

Thanks to Mom, Thanks to Hong Kong

Kam Wing Chan, Seattle, May 14, 2018.

In 1964, my mother took our family of five (including my elderly grandmother) from Shantou to Hong Kong with one-way permits, to reunite with my father who was working in Hong Kong. This journey, crossing the Luohu Bridge, taking the train to Tsim Sha Tsui, and then riding the Star Ferry across the harbor to Hong Kong Island, was new to me and marked the beginning of a new chapter in my life. That autumn, I also started primary school in Hong Kong.

It wasn't until later that I realized how difficult it was to obtain five one-way permits for our family of five to enter Hong Kong. At that time, only 50 one-way permits were issued nationwide each day, and our family accounted for a tenth of that number in the country! It was entirely due to my mother's tenacity that we were able to accomplish this.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many families had men working in Hong Kong while their families remained in mainland China. After the Great Famine, many people applied to come to Hong Kong (including our family), and the waiting lines were long. The most common situation was that the authority would issue one one-way permit per family, allowing the wife to go to Hong Kong first to reunite with her husband. Some fortunate families might get two permits, allowing one child to go to Hong Kong with the mother, while the other children had to wait in line for their turn.

I still remember my mother taking me, her eldest son, to the police station on Yongtai Road in Shantou, pleading with the officials in charge of issuing permits to let our whole family go together, rather than going one or two at a time, like squeezing toothpaste, and separating our family in different places. That was the second time I remembered my mother cried. Facing those officials who held our family's fate in their hands, she fought hard, and must have felt a lot of bitterness in her heart.

My mother once said, going to Hong Kong meant the whole family going together, or not going at all; it was that clear-cut. Although my mother had never attended school, she was full of wisdom. If we were to leave, the whole family had to go together, and she would not back down on this point. It was this determination that made her go to the police station time and time again to plead. Her efforts eventually paid off and all of us could move to Hong Kong together, with our grandma too. Coming to Hong Kong meant that she could enjoy the happiness of being with her children and grandchildren. For me, the happy times I spent with my grandma in my childhood are still vivid in my memory.

Looking back, when we left mainland China, time was already pressing, and the tumultuous Cultural Revolution was about to break out. During that crucial period of my education, I was lucky to have an environment where I could focus on my studies. Although Hong Kong also experienced the 1967 riots, and the first primary school I attended was a simple, even shabby, school with only simple partitioned classrooms and no other facilities, the education I received there laid the foundation for my later studies and life. In contrast to my cousins who had to go to the countryside and could not study properly in mainland China, we not only received a complete and continuous education in Hong Kong but also had the opportunity to attend university, which

was truly fortunate.

If my mother had compromised back then and taken only one child to Hong Kong, it would probably have been my 2-year-old sister; I would have stayed in mainland China, watched by my grandma, and waited for my turn to apply to go abroad. Given the situation at the time, the Cultural Revolution would have started while I was still in line, and the country's doors would have been closed. If I were to apply to come to Hong Kong again, it would have been in the early 1980s. My parents and siblings, and I would have been separated by twenty years.

If I had stayed in mainland China, by the early 1980s, I might have been a returned urban youth who had gone to the countryside in Hainan Island, experiencing the baptism of the Cultural Revolution, just like my cousins back in my hometown, living the life that I now understand from their memoirs. It's also possible that after the resumption of the college entrance examination, I might have gotten into college and become a professor or an official in mainland China. Another one more possibility is that I might have answered the government's call to settle in the countryside, marrying a countrywomen and having a family. I would have lived a simple life. That version of me would have been entirely different.

Thanks to mom for taking us across the Shenzhen River, and thanks to Hong Kong for allowing us to find a different path.

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