

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

Book Launch, HKU Main Library

May 19, 2009

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen and friends:

First of all, I would like to thank Vice Chancellor Tsui Lap-Chee and Prof. C.F. Lee for arranging this launch for me. I am most grateful to Frank Ching for making the time to speak on the book this afternoon.

I would like to think this book is special because it's about my ancestors, but I do believe everyone has a good story to tell, and every family is interesting.

I want to explain that this book, that is being shown, is actually the combination of the first two books I have written – one on my grandfather and the other, on my father. I was asked by academics to combine them into one paperback in order for it to be affordable to students who are interested in the history of Hong Kong and modern China.

It was up-dated and co-published in 2006 by York University in Toronto, and the Hong Kong Institute of Education, and was launched at the University of Toronto the same year. Since the book is about Hong Kong, I am glad it is finally launched here.

What makes a person write about his or her family? In my case, it was curiosity. Ever since I was a child, I had two important questions in my mind. The first was about my family name, which is very unusual - only a small number of Chinese have it, and most of us are related.

Since you are all from Hong Kong, you know the word “Lee” is most commonly used to mean profit, or interest on loans. I wondered whether my ancestors were usurers, but the elders in my family couldn't tell me. I guess they weren't inquisitive!

The other question I had was, “why did grandfather die so young?” All I knew was that he was assassinated, but why, and by whom? No one in the family would talk about it. However, I was aware that my father would

never go to Macao, even though the Lee family had lived there for a period when he was a child. He would also not allow any of us to go there during his lifetime, and we weren't allowed to ask why.

These two questions were lying dormant somewhere in my brain for the longest time. When you are young, there are always other things that need attention more, such as raising one's family, and establishing one's career. Then, one day, I decided it was time to get some answers before all our elders were no longer with us. Unfortunately, by then, my father had already passed away, and my mother's memory was getting cloudy.

It was around 1992, when I was working as a knitwear designer and running my own company that I started researching my ancestors.

My fourth uncle, J.S. Lee, father's younger brother, was one of the few elders still living at that time. He was very helpful, and gave me a copy of our ancestral record. These are usually not given to daughters because their names are not recorded, and the only females listed are the wives of sons.

Just think, generations from now, descendants of the Lee family would wonder who the family historian was, since her name was not in the records!!

From the ancestral records, I was able to trace our ancestry back more than two thousand years. And, I was very fortunate because I found the origin of my family name, and guess what? It had nothing to do with usury. Disappointing, isn't it?

The name was given to our ancestor during the feudal period in China. He was the Prince of Zhau, the feudal lord of an area in today's Honan province. The "Lee" river ran through his fiefdom, and so the emperor gave him the name "Lee."

My other question was about the circumstances of grandfather's death. I asked my Uncle J.S., but he wasn't much help. He was very young when grandfather died, and since it was an unspoken topic in the Lee family, much remained unknown. I was fortunate to find a granduncle, by then already in his late eighties, who was about to move to the U.S. to join his children. He was much younger than grandfather, and was treated by him as one of the children in the family. Consequently, he was able to shed some

light on grandfather's daily life, and the circumstances around the time he died.

Knowing that Grandfather died in 1928, I combed through old newspapers in the City Hall Library in Hong Kong. Sure enough, I came across articles which shed light on the assassination, where and how it happened. I was satisfied that I finally had the answers that were unknown to other family members. I felt the need to share this information, so that was how the writing began.

I didn't know how to use a computer, and there was no way I was going to write a book by hand. So I bought my first computer, and taught myself how to use it. It certainly turned out to be a very useful tool when I subsequently went back to graduate school.

With the computer, I began to organize the information I collected through books, memoirs, newspapers, journals, personal letters and any documents I could get my hands on. With the help of family members, friends, as well as our family company which had existed since 1923, I got hold of leases, articles of incorporation, and even business plans typed on primitive typewriters.

What I found particularly useful were interviews with different family members and friends of the family, which I had put on tapes. Oral histories are not only important sources of information; they enabled me to bring life to the story.

This book tells the story of Hong Kong, from the time it was a series of rocky islands with fishing villages, to when it became a major financial centre in the 1980s.

As we know, history is written by the victors, and in the case of Hong Kong, the British colonizers. In many English history books on Hong Kong, the Chinese population is on the periphery. My book tells the story of the life of the Chinese in Hong Kong.

In my research, I owe a lot to the Special Hong Kong collection in this Library, as well as its replica at the University of Toronto. My thanks to Prof. Elizabeth Sinn, who recommended one of her history graduate to help me with the research of government documents, and Hong Kong Chinese

newspapers covering important periods, such as during the severe water shortage in the 1960s. From these documents, I was able to get a pretty clear picture of my father's role in the community in Hong Kong.

Near the latter part of the 19th century, my great grandfather went to San Francisco (Gold Mountain) to make money to support his family in Hoiping. And, unlike some who stayed and later became Chinese Americans, he returned to China after saving some money, and moved his family from Hoiping to Sunwui. He also opened an import company in Hong Kong, called Lai Cheung Loong, selling blue cotton from Shanghai. That was how the Lees settled in the British colony, and we have been here for more than a hundred years.

Grandfather learnt English during the few years he was with his father in San Francisco, and he continued his education in Hong Kong at the Central School, which later became Queen's College. From the beginning of the 20th century onwards, the life of the Lee family reflected the history and the success of the Chinese in the British Crown colony.

I am going to tell you some of the highlights of my research. My fourth uncle J.S. was the only son during Grandfather's lifetime who was not sent to England to study, unlike my father and another younger brother, Uncle Harold, as well as two aunts. It was decided in the family that at least one son should study the Chinese classics, and Uncle J.S. was chosen to stay in Hong Kong. Consequently, he was the son who used to follow grandfather around and really knew his habits. Many of you know that he was a Chinese scholar, and it was my luck that he also liked to accumulate old documents as well as old photographs, despite the fact that a lot were lost during the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong.

As a historian, I am always excited when I hold old documents in my hands. I have to mention one that really surprised me. In 1923, Grandfather, whose fortune was made in real estate, bought the original estate of Jardine Matheson, called East Point Hill, which consisted of mansions and horse stables. Grandfather took over the original lease which was for 999 years!! When I first saw it, I thought I had double vision!!

I really needed to know how the 999 year lease came about. Historical documents have shown that in the 1800s, land leases were sold by the British colonial government, many for 75 years, and Jardine Matheson

complained to the higher authorities. Being a very powerful commercial company, it bargained for a much longer lease, and got it for 999 years. Isn't that amazing!

It must be my good karma having many librarian friends who have been of great help to me, eg. Dr. Kan Lai Bing, Dr. Y.C. Wan and T W Chu. In one part of my story, I wrote about my father's exploits in the development of Hainan Island. In the early 1930s, Hainan was similar to the North American Wild West, where young men went to live out their dreams.

I have stories and photographs from my parents, of the naked aborigines from the hills, gold nuggets in the streams, and a huge Garoupa that was caught by fishermen one day that was ten feet long, which fed the entire village. It was on Hainan that my father went hunting for wild boars, and cultivated land for farming and ranching. It was pure fantasy to me.

One day, out of the blue, W.C. Wan came across some documents pertaining to my father's other business venture which I didn't know anything about, and this is flax growing and processing in Hainan, with a 20,000 acre farm. My mother used to say that, the way land was bought in Hainan at that time, instead of it being measured in acreage, it was described as, "as far as the eye can see." Yes, I was really excited to obtain from Y.C. the details of that business!

Unfortunately, my parents' adventure came to an end in 1937, when Japan invaded China, and my father wanted to return to the Chinese mainland to help in the war effort, so my parents said goodbye to their tropical paradise.

When I was little, I used to love listening to the adults talking about their experiences during the war years. I would sit quietly in the room, and perhaps no one even noticed that I was there. Many of those stories I pieced together in the section on the invasion of Hong Kong, and our life as refugees in China. It is generally said that memory is selective, and as a small child, I only had interesting memories of those years without any of the gory details of the war.

I also enjoyed writing about my childhood years after the war. Those were some of the most carefree and happy years of my life. Today, whenever I hear the chirping of birds and the crowing of roosters, or when

the heat bugs start buzzing, I see myself as a child again playing in our garden (now Bamboo Grove). When I smell the fragrance of Jasmine or Osmanthus in bloom, nostalgia for Hong Kong in the 1940s and 50s overwhelms me.

I hope, when you read my book, you will also feel very nostalgic about Hong Kong's past - the blue skies towards which my kites used to soar, and the beautiful sunsets which I used to paint as a child.

Thank you.

Proceeds of the sale of this book go directly to the York Centre for Asian Research at York University in Toronto. The university has since established an annual student award in my name.