

Lai Zhou, Shandong Province, China
Late Nineteenth century.

We travel a hundred years back to the late nineteenth century, the scene, Northwest China. A humble seaside farming settlement on the southern side of the Bay of Jiao Zhou (膠州灣), this is MaChui (麻渠村), Ye Xian (掖縣) Shandong Province, the hometown of Sun Bao Shu (孫寶書), son of Sun Rui Lin (孫瑞麟). China during this time was governed by the Qing government which was facing internal turmoil of famines and riots and had to deal with the aggressively expanding Western powers. Unemployment was driving migration to Manchuria where opportunities were abundant resulting in the Qing government placing restrictions on travel in an attempt to stem the tide.

The year was 1885 and Sun Bao Shu, then a young lad of 16 or 17 years was eager to eke a living. Like many other young men of his age he had set his eyes on Vladivostok (海參威), a seaport in Siberia of Russia which formerly belonged to China and was now a bustling place under the new administration. To get there, Sun Bao Shu first had to make a voyage across the Bohai Sea to the City of Dalian. From there came a rough and bumpy journey of over a thousand kilometers on the road which lasted for many months. Finally arriving in the promised land, Sun Bao Shu saw that it was profitable to trade in building materials given the increasing demand for housing. Opportunity coupled with honesty and hard work led Sun Bao Shu to acquire much wealth. It was finally time to marry Yu from his hometown and to start a family. In 1910 Sun KweiChi (孫桂籍), the father of Sun Yu-li (孫宇立) was born in Vladivostok.

Seven years later, the Bolshevik Revolution broke out in 1917 throwing Russia into turmoil. It was time to move back to China and Harbin.

Meanwhile this was the time that opportunities were plentiful in Harbin, Manchuria as many Chinese capitalists had set up businesses in brewing, food and textiles. In 1917 with a career that had stabilized, the couple with their two sons and a daughter, decided to move to Harbin. They bought a stretch of 3 storey street-fronting shop houses (with a common courtyard at the back) in the city center and settled into one of them.

There was a friendly, affluent and childless Russian couple, JiaJia and WaWa staying a few doors away from JuJu's house. WaWa was fond of the little toddler and always helped to take care of her when her mother was busy at home. It was an afternoon when JuJu was brought over and was playing in the garden. All of a sudden, WaWa noticed JuJu was nowhere to be found. She went around frantically searching for JuJu. To her complete shock she discovered the toddler girl had wandered and fallen into a tub of water. It was providence that JuJu was discovered in the nick of time as any later, the girl who would later become the mother of Sun Yu-li would have drowned.

JuJu was just only two years old when her mother Lee passed away due to an unknown illness. After the funerary rites were completed, her father, Zhang Ri Gao (張日高) arranged for the coffin to be brought back to his hometown to be buried.

He decided to accompany the coffin on the months-long journey. Who was going to look after JuJu? Sadly and reluctantly, he decided that it would be best that JuJu be raised by the Russian couple who were ready with their arms open to welcome her as a new member of their family. A special bond had already formed between WaWa and JuJu since that fateful day when she saved JuJu from drowning.

JuJu could be rescued from an untimely death but there was no salvation for the Romanov family. Seen as an archaic reminder of old, backward Russia, the royal families were quickly disposed of when the Bolsheviks seized power in the revolution of 1917. They did not go

down alone as every bureaucrat, every cog that turned in the machinery of the Czarist government suddenly found himself without a job. JiaJia was not unlike the others and lost his Chief Bureau position of the Trans-Siberia railroad in Harbin. Depression set in and he found himself confiding more in the charming young lady who offered words of comfort or perhaps more. News of this came to WaWa's ears and sounded the death knell in their marriage. Distraught, WaWa was now left with JuJu whom she called Zoa, a shortened form of a full Russian name that meant "life". Decisions that were once made together had to be made alone and WaWa decided that in the interests of her Chinese daughter, a Chinese education would be in her favour. From a large house in the suburb, WaWa and Zoa made their new home in a rented room in downtown Harbin where there was a good Chinese school which Zoa could enroll in. As fate would have it, this rented room belongs to Sun Bao Shu, Sun Yu-li's grandfather.

On the day of moving in Zoa at 6, while playing in the courtyard, met Kwei Chi at 12. Zoa ever since became an admirer of Brother Kwei Chi. As time passed, Kwei Chi also started noticing that the little Chinese girl who only spoke Russian was transforming into a pretty young teen. However it was a time when China was in turmoil; with warlords infighting, Japanese imperialistic invasion...both Kwei Chi and JuJu were forced to separately flee their own way.

It was much later and after much hardship, that they were finally reunited in 1938 in Chong Chin, the temporary war capital of China. They married in 1942.

The lives of Sun Yu-Li's parents were very much shaped by the developments taking place in China. Zoa, who spoke fluent Russian and Mandarin made history as the first Sino-Japanese war zone journalist. She reported from the front line of the battleground, providing critical updates to the Soviet owned Tass news agency and central News agency of China.

Sun KweiChi saw his political career take off and at 36, Sun Kweichi became the youngest mayor of Chang Chun (長春), the Capital of Manchuria, a major city of the Republic of China. In 1947, Sun Kweichi was elected to be a parliament member of the Republic of China in 1947, and moved to Nanjing, where Sun Yu-Li was born in 1948. With the rise of the advancing Communist Party of China, the Kuomintang government retreated to Taiwan and the Sun family followed suit.

Sun KweiChi used his influential position to serve his countrymen in many ways. Sun KweiChi was the youngest parliamentary member in the Legislative Yuan (立法院) and served in the Economic Sub-committee. A capable, well connected and respected politician, he was behind many important economic policies which contributed to Taiwan's economic miracle. The Sun house was frequently visited, from those seeking minor requests to ministers seeking consultations on major policies.

Another memory that stayed with Sun Yu-Li was seeing two pots of Chrysanthemum delivered to his home every Chinese New Year since he was 10 or 11 years old. Sent by Taiwan Cement, this came about because of a recommendation that Sun KweiChi made to his best friend, Mr YS Sun, then the General Manger of TaiPower, the national provider of electricity. Sun KweiChi had suggested to Mr YS Sun to replace the timber electric poles with cement and as a result, Taiwan Cement grew from strength to strength. As cash was out rightly refused by the Suns, Mr Lin could only send two pots of chrysanthemum as a token of his appreciation.

Mr Sun YS would go on to become the premiere of Taiwan from 1978-1984.

Despite Sun KweiChi father's deep involvement in politics, he did not influence his son Sun Yu-li to pursue a political career. His own foray was due to the circumstances of his generation.

How could he not do anything upon seeing the turmoil and upheaval in China? Widespread famine and poverty due to corruption and mismanagement, war and colonization by the foreign powers, these were among the many problems that befuddled China. As an idealistic and patriotic student leader, it was unsurprising that Sun KweiChi became increasingly involved in politics. That was the challenge that faced his generation, since his son lived in a time of peace, there were many other options that he could pursue outside of politics and he encouraged his son as such.

While Sun KweiChi was busy with affairs of the state, his wife was actively working. To supplement the family income, JuJu worked her entire life. Once dinner had ended, JuJu would lay out the paint brush and paper on the dining table and paint. She was a renowned artist in Taiwan for her skill in Chinese brush painting and Sun Yu-Li recalled the many times when she would patiently explain and demonstrate the finer points of painting to him and his brother Yu-Tong. JuJu also took lessons with teacher Master Huang Jun Bi (黃君璧) and Yu-li often accompanied his mother on these lessons where he was placed closest to Huang so that he could have a good view of the master painting.

These memories resided in Yu-li's subconscious and when he decided to practice art, he found that he had the necessary skills to paint. The early exposure had given him a confidence with the brush and understanding of colours.

JuJu was also known among her husband's friends for her exceptional culinary skills. Their group of friends gathered eight to ten times a year and at each gathering, they would be in for a treat with dishes from Northeastern China, sauerkraut steamboat (酸菜火鍋), stuffed pancake (餡餅)、and Russian Borsch, Piroshk. Singing and laughing, the close group of friends spoke mainly in Russian and the merriment would continue into the wee hours. Unsurprisingly, Yu-Li picked up his cooking skills from his mother who would seize opportunities when he passed by the kitchen to pop a morsel, to explain her cooking method. He did not give these conversations much thought then and surprised himself when he found that he could cook when he left Taiwan for further studies in America. Till today, Yu-li knows that he too can whip up a dish to impress his friends.

The Sun family was tight knit and Yu-li looked forward to the precious afternoons when his mother would take him to Astoria - the only Russian style Cafe in Taipei. Located on Wu Chiang Street (武昌街), the cafe was in close proximity to his parents' offices. A cup of coffee and a slice of Napoleon was truly heavenly enjoyment. Yu-li's parents would use this opportunity to counsel their son. A cup of coffee could not last those two to three hours and his parents would request for hot water. Yu-li would follow suit and till today, he would ask for a cup of hot water whenever he orders coffee.

Afternoon tea was a family tradition. If Yu-li happened to be home from 3.30pm to 4pm, JuJu would brew coffee and prepare deserts. They would chat until dark over the best French cognac which she would add to the coffee and sometimes to the desert. This was how WaWa and JiaJia had their afternoon tea. JuJu also brewed her own plum wine which would be enjoyed as part of afternoon tea. Yu-Li could claim that he started drinking since the time he started drinking water.

A deep love for nature was also cultivated in Yu-li from the outings that his parents took him to during the school holidays. For JuJu, this love of nature was something that her own mother, WaWa has instilled in her. Yu-li deeply relished the times his parents took him to the

seaside where they would spend days swimming in the sea, playing on the beach or walking among the trees. At night, Yu-li loved to lie on the sand, amazed by the starry sky.

When Yu-li entered Tung Hai University in 1967, he took time to explore the trees and the valleys alone. The Sun Valley (太陽谷), Dream Valley (夢谷), Old Castle (古堡) were some of his favourite haunts. Weekends would be spent at farmer Zhao's house at Wu Qi (梧棲) which faced the beach. Taiwan relies on a conscript army and during his national service days, Yu-li found himself posted to the offshore island of Peng Hu (澎湖). As a Marine Corps platoon commander, he was assigned the duty of guarding the coast and this gave him the opportunity to sit alone at the beach watching the morning and evening tides. After completing his degree, Yu-li decided to continue his post graduate studies in Urbana, Illinois. During the years of 1972 -1974 he frequently stayed with the Smith family. They owned a huge farm of over 600 acres of corn, soybean and wheat fields and he would explore the terrain on foot, horseback or bicycle during the weekends and holidays.

Having completed his post-graduate studies, Yu-li went on to become an architect. In the 1986-1989, he often travelled to Beijing for work. During his free time, he travelled to the remote Western part of Beijing and into a half-deserted mountain top village called Chen's Ravine (陳家溝). There he made friends with the Chen family who were dirt poor farmers. They were surrounded by vast barren fields and Yu-li took delight in wandering in this alternate paradise.

Later on when he and his family moved to Singapore, Yu-li found his very own paradise at the eastern end of Pulau Ubin. It was a hundred year old lease for four acres that he bought in 1990 and with his 1960's built Yamaha power boat (SZ 364), he could zoom across the strait in 10 minutes and arrive at his very own jetty. Yu-li spent a lot of time there contemplating alone in the timber cabin which faced the sea. The lease was terminated in 2003 and it has now been turned into a protected nature reserve called Chek Java.

Yu-li always longed to be away from the hustle and bustle of city life and loved these times of solitude surrounded by nature. He found it hard to answer why nature had this irresistible pull. Perhaps it was WaWa's love of nature which influenced Zoa and in turn shaped his perspective. Or was it his father's great interest in archaeology, metaphysics, and I Ching that fascinated Yu-li. And thus the seeds of curiosity about the invisible universe were planted.

Looking back, perhaps Sun Yu-li's decision to become an artist was not so surprising. Not only was his mother an established painter, the opportunity to meet Professor YuYu Yang left a deep impression on his young mind and may have helped shape his decision to be a sculptor.