

Memories of My Father

My father left his home in Shandong, China, to seek his fortune while still a teenager in the 1920s. After the Communists took control of China in 1949, he settled in Pusan, South Korea.

He had once worked as an apprentice in a Shanghai trading firm, so he took up this work in his adopted country. His trading business prospered, particularly after the Korean War.

Photographs of him from that time show a man full of vigour on a plane or in a jeep during the trips he made to places like Hong Kong and Japan. The earliest toys I played with were the elegant Parker fountain pens he had collected.

When I was one year old, I was diagnosed with polio, and my father wanted me to have the best possible care. Our neighbours in Pusan were so amazed at how much my father had spent on me that, even years later, they called me the "son made of gold."

These same people were also astonished that my father's fortune could have vanished so abruptly.

Shortly after I was diagnosed, a distant relative gained my father's trust when he found some doctors for me. He then introduced my father to some people who persuaded him to invest in a new tourist hotel in Pusan. Before the eight-story building was finished, however, my father discovered that he had fallen prey to a wicked swindle. The money he invested was spirited away, and the people who were responsible for it disappeared. Construction on the hotel was halted, and my father had to sell all his assets to bring the fiasco to an end.

I will always remember seeing him going out one rainy afternoon to sell our telephone. He was 50 years old.

With his business destroyed, my father was no longer a leader of the local Chinese community. The only consolation was that he managed to save the family home.

Fortunately, as a calligrapher and as an expert of the abacus, he was able to support us.

He left Pusan and began working as an accountant in several other cities in Korea. Years later, after my mother died, he returned to Pusan and took a job collecting membership fees from local Chinese businesses for the Chinese Residents Association.

To collect these tiny sums he spent his days riding the bus, going from door to door. One thing that impressed me was the fact that, despite the menial nature of the job, he was always fastidious about the clothes he wore. It did not matter what season or weather he found himself in, every day he wore a crisply pressed suit, a snow-white shirt and a sharp-looking tie.

At night, I would see him completely engrossed in recording the day's accounts. He always finished by going over his calculations with the abacus, the beads clattering as he pushed them back and forth at a furious pace. When he was finished, he'd say, "here, right to the last cent."

This was how my father managed to maintain our family in comfort, though in somewhat straitened circumstances. He relied solely on his monthly salary, which would not have been enough to pay for a meal with friends in his better days, and a trivial sum of money that he obtained from renting out part of our house.

When I was in high school, I gradually grew dissatisfied with my father. One day, a friend told me how his father regained his wealth after he had suffered a setback. His story planted a seed of doubt in my mind: Why couldn't my father rise again after his stumble at the age of 50? A person should be at the peak of his faculties at that age.

I began to think how senseless it was for him to scramble around during the day for those trivial membership fees, and to count every last cent on his abacus at night. I began to doubt if he'd ever had the strength of character that enabled him to get into the trading business in the first place.

Why couldn't this man summon his resourcefulness to restore his past glories? How could he be satisfied with balancing a pile of loose change in his books?

I couldn't stand his officious counsel, either. Worried that I might not be able to find a place for myself in society, he would remind me to be circumspect and cautious. His pessimistic outlook on life, which must have come from his business setback, filled me with contempt. After two serious arguments, we settled into a protracted cold war. Then, when I was 18, I moved to Taiwan to attend university. Only many years later, after so many foolish and unfilial acts on my part, I was lucky enough to re-establish our relationship. It was then that I realised my father had always been waiting for me to come back to him. It was just that I was not ready for a reconciliation.

Although we were still living in different places, we wrote and visited each other as often as we could. As always, he didn't talk much. On several occasions I asked him about the scam that had cost him his fortune. He only smiled, however, and said nothing. Nevertheless, our minds seemed to better understand each other.

One day during his afternoon nap, just after reading a letter from me, he passed away quietly. He was 79.

Not until much later, though, did I truly begin to understand him. I was 40 years old and had suffered a serious setback in my own career. I had devoted eight years to a company, and had just stepped down as president. At first, I was very depressed.

One day, after offering incense to the ancestral tablet at home, I sat down and thought of

my father. I remembered how for so long I regarded him with disdain because he had failed to get back on his feet after his own misfortune.

I suddenly felt as if he was standing in front of me, smiling and reaching over to pat my shoulder. "My dear fellow," I could almost hear him say, "That's perfectly all right. Come, show me how you are going to handle this blow. You are but 40 years old."

The word shame must have been invented just to describe how I felt at that moment. As time passed, I came out of my slump, and restarted my career. Best of all, I had a deeper understanding of my father. I now realised why he had refused to talk about how his empire fell to pieces. I understood why, after amassing great wealth, he could be content with making a modest living collecting those pitiful membership fees. I understood why, even for a job like that, he would pay such careful attention to his appearance.

A man devoted to his work should not try to explain away or look for excuses for his mistakes. A man devoted to his work should give his best effort to even the most menial task. A man devoted to his work should march forward with his head held high, in good and bad times. Success or failure is just a matter of opportunity.

One day, I found myself in a taxi with a driver whose daughter had contracted polio in 1964, a few years after I did. "At first, I thought it was just the flu," the taxi driver told me. "Later, I could see that she could not stand, and her reflexes were gone when I tapped her knee. I thought, It's all over. It's polio."

Listening to him, I almost hear what he was going to say next: What is she going to do for her life? Instead, he said: "I thought, We're going to have a hard time making ends meet."

As he talked about how he had been in debt for many years, I thought about my father. When my polio broke out, he could not have been thinking about how much he would have to spend on me. He was rich then. But because of me, indirectly, he lost his fortune.

As tears rolled down my face, I realised for the first time that in every joint and vertebra of my twisted and deformed spine lies his investment in me, his concern and his love. I am truly a son that he made from gold.