

## Wish I knew you better

There is always someone we regret not knowing well enough, and now the person is dead and gone. I knew my parents well enough and grew up under their best care. I was also very close to my paternal grandmother, one of the last full-blooded nyonya in regular dress and conduct, and generosity (as a child, I received more pocket money from her than from anyone else).

I sometimes wonder what my grandfather was like. All I was told was that he was a wealthy man with rubber estates, but lost all his fortune during the Great Depression (late 1930s to 1940s). I was born in 1949, when China became a republic. As I have never met him, I have no memory of him, except for some ideas from hearsay and some old photos.

However, I knew my eldest paternal uncle, TAN Gim Ann, the most educated in the family. The Straits Times (24 Oct 1924:8) says that he was one of those seniors who had passed the Teachers' Normal Examination.<sup>1</sup> Then, he went on to Hong Kong University, where he lived in Eliot Hall. On his return, in due course, he became the founder principal of the Gajah Berang Secondary English School (in Melaka, Malaysia), which he served from 1956 to 1958. My secondary schooling days there (1962-1966) are amongst my happiest memories. That much history of him I know.

My fondest memories of him were of his visiting us in our large baba house in Tengker Road in Melaka (old Malacca) (whose monthly rent he dutifully defrayed). I can still remember the house filled and ringing with the laughter from his jokes and his gentle teasings of the women in the house, especially making the Boyanese housemaid "latah."<sup>2</sup>

On the net, I found a caricature of him as a dancing scout master in Ong Sek Pek's article in the High School Malacca's website, which attests to his good nature.<sup>3</sup> My mother would bring me along to visit him and his family at his bungalow in Limbongan, facing the sea on the north coast of Melaka. I remember watching him, chest-deep in sea-water, pushing the langai (a local shrimp-net),<sup>4</sup> netting krill-like "gerago" (Malay geragau).

During his HKU years, my uncle met his Hong Kong wife, a Christian convert, who in turn converted him, and they started their own church in Melaka. Once, I remember, she asked me, as she was wont to, whether I believed in God, and I emphatically answered no. She retorted by quoting the Bible which says that only a fool would think so. Religion thus kept us apart, though I remember enjoying the delicious pancakes she would make for us during our visits.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Page/straitstimes19241024.1.8.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Latah is a startle-induced dissociative reaction, where a surprise gesture or remark could set off an echo reflex from the subject. A monograph on this is R L Winzeler, *Latah in Southeast Asia: The History and Ethnography of a Culture-bound Syndrome*, Cambridge Univ Press, 1995: esp chs 5-6: <http://books.google.com/books?id=cx6lttzLAGMC&printsec=frontcover&hl=en#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

<sup>3</sup> Caricature of TAN Gim Ann: <http://www.malaccahigh.net/ongremembersmhs.pdf>: see p 111.

<sup>4</sup> On the langai or langgiang, see <http://www.demotix.com/news/393287/shrimp-netting-portuguese-settlement-malacca>.

Whenever we visited my uncle, I remember wishing to spend more time with him, but I never had the courage to speak much with him. One reason, I think, was because I was still a young primary school-boy, unskilled in conversation. A bigger reason was having heard that he would cane his students for indiscipline. So to me he was more of a fearsome British-trained cane-wielding school-master than a loving uncle.

Then came a surprise that made me wish I had the courage to have visited him on my own when I was older (in early secondary school). When he died of nose cancer, he remembered me in his will. I was to have whatever books I wanted from his library, the rest of which would be donated to my school library (of which I was then the student chairman). I remember being overjoyed finding a copy of Darwin's "Origin of Species" in his library. My dour aunt, his late wife, with some disapproval said, "Why do you want that book?" My reply: "Well, he read it, you know; now I want to read it."

My uncle has passed on, reborn as someone else or some other being. All I can do now is to remember him with lovingkindness and dedicate the merit of some wholesome deed, like writing this reflection, to him.

To date, I'm not sure how he knew I love books. But I am very grateful that he did, and I miss him all the more. Surely, this would be a more interesting reflection if we had known each other better.

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