

"Ah Ng"

The fertile Pearl River delta southwest of Canton provided ideal conditions for the cultivation of the mulberry tree and silkworms used in the manufacture of silk. During the silk boom years around the turn of the century, this home-based industry provided ready work for many unmarried women who, unencumbered by family obligations, were able to devote their time to all stages of this ancient art. These women formed sisterhoods, opted out of marriage and worshipped the chaste goddesses Tin Hau and Kuan Yin. When the boom ended with the depression and war, these women turned to domestic service in droves, becoming the 'amahs' to well-to-do families and European expatriates in Hong Kong, Singapore and other south east Asian centres. Apart from wearing the 'samfoo', long ponytails, and black cloth shoes, they were also distinguished by their independence and commitment to celibacy.

"Ah Ng" ("Fifthborn") joined our family not long after we moved to Hong Kong as refugees when the Japanese invaded Canton in 1937. My earliest recollection was of an incident when, at age four, I was unable to extricate my head after pushing it between the iron bars of a window. "Ah Ng" came to the rescue. A slight woman, in her thirties she had a kind face and quiet demeanor. She did not have a network of other amah friends, her social life consisted mainly of engaging herself in spirited conversation when she thought nobody was within earshot. Her only relative was a brother back home in the village to whom she occasionally sends money. I can surmise that her parents did not survive the many conflicts and reprisals that shook the She showed great fondness for us children, especially little Victor, born just 2 months before the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong in December 1941. Without her loyal service, I doubt that we would have survived those dark days.

During the invasion and subsequent occupation, we were given safe haven within the large compounds of the Canossian Convent at 16 Caine Road. Ah Ng took care of us while mother was off serving as a nurse with the Red Cross during the fighting. I can vividly associate Ah Ng with two appliances: a twin cookstove made of brass with a built-in water heater in the middle and a stone mill. I can visualize Ah Ng crouched in front of the stove, blowing with all her might to get some soggy firewood to burn, to provide us with a hot meal as well as hot water for our baths. The primitive mill, a heavy round piece of granite rotated by hand on a central peg of its base, not only provided pureed food for infant Victor, but also, when the ingredients were forthcoming: soy milk, wheat flour, rice flour, even peanut butter! One of the Italian nuns would occasionally bring us a couple of eggs hidden in the pocket of her habit. The contents of the eggs went to Victor, and mother had the ingenious idea of having Ah Ng grind up the egg shells for Elisa and I to provide us with some dietary calcium! We swallowed the gritty powder dutifully but I doubt that it did me any good, judging from my stature!

During those early months after the invasion, several other families were housed in fairly close quarters with us. In the next room was a wealthy family who owned the bus company before the war. Mrs. Ngan approached me one day seeking my help because some of her valuable jade jewellery had mysteriously disappeared. She somehow convinced me, a six year-old at the time, that Ah Ng was the culprit. I led her to Ah Ng's trunk, and I watched as she rummaged through its contents: a threadbare jacket, some old clothes, a faded photograph, a double sided comb, and a round cigarette tin with something within it that rattled when shaken. Her eyes lit up as she opened the tin, allowing the precious contents to tumble out: a handful of mouldy peanuts! I never could bring myself to tell Ah Ng what I had done.

Shortly after the Japanese occupation, dad left us under cover of darkness. We learned later that the Japanese military authorities knew of his work, and were seeking him out to make a statue of the conquering general for a military shrine that was being planned for Hong Kong. For them, this was now part of the Japanese empire forever - and we all had to learn Japanese in school. While mother busied herself to earn some money with her sewing late into the night (she made beautifully embroidered woolen sweaters that were sold at Lane Crawford's on consignment) or giving tuition in French (her pupils included Mr. Yoshikawa, a Japanese officer and, uncharacteristically also a gentleman who impressed us with his gifts of rice dumplings and fruit) faithful Ah Ng took over caring for us. We subsisted mostly on sweet potatoes and the leaves of the same plant. Victor did not see his first apple till he was 4!

When we were lucky enough to have soup bones, we took turns treating ourselves to the delicious bone marrow which we freed up using a chopstick. A shop in Canton owned by us was sold on our behalf by a relative, for a barrel full of Chinese money. By the time this "Dai Yeung" reached us, inflation was such that it bought us two sacks of rice, two bottles of cod liver oil and several long bars of crude soap! This was to become a recurring bone of contention for Dad. Little did he realize that mother was able to keep us alive with the rice. There was no fat in our diet, so the cod liver oil, which was doled out to us a few drops a day, provided us with the essential vitamins A and D! The soap also came in handy when mother used to scrub me down repeatedly to cure me of a horrible case of furunculosis (generalised skin involvement with pustules). She later confided that she could barely hold back the tears for having had to inflict such a ruthless, though effective therapy. My mother would have made a great surgeon!

In September 1943 Italy surrendered to the Allies. Suddenly, mother, an Italian national, found herself a citizen of the enemy rather than an ally of the Japanese. We were thus interned under guards in the top floor of a building on the waterfront, ostensibly for our own protection. We had to leave Ah Ng with the nuns. She would come and stand on the pier. We looked out the window at each other not daring to wave in case we were being observed. I remember playing on the rooftop, under the watchful eye of a young armed Japanese conscript. We did not really mind that confinement so much, because for once we had regular cooked meals. Alas, it did not take long for them to realize that a woman in her thirties with three small children was not exactly a security threat to Imperial Japan, and we were released.

A letter to father delivered through the kindness of Mr. Yoshikawa:

"1943 My dear Goon,

Some weeks ago, Ah Fee received your letter and gave me the part that you wrote to me and the children. We were very happy to hear that you are well again. I hoped to receive some money from you but the month is over and nothing has come. From the shop money, I have spent 6200 M.Y. You tell Ah Fee to keep five thousands for himself, two thousands five hundred went to Tai Kung (who wanted more) one thousand five hundred to the broker - now you can see that there is nothing left. In March, Victor was very very ill with bronchopneumonia, the child got it because left at home by himself while I had to go out to teach. He was sick three months, I had to give up teaching and with the help of God and of the doctor I nursed him back to health. All the nuns and people in the convent were so kind and helpful and everybody was frightened that the child was too ill to live. He had also whooping cough. When he got well he was so thin he could not walk anymore, it was was lucky that the shop could be sold and I could give him some beef soup and eggs and tonics. It was lucky also that you sent about 490 MY monthly, with that I gave Anthony and Elisa some better food. Ah Fee gave me always small amounts by small amounts. I could never make provisions by the time the money came again, the foodstuff was worth three times as much. Now I need MY1000 only for rice monthly. We use about 2 catties and half daily, we live only on rice now, and some vegetable, sweet potatoes are too dear for me to buy. Meat was cheap two weeks ago but I could not buy any. I told the children if Daddy sends money I will buy some meat and some eggs for you. The meat has gone up again and they and they have not had any. I make the money last as long as I can but Anthony and Elisa look very pale and thin. I wonder how long can we live only on rice and vegetables alone. I see that Ah Fee is not pleased to give me money after you told him that he may keep 5000, last time he told me, how much you want? I must sell the goods to give you the money. He is talking of selling our house now. I hope that you can send us money so not to be forced to do that. On the other hand I have to feed the children and myself, and Ah Fee has always been kind and helpful to me, only you can't imagine what difficult times are these and how terrible it is to be hungry. Elisa is in better health than Anthony - he does not grow, he should have a little better nourishment. Victor is very tall for his age and he always asks me "where is my Daddy" and how many Daddy he has. It breaks my heart " The war dragged on. The Japanese were losing the Pacific war. Hong Kong was bombed regularly by American B29's flying high and dropping their carpet bombs and incendiary bombs meant for the naval dockyards. My collection of schrapnel was growing. At classes, another seat would be vacant, the consequence of yet another stray bomb. Food was getting scarce, the provisions had run out. As a ten year old, one does not notice such things, but a photograph I came across years later showed mother looking gaunt and thin, with the hauntingly large eyes of the

starving. Mother and Ah Ng always ate after us children. We later learned that they often did not eat at all. This eventually took its toll, and mother began to behave bizzarely. She would stand gazing out the window for hours, not responding to anyone. At night, she would be up and down, with Ah Ng sleeping on the floor beside her, trying to pacify her. For nights on end, poor Ah Ng had to go through the motions of kneeling in prayer with mother, crucifix pressed so hard to her forehead till it left its mark, ranting that something terrible was about to happen. In retrospect, this episode was easily diagnosed: mother had Wernicke's encephalopathy, a brain disorder caused by deficiency of the vitamin thiamine, and she rapidly recovered after some rest and treatment. Harder to explain is the fact that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki occurred within days.

That Ah Ng survived all that unscathed showed her toughness. On one occasion, after the war, while we lived on Mosque St., our dog "Bobby" (every optimistic dog nowadays hoped for another Blackfriars Bobby!) suffered a fractured leg after an altercation with a car. Ah Ng carried Bobby, a good sized dog, all the way up the steep Mosque Street from the vet till her arms went numb, such was her stamina. Alas, a year later, our beloved Ah Ng came down with a mysterious illness which took her life. It came out of the blue and progressed rapidly. Looking back, with what I know now, I suspect she had liver cancer, so common among the southern Chinese. Sun Yat Sen died young of the same cancer, which we now know can be caused by Aflatoxin, a carcinogen found in mouldy peanuts...

Today, every Sunday, you can see hordes of Phillipino nannies meeting around the Courthouse grounds near the Star Ferry in Hong Kong. Gone are the Amahs of old who were so often our guardian angels.