

## **Dead Ends, U-turns & Fresh Starts: Little Ironies of Death in Diaspora**

### **Choa Chu Kang Christian Cemetery (19 December 2006)**

19 December 2006 is on record as one of the wettest days ever noted in Singapore. On that dark drippy morning, I drive my mother (Mrs Tay Poh Luan, nee Lim) and my brother Herbert out west to the Choa Chu Kang Christian Cemetery. My mother is anxious not be late.

We arrive just before 7.30 am. We get a little lost amidst the lanes between the blocks of burial plots. Ahead, we see an improvised tent structure. A white car, belonging to my cousin Moses, and an old blue pick-up truck, belonging to the undertaker, are parked not far away. I drive up in our red car. It seems that my cousin, Moses, has beaten us to the gravesite, despite having had to bring my Aunt Mary and making a detour to pick up Janz, another cousin. Aunt Mary and Janz wait in the car together, Aunt Mary because she is on the edge of flu and Janz because she is squeamish (despite feeling the need to represent her family during this important duty). Unfurling umbrellas, Herbert and Moses escort my mother to the gravesite. I park the car and join them.

In tiny land-scarce Singapore, it has become a luxury for the dead to be buried. Many old cemeteries have been exhumed and the land has been put to other uses. A few years previously, my mother and her siblings presided over the exhumation of their grandmother (who died in 1947), an infant sister (who died in 1937), and the parents of a sister-in-law from Bidadari Cemetery. The remains were cremated and the ashes placed in respective niches at Hall 3 of the columbarium at the All Saints Presbyterian Church complex in Poh Huat Road, the same room in which the ashes of my father (David Tay Tian Swee) lie.

During late 2006, only four of the seven Lim siblings who grew into adulthood remain: Peter and my mother (who are in their 80s), Mary and Poh Chuah (who are in their late 70s). Collectively, they decide that they will exhume their parents while they are still living and before the Singapore government gives official notice to exhume the Lim graves at Choa Chu Kang. And because the family of William Lim, the baby brother who died of cancer in 1987, no longer lives in Singapore, Uncle Billy's children also asked my mother for help to exhume his body at the same time. The remains of all three people are to be cremated and the ashes also interred at the All Saints Columbarium.

### **What does it mean to be Chinese?**

I am the product of the Chinese diaspora of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when millions of people left China and migrated to Nanyang (i.e. the South Seas) and elsewhere in search of a better life overseas. I am ethnically Chinese, descending from good old Hokkien stock, my ancestors having left Fujian province over a hundred years ago. But as a third or fourth generation Singaporean (depending on which side of the family you look at), I do not feel "very" Chinese, being neither fluent in any Chinese language nor familiar with the nuances of Chinese customs.

As I was growing up, English was mostly spoken at home, with some Hokkien dialect thrown in. Being third generation, English mission school educated, I found it a chore having to learn Mandarin as a mandatory second language. Currently, I can speak more Mandarin than I can read (don't even ask me to read a Chinese newspaper—I would be clueless) and I can understand more Hokkien than I can speak the dialect. My grasp of English vs. Mandarin is such that I appreciate Shakespeare more than I will ever comprehend Tang or Ming poetry. So

I personally regard English as my true mother tongue, even though sociologists, anthropologists, linguists and Singaporean government authorities will disagree with me.

I attribute my disconnection from Chinese culture to my mother's grandmother (Lim Mui Neo), the family matriarch who changed the path of life for her grandchildren and subsequent descendents. According to my mother, Great-grandmother reached a turning point by 1931. Not only was she disappointed at how her adopted sons had turned out to be wastrels, but she was also devastated by the death of two grandchildren (precious offspring of her only daughter—my grandmother bore 11 children in all) who died within months of each other. In solace, she converted to Christianity. She threw all the statues and pictures of Chinese gods and goddesses out of the house, used her faith to go cold turkey and break her opium addiction, learnt how to read the Hokkien Bible from Genesis to Revelations even though hitherto she had been illiterate, as well as depended greatly on Jesus Christ to prolong her life and ease her sufferings during her last years as she lay dying of breast cancer. Apart from the Chinese gods and goddesses that were chucked out, I presume that Great-grandmother also disposed off such artefacts as ancestral tablets, those pieces of wood and/or stone inscribed with the names of one's ancestors and the focal point of the ancient Chinese custom of ancestral worship—such practices not being congruent with the Christian faith. Great-grandmother's zealotry eventually led to the conversion of the entire Lim family to Christianity.

In rejecting that unique Chinese blend of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, I see Great-grandmother as having inadvertently denied an integral part of Chinese belief systems and cultural practices from being transmitted to her descendents. My mother grew up in the Methodist church, met my father through the church and tried to raise her children within the church as well. Having been brought up in the Christian faith and given an English mission school education, I know more about the Holy Trinity and the Greek-Roman pantheon than Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tse, Kwan Yin, Guang Gong, the Kitchen God or Ma Tsu. Put a lighted joss stick in my hands and I have no idea what to do with it. I am bewildered by the clamour, colour and smoke of Chinese temples. I have never burned paper money for my ancestors or visited ancestral burial grounds during the Qing Ming Festival to honour the dead and clean their gravesites. I am ignorant of practices that take place during the Hungry Ghost Festival to give offerings for the wandering souls who are let out of the Chinese underworld during that month. The elaborate funeral rites for relatives and relatives of Chinese friends who believed in the old ways are more a tourist spectacle for me.

Instead, the Lim family and its descendents (and also the members of the extended Tay family that I am in contact with) practise a highly "secularised" version of Chinese culture/folk customs that has been stripped of much of its original Buddhist/Taoist/Confucianist content and overtones. Some of these simplified customs that we still carry out are as follows:

- Respect for one's elders is still important. For instance, when my sister Celena got married, she and her husband went through the Chinese tea ceremony in which they poured and served tea to their respective parents and in-laws.
- Weddings are not complete without a huge multi-tabled, multi-course Chinese feast.
- Parents commemorate the first-month celebration of a baby by passing gifts of red eggs and cake to family members and friends.
- The title by which a younger person addresses her aunt/uncle will depend on which side of the family the aunt/uncle is from and the order of birth of that particular relative within the family unit.

- The only major Chinese festival celebrated is the Chinese New Year. Before the Lunar New Year, homes are thoroughly cleaned and decorated for the festival and there is much preparation of festive food and gifts. During the first two days of the New Year, relatives and good friends visit each others' households to exchange gifts (auspicious food is passed between relatives and good friends; the married give *ang pows*, or red packets filled with money, to the unmarried) and take part in sumptuous feasts. The joy and good cheer experienced during Chinese New Year is similar to Christmas.
- During funerals (Christian, of course), immediate family members of the deceased wear black and/or white, with different coloured patches of sack cloth on the left sleeve (an echo of the ancient Chinese practice of wearing different types of sack cloth dependent on the mourner's generational status in relation to the deceased). Visitors to the wake/funeral can opt to take away a red thread which they will discard in the street before they reach home as a way of dispelling bad luck that they may have picked up while paying their respects to the deceased.

Most significantly, the sense of distance that I have from the culture of my ethnicity is manifested within the very name that I carry. My name in official documents is: Tay Siew Hui Verena. "Siew Hui" is my Chinese name, bestowed upon me, not by my paternal grandfather (as should be the usual custom), but by my maternal grandfather. Physically, it was impossible for my paternal grandfather to have named me since he died when my father was three years old. But the most marked thing about my Chinese name is that it is not a "Boon XXX", "Boon" being the common name that should have been shared amongst my generation of Tay cousins. My father was so estranged from his family (having quarrelled with his half-brothers over the Tay estate) that he refused to have his three children named "Boon XXX". Hence, my brother is Keng Joo; my sister, Siew Tee; and I, Siew Hui.

### **Choa Chu Kang Christian Cemetery (19 December 2006)**

As the rain pelts down incessantly, my mother, Herbert, Moses and I balance ourselves precariously on the tops of neighbouring grave mounds and first witness the exhumation of Lim Hai Phow, my grandfather who died in 1979. Most of the earth had already been removed from above the coffin the day before; only a cursory layer remains over which rain water floods (the impromptu tent over the gravesite only provides nominal cover against the rain). The undertaker's two young and lithe labourers take turns to move the remaining earth away and bail out water. At last the coffin lid is reached. One of the labourers carefully spreads his feet apart over the width of the coffin. With a few heavy strikes of his *chungkul*, he breaks the lid.

There is already flood water within the coffin. It seems that my grandfather's coffin has not stood the test of time. The labourer climbs out of the gravesite. Protocol forbids that he searches the coffin. Instead, with the help of his middle-aged assistant, the old arthritic, bandy-legged, shorts-and-slippers-clad Chinese undertaker steps gingerly into the coffin. The old man bends down and uses his bare hands to feel the muddy water. Slowly he brings up bits of bone, degraded clothing and grey coffin lining amidst clumps of mud. Not much is left of my grandfather—try as he may, the undertaker cannot find an intact skull or long bone. All the bones have crumbled, possibly because my grandfather had died with a poor bone structure since he was an opium addict for most of his adult life.

All debris from the coffin is first placed into a plastic basket; the bones are sifted out and placed into a black trash bag. Only when most of the bones have been picked out does the assistant enter the coffin to bail water out and help the old undertaker do a final check of the

interior of the coffin. When the coffin is empty, the old man and his assistant are helped out. The assistant discretely ties the black trash bag and carries it to the pick-up truck.

### **China => Singapore => Beyond**

I have often read that many Chinese who left China in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries intended only to stay abroad long enough to make their fortunes and then return as rich as kings to retire and die in their ancestral villages. I have often wondered if this was the case for my forebears and when it was that they decided to stay for good and die in Singapore/Malaya, either because they found that Nanyang suited them or because they were too broke to return to China.

I know of two descendents that made the journey back to China on our forebears' behalf. Boon Sheik and Boon Keng, two Tay second cousins (and two of the few Tay cousins that I have ever really known), travelled back to the Tay ancestral village somewhere in Fujian province during the early 1990s. As part of a generation that was not forced to learn Mandarin while schooling in Singapore, both brothers generally found it hard to travel about within China. But once they reached the ancestral village and spoke the Hokkien they had grown up with, they were welcomed with open arms by distant relatives whom they had never met before.

While much has been written about the diaspora out of China mentioned earlier, little has been documented about the subsequent diaspora of Chinese Singaporeans to the rest of the world. Both sides of my family are clear examples of this secondary migration of Chinese people out of Asia, their Western education and Christian upbringing easing their way into the West.

In the 1960s, Boon Sheik and his sister Boon Lin migrated with their respective spouses to the UK. They settled in Sussex and raised their families there. They are now happy grandparents.

In the 1970s, the two children of my mother's older brother, Peter, migrated to Canada. Eric and his wife Belinda and their two girls settled in Edmonton, Alberta. Anne married a Canadian and settled in Halifax, Nova Scotia; they raised two boys. Eventually, both Uncle Peter and his wife migrated to Edmonton to join Eric and his family.

In 1981, my brother Herbert migrated to Edmonton. After he received his Canadian citizenship, he studied for his MBA at Stanford and eventually settled in Los Angeles in the 1990s, getting his green card a few years later.

In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, it was the turn of Uncle Billy's children to move away and live in the UK. Educated in Canada, Janz married a British man and produced two boys. They first lived in Edinburgh, and now run a Bed & Breakfast in the Lake District. Serene, Janz's sister, moved to Scotland to pursue her dream of studying and practising physiotherapy. Teddy, their brother, also followed suit to study engineering-related courses and now he holds a PhD and does research. Both Serene and Teddy presently live in Edinburgh. Aunty Mui Ngan, Uncle Billy's wife, usually spends part of the year in Singapore and part of the year in Edinburgh. However, as her Alzheimer's Disease progresses, it is most likely that she will live permanently with her children in the UK.

Like our forebears who moved out of China, my brother and cousins migrated from Singapore in search of better opportunities. They have continued to stay in the country of their choice because they have found a lifestyle that they enjoy. And they will die and be buried or

cremated willingly in their new adopted homelands, unlike our forbears who most probably would have preferred to have been buried on Chinese soil.

While my cousins may hold fond memories of their childhood in Singapore and may occasionally visit Singapore to touch base with family and friends and eat favourite foods unavailable in the West, their only real links left to Singapore are parents, aunts and uncles who stayed behind, people of my mother's generation. And when my mother and her generation are gone, what physical ties of kinship will there be left to claim between my overseas cousins and I? And to push the existential questioning further, will these relatives and their descendents who now live in the West continue to value and practise their Asian heritage? Do they or will they ever ask the same question that I have posed myself: How Chinese am I?

### **Choa Chu Kang Christian Cemetery (19 December 2006)**

We family members and the undertakers proceed next to exhume my grandmother (Khoo Ban Git, who died in 1977) and my Uncle Billy at two different parts of the cemetery. The same procedure of exhumation is repeated in each case. The condition of my grandmother's body and coffin is better than my grandfather's. The coffin is less flooded with water and her bones are not as brittle. The undertaker is able to bring out an intact skull and some full rib, leg and arm bones. He even fishes out the jade bangle that she was buried with. He gives the bangle to my mother.

When it comes time to exhume Uncle Billy, the rain lessens momentarily to a slight drizzle. A little drama unfolds. Although her father will be unearthed next, Janz still refuses to step out of Moses' car. Instead, Aunt Mary, who had looked after Uncle Billy as a child and helped to nurse him during his last days, wants to witness the exhumation. Afraid that her sister will catch cold and more afraid that she will cause a scene during the event, my mother uses her frail body to forcibly block an even more fragile Aunt Mary from approaching Uncle Billy's gravesite.

The exhumation of Uncle Billy is slightly different. He had been buried in a better grade of coffin that is harder to break into. Perhaps because of the quality of the coffin, perhaps because he had been underground for a lesser time, and perhaps because he had died while in his early fifties, his entire skeleton is more or less preserved and the suit, shoes, socks, spectacles and watch with which he was buried are still intact. As the old undertaker steps into the muddy water of Uncle Billy's coffin, he mutters matter-of-factly in a macabre sort of way that the water temperature is warm, compared to the water found in my grandparents' coffins.

It is about 8.45 am by the time all three black trash bags of bones are placed in the pick-up truck. Before he drives to the crematorium, the undertaker discretely approaches my mother for *ang-pows* of luck money (over and above the costs of exhumation and cremation) to help he and his men ward off evil. Having forgotten to prepare for this vital gift before hand, my mother sits in our car, fishes red packets out of her handbag and borrows some money from Herbert and Moses to make up the entire amount. She gives the money to the undertaker and reconfirms that the family will meet him and the pastor at All Saints by 12 noon for the interment of the ashes.

### **The All Saints Presbyterian Church Complex**

Run by the Chinese Presbyterian Church, the All Saints Presbyterian Church complex at Poh Huat Road is located in a north-eastern suburb of Singapore. There are three distinct wings in

which the living, the dead and the dying coexist together. In the centre is a chapel, where both funeral and ordinary Sunday services are carried out. To one side of the chapel are four octagonal shaped, two-storey buildings that form the main columbarium where members of the Chinese Presbyterian Church or devout Protestants from other denominations can have their cremated ashes interred for perpetuity (or at least until economics and/or the Singaporean government closes the columbarium). On the other side of the chapel is a several-storey old folks' home cum hospice. Because niches at the original columbarium site are becoming limited in supply, the basement of the old folks' home also functions as a secondary columbarium. From the outside, the conditions at the old folks' home seem all right. But I have often wondered how the residents feel living next to and over the ashes of thousands of deceased people.

The first time I came into contact with the All Saints Columbarium was February 1996. In the middle of 1995, my father was diagnosed with lung cancer. His condition was in such an advanced stage that it was not worth operating or making him suffer rounds of unnecessary radio- or chemotherapy. The oncologist advised the family to make his remaining months as happy as possible. Within weeks, my parents were shipped off on a three-month round-the-world tour so that my father could see relatives for the last time. In the early hours of 20 February 1996, the second day of the Lunar New Year, my father passed on and he was cremated a few days later.

Prior to my father's death, my mother had often expressed her desire to be cremated and have her ashes scattered at sea when her time came. It would be less fuss over the long term than being buried, she thought—after all, who in the family would want to visit her gravesite after some time (she not having visited her own parents' graves much since their respective burials) and there would always be the eventual threat of exhumation that the family will have to deal with, given the Singaporean context. But when my father died, she succumbed to social pressure and bought a double niche at the All Saints Columbarium to hold my father's ashes and her own in due course. Every Chinese New Year since 1997 (except when I have been out of the country), I dutifully drive my mother to Poh Huat Road to pay our annual respect to my father's ashes.

Paradoxically, my father, who was at odds with the Lim family, especially his parents-in-law, for much of his married life, will now spend eternity in the company of the ashes of a fair number of the Lim clan. In September 2006, Charles Lim, Moses' father, passed on. Moses then arranged for the ashes of his father and mother (who had died a month earlier than my father) to be placed in a double niche at Hall 4A of the All Saints Columbarium. When it came time to exhume my grandparents and uncle in December 2006, Moses made all the arrangements for the interment of their ashes also in Hall 4A at the same columbarium. While at Poh Huat Road on 19 December 2006, Aunt Mary eagerly pointed out to me the niche (also in Hall 4A) that she has bought for herself.

### **The All Saints Columbarium (19 December 2006)**

The undertaker is late. The heavy rain has caused floods in various parts of Singapore, thereby affecting his access to the crematorium to cremate the remains of my grandparents and Uncle Billy. My mother, Aunt Mary, Herbert, Moses, Janz, Teddy, Aunt Mui Ngan's former pastor and church friends, and I wait patiently in Hall 4A.

Moses has chosen a double niche for our grandparents on the other side of the wall that contains his parents' ashes. Uncle Billy's niche is located a few levels below where my grandparents will be placed.

While waiting, I look at where Uncle Charlie and Aunt Lily lie—Moses has outdone himself, choosing a black marble façade engraved with gold lettering and inset with his parents' wedding picture, far more elaborate than my father's plainly engraved grey marble façade that is adorned with a photo of him holding a camera.

Finally, the undertaker arrives, fills the urns provided by All Saints with the ashes, and cements each urn. The urns are placed in their respective niches. The pastor delivers a short message. The niches are then sealed; my grandparents are covered by the engraved marble façade that Moses had already ordered; Uncle Billy's urn is covered by a temporary blank façade (Moses has not prepared anything for Uncle Billy as he did not know what Auntie Mui Ngan, Janz, Serene and Teddy would have liked). The pastor says a final prayer and the ceremony is complete. My mother then tries to give a red packet to the pastor for his services; he refuses to accept until my mother insists that he takes the money as a donation towards his church's ministry of running an orphanage in Myanmar.

### **The Present (22 September 2007)**

As I write this essay, I smile. Although Great-grandmother may have thrown out the ancestral tablets years ago when she converted to Christianity, she and her offspring (and my father) all have commemorative tablets of their own—those marble façades that cover their respective niches at the All Saints Columbarium and that are engraved with their names, the dates of their life spans, and crosses, symbols of their faith in a different God.