

# 伍淑賢：父親

## Father

By NG Suk Yin

Translated by Duncan Hewitt

People called my father Uncle Chan; he was otherwise known as the Mahjong King of the sixth floor. Dad didn't have to go out to work—his job consisted of setting up two mahjong tables in our home every day, inviting the housewives of the fourth, fifth and sixth floors to come and play, and taking a cut for himself—and he didn't do badly. We were the third family in the whole estate to get air-conditioning.

Dad had five sons, and all of us grew up beside the mahjong table—we could recognize the tiles before we could talk. The neighbours all called us mahjong devils. And the whole flat was furnished like a mahjong parlour.

But the true mahjong king was scrawny Mr Miu, the father of Miu Siu Ching who lived opposite. Mr Miu worked in the bank; he was rather sickly, but now and again, on a Sunday, he'd drop in to play a few rounds. Whenever he came, all the kids on the sixth floor would squeeze into our flat, and crowd around behind the adults' backs to watch the game with bated breath—not that they really understood it.

Mum was an estate woman born and bred: fat, loud, always wearing a garish Chinese trouser suit, she worked in a cotton mill and beat her children with great zeal. She was fond of slapping me on the head with a dark brown plastic sandal; she always hit me unerringly in the same spot, so that once I got used to it it didn't

hurt too much. But the sandal was filthy and afterwards she'd have to drag me to the kitchen to wash my hair—what a pain.

Mum worked very hard. To leave as much room as possible for the mahjong tables, we only had one very small bedroom. My four brothers and I had to sleep on mats on the floor. Every morning at six Mum got up, prodded us awake with her feet, then assigned the tasks for the day. It was usually my job to wash the floor and clean the mahjong tiles. I'm not boasting when I say our floor was the cleanest in the whole block. Every day, morning and night, it had to be scrubbed from wall to wall, with fresh water and a cloth. As time passed, the cement floor even came to glisten and sparkle.

I liked cleaning the mahjong tiles too. I'd open the mahjong table, tip the tiles out of their tin boxes with a clatter, lay them out flat along the raised edge of the table and wipe their green backs with a damp cloth, then turn them over and wipe the fronts. We had three sets of tiles: green and pink plastic ones, and a pale yellow set made of ivory. We hardly used the ivory ones, only taking them out for a game at Chinese New Year. The newly cleaned mahjong tiles glistened like ice—easy on the eye and pleasing to the touch.

Mum usually worked the eight o'clock shift. Dad got up at nine and potted around the flat, watering the plants and reading the paper. My two older brothers went to school in the mornings; my two younger brothers and I were in the afternoon class, so we made use of our time to go 'canvassing' for clients. The block had six floors; we took two each, and went from door to door looking for players.

On hot summer's days everyone left their doors open to catch the breeze; they just pulled the metal grill across, with a piece of material attached to cover the entrance. I had a piercing voice—when I stood at one end of the passageway, the whole floor could hear me: "103, Mrs Lee, Uncle Chan from the sixth floor says are you playing today?" Sometimes the doors were shut tight, and there'd be no reply—they were out doing the shopping. Sometimes they'd stick their head out to say they'd be along at such and such a time. There were some who simply yelled out from indoors that they weren't coming, they'd lost quite enough the night before. As our cries rose and fell, passers-by in the street often looked up in surprise.

When we'd got the eight hands we needed for the mahjong, we'd go back and tell Dad, and then my job was done. Only now could I start my homework. I'd pull up a small plastic chair as a table, and do my work sitting on the floor facing the door, so I could catch a bit of the southerly breeze.

After ten, Mrs Miu opposite went out to do her shopping, carefully locking the door and the iron grill behind her. The Mius very rarely left their door open; only if it got too hot, or on the eve of a typhoon—like today—would they open it to let some air in.

Mum didn't like Mrs Miu, said she was a dry old stick who ruined everything she touched. And it seemed to be true. The Mius' children didn't play much with anyone else, and they spoke in a near whisper. They had a few potplants on their balcony, as scrawny as spring onions and covered in dust. It was a far cry from the luxuriance of our balcony, where the plants had both green leaves and flowers.

But I liked Siu Ching, because she was in the next class to me at school, and also because she always had a cheery smile for everyone she saw. And I liked Mr Miu too, liked seeing his slightly hunched figure, liked the refined way he spoke, how he wasn't always shouting and screaming like Mum and Dad.

Mr Miu had asthma, everyone on our floor knew it. Every day after school Siu Ching went to Central to bring him home. I loved leaning over the railings in the passageway at dusk, watching as she led him by the hand slowly home through the little garden—it looked like an illustration in my Chinese text book.

But today was different. Today was Saturday, a scorching hot day, there was a typhoon on the way, and in the afternoon the races were on.

Saturday was my busiest day, the morning game of mahjong started at ten o'clock, with a break at one o'clock for lunch. In the afternoon after two o'clock the guests wanted to listen to the racing results on the radio while they played; it was all go. Somehow my two older brothers always used to vanish, so my younger brothers and I had to serve the tea, or go out and buy cigarettes or beef fried noodles or custard tarts for the guests. If one of the players wanted to go to the toilet, or if Mrs Cheung wanted to go home to put the soup on, I'd sit in for them. So on Saturdays I got my cut of the takings too.

It was only at three in the afternoon, when the whole flat was full of people and boiling hot, that Dad let us put the air conditioning on and turn the electric fan to its high setting, making Mrs Wong's and Mrs Lee's hair stand on end in the breeze. I slammed the windows tightly shut, to stop the cold air escaping. When I closed the front door, Mr Miu was just coming out of his flat. On Saturdays he always came home at lunchtime, then went out again after three. But surely the bank was shut in the afternoon, and Siu Ching was never with him—I had no idea where he went.

At this moment Mum came back, so I gave her my place at the table. She said: "It's boiling out there. Hong, go down and fetch me a bowl of beef noodles and an iced coffee. And get me a packet of 555s." She opened the drawer and gave me a five-dollar bill. When we played mahjong in our house we didn't use chips, it was all cash.

Then all the guests started asking me to get them things to eat too, so I tore a page off the calendar and wrote their orders on the back.

Mrs Hung on the other table beckoned me over and asked me to put some

money on a horse.

"I've never bet before," I said, "I don't know how to."

Mrs Hung stuffed ten dollars into my hand: "It's easy, go to the Wing Hing café on the corner, you know the place? Look for the table nearest the kitchen, you'll find a man called Uncle Chung there. Give him my name and put this money on number eight to win in the fifth and number one for a place in the sixth. He'll write you out a slip of paper, you just bring it back and give it to me—that's it. You can get the tea and coffee there too."

After this, others started wanting to place bets too, so I tore another page off the calendar and wrote them down. The third race had already started, so I had to run.

It was such a clammy day, I felt as if I'd been wrapped in a shroud. The litter bins by the side of the road had been boiling in the sun all day—when you looked closely you could see steam rising from them, making their outlines quiver.

I knew the Wing Hing café well, I could have found my way there with my eyes shut, but I never knew you could place bets there. The Wing Hing looked pretty smart from the front; it had a tinted glass door, with a white net curtain behind it and a plastic sign in the middle which proclaimed, in big letters: 'Air-conditioned', with a line of frost painted above and below.

Inside it was as noisy as a mahjong parlour. First I went to the cashier, paid for the food and drink and handed in the receipt to the kitchen. Then, following Mrs Hung's instructions, I went to look for Uncle Chung. I didn't need to look far—he had to be the man sitting at a square table, surrounded by a crowd of people. On the table were a few racing papers, a transistor radio blaring out at full volume, some half-empty cups of tea and a pile of notepads. Uncle Chung was terribly busy, writing on the notepads, then taking money from people, then writing in the notepads again. His reading glasses had slipped down to the tip of his nose, but he didn't even have time to push them up again.

Being short, with a bit of pushing and shoving I was able to squeeze through the crowd; I placed the bets on the numbers each person had asked for, handed over the money and got a pile of slips of paper in return. Then I leant on the table, intending to watch the action for a bit longer. Uncle Chung said: "Hey kid, you've put your bets on, what are you hanging around for? I don't want you getting in the way of my customers."

"I want to go to the toilet," I lied.

"The toilet's at the back of the kitchen," said Uncle Chung, half dragging and half shoving me out.

It goes without saying the kitchen was hot and the floor slippery, and I had no desire to go to the toilet, so after a few paces I turned round to leave. The strange

thing was, opposite the kitchen was a very clean wooden door which looked like the entrance to some sort of office. It wasn't completely shut, so I peeped in; inside there were indeed three wooden tables, with several rather respectable-looking people sitting at them, heads down as if buried in their work. And one of them was Mr Miu. He was poring over an abacus, still dressed in his usual white shirt and grey trousers.

This room couldn't have had air-conditioning. It was dark; a blackened upright fan whirred from side to side. Each time it turned towards Mr Miu it ruffled his hair, and sent the pile of papers on the table flying.

So Mr Miu worked as a bookie's clerk as well—it must have been to make a bit of extra money.

I didn't dare watch any longer, so I went out, collected the food and drink, and headed home.

That night it was just too hot outside. The players all loved our air-conditioning, and were reluctant to leave. As the night drew on the adults became so engrossed in the game that they didn't even want any tea. My brothers had gone to bed long ago; I sat on the floor still wide awake, reading a pile of back issues of 'Old Master.'<sup>1</sup> I'd read them all before, but it was odd, reading them again they were still really funny. The best thing was the spoof 'The Water Margin' serial at the back of every issue, which had The Old Master and Mr Chin dressed in ancient costume as the brave outlaws of the greenwood. As I read them I roared with laughter. I didn't notice the noise of the mahjong game at all.

The game didn't break up until four in the morning. As I opened the door for the guests to leave, I saw Mr Miu coming home. Could he really have been in the café doing his calculations all this time? Maybe that wouldn't have been so strange—Mum said the Wing Hing's owner was the big boss of all the illegal bookies in Kowloon, and it had made him a mint.

Mr Miu took out his key and softly opened the iron grill, then softly pulled it to again, without even putting the light on. Because it was so hot, the Mius were sleeping with the front door open for a change, with only the grill locked.

Mum and Dad counted up the proceeds from the day's game, put all the cash away and went off to bed in their room. I wasn't tired; slowly I tidied away the tables and chairs and put the mahjong tiles back in the tin box, my mind still filled with the funny story of Old Master playing the part of Song Jiang, the leader of the Water Margin heroes.

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<sup>1</sup>A strip cartoon extremely popular in the 1960s. Old Master 老夫子, the lead character, was dressed in Qing-dynasty costume despite the fact that the stories all took place in modern day Hong Kong.

I'd finished clearing up and turned off the air conditioning, but still I didn't feel like going to sleep, so I went out onto the balcony to water the flowers. It was well past four now, the wind was starting to blow, the whole sky was red. Since I was there, I took the dozen or more flower pots down and put them on the floor. The storm was on its way.

Now I really did feel sleepy. I spread out my straw mat near the front door and lay down. No sooner had I done so than I noticed a light on Mr Miu's balcony opposite; maybe he was out there having a wash. I looked more closely—in fact Mr Miu, already in his night clothes, was squatting on the balcony, playing with the youngest of his daughters. I stared for a long time before I realized that they were playing at cooking. They were using coloured plastic pearls as rice, putting it into transparent plastic pots and bowls, frying it up, stirring it back and forth, acting as though they were really about to serve it up. Mr Miu took a small plastic spoon, and ladled up a few pearls—the 'rice'—as if he really was about to swallow a mouthful. His daughter's mouth was wide with laughter.

"Mr Miu, don't you need any sleep?" I wondered—then immediately fell into a deep sleep of my own.

The next morning the typhoon signal number eight had been hoisted, and the streets were filled with flying litter and waste paper, stirred up by the wind. On typhoon days our house was always especially busy, so Mum woke us up at the crack of dawn to prepare for the start of the game. My job was first to go to the store downstairs to buy a big order of tinned food and sliced bread, then to go to another shop to rent two more mahjong tables and two sets of tiles. Today we'd need four tables for sure.

On my way home, buried under my load of tins and other items, I met Siu Ching on the stairs. She smiled at me and said: "Dad says do you need any more players today?"

"We're having four tables, they're not full yet."

"Well he says he'd like to come then. What time does the game start?"

"Ten o'clock. Tell him to come, I'll let Mum know."

She nodded and set off down the stairs; it seemed she was on her way to buy tins and bread too.

Mr Miu arrived at ten-thirty. He and my dad had known each other for a long time but they had never been close friends, and they were always very polite with each other. Dad always insisted on playing with Mr Miu himself, and called a couple of other uncles to join them for an all-male table. Dad knew that when Mr Miu came to play he was really there to make some money, so he had to have all his wits about him.

On typhoon days the children weren't allowed to go out to play, so they ran

up and down the passageway, and when they saw the activity in our flat they all leaned on the grill to watch. I wouldn't let them come in, except for a few we knew especially well.

Just as the game turned from the east round to the south round, Siu Ching came over, carrying in her arms the little sister who was so fond of playing at cooking. I brought her a stool so she could sit behind her father and watch the game. The little girl, who was just two, clung to her like a ball of sticky rice dough. I stood behind them and watched the game.

The men all liked to assemble whole suits, leaving the 'flower tiles' out of the game; they said this was the only way to really prove your prowess. Of the four of them, Mr Miu was the most inscrutable player. Dad's emotions were quite easy to read—he couldn't fool anyone. The other two were seasoned mahjong hands, but they were really more interested in betting on horses, and as their hands shuffled the tiles, it was yesterday's odds which were on their lips.

They were all playing for high stakes, each trying to dominate the other three—it was pretty fast-moving. Dad's hands were generally quite good, but the problem was the others could easily see through him, so as the game went on it was less and less in his favour. Standing behind Mr Miu, I could see all his moves: his hands weren't particularly good but he knew which tiles to hold on to and which to lay out, and after three or four turns he'd already carved himself out a winning position. On one occasion he assembled a three-of-a-kind flush, I still remember it, in just four turns, it was brilliant. When they played they didn't say much, when their hands were free for a moment they drank some tea, concentrating as hard as if they were at work. Siu Ching sat there, watching fascinated, sometimes she'd smile or nod her head as if to say "well-played".

The ball of sticky rice dough in her arms kept falling asleep and waking up again, then started crying. My younger brothers and I set to work, boiled some water, and made a cup of very sweet condensed milk to feed her with; only after that did she go to sleep.

In the first eight rounds, Mr Miu won a bit. In the next eight, someone else won big several times, and Mr Miu lost it all again. For the next eight rounds Mr Miu played very cautiously, keeping an eye on everything that was going on, not speaking a word, as though concentrating all his mental energies. On one occasion he needed a Three Bamboo or a Six Bamboo to make a run, but was pipped at the post by his opponent; beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. Fortunately he got it all back in the next round.

In the afternoon Mum told me to open the cans of food and make everyone something to eat. I passed a sardine sandwich to Mr Miu; he took it, put it to the side of the table and immediately forgot about it. After a while, when the bread

was starting to get dry, I quietly took it away and ate it myself.

At about seven o'clock Mrs Miu came over and called Mr Miu and their daughters home. I worked out that altogether he'd won about eighty dollars today, minus ten dollars for our 'taking', which was pretty good. He took out a handkerchief, wiped the sweat from his brow, and said: "There's a typhoon blowing, but it's not getting any cooler."

Dad smiled and said he should come and play again when he was free. Then he told me to go downstairs again to buy some noodles.

"But there's a typhoon—all the food stalls are shut." I didn't want to go.

"Then go to Wing Hing. They're always open, even when it's typhoon signal number ten."

So I set off. Wing Hing was very quiet today; even though it was dinner time, only two or three tables were occupied. To my surprise, Mr Miu and his family were sitting at one of them. It was a rectangular table. Mrs Miu sat at one end feeding the youngest daughter macaroni. Siu Ching was busy devouring a huge plate of rice with a fried egg sunny side up on top. Some of her older brothers and sisters were eating, some were talking, all apparently very cheerful. None of them noticed me.

Mr Miu was sitting at the head of the table, a steaming bowl of rice and a cup of milky tea in front of him. His head lay on the table, cushioned in his hands; he was sound asleep, dead to the world.