

## **Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy**

### **Family Stories**

**Library Association Luncheon,  
Robarts Library, University of Toronto**

**March 30, 2009**

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen and friends:

First of all, I would like to thank Carole Moore for inviting me to speak today. Carole thought the members would like to hear the process I went through in writing my family biography.

I will begin by saying that I believe every person has a good story to tell, and that every family is interesting.

Curiosity was what made me start researching my ancestors. Ever since I was a child, I had two 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. In everyday life, the word “Lee” is often 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 very inquisitive!

The other question I had was, “why did my 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 quite 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 not allow any of us to go there during his lifetime, and we weren’t allowed to ask why Macao was off limits.

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 most of our elders were no longer with us. Unfortunately, by then, my father had already passed away, and my mother’s memory was getting clouded.

It was around 1992, when I was working as a knitwear designer and running my own company that I started researching my ancestors, which subsequently led to my first book, covering the period from as far back as I could go, to the time of my grandfather's death.

My fourth uncle, grandfather's number four son, and my 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. Can you imagine, generations from now, descendants of the Lee family would wonder who the family historian was, since her name is not in the records!!

From the ancestral records, I was able to trace my ancestry back more than two thousand years. Westerners might find that extraordinary, but not Chinese families, because we come from a very ancient civilization, which has had a written language for thousands of years.

In my case, I was very fortunate because our records trace back to the origin of my family name, and guess what? It had nothing to do with usury. The name was given to my 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."

The other question I had was about the circumstances of grandfather's death. I asked my fourth uncle, 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 a much younger cousin of my grandfather's, so 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.

Aside from that, I was not able to get any details of the sequence of events leading up to his death.

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 first book began.

I didn't know how to use a computer, and there was no way that 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. I read many books, memoirs, and of course, 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 very useful were interviews with different family members and friends of the family, which I had put on tapes. Oral histories are not only very important sources of information; they enabled me to bring life to the story.

Before getting down to writing, I needed to give my book the right historical context. I read numerous books on the Chinese in America during the gold rush because that was the reason my great grandfather was in San Francisco in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Books on modern Chinese history, and Hong Kong history, also helped to tell the story of Hong Kong, from the time it was just a series of rocky islands with fishing villages and pirates' lair, to when it became a major financial centre.

Many of the books I read on Hong Kong were written in English, and I realized that the majority Chinese population, though extremely important to the economic life of the colony, were seldom, if ever, mentioned. As we know, the success stories were always written by the victors - in this case, the British colonizers. So, I thought it was time that the success of the Chinese in Hong Kong was documented in English.

When I was doing research for my first book, I was simultaneously collecting material for my second book, which was a biography of my father.

In order to be thorough, I hired a history graduate from the University of Hong Kong to research all the debates in my father's name during the period he was appointed to the Legislative and the Executive Councils in the colonial government (these are voluntary positions). I also asked her to comb through 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. I needed to experience those times in Hong Kong even though I was living in Canada, because it is important to actually live what you write.

It became very clear to me that many things my father did in his life for the people in Hong Kong, even though recorded in newspapers and numerous documents, were not mentioned in books written in English.

Can you imagine how horrified I was, when I read a history book, written by an academic about Hong Kong after the war, and learned that my father's name was missing from the list of those who served the people of post-war Hong Kong. He was appointed by the Governor as the Rice Controller for Hong Kong, and it was his responsibility to make sure that there was enough food for the population in the colony.

I have always loved learning history through people's lives, because that is how history comes alive. In writing the biography of my family, both the first and the second book, I have in fact documented the history of the Chinese in south China and Hong Kong, from the last part of the Ch'ing dynasty to after Deng Xiaoping opened China for trade with the West.

As I mentioned earlier, my great grandfather went to San Francisco (Gold Mountain) to make money to support his family in China, and unlike some who stayed and later became Chinese Americans, he went back to China after saving some money, moved his family to a more fertile area of south China, and opened an import company in Hong Kong, selling blue cotton from Shanghai. That was how the Lees settled in the British colony, and we have been there for more than a hundred years.

We still have close family members living in Hong Kong, and our family real estate business, established by my grandfather in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is still thriving.

My 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 was (est.1861) regarded as the Harvard or the Eton of the colonies (Queen's College). From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the life of the Lee family reflected the history and the success of the Chinese in the British Crown colony.

You might wonder why I speak about China and Hong Kong as if it's the same country, even though Hong Kong was a British Crown Colony until July 1, 1997. That's because there used to be an open border between China and Hong Kong, and people could go back and forth at will. After the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, the border closed in the early 1950s.

Being a person who loves well researched books, I really had fun digging up the truth about people and events. I am not at all sure how others do their research when they write biographies, but I went through every possible avenue. I wrote letters to friends of the family in different parts of the world to get information, and I arranged interviews with those I believed could be helpful to me. I travelled all over the world in order to do this. That needed a lot of planning, particularly when those I wished to interview were old, or they had moved, and were difficult to locate. I had to be resourceful, and I had no problem asking for help.

I am going to tell you some of the highlights of my research. My fourth uncle, the one I mentioned earlier, was the only son during my grandfather's lifetime who was not sent to England to study, unlike my father and another younger brother, as well as two aunts. You may ask, why England? Remember Hong Kong was a British Colony, and my grandfather knew that an English education for his children would be very important for the success of his family.

However, it was decided in the family that at least one son should study the Chinese classics, and fourth uncle was chosen to stay in Hong Kong, and consequently, he was the son who used to follow grandfather around and really knew his habits. He was a Chinese scholar, and it was my luck that he liked to accumulate old documents as well as old photos, 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. You would all know that, in Canada, land is held freehold, but in Hong Kong, it is leaseheld, and the lease varies, but it is usually 99 years. In 1923, my grandfather, whose fortune was made in real estate, bought the original estate of the Taipans of the powerful trading company, Jardine Matheson, (also known as the opium princes) 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 couldn't believe my eyes.

Yes, we still have most of that property, and the hill was leveled in the early 1950s, and the land developed. I sometimes wonder whether the present Chinese government would honor that lease. To my knowledge, no questions have been asked, yet!

Being very inquisitive, I 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 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!

My research had been helped by the fact that I am never afraid to ask questions, and I make friends easily. I have many friends in libraries because of my sense of curiosity, and they often look out for information for me because they know what I need, and this has helped me numerous times.

I'll give you an example. In one part of my second book, I wrote about my father's exploits in the development of Hainan Island, a tropical island in the southern most part of China. At that time, 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 a fantasy to me that belonged to another world!

To add to that part of the story, I was able to collect more details from relatives and friends of my parents. And then, out of the blue, one day, a

librarian friend from the University of Hong Kong came across some documents pertaining to my father's other business venture in flax growing and processing in Hainan, with a 20,000 acre farm. That was really news to me, and very welcome news at that. Can you imagine me getting 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.

Another part, that I really enjoyed writing about, were 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. When I smell the fragrance of Jasmine or Osmanthus in bloom, nostalgia for Hong Kong in the 1940s and 50s overwhelms me.

In order to write a family history, there are bound to be obstacles, and I believe they are mainly found in the personalities of family members. My research was so thorough that it could not be disputed, but there are always those who want to prevent the completion of a biography. Well, I did it in spite of some negativity that I encountered, and I had enough help to overcome all obstacles.

My books, in many ways, have helped to set the record straight, in the historical sense, and among family members. The one I am showing you today is the combination of my first two books that I was asked to do by academics, and it has been up-dated as of 2006. It was published by York University and the Hong Kong Institute of Education. It is printed in a paper back format in order for it to be affordable for students who wish to study the histories of modern China and Hong Kong.