

A Taoist Master's Search For His Chinese Ancestry

Part Four

Chungliang Ai Huang



Chungliang doing his "calligraphy dance."

Photo by Christopher Gallo.



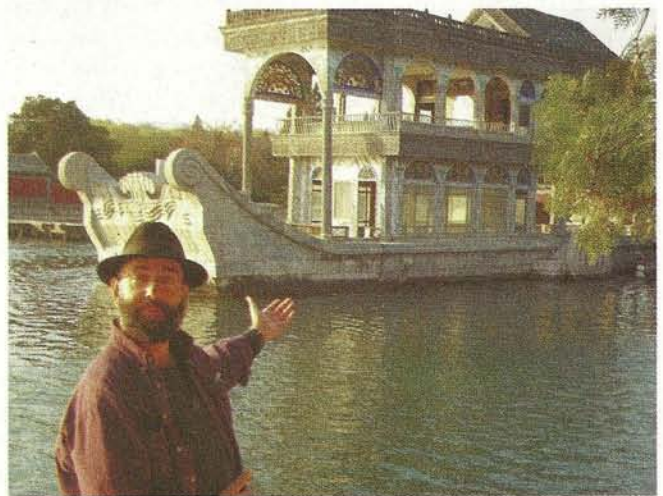
The Tai Ji Sculpture is by the famous Chinese artist Zu Ming which was bought and installed at The Marsh Center for Wellness and Balance in Minnetonka, Minnesota May 19th last year on their 25th anniversary. David Darling and I were the visiting Artists to help with the installation, and gave our concert of Chinese Poetry. Photo by Dan Ottney

Dowager Empress's Stone Boat at the Summer Palace

My maternal Manchu great grandfather Lee Hong Lie 李鴻烈 was cousin to the much more well known historic figure Lee Hong Zhang 李鴻章 who was in charge of building the Chinese naval force 北洋海軍 on the coast of northeast China. Great grandfather Lee was supposed to start building the equivalent naval force along the South China Sea. Such was the story told by the Lee clan when they migrated from Beijing to the port city 馬尾 Ma Wei (Horse Tail) in the southern province of Fujian 福建. But according to the story told, the funding to build the navy in the south was never delivered. Instead, the Dowager Empress Ci Xi decided to use the money to build the Summer Palace, Yi He Yuan 頤和園 in the capital. The only thing that had anything symbolically related to the navy was perhaps the stone boat on the lake, which was purely for Ci Xi's entertaining pleasure. For years, since the fall of Manchu Dynasty, Chinese people have cursed the woman for her ignorant and wasteful extravagance. We have blamed her for losing so many wars to the West, including the infamous Opium War, in which China lost Hong Kong to the British. But, in retrospect, even if the naval funding had been used to develop a stronger navy to fight the British, win or lose, the money would have been wasted on warfare. Instead, this stone boat, perched on the lake at the Summer palace in Beijing is built to last, to be admired and enjoyed by Chinese, and tourists from

all over the world from Here to Eternity.

As children, we remember going to visit these ancient relations in the old mansions, conspicuously out of place, in the village Yang Yu, 洋嶼 near the Port Ma Wei 馬尾. These human relics of the past dynasty were still wearing Manchu clothes, ghostlike, resembling figures in the ancestral portraits displayed in museums around the world. Figures with sunken eyes and hollow cheeks and elongated fingernails. They were totally unreal and



Lan Ting Institute seminarian Jeff Wolf admiring the stone boat at the Summer Palace, November 2010

frightening to us children. The halls and rooms all seemed darkly dim and reeked with a strange aroma—we now know it must have been opium smoking. They were the lost generation of leftover, displaced royalties, still living in the past, selling family treasures and jewels to support their dream fantasy and sad habits. What was so very touching was the fact that all the servants remained loyal to the masters, in spite of knowing well that a new era had dawned for them to be free to live in the new Republic of China.

It was indeed a confusing time in Chinese history. The younger generation became revolutionaries, open minded intellectuals, riding high on idealism and hopes for a new China. Our grandparents' generation struggled for identity and to find suitable niches to make lives sensible. Our parents' peers were joining armies to tame the warlords and liberate the peasants, forming unions for workers, joining political parties, studying abroad; and in general, breaking away from old family bondages and cultural traditions. It was truly the Best and, the Worst of Times for the Chinese.

In our family, grandma was still the Manchu lady, speaking to us in the Manchurian dialect. Our parents spoke with each other in Cantonese as they both had enlisted and trained as military cadets at the Huang Pu Military Academy in Canton (now Guanzhou). We children spoke to one another in Mandarin which we must learn in schools, also the local dialects which we had to learn when we moved constantly, escaping from the Japanese during those eight long years of resistance. In spite of all this, we were still living with a household of servants, a somewhat incongruous life in a new era continuing to fumble for our true identity. For most Chinese this struggle would continue to linger for decades.

“Autumn Water Mountain Villa” 秋水山莊 by the West Lake

Right after our victory overcoming the Japanese, father was promoted to command one of the newly formed Youth Military Troops 青年軍. We, his family, were assigned to live near the lake city of Hangzhou, in the fabulous mansion, the “Autumn Water Mountain Villa” 秋水山莊, formerly owned by the Shanghai 申報 newspaper tycoon Shi Liang-cai 史量才. (Shi was assassinated by the “Blue Shirts”—the “CIA” of the Nationalists, shortly after the Japanese surrender.) This spectacular lakeside retreat for him and his favorite consort 沈慧芝, poetically named Autumn Water 秋水, was built facing the best view of the West Lake, next to a tranquil nunnery, and backed by the green hills. It had the most ideal Fengshui 風水 geomancy. The villa was a two-storied pavilion with both ornate Chinese architectural aesthetics, as well as Western convenience and extravagance, complete with hot and cold running water facilities, flush toilets and a Western style ballroom with a bandstand stage for the trendy ballroom dancing. We had a spacious Chinese gar-

den with imported real rocks representing the five sacred mountains in China, a fish pond with rainbow colored quays, and a profusion of flowers, ready to be gathered for the vases in the entire house. Most intriguing for us children was the secret underground bomb shelter, to be entered amongst the rocks, with a special “Open Sesame” touch to reveal the pathway, descending into a complete furnished room with beds, cooking and toilet facilities.

On the second floor, between our parent's boudoir and the children's quarter, was the huge living room, and a long open veranda with a view of the garden and the hills beyond. A nightly routine for mother was to walk the open veranda, to check on us to be sure that we were all nicely tucked in. She was often troubled by the sound of a woman weeping; and one actual night she thought she could see a ghost in the garden in the misty moonlight. Mother began a serious investigation into the house's history. She was told a sad tale of a young servant girl, raped by a Japanese officer, who had thrown herself into the garden well, which was obviously covered up later. When it was confirmed that the exact spot where mother saw the ghost was indeed the old well, mother engaged the Buddhist nuns next door to perform the necessary ritual for the salvation of the victim. According to mother, she never again heard weeping in the night or saw any phantom ghost appearing in the garden anymore.

Hangzhou, with the West Lake, is often called the Venice of China. It was and still is one of the loveliest cities in China. The Song Dynasty poet Su Dong-po was an official there, and had a great deal to contribute in making the city so aesthetically inspiring. In the days of our youth when we lived in the Autumn Water Mountain Villa, there were no motor driven boats in the lake, no noisy cars and buses, no overwhelming tourists and air pollution. It was truly a blissful utopia. After nearly 40 years in exile abroad, I finally could return to visit Hangzhou. The glorious mansion was in total disarray. It had been allocated for public housing shared by hundreds of people, partitioned and parcelled into un-recognizable congested living spaces. It was heart-breaking for me when I finally found the place. I tried hard to reconstruct faint memories from my youth. Ah, I recognized the moon shaped gateway upon entering father's study. And, the open veranda was still there, but the expansive view of the green hills was now jumbled with ugly, gray and dusty tall buildings; the nunnery was also gone. The beautiful garden was now cluttered with debris, except for a long row of western toilet seats piled up and about to be installed for the hotel to be built next door. I bursted out laughing at the irony, transforming bitter tears of resentful disappointment into cosmic jokes. Oh, Well, nostalgia is never what is used to be. Let it be!

My subsequent return trips to Hangzhou to visit our old Villa would continue to jolt and surprise me. One year, the place was totally defaced, turning it into a bland youth hostel. Another year, the whole building was all boarded up for renovation. But the past two times I saw

李母張太夫人七十一壽辰紀念十月十日

Grandma Feng-Xien's 71 Birthday 1946
Lee-Huang Relatives



Chungliang at nine, seated center at grandma's seventy-first birthday celebration with 3 generations of relatives

the resurfacing of the old main gate, complete with the original four calligraphic written symbols of Qiu 秋 Shui 水 Shan 山 Zhuang 莊. I found out for certain the place was going to turn into a Five-Star tourist hotel, using the old name and promoting its historic old glory. (See the website: www.chzzz.com/qiushuishanzhuang.htm. At least, I will no longer be sad to see the place turning to ruin, but this new incarnation, although extravagantly plush for rich guests visiting the Lake City, it no longer holds the magic for me. The fascinating Hangzhou I remember so fondly from my youth can only be re-imagined and retold by those of us fortunate enough to have experienced it in its dreamlike past. It can never be the same again.

The Historic Railway Hotel where Zhou Enlai and My Father Stayed--

In recent visits to Shanghai, I often chose to stay in a relatively modest hotel, The Railway Guest House 鐵道賓館 on Guizhou Road 貴州路, mostly suited for a Chinese clientele. Instead of feeling like a foreign tourist in other more expensive hotels, I like being able to melt into the Chinese crowd there, but mainly, I feel significantly connected with the history of this place through my birth.

In the center of this hotel's lobby, there is a commemorative marble plaque recounting a specific historic event in this hotel, formerly called "Zhong Guo Fan Dian" 中國飯店. "In the early days of July, 1937, Comrade Zhou Enlai, together with a delegate of the Communist Party met with the underground members here prior to their meeting with the Nationalists in nearby Lu Shan 廬山, to discuss forming an alliance, with full cooperation, to fight the Japanese invasion...." Within a week, on July 7th, 1937, called "Qi Qi Shi Pien" 七七事變 (Seventh month-Seventh day incident), Japan launched a full assault on China. Father was very likely also in Shanghai as a member of the Nationalist delegate, meeting with his old mentor Zhou Enlai, the former Dean of Political Science from Huang Pu Military Academy. This historic coming together was the alliance between two feuding parties, swearing a patriotic pact to fight off the Japanese together. Shortly after, father was on his way to America as an envoy to seek support to deter Japanese aggression in China and warn America of Japan's future threat to the West.

Mother was 8 months pregnant with me at the time, still in the capital Nanjing when father was in Shanghai,



Chinese Opera artist Dr. Mei Lan Fang in one of his famous roles.

helping to coordinate this meeting, probably staying at "Zhong Guo Fan Dian" 中國飯店, now the Railway Guest House, in early July, 1937. To escape from the advancing Japanese, the rest of our family also moved to Shanghai, waiting for mother to give birth to me. On August 13th, Japanese war planes bombarded Shanghai. I was born the following day on August 14th in a deserted hospital. Our family barely survived the assault; we soon escaped to Hong Kong on a refugee boat. Many heroic sacrifices were made in the skies over Shanghai. Since then, August 14th became the "Air Force Day" 空軍節 to honor all the brave airmen who heroically fought the Japanese during those few fateful days.

I often wondered when I was there, if perhaps by some serendipitous chance, my father might have stayed in the very same room in this same hotel seventy-some years ago. Wouldn't that be something?!

Grandma Lee at her Lantern Lane 燈籠巷 Mansion in Fuzhou 福州

During the eight years war with Japan when our family hid in the villages with peasants, life was austere and very basic. From time to time when Japanese troops moved on to other more strategic posts, we were able to return to grandma's house in the city of Fuzhou for a reprieve. This old mansion was built for a Manchu high official, very grand and traditional. We entered the main gate with a high threshold, which was always open to a courtyard, to the ante-hall; then another gateway, another threshold, which reached to the ancestral shrine, sur-

rounded by living quarters; then another open courtyard, which reached way back to the dining hall; and another courtyard with the main well and water supply; lastly, the big kitchen where the chef and serving staff resided, to prepare daily meals for the large clan of three generations.

I remember miniature rock gardens with potted plants interspersed amongst sections of the living areas, art objects and scrolls of paintings displayed everywhere. But, mostly I recall stepping over various thresholds to enter different sections of the house. Thresholds in old households were integral architectural reminders for all of us to observe propriety as we lifted our feet to step into each new household territory. We observed different rituals wherever we went while we stepping over these thresholds into various halls and rooms.

I especially loved stepping into grandma's boudoir which I remember as most ornate and aesthetically pleasing. On her bed, she had a lacquered headrest elaborately painted with floral patterns. This headrest pillow was also a jewelry chest, containing her most treasured dowries of gold and silver, jade earrings, bracelets and trinkets of other precious stones. From time to time she would open it to allow the grandchildren to marvel and play with them.

As children, our most fascinating moments with grandma were observing her morning ritual of combing her hair up, to be tucked under an elaborate bun; then, ornamenting it with various trinkets, dangling from her head; also watching the way she meticulously applied light rouge to her cheeks, and in the palms of her hands. Especially awe inspiring was to gaze at how she bathed her bound feet in perfumed water, then dried and powdered them, wrapping them tightly with silk sashes before wedging them into her dainty "Three Inche Golden Lilies" embroidered shoes. Even then, after watching this elaborate daily ritual, we could tell that she had trouble walking properly, always wobbling and needing support from others to maneuver around the house.

My personal blissful moments with grandma were during the summer months, when I pleaded for her to soothe the itch from my heat rashes, using her extra-long nails to scratch my back. She would lovingly allow me to sit by her, and patiently, with such gentle touches make me coo and purr with appreciation. Ahhhhh... such blessed moments to remember!

Chinese Opera Memories

All through the 8 years of war with Japan, our only cultural arts experiences were gathered from occasional visits to Fuzhou. Fortunately, this city was rich with cultural offerings, especially the Fuzhou Opera which was my first love of live theater. We later learned to appreciate the Beijing Opera and the more traditional Kun Qu 昆曲 in Shanghai. Fuzhou Opera was wonderfully unique with melodically lyrical instrumentation in its orchestra; and with only male actors playing all roles. Female impersonation by men became a very special, subtle art

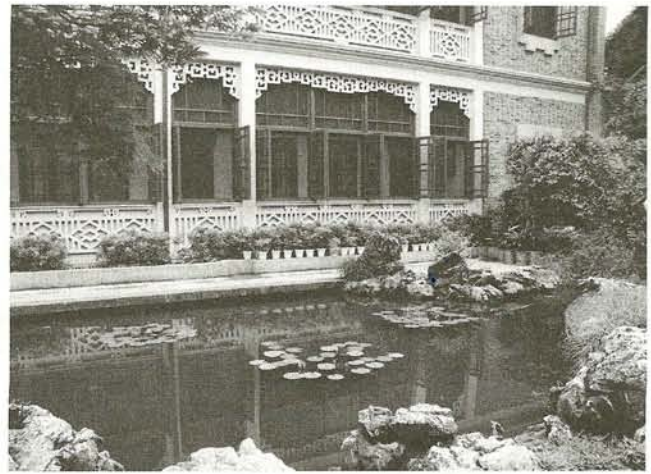
form. When men learned to play women, they had to enter into the deeply subtle essence of "being feminine" rather than pretending to be female. The male artist could be "more woman than woman" in his subtle, nuanced impersonation. The most famous Kun Qu actor, Mei Lan Fang was one such great male artist who specialized in playing female roles, who later toured the USA, took America by storm, and received an honorary doctorate from Pomona College in California.

I can still recall how mesmerized I was at the opera, responding to and imitating every gesture and move from these fantastic performers. Another reason for my fascination with the Fuzhou Opera was the visceral impact of the dynamic choreography of the actors on stage. For instance, at a heartrending reunion of two lovers, forced to be separated until this moment, the actors do not come straight forward to each other; instead, they will go through an elaborate dance, circling in a heart-moving, tear-jerking dance on two opposite sides of the stage, going through "larger than life" emotional gyrations with their bodies and vocal expressions, before the final tableau of the embrace of a climactic union that draws tears and loud crying sighs of relief and applause from the equally emotionally heightened, appreciative audience.

There is no pretension of being on this side of the "fourth wall" as in the Western theaters, to maintain an "aesthetic distance" of the audience from the drama unfolding on stage. Chinese audiences in live theaters are fully participatory in every way. We sing along with the actors on stage, getting totally involved with the drama up there, crying and laughing with the actors, and completely open to sharing the entirety of the cathartic experience.

Chinese theater lovers are proud to admit that they can be just as "madly" dramatic, even more than the lunatically "moonstruck" actors performing on stage.

A most treasured memory was when Mother took us to Shanghai to spend a whole week in the box seats at the Opera House, Da Wu Tai 大舞台, to witness 梅蘭芳 "Dr." Mei Lan Fang's farewell performances. Other great opera



Autumn Water Mountain Pavilion", after renovation as 5-star hotel in 2010

stars of that time, such as Ma Lien Liang 馬連良 and Qi Ling Tong 麒麟童, who famously played the roles of old men and warriors, joined his company in performing the complete repertoire from Mei's illustrious career. Bless you, wonderful Mother, who took us out of school, to experience this marvelous "once in a lifetime" treat which we will never forget. We will forever be grateful to you.

Note: In the last issue, regarding my father's duty of transporting national treasures to Taiwan in 1949, there were no "jumbo jets" yet, probably not even jet planes in China. Well, there were planes, trucks and boats for transportation then. Nostalgia can easily confuse time back and forth.



Chungliang Al Huang began practicing Tai Ji and studying the Taoist classics as a child in China. His seminal book, *Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain: The Essence of Tai Ji*, published in 1973, is a transcription of his teaching during the early days of Esalen Institute, and has become a classic in 14 languages. His unique style of teaching his students to fulfill their "human potentials" has garnered accolades and nurtured students of life around the world. Thirty-seven years later, this enlivening body of knowledge/wisdom, accumulated and crystallized into gems of structure guiding forces, are ready to be transmitted to those who truly wish to gain knowledge, wisdom and expertise to become what Chuangliang calls the "Living Tao Practitioners", the perpetual students of lifelong learning who have and will become mentors to others. For the very first time since the inception of the Living Tao Foundation 33 years ago, Master Huang is committed, in addition to continuing with his teaching, to include a training program to be held at the River House, the home base of Living Tao Foundation's Lan Ting Institute in Gold Beach, Oregon. He will personally offer his lifelong learning, guiding those who are ready to be inspired by his work, and willing to truly commit to concentrated in-depth studies, worthy to receive and take responsibility for this "Living Tao" legacy in their lives. Contact: www.livingtao.org or info@livingtao.org.



Autumn Water Mountain Pavilion, before restoration.