discussion of this incident by Grace. And there was never a private discussion between me and Father about the fact that Grace took the money. She was my mother. I owed her filial piety, which included obedience and loyalty. I did not tell on her. At the end of my punishment, my parents gave me a kite, without an explanation. I was surprised, because they never gave me a gift either before or after this incident. The kite was left untouched because I could not fly it by myself. Was the kite bought with the Ambassador's new year's gift? Was it consolation for the punishment I had gone through? I never knew.