

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF MY FAMILY

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At six o'clock in the morning, when daylight is gradually approaching, a four-storied, red-brick building can be seen in a quiet neighborhood in Hong Kong. The top story of this building is the home of a family, a Chinese family not very rich and not very poor--my family.

At this early hour the whole house is hushed, but there is a slight stir in the kitchen for our old servant, Ah Tung, is already busy preparing breakfast. A kettle of water is boiling on the stove, water for tea . . . My two little brothers, Junior, aged six, and Roy, aged four, are soon up and out of bed, playing together and jabbering in a flow of fluent Chinese which wakes their servant, Ah Yuet, up. Ah Yuet is a very fat, moon-faced girl. Every morning she spends a great deal of time combing her long, black hair into a thick pigtail extending down her back. By seven o'clock the whole family is awake. My father and mother are reading the morning newspaper and my elder sister, Gwynne, I, and my younger sister Linda prepare for school.

The first words we utter as soon as we awake are "good morning." For every morning there is an exchange of good morning greetings between the members of the family and also between the family and the servants. Chinese children are brought up to be very polite and respectful to one another and to their elders.

We breakfast about seven-thirty a.m. The members of the family sit together around the big table in the dining room while Ah Tung serves us. She places the main dishes--usually fish, green vegetables, eggs perhaps--at the center of the table, then hands each of us a bowl of rice and a pair of chopsticks. This done, she stands nearby while we eat, ready to give anyone a second helping of rice by refilling the bowl.

When the meal is set before us, we do not start eating at once. Instead, bowls and chopsticks in hand, we exchange the phrase, "Let's eat rice," but we do not say grace like many Western families, because our religion places no such obligation on us. We eat by holding our individual bowls of rice in our left hand, and the chopsticks in our right, helping ourselves to the food at the middle of the table. Eating from a common dish, we have learned, is not sanitary, yet we have never thought of eating in any other way. Our way of eating is a tradition deeply rooted in us. Another Chinese tradition which we cling to is having rice for breakfast. Frankly, we children do not like such a heavy breakfast, but, as my father loves it, we do not complain. Since Father is the head of the household and buys the food, we believe he should have his way. We are grateful for a good father and for having food. The beggars, we know, are not as fortunate.

Breakfast over, Ah Tung pours the tea for us. We all drink pure Chinese tea without cream or sugar. Even Junior and Roy drink tea. Tea hinders the growth of children, so we learned, and yet we give tea to our youngsters.

Our two servants breakfast together when we are through eating. My sisters and I leave for school. Gwynne attends the University of Hong Kong and Linda and I attend St. Clare's School, a little missionary school near our home. My father, a photographer, goes to work.

Every morning my mother worships our ancestors, for my parents believe strongly in ancestral worship. Near the window in our parlor stands a long, narrow table, on the top of which are two framed portraits of my paternal grandparents (for only paternal ancestors are worshipped). On the long table are also two containers for the burning of joss sticks, and also two candleholders. After burning joss sticks, my mother pours some tea (by the way, this tea must be "fresh" tea--that is, it cannot be from the breakfast teapot) into some very tiny tea-cups and sets these tea-cups before the ancestors. This done, she prays to our ancestors and asks for blessings.

Ancestral worship is the religion of my parents. It is a traditional religion, for all our ancestors as far back as can be traced, have heeded this religious practice. This practice has become one of the important mores that my parents accept without question. Though they know about Christ, my parents cling to their religion of ancestral worship. We children, however, do not. I, for one, respect my deceased grandparents, but do not worship them, and consequently do not pray to them. It is not that we children have no religion. Gwynne is rather indifferent, true, but Linda and I believe in Catholicism and attend mass every Sunday. My parents have never forced us to indulge in ancestral worship, but are happy if we do. My parents have never forbidden us to go to church. In other words, we hold different views in the matter of religion but we never discuss which is the true religion. For we respect each other's beliefs, and there is harmony in the home.

Like other Chinese families of our position, we have servants. After breakfast they do all the household tasks. Our two servants live in, are given food and board and also rather high salaries--no longer is domestic help cheap as it was in the "good old days." As a whole, we treat our servants well. To lighten their work, we have an electric washing machine, a gas stove, a refrigerator and other modern work-saving devices--things not many Chinese families would purchase for the use of servants. We also help with the light household chores such as tidying our own rooms, for my parents believe that we should do some of the work and not be "spoiled." My friends in Hong Kong, however, never do such things. They tell me we "spoil" our servants by helping them.

And they are right! Because we treat our servants well, they "take advantage" of us. They get lazy, omit to do their duties . . . Moreover, they tend to forget their positions, making too free a use of the radio, lying on our beds, when we are not around, and so forth. Hence we often find it necessary to reprimand them in order to discipline them.

Everyday, while the servants busy themselves with the household chores, my mother teaches Junior and Roy their lessons. My two little brothers also go to St. Clare's School, afternoon session, from one-thirty p.m. to five-thirty p.m. Though this is their first year of school, their studies are very difficult. They learn English (reading and writing), arithmetic (adding, subtracting, and multiplying), and religious knowledge, memorizing the Catholic doctrine in Chinese. Most difficult are their Chinese subjects--reading, writing, dictation, and composition. Junior and Roy, being intelligent, learn very quickly and have even mastered the multiplication tables up till seven. How different this is from the American system of education!

By noon the house is spic-and-span. As my sisters and I get through classes before one o'clock, we have our lunch together at home. It is much the same as breakfast, though for variety we sometimes have bread or noodles, etc., instead of rice. After lunch Ah Yut takes the two boys to

school and the rest of the family attend to what we have to do or what we feel like doing.

Sometimes we go out, to shows, to friends' houses; sometimes we have our friends over. For our parents let us have our own way; they let us do what we wish; they let us choose our own friends; they do not tell us what we must do and what we must not do; they do not govern our lives. They believe us capable of making our own decisions. My parents rarely have to discipline us (in fact, I cannot remember having been either spanked or scolded!) for they have brought us up in such a way that we discipline ourselves. In bringing us up, they have implanted in us a sense of responsibility. We feel we must always do what is good, what is right. We realize that our parents trust us, and we must not let them down. This feeling of being good children that our parents can be proud of, comes also from the great love we have for our family.

Coming back to a day in our life, we have tea at four p.m. At this hour, we drink our tea with sugar and cream and also have cakes or pastries to go with it. Tea is a British custom which we have adopted.

After four, Ah Tung does the marketing. She always charges us more for the groceries and "pockets" the profits. This is a common practice among servants in Hong Kong, and there is hardly anything we can do about it.

In the evening my mother again burns joss sticks and worships our ancestors, but this time she pours away the tea and washes the teacups.

We generally have our dinner at eight p.m. or later, when the whole family is home and the meal goes on much the same as during breakfast. Our hearty meal usually consists of a dish of fish, shrimps or some other sea food, a dish of meat, some vegetables, and soup. There is much friendly chatter around the table, accounts of daily events, interesting bits of news, and so forth.

After dinner, the servants clear the table and "clear" up. My sisters and I then do our homework. We do it well, for we know the value of education. Father has taught us this. My father wants us all to have a good education. He believes that a good education will prepare us to take our stand in life when we become young men and women. Much as he values education, however, my father has never, and will never, force any of us to go to college. This is entirely up to us.

After dinner my parents work in the dark room which we have in our house. Oftentimes we go there too, either to help or to watch and chat.

When we take our bath at night, we prepare the water ourselves, that is, we boil the water (for there is no hot water in Hong Kong) and pour it into the bathtub ourselves. Other Chinese families rely on their servants to prepare their baths.

And before going to bed, when the day is over, we never fail to wish each other a pleasant good night.

This has just been a very brief glimpse of a day in the life of my family. As you can see, our family life is not typically Chinese--it is a sort of combination of Chinese, American, and British culture. To understand this a sketch of our family background is necessary. My father was born in Hong Kong but lived in Honolulu in his youth. My mother is Chinese,

but was born and raised in Honolulu. It was in Honolulu that they met and fell in love, but they went back to Hong Kong to get married. It was a typical Chinese wedding, the bride all dressed in her costly, elaborate Chinese robes sitting in a sedan chair hoisted by coolies . . . Gwynne and I were born in Hong Kong. When the Second World War threatened Hong Kong we immigrated to Honolulu and soon Linda was born. Spending seven years in Honolulu we children soon forgot Chinese and adopted the American way of life. But in 1947, the war being over, we returned to our native land, Hong Kong. After some years, Junior and Roy were added to our family.

Hence we know both ways of life--American and Chinese--and also a third way of life, the British (Hong Kong is a British Colony). We adopted certain aspects of each culture. From the Chinese we got the drinking of tea instead of water, the worshipping of ancestors, the extreme politeness and deep reverence we have for our parents . . . From the Americans we learned how not to be "spoiled," how to work for ourselves, how not to look down on people below our rank (as Chinese are apt to do) . . . From the British we got the habit of having tea at four in the afternoon . . . Moreover these different ways of life mingled. Our clothes, for instance, are Chinese and English. And the language which we speak at home is both Chinese and English. For indeed certain members of the family know Chinese better, while others know English better, while my two little brothers only speak Chinese, though they understand English. Consequently, both Chinese and English are spoken at home. Sometimes we speak English with the addition of many Chinese words, or vice versa, and the result is a somewhat "modified English" or a "modified Chinese" or, as the Hawaiian would say, "pidgin-English-Chinese!" I can truthfully say that changing from our culture to another has greatly affected our way of living.

Moreover my parents are not like many Chinese parents who love only sons because they carry on the family name. I am glad to say that my parents love all of their children. Also my mother is not like many mothers in Hong Kong who leave the children entirely under a servant's care. My two little brothers do not lack parental affection though they have a servant to care for them. We are a very happy family. I can truthfully say that I am extremely fortunate in being a member of this family, and living in a household pervaded with the atmosphere of love.