

Stories of four brothers

An old photo showed a mother holding a one year old boy with three other boys standing in front of her. The one year old was Waimun. 5 years old Waihon was on her left, 3 years old Wainang on the middle and 4 years old Waitak was on the left. The daughters behind mother were Fookbo and Fookwah. The time was just after world War II and the place was the house in Haiphong, North Vietnam. Because these four brothers were born just few years apart, they were destined to spend their youth together. Waimun was the cute one and Wainang was the naughty one. One of Wainang's stories retold by mother was that an old employee at father's business asked him "why didn't you say good morning to grand uncle #2?". Wainang replied " You devil grand uncle #2 good morning.". Wainang would taste any vegetation in the garden. In Chinese history the legendary medicine man did the same thing to find herbs for curing illnesses. Wainang showed in his early days that he would be a medical doctor someday.

Soon after the war (maybe 1948) father had a thought of returning to China. Hence he sent mother and the four boys back to visit the Lee's ancestral village, Samsui. To reach the village we took a tiny row boat from Canton and travelled through the river water ways to Fu Shan and then continued on to Sam Sui. Our maternal grandfather was a rich man in Fu Shan. Just on the night of our arrival a group of bandit thought our grandfather had arrived from Canton and wanted to capture him for ransom. Of course, our grandfather was not in town. As the bandits tried to break down the front door, Mother hid us under the wooden bed and hoped that the bandits would not find us. Luckily the sound of gun firing from our neighbor next door scared the bandits away. As morning came, we found the front door was nearly broken through by the bandits. With this scare we did not continue our journey to Samsui and returned to Canton and later went back to Vietnam. During the years in Haiphong, we did not attend formal school and were tutored by a teacher at a friend's house.

In 1951 with the war between VietMing and the French coming to an end and the French army lost, father decided to move south to Saigon. The first few years lived in a warehouse building in a district call PhuMei. Residences were on the

second floor looking down to an open loading area below. From the patio of our residence we could see a lumber yard across street. The street in front of the warehouse ended at a river. Lumbers were transported to the lumber yard by floating them down the river. Not far from the warehouse and on the river side was a club house owned by father's firm where the French employees went to row boat or play bocci. Beyond the lumber yard was a market. On the opposite side of the river from our house was the Saigon Botanical garden.

We started our formal schooling after we arrived Saigon. Waitak and Waihon attend 4th grade, Wainung 3rd grad and Waimun 1st grade. Lingnam Middle school was in Cholon, acity near Saigon. Although it was not far from home, we lived in the dormitories of the school. Boys 4th grade and up lived in boys dormitories and boys 3rd grade and below stay in the girls dormitories. Every two weeks we went home for the weekend. Looking back, we started to live away from our parents at a very early age. Of course, it was the hardest for Waimun since he was only about 6 years old then. Waihon was one year older than Waitak and they were in the same grade. Father consoled Waihon that it was better to be the peak of a chicken than the ass of a cow. By this he meant that it was better for Waihon to do well in 4th grade than to struggle in 5th grade. This was one of many lessons that we learned from Father. There were a lot of fond memories living above the warehouse. Father introduced us to Swiss cheese, yogurt, margarine, Durian and fish intestines. Once father told us that the end of the chicken was very delicious. The consequence was that Waihon and Wainang both wanted to try it. This was the only time that we fought for something. At home during summer time Mother used to read books for us before bedtime. Reading was the main leisure activity for us. The warehouse had a flat stoned roof where we learned to ride bicycles and roller skates.

After Vietnam became independent in 1954 we moved to a two stories villa built by Father's firm. There were two other one story villas next to it. Not far from the villas was a big warehouse. We first learn how to play Bridge from father in that villa. Father taught us the techniques of the Bridge game. The foursome was father and three of us. We play bridge almost every night during summer time until we left for Hong Kong in 1958. Later we moved to the one story villa next to

the border of the property. The other two were rented to American officers. Wainang is the outgoing one among us. Soon he befriended Michael, son of our American neighbor. During that period Waihon took cello lessons. Every Sunday father drove Waihon to cello lesson. Afterwards they went to father's friend ice cream parlor to have ice cream. The property where the warehouse and villas situated was spacious. We had a covered ping pong table and a badminton court. There were bamboo trees lining along the borders to our neighbor property. Sometimes we crawled under the wire fence to dig bamboo shoots from our neighbor's bamboo trees.

1957 Vietnamese government limited the classes in Chinese school to only one year for senior high schooling. We left Lingnam Middle School and spent one year in a school that specialized in English. This paved the way for us to receive our education in Hong Kong. Spring of 1958 Mother took the seven boys in a sea journey to travel from Saigon to Macau. Upon arrival Mother paid to get fake ID for the four older boys. She then took the young three boys with her to enter Hong Kong ahead of the four older boys. On that eventful day to go to Hong Kong, we were bought on board of a Macau Hong Kong ferry in the middle of the night. It was morning when we arrived Hong Kong. Holding the fake documents we sheepishly walked towards the gate. The person taking care of us tried to separate us to make it look less obvious that we were illegals. After we went past the inspecting officers, our care taker took our papers and quickly pushed us out of the gate. Mother was there waiting across the street. During that time in Hong Kong many things could be done through connections. We got our Hong Kong ID card and became Hong Kongese. We entered Hong Kong in June. Mother's first order of business is to get us into schools in Hong Kong. We went to a tutor to prepare us for the entrance examination. The first school we applied was Pui Ying Middle School. We were all admitted. As we were admitted to more schools, Mother would pay tuitions to every schools to guarantee our space in that school. This allowed her to select the best school for us at the end. A new school, Ramondi colloge was open to enrollment that year. Waihon get admitted to Form 4. Waitak and Wainang were admitted to Form 3. Later on Waihon was also admitted to Puiching Middle School. By September mother decided that three

older brothers went to Ramondi and Waimun went to Pui Ying. The plan is that while in Hong Kong we stay with brother William who just got married earlier in the year. He put two bunk beds in his work area to accommodate us. One week before school started, brother William suggested to Waihon to go to Pui Ching instead of Ramondi college. A year later Wainang was transferred to Wah-Yan college. In December that year brother William's son Frank was born and Brother William decided to go back to Saigon. He arranged with his friend to rent a room to us and provide dinners for us. Just like in the boarding school in Saigon, we were alone by ourselves again. During those years we had bread and Ovaltine drink for breakfast, bought lunches at school and had dinners with the landlord's family. All the expenses including tuition, bus tickets, pocket money and room and board amounted to HK\$500.00. For comparison a catered banquet was about HK\$100.00 at that time. We had a radio to listen to. One of the programs we listened faithfully was the hit song parades every week. Waitak learned to build crystal radio which became his hobby and led to his future interest in electronics. Wainang and Waihon liked to read Agatha Christie's mystery novel. Occasionally we went to visit Uncles and grandmothers in Hong Kong. Every Chinese New year Auntie No. 3 would take us to buy new clothes. Daily clothes were just our school uniforms(white shirt and white pants). We washed our own clothes.

1961 Waihon graduated from Puiching. With the advice from Brother William he went to MIT. A year later Waitak also went to MIT. Another year later Wainang went to UC Berkeley. Finally Waimun also came to UC Berkely.

The first time that the four brothers came together again was 1968 at Waihon's wedding. By 1973 the four brothers all lived in Califronia. Waimun and Waihon lived in Bay area. Waitak and Wainang lived in Los Angeles.

One of the most important meeting among the brothers was to discuss how to evacuate the family out of Vietnam in early 1975. Waihon was already American citizen and could apply for parents and sibling to United States. To make sure we could fast track the process, we went to see an immigration lawyer in San Francisco. Instead of giving us advice he commented that Wainang did not look

like a medical doctor and looked more like a lumber jack. With that remark we left his office. At immigration office we learned that Waihon's birth certificate was sufficient to apply for mother's entry. Waiseng and Fookyun's birth certificate were sufficient for their entry also. However, we needed a marriage certificate between mother and father to prove his relationship to Waihon. In the 1940's there was not marriage certificate as such. Immigration officer insisted that an application for Father would not be possible without a marriage certificate. WaiMun came up with an idea and he called Senator Scanston's office. Through his office we get an appointment to meet with the director of immigration on the top floor of the immigration building. In 5 minutes she took us down and went directly to the back room to give our papers to a person to take care of it right away. By paying a small fee it was promised that the approval will be sent to US Embassy in Saigon by a telegram. In fact we got a call the next day that the telegram had been sent. Wainag also wrote a letter in February to Bob, husband of Dorlene's sister Anita. Bob worked for the US government.

To make the story short Waiseng arrived Pendleton airbase around may 1st 1975. Because Waiseng fiancée Lanying and mother's servant did not have paper, they have to stay in refugee camp in Kansas city waiting for sponsors. Father and Mother would not leave the camp without them. Finally Waimun flew to Kansas city to sponsor them and get all of them out in July. The Lee family finally reunited in United States.

The evacuation from Saigon could not have happened without the help of Bob. After the fall of Saigon Bob and Anita stayed with Wainang for quite a while until they moved to Las Vegas. To this date Wainang still took care of Anita.

The amazing things about these four brothers was that most of their lives they were away from home. They were connected to their parents through only letters. Of course, without Father's financial arrangements all of our schooling away from home would not be possible.

Stories of their individual lives after 1975 are more eventful and too numerous to recount. But those developing years are most unforgettable ones.

