As For Going Abroad

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In Memory of Mr. Iàp Tāu Kì

I went back to Tâilâm to say farewell to friends and family just before I went abroad, in the summer of ’65. Early in the morning on my last day there, I went to the temple yard to get some of Old Kankhó’s peanut *chàng* — my grandmother’s favorite, when she was alive. I was going to stop by her grave.

The ever-bustling courtyard of the temple of Siōngtè was deserted. New signage at the temple doorway read, roughly, “Anti-Communist China Youth Corps Service Center.”

I stepped inside. The temple was nearly empty. There was a desk and two old boys wearing Sun Yat-sen — or Mao — suits, fooling around with a lady wearing a good bit of makeup. She looked like a dancer with a propaganda troupe. They were having their way with her some. I asked where the *chàng* vendor had gone. They didn’t bother to answer. They pointed at some books on the desk and went back to whatever they were doing.

I turned and went behind the temple. Chîⁿ — *Money* — was sweeping the grounds. He was the temple keeper. He was my best friend from grade school. His folks didn’t have the money to keep him in school past grade school, so he dropped out to work at the temple. Chîⁿ told me what happened the morning of the mass arrests. First, a district officer came by to announce a new rule: No hawker stalls at the temple. Everyone was going to have to move.

The hawkers stood their ground and met the ultimatum with abuse. “Who’s moving?” taunted Old Kankhó. “Old Tân-Khó or you? Snotface! I was right here selling *chàng* when you were in dirty diapers. So move my big fat dick!”

Nobody left. The officer left and came back with officers with clubs. One tried to carry off Kankhó’s *chàng.* The old man saw red and poled him full strength in the head. The cop collapsed in writhing pain.

He must have thought Kankhó wouldn't dare. Now Hóe jumped in swinging. The police had tipped over his spread of relish and things. He was riled up. But the police had the numbers and would not be denied. They had their way and hauled everybody off, except Châi the *bíko* man. He'd been a step ahead and got away in time. So pretty soon the China Youth Corps took over the temple and everybody had to move over to Park Street.

I left the temple and cut over to Park Street. The lordly *iâm sng* mulberry trees lining both sides of the street had just given fruit prodigiously. The air was thick with the tang of the berries. I used to eat the *iâm sng* berries when I was a kid, right here on Park Street.

Soon enough I saw Old Kankhó selling *chàng* under a tree. Business was brisk as always. He saw me and had me sit. Chu — *Pearls*, his daughter — unwrapped a *chàng* and brought it over to me. She was seventeen. Her eyes were lovelier than her namesake, or any other turn of phrase. She was my crush. I loved her in secret, and I would never let her know.

I took in the sight of that *chàng* — the orbs of peanuts, the blond sticky grains, the dark blanket of soy gravy, the bright minced garlic, the green petals of cilantro … enmeshed in a scent of *chàng* leaves and steam and gauze, yielding a fragrance that words cannot name. Such were Old Kankhó's *chàng*, first sold by his grandfather in the Siōngtè temple yard going back to Japanese times. Now Old Kankhó was born a Khó, but he had been adopted into a clan Tân by way of marriage. That made him a Tân-Khó, but tongues slipped over time and folks took to calling him Kankhó — *Hard Luck*.

Old Kankhó came over when the action lulled. He knew I was going abroad. He was glad, for my sake. "Can't beat going abroad for you young ones," he said. "I heard America is rich. Rich! Why don't you go for a look-see, see how they got so rich?"

"It's their political system," I said. "That's why they're rich." I was fresh out of college. I knew it all.

Old Kankhó chuckled. "Well, why don't you go get a Ph.D. in politics then? You can be mayor when you get back. See if you can make us all rich."

I laughed a little to myself at that. I asked about what had

happened at the temple. Old Kankhó̍ shook his head. He paused, then said, “Is there a China Youth Corps in America?”

I finished my *chàng*. Kankhó̍ wouldn’t take my money. “Pay up when you get back from America, if I’m still here.” He gave me three more *chàng* to bring to my *amá*’s grave.

He remembered. She loved their peanut *chàng*. She used to buy them every morning. After she fell ill, my folks wouldn’t let her have her *chàng* because *chàng* are made with sticky rice and sticky rice doesn’t play nice with medications, or so they said. So she funded me and had me smuggle *chàng* home in my bookbag. We’d finish them in her room, one for her and one for me. She was happy when she could have her *chàng*. They revived her. It was almost like they made her well.

“Iông,” she said one day, “when I’m gone, don’t bother with all the other stuff on my *kī* days, my memorial days. Just get peanut *chàng*.” She laughed at herself. She told me to wipe my mouth and go back out.

After Amá passed, I went up to North City Tâipak to further my studies. I was rarely in Tâilâm on her memorial days. And then I went abroad. Twenty-odd years went by in a flash — twenty-some long years, to be sure, without a taste of Old Kankhó̍’s *chàng* or anything like them.

And then that day came. I was back in Formosa again, on a train bound for Tâilâm. My hometown. I got off and walked out of the station past Tâilâm Hospital. The open sewer was full of trash and stench, as it had been over twenty years ago. When I got to Park Street, I barely knew where I was. The mulberry trees were gone, to the last tree. Buildings large and small lined the street. The little stone library at the intersection where I used to love to go was gone. A seven-story department store had taken its place. The old oasis of greenery and quiet had given way to the pressing noise and stink of a gridlock of people, cars, motorbikes, trucks….

I crossed Park Street and stepped into the Siōngtè temple. Two men were playing chess inside. I asked the middle-aged man in shorts if he knew where Chîⁿ the temple keeper might be. He said he was Chîⁿ! I did a double-take. I did not recognize my classmate and best friend of old. He was thin and worn, halting of speech, devoid of vigor. But he recognized me. It was a glad reunion. He took me to his place, in the alley behind the temple. He was married with kids, but he had been in

poor health. Something was wrong with his liver. He introduced his wife — none other than Chu! Old Kankhó͘'s daughter, my secret flame. She looked just the way I remembered her, eyes finer than pearls or anything else. The years had not changed her.

The three of us sat together in that sheet-metal shack and talked about the old days, before I went abroad. Chu said she remembered how I would smuggle *chàng* home in my bookbag. I asked her if she still sold *chàng*. She said she quit after her father passed. She didn't have it in her to make them anymore. I asked about her father. She said not long after I left, someone started a rumor that it was Old Kankhó͘, erstwhile Siōngtè temple *chàng* man, who had buried Thng Tek Chiong.

Mr. Thng Tek Chiong had been executed in the days following February 28, 1947 — at the *chio̍hsiōng* park, as we called it, where the statue of Kodama Gentarō stood. I remember his body lay there for three days and three nights. No one dared collect it.

Now once the rumor spread, Old Kankhó͘ was subjected to frequent questioning and badgering by plain-clothes officers at his home. Some time later, he was run over on Park Street by a ten-wheeler, right by the tree where he served his customers, *chàng* flying everywhere on impact.

I was overcome with dismay and anguish. I stood and took leave of my friends. I tried to give Chu the money I owed Old Kankhó͘. She wouldn't let me. Chî^{n} came looking for me the next day, though. He handed me a string of *chàng*. He said Chu knew I must have missed her father's *chàng*, living abroad all this time, so she made some just for me.

The scent of Old Kankhó͘'s *chàng* filled the air around me. My heart was as heavy as the *chàng*. For all the time I had been away, a salt-of-the-earth have-not like Chî^{n} — or Chu, who hadn't had it in her to make *chàng* for who knows how long.... They welcomed me. My hometown had kept a light on for me.

Chàng in hand, I slowly made my way past Khai Goân Temple and the old south gate of the city to where Amá — and Old Kankhó͘ — were buried. It was high noon when I got there, and the sun was fierce. I came upon Old Kankhó͘'s grave next to a *gio̍klân* Champa tree. I laid the *chàng* at his grave and sat down under the tree.

The white *giȯklân* champaca flowers were in bloom. I had not known the smell of *giȯklân* for years and years. Its scent now flooded my consciousness along with the people and things I had missed most since I went away. I saw my dead *amá* in my mind's eye, and the lordly mulberry trees on Park Street. I saw our beloved little library, and an old guy selling *chàng*. Now I realized they were persons and things of the past. They were gone, with their joys and their sorrows, their virtues and vices. But they were still bound to us, for the history of Tâioân and the patterns of its humanity had been handed down to the next generation, and we were now its keepers.

In time I chanced upon the knowledge that it was not Old Kankhó͘, Siōngtè temple *chàng* man, who had buried Mr. Thng Tek Chiong in the dark days that followed February 28. Rather, it was Mr. Iȧp Tāu Kì, keeper of the Tāitōkong temple. He would have been around eighty at the time. A descendant of his told me this in person. Unfortunately, he did not know where his forebear had buried Mr. Thng Tek Chiong.

I have hereby chronicled this slice of Tâilâm history, on one hand to commemorate the courage of Mr. Iȧp Tāu Kì, and on the other to introduce these matters into the public record. For someone may read these lines who knows where Mr. Thng Tek Chiong, martyr of February 28, now lies.