

Our Dearest Mom

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Preface

Thank you for taking time to read my mother's biography. She lived 92 years. It was not a short life by any account. But she passed away so unexpectedly that I was not prepared at all for her death. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was not allowed to visit her freely in the hospital after I rushed back to Taiwan. I saw her four times (each time 30 minutes) before she left us, but the last time, she couldn't have been aware that I was there. The first time I saw her in the hospital, she was alert and she squeezed my hand when I held hers. I sang into her ear the song that was playing on the radio, and she sang part of the song with me. She smiled warmly as usual. I really thought she was going to make it just like she did many times before.

To write my mother's biography not only helped me to ease the pain and sorrow of losing her but also allowed me to understand her better. I knew pieces of Mom's past, but they were like loose puzzle pieces. Writing her biography put all the pieces together and let me see the bigger picture. This book purposely leaves blank pages for readers to add their own notes. I believe my mother's story was representative of most of the Chinese people of her generation. They were forced to leave China and to start a new life in Taiwan. While building their new lives, they also built Taiwan. So many unsung heroes: they are the greatest generation.

Early Life

February 18, 1930, a chilly day in early spring, a baby girl the size of a kitten was born prematurely in the city of Wuchang (武昌), the capital city of Hubei province in central China. Everyone said this baby would not make it. Her mother was only 16 years old and had no idea how to care for this tiny infant. Her grandmother wrapped her in a soft old cloth and put her in a bamboo basket, which she placed near the kitchen stove.

Against all odds, the baby lived to become a beautiful girl. Growing up, Mom was closer to her grandmother than she was to her own mother. Another person she was close to was the housekeeper Chiau Ma (喬媽). Chiau Ma and Chiau Pa (喬爸) were live-in helpers. Chiau Ma either held Mom in her arm or carried her on her back everywhere they went. The soles of Mom's shoes never got dirty until she started grade school. Chiau Ma simply adored her little mistress.

Grandpa served as the secretary for the provincial governor and was very fond of his first-born daughter. Every time he left on a business trip, he would buy new clothes and shoes for her. Mom would happily put on the new clothes and shoes and then skip around in the neighborhood, sort of to show off just like any little girl would do. She told us many times that her childhood home address was Wuchang City, Long Lake Bank, East Sea Zone, #2 (武昌市長湖堤東海區2號), as if she expected

that one day we would visit her hometown in mainland China. Sometimes, it seemed like she was worried that she would forget her old address. There really was a lake right in front of Mom's house. She remembered that her family and the neighborhood residents used to harvest lotus roots and water chestnuts from the lake and they tasted very good.

Mom was born with a silver spoon in her mouth, raised in an affluent household until she turned eight years old. Every thing changed when Japan invaded China in 1937. Overnight, all of China fell into a state of misery. At this time, Mom was a second grader in elementary school (四維國小). Often in the middle of class, the air sirens would sound and everyone would hurriedly crowd into a concrete shelter. When they came out, they found body parts hanging on the trees. Mom described seeing birds picking at dead people's intestines and dogs fighting over a human limb. After the bombing intensified, she fled with her family to the mountains.

It was during this time that Grandpa died. On his deathbed, he asked his personal assistant, a Mr. Kuo (郭化昌), to take care of his family. After Grandpa died, Grandma remarried to Mr. Kuo. Mom and her siblings all changed their last name to Kuo. Her biological father's family name was Zhan (詹). Grandpa Zhan was buried in a simple grave on a mountain. Throughout her life, Mom always wanted to find Grandpa's grave to give him a proper burial, but that became impractical after fleeing to Taiwan when the KMT retreated there after losing to the Communists in 1949. When Mom first arrived Taiwan,

the commander-in-chief of the army was her cousin. However, he refused to help her when she went to him for help. Perhaps he was upset about the change of the family name.

Mom was 16 when Japan surrendered. For most children, the years from 8 to 16 should be carefree and joyful, but Mom spent these eight years in constant fear and despair. As an adult, she refused to take medications made in Japan when she was sick. That was how much she hated the Japanese. However, she changed her mind about the Japanese people after a visit one year by a group of Japanese Christians to her church in Taiwan. Realizing that the Japanese also love God and were loved by God, she changed her mind about the Japanese people.

First Love & Married Life

At age 15, Mom fell in love with her art teacher, a Mr. Du (杜經武). That was a big no-no because art teacher was not considered a good profession. Grandma asked a matchmaker to find a more acceptable suitor for Mom. After screening, two potential suitors remained. One was a Mr. Zhou (周), and the other was Mr. Chang (張) - our Dad. Mom watched from behind a screen, as they were being interviewed. She preferred Mr. Zhou because she found him to be better looking. He was Muslim, however, so Grandma told Mom: "If you marry him, you can never eat pork again." Thanks to Allah, Dad emerged as the winner. *Honestly, I suspect that Grandma preferred Dad for other more practical reasons.*

Dad had just buried his wife, who died during childbirth. Dad visited her grave regularly, which involved passing by Mom's house. Grandma said that if this man is so good to his deceased wife then he would certainly be good to his living wife. Since Grandpa Zhan had recently died and Grandpa Kuo had just married his late employer's wife, the final decision as to whom Mom would marry was left to Great-Grandma because she was the most senior member of the family. It turned out that she made a good choice: Mr. Zhou ended up marrying Mom's classmate and in middle age had an affair, driving his wife into depression.

Dad's family home was in the countryside in Anhui (安徽) province. It was a seven-layered courtyard complex (七進院) built by the Qing Dynasty emperor and given to Dad's grandfather (張錫嶸)¹ as a gift. Dad's grandfather was a member of the Han Lin (翰林) Academy and taught the emperor when he was a young prince. The entire Chang clan lived here.

In those days, in rural areas like Dad's hometown, people made basic necessities, including clothes ad shoes, using their own hands. Growing up in a big city, Mom had not learned to make such things with her hands. Dad's hometown was in the northern part of China where flour was the main food staple, while Mom grew up in the south where rice was the staple. Mom was not familiar with flour, nor did she know how to make food with it. Some members of the clan laughed at her, saying that she was a useless big-city schoolgirl. One day, when Mom was feeling sad about this criticism and told Dad about it, Dad grabbed the pistol from his waist, slammed it on the table, and shouted: “Who dares to criticize my wife?” That pretty much shut everyone up.²

Luckily Second Aunt (二嬸) liked Mom very much, she took Mom under her wing. After First Uncle (大伯) died, Second Uncle and Aunt had the highest seniority. She taught Mom how to make soles for shoes and how to

¹ 張錫嶸 (Zhang Xirong), had won third place in the Advanced Imperial examination. The Qing Dynasty History Manuscript (清史稿列傳 忠義四, kept in the Taipei History Museum) has a paragraph telling his story.

² Dad's father was deceased before dad was born. He lost his mother when he was four. He was raised by his elder siblings. They probably took pity on him and spoiled him a little.

make pasta out of flour. Later, Second Aunt would show off the soles Mom had made, saying, "Look, everyone, see how these soles made by Jian'e (建娥) are all so straight and even!" Mom also learned how to make various kinds of food using flour. She made delicious baozi, jiaozi, noodles, and all sorts of cakes.

Growing up in Taiwan, we all enjoyed Mom's culinary skills. Many of Dad's bachelor friends loved to visit us because they wanted to eat Mom's delicious food. Mom always happily prepared a tableful of delicious dishes using whatever ingredients she had on hand. One day we received as a gift a package of high-quality dried mushrooms, something that was very expensive at the time. Mom said she would save them for when we have guests and bought cheaper ones for our regular family meals. She always reserved the best for our guests.

One of Dad's friends, a Mr. Tao (陶富誠), who was in his 40s, was a regular guest in our home. He had left his wife behind in mainland China when fleeing the Communists and he never remarried in Taiwan. One day, he showed up uninvited when Mom only had some tofu and spring onions in the kitchen. She whipped up a soft dough, rolled it into a big thin circle, smeared oil on top, and sprinkled salt, chopped spring onions, and cut-up tofu pieces. She then rolled up the whole thing and made a round flat cake, which she pan-fried into a tofu cake that was crispy and crunchy on the outside yet soft and tender inside. Mr. Tao marveled at how delicious it was and always asked for it whenever he visited. This special

tofu cake was Mom's own invention, inspired by that surprise visit.

A War Bride

Mom lived in this big house for less than a year when the civil war between the KMT and the Communists resumed. She went to the northeastern part of the country with Dad because he had signed up to fight there. Dad was a KMT regiment commander. They first landed in Shenyang (瀋陽), where they enjoyed some good times. Dad, who enjoyed eating out, was always generous to the waiter. Every time the waiter saw Dad stepping into the restaurant, he would turn to the kitchen and shout: "Save the kidney flower (腰花子留著!)" because it was a dish Dad used to order every single time. *This experience in Shenyang must have left deep impression on Mom as an 18 year old who visited the northeast for the first time. Every time when Mom recalled this memory she would mimic that waiter's Sandong (山東) accent.*

I assume Dad was there to train his soldiers. Mom was pregnant with her first child but volunteered to teach the soldiers the Huangpu (黃埔軍校) Academy song (Huangpu was the Chinese equivalent of West Point). One day the general happened to pass by, he asked: "Whose wife is she? She sings very well!" Someone told the general that she was Commander Chang's wife. *She could sing the whole song from memory without any hesitation up to the very end of her life.* Eventually Dad went to fight on the front lines at Siping Street (四平街), while Mom

stayed in a hospital in Shenyang preparing to give birth to her first child.

Mom, who had never left her family, was now all alone in a strange city in a hospital where all she heard the whole day was the ghastly screaming and wailing of other women in labor. Dad was her only nearby family member, but she had no idea whether he was still alive. Mom developed a very bad case of postpartum depression. She broke all the glass windows in her room. When the nurses fed her milk, she bit the glass, causing her a bloody mouth. Finally, the hospital personnel tied her to her bed and telegraphed Dad to come to transfer her to a psychiatric hospital.

Dad showed the telegraph to his general, who said, "According to military law, the country is in the midst of war and as a commander, you should not leave. But you and I have been together for so long and are almost like brothers. I can't bring myself to stop you from going. So how about if you leave this evening and come back as soon as you've taken care of my 'sister-in-law.'³" Dad figured it would take two days to settle Mom into a psychiatric hospital. He left the camp after dark to take the night train to Shenyang. It was still dark when he arrived at the hospital, and the doors of the building were locked. Dad jumped over the wall, finding Mom, she recognized Dad and cried to tell him that everyone was being bad to her.

³ The general was not actually related by blood to Dad. It is customary in Chinese culture for men who are very close friends to refer to each others' wives as "sister-in-law." This is similar to the way that friends of parents are referred to by children as "Uncle" and "Auntie."

After daybreak, the news reached the city that the Communist army had ambushed KMT troops before dawn and all KMT soldiers (including the general) had been killed. The only other survivor was the cook, who had left the camp on his three-wheel trailer in the wee hours to head to the market to buy groceries. This was the notorious Siping Street Battle and the turning point of the civil war.

Dad now had no army unit to return to. In addition, Mom needed time to recuperate from her condition. Dad said he had no choice but to be a person of “no righteousness or justice (做一個不仁不義的人)” for breaking his promise to the general. Dad tied a few personal belongings together on his back, carrying his newborn baby in one hand, while holding his crazed wife in the other. The journey from Shenyang to Anhui was about one thousand miles. Public transportation was not highly developed in the 1940s. Additionally, many of the roads and railroads had been damaged by Japanese bombing. I don't know how Dad managed to make it, but he did. The journey must have been especially hard on him, knowing that all of his comrades in arms, including his dear friend, the general, had all just perished. I often shudder at the thought of what would have become of Mom if Dad had not left camp that fateful night. During this homeward journey, Mom knelt down so many times to kowtow to passersby that she got a bruised forehead.

Once back home, Dad designated a young maid to watch over Mom. One day Mom disappeared. Everyone

looked everywhere for her. They even checked the fish pond, but Mom was nowhere to be found. In the late afternoon, a servant went to the flour tank to get some flour to prepare supper. When she lifted the lid, she saw a person sitting in the tank covered in flour from head to toe. The servant was so shocked that she almost went crazy herself. Another time, Mom swallowed the gold ring on her finger. Dad boiled some Chinese leek whole and fed it to Mom. The next day, the ring came out wrapped in the leek. I am sure there were many more similar incidents that might have happened during this time.

Mom's first-born daughter Chen Yuan (承雲) was a beautiful baby girl nicknamed Sixth Hair (六毛) because she was the sixth child to be born of her generation.⁴ As Second Aunt held the baby, she announced: "The Chang family hasn't had such a beautiful baby for many generations." Under Dad's care in this big house in the countryside, Mom was gradually cured.

⁴ Parents often gave their children "worthless" nicknames, in keeping with the superstition that the King of Hell would not want to steal a child with a "worthless" name.

Fleeing China

Luckily Mom had been cured because by this time the KMT had lost most of the battles. Grandma wrote to Mom that Grandpa was fighting on the front lines but she had not received any salary for several months and didn't have any money for food. She had already sold one son in order to survive. She still had one daughter, age 12, and two younger sons, age 8 and 6, when she wrote to Mom. I guess some members of the clan were not willing to help. After all, the timing was bad and everyone needed to look out for themselves. Mom was so worried that she took Sixth Hair with her to the train station without notifying anyone. The train station was very crowded. While Mom was busy looking for the train schedule to go to Wuchang, Sixth Hair called out: "Baba, Baba." Dad had gone to the train station in search of Mom. He told Mom not to leave so hastily but to give him time to figure out what to do. In the end, Grandma and Mom's younger siblings all went to Anhui to live with Mom in that big house.

Dad joined in the war again. Shortly after he left, his hometown fell to the Communists. Mom, who was then pregnant with her second child, had to flee with her family and Dad's older brother, Third Uncle (三伯父). They first fled to Nanjing, where they resided in the home of Commissioner Wang, (an acquaintance of Third Uncle) who had already fled.

One day a stranger in a long robe knocked on the door asking whether Mr. Yong Jing Chang (張永景) lived there. Mom didn't know whether this stranger was a friend or a foe so she said no, as Third Uncle was the president of the parliament and his head was wanted by the Communists. After closing the door, Mom peered through the gap in the gate. She observed the stranger pacing back and forth without leaving. Finally, Third Uncle said to let him in.

After the stranger entered, he asked for a pair of scissors. He then took off his robe and cut open the seam, to retrieve a small piece of paper from the cotton padding. The piece of paper turned out to be a handwritten letter from Dad. In it, he directed the whole family to go to Shanghai immediately and then to go by boat to Zhoushan Island (舟山島), where Dad would be waiting for them. The fees for passage by boat had already been paid, he wrote.

Third Uncle pondered how he would take care of such a big family on the run. He decided to sneak back home to get some more money for the road trip. Unfortunately, once back home he was captured and executed by the Communists. When this news reached Mom, she had no choice but to take the whole family from Nanjing to Shanghai by herself. She was only 19 years old at the time. This group included Mom, who was eight months

pregnant, Sixth Hair, Grandma⁵, Mom's younger sister, and two younger brothers.

Mom had no money for staying at a hotel in Shanghai, so they slept under the eaves of a warehouse. As a busy international port, Shanghai had many warehouses. They slept on discarded pieces of cardboard. Mom went to the harbor every day to check on the boat ride. The boat owner always said, "Tomorrow, tomorrow," as there were many more people who wanted to flee than he could accommodate.

Finally, one morning, Mom took the whole family to the harbor and told the boat owner: "My husband paid all your fees for our passage long ago. If you don't take us by boat today, we will all move into your house. We will eat your food and sleep in your beds." The boat owner turned to his son and said: "Tell so-and-so to come tomorrow and take Mrs. Chang today." Mom and her family were then finally able to leave Shanghai to reunite with Dad on Zhoushan Island. Here, they waited for about a month before they boarded a military ship that was part of the Nationalist retreat to Taiwan. Their ship was the last KMT military ship to leave mainland China.

When they reached Taiwan, Mom was barely 20 years old. Her second daughter, Chen Lu (承露), who had been born in Nanjing, was three months old. Dad only brought a hot water thermos and a bag of diapers with him. When

⁵ Grandma's feet were bound when she was a little girl. Feet binding was outlawed after the establish of Republic of China. However, grandma's feet were permanently disformed and she could not walk too fast.

I was in college, one day during a chat with Mom, she suddenly said that when they first arrived in Taiwan Dad had only the clothes he was wearing and every time Mom washed them, he had to hide under the bedsheets. She smiled when she said this, but I was shocked. I remember Mom once talked about how she used river sand to brush her teeth. I think it was probably during this time when she was in Shanghai.

These two photos, taken in 1953, are the earliest we could find of Mom. Thanks are due to my cousin Wang Xiaoxiu (王曉秀), who kept them all these years. Mom is the one in the dark-colored dress. She had just lost her first-born child, Sixth Hair, which may explain why she was the only one not smiling. In the photo, she is holding her third daughter, Wendy (the author of this memoir). The younger woman with the bow in her hair was Mom's younger sister, known as our Little Aunt (小姨). Grandma is at Mom's left, holding her youngest son, James Kuo, the only child Grandma had with Grandpa Kuo. The toddler with lots of hair was Mom's second daughter, Louise. The boy in the front was Mom's younger brother.



A New Life in Taiwan

The first house that my parents rented in Taiwan (which I think was more like a storage shed with a dirt floor) was next to a pig pen. The landlord was mute but very kind. Mom washed laundry to make some money. Later Dad made mung bean balls (綠豆丸子) to sell. I assume the landlord stored a mortar in the rental house, which Dad used to grind the mung beans. Carrying the mung bean balls in a basket, Mom hid in a small alley. Every time someone walked by, she would lower her head to look down at the ground because she was too ashamed to look people in the eye. One very kind lady told her: "You can't sell anything here in this small alley. You have to go to a busy street." She took Mom with her basket to her juan cun (眷村 military dependents' village)⁶ and yelled out to her neighbors to buy. Mom was able to sell her wares quickly that way. The two became very close friends and we children called her Big Aunt, as opposed to Mom's biological younger sister, Little Aunt. Mom was able to sell so many mung bean balls that she needed a shoulder pole to carry two baskets of them.

⁶ A juancun (眷村) is a community (village) where families lived in simple row houses provided by the Nationalist government (KMT). Most of the families were dependents of the military members who had fled from the Communists to Taiwan. About one millions followed KMT to Taiwan after the civil war. Because of the Siping Street Battle, Dad never used his Huang Pu credentials again so he didn't receive a housing unit in juancun.



The front door of a military dependents' village house very similar to the one grandma lived in.



The back alley of two rows of Military Independent's Village houses. Almost all villages were build the same. Usually same unit lived in the same village and each village has its distinguish name on the main gate.

I have no memory of this rental next to the pig pen, but I was born in this house, on an afternoon when a storm was forecast. Dad went up to the roof to cover up some leaks. Mom was in charge of finding rocks from the ground and passing them up to Dad so he could use the rocks to hold down the tiles. Mom started having contractions in the midst of this operation. I was born in a storm, my parents' third daughter, Chen Wen (承雯). By this time, Mom was desperate to have a son. In those days, a woman with sons was better situated in the family clan.

The wealthy parents of an only child, a son nicknamed Little Tiger, offered to buy me as a child bride. Dad refused, saying that no Chang children would ever be sold. He said even if he were to become a beggar, he would carry his children on his back to beg. I now understand how hurtful that offer must have been to Dad. Such an insult to the offspring of a Han Lin! It must have made Dad feel both ashamed and offended.

When Mom's fourth daughter, Chen Hsia (承霞), was born, Grandma hid the baby from Mom, telling her that it was a boy. Mom was of course thrilled. Grandma changed the diapers and bathed the baby for an entire month. One day Mom removed the diaper, discovering that she had actually given birth to her fourth daughter. She cried for a whole day. Another family offered to buy this baby but again Dad refused. These offers were the telltale signs of how poor we were.



Mom and Dad outside a restaurant before attending a wedding banquet. They both were so painfully thin.



Another occasion in the same dress. Probably the only nicer dress Mom had at the time.

By the time I could form memories, my family was running a weaving factory that manufactured fabric for mosquito nets. Mom would usually sew mosquito nets under a dim light after a whole day's hard work, to make a little extra money. Our lullaby was usually the sound of her pedaling the sewing machine. Mom's fifth child was finally a boy and she was so proud when Chen Li (承理) was born. She subsequently gave birth to two more sons, Chen Dao (承道) and Chen De (承德).

Mom probably felt her position in the clan was then secure but life didn't become easier for her with so many mouths to feed. Dad's salary usually didn't last to the end of the month. Very often Mom had to ask the grocer to allow her to buy food on credit. When Mom accumulated too much debt at one grocery, she would go to another. Sometimes she had to take a detour to avoid passing in front of certain stores to which she owed money. She would pay them off on Dad's payday but before the end of the month, she had to buy on credit again. She became trapped in this cycle.

Mom and Dad never compromised their morals for money, however. I remember clearly that one evening when I was about 6 or 7 years old, a short and skinny man came to our house to give dad a package wrapped in newspaper. Dad opened it, to find a thick stack of money. As Dad was in charge of purchasing uniforms for the police force, this man was offering Dad a kickback. Dad closed the package and returned it to him, saying: "You don't need to give me any money. Just make sure you

make the best uniforms for our policemen.” Mom was in the same room but she never urged Dad to accept the money.



Probably the first formal family portrait.

“The Dawn Is Almost Here!”

Mom's big break came in 1970 when Chen Hsia graduated from middle school. At age 16, Chen Hsia was legally able to work a full-time job, she passed the exam to become a city bus stewardess. Her salary (plus the bonus based on how many passengers she served) was sometimes more than Dad's take-home pay. It was around this time that Mom often murmured: "The dawn is almost here!" I wouldn't say she meant that the past 20 years had been a complete nightmare but those decades certainly must have been very hard on her. Shortly before I graduated from Taipei Business College, one day I half jokingly told her: "Mom, the dawn is almost here!" She smiled; and it was like a bright sunshine burst from her face.

By 1974, all Mom's children had graduated from school. Three daughters all had steady jobs and two sons were in the military. For the first time in 25 years, Mom was free from financial burdens. We all gave our salary envelopes to Mom (this was before the paycheck era; all employees received their salaries, bills and coins, in a yellow paper envelope). We were just very proud to be able to contribute. No one questioned what Mom did with the money. Little did we know that Mom had saved enough to put the down payment on a pre-construction three bedroom apartment unit. The next year, 26 years

after my parents landed in Taiwan, we moved into our very first house. The final installment was more than NT \$50,000, which was a huge sum at the time (about one year's salary for a teacher). Mom had exhausted all her savings on previous installments. Again, Chen Hsia came to the rescue. She just happened to get engaged at this time, and she gave all her \$60,000 dowry money to Mom to pay off the house.

Dad was very much against buying a house. He always said that we would return to China one day; then what would we do with the house in Taiwan? Mom realized earlier than Dad that we would not go back to China anytime soon.

Chen Lu was the first of Mom's children to get married in this house, in 1977. She married Benjamin Shen (沈北辰). The next year, Chen Hsia got married, too. She married Richard Liao (廖興隆). One year later, Mom welcomed her first granddaughter, Lei Shen (沈蘋), and first grandson, James Liao (廖健慎), to this world.

In 1980, seven years after she graduated from Taipei Business College, third daughter, Chen Wen, went to study in the United States. She married Henry Chan (陳再生) in 1981. They have two sons: Jesse (傑曦), born 1985, and David (德蔚), born 1989. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, David married Xiang Xiaomeng (向曉萌) in January 2021. They reside in Houston, Texas.



Chen Lu and Benjamin Shen (沈北辰) at their engagement in 1977.



Chen Hsia married Richard Liao (廖興隆) in 1978.



Dad celebrated his 60th birthday.



Mom, then 49, took two grandchildren to visit Grandma.



Mom and Little Aunt at the airport on their way to Japan, the first overseas trip for both of them.



Mom holding Lei Shen and Dad holding James Liao, both grandchildren were one year old in 1980.



Mom and Dad having fun with grandchildren.



With Louise and Lei in front of company van before Louise moved to US.



First time to visit the US in Louise's California home.



Mom and Dad during a trip to Yangming Shan, a well known attraction just outside of Taipei city.

A Business Woman

In 1979, a family friend, Mr. Chen (陳繼武), was diagnosed with end-stage cancer. He offered to sell his detergent business to Mom. Mom bought it so that when her two sons came back home from military service, they would have a business to operate. Chen Li retired first from military service, so he and Mom ran the operation together. Later, Chen De joined after he finished his military service. The detergent business included mixing the chemicals, bottling the finished product, labeling, and delivery. The most tedious part was cleaning the returned bottles and removing the old labels from them. They were often busy washing the bottles until midnight. The three of them made and delivered Seven Seas detergent (七海沙拉脫) to numerous department stores and restaurants. It was a well-known brand in the marketplace, with a good reputation.

One day while shopping in a neighborhood store, Mom chatted with the shop owner. He said he was considering selling the store because he was too old and too tired to run the place all by himself. Mom bought the store and worked there as a cashier, a position most female owners held. Chen Li and Chen De took care of the detergent business but came to the store to help (and to eat) when they were free. Mom was tired all the time and often fell asleep at the front desk. She had diabetes but didn't know it.

Mom's youngest son, Chen De, got married in 1985. Two years later, he left the family business to start a clothes factory with his wife. Around this time, many modern stores opened in the neighborhood. These included 7-11, Family, and Life, etc. Because these new stores were more attractive to customers, they reduced the traffic to Mom's old-fashioned store. Mom's health also deteriorated with frequent asthma attacks and diabetes, plus a slew of other chronic diseases, that Chen Li decided to close the store.

Chen Lu immigrated to the States in 1984 when daughter Lei was 4. Chen Hsia followed in 1987 when her children, James and Susan, were 8 and 4. Mom and Dad came to the States several times for extended visits, to spend time with each daughter and to help out with grandchildren. Mom even went to adult school to learn English. She was a very hardworking student. I often saw her sitting at the desk doing her homework. She regretted that the Sino-Japan War interfered with her studies.

When Chen Li got married in 1994, all of Mom's children were married and had families of their own.

Mom's three daughters all adapted an English name after arriving the US. Chen Lu is also known as Louise, Chen Wen is Wendy, and Chen Hsia is Sally.

Louise and Benjamin's daughter Lei married Mr. Bryan Unke in 2008. They have three beautiful daughters: Aria, Vivian, and Eva. Vivian and Eva are identical twins. They reside in Chicago, Illinois.



Sally and Richard's daughter, Susan, married Jason Hu (胡振聲) in 2011. They have two adorable children: daughter Cassia (源詩), son Jachin (家棟) . They reside in Southern California.





Dad's 70th birthday banquet in a restaurant.



Mom's 80s birthday. All three daughters came back home from US to celebrate.

Final Chapter

Mom finally tried fulfilling her lifelong wish to give her father a proper burial in 2017 after Chen Hsia retired. She and Chen Li accompanied Mom on a homeward journey to Wuchang, 70 years after she had left her childhood home. She was then 87 years old. So many things had changed. The old address no longer existed but they found the lake was still there. A shopping mall (首義廣場) had been built where Mom's childhood home used to stand. It was named for the first uprising initiated by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, who eventually toppled the Qing Dynasty after 11 uprisings. The first one was about 100 meters from Mom's childhood house.

Holding a piece of paper with Mom's childhood home address on it, they asked anyone who was willing to look at the paper, if they knew any information about the old place. Someone said she knew an elderly lady who used to live in that area. When they found her, it turned out that she had grown up just two streets from Mom's old house. Even though they didn't know each other when they were little, but they held hands and chatted together like two old friends. As for Grandpa's grave, Mom was unable to identify the exact location, ruling out any chance of finding it.

One evening after supper while we were running the fabric factory, Mom carried two rolls of fabric by bicycle



In 2013, ChenDe and ChenShia took mom to a tour to Korea. She was 83 years old.



Exercise with high rise neighbors.

to sell them to stores. She fell from the bicycle, hitting the handlebars. There was no visible injury, only a small red circle on her belly, but it was very painful. *I think the red circle was caused by the end of one side of the handlebars, which had lost its protective rubber cap.*

Dad bought pain pills for Mom but the pain persisted, so he gave her more pills. At midnight, Mom told Dad that she was about to die. Dad went out to find a pedicab to take Mom to the hospital. The doctor diagnosed a rupture in Mom's intestines. This allowed food to leak into her belly, and it started to become putrid after so many hours. "If you had waited just 30 minutes longer," the doctor told Dad, "even a shenxian (神仙)⁷ could not have saved your wife." Doctors removed the eroded part of the intestine, after which they joined the two healthy parts back together. For the 1950s, this was a major surgery. When Mom was 46 years old, after being diagnosed with uterine cancer, she underwent surgery to remove her uterus. Ten years later, she was diagnosed with colon cancer, after which she had yet another operation. None of these cancers recurred.

Later in Mom's life, she was a frequent visitor to hospitals, mostly for problems relating to asthma and diabetes. She usually came home after a stay of several days in the hospital. In mid-September 2021, Mom went to the hospital after a sudden asthma attack. The doctors couldn't get her breathing back to normal with the usual oxygen treatment. An X-ray showed that Mom had pneumonia, after which the doctors started to treat her

⁷ This refers to an immortal (supernatural/celestial being) in Chinese culture.

with antibiotics. They used four different antibiotics, but none of them helped. As a last resort, the doctors used a new drug (after consultation with the family), which had strong side effects. They warned that if this drug did not work, there would be nothing more that they could do. The new drug was effective, but it also made Mom very weak. Moreover, the positive results lasted only two days before the bacteria showed resistance to the drug. Doctors asked the family to make a decision as to whether they would be allowed to perform a tracheotomy when Mom was unable to breathe on her own. Chen Li called me to discuss this. (I was obliged to quarantine in a hotel because of the COVID-19 pandemic.) We wanted Mom to stay with us, but we didn't want her to suffer. We guessed as to what Mom would prefer, because she was no longer in a condition to discuss the matter with us. In the end, we decided against a tracheotomy. Then we both cried together by phone. Five minutes after I hung up the phone, I suddenly thought: what if there was still one tenth of chance? I hurriedly called Chen Li, he said there was not even one one-hundredth chance.

Dad passed away on December 24, 1988, in California. Mom had outlived Dad by 33 years.



Mom's homeward journey in 2017, 70 years after she left home. The old lady to her right was a childhood neighbor who lived two street apart but they didn't know each other when young.



Singing karaoke, mom's favorite pastime.



Outing with third daughter Wendy and her classmates. Everyone loved mom as their own mother.



With third and youngest son ChenDe on her 90th birthday celebration.



Two grand sons James Liao and David Chan volunteered to be background dancers.

Reflections

Thinking back, my family was quite poor when I was growing up. But I never felt that I lacked anything. My parents scraped together every bit of food and clothing to feed us and to keep us warm. My mother, even with the heavy load she carried to raise her children, was always attentive to giving us a proper upbringing.

She taught us good manners and healthy attitudes, from the youngest age. She would tell us to always sit squarely when seated and to stand upright when standing. Leg shaking was never allowed. She was most strict about table manners: no talking with food in our mouth, chew quietly, elbows off the table and close to our body, chopsticks should point downward and not sideways, choose what to eat with our eyes and take what we touched, and only take food from the part of the dishes nearest to us. In other words, do not climb over the mountain, so to speak. Divide the food among all people at the table to decide how much each person's share should be, so that we would not eat more than our share. No double dipping. She forbade us to use the words "pee" and "poo." Instead, we were to say, "I need to wash my hands."

I remember that when I was about five years old, whenever Mom didn't approve of something I did or said, she would tell me: "Your mother-in-law will not tolerate this" or "How will you survive your in-laws like this?" I often felt she was not raising her daughter but someone

else's daughter-in-law. She stopped saying these things when I started college. Either I had improved so much that she felt I would survive my in-laws, or she sensed that the times were different and that women had more rights. My father used to tell us: “One may be poor but one should never lose one’s sense of pride (人窮志不窮)” and “It’s better to have a big heart than a big house (寧願心寬 不要家寬).” We all remember our parents’ teachings and are teaching our children the same thing.



Mom's Deepest Sorrow

When Sixth Hair was five years old, one day she got very sick with a high fever. Mom took her to the hospital and the doctor gave her a shot, after which Sixth Hair started to tremble and foam at her mouth. She died shortly thereafter in the hospital. I was only a few months old when she died. Mom said she would pull a small stool next to the bed and stood on it to pat me when I cried.

Twenty years later, on the day after his 18th birthday, Mom's second son, Chen Dao, and a friend rode by motorcycle to Kaohsiung to visit Chen Li. Halfway there, they had an accident. Chen Dao fell down a bridge, hitting his head on a rock. By the time my parents rushed to the hospital, Chen Dao was already in the morgue.

Anecdotes

1. When I was in middle school, the rental unit in which we lived was on the second floor of the building. The landlord operated a business on the ground level. We had to go through the store to get to the second floor. The landlord had hired a helper who was very polite to Mom and whom Mom liked very much. One day Mom came back from an errand but didn't see the helper, so she asked the landlord where he was. The landlord said that she killed "him" (in Chinese, "he," "she" and "it" all sound the same). Mom was shocked and asked: "Why did you kill him"? The landlord said: "Because it was New Year's Eve, so I killed him." Eventually, they realized that Mom was asking about the helper (伙計) but the landlord thought Mom was asking about her turkey (火雞) which both sound the same in Mandarin (huo jī). After Mom came upstairs and told me about this, we laughed so hard that we both fell onto the bed laughing together.

2. Another time, while Chen Lu was getting her hair done in the salon downstairs, her Japanese friend called. Mom gestured to me to get Chen Lu but she kept on talking to the phone. When I later asked what she had been saying, she said she just wanted to keep the caller on the line so he wouldn't hang up before Chen Lu could take the call. And I thought she was really making some conversation with the caller. Ha!

3. When Mom lived together with me in Houston, one day I hired a carpenter to do some work in the house. Mom was puzzled and asked me why I kept calling him 恩主 (Merciful Lord). At first I didn't understand, but then I realized that because the worker's name was Andrew, it sounded very much like the Chinese term for "Merciful Lord."

4. On one occasion when I went with Mom to Las Vegas, she observed a distraught man who had lost his gambling money when playing

the slots. After he had lost his last coin, he turned toward Mom with an open-armed gesture. Mom thought it was remarkable that this Caucasian man knew Taiwanese, as she thought he had exclaimed, "Longmo" (meaning "everything's gone" in that dialect). Actually what he had said was, "No more!"

Postscript

The stranger who carried Dad's handwritten notes to Nanjing was a real hero. Nanjing was under Communist control at that time. It was a dangerous mission. Unfortunately, we don't know his name, but we have always been extremely grateful to him.

I do not know from where Dad flew to Zhoushan Island, but I know it was a very chaotic move. One evening, Dad's cousin, who was a pilot in the air force, rushed over to Dad and shouted to him, telling him to leave right away. Holding a jacket that belonged to his comrade pilot, he told Dad to put it on. The jacket had the name Fang Hengyou (方亨有) on it. Because of the Siping Street battle, Dad never used his Huangpu Academy credentials again, as he would have been considered a deserter. For this same reason, he didn't get a house in Military Dependents' village (眷村).

After Dad died, Mom had several suitors. Some of us children were strongly opposed to her remarrying. Mom was such a traditional woman, always following the teachings of Confucius: When her husband was alive, she deferred to him. After her husband died, she deferred to her sons. I now deeply regret opposing Mom's remarriage. It was both foolish and selfish of me to have done so.

Mom was truly a remarkable woman. What amazed me the most was that I rarely heard her complain. She always spoke softly and calmly, never raising her voice on any occasion. She took what life threw at her and tried to make the best of even the most difficult situation. I am grateful that she didn't suffer much in the end and she didn't even know that she was leaving this world. She was a blessed woman.