

## A Sketch of My Parents

In response to questions from my nephew's family. I wrote this brief sketch of my parents in 4 parts:

- **Family background of Mother & Father**
- **How our parents met, and the young family**
- **Father's business**
- **My parents: their personalities and marriage** (to be completed later on)



### **Mother: (Nancy) Hsu Mu-Cheng 許慕貞**

- My mother was born in 1905 in Shanghai. Her parents were originally from Anhui province, a small town in the foothill of Huangshan (a famous mountain range, acclaimed historically through art and literature). I would characterize the family's social status as middle class; her father started working in a rice shop and was sent by the owner to run a branch in the boom town of Shanghai and ended up managing several pawn shops there.
- My mother was the 13<sup>th</sup> child (the 5<sup>th</sup> among the surviving girls; she is called 五小姐 "Miss #5"). She was "not wanted" -- "given away for adoption" to a childless couple (relatives). The adoptive parents loved her (avoided foot binding), but they died when my mother was around ten. She returned to her birth mother, who mistreated her. As recounted to me by my cousin: she was beaten when restrained in a burlap bag -- as her mother had bound feet and could not otherwise chase down the preadolescent child.

- After junior high school (age 15), Mother became independent, living on her own, working at the Dutch consulate under her elder brother, who was the head of Chinese staff there and was kind and loving, almost like a father, to her. She worked (mostly as a typist/secretary) at the consulate for at least 15 years, until her marriage in 1937.
- Her father died around the time when Mother returned to her own family; her mother passed away when Mother was in her late 20s. According to the cousin (the younger son of the beloved brother mentioned above), she was so estranged from the family that she refused to attend her mother's funeral! She rarely talked to us about her own mother, but I sensed that in remembrance she had empathy – her mother was a spirited person, yet her life was smothered at home with the never-ending unwanted childbirths.
- I never knew my maternal grandparents as they passed away before my parents met and married. But there are many uncles, aunts, and their offspring. In fact, so numerous were the cousins I had difficulty remembering their names and their mutual relations. I was complaining about this to Leslie in the early 1990s. Being highly organized she offered to make a computer listing of all the known maternal relatives. We received an enthusiastic response by mailing it to those we had their addresses, resulting in a more complete compilation. In the end, a list of over 150 of my maternal relatives<sup>1</sup> was collected.
- Mother was considered a beauty. According to family lore (e.g., told by her mother-in-law, my paternal grandma), her pictures were used on cigarette advertisements and plastered all over the city. There was no enforced patent law; the photo studio simply sold the pictures without the subject's consent.

### **Father:** (John) Cheng Hok-Chow 郑鹤樵 (pinyin: Zheng Hok-Qiao)

- My father was born in 1912 in County Jinghai “Quiet Sea” 静海县, in Hebei Province 河北省 -- now part of the Tianjin metropolitan area, less than a hundred miles southeast of Beijing. Agriculturally it's a poor region; as the name suggests, it's a region not far from the sea (could even be an ancient land from the receding sea). Freshwater is hard to come by. People had to porter fresh water far from home, seldom able to bathe. The limited amount of water would allow the grandparents to wash first, then down the line of the family hierarchy.... Father told me that it was not until he got to Shanghai (age 7) that he realized people's skin was not black! By the way, the situation has much improved now. When Father and I went back to visit his village in 1992, we discovered that people now had plenty of fresh water -- by drilling deep wells, down to aquifers (this has also caused subsidence -sinking of earth's surface- of the area).

---

<sup>1</sup>Here is [a list of the descendants](https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:US:ac425049-b8ea-4aeb-8af4-527c2606f566) of my maternal grandparents, the Hsu's.

<https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:US:ac425049-b8ea-4aeb-8af4-527c2606f566>

- The family was poor, but not that poor; it belonged to a clan prominent in the area (for instance the family cemetery-ground had large carved statues). While their branch was relatively impoverished, they were well-off enough to afford to send my grandfather, *YeYe*, to a tutoring group. But he “simply could not learn” (we now call it “learning disabled”) and remained illiterate all his life – be mindful that the non-phonetic Chinese language requires a child to learn thousands of pictogram characters. I heard one of the saddest stories from my grandmother, *NaiNai*, who was married to *YeYe* through a family arrangement (as was the general practice of the day). “As part of her wedding ceremony, she was to hold the bridegroom’s hand (for the first time), dawning with the realization that he was a laborer, ...” I will relate their life for another day.



My Grandma



My grandpa

- There is this myth of Chinese village life: “large families living harmoniously together” -- is often just a myth. Each generation of sons has to share a limited inheritance... fighting over a small plot of land, down to the kitchen pots and pans, yet all stuck in the same confined space with no escape. My grannie *NaiNai* told me: “life was hell.” Among the Cheng clan, other branches were doing okay (for instance, the Cheng’s were studying in Germany...) One such distant cousin, who was working in Shanghai, came to our village for a visit ... just after one of those family fights. *NaiNai* begged him to take my grandfather to Shanghai to work. With no skill to offer, *YeYe* got a job as a watchman in the railroad yard.
- That’s when my father came to Shanghai, actually to Wusong 吴松, a railroad town on the city's outskirts. Father described to me the scene of *YeYe* and him going to Shanghai for the first time...so scared by the traffic in the big city, they ran back and forth, not knowing which direction to turn. Upon his graduation from elementary school (provided by the railroad company), his parents could not afford to support him to attend junior high. As the general practice, he was expected to start working in the local factory. His bachelor uncle (*NaiNai*’s younger brother) graciously offered to pay his tuition. A few months later in JH, the teacher told the class: “There is this Shanghai school training wireless operators. The graduates can earn a salary of xx *dollars*...” Again, it was this uncle who came up with the tuition. That’s when Father finally got to Shanghai. On weekends the elder brother of a classmate friend would take this classmate and my father out for a nice meal. (The relevance of this will become apparent below.)
- Upon finishing the training school, my father became a wireless operator; he was posted (by the State Bureau of Transportation) in the city of Yichang 宜昌, up from Wuhan by the Yangtze River near the Three Gorges. His starting salary was over ten times *YeYe*’s as a watchman. Father became, ever since that time (he was 15), the sole breadwinner of his family. After two years, Father managed to get himself transferred back to Shanghai. Thus, he could escape poverty through education (a bit of JH and wireless operator school...)! He always regretted that he could

not stay in school longer. But he was a lifelong learner, an avid reader, practicing calligraphy on his own, and taking private English lessons whenever he could afford them, ... Expressing his aspiration, he named his son, me, *Ta-Pei* 大培, which means, in Chinese, “big education.” Typically, Chinese names such as mine, 郑大培 *Cheng Ta-Pei*, with the first character, in my case, “*Cheng*,” being the family name, the middle one being a “generation name,” fixed by the Family Book for all male members of each generation in the clan. So, if I met another man named “*Cheng Ta-something*,” we would immediately call each other “brothers” – no matter the age difference. Typically, the naming rule in the Family Book is in the form of a poem. I happen to belong to the *Ta*-generation, with the meaning “big”. The parents only chose the third character; in my case, Father picked “*Pei*,” meaning “education.”



## How our parents met, and the young family

- Mother was a very enterprising person. While working as a secretary in the Dutch consulate, she supplemented her income by being a ‘sublet landlord’ (called in Chinese 二房東 ‘second landlord’). In China, especially in Shanghai during that era, there was the practice by people of long-term leasing a house, then renting out parts of it to others for short-term contracts. You may have heard the story that one of Mother’s renters was *Jiang Qing* (江青), the wife of *Mao Zedong*. That’s when she was still a Shanghai movie starlet, going by the name of *Lan Pin* 蓝苹 (*Blue Apple*), before she joined the communists in Yan’an (延安) and later married Mao, in later years as the leader of the infamous “Gang of Four.” This is a long and tragic tale involving the mother’s maid, *Guizhen* – I will tell it in another article.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See in this section Personal Essays: *Guizhen – A Life in Tumultuous Time*

- So, Mother was the sublet landlord; Father and a group of his young operator colleagues were the renters. He was mesmerized by this stunningly beautiful and clearly smart landlady, living on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the house. Finally, he got enough courage to write her a letter asking for a date. (The first few dates had *Guizhen* as a chaperone!) A year later, in 1937 they were married: Father was 25, while Mother was 32.
- Two weeks after I was born (11/26/1941), the Pearl Harbor attack occurred. It had a big impact on our lives. We were living, and our parents were working, in the “foreign concession” part of Shanghai. After Pearl Harbor (12/8), the Japanese took over the entire city. Soon Father was arrested by Kempeitai (the Japanese military police) because he was found to operate a secret wireless station in our home’s attic for the Chinese Nationalist government -- which had retreated to the country’s interior. Although he and the family feared the worst, he was released after three months – I suppose, the Japanese realized he was just a small fish doing it as a job.
- He was despondent after losing his income and the means to support the family. One day he was sitting by himself in the nearby park<sup>3</sup>, and it just so happened that the aforementioned brother of his operator school classmate walked by. Upon hearing the sad story of what happened to Father, he pulled out from his pocket a small gold nugget bar and gave it to Father -- along with his business calling card as he offered Father a job as a buyer for his company -- to collect the agricultural product from the countryside. This is how Father began the road (away from being a salaried clerk) of becoming a businessman. This transition was greatly encouraged and aided by Mother, who possessed more of a business mind. The enduring image memorable in our young minds was our parents constantly discussing Father’s business. As I wrote in *Leepo’s* Virtual Memorial, Mother’s “involvement” with Father’s business almost cost her life in 1952 under the new communists regime.
- *Leepo* was born in 1939. She was always physically and mentally bright - our parents' favorite. Additionally, being asthmatic, she was even more the center of the family’s attention. Mother had sought all sorts of medical help – including taking *Leepo* to Taipei (Taiwan) in 1947 for several months, where, due to the Japanese colonial legacy, the medical practice in Taiwan supposedly had a higher standard. I tagged along too, so I sometimes remind Leslie that I got to Taiwan before her parents did in 1948 and 49! Mother also took the advice of some friends, claiming that the dry climate of Beijing (not far from the Gobi Desert) would help *Leepo’s* condition. That’s when in 1950 (Father had gone to HK; Mother was back with me in Tsingtao), during a mahjong game involving *Leepo* and *Guizhen*, the police busted the game by climbing the roof and coming down through the roofing tires, as mahjong was forbidden as a bourgeoisie game. *Guizhen* right away told the police that she knew Madame Mao, etc. Nothing serious happened afterward but left the memory of this good story. In any case, I want to note that *Leepo* stopped going to school after 2<sup>nd</sup> grade but had lived in many different cities when she was young: Shanghai, Tsingtao, Taipei, Beijing, and, of course, HK. When I say different cities, remember that they all differed in their culture and languages (dialects) – more like cities in Europe. That’s a broad education for her (and for me, too).

---

<sup>3</sup> Fuxing Park (复兴公园) was only a couple blocks away from “Shanghai Villa” where my parents lived.

## Father's business

- It was the role of a buyer for that import-export company that allowed my father to contact others doing similar lines of work, particularly C.S. Wan. Eventually, after 1945 four of them formed a company of their own (dealing mostly with textile equipment): Wan being the principal shareholder -- with Father going to Tsingtao and another partner, H.C. Tung, to HK. My understanding was that the Tsingtao branch did exceptionally well. When Father got to HK in 1950, he was initially sent to Tokyo to explore business opportunities there... All of this showed the well-known entrepreneurial spirit of the Shanghai people.
- They then had the idea of going to Indonesia to open an enamel factory – in those days enamel wares were used much in poor countries such as Indonesia -- in partnership with an HK factory owner who would provide the technical know-how. For such foreign investment, the government required 50% ownership by an Indonesian citizen. Father's group found someone qualified 'on paper' for such a role. To make a long story short, after the factory (named *Cosmo*) was in operation for a year (after father had been there for a couple of years), the Indonesian partner engineered 'a coup' and attempted to swallow the whole enterprise. Part of his scheme involved some corrupt military officials having my father (and two others) put in prison. After two months of (very soft) jail life, Father's side bribed some other officials, managed to recover the factory, and released Father. This just gives us some idea of what doing business was like in those days in Indonesia.
- That was Father's first Indonesian venture. The second one (more than ten years later) was a big success. In the mid-1950s this C.S. Wan group (aided by the passive 50% investment from the HK Furama Hotel family) had the idea of starting a textile factory in HK, called *Eastern Cotton Spinning Mills*, which was barely profitable – in the end, some money was made (like so many companies in HK) because of the real-estate appreciation of the factory site. After more than ten years of operation, the factory's survival (with its aging machinery) was in question. They had the idea of moving the facility to Indonesia (for its skilled and cheap labor). They managed to form a three-way alliance made up of a well-established *HK South Textiles Ltd* (Jerry Liu was its owner) to provide the technical leadership, a reliable Indonesian partner (who was known to Father from his previous stay and was already a successful multi-millionaire), and *Eastern Cotton Mills* people to provide the management --- with Father being the point-man on the ground to oversee the finance and the government relation. Father moved to Indonesia again around 1973 – he was over 60! *Eratex Djaja* became a successful enterprise, expanding from spinning, to weaving, all the way to garment making, employing well over 1000 workers in the town of Proboliggo in Java (100 km southeast of the big city Surabaya). The company had its IPO in 1990. Father retired in 1992 when he was 80 years old. It was a lesson to us all: one's relentless effort can lead to success even later in life!

## My parents: their personalities and marriage

- As noted above, Mother was seven years older than Father. But she kept her age a secret. (She told people, including us children, that she was one year younger than Father.) Analyzing it now, I believe that part of this psychology was that Mother did not want to be reminded that she did not have a well-off family (parents) who would have supported her in search for a proper prospective husband. In contrast to many of her junior high classmates who have married well, she was on her own for so many years. She was proud of being independent but also knew the insecurity of working women's lives.
- This is part of why we seldom celebrate birthdays (except Father's) in our family. An amusing story took place in 1994 in Hong Kong. A group of old friends, who knew Mother's actual age, thought that it was important that her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday<sup>4</sup> should be celebrated. But they also knew that Mother never revealed her age to "the public." So, they arranged to give her an elaborate banquet party, with all the proper birthday symbolic food such as longevity noodles and longevity cakes, etc. Still, no one said a word of "Happy birthday" to Mother, who pretended not to notice anything unusual about the occasion. Leslie and I happened to be in HK at that time. It was the strangest birthday party we have ever attended! A postscript: Mother died in 2003, and Father in 2005. They were buried in a Maryland cemetery near Leepo's house<sup>5</sup>. When we saw the headstone marking their birth and death years, 1905 – 2003 and 1912 – 2005, we realized that Mother would not be happy -- the whole world now knows that she was seven years older than Father!

[I WROTE THIS SKETCH DURING THE 2022 SUMMER AND INTENDED TO FINISH IT SOMETIME IN THE FUTURE. BUT DECIDED TO POST IT ANYWAY IN 2023.]

---

<sup>4</sup> You may remember that Mother was born in 1905. How come the celebration of her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday was in 1994? That is because we have a different way of counting age in (old) China. They say that it's counting according to the lunar calendar: this is only partially true. Yes, the date can follow the lunar calendar -- so each of us has two birthdays: one according to Gregorian (we just say the Western calendar), another to the lunar calendar); but the different way of counting one's age is not because one uses a lunar calendar. It has to do with the different ways of counting. When a baby is born, according to this old system, he is counted as a "one-year-old." What it means is that this is his/her first year, namely it uses ordinal numbers to count. By "first year" of course, it means the first Chinese year (according to the lunar calendar). At the next Chinese (lunar) New Year, the baby would be "two years old," his/her second year. So, if you were born on Chinese New Year's Eve, you would become two years old a day after you were born! This means that everyone increases one year of age on Chinese New Year. The New Year custom of giving youngsters red envelopes (with money) is called giving "increase-of-age gifts." Thus, the lunar year of 1994 was Mother's 90<sup>th</sup> year; for most of 1994, she was 90 years old, two years older than the way ages are counted in the West. The lunar birthday of that year (in December 1994) was counted as her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

<sup>5</sup> How our parents were buried in the United States.