

My father

CHEN Yingzhen (Translated by LU Yiting and LIN Chia-Hsuan)¹

I have a particularly comfortable pair of leather shoes, but both heels are worn out. I couldn't bring myself to throw the shoes away, so I plead my wife to get the heels repaired.

"I have seen no one walking like you," my wife says. "Why do you always drag your heels when you walk?"

I look at the leather shoes carried in my hand. The heel of the right shoe is worn out to the right as though it's been shaved by a knife, while the left one is shaved to the left.

It reminds me of my father's leather shoes.

It was the summer of 1949 when I was in the fifth grade that my father, who was then the principal of an elementary school in Tao Town, came to visit my foster family. For many days, with mixed feelings, I had been looking forward to the day my father would come and bring me back to my birth family for a short stay. As a young boy, I was unwilling to depart from my foster parents who treated me as their own child—my foster parents were my father's third elder brother and sister-in-law, thus my third uncle and aunty. But meanwhile, the temptation of playing with my biological sister and four younger brothers in my birth family was so strong that I could not withstand it either.

In the dark living room, while my father had a long talk with my foster father, with whom he had shared an intimate brotherhood when they were young boys, my foster mother had me already changed into a starched student uniform. Squatting beside the well to watch my foster mother washing vegetables, I chatted with her from time to time, trying hard to conceal my

unwillingness to leave her even for a short time and the irresistible expectation of returning to my birth family, knowing both would make her sad.

But the time of leaving still came.

"Third brother and sister-in-law, I think I should be going," said my father.

I carried a small bag in my hand and cast a glance at my foster mother. Wiping her wet hands with her apron, she wore a smile on her face. I waved goodbye to her, and followed my big and tall father, with a sense of security, to step out of the gate of my foster home.

Father took me to the nearby train station at Yin Town to travel to Tao Town, which was only one stop away. As I recall, I was so absorbed in watching the spinning pastoral scenery outside the window that, for the entire trip, father and I didn't speak to each other at all.

When the train reached Tao Town, we got off the train and exited the train station. I kept walking behind my father whose tall figure was covered in a very old suit jacket. And it was at this moment that the two heels of his big leather shoes came into my sight. The shoes were very old, dusty and even out of shape, while the heels were worn out to the right and left respectively as if they were shaved by a knife.

Father suddenly stopped in front of a small restaurant near the train station and signaled me with his eyes to follow him up to its second floor. Father and I then sat opposite each other at a big round table. Before long, the two plates of stir-fried rice noodles he had ordered were served in front of us.

Even up to today, I still think it was the most delicious stir-fried rice noodle I've ever had. In the dim restaurant, without

extra soybean sauce, the delicious plate of rice noodles in its original white color gave off the gleam and aura of lard. Greedily, I ate them up bite after bite.

When we finished, my father talked for a while with the owner of the restaurant who was friendly and called him "Principal Chen." And then, with my small bag, I continued following my father towards the principal's dormitory at the Tao Town Elementary School. All the way to the dorm, I focused on the heels of my father's old leather shoes, wondering how they could be worn out like that.

"Only by dragging the heels when you walk could they be worn out like that ..." my wife says.

I say nothing in response, but am amazed at how heredity determines even our walking postures.

My father was born in 1905 into a very poor family in Zhongzhuang, a shabby village located between Xi Town and Yin Town. When he was in the fifth grade of the Common School, as ordered according to the Japanese educational system, my grandfather passed away. To pay for the funeral affairs, my father's family had no alternative but to borrow money from usurers by mortgaging their shabby family house. My father's three elder brothers held a meeting and decided that they would make every effort to earn money and to redeem the family house back as soon as the funeral ended. Standing aside as a student yet to graduate from the Common School, my father knew immediately that it was an extravagant hope for him to enter a middle school after graduation.

In the summer when my father graduated from the Common School, his teacher walked for miles from Yin Town to visit my father's family in the hope of persuading them to let this really talented child get more education. But upon seeing the poor condition of my father's family, the teacher fell silent. "Then my teacher told me, 'it's all right, because self-study could also make a person great,'" my father recalled.

"He taught me how to learn from consulting dictionaries and reference books, and then left in sadness."

As the summer was over, my father saw some of his classmates who did far worse than him in school putting on uniforms and going to the middle school. He could only hide himself and choke his feelings back.

Since then, my father worked in the daytime and studied hard until midnight. Years later, he passed the entrance exam and got the qualification of a civil official as a "Faculty Member of Senior Primary School" in the Japanese government before his classmates got their middle school diplomas.

The pain of being denied the right to education due to poverty motivated my father to take being an educator as his lifetime career. Educating and helping students like him whose early intelligence was restricted by impoverishment became my father's lifework once he got the qualification as Faculty Member, and he devoted himself to teaching at schools in Taoyuan and Zhunan. In 1935, my father met my shy and beautiful mother in an adult education class in Zhunan, and then they married.

My father successively worked in the Household Registration Department of Hsinchu District Government, Dominating Tea Company and Taiwan Broadcasting Bureau in a time when Japan expanded its influence outwardly. Soon, the day of the Taiwanese Restoration came.

Before long, my father was recommended to take charge of the higher education department in Taoyuan County Government that was under the direction of Liu Qiguang, a pre-war peasantry campaigner in Taiwan who had returned from mainland China. The person who recommended my father was Liu's old comrade.

It was when my father was dispatched to receive a short-term but intensive training in Provincial Discipline Group in Taipei that the unfortunate February Incident occurred. A few days after the incident, I stood in front of my foster home and unexpectedly saw my father, looking tall, with a

windbreaker draped over his shoulder, appear as a figure in a distance. He stepped on the sleepers underlying the railroad, padded around a footpath, and walked toward the gate of my foster home in Yin Town.

Because the railway transportation between north and south had come to a standstill, my father traveled on foot along the railroad to visit his third brother in Yin Town. The two brothers sat on the *tatami* mats and conversed worryingly about something unknown to me. After the talk, my father dined at my foster home, threw on his grey windbreaker again and stepped along the sleepers back to Tao Town.

"Don't hang around outside the house on your own, all right?" my father said to me with an amiable look before he took off.

I silently watched my father departing without looking back until his figure disappeared in the shadow of a beautiful Acacia bush at the turning of the railway. I was deeply attached to my foster parents since they loved me so dearly in every possible way. But the call from my birth family was like a tide of flesh and blood to me. The tide got stirred only at such times as my father came and stood before me, and the ripples would temporarily ease when he left. But in my young heart, such a process of "easing" also generated overwhelming loneliness. With such loneliness in my heart, I gazed at my father's figure gradually fading away in the chill of early spring.

Father recalled once about what life was like after the February Incident. After the Incident, Taiwanese people were utterly disillusioned with the liberation promised to come with the Taiwanese Restoration. They sorely felt the despair when it came to the prospect of Taiwan's postwar political environment. "However, the huge despair made people in Tao Town put their hope instead in educational undertakings. Since they could not see a future for their own generation, they placed the hope in their children," said my father. My father was in his forties at that time, and was much appreciated by the respected people in Tao Town.

They urged the county government several times to make my father the principal of the Tao Town Elementary School, and finally he took the job.

After taking over the Tao Town Elementary School, my father negotiated with the government to evacuate the garrison from the school in order to restore a normal educational environment. With the full support of the Parent-Teacher Association, my father initiated a fund-raising project among the students' parents to provide regular monthly pay for teachers in the school, since it was quite common that, in the wake of Taiwanese Restoration, servicemen and civil officers' salary were often overdue or even unpaid. At that time, there was a critical shortage of teachers in disciplines such as languages, Chinese history and geography. My father firmly believed that it was better to hire teachers who were from the mainland and more familiar with Chinese history and geography to teach mandarin, history and geography in school. Therefore, he searched all around for decent and talented teachers, and finally found several who not only could speak and teach standard mandarin but were also trained in history and geography. Moved by my father's enthusiasm toward education, the teachers worked hand-in-hand with him to launch the creative and lively teaching plans, which, in a depressing era, brought a carefree and delightful teaching atmosphere to the campus. Before long, the Tao Town Elementary School became the most outstanding school among Taiwan's elementary schools in terms of language education. Through activities such as performances in the school carnivals, short plays and speech contests, language education in this school soon allowed every teacher and student to read and write mandarin fluently.

I can still remember, it was during that short stay at my birth family—which my father went to Yin Town to take me back to—that I attended one of these school carnivals. There was a short play on the stage, and what impressed me the most were several actors playing peasants dining outdoors and resting in shade. They were

strangely named after the unit of weight, such as “seven catties,” “six catties” and “nine catties.” There was a child playing the role of an old lady. She spoke in flawless mandarin, acted and sighed repeatedly in an exaggerated way, “...I... have lived long enough... the younger generation... gets worse... than their parents.”

I didn't realize until many years later that it was a short play adapted from one of Lu Xun's famous stories “Storm in a Teacup.” It's still beyond me how the adaptation could make the profound irony in this story comprehensible to those children. However, considering mandarin was still an unfamiliar language in Taiwan at that time, those language teachers' creativity, aspiration and enthusiasm in adapting this story and directing children to perform it were much greater than what one could imagine under today's deeply flawed mandarin education.

As long as a competitive college entrance system existed, the unequal educational programs such as the differentiation between “classes aiming for higher education” and “classes not aiming for higher education” (“classes for given-ups”) were inevitable in educational institutions. Such growing educational discrimination was in fact a result of the social, economic, and class oppression on people's right to education, veiled by the claim that everyone's right is “equal before the law.” Since my father, who deeply suffered from the pain of being deprived of education due to poverty, could not overthrow the existing discriminative educational system, he used his own experience as the example to earnestly ask teachers to treat students in both kinds of classes equally, even though there was a division between the two. They should treat all students with equal attitude and educational practices. My father required teachers who taught in classes aiming for higher education to treat students in classes not aiming for higher education with nondiscriminatory love and responsibility as an educator. He also opened a basic calculation skill class and a bookkeeping class for students in classes not aiming for entrance to help students get

ready for work. Moreover, to help students who intended to engage in self-study in the future, my father also asked the teachers to teach them how to consult dictionaries and reference works. My father never gave up on students in the “classes for given-ups” and constantly visited their classrooms with a sincere concern. He earnestly told the children that he himself had also been a child too poor to go to school. “Nevertheless, through self-study and hard work, people with aspiration could still make themselves great,” father told them. “Never, ever give up on yourself ...”

There was one summer, when the graduation song was sung, that parents of the students in classes aiming for further education held a convivial banquet to thank the teachers. After the banquet, teachers went back to school and were amazed to find graduates from the “classes for given-ups” waiting for them in a classroom. The students had managed to gather a small amount of money by themselves to brew a pot of green bean soup for their teachers. They went timidly to the faculty's office and invited their teachers to go to the appreciation party they held in the classroom. “All of the teachers accepted the invitation to join the party. After all, these children realized and believed the school and teachers never looked down upon them,” my father recalled in an unsteady voice full of emotion. “Many of the teachers were moved to tears. Deeply touched, they happily drank up the cup of green bean soup they would certainly remember for the rest of their lives.”

In fact, before all of these events, my father had unexpectedly lost his dear son in 1946—my twin brother Yingzhen. My father had struggled on his own with the huge pain of loss for four years, and it wasn't until he converted to Christianity in 1951 that he was able to recover from this grief.

Faith enriched my father's mind and soul in new and profound ways. In the autumn of 1951, with a joyful heart he went to Taizhong and helped to establish a seminary there. He took charge of general affairs

and served as a teacher in the seminary until his retirement in 1976.

In the mid-1960s, I gradually took a radical path in terms of thinking. I talked with my father more often, since I constantly returned to my birth family in Taizhong. Although I had never explicitly revealed my thoughts and deeds to him, as someone who had experienced the Japanese governance in the 1930s, he already noticed my orientation in thinking. However, my father was not like any father in an era of political terror; he didn't stop or blame me with harsh words. In our talk before my arrest in 1968, some points he made remain vivid for me to this day.

We had talked about Chinese socialism. As a child of a poor family and knowledgeable about leftist thoughts in the 1930s, my father harbored an understanding in socialism that was much more profound than any hearsay about it. He was deeply sympathetic to Chinese socialism, and has certain expectations towards it. Meanwhile, as a pious Christian, my father also carried a keen religious concern when witnessing the disturbance brought by the Cultural Revolution. He said that it was after converting to Christianity that he came to know the original sin within human beings. He believed that if the problem of human sins was not solved, it would eventually ruin the movements of liberation and justice even though these movements came from the best wishes of human hearts. My father had shown, several times, his respect for the Japanese scholar Yanaihara Tadao, who was also a Christian advocating the non-church movement. According to my father, in order to avoid the weakness and corruption that was inevitable in the institutionalized church, Yanaihara sought the kind of faith that could do without religious organization and hierarchical structure, and by which an individual could directly converse with God through Bible study, meditation and prayer. On the other hand, in the field of academic study, Yanaihara was a well-known Marxist economist. As a Marxist economist, Yanaihara scientifically revealed the secret of the exploitative imperialist

system Japan applied to the sugar industry in Taiwan, and his work largely inspired and encouraged the anti-imperialism and anti-Japanese ruling movements in Taiwan. Moreover, as a faithful Christian—in the 1940s when the Japanese militarism went wild—Yanaihara was like a lonely prophet who denounced Japan's invasion of China. He openly prayed for Japan's defeat to save Japan from its crimes and craziness. However, Yanaihara was eventually imprisoned by the Japanese fascists and wasn't released until the end of the Second World War.

My father considered Taiwanese church's abhorrence of socialism as a gap in Christian faith. Taking the church in the apostolic days as an example, he suggested that, back then, the followers sold off their properties and belongings to have the proceeds "laid at the apostles' feet" for public use, and the apostles then "parted the proceeds to all men, as every man had need." My father regarded such a church as one of the socialistic communes that emphasized fair distribution and "every man got what he had need." He thought the early church did not last long for ignoring the mode of production based upon the public property. But he also pointed out that *The Book of Acts* gave a description of "Ananias and his wife Sapphira" who with selfishness kept back part of the proceeds to themselves when selling their properties and thus incurred severe punishment from God. With this example, my father suggested that rather than abhorring socialism, Christianity should be more aware of human sins. Any good conception, institution and movements could not but get corrupted as long as the question of human sins remained unsettled.

My father's emphasis on the moral aspect of a reform movement was also demonstrated more than once in the question of "darakan" in Japanese. In the 1930s, Japan swiftly turned to militarism. Under the fascist high-handed political pressures, many Japanese leftist intellectuals, cultural figures and party cadres overtly betrayed their previous thoughts. Such a trend of "converting" (surrender in terms of thinking

and political affiliation) pulled these previous revolutionists down from the altar on which they had enjoyed the respect of the poor and young people as their mentors. The public thus denounced them as the “corrupted cadres” (*darakukanbu*) and, because of the abbreviation in the Japanese language, the term “corrupted cadres” was also pilloried as “*darakan*.” My father recalled that when he was young, he witnessed a leftist cultural figure he had admired brazenly proclaim the conversion, and it was like a heavy blow to him. For my father, although the oppressive political environment did leave people little alternative, some of the self-righteous “*darakan*” were much worse than a “reactionary.”

These words of my father’s left me with a deep impression back then. But it wasn’t until 1968 when I was imprisoned that the profound meaning within was unveiled to me. While squatting at the corner of a cell, I pondered and came to realize how much my father had been worried for me as he witnessed his own son walking up a dangerous road without turning back, and how he endured the fear and pain of losing another child when he earnestly urged me again and again, “Don’t forget about the human weakness, nor should you lose the purity of your soul when you pursue justice in this world,” and “Learn from Yanaihara Tadao’s example that the revolutionary practices did not conflict with religious faith, rather, they could in fact enrich each other—one should never forsake his or her own faith as a result of pursuing social reform ...”

In fact, my father had painstakingly exhorted me as his son whom he couldn’t stop worrying about. My father once expounded to me that wise people should be able to correctly estimate their own ability, to know what they could or could not do, and accomplish their undertaking by doing what they were really good at. Maybe my father was worried that this silly child of his could not understand what he actually meant; he went on to take Lu Xun as an example and demonstrated how, in the process of reforming China, Lu’s literary

works exerted an influence on people’s minds that went far beyond the power of strong armies. When my comrades and I were all arrested, our naive organization shattered, and I could not but feel weak and small in front of the violence of a gigantic “state,” these words of my father resonated heavily in my mind.

In the autumn of 1968, when I was finally permitted to meet my family for the first time since I was imprisoned, I saw my father. At the sight of my father’s grey hair, I knew in my heart how heavily I had worried him. With the deepest apology, I couldn’t stop the tears running down my face. But my father was very calm and serene, he didn’t utter a single word of blame and reproach to me. Instead, he urged me not to forget the three-layer self-identity when I was in prison.

“Foremost, you are the child of God. And then, you are the child of China. Lastly, you are the child of mine,” said my father.

At one such meeting in the following summer, my father mentioned that a magazine outside the prison published a reportage about my case and pleaded the government for a “pardon.” Because of the strict surveillance in prison throughout the meeting, he left out many details and made it very vague, and I forgot about the whole thing as time passed by. After I was released in 1975, my father brought up this event in a conversation again that a magazine pleaded the government to “pardon” a “young native Taiwanese writer” (something like that) and so on. My father didn’t explain why he went through the trouble to inform me about this event at that meeting, given the strict surveillance in prison, but it suddenly occurred to me that he probably had been worried that I might be forced to “convert” under pressure and become a shameful “*darakan*.” My father’s prayer for his imprisoned child was clear: as “the child of God” and “the child of China,” my father hoped that I would finish my time in prison with a pure conscience!

Throughout his life, my father was never a secular political oppositionist. But in 1968

when his two sons—my sixth younger brother and I—were secretly and unexpectedly arrested at the same time, my father overcame the test of austere political and social restrictions, and acted as a Christian with firmly founded faith, a father with kindness and extraordinary understanding of humanistic thoughts, and an intellectual full of wisdom and dignity.

In the difficult days of the imperial Japanese occupation, my father on the one hand was regarded highly by some of the Japanese for his prominent talent and ability, but on the other hand, he often argued with the Japanese over racial discrimination in the workplaces, and stormed off. My father constantly brought up the episode of when he was little and my grandfather told him the national flag of the Qing Dynasty had “five colors” on it, which was much better than the one of Japan that only had a “red plaster.” When the Japanese army invaded Taiwan in 1895, my father’s uncle and other young men in the poor village where they lived hastened to Sanxia and found the foreign guns left behind by soldiers of Qing’s army. But they did not know how to use these guns, and “just when they got into battle, they were immediately killed by the Japanese. This was what your grandfather told me,” my father said. Once the news of his brother’s death reached the family, my grandfather rushed overnight to the battle field in Sanxia and finally found my great-uncle’s dead body in the morning twilight. He carried the corpse home on his own to bury his brother properly. “The tomb of your great-uncle is still in Zhongzhuang. He hadn’t got married when he was still alive so he left no children,” my father said. “When it’s time, confer with other relatives to rebuild the tomb of your great-uncle.”

I can still recall that my father had started looking around for information to complete the family history book back when I was still a junior high school student. For generations since our clan of the family came to settle in Taiwan, they had been too poor and lacked resources to be able to complete the family history book

that was passed down from our ancestors. But my father finally got the family history roughly into shape by visiting more resourceful families in our clan and consulting the family history that was passed down orally. However, there was one generation of our clan that remained unidentifiable since their southward migration to the Minnan region, and the consequent gap in our family history remained a deep concern of my father’s over the years. Since the 1980s, my parents have dwelled alternately in North American and Taiwan, and were loved and taken good care of by their children in these two places. During this period of time, my father had earnestly hoped to go to his ancestral home in mainland China to fill in the gap in the family history, but he always stopped himself. He feared that if he violated the political taboo and went to the mainland, he might bring trouble to his two convicted sons. It was not until 1986, when he became much weaker with age and feared that he might lose the final chance to complete the family history if he waited any longer, that my father decided to visit Minnan region in mainland China by way of North America, accompanied by his youngest sister and her husband. Finally, he returned to Anxi County of Fujian Province, our ancestral home, from which seven generations before me originated but no one had ever returned until this moment. My father was so nervous and excited as he got closer to his ancestral home that he unexpectedly had a heart attack. The people accompanying him tried very hard to persuade him not to proceed and enter the ancestral home located in Jinshi Shipan, which was already close at hand. Instead, they asked someone to bring from the ancestral home the family history book which, fortunately, had not been destroyed in the Cultural Revolution. After a cross comparison, the gaps on both sides of the family history were perfectly filled. My father was so overjoyed that even the local people around him were deeply moved.

Among the criticisms of Christianity in the 1920s and the 1930s, there was a saying

that hinted at extremism that in China, "with one more Christian, there's one less citizen left." Whether this saying is applicable to today's Christian circles in Taiwan remains debatable, but it definitely could not apply to what my father believed. My father had a sympathetic understanding towards the Three-Self Church in mainland China, but he could not lay aside his worry about the "underground church" in the mainland that was built by Taiwan's church as its extension. As he suggested in *What I Learn in Christ*, the only collection of his essays published in 1989, Chinese Christianity should integrate with real conditions in China in terms of culture, humanistic tradition, and national character, as well as social and ethic systems so as to explore and establish China's own theological and religious languages. My father was never a follower of the Social Gospel, but he believed that people were more important than the ritual ("The Sabbath is made for the people, not the other way around"). He also believed that the zealotry to pursue justice would liberate a person from mental as well as physical constraints, and this was the mission "the Father hath given the Son to finish." My father believed that the greatest blessing God has for humans is to "let fairness run down as great waters, and justice as a mighty river."

In this way, my father unintentionally preserved an ideal native land for us as his children. When the possibility of losing our native land swept over us like a confusing mist, it was my father who gave us a solid image of such a land that steadied us as a rock, leaving us happy and content.

For me, the easy and sincere humbleness of my father was also exemplary. Throughout his life, my father developed no self-abasement for being born into a poor family, nor did he become arrogant and sadistic, which was common and often inevitable in people who were educated by self-study. My father never showed off his outstanding knowledge and opinions. Even though I, as his child, earned some undeserved literary fame, my

father hardly praised in front of me those of my works that he liked; neither did he go along with some people's compliments of my achievement in literature. In his whole life, my father calmly and comfortably hid his extraordinary talent, knowledge and his noble spirit. He wrote himself the following epitaph, "Here lies in seclusion an old man who has nothing worthy enough to hide," which epitomized his humble life style. And he asked us to engrave the epigraph on his tombstone.

My father, of course, was not a person without flaws. A quick temper was one of his weak points. When he lost his temper, the anger might temporarily overwhelm his wholehearted love for his children. But even so, as my father's child, I always thought that the life I led was no match for his noble life style.

In 1996 when my father was 91 years old, his physical condition declined rapidly. On November 31, he eventually rested in God's embrace, where he placed his faith.

In these days, my mother has also become weak with illness, while my foster parents have already passed away—the trees on their tombs have grown tall. It might be a blessing for me to only experience the grief of losing my parents when I am over 60 years old and have begun to age myself. But even so, an unexpectedly deep loneliness, as if I were left alone in the world, wells up in my heart. Not until this attempt to remember my father have I come to understand how deeply he influences me. My father was never one of the high-ranking gentry or a rich and successful businessman, neither was he a formidable scholar or a grand preacher in church. For us as his children, however, his mighty figure as a father is far greater than those of earthly fame and enterprises. My father left us no homestead or family estate, but instead, he gave us the spiritual property that cannot be traded with any worldly goods and is so rich that it would never decay, ever.

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Note

1. Note on spelling: all the Asian names in the text are presented in the Asian order: last name first.

Author's biography

Chen Yongshan [陳永善] was born in 1937 in Taiwan. Chen Yingzhen [陳映真] is his literary pen name, whereas the pen name Xu Nancun [許南村] is mainly used for his review articles. He started

writing literary works in 1959, and was incarcerated for seven years in 1968. After his release from prison, he continued writing and involved himself in various leftist social practices. His writings and deeds remain among the most important resources for leftist thoughts and practices in Taiwan.

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