

Victor's Odyssey

No matter where a "Chinaman" finds himself, his heart is never far from his birthplace. This fact is well illustrated by Chun Ah Chun, who as a young man, left his native South China to work in the sugar cane fields of Hawaii in the 1850's. His boundless energy and keen sense of business eventually made him a multimillionaire and a prominent member of society. In his sixties, he announced to his Caucasian wife and their many offspring that he was returning to China, reassuring them that they had all been well provided for. Taking leave of all his Hawaiian attachments, he returned to the mud huts and dirt roads of Toishan, his native village near Canton where he spent the rest of his days*. *(Ah Chun's life was the basis of a short story written by the American novelist, Jack London.) So when Victor suddenly announced in the Spring of 2004 that he was going to China, it was with some trepidation that I enquired about his intentions. "Oh, just to visit Hong Kong (where he was born), Canton (where I and our sister Elisa were born) and Ping On Village (where our father was born) and to attend to the unresolved matter of Daddy's properties in Canton." He even kindly invited me to join him, but I felt that my presence would detract from the nostalgia of this very personal journey. So off he went on his own, armed with camera and tape recorder, documents and photographs and the enthusiasm for his homeland that lurks within the heart of every overseas Chinese.

A little background: My little brother was born in October, just weeks before the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong, in a surprise attack a day after Pearl Harbour. As a six year old, I was thrilled when the baby grabbed my finger tightly: "he knows me!" I delighted, not knowing about the "grasp reflex" possessed by every newborn. We are sufficiently different in ages that there was never any fraternal rivalry between us. Furthermore, we are two very different people, our only similarity being that we our voices sound the same. Victor is outgoing while I am reclusive; he loves athletics while I prefer to tinker, he has bursts of energy while I tend to be stolid, he is money smart while I am not and the list goes on. His shrewdness with money was first displayed in early childhood since he was the only one who always had money in his pocket, and he never let you forget what you owed him! My need to be a big brother was largely obviated by Elisa, who was his protector and mentor. I had to fink on him for some of his more serious derring do's, such as jumping between highrise rooftops, or balancing himself precariously along the edge of a sixty foot parapet. I can only recall one occasion when I had to bloody a bully's nose on his behalf. I believe I did have an influence upon him during his medical school years. A couple of incidents come to mind. Two years into their medical studies, Victor and a bunch of his classmates were expelled from the university for taking part in "ragging" of freshmen students at their hostel. Indeed there was treachery on the part of Father Harris, warden of the hostel, who chose to take the extreme measure for something that was a harmless tradition. All the desperate parental appeals were met with a stone wall. I met with the agrieved young men. I told them that they were rightfully indignant at their undeservedly severe punishment but that this was no time for anger or name calling. Yes, Fr Harris was a "smiling tiger" but protests would get them nowhere. I believe my words were: "You all have to humble yourselves and grovel a little, you can kick ass later!" I don't know if the humility worked, but during their final appeal in front of Dr. Ride, the Vice-Chancellor of the university, there was no sign that he was going to give them a reprieve, until Victor happened to recognize a couple of Dad's art-work in the office and said, "my dad did those" - whereupon Dr. Ride's demeanor changed. The boys were reinstated. I remember the piece which dad made for Dr. Ride of a statuette of an infantryman aiming his rifle - yet nother example of dad's invisible hand guiding us, which harkens me back to the time when dad, unable to speak after his stroke that took his life later, put Victor's hand in mine in a symbolic gesture. The other occasion when I might have had an influence was when Victor went to pieces just before "2nd MB", a tough examination in anatomy that was absolutely required to continue. "I can't take the examination, I know nothing!" So I sat him down, pointed to his upper arm and asked, "what bone is this?" "The humerus" came the answer, and I pointed to the forearm, and the wrist, and the tiny carpal bones, and he was able to name every single one in correct order! Then I asked him a couple of difficult questions, and he knew the answers to them too! Needless to say, he passed the examination. I clearly remember the day he announced that he had passed his final medical degree examinations with

distinctions, with the remark which betrayed the only hint of rivalry I can recall: "see I am as good as you!!" - which instead of irking, delighted me no end. Looking back, I sometimes wonder how he did it, since his lecture notes showed more doodling and caricatures of the professors than lecture material! His interest in kidney ailments was acquired from the New England Deaconess Hospital in Boston where he served his internship. On completion, he came away to British Columbia in 1969 with another acquisition: a pretty young bride. The Judy-and-Victor clan has now grown by five, with two more on the way! Victor managed to continue painting watercolors (he inherited all the talent) while maintaining a full practice in nephrology. The rest of his free time is spent on the ski slopes, golf links or tennis courts.

As the flight to Hong Kong landed at the new airport, Victor decided that he would be remain unannounced to his friends to to avoid time consuming socializing. He proceeded to travel to Guangzhou (Canton) on the Kowloon Canton Railway, the same railway on which, 67 years earlier, Dad and his young family fled to Hong Kong as refugees from the Japanese invasion of 1937. Canton was much more built-up and modern than he recalled from his last visit in the eighties. The weather was perfect, as the stifling heat and humidity of late Spring had not yet arrived. Through the kindness of a Mr. Au Yeung of Vancouver, Victor was provided with a chauffeur driven car which took him the two and a half hour drive to the village of Dad's birth, the Ping On Chuen or "Village of Peace". Unlike the cities, the village showed its age, and little had been done to upgrade or beautify save the application of rather incongruous colored tiles over doorways and facades. Standing at the entrance to the walled village, he could see the surrounding paddy fields lush with a new crop, and beyond them the hilly countryside, with scattered bamboo groves here and there. The buildings were of brick and mortar, the iron bars on the windows dripped rust stains down the sides. The observation tower bears closer scrutiny. Six stories high, this four sided struction supports a covered observation deck, the roof being decorated with elaborate cornices and finials. Two turret like structures supported small stone lions. The sides of the deck was also decorated with ceramic tiles depicting dogs and other animals. The roof was capped with a pinnacle flanked on both sides by two structures pointing to the heavens. The tower itself sported many portholes, through which shooters could fire their arrows or guns. Everything was undisturbed except for the ravages of time. Victor thought that it would have been a magnificent sight in it's heyday and learned later that this, and many other landmarks of the village, were funded by remittance money sent by villagers who did well in "Gold Mountain" in the 19th century. Victor stood silent for a time, savouring the sight. But for the overhead electric cables, and the occasional buzzing of a moped, this would have been the way it was when Dad spent his childhood here. He was then taken to the ancestral hall, another old structure which had received a recent facelift by the addition of some glazed colored tiles over the entranceway, quite incongruous to the original structure, thought Victor. He was introduced to the village administrator, who seemed reserved at first but quickly warmed up to Victor when he explained in Cantonese that this was his father's "goo heung" or "old village". Mr. Chan barked instructions to his assistants to get the genealogy charts and to seek out oldtimers who might have memories about Dad. The charts were duly produced, and he was able to find the entry of Dad's family, 24th generation on record, with a notation that he had married an Italian. Victor took the opportunity to update the chart, adding our children's names. As to living memory, alas they drew a blank; afterall a century has elapsed since Dad left as a fourteen year old boy in 1906. As the old Chinese saying goes, "The mountains and rivers remain as of old, but all the faces are no more!" Victor spent another hour under the cooling shade of an old banyan tree, where a small crowd had gathered to look through the catalogues of Dad's work. After posing for photographs and leaving a donation to the village, he bade them farewell. As his car sped back towards Canton, Victor felt satisfied that he had fulfilled a very important dream.

Poon Hok is China's pre-eminent sculptor and professor at the Canton Art Institute. His works adorn many public edifices all over China, mostly depicting revolutionary themes. His work is bold, larger than life and in my opinion somewhat idealized due probably to the strictures of the times. Today, a deceptively youthful looking man of 81 he enjoys the luxury of having his own sculpture display in a parklike setting and is able to indulge in subjects of his choosing, like lions in different poses, and giant hands supporting a coffee table. As a young Cantonese in 1940-41 he had heard of Dad when he enrolled in the Canton School of Art. His study was derailed by WWII when his family took refuge in

by Haydenfoil
JUNG SHAN
with his
high school
classmate
at whose
apartment
he spent
the night

Macao. After the war, the young man did seek Dad out in 1947 and by his account, spent a memorable day with dad in his studio on Caine Road where he had a chance to view many of Dad's work. Further contact was prevented by the "liberation" of China two years later. Being from a well-to-do family, they were subjected to confiscation, public humiliation and Poon himself was imprisoned for over a year simply for being one of the "intelligentsia" during the Cultural Revolution in the late sixties. But he persevered and soon gained the reputation he deserved. He received Victor warmly, remembers Dad well and had many stories to tell. Victor gave him a copy of Dad's catalogue as he pledged to register it with the Canton Institute of Art archives. At least Dad's memory lives on in the city he loved.

Next, Victor set himself the task of finding the house our parents owned on 38 Wayau Hou Jie, and to see if there was any recourse or claim possible. After going through many agencies, he was taken to the place. It was on a quiet treelined street of thirties style buildings now a ramshackle building site with only the foundations and some rebars jutting from the ground. He met an old man nearby who had lived in the vicinity since 1948. The gentleman stated that the original house was demolished during the Japanese occupation and the area used as a parade ground. A subsequent building project was abandoned due to lack of funds. With difficulty, Victor found the land registry office where he was told that once a site is vacant, it reverts to government ownership. If nothing else, this gives us closure over this matter.

Back in Hong Kong, Victor had the rare opportunity of spending time with one of Dad's contemporaries, the noted artist Yeung Sin Sum. Born in 1913, he must have been the youngest among the group which is now well known as the Ling Nam Group of artists (much like Canada's Group of Seven). He received Victor with great excitement, and had much to say about Dad and his work. He repeatedly asserted that Dad was the foremost sculptor of his time, "yat lau" or "first class" in Cantonese. Pressed about his recollection of Dad, he said that Dad was very quiet, but he spoke volumes through his art. He said that Dad's portraits showed uncanny likeness which also conveyed the spirit of the person, all done with artistic flair. As a 91 year old in failing health, Mr. Yeung had a remarkable memory in naming many of the people depicted among Dad's busts illustrated in his catalogue. Among them was a bust of Chiu Siu Ngong, the leader of the Ling Nam Group. He also was well acquainted with Bau Siu Yau, Victor's own art teacher. So there was a meeting of minds. Victor even unabashedly shared his trick of using sprinkled salt on his watercolors to achieve a stippled effect, and Mr. Yeung graciously enthused over it. He also commented about Victor's watercolors, about their exquisite delicacy and spontaneity. By all accounts, it was a memorable day for both, and a fortuitous one, since Mr. Yeung passed away a few months later.

Victor's final task was to find and photograph some of Dad's works on public display. This quest brought him in touch with the son of Mr. Chiu, the famous artist. Unfortunately, the bust of his father had been sold but Victor was able to get some information about Guangchow where Dad spent the war years and was able to continue his work in obscurity. Robert Kotewall's bust was in the public library in Causwaybay. Finally, he found himself in the plush boardroom of the Faculty of Medicine on Sassoon road. The bas relief of Dr. Sun Yat Sen, the first graduate of the Faculty, was prominently displayed after it was donated to the university by mother at the School's centenary. I will wager that young Dr. Sun's lecture notes contained no doodles or caricatures, but lots of notes about the *Three Principles of the People* which he was developing at the time; for soon after graduating he devoted his full energy to revolution.

As the plane took off, Victor could see below him the two symbols of modern China: the world's longest suspension bridge and its largest Buddah, symbols of technological advance and ancient tradition side by side. Can China balance the two and recapture it's greatness? Is this China's century? Time will tell.