

Interview with my mother, 張翠屏 Cheung Chui Ping.

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My name is 張翠屏 Cheung Chui Ping. I was born in Hong Kong, *Tong Tau Po*. *Tong Tau Po* is one of the 18鄉 (indigenous townships). It is a 村 (village). I have 7 brothers and sisters in total. I'm number 3. I have 2 older brothers, 2 younger sisters, and 2 younger brothers.

At home we spoke 圍頭話 (*Weitouhua*) because we seldom came into contact with people outside who spoke Cantonese. All of us just spoke *Weitouhua*. Except for when you'd go to school, but you'd still be 5 or 6 years old before school started. Then we'd realise, "Oh! Their language is a bit different to ours."

It took a period of time to learn Cantonese. The teacher would question you if you pretty much only spoke *Weitouhua*. It took about a month or two before you picked up a little bit of Cantonese.

The house we grew up in was a "green-tiled house". So a very old, traditional village house. It was 13行 (rows) wide. Each row was the size of one roof tile. In total, there were 13 horizontal rows, so that's why it was called "13行". This was a standard size.

When you first entered the house, there was a kitchen with a stove to burn firewood and hay. There was giant wok. A person wouldn't be able to wrap their arms around it. The wok was used for cooking rice, frying vegetables and making cakes... puddings, deep-frying sticky rice dumplings. All of this happened in the wok. We used only one utensil. At night, we'd even use this wok for baths. Of course, before we boiled

the bathing water, we'd have to clean the oils off the work.

In the middle of the kitchen, there was a small trench, not unlike a modern shower. We called it *yaan* in *Weitouhua*, for showering, where the water would flow away. If you looked above, there was a sky light. The sun would come through this hole. If it wasn't raining, we'd open this sky window. Then you'd walk further inside to the lounge room in the middle of the house. In the lounge room, there was a bed to the side where my father would sleep.

Above the lounge room, there was a spirit table called *wangeoktsai*. It was really long across, well its length was as long as the 13 rows of the house. It contained the ancestor's names. Every morning you'd climb up a ladder and light the joss sticks which were positioned up high, and also change a bowl of spirit water for your ancestors.

Then further inside, there was a *fangaan* which was the bedroom. Before you entered the bedroom, there'd be a piece of fabric used as a veil. Inside, there'd be a dressing table and a bed. The bed was slightly bigger so my mum and my 2 baby brothers would sleep there.

Then the girls, the 3 sisters, would sleep in the *goktsai* (loft). To the right of the bedroom, there was another ladder leading up to this square loft area. The loft was big, it was the same as the bedroom, but one storey higher. It could fit 10 people but all girls. The boys slept in the lounge room. Boys and girls would be separated.

There was no toilet inside the bedroom. There was a *qing* (chamberpot) made out of porcelain. About 10 litres in volume. It'd go up to about your knees. The chamberpot was for urine only. It had a lid. The chamberpot was very precious. The urine would be used for farming as fertiliser.

We'd put the urine out for a week onto the earth to ferment. It was really good for the plants once we diluted it with water.

磨米歌 RICE MILLING SONG

We played with very simple and rustic things. For example, 豹琥 (*paofu*), a spider-like bug. It's very small but it doesn't bite people. We'd go to the mountain side to catch *paofu*, and collect some tall grass nearby. Thickish ones, sort of like aloe vera. We used that to weave a little cage for it, build a little house for it about the of size a match-box. We'd put the *paofu* inside to live.

Each day after school, we'd have a look at the *paofu*. "Oh! It's so cute! It's so lively!" We'd observe it and feed it. What type of food did it like to eat? We'd break up tree leaves for it and also feed it leftover rice.

Girls played with dollhouses. We'd use stones and old bricks from crumbling village houses to make a dollhouse. We'd draw figures onto paper, clothes onto paper, and play dress ups with them.

Boys were naughtier. There weren't many exciting things to do. Each family in the village had a cow for farming. Children would play with the cow dung. If it was Chinese New Year, there would be firecrackers around, right? The kids would break up the firecrackers into little pieces which had gun powder inside. Then they'd put that into the cow dung, light it and it'd would explode everywhere! "Quick! Run! Run!" So mischievous! But people wouldn't really do this anymore!

When I was young, the toughest experiences had to do with the weather because my family were farmers. Each morning, my siblings and I, and my parents, would walk for about 20 minutes

towards a hill behind our house called *Coeng Ngau Saan*. We'd farm there.

What did that consist of? We'd grow rice. It was very famous and was called *Yuen Long Si Miu*. What else? Corn, turnips, beans, snow peas, tomatoes, eggplants, *choysum*, *gailan*, *gaichoy*, *gailantau* (variations of Chinese greens).

When there were typhoons in the Summer, the crops would be totally flooded. Our harvest would be completely lost. A few days before the rain, we'd try to pick whatever we could. If they weren't ready, the only thing we could do was wait and hope the typhoon wasn't so heavy. When the rain came, we'd try to mitigate the damage by digging four big holes at the corners of the field so the water would run and wouldn't flood as badly. We tried to reduce our losses as much as possible.

The happiest... I was 5 years old. I have this memory of my youngest sister. I am number 3, she is number 5. My mother brought her home after she was born and said, "This is your little sister." I thought she was so cute. A little baby! I asked, "What's that thing?"

"It's a nappy." There weren't any diapers back then, only cloth nappies which you had to hand wash.

I said, "I'll wash it!" My mum asked, "You know how to?"

"Yes, I know! Just get some water, give it a wash and let it dry in the sun. That's it!"

"Alright, alright. Off you go then."

This is one of my most cherished memories. Of mum saying, "This is your baby sister. She's just come into the world." This I can remember well. Very clearly.

覺覺仔 LULLABY

When girls started menstruating, they'd often stay home. But for those whose homes weren't so accommodating for this matter, there was usually an older woman in the village who didn't have children and who wanted some company. She was full of life experiences. She knew all the walled villages' folk songs and social etiquettes. Many teenage girls would go there to learn things.

During the day, the girls would complete her house chores. At night, she'd go to this aunty's house to sleep. I think usually at least 6 to 7 girls together, learning how to sing, how to mend clothes, how to embroider flowers and the like. In turn, they'd help the aunty get water from the well, gather hay, cut firewood for her to use. It was very joyous.

In the past, people didn't want girls to be schooled. Educated boys were cultured and valued. For girls, 女子无才便是德 "A woman's virtue is to have no talent." So women were just supposed to have babies and do housework. Literary things, society thought, weren't for girls to know about.

Once we finished eating dinner, we'd normally look at the sky. Back then, the sunset was very beautiful. We'd look at the clouds. "Oh, it's a cow! It's a lamb!" Various animals. When the sun went down, then we'd start making plastic flowers if we had any orders.

Firstly, you had to snap the plastic flower out of its frame. My mum and grandmother would usually do this part. I was in charge of the basic flower shape. There was a piece of wire which became the stem. Then you'd thread through the pistil, the petals, and the receptacle. Once you made the flower shape, then you added the

leaves to the stem. It'd become, say, a rose or an orchid. Each bunch was made up of a dozen. We'd tie it together with a rubber band. They'd be appraised every gross. What is a gross?

Well, when we did maths at school, I knew that a dozen was 12. The teacher was impressed. "Very smart! Does anyone know what 12 times 12 is?" Then I thought to myself, of course I know! Damn plastic flowers! 12 is a dozen. 12 dozen is 12 times 12, which is a gross. So, of course I'd remember — 144 flowers, a gross!

When making these flowers, because some of the metal parts were sharp, you'd sometimes cut your hands in the process. Of course, we didn't have gloves. You had to pay for gloves! So we just had to be careful and go slowly. You could use bits of old clothing to protect your hands. Yeah, it was like that. We didn't think much of it at the time. If you stabbed your hands, you'd just run them under some water.

新年歌 NEW YEAR SONG

The pay for plastic flowers was very bad. The more complicated flowers got higher fees. But on average, the pay was very low. Though back then, you wouldn't care if the pay was high or low. If there was work, you'd be grateful. Even if it was just a little bit of money then that would help the family out. Or as we didn't have any pocket money, a little extra cash meant that we could buy some sweets. We didn't have any lollies, or toothpaste, or soap. We really didn't have anything. No towels. When we brushed our teeth, we just used salt on our fingers and rinsed with water.

At school I'd smell the fragrance of LUX soap on my classmates. They smelt so nice! So, so nice! I was very envious. I thought to myself, they have perfumed soap to shower with! I don't know when we will get to do so!

And I remember seeing a classmate eat chocolate. "What's that black stuff? Oh, it's chocolate!" I could tell they were enjoying it. Again, I was very envious. We knew about chocolate, but we had no idea what it tasted like. The first time I ate chocolate... I think it was when I started working. Yeah, I think so. Aunty Michelle reminded me. The first time I got paid, I bought some chocolates for the family. And I bought a hose.

One problem was that the well didn't always have water in it. When the weather was dry there wasn't any water. And the well was for the entire village to use! So the village president, that was my grandfather, registered with the government to install a public water hydrant. Many people wanted to connect their homes up to this public hydrant, which they had to pay for separately.

Back then, we didn't have this kind of money so we had to fill up big buckets with the water from the hydrant and carry back them home. They were so heavy. It was very hard. So I thought, when I get my first pay check, I must buy a hose so we don't have to carry these buckets of water anymore. I used \$50 to buy a hose and some chocolates. My first pay. That was a very happy moment.

Yes, we were bullied. At school. the other village people would tease us for being poor. They'd say, "Who gave you that dress? You can't afford that! I bet someone gave it to you." I'd say, "Yes, it doesn't matter... so and so gave it to me. I am thankful." Or they'd say, "What will your family eat tonight? Let's have a look at your bowl. Aiya! She doesn't have any food to eat. They only eat plain rice! They can't afford meat. They only eat black beans." Those people were very nosy. These kinds of memories have stayed with me because... well, back then I was only a kid.

Even though I grew up in a rural village, when I look back, I feel those experiences were very unique and happy. My mum raised 7 kids, so I feel my childhood was very special, very intimate, our feelings. Although both my parents have passed away, our ties stay strong.

Sometimes when I think about my mum, I really miss her. She taught us, "If you don't understand things, it doesn't matter. The most important thing is to ask someone politely. If you ask, someone will answer. You have to be courageous and just ask, then it'll be ok." Yeah. My mum was very hard working... And she would... cry very easily.

— *Just like you. Just like me.*

Yes. She was very hard working but very tender. She'd cry very easily.

Migration... It's really difficult. Really difficult. Well, I brought you 4 girls over here so you could receive an Australian education. When I look back, now that you've all finished your studies in Australia, I want to thank the Australian government and their education system. Thank you. But back then, we had a lot of hardships.

Why? Because running a Chinese restaurant meant very long working hours. Very, very long. The only way to communicate with you girls was by phone. Do your homework. Have you finished it yet? Take a shower, etc, etc. The biggest help was your eldest sister, Kitty. She was like a mother to you guys. Basically a mum. She helped us to look after you three. Yes...

With the firecrackers sounding, all the sisters are here together to celebrate the New Year.

