

Life on the Run

a translation of Chua Bing Ching's narrative essay by grandson Gershom Chua

During the holidays, my wife usually cooks up a storm, preparing our grandchildren's favorite dishes. The stream of phone calls ringing in often heralds the return of our children and grandchildren back to the old ancestral house.

After the sumptuous meal, the family often gathers in the spacious hall to catch up and share stories. One of our grandkids, Ah Long, usually gets these storytelling sessions going by asking us about our reminiscences. We've made a habit of sending our grandchildren to summer study tours to help them further their interest in Chinese language and culture, and Ah Long has been sent out the most times because he has shown great promise with his command of the language. By our last count, he's joined summer language camps in Taipei, Beijing, Shanghai, and Xiamen.

This afternoon, Ah Long gets the ball rolling by sharing that he has always wanted to accompany me on a trip back to China to revisit our hometown and find our roots there. He asks if I can share stories from my childhood, what it was like growing up there, and what had led to our exile to the Philippines. With the other grandchildren also eager to listen, this old grandpa is left with no choice but to indulge their curiosity.

With eyes closed, I turn back the wheel of time in my mind. Piecing together the bits and pieces of childhood that I can still remember, filled in by stories my elders have told me, I attempt a reconstruction of the events of that time.

This story begins in 1938, when my father returns home from the Philippines and excitedly tells my mother that he has already completed the processing of our family's "Tua Di Mia" (Large Character Certificate) immigration papers. She is overjoyed at the prospect of finally being able to join her husband in the Philippines permanently, no longer having to endure separation for the sake of maintaining the family business there.

It is only when she starts reading the preparatory documents for the immigration interview that she realizes that her eldest child, my older sister, has not been included in the list of family members being petitioned, replaced instead by my younger uncle. Older sister has always been the apple of our mother's eye, and the two share a deep love for each other. We knew then that her exclusion from the list meant that she'll be left behind indefinitely, making our departure from China the final time we'll be able to see her. Thinking of this now, I cannot help but hold back bitter tears. Our mother refuses to leave without her daughter then so father has no choice but to return to the Philippines by himself.

The situation turns dire in the span of just a few months however, as the Japanese army begins its invasion of China, threatening to annex the entire country. The provincial capital of Xiamen falls to their control and our prefecture, Quanzhou, faces relentless Japanese bombardment. The Chinese army, ill-equipped to resist, loses ground by the day.

Braving the dangers of war, my father rushes back to our hometown, accompanied by a family friend, Uncle Tan Bun-yok. They each take their families from Quanzhou and travel by bus to nearby Fuzhou,

boarding a ship to Gulangyu Island and then sailing towards Hong Kong. Uncle Tan arranges for his family to settle in Hong Kong for the time being, probably because the sudden onset of war has left him without enough time to prepare his family's paperwork. Meanwhile, on the same boat, we finally make the fateful journey to Manila. Before setting sail though, we are subjected to eye exams and stool tests for medical clearance. The doctors at the port spot some redness in my younger uncle's eyes and he is diagnosed with trachoma, so he is made to stay in Hong Kong for medical treatment. Father, mother, and I receive a clean bill of health and are allowed to continue on, but my younger brother who was barely a year old develops an irregular bowel movement en-route. Upon our arrival in Manila and after going through customs, my father, being a registered resident, is allowed to leave the port to tend to business without issue, while my brother is immediately sent to the hospital with our mother in tow. Meanwhile, I, a seven year old ignorant country bumpkin who has never travelled outside of our hometown, let alone the country, am now left by myself to stay at the Tsuy-chu (the "Water House" or Immigration Detention Centre), where I am locked up with seven or eight other children awaiting our parents' return.

Oddly enough, despite being a kid in a strange place surrounded by people I do not know, I feel absolutely no fear. I do not even cry. These other children may be strangers to me but they treat me so kindly and are so friendly. I have no clue as to what to do or how to behave here, so I just follow their example. When they eat, I eat. When they bathe, I bathe too. Everything is just so new and fascinating to me.

Three days later, with my brother and our mother now out of the hospital, they too join me at the Tsuy-chu. I am taken from the children's ward and placed with my mother for the remainder of our mandatory quarantine. After three days of living here, I have learned that rice porridge and bread are always served for breakfast, and that I can have one or the other, or even both if I so wish. So when we wake up the next morning and before my mother can ask around, I immediately run to the kitchen and ask for the full spread—a bowl of rice porridge, some fish and meat floss, a few pieces of bread, and coffee. I bring these back to my mother who, fighting back some laughter, ask me to help her finish everything.

After passing our interviews with the immigration officers, we are released the very next day. Father comes to pick us up, and we are all put up in a hotel along Tomas Pinpin Street. Whenever I find myself with nothing to do, I go out unaccompanied and walk along the stretch of road between Tomas Pinpin Street and Ongpin Street. The area is bustling with business and filled with people with places to go, and I dare not venture very far for fear of not being able to find my way back. I only ever go as far as the Tua Geng Bing cinema, where I spend hours just looking through the movie stills posted outside. It is on one of these walks to the cinema that I encounter a young Chinese boy scout by the busy roadside, asking for donations to buy bullets for the army back home. News has spread that Quanzhou has once again been bombarded by Japanese artillery, causing the death of so many innocent civilians. I cannot fathom the inhumanity of the Japanese army.

When we get to the Southern island of Tacloban, my father enrolls me at the local Chinese school, the Leyte Progressive High School. Since classes back in my hometown have been taught using Bannam-ue (the Hokkien language), and the local Chinese school uses Kok-gi (the Chinese national language, or Mandarin) as the medium of instruction, I frequently get ridiculed by my classmates, especially as

there is no one to guide me or offer tutorial classes. Soon after our arrival in the island, my father also notices my mother's struggles getting used to our new home, not knowing anyone nor being able to speak the local language. Around this time, an associate of my father, Mr. Po Keng Suy, puts up a traditional Chinese medicine shop, moving his family into a nearby building with a spare room that he has put up to board. Father moves our family into that rented room, allowing me to befriend Mr. Po's children. From then on, I would have big brother Tong-diong and big sister Hwi-tsin to walk home with from school, and to work on my assignments with and ask for help from into the evenings. When my father is away to tend to business, my mother has Mr. Po's wife (whom I affectionately called auntie) to accompany her, making us feel a lot less isolated in this new place.

Eventually, Mr. Po also moves his family to live above their traditional medicine shop, leaving their old space open to new renters. Luckily, Uncle Tan Bun-yok, who has now come to Tacloban with his family from their temporary stay in Hongkong, fills in the vacancy and we find ourselves with new neighbors once again.

The year 1940 rolls in and the Japanese army begins its invasion of Southeast Asia in earnest, and soon General Douglas MacArthur, the head of the American colonial government in the Philippines, after many defeats, retreats to Australia. Everywhere in the Philippines, schools are ordered to shut down, businesses close up, and the people flee the cities to run from the invading forces of the Japanese in a bid for safety.

Our family retreats to Pastrana, the base for the business that my late grandfather founded and that my father had to take over for when he was orphaned at only age 11. Twenty years on and the locals have come to regard my father as a fellow villager, speaking their dialect fluently and being no stranger to them. His generosity and helpfulness have earned him the respect of the young and old alike. Running a general merchandise store and facilitating the sale of local produce in a place at least 10 kilometers away from the city has made Father quite a popular figure among people, who have become his regular customers and with whom he has built great friendships with throughout the years.

When Mr. Po Keng Suy brings up the idea of taking his family to hide out in Pastrana with us, we have already gotten used to having them as neighbors for so long that Father happily welcomes them into our new home. Uncle Tan and his family initially stay back in Tacloban until they too decide to join us after a couple of weeks. Other Chinese families soon follow suit and settle in huts and houses near ours. Although we do not know these later families as much, our shared experience as reluctant refugees has taught us the value of mutual aid, prompting Father to encourage all the families with us not to hesitate seeking help in any form, demonstrating such a powerful act of kindness at such a time of great need and danger.

Uncle Tan and Father are close friends, as most of the fabrics and textiles sold in my father's general merchandize business is supplied by Uncle Tan's firm. Too young then to remember Uncle Tan in much detail, I do know that the demands of his shipping business made it so that he was seldom home with family. I remember him as a tall man, and with the exception of his eldest son, whom I have never met, of his children, big brother Ying-hok resembles him the most.

Finding refuge from the fighting and the bombardments, we live out a peaceful life in the next few months. For some unknown reason, Uncle Tan one day confesses to my father that he wants to leave Pastrana and hide out somewhere else. This development takes Father by surprise. He has lived here for a long time, and the local community sees him as a fellow villager. His friends, Uncle Tan included, are treated as friends by the locals too, and there is no reason for anything untoward to happen to them. Sourcing rice and grain among the villagers will never be a problem, if that is what Uncle Tan worried about. Father's villager friends have also helped build a large hut way up in the mountains, waiting for us at any moment should any dire changes happen in our area that necessitate fleeing further into the wilderness. Given the situation and our warm relationships with the other villagers, we are completely in an advantageous position. Of course, during times of chaos such as this, there really is no place that can guarantee absolute safety, and as a friend, Father can only suggest and never dictate upon Uncle Tan, but I know he asked his friend to rethink his decision.

In the end, Uncle Tan decides to leave Pastrana and take his family to cross the sea towards Samar.

Soon after, the Japanese army occupies Tacloban and stations troops along the outskirts of town to keep the provincial capital under their control. The people who have remained in town to safeguard their homes and property are initially terrified of the invading force, until they find the Japanese troops to be otherwise well-disciplined and very much intent on keeping the peace. As soon as news of their demeanor spread, the people who have fled into the mountains and further into the wilderness gradually come back to their homes and businesses in the city.

News arrives from Tacloban: Uncle Tan has been shot in the palm of his hand by a bandit's bullet. He has been taken to Tacloban by canoe to have his wounds treated, but because he hates the Japanese with a stubborn fury, he refuses treatment and dies due to infection.

Since Pastrana is not situated along a major transport route, the Japanese army does not station any of their troops there. Clear of any Japanese presence, the Filipino guerrillas often come to the area to donate food or daily necessities to the villagers. Upon hearing about these activities, the Japanese army sends out their military vehicles to make chase, but the guerillas, having gotten wind of their plans, are long gone when they arrive. They engage in this cycle of hide-and-seek numerous times but always to no avail. Trying a different tactic, the Japanese army attempts to get local guides to help them look for the guerillas hiding out in the mountains, but their search turns up nothing. When the Japanese troops have gone, the guerrillas return and arrest those who served the enemy as guides, threatening to execute them on the spot for their betrayal. Only after their family members have begged and pleaded their cases, saying they have only done so under duress, and with the intercession of the other villagers, did the guerillas relent and allow them to return to their families in peace.

We wake up the next day to an eerie silence that seems to have enveloped us. The usual cacophony of crowing roosters, barking dogs, and people going about their day is suddenly nowhere to be heard. Going out to inspect the silence, we find that all our neighbors have left earlier that morning. Realizing that Mr. Po's family, who's been staying with us, and our family are the only people remaining in that corner of Pastrana, Mr. Po and my father quickly assess the situation, deciding that it will be unwise to track through the mountains together for fear that the Japanese army might mistake us for guerillas should we encounter them in our flight. In the end, the Po family decides to make their way back to

Tacloban City, while our family trudges inland to Palo, where Father knows he has some friends and business partners who can lend a hand.

With no means of transportation and not daring to take the main road for fear of being caught, we walk through fields, uneven meadows, and up and down mountains on foot for more than 10 kilometers before reaching our destination. We stay in Palo for a few months until we get caught up in the crossfire between the Japanese troops and the guerilla forces, leaving us with no choice but to make the dangerous trek back to Tacloban City for a life away from the active fighting.

Some months pass and a huge typhoon hits Tacloban, blowing down trees and leaving the city in a state of total disrepair. The day after the typhoon, when the winds have finally stopped roaring, early that morning we hear the sound of a number of low-flying planes circling above, causing a panic among many in the city who have mistaken the planes as Japanese reinforcements. Amidst the confusion, a man who has gotten a clearer view of the descending planes shout out to the crowd, "The Japanese have retreated, General McArthur has come back! We have been rescued at last!" This is where our life on the run finally ends.

To my grandchildren listening with rapt attention, I hope that you grow up to love and value peace!

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每逢佳節，老伴通常親自下廚，燒了幾樣兒孫們愛吃的菜。電話一通，不多時，兒孫們便由四面八方，趕返回老窩。飽餐之後，就聚集在大廳談天。孫兒阿龍，漢英文成績都不錯，為增強他對華文的興趣，特令他於暑假，參加海峽兩岸舉辦的華文進修班。由此他先後到過臺北、北京、上海、廈門等地。

他希望能有一天，與公公回到祖籍地尋根。因此他懇求我講述小時在故鄉情況，及後來為什麼須飄洋過海到菲律賓來？其他孫兒女都齊聲贊同，要公公講。

這時合著雙眼，隨時光倒流，回到從前。當然小時的經歷，只是無數的片段。隨著年歲的增長，聽了長輩們的傳述，方能把那些無數的片段，依先後次序，串連成一部完整的事蹟。

那是一九三八年開始的年頭，我父親由菲返抵家鄉，告訴母親已為我們辦好“大字”移民菲律賓入境手續證件，母親想到從此一家人，能永相聚首，不再分離，感到很高興。

在默念入口，口詞問答時，才知道四人中，並不包括大姊在內，為四叔代之。母親對姐姐一向視如掌上明珠，母女情深，如此豈非生別離，何時方能相聚。想到這裡，便痛哭流涕。姊不隨行，母親也不去。父親沒辦法，終於只得隻身再返菲。

不幾個月，時局劇變，甚是危急。日軍開始侵華行動，揚言將於幾個月內，併吞全中國。廈門已失陷，泉州也受日機轟炸，我軍全無能力抵抗，節節敗退。

在如此危急的情況中，父親便與陳文佑伯伯作伴，一同繞路迴鄉。各自帶家眷，由泉州坐汽車到福州，再登洋船到鼓浪嶼出海到香港。陳伯伯即把家眷，暫時安頓在香港居住。（可能是他們來不及做大字）我們則乘原船，駛向岷里拉。在未開船前，醫生為我們檢驗眼睛及大便。四叔良圖因眼有點紅，驗出患有眼沙，惟有留港就醫。父親、母親和我都沒有問題，只有快周歲的弟弟，明初的大便不正常。船到岷里拉，進入海關後，父親是舊客，可直接出關，弟弟被送進醫院，母親自然隨著去。剩下我這個未滿七歲，默頭默腦的鄉下小孩，未曾出遠門的新客仔，單獨被送進水厝（入境拘留所），與七八個沒爹沒娘的在水厝裡，關在一起。

我自感奇怪，當時在陌生的地方，與陌生的人在一塊，我一點都沒感到怕，所以沒有哭。大家對我很友善，我什麼都不懂，只是有樣學樣，跟著大家。他們吃飯，我也吃飯，大家洗澡，我也跟著洗，什麼事都感到新奇！

三天後，母親與弟弟從醫院出來後也進水厝。我就被帶出與母親同住。三天在水厝生活，我知道早餐有稀飯和麵包可吃，可選一樣，或兩樣都要也可以。因此早上醒來，就為母親跑到廚房，要一碗稀飯，一條魚及一些肉鬆，還有幾個麵包和咖啡。母親看了笑嘻嘻；要我合力把東西都吃光。

海關人員口詞問答後，隔天便放行，父親來接，我們暫被安排住在智彬彬街一家客棧。無事時我獨自跑出門，沿智彬彬街轉到王彬街，發現這條街最熱鬧，路人很多，但我不敢走很遠，只在大光明戲院看戲照，路邊有童子軍在向人捐錢，說是要買子彈打日本鬼子，聽人說前天日機又炸泉州，死傷有好幾個人，日軍真無人道。

到南島獨魯萬後，父親即帶我到興華學校插班，由於在家鄉，我們是用閩南音念，而僑校是用國語，我常被同學取笑，念得很困難，課後又沒人可請教，如此這般，成績怎能好。後來父親看到母親對新環境一時向難適應，又不曾說土語，心理上沒安全感。剛好開中藥房的傅永水先生，租一大樓房，尚餘一空房，父親便把它租下。從此上學回

家,我都跟隨傳家棟樑兄、慧真姊,晚上則同桌與他們各自溫習功課,不懂的可請教他們。而母親在父親出門時,有伯母作伴,使我們生活過得不感到悶。

可是不久,汞水先生一家人,搬進他們店裡住,留下的空房,剛好陳文佑伯伯才把家眷由香港接來獨魯萬,就即刻搬進,我們又有新鄰居。

一九四零年,日本發動太平洋戰爭,侵向東南亞各國,美軍駐菲總司令麥帥,不敵撤離避澳洲。全菲各地,學校停課,生意關門,人民都遠離市區,避於鄉鎮,以求安全。

我們一家人,退回到“巴示丹那”社,此地為先祖父商業基地,父親自十一歲接手,亦已有廿餘年,當地人都把他當為同鄉,他講一口流利土話,與道地菲人無異。他慷慨,好助人,因此獲得老或少的尊敬。由於父親是經營雜貨店,外加買賣土產,離社裏方圓數十公里,都有顧客、熟人,人緣好。

一直以來,都是住在埠中的傳汞水先生,由於曾經住在同一屋子裡的緣份,想隨我們到“巴示丹那”,父親非常歡迎他們。但是陳文佑伯伯一家人,卻改變主意,幾星期後,也搬來同住。還有幾家華人,自動搬來,住在我們附近,雖大家不很熟,然都為避難人,貴能守望相助,因此父親自我推薦,如果須要幫忙,請大家不必客氣,這是患難見真情的義舉。

陳文佑伯伯與父親是知交,山頂店裡賣的布料,都是向他們福全商業購買的。由於陳伯伯兼職船務,很少在家。當時我年紀還小,印象不是很深。記得他個子高大,在他的兒女中,除了他的大兒子我沒見過,穎鶴兄應該最像他的相貌。

大家在戰亂避災生活中,安然渡過了幾個月。不知是為了什麼,有一天,陳伯伯向父親表白,他想離開“巴示丹那”,想避到別的地方。父親聽了感到很驚駭!父親久居此地,社裏的人早把他認作同鄉,自己的朋友,就是他們的朋友,絕不會發生意外。米糧的來源與供給如有朝一日應也沒問題。在深山處早托友人蓋了一大茅屋,此地有變,可即刻退到深山。在此我們是佔盡地利與人和。當然處此亂世時期,沒有一個地方是絕對安全。身為幾十年老朋友,際此境況下,卻也不必勉強,更不敢強留,但請好友三思!

陳伯伯最後決定,還是要離開“巴示丹那”,聽說是到“過水”(就是過海,像是屬三描島)。

不久日軍佔領獨魯萬,並在外圍派兵駐守較為重要社鎮。那些尚留守家園,沒撤離的百姓,在日軍入境後,最初有些驚慌。但見他們軍紀嚴明,並沒有亂來,也就安心生活。消息一傳開,那些逃離的人民,也就三三五五,陸續回來。

從獨魯萬傳達到的消息:陳伯伯手掌心被土匪的槍彈打中。後用獨木舟載到獨魯萬,由於他痛恨日軍,拒絕醫治,便毒發攻心,就這樣離開人世。

“巴示丹那”社非處於交通要道,因此日軍並未派兵駐守。常有菲遊擊隊出沒向居民捐糧,或日常用品。日軍聞訊,即用軍車追擊,遊擊隊早聞風而逃。如此好幾次捉迷藏,日軍操勞無功。換方法捉拿百姓帶路,入深山追捕遊擊隊,雖無成效,至少隊長回隊有理由交差。日軍回去,遊擊隊又來,把帶路者捉拿,在大眾面前要就地槍決,經家屬苦苦跪求,說是被日軍所迫,實非自願,社民亦合力說情,才免其罪。

隔天一早醒來,我們感到非常奇怪,四周靜得有些可怕。平時的雞啼狗吠,人來人往的吵鬧聲,像忽然消失。出門一看,全村看不到人影,大家都跑光了。只剩下我們與我們住在一起汞水先生一家人,共同研討的結果,認為這時入深山比較危險,怕日軍把我們當遊擊隊。最後傳家決定搬回獨魯萬,我們則暫避到巴洛社,依靠父親前夥計。

我們沒有交通用具,不敢走大路,只好繞著高低不平的草地、田地、山路,用各自的雙腳,一步一步,走了十幾公里,到達目的地。在巴洛我們住了幾個月,由於遊擊隊常來偷襲,我們常被夾在兩方交火中,馬安全計,最後還是決定搬回獨魯萬,以求過著較為正常的生活。

一天,有個特大的颱風,襲擊獨魯萬,植物被吹倒不計其數,使獨魯萬面目全非,隔天風停,大清早就聽到多架低飛的飛機聲,眾人以為是日機在演習,但爭相出門一看,原來是美軍軍機。有人大喊:日軍撤退了,麥師回來了!我們終於被解救了!

從此結束了我們逃難的生活。孫兒女們都聽得入神,希望孫輩會熱愛和平!

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