

CHINESE ROOTS

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INTRODUCTION

It is strange how rare instances arise in life, when one can be struck with a moment of clarity in which you are foretold of an event. I recall that day in January when I took my leave of him as if it has been etched upon my brain. I fastened my seatbelt and accelerated, giving one last wave of my hand as I gazed into the rear vision mirror with the consciousness of a dull ache rising within me. Unasked, the tears began to course slowly down my cheeks as the slender, frail figure of that small, solitary old man gradually disappeared before my eyes. He stood, the last one of his family's generation, hugging the edge of the pavement until I vanished from view.

I drove on mechanically, not noticing the road or where I was going, nor very much caring. Swamped with an inexplicable sense of loss, I somehow understood deep in my bones that I would never meet him again. The pain of this moment swept over me, sharpened by the recognition that our brief and precious time together was over. For quite some time I continued blindly, until finally the newness of the roadside scenery registered. I was in unfamiliar territory and must have taken a wrong turn off the main highway from Bendigo. To my surprise, I found myself near the small town of Malmsbury, even though I had travelled this route back home to Ballarat many times before without mishap. I was miles out of the way from my normal route, but it gave me time to compose my thoughts and relive some of those precious moments which are now indelibly recorded upon my memory. Later on,

as I mulled over the events of this last visit, I asked myself what it was that had triggered this premonition of Uncle Sam's death.

Yes, he had been more relaxed and less formal with me than ever before! He had greeted me with a handshake when he answered the door as was his custom, but this time, he was eager to know that my story of the family history which included his own recollections and memorabilia had been completed. For a man of 92 he was still amazingly agile and sprightly of mind and body, with a smooth skin and youthful appearance which much belied his age. When young, he had always been considered the good looking one, despite his 'Asian' features. Almost eagerly he received the folder of the family history I gave him and settled himself down at the dining room table, beckoning for me to sit in the adjacent chair.

With an air of great solemnity and purpose, he took his spectacles from their case, placed them upon his nose and proceeded to open the folder. In silence, as if time had been suspended and we were the actors in a slow-motion movie, he began to read each page, occasionally stopping to remark on some minor detail of information he considered to be not accurate enough and which required alteration. I had not expected such a dedicated application to the task in hand, but he read the entirety of it in one sitting from cover to cover, before he looked up to pass judgement.

'I must congratulate you for an excellent piece of work! There are just those few details you will need to correct,' he said in his formal schoolteacher's voice. Of course, he was referring to a few alterations mainly in reference to himself, Samuel John Tongway. He held a notion of himself as a worthy Australian-born Chinese who was legitimised by the lifelong achievements in which he had distinguished himself as a respectable citizen, retired headmaster and pillar of conservative society. He was particularly proud of the fact that he had been the only First World War veteran to march on Anzac Day in Bendigo recently

and he eagerly displayed to me the newspaper excerpt he had kept from an item on the front page of the *Bendigo Advertiser*. In his eyes he was 'whiter than white', and considered that he had earned the right to regard himself as such.

Basking in the glow of this rare moment of approval and sensing that I had come through the formal barrier of politeness in which he'd long held me at arm's length over a two-year period of scrutiny, I was gratified and relieved to have emerged relatively unscathed. After sharing a cup of tea together with the scones I had baked him, he varied normal procedure from the usual polite observance in which he took his formal farewell of me with a handshake at the front door. Uncharacteristically, he had decided to accompany me to my car, parked out front on the roadway. I was acutely conscious that the purpose for my visits under the pretext of family research no longer existed. We stood a little awkwardly on the footpath before saying our goodbyes; he took my hand to shake it, then for the first time simultaneously kissed me on the cheek, as if on a sudden impulse. This was the moment of my demise! The significance of this brief unbending slowly dawned upon me and a mutual realisation passed between us at that moment – he had known it also; a premonition that this was to be our final goodbye.

Since then, the poignancy of those few precious meetings I had snatched so late in his long life of 92 years have haunted and reminded me of those wasted, tragic years which have plagued and fragmented my family for so long. It tempered my resolve to unravel and reclaim these fragments; to piece them together like the smashed sections of one of my grandmother's treasured Chinese bowls, for these fragments are all she was finally left with and they are the symbols of a legacy I was born into. I resolved to make some sense of these fragments of their lives by recording their individual stories, by putting the pieces back together in the hope of resolution and to restore a sense of connection with the

past, once divided by two opposing cultures and differing loyalties. Their epitaph lies in unyielding stone at the Ballarat Cemetery in mute testimony to the stories sealed within and never told.

It is my hope that the long-cherished and -remembered Chinese proverb will be fulfilled by this telling of our family story:

‘Upon the roots of the tree rest falling leaves.’

TSIN CHIN SHAN – FIRST GENERATION

The story begins during the early gold rush discoveries which heralded the great influx of eager immigrants to Victoria from mid-1851. Following on the heels of the Europeans came the first shiploads of Chinese gold seekers, their numbers swelling rapidly in the frenzy of feverish acquisition and hard labour which spread like the tentacles of a hidden virus throughout the colony, filling the headlines of newspapers at home and abroad.



1. Line drawing of Chinese by Garth

It was in this climate that Liu Chou Hock, a peasant farmer from the village of Wang Tung in the province of Kwangtung, joined the many gold-seekers in 1863, who years before him had rushed to gain indentured passage to Victoria from money lenders, and departed from Hong Kong.



2. Photo of village - Wang Tung 2018

It was the first time he was to leave his wife, Shin Nue, and his infant son, Liu Zong Wei, to venture far beyond the confines of the village, traveling on foot with other men from the Sze Yap district of Toishan in south-western Kwangtung. The journey to reach Canton took three days, with each member traveling at a trot in single file so as not to entangle the loaded baskets or ta'ams they were carrying, carefully balanced across their shoulders. Upon reaching the ancient, walled city of Canton, their destination was the Pearl River on the southern side of the city. The water's edge was crowded with the river junks which were to carry them, jammed together like sardines, bound for the port of Hong Kong in readiness for the time of their departure to the promised land of Tsin Chin Shan, or New Gold Mountain.

Along the way, their eyes captured the scenes of life on the riverbanks and beyond, with the distant villages and farmhouse plantations of mulberry trees, sugar cane and clumps of bamboo and fruit orchards. On the river itself were fisher folk busy hauling and plundering the fish from their coarse bamboo nets, surrounded by the rich multitude of bird life such as the wild fowl, ducks, geese, coots and other river birds which provided the food source and livelihoods of so many. Down river they passed the great sea-going junks, decorated

with huge wooden heads of dragons. Strains of music were heard from passing flower boats. There were the brightly coloured revenue cruisers, armed with flashing cannons and flying large flags painted with vermilion characters to distinguish them from lesser vessels. It was all a fascinating sight for Liu Chou Hock and his companions who had never witnessed such an amazing variety of life and activity before in their simple village existences.

As the junk entered the western channel of the Hong Kong harbour, the spirits of even the most despondent villager must have risen to admire the beauty of Victoria Peak in the background, bathed in morning sunshine. The calm waters of the harbour were filled with shipping and familiar sampans; lorchas and junks were overshadowed by the men of war and merchant ships of many nations. In contrast with the relative discomfort of the junk they had travelled in for the last leg of their river journey, upon reaching their destination, the accommodation they faced in the Hong Kong barracoon enclosures was more primitive than holding pens for animals waiting for slaughter. Their conditions were squalid, vermin infested and drastically overcrowded: the doors were heavily padlocked to prevent escape and the windows were boarded and nailed so little light could penetrate the interior. The makeshift sanitation was grossly inadequate, and the only food supplied was a bowl of rice, sometimes with a bit of salted cabbage. Held within this virtual prison, many were induced to gamble and often borrow money they could ill afford to repay, or they were persuaded to dull their senses with opium to endure the anxiety of waiting. Despite many who regretted their plight and looked for escape, this was where they were to remain until their departure for Australia and, along with his companions, Lue Chou Hock was forced to endure it the best he could manage.

Finally, they were informed that their waiting was over. On boarding the vessel, they were lined up on deck for inspection and the counting of heads. This was to be the only time they were permitted to enjoy

daylight and fresh air for the duration of the voyage. When standing on the ship's deck as it readied for departure, Liu Chou Hock was to gaze back at the shoreline of his native land with mingled thoughts and emotions; of regret at the way in which he had forsaken his young wife, Shin Nue, and his only firstborn infant son, barely two years of age. But as he ventured into the unknown, there was also hope, mingled with apprehension and excitement which rose in his throat as he contemplated the opportunity which promised him chances of reward. He thought of the honour it could bring to him and his family on a successful return from Tsin Chin Shan, the New Gold Mountain he hoped to reach, known as Australia. Whilst he gazed into the endless waves before him, he knew that if the fates willed it thus, the god of wealth would be bountiful, and luck would be on his side. He was still young and strong from a life of tilling the soil in the small plot of land which for generations had belonged to his family in the village of Wang Tung in the Sze Yap district. Furthermore, he had only to support two mouths to feed, because his aged parents had already joined their ancestors in the great spirit world. He felt confident that he would be able to send enough home from his earnings to support them until his return. On that, his honour depended, and he had made a pledge. Dutifully, his wife had submitted to his will, but he had heard much wailing and sorrow expressed behind closed doors at the time of his departure.

Thus, it was that travelling steerage class in the hold of a ship, jam packed to overflowing with Chinese gold seekers like himself, he endured the privations of the journey with appalling sanitation, poor drinking water, and food unfit for normal human consumption. Added to this, the months of interminable sea sickness and the inescapable, close bodily proximity to other sufferers; some of whom succumbed to fevers and illness brought on by their living conditions. Sadly, it was they who were not destined to see the shores of Tsin

Chin Shan, let alone return to their homeland. So many of them were illiterate peasants who could neither read nor write, hence their fate went unrecorded and consumed by the ocean, their plight remaining forever unknown back home.

Fortunately for Liu Chou Hock, he was able to doggedly endure the privations of the journey and after his embarkation at the Port of Melbourne, he made his way on foot towards Ballarat with many others of his countrymen from the Sze Yap district. Travelling through Flemington and on to Digger's Rest where they rested overnight, they made an unusual sight moving in a single procession with heavily loaded bamboo ta'ams across their shoulders and traveling with surprising swiftness in their customary shuffling gait to conserve energy. On reaching Ballarat, Liu Chou Hock eventually staked out a claim and with a few fellow villagers, he concentrated on reworking many of the early abandoned sites which still offered rich pickings for the patient, hard-working Chinese. These men worked diligently and were prepared to carefully pan, sluice, cradle and thoroughly reprocess the mullock and dirt from the leftovers of earlier miners whose frenzy for easy pickings meant that their methods had been slapdash and much alluvial gold and even small nuggets had been overlooked.

Eventually, Liu Chou Hock concentrated on the outer goldfields situated miles from Ballarat, such as Smythesdale, Scarsdale and Haddon, where although the surface gold had run out, a new phase of deep lead mining had begun. This occurred with rich deposits being discovered underground and the opportunity for small shareholders with some capital to invest in local company mines or contracted to work as tributors in small groups for the larger mines. Hence, there were a few Chinese like himself who were able to reap the benefits of their hard-earned effort from their savings and earlier back-breaking work. Unlike some of his countrymen who succumbed to the loneliness and feelings of homesickness, he did not while away the

hours by gambling at Fan Tan and smoking the opium pipe to dull the senses. Liu was carefully putting aside the profits he made and sending what he could spare back home to repay his debt for the indentured journey; the remainder being sent and entrusted to his wife and family in the village of Wang Tung. There was no opportunity for any social contact with the white European community in the local area, because their Chinese camp was well separated from the dwellings of the remaining inhabitants. This suited Liu Chou Hock and his fellow countrymen, who were aware of European resentment against their cultural differences and their modest mining successes on the fields. He was proud of his own ancient land, and he regarded these recent usurpers of the lands of the New Gold Mountain from the indigenous Aboriginal people as the true, uncultivated 'barbarians'.

He worked steadfastly for almost a three-year period until he considered he had been successful enough to book his passage and return to China in the knowledge that he was now a wealthy man in the eyes of all in the village who knew him. Unlike many less fortunate others amongst his countrymen, Liu was able to return home with honour and claim the prestige which gold discovery had bestowed upon him. In this way his newfound wealth enabled him to consider how he could provide a better life and future for his family, especially for Liu Zong Wei, the young son he had left behind at two years of age. What a difference these foreign years of toil had made to the family fortunes. For his wife, he was now able to build a bigger and better home and he would ensure that this money was wisely invested, because it provided the means for educating his son, now five years of age. Education and scholastic ability were highly valued in China and the sole means by which the youths of the village could obtain social mobility via the annual public service exams: success could secure high ranking positions attached to government and possibly ensure a lifestyle of greater affluence and security for his son, plus increased status for

the entire family. Also, young Liu Zong Wei viewed his father as an enlightened man and free thinker for his time, as he explained many years later in his memoirs, 'My father was a follower of Confucius and he was very anxious that I should have a good education and be thoroughly instructed in the teachings of Confucius'. Unlike many others in the village, his father failed to entertain the superstitious beliefs and religious practices associated with the Joss, commonly held by his wife and their fellow villagers. Therefore, Liu Zong Wei became proficient in the teachings of Confucius, in line with his own father's wishes and beliefs. Unlike the majority of children in the village who were the offspring of poor peasant farmers eking out the barest subsistence living from their rice crops, Liu Zong Wei regularly attended school, with the intention that he would eventually become a successful scholar whom his mother and father could be extremely proud of. Between the ages of eight to twelve years, he had mastered all the principal books of Confucius that were taught and at thirteen years he subsequently continued with his college education in a neighbouring village until, at eighteen years old, he finally gained an appointment as the village schoolmaster.