

Paper Sons and Daughters

Growing up Chinese in South Africa



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Pinky

I lie on the lap of a giant pink teddy bear and stare up at a galaxy of full stops in the perforated canopy of my dad's old Cortina.

My nine-year-old self starts to count the dots but my stop-start conversation with my dad in the driver's seat keeps bringing me back to number one. We lurch towards another traffic light and my counting is distracted again as I grip on to the Cortina's fake leather seats with their exhausted stitching that has long ago surrendered to outbursts of foam.

I work through the dots again. I do not mind because my father is in a good mood, so I am in a good mood. Dad is happy and Pinky is the trophy to prove it. We have bought her at a roadside stall along with two smaller teddies holding their breath inside puffed-up plastic bags. Among the gifts there is a round leather ottoman, dubiously shaped by a rustling straw inner. My mom is going to be delighted with her gift and so will my brother and two sisters.

But these are more than just gifts – Pinky, with her curly blue bow and large flat eyes, is a triumph of dad's success at the fahfee banks today.

My father, my Ah Ba, is a fahfee man, the mm-china or ma-china of the townships, a so-called *ju fah goung*, as we say in Cantonese. Fahfee is an

illegal betting game with 36 numbers and wonderfully curious connections to dreams, to superstitions and to luck and chance; the dirty gambling of the townships.

In South Africa fahfee has evolved from its recreational gambling roots and has been transformed into an economic survival strategy. It can endure in South Africa's socio-political space where segregation is so well worn it is like an involuntary impulse to separate, to categorise, to divide. It is South Africa in the 1980s and there is no place for a yellow man, especially not one like my dad who is uneducated, who is not savvy to the social rules that make up polite white society and who is prohibited from even trying to fit in.

It is to fahfee that he turns and the townships far from the mainstream of middle class. And it is what my father does for the biggest chunk of my memory. Fahfee, when the gambling gods will it, brings fortune, good times and even the likes of Pinky. It pays for my school fees, treats at a roadhouse and eventually an assortment of second-hand cars as we climb the ladder to middle class.

All the time, what turns up in the numbers makes real the superstitions of the old country: the mysterious what-ifs that connect the realm of the explained with what cannot be known. And in the dreamtime, the fahfee man's beliefs and impressions thread together a place far, far east to the golden mountain of Johannesburg, glorious with the nostalgia of when the yellow metal did line the streets.

Fahfee is about sweat and drudgery. It is about toil on the periphery of society where it stays hidden, out of sight and secret. It is about what luck brings and what risks you are prepared to take when you stand to lose everything.

In my family, fahfee means we stand to lose a lot.



Here be Dragons

I grew up in Bertrams, in the east of Johannesburg, in the 1970s and 80s. I am the third of four children. We lived in a semi-detached house along a wide road that pulled apart the suburb for the cars advancing towards the shopping centre and highway exchange that over the next three decades would become the massive mall of Eastgate and the throbbing clot of the N3 interchange.

This was a so-called grey area, where Chinese people were mostly ignored for living in these spaces that were still legally reserved for whites in apartheid South Africa. No one cared really that a few Chinese lived here because these were not the fancy suburbs where people worried about backwashing swimming pools or keeping appointments at the doggie parlour. Like dragons in fairytales, we were left to become the demons of people's theories, mysteries and loathing. As long as we stayed in our lairs and did not breathe out fire, we were pretty much left alone.

Of course, I did not know then that things like pool maintenance separated and defined people. I did not know that being Chinese made me different, like I did not know what fahfee would come to mean for my family, and especially for my father.

This gambling game practised in hidden places was never spoken about openly to outsiders. Fahfee was always sullied, polluted somehow. It was associated with the working class, with transacting with the poorest of the poor. And so fahfee was something people skirted around even to community insiders and completely so to outsiders. It remained a practice of humiliation and secrecy, which turned into a practice of shame and stigma.

I did not know these things in the 1980s when I was growing up as we were a part of living these shadows and scars. We were a society full of cleavages; we shared a country, but we were not a nation. Separated in delineated living spaces, we stayed in our boxes of stereotypes, convenient prejudices and simmering tensions.

I was blissfully unaware of all this as a child, a bit like the small fertile patch in our garden that showed happy oblivion or maybe it was quiet rebellion, growing with abandon against expectation and convention. Where there should have been hydrangeas and pansies, the small patch of soil became a vegetable haven of downy winter melons, smooth green Chinese spinach and eruptions of spring onion – the vegetables you could not find in a local greengrocer in South Africa in the 1980s, but which were the staples on a Chinese family's daily menu.

Most Chinese we knew used whatever land was around them to grow food. No one really moaned about the fluttering strips of plastic bags that stood in for scarecrows because this was a crumbling bit of suburbia.

Further down the road lived a Chinese woman and her adult son. She raised chickens on the small property and sometimes we walked down to her corner house to buy a freshly slain bird.

The old aunty disappeared behind the backyard door, closed it and told us to wait. There was a muffled squawking, the sound of someone moving quickly. We sat in the kitchen in silence, imagining the poor chickens darting across their small pen hoping not to be the unlucky one. She reappeared some minutes later with a limp bird, some of its white feathers wet where the first blood of its death had been rinsed off. The chicken was placed into a double-bagged, blue-grey plastic bag and we walked home with its still-warm body knocking against our legs, ready to be paired with our winter melons on the dinner table.

Outside the stout walls of our house an oak tree's trunk burst out of the grey pavement. It was the pavement where the old brown Cortina was parked, because there was no garage or driveway. There was no grass

around the old giant, just a scattering of its leaves and acorns; the rest was tarred. I liked to collect the little nuts, pop off their hats and peel off their hard casings until my fingernails were split and sore. The pain was worth it to treat the squirrels that I believed lived in our neighbour's tree. My older sister Yolanda (I called her Kaa Jeh or Kaatch) convinced me that my furry friends did appreciate my efforts, so I happily peeled away in pain, but there were no squirrels in suburban Joburg. Yolanda kept up her poker face and I believed her, thinking that the more I peeled, the more grateful the squirrels would be and then I would surely see them.

I did my growing up with Yolanda, who is the eldest. She was short, cheeky and always hatching a plan to get her way and to get us to be at her side when it happened, just in case things went pear-shaped. My older brother Kelvin was the only boy, all stringy and weedy when we were growing up. He tempted us to join in his invented games and we could not help being his participating audience for his card stunts and magic tricks, begging him to show us how to do them, but of course he revealed nothing. He was the brother who offered to 'operate' on a pair of talking teddies. He said he would open their voice boxes, tweak their wires and electric chips and they would greet us again with 'Hello, I am Teddy the bear, the one who is always there'. We believed him but once their little voice boxes landed in his surgeon hands, our bears never greeted us again. Perhaps they just needed a fresh set of batteries. The baby was Unisda. She was quiet and mostly went with the flow, scooped off her feet by the waves of her older siblings. Unisda and I were so close in age we became like twins relegated to the bottom of the pecking order.

Together we made up the generation of Hos born on South African soil, here in the eastern suburbs of Johannesburg. We have Chinese names, too. Mine is Chiu Ngaan, which means colour. In Chinese your surname comes first. My sisters are Chiu Yeng and Chiu Saan. Chui is the common name for us girls and it means jade. My brother is Beng Leung; it means bright, and Beng is a common name he shares with all the other second cousins in the extended family. My parents realised that in South Africa we needed to have English names, too. I thought I had a strange English name; for years until I was well into my teens I resented the unusualness of my name. Not only did I almost always have to repeat myself, but I also had to think up explanations that I had no answers for.

Even Ho is strange. People always wait for more, like surely I mean to say Hough or Home or maybe at least the addition of an 'e' and I have to

say: 'That is it, just H.O.' There is not even an ordinary animal I know that starts with U, as in Betty the Bear, David the Donkey or Helen the Horse.

My mother's uncle was entrusted with the role of giving us English names, because my parents did not trust their own English proficiency. My theory is that this grand-uncle, whose English was also a little dodgy, managed fine with Yolanda and Kelvin – both being reasonably ordinary names. But by the time I came along I think he believed some creative licence had been earned. My younger sister also got a 'U' tagged on to the start of her name and she became Unisda. At least we both had Us and that horseshoe letter looped us together as we grew up. I always laugh when I imagine what would have happened if my parents had had a fifth child who would probably have been subjected to a concocted 'U' name, too.

In my family we call each other by our Chinese names. I respond to Ah Ngaan and we used an old-fashioned address of calling older siblings not by their names but by something that translates as 'my family sister' or 'my family brother'. With only a year or so between me and my younger sister, Unisda took to calling me Ah Ngaan when we were children. I was too little to think that it was not proper but my parents kept trying to drum into Unisda's head that I was Yee Kaa Jeh (second family sister) not Ah Ngaan to her. It did not work – I am still Ah Ngaan or Ngaanie to her today.

We were squashed into a less-than-six-year age gap from youngest to oldest so it made for a riotous growing up in our household.

We three girls shared a bedroom painted in a peachy pink. It was topped with a naked light bulb in the centre – there were no extras like fancy light fittings – that cast gently swaying shadows over the walls and floor at night when there was a bit of a breeze.

Unisda and I shared a bunk bed in the room, while Yolanda was pushed up against the opposite wall. For years we switched between taking up the bottom and the top bunk. We liked to push our feet up against the soft steel frame and irritate the person who was on the top bunk.

'Hey, stop it man,' the top-bunker whined as the bottom-bunker pushed harder against the diamond mesh of the bed frame, bouncing the top bunker a bit.

But the top bunk was also a refuge. With every few feet from ground level the lucky top-bunker got to escape the general madness of the congested shared space that was our bedroom.

The assortment of furniture in our room collided with patterned homemade curtains, dark, practical carpets and rugs and the rainbow frenzy of smiling teddies and toys that shared our beds.

We also made a mess, a lot of it. Clothes we never folded and never put away made ever-growing, crumpled mountains. And mom and dad's moans and threats could not keep up with the neglected dust balls we were supposed to clean up.

Across the passage my brother fought off the dolls and girly saturation with train sets and Lego. As the only boy he did not have to share a room but he did have to give up some of his domain for storage space in the form of locked wardrobes, canned food and toilet paper bought in bargain bulk.

Sometimes my parents opened up the wardrobes to air out a winter coat, lined and heavy, or to retrieve a satin-finished, heavily encrusted evening bag replete with sparkling beads and tassels. These were the outfits and accessories reserved for weddings, an 80th birthday or some other dress-up event. When my parents did open up the wardrobes, the strangely comforting smells of mothballs, old wood and dark places filled my nostrils. It was the release of these otherwise intangible treasures, the moment that these items of whimsy and wonder were temporarily let loose to interrupt the ordinariness of a normal day.

Normal days for us children were made up of the bliss of turning the passage that dominated the small semi into our playground. It was full of potential for hide-and-seek, which we played often, and games of fantastic make-believe.

An old record player had its home in the passage, wedged into a corner behind the front door that had a frosted glass panel in a design resembling a flower and was complete with an ankle-high letter flap that said 'Letters/ Briewe'. My father had won the record player in a community raffle years before he met my mother. For a long time it was the only fancy thing he owned that was not handed down, loaned or bought second-hand.

Even as it stood in our passage, it belonged to a different world, not the world of a fahfee man who worked long hours every day dodging authorities, arguing with grumpy gamblers or becoming grumpy himself on days when the gambling gods turned the tables on the ma-china. He did not have the luxury of turning to a music box for pleasure.

I do not remember my father ever pursuing a proper hobby all his life, just the distractions of his own gambling, or on the odd occasion being the

master chef of a cook-up of a special dish like crispy deep-fried pigeon or garlic and ginger crab, all creepily alive, scratching in the boxes punched with small holes or in shallow buckets of water, waiting for my father to come home for the big slaughter.

The record player flanked a wardrobe filled with sheets and homemade curtains. My mother never threw anything out; a worn sheet was cut down the middle and sewn together again where the fabric still endured. Even when its life as a sheet was finally over, it was reincarnated as a patterned floor rag that found itself useful again on the kitchen floor.

The record player was the princess in this sea of sensible practicalities. It looked like an old-fashioned letter-writing bureau with its wooden legs and its curious flip-up lid. It had a revolving rubberised disc and a slow-moving mechanical arm. My mother kept a few records that were loaned from friends and family. They were mostly Chinese opera records or high-pitched sweetly sung folksongs, all dusty and housed in crumbling paper sleeves. When my mother plugged in the record player and set it into life, it never failed to fascinate us as its mechanical arm shifted across with fluid precision and dropped exactly as a vinyl flopped gently on to the revolving disc. It broke into the squeaky opera songs and we mimicked the singers and then put our hands over our ears as the records squealed on. My mother, though, loved it. She did not have a singing voice but it did not stop her from testing out the tunes and the lyrics. We laughed and laughed, making faces at what sounded like pained cries and howling. The singing was mostly in old-fashioned Chinese and with the added high-pitched squeaks we caught very little of the storyline, even though mom tried to tell us what was going on as the characters wailed to each other.

The record player also doubled up as a counter top when we played shop. We lifted its lid, took in the smell of its wood, pushed the arm and turned the dials like it was a cash machine. If I was the shopkeeper, I got to stand by the record player. Unisda was my customer most of the time, picking up her 'purchases' of bits of tea set, teddies, pencils and crayons before coming to the 'pay-point'. I pretended to ring up her goodies, pushed the buttons and the dials, then packed her purchases into a plastic bag and said 'thank you' and 'goodbye and see you again'.

Later on I learnt the dials were for record speeds and we drew out the comedy in the records by making them yelp at chipmunk-speak speed. Sometimes the record player was simply a place to sit and swing our legs when our mom and dad were not looking.

The old semi had pressed ceilings and old-fashioned chair rails. The chair rails created a split wall effect that convinced my ever-practical mother to paint the walls in an odd contrast of midnight-blue and creamy white in a paint that had a shiny finish. It was shiny because the oil paint finishes were easier to wash, my mom said. She chose midnight-blue on the bottom half of the wall, so the dark paint disguised our grubby handprints and our wax crayon art that proved to be stubbornly permanent – a little like the lingering sting of a whack on the bum for making the drawings in the first place.

We were punished quite harshly if we were naughty, misbehaved or were disrespectful. There was no thinking-step, time-out or negotiations; that is all the stuff of 21st-century parenting. In our household you could count on a tongue-lashing and a hiding. We might also be banished to our rooms or locked out of the house for a few hours, threatened with no dinner and told to ponder our actions on the *stoep* (veranda) – or rather to wait for my mother’s seething finally to evaporate. If my mother was really mad she would wait until my dad came home. If he thought what we had done called for a second round of punishment then we would see a replay of my mother’s rage, acted out by my dad and maybe even a whip or two from one of his belts.

One day, though, when I was about nine or ten, my dad said he would never hit me again because if I had not learnt my lessons by then no amount of hidings would teach me to be the wiser. It scared me more, thinking I would have to live up to the expectations of my parents rather than deal with a stinging bum.

But we did not fight with our parents much; we dared not. Chinese children, at least as far as my parents were concerned, did not negotiate, did not backchat. Filial respect was not an option for Chinese children. There was a Confucian thread that ran through our childhood of honouring your parents, of trusting their word even if you disagreed. I believed my parents were harsher than other parents. As I grew up, I thought them old fashioned, conservative; now I know that they were exactly as they had to be.

The old ways were ever-present in our house. Sometimes we were scared into good habits with old wives’ tales and the superstitions, myths and rituals that were bred in a closeted place in China but were never far away. If we left grains of rice in our bowls, we were told that children were starving, that each grain could grow into a plant and we had wasted

its potential. Other times my mom said it meant we would find an ugly spouse. If you sneaked food from a chopping board, she said it would mean we would be cursed to be damned for things that were not our fault.

Over time, the superstitions were infused with my mother's personal concoctions, too. We did not wash our hair on the first day of new year or on our birthdays or each other's birthdays because the word for prosperity, *faat*, sounds like the word for hair and washing your hair on these luckiest days would rinse away prosperity. My mother also believed that if you broke something on the last day of the old year, you took the same clumsiness and misfortune into the new year ... very unlucky. My gawky child's co-ordination dribbled food on my clothes and often relieved cups of their handles so I spent most New Year's Eves terrified of a slip-up.

Superstitions slipped directly into my beliefs, too, even though I eventually acquired enough common sense to doubt their actual power to manifest doom and gloom or to alter destiny. I understood that superstitions gave people something to hold on to. They helped them to contain the unexplained and they gave some order and hope when none existed. Still, I was not immune to these forces.

One day I was playing around in the house with Unisda and I accidentally bumped a stand where the porcelain statue of Kwun Yum took pride of place. One year my granny had bought each of us grandchildren a figurine of the most important deities that rule a Chinese home. Kwun Yum is the goddess of mercy and goodness, and she was Unisda's figurine. She rose out of a lotus flower with a flowing robe, a beatific expression, pure and so good. I literally decapitated this 30-cm saintly deity as she fell backwards. It was a clean break right across her slender neck and as I held her head in my hand I could peer down through the hollow core right to the small hole at the base of the porcelain goddess's lotus pedestal.

Terror gripped me as I imagined how angry my mother would be when she found out. More than this, though, I was also horrified that I had invoked the anger of this mystical creature and that she would rain bad luck and evil on me or my family for my insult and my violation.

Unisda could only look on in relief that she was not the one who had crashed against the stand. I had to enlist her help and her complicity and we took Pritt, the paper glue stick, from our schoolbags to glue her back together. I smeared the glue around the clay-like rim and balanced Kwun Yum's head back on her neck. I almost breathed a sigh of relief when I saw

she was still smiling and looked surprisingly whole, no visible chips or anything. Still, I clasped my hands together, almost involuntarily, assumed a prayer position and bowed three times in front of the statue, in that old respectful Chinese way.

Kwun Yum made it and even survived a house move years later. In fact, she still stands in my mom's house today, perfect bar the faint line above the beads that adorn her throat. What also survived were my sister's sneers. She reminded me even when we were grown-ups about my submission to superstition. It embarrassed my adult wish to snub silly superstitions, but actually I was happy Kwun Yum was still smiling.

I even once followed a very old Chinese custom of going down on your knees and offering a cup of tea as a sincere apology. It was like a dramatic scene out of a Chinese period film. Imagine the flowing silk robes pushed to the side as the person with the guilt drops to the ground with head bowed and two hands raised holding up a teacup. The person who must grant forgiveness gazes out of a rice-paper-filled window pane and sighs; and tears maybe then roll down the cheeks of the person on the ground as the teacup is taken and the contents gulped down.

On one occasion I played out this scene with my mother because I had made her so angry. I cannot remember now what I had done but it had been terrible and I was truly sorry. On top of this, my mother suffered from migraines and on the day I had made her so cross she was struck by one of these headaches. When the headaches came they scared me because she would get so ill she would have to take to her bed with the curtains closed and she would lie there in the darkness.

My mother – who could fix anything of ours that broke, knew instantly where to find our missing shoes, toys or whatever, even when we said we had looked everywhere, and was never late with a dinner or for picking us up after school – was diminished to a groaning patient with no one to take care of her. We could only watch, occasionally slipping into the darkened room and calling her softly, only for her not to respond. She would not feel much better even with the green and white capsules that were in huge supply in her drawers and even after tying thin slices of potatoes with a cloth around her forehead and smearing the Chinese *bak fa youw*, the menthol-smelling 'white flower oil', on her temples and behind her ears.

When a headache coincided with that terrible something I had done, I was horror-struck and sure that I had brought on the pain. I remembered the old custom of asking for forgiveness and how my mother had said it

was old fashioned but correct. So I brewed a cup of Chinese tea with a few dried leaves, throwing out the first seep then refreshing it with more hot water. I put a saucer under the cup and took it to my mother's room. I called her and she turned on the bedside lamp in the darkened room. I said my teary sorry as I dropped to my knees and I offered her the tea. She drank the tea; mothers always do, I guess.



The semi-detached house at number 62A was a treasure trove – to us children anyway. It was tiny but we grew up along its central passage that seemed perfectly long enough for my six- or seven-year-old self. It was a house with hiding places and unusual nooks and crannies. There was a small pantry and scullery attached to the kitchen. The pantry was like a science laboratory with shelves upon shelves of strange and wonderful things stored in glass Consol jars and tins with faded pictures of cherry blossoms and Chinese words. They were filled with dried wood fungus, dried wolf berries (now marketed as superfood goji berries that make it on to the ingredients list for smoothies and muesli), dried shrimp and dried sheets of crinkling, brittle tofu; there was pungent fermented tofu in jars of spicy brine and pickled lettuce and pickled salted fish. Sometimes when my mom was not looking, my father would sneak down a handful of dried shrimp from a shelf we children could not reach. Usually these shrimps were soaked until soft and added to other dishes like glutinous rice cooked up in sticky deliciousness or taro potato cakes dotted with these treasures in their sturdy slabs. To eat the small and salty, peanut-like morsels was forbidden – they were expensive delicacies that my mom tried to ration and use sparingly. Sometimes we would chew on these curled salty bodies, giggling in our secret pact.

When our games spilled out of the semi-detached house, we amused ourselves in the backyard. The backyard began with a long strip veranda jammed with a few chairs, pot plants and an outside cooking area that always left everything slightly greasy. Every authentic Chinese house needed one of these cooking spots. It was here that a fierce gas fire could be tamed into a cooking plate to make woks sizzle for gastronomic alchemy and it made easy work of even a three-tier bamboo steaming rack.

To get to the yard, you went down a flight of grey, concrete steps. The yard's uneven surface was filled with small, dark, coal-like flakes, not concrete paving or sand or grass. It crunched under our feet and was so loose and uneven you could not bounce a ball on its rutted dreariness. There were also two small hollowed-out areas under the house and the stairs. These cavernous structures spooked me. They were used to store coal in the house's previous lives when people still relied on coal for their stoves and fireplaces. In our house, though, the stained, larger hollow was filled with junk, mostly broken furniture and appliances that no longer worked but that my parents thought might be fixed and prove useful again some day. The smaller hollow became a dog kennel of cardboard and old blankets for the dogs that shared our lives as children.

There were also three smaller storerooms in the yard and an outside toilet. One was used as a storeroom with more old toys, broken appliances, wedding gifts never opened and saved for a special occasion and more toilet paper and soap bought in bulk that did not fit in Kelvin's room.

The second storeroom was turned into a pigeon coop on and off in the years we lived in Bertrams. When it was used to raise birds, the stifling dark room was filled with stacked old five-litre oil tins with pictures of sunflowers on the front. These were cut out crudely, folded back and filled with dried grass and straw for the nests. These pigeons were not pets. They were raised for slaughter. I did not like going into their room and the adjoining open aviary but we were expected to clean the coops, scatter the feed and change the water bowls. As the pigeons' cooing gave way to sudden flapping, I was always startled and felt like holding my breath among the dirty airborne down feathers and bird poop. I guess I also never liked the coop because I knew the pigeons' throats would be slit and their sagged bodies would be plunged into boiling water sooner or later. They would be plucked of the feathers that made them resemble the birds that were just moments ago pecking away at their corn and my feet. Then they would be deep fried to a crispy delicacy that my father was particularly fond of. I also liked them for many of my childhood years, I have to admit, but it became too sad to connect the dots to their death and then to my stomach.

Throughout our time in the Bertrams Road house, and even for a few years after that, my mother raised chickens and even a duck or two. We all eventually learnt not to get attached to them as they roamed around pecking corn and seeds that we scattered for them. I was never comfortable

with the slaughter even when it was deliberately hidden from us children and sometimes we were simply told the birds had flown away.

Unisda (or Ah Saan as I called her by her Chinese name) and I also had two pet rabbits. Hers was snow white and her eyes looked reddish sometimes in different light. We called her Jane. My bunny was called Dick; we decided he was a boy because he was black and white. The names came from a book my sister and I had to read as one of our first readers, the iconic Dick and Jane series.

My mother built our rabbits a hutch, sectioning off a part of the charcoaled backyard for them and putting up chicken wire held together with scrap bits of wood nailed together. We fed them wilted Chinese spinach leaves, vegetable scraps and treats of juicy carrots wedged through the hexagons of the chicken wire.

My mom did not drive until I was about eight years old. So sometimes she let Saan and I walk to the local greengrocer a couple of blocks from our home to get food for Dick and Jane. We dragged home a big mesh bag of carrots for our bunnies. We loved to watch them hop close to the mesh and gnaw down at the sweet carrots, leaving small stumps once the sweetness of the sections of new growth were spent. I liked that we could pet them without fear that they would dart out of their hutch or retreat to a corner.

One day we arrived home from school to find an aunt we called Yee Gu Mah, a spinster and an older relative on my father's side of the family, had come to visit. It was a novelty that she had come over to visit on a school night and she said she would be staying for dinner. The break in routine was fun enough; it meant mom let up on the routine of homework and chores as she was distracted with Yee Gu Mah's visit. We changed out of our school uniforms, which my mother was always strict about, and went to feed Dick and Jane.

When we could not find them we rushed with alarm back up the stairs to tell my mom that the rabbits were missing. She said they must have burrowed out of the hutch and run away. We were heartbroken and crushed. That night, though, my chopsticks could not connect with the pieces of meat that were generously piled in my bowl. I did not know for sure then that our rabbits were the meal and years later I have never asked outright either. I guess it is because I have always known the answer.



As we grew up our games were made up of the mystical East and the reality of South African life. They were two different worlds that adhered together, contiguous and joined, and in places they fused in a weird but easy mingle. The copper-plated springbok ornament with mighty horns in relief was the epitome of 1970s kitsch decor. Ours was mounted alongside a fabric wall-hanging of an artist's impression of the precipitous drop of China's sheer mountains as they spiked into the mists of the old country.

A game my brother Kelvin invented one afternoon saw Unisda and I pretend to be the lion from the traditional Chinese lion dance. The dances are part of every Chinese celebration, chasing away bad spirits and welcoming new abundance. We were the head and the tail of the lion and Kelvin played the part of the *daai dou faat*, the caricatured big-headed man, who leads the menacing lion away from the village in a fable of triumph over evil, of bravery and community celebration.

To lead the creature away from the village, as the myth goes, Kelvin needed a magical wand, a chalice of sorts, as all good *daai dou faats* have. For that day's game he managed to smuggle a joss stick from the bundle that my mother kept locked away to light for the ancestors and the gods. They were lit for protection and prosperity on auspicious days or days of remembrance. We knew these fragrant incense sticks were not toys and playthings, along with all the other paraphernalia of pretend gold and silver printed papers that were folded into intricate paper ingots to be burnt for the dead, our revered ancestors. But which eight-year-old could resist something that burned and glowed and left a wisp of fragrant smoke in a tidy trail just long enough to be noted before it dissipated?

Kelvin had figured out that the small cupboard in the hallway where the joss sticks, candles, matches and papers were kept locked away was topped by a drawer that could be removed completely. If you slipped your hand carefully between the partition of the drawer and the locked door you could maybe fish out a prize like the joss stick he successfully captured that day.

Unisda and I took up our positions as the head and the tail of the lion under a brightly coloured blanket. The lions in the dance were always brightly coloured with bells and ribbon frills and my favourite – their fantastically long-lashed eyelids could be pulled along a pulley on the inside by the dancer to make the lion look like he was winking. In keeping with the festive shades of the lions we were so used to for these dances, the blanket we chose to use was one that had bright blooms on the one side, a soft cloth underside and a pleated ribbon edge.

We threw the blanket over our heads, Unisda bent and gripped my waist to become the hind legs and we peeped out to follow Kelvin's glowing joss stick as we danced around the bedroom, careful not to bump against the double bunk. As the joss stick glowed, we followed its seductive smoke coils, making up our own version of the rhythmic drum beat that accompanied every lion dance. 'Boom ba da boom, ba boom, ba boom, ba boom,' we shouted out. But in our manic twists and turns and our jokes and giggles, the joss stick dropped on to the blanket and its decorative flower prints proved to serve better as synthetic kindling. There were no flames, just an enlarging hole that spread at a speed outpaced only by our growing horror of what we could look forward to when my mother and father found out.

We would be punished for sure for this palm-sized hole we had created and for playing with the joss stick. We stamped out the rush of the burn but the hole stayed and the room filled with a chemical stench. And so, in the end, we decided to conceal the evidence of the now holey blanket. We said nothing and hoped to high heaven that we were never caught out.

Unisda and I had matching versions of this ill-fated blanket, hers with dominant blue colours and mine with stronger pink colours. As with so many of our things, from our clothes to our toys, they were identical or almost matching. Even our teddies and soft toys that have survived into our adulthood are twins or near twins and we named them similarly. We found tiny differences in our toys to distinguish ownership. Like 'Pinky Winky has longer whiskers and Winky Pinky has shorter whiskers'; we also had matching St Bernard toy dogs called Sweetball and Meatball, sausage dogs we called Dakin and Dalkin, and small teddies we called Blackey and Purpley. When we played Big Ears and Noddy, I was Big Ears and she was Noddy but we had matching orange knitted hats with multi-coloured pompoms at their ends made by my mother; my pompom was slightly bigger than her pompom, we decided, always finding the small differences of our twinned things.

It was a system that Unisda and I worked out and kept to quite naturally and it followed us into our adulthood. Many years later, my sister-in-law gave us beautiful classic bears after she and Kelvin were married. There were three bears for her new sisters-in-law and she asked us to choose. Two of the three bears were identical and as always Unisda and I chose the twin teddies simultaneously. Joe, my sister-in-law, could only laugh. ‘Kelvin said that was exactly what you would do.’

Yolanda, too, had a favourite game that she made up when we were growing up – a completely South African one that she liked to play on cold days when we were stuck indoors. The game started with the four of us piling on to her bed. An old Sealy with wheels, it was my dad’s bed from his bachelor days. Our backs faced the wall. In her scariest voice she told us that the bogeyman, the ghost of a man called Vorster, was going to come and get us if we fell off the bed. Much, much later I found out that Vorster was the prime minister at the time and he was indeed a bogeyman, but then he was a random name Yolanda had plucked from her imagination or maybe snatched from a passing conversation she heard from the adults. In her game, it was about who fell off the bed first. With her legs, which at that stage of her life (and about the only stage of her life) were longer than all of ours, she nudged the bed away from the wall, telling us the Vorster ghost was stalking us. Screaming in terror as the bed squeaked along the worn carpets and the floor, we scrambled around the bed, pushing each other to stay away from the edge. But inevitably one of us, usually Unisda or I, fell, or was pushed on to the floor and into the abyss of Yolanda’s horror stories. We sobbed and vowed never to play the stupid game again, at least not until later that afternoon.

On hot summer days we wished into being the pale blue ice cream truck that said ‘Roomys’ on its side and, like the Pied Piper, cranked out a mechanical tune to lead the children into lactose heaven. We wished even harder that our mom would say yes to the treat of creamy ice cream swirls and the dubious ooze of pink syrup.

Occasionally she conceded and then we screamed down the street, waving to stop the van as its musical tune started to get softer and softer in the distance. My mom stood watch at the gate, purse in hand, as we chased the van, then ran back to her for a few shiny, solid discs that were the old R1 coins with their assured springboks. We raced back to the idling van, stood on tiptoe to watch the ice cream vendor push down the lever that made the ice cream flop in crenulated twirls into a coloured cone.

Mom did not have much of a sweet tooth, so she mostly shook her head when we asked if she was sure she did not want an ice cream, too. We returned to the *stoep*, walking, licking our ice creams. She told us to eat up quickly before they melted, but already the serviette wrapped around the cone was sticky and wet and so were our hands.

At dinner we crunched through fare of yummy delights of black wood ear fungus or savoured the rich grey mush of the yolks of 100-year-old preserved eggs. These were the foods of the Cantonese plate.

The kitchen was my mom's domain for preparing vegetables, steaming dumplings and creating slowly cooked rice soups, *congee*. There was always the sound of chopping, knives slicing vegetables into julienned perfection or mighty Chinese choppers slashing down into animal carcasses – all done on a prized dense round of tree trunk that even the sharpest Chinese chopper failed to penetrate. My mom also had a pasta-making machine, but in our house it was for noodles and wonton skins. It was hi-tech for its time with its shiny silver colour, its metal screw-on bracket to keep the machine firmly wedged against the kitchen top and its removable winding arm to slot into varying settings.

My mother kneaded the egg dough patiently, turning it over again and again, slamming it against the table, anointing sprinkles of flour everywhere and then repeating the squish, squash action.

Cutting thick slices from the dough, she dusted them and set them through the machine to turn the dough into silky tumbles of noodles. She collected the noodles with her fingers and coiled them into little rounds that she laid out on a baking sheet with grease-proof paper. The wonton skins awaited small teaspoons of seasoned minced meat with water chestnuts and slivers of wood ear fungus.

The trick, my mother said, was not to make flabby wontons that would burst when they were dropped into the rapidly boiling water. But I struggled to mimic the consecutively neat parcels that were my mom's wonton origami. She allowed us to keep trying though.

Yolanda and Kelvin, as the older children, had the daily chore of rinsing out the raw rice grains and setting them to boil slowly in our hard-working rice cooker with its dim orange indicator light and convex viewing window on the lid. Rice was on our menu every night without fail. As the rice boiled, the lid rattled softly against the metal sides of the pot. Sometimes small bubbles escaped to the edges, then disappeared into a hissing haze of steam.

‘Once you have rinsed out the rice two or three times you have to level it out in the pot before you add the water. You know you have put in enough water when the water touches just above your knuckles,’ my mom said as it became my turn to take on more of the cooking responsibilities.

I have kept to the formula all these years, only now my rice cooker is a fancy upgrade with a multi-programme electronic brain and comes complete with coloured lights and warning chimes. There is no clinking lid to bounce against the sides of the pot and there is no little window to view the watery bubbles being absorbed by the rice grains. I only remember now and again that my hand is not the child’s hand any more and the water level that my mom talked about should drop closer to below where my knuckles are.

Ours was not a home of breakfasts of yoghurts and Weet-bix or fry-ups of hash browns, eggs and grilled tomatoes. I only realised as a grown-up how little dairy there was in traditional Chinese foods or the fact that cornflakes and bran were not the universal breakfasts like they were portrayed with smiling, ‘regular’ people in advertisements. My parents raised us in a time before low GI, probiotics, live cultures and pariah status for trans-fats and tartrazine.

Mostly we ate the foods that tested the stomachs of many. We loved steamed fish, like Red Roman, with ginger and spring onion finished off with oil and soya sauce. But it was the eyeballs that my father liked to share with us as children. The big eye peered out from the plate and my dad offered the eye, plunging his chopsticks into the socket and dropping the squishy mess of eye on top of my scoop of rice. The gelatinous glob melted until just the hard little bead rolled over my tongue. My dad loved that I loved it just as he did.

Years later I watched an episode of *Fear Factor*, the reality TV show that in part challenges contestants’ potential to hold down ‘gross’ foods. Next to hissing cockroaches and pigs’ testes, they set out the good old 100-year-old egg. The egg is preserved with straw and a soy mix, which turns the egg pitch black and into a firm jelly consistency. Its yolk becomes ash-grey goo. I laughed so much at the retching faces and the absolute refusals to try the egg and I remember thinking how good the eggs would taste with a thin slice of preserved ginger and a tiny sprinkling of sugar.

Most days before school we had a quick breakfast of a steaming cup of tea and a slice of bread with some butter and jam or a stack of Marie biscuits that we dunked into the sweet tea, carefully counting the seconds

to get a perfect tea-infused biscuit – not so soggy that the biscuits broke off and descended to the bottom of the cup as squishy pulp, but not so dry that you could still crunch through the biscuits. School lunchboxes were not simply sandwiches of peanut butter and cold meats. We also packed in thermoses of savoury rice and noodles.

On weekends we sometimes enjoyed breakfasts of *congee*, the delicious slow-cooked rice soups simmered for hours with any variation of beans, dried scallop, dried sheets of *doufu*, shiitake mushrooms, spinach or meat. And just as the heat is turned off, a few lightly beaten eggs are stirred in to become floating wisps of suspended protein. I loved to watch my mother's gentle stirring as the translucence turned into opaque morsels. Without fail, each time she reminded me how important it was to have the heat turned off and not to over-stir, but not to let the egg clump either. I could not wait until I was old enough to give it a try.

Food and eating in the Ho household was a hybrid of chopsticks and woks alongside braai tongs and toasters. It was two worlds rolled into one in our Bertrams home and all spiced up with our own Ho family brand, too. I think of it a bit like the common sweet sesame cake that is served up at so many Chinese gatherings, especially over Chinese new years. These *jeeng dui* balls are multi-dimensions of taste and texture, all crisply fried and studded with sesame seeds on the outside before giving way to a chewy, glutinous layer and a surprise ball of dark, sweet lotus paste in the centre. That is us, layers, unusual textures and the surprise in the middle, all in one tiny package.



A Long Way from Here

Long before Marmite and *pap* and *wors* collided with my mom and dad's world, their lives were very different. Home in China was a place of steamed rice, pungent fermented *doufu* and dried salted fish in viscous puddles of rich oil. Their countrymen and women looked exactly like they did, their houses were similarly smoky, with small altars that burnt with incense for the ancestors and deities to protect and bless their home and families. The codes of being and being accepted were known, like birthrights.

I have never made it back to the villages where my mother and father were born. Even on the few trips I have taken to Hong Kong and China, I have never been so deep into the interior that I have been able to get to what remains of these villages. Some relatives, though, have journeyed to the old country and returned with a bit of these rural outposts caught in megapixels of today's digital photographic genius. From these images, I see that even the passage of time does not cover up the simplicity of lives that are still spare even in an era of growing capitalist consumption. The pictures match up with some of the images I have held in my mind for the

longest time and confirm so many of the stories that my parents used to share with us.

The mod cons are there now, even in the villages. But modernity must still yield to old habits sometimes. TV sets and DVD players may blink digital numbers in standby mode but they are covered under thick, flower-patterned plastic coverings. The formal family photos of ancestors, some with the distinct studio touches of oval framing or sepia tones, share wall space with calendars sponsored by electronic stores and sellotaped blessings and prayers in the tradition of *fai cheun*, the Chinese calligraphy poems of only four characters written on sheets of lucky red paper.

The young people may wear jeans and branded sportswear, but the old women in the villages still get dressed each day in the traditional pantsuit made almost always from highly patterned cheap fabric and sometimes still with that skew ‘y’ closing typical of a mandarin collar cut. There is no dyed hair and shaped eyebrows for these women whose accelerated ageing is witness to harsh lives working fields in endless piercing winds and scorching days. In the biting winters, villagers wear the puffy coats and waistcoats that have not changed for decades. They are the garments of insulated padding dressed up in a reversible silk cover. Summers are characterised by men with shirt buttons undone and sweat-soaked vests. Woven grass fans shaped like fat leaves are put to work constantly.



My mom and dad were both born in Guangdong in China. They came from this southern tip of the mighty landmass of Asia where its inhabitants are mostly Cantonese speakers. Many Chinese early emigrants left from places such as Guangdong and Fujian, forming the first waves of emigration and planting the seeds of diaspora. It was probably because they were closer to ports and exit points compared to places farther north or deeper in the interior.

My mother, Fok Jow Yee, called the county of Li Geou her birthplace and for my father, Ho Sing Kee, his birthplace was the small county called Shun Tak.

When we were growing up, we were reminded often that it was a disgrace not to know your father’s village. It did not matter that we had

never visited it, or that there was not a single photograph of that place on which to hang a mental picture.

‘Where is your head? Have you lost your mind? You probably cannot even remember where your father’s village is.’

It was one of my mother’s favourite scolds when she thought we had done something foolish, frivolously indulgent or a stupid deed that she deemed we should be embarrassed about. We skulked off, too shamed to defend ourselves.

I only learnt years later that stating your forefathers’ village is a way for older people, in particular, to focus immediately on ‘whose people you are’. It is like the place of origin is a parent. It centres on kinship and trusted allegiances and also pronounces on sure hatred and well-worn grudges. It matters little in a changed world far from the old country. Stating your place of clan origin still allows people’s memories to race back along a known path of order and unbreakable bonds. They can insert you where you belong like it is determined by what runs through your veins, that fusion of blood and kin.

And as a Ho, Shun Tak took on a mystical importance for me. It was a place I envisioned only in my imagination, pieced together by stories, anecdotes and memory. It was where my father’s story began and so also where my own narrative finds its roots.



My mother was an only child, born to Fok Yat Gou and Low Wan Yuk. My maternal grandparents were joined as teenagers through a hastily arranged marriage. The Japanese were invading China and the young virgins were at risk of being raped or turned into concubines for the bastards, my grandmother would say in stories she would share in years to come.

Meeting Chinese nationals many years later, I understood how the old wounds of the invasion throbbed for the Chinese well into the 21st century. They waited for apologies that did not come, so in the long delay they held on to the stories of great aunties raped and killed, babies ripped from their mothers’ wombs and those who were not saved by death but were forced to be ‘comfort women’ for the loathed *gaa jay*, a pejorative snipe for a Japanese person that is supposed to mimic the sound of the Japanese language as heard by Chinese ears.

Once, on an overseas training workshop with foreign journalists, I wore a skirt that had a huge print of a striking Japanese woman on it, all kimono-clad with clay-white skin and dark, expressive eyes. I liked the skirt and I liked the contrast of being a Chinese person wearing a skirt with a Japanese icon on it. On the course were two journalists from China. Each commented on the skirt. ‘Nice skirt,’ they started in our mix of Cantonese, English and Mandarin, remarking on its patterning that was unusual and bold, I suppose. Then the piece of cotton wrapped around my legs became political and historical all of a sudden. Both these colleagues, who looked like me, but were also so different from me, being Chinese nationals, started talking about the Japanese as old enemies with old cruelties and never-to-be forgotten barbarisms. I understood then that a nation’s memory stays with its people. Even this becomes a kind of birthright.

To them, my being born Chinese, even though I was born in South Africa, linked me instantly to that memory and that historical allegiance. I liked that skirt, but I did not wear it again during the course.

Had it not been wartime, my grandmother’s family possibly would have been able to marry my grandmother to someone who was a more equal match in social standing. But there was no time for such an indulgence, and wealth and even class snobbery were levelled out when everyone was left with less than they started with before the Japanese invasion.

My grandparents never got along with each other – at least not by the time I knew them. They never fought outwardly; instead, they fell into a life of silent rage and deliberate separateness even though they shared the same roof until they were well into the winter of their lives. Although they did split up and lived separately, they still ended up in the same government retirement complex until they died – my grandfather in 1998 and my grandmother in 2000.

When I was a child I wished every day that they would make up, reconcile and be a happy couple. My childish hope always was that the big love that each of them showered on us would be enough to reunite them. I longed not to hear them speak badly about each other and wished that we children did not have to split up our time with each of them on the occasions when we visited them in Pretoria and then later Johannesburg.

During our weekly visits, my granddad, my Ah Goung, Fok Yat Gou, would take up his position in the single bedroom in their flat in Lorentzville, a tatty little suburb made up of ugly flats and light industrial factories in Johannesburg East. My grandmother, my Por Por, who was born Low

Wan Yuk, would be staked out on her sofa bed in the living room. They hardly spoke to each other, leaving biting notes sometimes when a grunt or sarcastic retort was not enough. The notes were a triumph for my grandmother, who had the privilege of being better educated and had a better vocabulary in her arsenal. My grandfather's defence was the saving grace of not always knowing the full extent of what she had written.

A visit saw the four of us children split up in pairs and spend time separately with each of them and then swop over as the afternoon progressed. We sat and talked nonsense with them about school, about family or some or other thing that we had been doing or had seen that week. Then we repeated some of our stories as we swopped over. They shared their stash of goodies with us but hid them from each other. 'Pour yourself some cooldrink, from my bottle, which is at the back of the fridge,' one of them would say, careful that we did not drink some of the other's provisions. Eventually my grandmother got her own small fridge that she plugged in near her sofa bed in the already crammed flat.

When they visited us in our home they tried never to be in the same room together and even when we sat down for meals as a family they perfected the art of making the other invisible, even around a small dinner table.

My father loved his in-laws; he was the son they had never had. And I think he wished as hard as I did that his in-laws could love each other or at least have that spousal devotion and caring that would have made their lives so much happier.

One of the biggest thorns in my parents' relationship was the fact that my father could not take sides when my mother did. Once, when my grandparents had obviously reached a breaking point in their relationship, my father suggested that my grandmother move in with us. We could squeeze her in somehow because it was the right thing to do, my father said. My mother hit the roof with shouting and screaming and sulking. She did not speak to my father for days and I remember my dad saying: 'I cannot believe your mom has this attitude. It is her own mother, for goodness sakes.'

My mother's affection was for her father, and in her stubborn, intractable way she made little excuses for her bias. She often said it was about making up for lost time. Sometimes she would say it was because my granny was not a good wife to my grandfather. But it was not about favouritism skewed by making up for the years she missed out on having

a dad close by. And I know she knew my granny never did anything that would make her a ‘bad’ wife. She had a bitter, abrasive relationship with my gran, and there was something deliberately evil about playing up her affection for my grandfather to hurt my gran. I resented my mother for this as I grew up. As for how I felt about my grandparents, like my father, there was no way to choose between two people I loved equally.

A gift my father bought once for my Ah Goung and Ah Por was a small statue of an old Chinese couple, beaming, holding hands. He said he had given it to them as a wish that they would grow older together happily: *bak tau dou lou* is a common wish for couples; it is a blessing to grow together until your hair is white. Like the blessing in the statue, I would wish that they could love each other, even just a little.

One day, though, I stopped wishing. I grew into the truth of my grandparents’ history, their life stories and the reality of fractures that are made by a thousand disappointments and a thousand crushed dreams too severe to be healed even by the desperate hopes of a child.



My granny, the fine-boned flower, was born into a decent, quite well-to-do family in the 1920s. Her father was an official of some rank and was sufficiently statured to marry numerous wives, even though polygamy was not reserved for only the wealthy class in China. My great-grandfather was sent to Vietnam along with his wives and it was there that my grandmother was born along with several of her siblings and half-siblings. Her mother did not survive beyond my grandmother’s first few years of life and she probably did not see her father all that often between his many wives and his official duties. When she was still a little girl, it was decided that she should be sent back to China to be educated there to stay true to her Chinese culture.

She was singled out for this important journey, but for my granny it was a separation from her family and she also hated that she had to leave the country of her birth, because it meant leaving her family.

She stayed with extended family in China and undertook to fulfil her father’s wishes for her to be educated. Education was the basics of learning to read and write and to be schooled in the teachings of what prepares young girls to be good wives one day. That education was enough to be the

lifelong treasure that no one could take from my granny. In later life she could escape into books, she could write to family back in China without having to find someone to dictate the letter to, and in this way she could stay connected to the China of her memory when she had become a South African citizen. I am not sure who she wrote to all those times, apart from some of her extended family, but she did write and often she was asked to help people pen a few words home and then to slip them into the very important looking airmail envelopes. Education set her apart from many of her peers, including her sisters, who were not as interested in learning as she was, or were never given the same opportunity. And it set her apart from my grandfather.

My grandad grew up to be handsome, honest and true, but he was from a poorer family and he was uneducated as so many villagers in China were. He had deft hands and would prove to be a talented amateur carpenter and a man with fingers that could coax flowers from reluctant buds and nurture vegetables to sprout with lush abandon.

But when he married my gran he was simply an uncertain teenager, like she was, and with the invasion of the Japanese a brutal reality after 1931 he increasingly became an insipid consolation for her.

In the first months of their married lives, they were made to work in the Japanese army barracks. They were put on shifts and when my grandmother got up to go to work, my grandfather was trying to squeeze in some sleep. When her long dreary shift finally ended, it was my grandfather's turn to work for the invaders.

Every day my gran lived in dread. She told me this when I had grown up enough to understand. The beautiful young bride was in fact still a virgin and was terrified that she would be raped by the Japanese or taken to be one of their comfort women. My grandparents were awkward teenagers exhausted from long shifts in the barracks of an enemy, and for many months their marriage was not consummated. My grandfather's distance from my grandmother's bed was the start of the slip of her respect for him.

It was not what either of them had expected of married life. Maybe when the match was made for them they let themselves believe that it would be a good match. Maybe they hoped they would come to love their chosen spouse and grow into the roles of husband and wife for each other. I read someone's personal account of arranged marriage once and she said it was like opening a present every day as the stranger presented a

bit more of himself. But this was not the story for my grandparents. Their marriage turned out to be not just a disappointment, it brought about heartbreak and defeat – an experience a million times worse than that feeling you get when you know a glass is about to crash to the floor and you will not save it and in the next few seconds there will be fragments everywhere.

‘I was scared every day that I was going to be raped by those bloody soldiers and I was a virgin,’ she said, of course expecting that the first time she had sex with her husband had to be by his initiation and it was not a fear that she could express to him.

To add to her anxiety, my grandfather’s family had been asking about grandchildren. A boy child, especially, was missing from the union and my grandmother was quickly being mocked as a failed wife as the months ticked by.

Maybe it was too much for my gran to share with me. Chinese people of my grandparents’ generation preferred to take their pain with them to their graves. They would rather remain silent, with an unvoiced acceptance of their disappointments, because life was just what it was, the roll of a dice; surviving and raising the next generation was more important than dwelling too much on personal injury.

But I am happy she did and I am glad she did not think that I was too young to know. I was a teenager and I was old enough to understand the dread of rape and the weighty load of not being able to please the interfering aunts with their accusatory spite.

My grandmother told me about the consummation, too. When it did eventually happen, it was inelegant and clumsy. There was not the intimacy she must have hoped for or the release of her anxiety both in her body and her heart. The act should have removed some of her fear and it should have settled the couple into marital domesticity. But by the time she told her stories to me, my gran did not have any more patience for remembering the pleasant ordinariness of life as my grandfather’s wife. The ordinariness that would have at least resembled a marriage that was tolerable.

The consummation and what must have followed were, however, enough for my gran to conceive. There must have been delight for her in those months as her belly grew with the promise of silencing the cruel aunts. She was maybe pampered a bit more, told to be off her feet, bought some or other specially prepared broth to balance her system and nurture the growing foetus.

The nine months went by and my gran gave birth. But it was not the desperately wanted boy child. This was a betrayal for my granny, because the pregnancy yielded a girl child who could not carry the family name. That girl child was my mother.

Later I would find out that there was also a boy child born to my grandmother a few years after my mother, but he survived only a few days. He did not even make it past his first full moon, the first month of life, which is the primary milestone of a newborn's life.

'He would have survived if only your grandfather had agreed to let him go to see the modern doctors, I know that, I know that ...' gran would say, pleading even after all those years. There were doctors who had started to move away from the remedy of old wives' tales and the hit-and-miss of homemade brews and potions. My granny probably trusted these remedies for most of her life, but when the child was lost, his death could be blamed on the one thing that was never tried – the one thing my grandfather never tried.

My grandfather must have had his own pain to bear when his son died. He never mentioned that child to us. My mom did not remember this brother who only had a fleeting presence in her toddler life. She remembered playing around the altar that my Por Por had erected for her dead son shortly after his death. And she remembered being scolded severely by my gran for fooling around the altar and disturbing the spirit of her dead brother. My granny was probably angrier than she should have been. But how could my mother understand that the anger was not for her but was directed at my grandfather? Anger also at the gods and the ancestors who had cursed her by taking her son away, and with him a part of her heart. For my mother, though, the incident was enough for her to hold on to her child's resentment for a brother she never knew.

My gran loved her only child and my mother was never like a consolation prize, but maybe my mother felt like that every time she clashed with my granny. My mother remembered the presence of the dead brother even years after he had died. The altar remained in the home, an eerie spectre stronger than the loss. Her dead brother took on a kind of phantom presence.

When my mom was in her late teens, she was struck by a period of illness and none of the healing concoctions my gran came up with made her better. My gran visited medicine men and women and followed their instructions for brews and poultices to the letter. She prayed to the gods, the

ancestors and consulted with the elders as she always did when there was disquiet in her heart and her home. My mom did not get better. Then came a revelation, and one that made most sense. Her dead son was unhappy in the underworld and was causing ructions among his living relatives. He was lonely and in need of a bride.

I have heard of the macabre and spooky rituals of ghost brides, where a live person is said to be killed in a sacrificial murder so her spirit can be joined with the spirit of a dead man who cannot rest. In a spirit marriage, a man and a woman can be joined and the living relatives will be blessed for having fulfilled their obligations to the deceased. Fortunately, my gran opted for a symbolic ritual. Instead of sacrificing a live person, she consulted with her family and they made inquiries to the neighbouring villages. Eventually, they learnt of a young woman who had recently died and the two families arranged for a spirit marriage.

My mother only remembers her brother's seat in the altar was moved to a higher rung, symbolising that as a 'married man' he had taken on a higher position in the realm of the afterlife. My granny remembers that my mother started to feel much better and to emerge from her illness after that.

By the time I was old enough to talk freely to Ah Por, it seemed like much of her life had concertinaed into a few memories, so many of them painful and raw with every new mention of them. The misery and bitterness haunted her all her life. Towards the end of her life, they managed to chase her down, leaving her defeated and spent.

Even my Por Por's black mutt, the only dog she ever owned, fell into this bleak recollection. He had to be killed or her entire village would have had to forfeit their rations during the Japanese occupation. The villagers decided to slaughter and eat her dog. Chinese people do not eat dogs ordinarily, but meat in lean times was a delicacy and her dog's flesh could not go to waste.

'I could not eat my dog when they bought me back a piece of meat. But I cooked it for your mother, who was too little to really know the dog. That dog was so loyal. When we women went to help the neighbouring villages with their harvests, we would be gone for days and my dog would not eat until I came home. He would always come running to the edge of the village to greet me, when he finally saw us returning.'

I tried to separate those haunting memories from the images of the granny who would moan about our bad diets as teenagers but would then tell us where to find her stash of potato crisps, which she would have

spent her pension money on to spoil us. My gran knew when there was a four or five rand increase in her telephone bill but she spent her pension money on these extras for us. She also saved up little pieces of meat for our two small dogs, Mozart and Snoopy, which we would bring along on our weekly visits to her retirement complex when we were older. She could not say the English names we had given them and she would shout that the dogs were not really allowed into the complex and that she could get into trouble, but then she would produce the neatly wrapped-up morsels she had saved during the week and let the dogs gobble them up on the small area partitioned as a kitchen in her cottage.

I tried to remember also the granny who told us stories as children with so much animation and vigour that we never tired of hearing the tales over and over again, and how we would gasp for air trying to breathe in between laughing so hard.

There were stories of old Chinese myths and legends. Like the two young lovers forbidden to love in life who in death would meet as two stars joined together only on one night a year, on the night of the mid-autumn festival. It is a full moon festival that falls on the 15th of the eighth month on the lunar calendar. On that one night a year, Ah Por would tell us we should gaze up at the celestial magnificence of the moon, and if we looked carefully we would be able to make out two stars that seemed to be moving closer to each other. They would appear to touch for a few magical moments, then separate as the night sky surrendered to day.

Another of my favourite stories was of an enchanted princess who washed up into a young man's life when he picked up a beautiful, odd-looking shell that was actually the princess's home. Bringing the shell home, he placed it on a table and went to sleep. The next day as he left to tend to the fields, he was unaware that the princess emerged from the shell while he was away. She cooked dinner and tidied up for the young man, then, satisfied with her task, she returned to her shell before he came back. The grateful but confused man decided one day to sneak back from the fields to find out who had been cooking him the delicious meals and he witnessed the magical princess climbing out of her shell. I do not remember the details of the ending well, but I am sure it led to a happy-ever-after as only magical tales can do.

There was also a less romantic tale about a man who was embarrassed by his farting and decided to carry a bottle with him every day into which he could let his fart escape safely. His idea, my granny said, was to store

up his farts so he would not be red-faced every time he let rip. The sound effects in my granny's story kept us breathless with laughter and we would ask her to repeat the story over and over again, especially the parts with the farts. Even now I remember the laughing better than the storyline.

Unlike Por Por, my grandfather, Ah Goung, never spoke too much to us about the past. Maybe he felt history was for those who had shared it or maybe we were always grandchildren in his eyes, even when we were old enough to drive him around in his battered, tomato-red Mazda or were the ones to sort out some official-looking bank letter. As his grandchildren, we did not need to be bothered with stories from a time before we were born. Maybe he simply chose quiet surrender to his rose bushes as the years rolled on.

Somewhere among the velvety blooms he could look beyond a failed marriage, failure to have a male heir, failure to amass the fortune that would have been the mark of success for a man who had swapped the land of mythical dragons for Johannesburg's streets of gold.



By the late 1940s, China was a tragic farce: it faced civil war, famine, the aftermath of the Second World War and the invasion by the Japanese that had started in 1931, the so-called September Eighteen incident. Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward, his Cultural Revolution in the subsequent years to overturn the old orders, translated into more difficulties for villagers, people like my grandparents and my father's family. There would have been the risk of being shot or publicly denounced and shamed for being counter-revolutionary or being capitalist pigs. It was more paranoia than policy that guided the ideologies filtering down from Peking. For villagers and peasants across China, it translated into starvation and grinding poverty. Life was about survival only, struggling under harsh living conditions and subsisting on rations, food coupons and even a dismantling of many of the elaborate religious customs, rites and ceremonies that would have been a social glue and comfort.

Authors and researchers Melanie Yap and Dianne Leong Man, who write about the Chinese in South Africa, contextualise the exodus. In *Colour, Confusion and Concessions*, they write that by the mid-19th

century the decline of the Chinese empire was in full swing. Natural disaster, famine, corruption and a general breakdown in social order were all made manifest in the wake of the two Opium Wars of 1839, and later between 1856 and 1860, and also with the Taiping Rebellion, which lasted fourteen years from 1850 to 1864. China was crippled economically and socially and more than 20 million people died.

When I read author and journalist Xinran Xue's *China Witness* I was simultaneously fascinated, saddened and buoyed by the oral histories and first-person accounts of the elderly 'forgotten generation' of Chinese – men and women who were a few years younger than my grandparents at the time they were interviewed in the mid-2000s. This book is filled with anecdotes and memories of a generation that lived under communist madness and also the euphoria of buying in to the propaganda while it was still good. But when things got bad, they went horribly wrong. One minute you were a party loyal, and the next you were being incriminated for the slightest thing that was suddenly deemed anti-party.

It turned neighbours into informants and it made friends turn a blind eye, just in case they were made guilty by association. Mistrust had an iron grip on the people living under Mao and toeing the party line was gospel, whether you truly believed or not.

They also worked hard on communal fields and even accepted that they had to be part of the government's hard-labour projects that needed the muscle of good men and women from the party.

Above all, I picked up the thread of a sense of pride. People were not defeated, even by the worst conditions. One woman separated from her children and family for ten years, whose husband had been labelled counter-revolutionary under the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, said: 'I never cried. We had a mission as part of the national plan and not completing the mission was like committing a crime.'

I have often thought that this hardness, this rigidity was just about 'saving face', that obsession with not showing weakness or failure, even turning it into boastful conceit. After reading some of the accounts in Xinran's book, though, I saw something different. I saw that some of what swelled the pomposity was not just hubris but about holding on, a desperate grasp on to small hopes shadowed by bleak lives.

With so few choices available to them, it was to a place called Gum Saan, the Golden Mountain, that some Chinese turned. Most people who fled China from the late 1940s onwards came from the Cantonese-

speaking southern regions. They would become the West's 'coolies', that offensive term that downgraded the people (mostly men) from China and India into a working class of illiterate, uneducated cheap labour as the world went into rebuilding mode after the Second World War. There was also the lure of being free men who could maybe strike it rich in the cities that had lapped up the gold rushes of the previous century.

Years later I found out that many early migrants to Johannesburg left the mainland not exactly certain of their final destinations. That is because the golden mountains of the world referred not only to Johannesburg but also to places such as Melbourne and San Francisco that for decades also had their own lure of the yellow metal.

I liked to ask migrants why they came to South Africa in the first place. Their answers were always about prosperity and pipe dreams of fortune, the belief that something better lay across the wide seas. There were also all the variables of chance and fate and an impossibly muddled view of a big wide world they could not know. They were cut off from the reality of geography and global politics. They were poor, unsophisticated villagers who did not have access to such information.

My grandfather knew, though, that he was heading to the supposed gilded mound in South Africa, not to one of the other golden mountains spread across the globe. My grandmother's older sister and her husband had left for South Africa some years earlier and had started a life that would bring them seven children, including a prosperous brood of six sons, and a small but sustainable spaza shop in Kliptown, Soweto. Over decades, it would grow into a provisions store that traded until recently when it was eventually sold. Competition had grown, markets had changed and the attrition of violent criminal fury against the comparatively wealthy, like this uncle with his business, meant a day of final trade had to come. And today their children have moved on from Africa, seeking their own prosperity and fortunes across new oceans.

Before all this would come to pass, the plan was for my grandfather to work for my grandmother's sister and her husband until he could set himself up, until he could send for my gran and mom. He left China in the late 1940s, when my mother was a small girl.

There is a black and white photo that I found in an old album that belonged to my Por Por. It is a family photo that was taken shortly before my grandfather set off on his journey south. My Ah Goung was in Western-style dress. He wore a pair of long shorts topped by a short-

sleeved, collared shirt. His thick, ample hair was oiled and combed back neatly. It was a posed studio picture and my grandfather was propped up against the armrest of the sofa.

My Por Por was fresh-faced and beautiful. Her hair was pulled back and clipped on the side, showing her fine features. She was in a traditional Chinese outfit. It had a typical Mandarin-style collar and she was wearing a matching pair of trousers. Next to her was my mom, aged maybe two or three. She was in a little Western-style dress and her hair was neatly tied back; she looked like a shy cutie.

Por Por and Ah Goung looked impossibly young. When I gazed at the photo my heart went straight to this young family that had to make decisions that would put thousands of kilometres between them and shatter their innocence with it.

It would be eighteen years until they were reunited. I have no doubt about the years of separation, even though so many other timeframes and dates that I have about my family's history are estimates deduced from the overlap of stories. There was also the confusion of intersecting Chinese lunar calendars and Western calendars, illiteracy and foggy memories. The number of years here, though, are accurate because that number eighteen was the fulfilment of a terrible prophecy.

Around the time my grandfather set out, my Por Por approached a temple priest hoping for a prophecy of a prompt reunion with my grandfather. My grandmother was religious her whole life and had a connection with the spiritual realm that was like a completely innate sixth sense and was something I never questioned. She must have been emotionally torn by my grandfather's trip, but she would have had to hold on to some belief that it was the right move and that it would change their tough circumstances. Her unsettled heart would have sent her to the temple.

But that day the temple priest revealed a prophecy that would prove to be devastatingly accurate. This prophecy came in the form of *kau cim*. To *kau cim* is a traditional way to seek the wisdom and revelations from an ancient Chinese oracle. One hundred small flat sticks, each individually numbered and each with a corresponding parable, are shaken in a bamboo cup at a temple. Each stick has a symbolic meaning represented and can be interpreted by a priest.

As my granny held this container in both hands, she would have shaken the container gently, asking her one question over and over again in

whispered prayer. As a single stick tumbled to the ground, she would have retrieved it and hurried off to consult with the temple priest.

‘He said we would be separated for eight years or eighteen years and that is exactly what happened,’ my granny told us years later. As she got older, my gran developed an agitated quiver in her head when she was worked up or when her nerves set her off. And though she had put emotional distance between her present and the many hurts that she had experienced as a young woman, that slight side-to-side quiver of her head betrayed her every time. It hinted at the eighteen years of not having a husband to speak to, a husband to take her side, no division of labour and no one to share a home with as a married woman. Eighteen years that would make her husband a stranger just like when they were first married.

I never fully appreciated my granny’s strength, independence and the tenacity that was wrapped up in her tiny frame and her subtle, proper ways. She would survive, though, even if the prophecy must have come like a dark storm over her heart. She would survive to give her daughter a better life.

With the ghost of a boy child and an absent husband who had stowed away for Africa, my gran decided to find a life away from the Guangdong mainland. Many from her village had already left for the island of Hong Kong by the 1950s. They hoped this fragrant harbour, literally *Heung Gong* as it is called in Cantonese, would yield some of its perfume to them.

The British had resumed control of Hong Kong after its occupation by the Japanese during the Pacific War. As such, Hong Kong was a free port with greater political and economic autonomy, which offered the hope of breaking free from the unforgiving life on the mainland. By the 1950s and the 1960s, it was up to the mainland newcomers, these refugees, to revive the economy of the trading port. Their cheap labour would spark the era of manufacturing superiority that characterised Hong Kong. The time of the ‘fong kong’, as South Africans now say of everything made in the East, had dawned. It would be the start of fake flowers, knock-off textiles and plastic everything, and it was the sheer manufacturing output that was the way out for Hong Kong and a way out for my granny.

Life in Hong Kong meant an end to picking rice and working the fields in the villages. My gran also wanted my mom to be educated. Por Por took a job as a seamstress, working uninspired stitches in a hot factory of whirring sewing machines. The textile and manufacturing industries

became the major employers for female labourers like my grandmother. For the first time my gran had an income and did not have to wait on the small remittances my grandfather sent along with the letters that someone helped him to write. But wait she did, for eighteen long years.