

THE VILLAGE

On arrival by boat in 1931 to China from Italy, my father's first duty was to visit his ancestral village and to pay respect to his elders. He had brought his Italian wife home. A home he had left 23 years before. His parents had passed away during those years and he had a black and white photograph of his father's funeral, taken of the large crowd, likely comprising everyone in the village. The photographer had to be standing near the top of the watch tower as this was a view from high above. His father was a government official in the Qing dynasty. He had been a scholar and poet and obtained his commission after success in the confucian system of examinations. We do not know if he worked in the district of Toishan or if he was in Canton.

Mother's account of the Village was that it consisted of a grouping of houses with black brick walls and tiled roofs with ornamental figures along the roof lines with animal figurines in porcelain at the ends. An outer wall surrounded the village and a waterway separated it from the approaching road, somewhat in the form of a moat. Beyond the gates was the court yard where a towering structure 7 stories tall with slit windows and iron shutters. She later learned that it was a defense structure for the villagers in times of attack, which occurred with some frequency, by bandits. Much like medieval towers in Europe, the defenders could fire at the attackers through the slits and the harvest was safely kept inside. The village was surrounded by paddy rice fields and the landscape was framed by a bamboo forest in the back of the compound and by rolling green hills in the distance.

At that time, the head of the village was an uncle, who, on hearing of his nephew's return after so many years in America with a foreign wife, was not prepared to welcome them into the village. He had been a magistrate and in his studies and work knew some Italian history. So, when he learned that she was Italian he mellowed and came out to welcome them saying "Come sta".

The days in the village were not easy for the young Italian bride from Capri. Curious crowds of young and old would come up to her touching her brown hair or skin and clothes and speak in a language she did not understand. They had never seen a European woman before.

On her part she was not used to sitting down to dinner with good intentioned relatives serving her bowl with food using chopsticks they had just put in their mouths.

She would go out for a walk in the morning and be followed by children calling out to her. Her response was to hand out coins with a centre perforation "Kum Chin" that she carried around with a string. This she did until one day father asked her why she was giving away money. "They greet me every morning". To this he replied. "They are calling you Foreign devil woman!"

In 2003 I was motivated to seek this ancestral village by a passage in the preface to the book of works by our father which gave "Toishan, Ping On Village" his origin. With the help of a few friends I made my way to Chung Shan and then hired a car to Toi shan where in Toi Sing (capital of the district) I was met by a Mr. Chan, a relative of a patient of mine who had done some home work in locationing the right Ping On Village as there were 4. This was with the help of the district representative and the representative for returning chinese. My having a copy of the geneology family tree helped pin point the correct village and the four of us drove south of the capitol seeking. As fate would have it, the driver almost drove past the village and it was I who saw the sign "Ping On" on the front wall of the ancestral hall.

The village chief was called when I claimed to be a returning member of the village. He and the rest of the villagers, including a 92 year old lady and children returning home from school, could not understand how that could be as I look western "Lau Wei". I showed him the copy of our geneology and he fetched the original. Both listed my father as 24th generation married to an italian lady. Their two

sons, my brother and I were also listed. Father had registered us at birth. Time appeared to have stood still. Apart from some renovation to the Ancestral hall, damaged by the red guard during the cultural revolution, the village houses, the tower, the bamboo forest was as mother had described them. The paddy fields were still being farmed though the workers, I was told, were migrant workers from the North. The locals simply leased the land out.