

## Happy Childhood of Kites and Geese

**M**y ancestors came from Shao-An County, Fujian Province, China. I was the 15<sup>th</sup> generation to be born in Wu Chuan Tsun, Ta Yuan Township, Tao Yuan County, Taiwan in 1939. My grandfather, Kun-hao Lee, married my grandmother, Cha Chen, and gave birth to my father, Wan-cheng Lee, who married my mother, Chu-mei Chang. There are four boys and three girls in my family and I am the oldest.

The 9<sup>th</sup> generation of my family went across the Taiwan Strait and settled in Taiwan. My family has been in Taiwan ever since. There is a 32-character family poem in which each character used in the beginning of our first name specifies our generation, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 33<sup>rd</sup> generation. It was quite a shame that the tradition was interrupted during my grandfather's generation. My brothers and I have decided that we will continue the tradition by naming our grandsons according to the character sequence of our family poem.

My grandfather had five brothers. In the year I was born, my grandfather and his brothers built five beautiful brick houses named Lung-Si Tang at Ta Yuan Township of Tao Yuan City. Lung-Si (means west of Gansu Province) Tang might have indicated that our ancestors relocated from Gansu Province of Mainland China many years ago.

My grandfather and father, who were both farmers, worked by themselves on about five acres of rice fields and rented out the other five acres. Typically, we harvested twice a year. At that time, according to the status of a farmer's life, we were classified as a well-to-do family. Every year, at the beginning of rice planting or harvesting, we celebrated by holding worship ceremonies. On this day, we had the opportunity to have excellent meals. The rice noodles and the red, colored, and stuffed turtle-shaped cakes that were prepared by my mother and grandmother in the summer harvest were so delicious that they made my mouth water.

When I was a little boy, my grandmother took me to the local temples to worship the gods. There were lots of various celebrations to entertain the gods, such as the performance by the Taiwanese opera troupe, which touched me deeply. Part-time farmers performed Taiwanese opera and the performances were closely related to a farmer's daily life. Therefore, a small kid like me got really excited when I would see these types of performances. Soaked in this environment, the spirit of Taiwanese religions more or less influenced my beliefs. Overall, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism influence me. This kind of influence affected my education, philosophy, and my career decisions.

When I was a small child, I loved the Chinese New Year and other festivals very much. They were the only occasions that we could wear new dresses and eat pork, chicken, duck, or goose. I always looked forward to sweeping our ancestors' tombs on Tomb Sweeping Day, eating wrapped bamboo leaves and glutinous rice tamales during the Dragon Boat Festival, or having delicious moon cakes for the Mid-Autumn Festival. In particular, the Chinese New Year was my favorite. I loved receiving new clothes, new shoes, lucky money, and juicy red oranges.

Right at the time of World War II, when I was about four or five years old, I became painfully acquainted with the outside world. Americans bombed our town every day. Whenever I was frightened to tears by the bombings, my father or my uncle, Ke-ming Lee, would take me to the bunkers to hide. Although life was difficult at that time, I lived quite happily. I recalled that the Japanese garrisoned their army

nearby our home for a while. I did not like them because they treated the Taiwanese poorly. The daily food supply, which consisted of thin rice porridge and pickles, was distributed in rations at that time. Rice and meat were very rare. When I was six years old, I couldn't go to school because the bombings never stopped. I could only study in a private tutor's house nearby and learn from some old Chinese books, such as the *Three-Character Odes*.

We lived on the hill that was not far away from an anti-aircraft artillery unit at the Tao Yuan Air Force Base. Whenever the American bombers came, the artillery would fire. Sometimes, from the bunker we could see the fighting between American and Japanese aircraft. Japanese fighter planes would usually hide themselves whenever they could not beat the Americans. Therefore, I had some chances to observe the Japanese fighters at a very short distance since they were hidden nearby our house. When American fighters were hit and the pilots who jumped out were captured, the Japanese would have a jubilant celebration.

During World War II, the American artillery shells spread over the fields. In the fall of 1945 when the Japanese lost the war, my family and I picked up the artillery shells in our rice paddy and sold them. I felt sorry for the Japanese who looked upset when their army left Taiwan. On the other hand, I along with all the Taiwanese people looked forward to welcoming home our soldiers with excitement and joy. However, we were disappointed when we finally saw our soldiers, poorly equipped and lacking training and moral discipline.

Another large part of my childhood consisted of listening to folk stories told by my grandparents. My grandfather told me that when the Japanese first invaded Taiwan, every family killed their fowls and ate them before they escaped from their homes. My grandmother told stories about the Grandaunt Tigress who ate children. Her stories really scared me. Of all the stories I heard, I liked the myth, "Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea" the most. When I taught at the American Training Center at the Engineering College of Dalian, China, in 1983, I took the chance to visit Yentai of Shantung Province by boat to see where that story took place.

Bamboo was a main product in the countryside. Even though

bamboo stems are sturdy, bamboo shoots need to be treated delicately. They can be used to make cradles and high chairs. The simple handmade bamboo toys were my favorite and since there were no commercial toys available for us, they were the only toys at that time. When I was about six years old, I would try to catch crickets, tadpoles, and frogs in the field. While I was studying in elementary school, my favorite games were playing cards with Chinese zodiac drawings, playing marbles, jumping rope, and hide-and-seek. I also enjoyed the bamboo flutes made by my father.

I also enjoyed fishing and flying kites. The streams and ponds were clear of industrial pollution, so we could easily catch fish and shrimp. This was a lot of fun especially because what we caught would become a delicious addition to our dinner. Another pleasant fall pastime was flying kites in the open wilderness under the blue sky.

I also helped my family herd our water buffalo and remove the weeds in the rice paddy. When I took care of the buffalo, I would let them wander and graze by themselves as I rode on their back, watching the beautiful sights, enjoying the high soaring eagles and elegantly gliding egrets. As for the weeding, it was a tough job, which I believe no modern kid will have the chance to experience.

Sometimes, I helped my grandmother guide geese to the wilderness. I could not let them get lost. On the way home, I had to cut some grass to feed our buffalo and geese. Another one of my jobs involved catching frogs and rice field shells for our ducks. I would also catch mud snails and eels in the winter for our supper. My father would often go to the streams to catch crabs and shrimp in the winter. I think of this as the perfect memory of my father, because it shows just how hard he worked for his family.

When I was a little kid, both Chinese herbs and western medicine were used to treat diseases. My grandmother and mother usually worried when I was sick, especially when my fever lasted for a long time. They would sit by me, and stay up to take care of me. When my tooth was loose, my grandfather would pull it out and throw it on top of the roof because it was said that in doing so, the new tooth would grow out sooner.

By 1946, Taiwan had recovered from Japan's occupation and I had started my elementary school education. I was one of the first students to attend the official Chinese schools. The Pu-shin Elementary School where I studied was far from my home. I walked about one and half hours to and from school every day. Walking on the unpaved country road, without wearing shoes, was like a foot massage and it set up an excellent foundation for my health. To have a bike to ride to school was our dream. There were no electric lights then, so I read under the kerosene lamps. There were no radios or televisions at that time either; therefore, I could spend much more time than kids today, focusing on my studies.

Winters during my childhood were tough. I had to walk to and from school with bare feet, and my hands and feet were always freezing when I arrived home in the evening. I had to read with a quilt to warm up my body. My grandfather and my father usually stuffed hay under the mattresses to make us warmer. We called it the hay spring bed in winter. When it rained, I had to wear the straw raincoat and hat to herd our buffalo and to chase geese. However, the experience of such a tough life made me stronger and more prepared for the future.

At a young age, I was extremely fond of reading. I brought my books with me when I herded our buffalo and geese. Every night I would stay up late and study until my grandfather urged me to go to bed. People in the village never understood why I studied so hard. My relatives, Ke-da Lee and Ke-hsiung Lee, were in my class at that time. We always went to school and studied together.

Ms. Yen Lee was my homeroom teacher in the first grade. She appointed me as the class leader because of my excellent academic performance. Being the class leader made me more confident of my ability and cultivated my leadership. For all of my six years in elementary school, I was the class leader and was always at the top of the class. My teachers included Mr. A-chang Liu, Ms. A-hsiang Wu, Mr. Jen-tang Huang, Mr. Chiu-hsun Wu, Mr. Chao-ming Kuo, and Mr. Ching-hui Chen.

In our elementary school, labor services for the school, such as gardening, were required. During our second reunion in 1999, under the guidance of Principal Ching-chun Huang, we were very proud to

see the tall eucalypti, which my classmates and I planted during our time at Pu-Shin.

During my elementary school years, dodgeball and basketball were my favorite sports. I tried high jump, long jump, and track, but I was never good at them. Since I served as class leader during elementary school, I led my class to the flag-raising ceremony and stood imposingly on the platform every morning. I am grateful for this experience because I can now speak confidently in front of crowds.

Everyone in elementary school would take part in the annual field day activities. My classmate, Chu-tsun Yu, was always the champion in racing contests. Most students in our school came from Wu Chuan, Pu-Shin, and Nei Hai villages. Every year, the chief of each village led their athletes to participate in the contests. As students from the Wu Chuan Village, we often won most of the contests. Because of this, our village chief won our utmost respect. At that time the current chief of Wu Chuan Village, Chung-wang Lu, was my brother-in-law. This was his second term as chief; he was also the chairman of the Farmers' Association at Ta Yuan Township. Although many farmers' associations suffered financial problems in Taiwan, my in-law's association held a sound financial structure, which ranked third in the country.

In the summer of 1986, when I went back to Taiwan, I called my classmate, Mr. Chao-hsiung Wang, manager of Nanking Branch of the Medium Business Bank of Taiwan. We returned to our elementary school to visit our teachers and took pictures in front of the school gate for old times' sake.

On April 25, 1998, we had our first reunion among our elementary classmates. All of the teachers joined us, except Mr. Chiu-hsun Wu, who passed away several years before. It was a precious moment. Forty-seven years after graduation, most of us were over 60 and had become grandparents. Everyone was joyous, but upset by the realization of how quickly time flied by. All of the classmates were so excited by this reunion that we decided to have another reunion the following year. We had another successful reunion on August 22, 1999 at our alma mater, Pu-Shin Elementary School.

Over the past 47 years, my classmates succeeded in different

areas. Currently, Mr. A-cheng Lee, Mr. Ke-hsiung Lee, Mr. Cheng-shan Chiu, and I serve in the field of education. Mr. A-cheng Lee was the principal of Yang-Ming Senior High School at Tao Yuan County. Mr. Ke-hsiung Lee was the principal of Pei-Men Elementary School at Tao Yuan County and, Mr. Cheng-shan Chiu was the teacher of Wu Chuan Elementary School at Ta Yuan Township.

My aunt, Hsiu-ying Hsu, visited my home from time to time. She was very fond of me and often encouraged me to study harder in order to attend the better high schools in Taipei. Her encouragement was the main reason I participated in the entrance examination for high schools in Taipei. When I was a third grader, it was difficult for me to understand the snow scenes of northern China described in a textbook. My aunt explained them patiently to me and in the winter of 1957, when I was a sophomore at Chien Kuo Senior High, my aunt took me with her to see the rare snow scenes of Yang Ming Mountain in the Taipei suburb.

To help us to pass the junior high school entrance exams, our school offered supplemental learning classes for us. During the second semester of the sixth grade, we studied even harder than before. Many students succeeded in their entrance exams because of the encouragement we received at our school. I passed the exams of the local Ta Yuan Junior High School and also the junior high of Tao Yuan High School. More importantly, I also passed the entrance exam for the junior high of the famous Chien Kuo High School (C.K. High included three years of junior high and three years of senior high). My classmate, A-chung Wang, also gained admission to C.K. High while my other classmate, Chun-ching Wu, passed the exam for the Affiliated Junior High of National Normal University. Our success in the exams honored our school and encouraged our younger schoolmates to set higher expectations.

My grandmother insisted that I study at Ta Yuan Junior High to save money, but I was so eager to attend Chien Kuo Junior High (C.K. High) that I begged my aunt, teachers, and my friends to persuade my grandmother. After crying for several days and with the help from my grandfather, I finally got my grandmother's consent to study at C.K.

High. If I had not insisted and studied at Ta Yuan Junior High School or Tao Yuan High School, it would have been impossible for me to study at the best university in Taiwan, and my life would have been entirely different. From this experience, I realized that persistence is essential in achieving goals.

As well-to-do landlords, my family encountered some tenant farmers who humbled themselves and paid high respects to us because they were afraid of losing their lease on their farmland. I felt really sorry for the tenant farmers. Later, when Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan, to stabilize the society, he forced landlords to give up their farmland by executing the 37.5 percent Land-rent Discount Program and Land to the Tiller policies during the years of 1949 to 1953.

After executing the 37.5 percent Land-rent Discount Program, our family income decreased and our finances were affected. In the policy regarding farmers owning their own land, the government forced landlords to sell their farmland with a compensation of 70 percent of rice and 30 percent of stocks to one of the three big nationally owned companies. The landlords were not confident in stocks after the big depreciation of the old Taiwan dollar. Most landlords sold their land at the price of about 30 percent of the original. My family did the same. This policy really angered the farmers, but people kept quiet. After experiencing the terrible riot and massacre on February 28, 1947, caused by the corruption of government officers and misbehavior of soldiers, I believed, even more, that the only way to help and honor my family was to study hard.

During my elementary school days, I lived a happy childhood with a well-off family and love from my teachers. Having experienced World War II and the social reforms brought by the relocation of Nationalist Kuomintang after they retreated to Taiwan from the civil war, I understood that working hard and aggressively would be the only way to achieve success. Although suffering in an unstable society, I still graduated with excellent performance and gained admission to a prestigious high school, and became famous in the neighborhood areas. Even though it cost more money to attend Chien Kuo Junior High, I appreciated the understanding of my family, which was indeed the beginning of the happiness for the



rest of my life. I guess this must be the good return of my frequent visits to temples and worshipping gods with my grandparents. Buddha blessed and brought happiness to me.