

Talking Tales Oral History Project

Interviewer: Leung Siu Man Wendy

Interviewee: Mr. Lam

Venue: Mr. Lam's office

Date: 10/3/2000

Wendy: I am the interviewer, Wendy. It's my pleasure to invite Mr. Lam to have an interview today. It's March 10th, 2000. The venue is Mr. Lam's office. Hello, Mr. Lam, I would like to ask you some questions about your childhood. When and where were you born?

Mr. Lam: I was born in Hong Kong in 1953.

Wendy: What's your father's job?

Mr. Lam: He worked as a carpenter since he was a young man.

Wendy: What's your mother's job?

Mr. Lam: She was a worker in a textile factory. Both of my parents are retired now.

Wendy: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Mr. Lam: Yes, of course. I come from an old family. At that time, every family had at least four to five children. My family wasn't the exemption. I have three younger brothers and two younger sisters. I am the eldest.

Wendy: Where did you live when you were a child?

Mr. Lam: Um... Before I was twelve years old, I lived in Hung Hom with my Father, and my brothers and sisters lived in another place with my mother.

Wendy: Your parents didn't live together? Why?

Mr. Lam: My mother's factory was far from Hum Hong. If she lived with me, I think she would have to spend at least four hours on the way every day. But the most important thing is that my parents' feeling were not so good. At that time, not too many people knew each other before marriage. My parents found their characters were quite different after living together for several years, so they often quarreled. Later, they believed that that living apart was a good way for them to avoid the conflict. That is why I didn't live with my mother when I was a little child.

Wendy: But why didn't they divorce?

Mr. Lam: People seldom divorced at that time, because they were not open-minded like the present people.

Wendy: I see. Except your mother, was there anyone else living with you before twelve years old?

Mr. Lam: Yes, I lived with my father, my uncle, my kai grandmother and several workers.

Wendy: Your kai grandmother?

Mr. Lam: Yes, she was my father's boss. She was a single woman and treated my parents as her son and daughter. My parents also respect her. I called her "grandmother" since I was a child.

Wendy: Did your grandmother like you?

Mr. Lam: Yes, she liked me very much for two reasons. Firstly, she earned a lot of money from the business since I was born. Secondly, her hobby was gambling. Each time, she brought me to gamble. She always could gain the money. She thought I could bring her good luck, so she loved me very much. I was spoiled by her.

Wendy: Could you tell me how she spoiled you?

Mr. Lam: Sure. If I liked something, she would try her best to buy it for me. Once

upon a time, she even bought a monkey for me. It was a real monkey, not a toy.

Wendy: Monkey? Why did she buy a monkey for you?

Mr. Lam: Hehehe..... because I saw the monkey on the street. It was making a show in order to earn the money for its owner. It was so cute that I asked my grandmother to buy it for me. At last, after negotiation, she spent HKD 100.00 on the monkey. You know, it was a large amount at that time. Before twelve years old, I lived like a prince --- never worried about money.

Wendy: Were there any changes after you were twelve years old?

Mr. Lam: Yes. As I told you before, my grandmother liked gambling. She spent a lot of time on it and didn't care for her business, so the business became worse. Next, how can a person continuously win the money in the gambling? Later, she began to lose money and owed other people a lot of money. At last, she had to sell part of her shop.

Wendy: How about your family's economic situation at that period of time?

Mr. Lam: Quite bad. Because my parents had seen my kai grandmother as their mother. So, my parents used all of their savings to pay the debt for her, but it was still not enough. I began to do a part-time job at that time to pay my tuition fee. Although all of us worked very hard, my family was still very poor. Because of money shortage, we had to move to a wooden house to live in. I don't know if it can be called a house, because the water always leaked in. In the rainy days, I nearly could not sleep for the whole night, because my bed was full of water. Till now, I still don't like the rainy weather due to that period of rough time.

Wendy: Can you describe more about your part-time job?

Mr. Lam: Um..... Nothing special about my job. It relates to transport goods. The location was in the same factory as my mother. At that time, I

had almost no leisure time, because I needed to work for 5 hours from Monday to Saturday and worked for the whole day on weekends and public holidays.

Wendy: Did your brothers and sisters do the part-time job at that time?

Mr. Lam: Yes, they did the same job as I, but I tried my best to do as much as possible, because I was older than them.

Wendy: It was really a hard period of time. Well, Mr. Lam, Can you tell me if there are any things that stick out in your mind?

Mr. Lam: Too many things. Before twelve years old, I was a naughty boy. In Hung Hom, other children called me “little overlord”, because I always fought with them if they disobeyed my ideas. So, many of them were in dread of me. Once upon a time, a boy didn’t listen to me, as a result, his head was beaten by me and the wound bled profusely. Horrible! I knew I got into trouble this time and dared not go home. At last, my father found me on the street and slapped my face on the spot. That physical punishment brought me serious after-effects. My left ear began to have some hearing problems since that time.

Wendy: Did your father ask you not to fight with other children any more?

Mr. Lam: Yes, he did, but I seldom followed his words. My parents and my teachers got headaches about my education. They thought they could let me change the bad habits by physical punishment. So, once they knew I fought with other children, my father would use the stick to hit my body and my teachers would use the ruler to hit my hands. But it was useless, I even couldn’t change a bit after physical punishment.

Wendy: Why? Were you not afraid of physical punishment?

Mr. Lam: Um..... I think there are three reasons. Firstly, mainly because I was a naughty boy. Secondly, I tried to use this way to show my brave character. Otherwise, how could I get other children to follow my words? Thirdly, my kai grandmother spoiled me. I thought I could do anything I like.

Wendy: When did you begin to be a well-behaved child?

Mr. Lam: After I was twelve years old.

Wendy: Can you tell me why?

Mr. Lam: As I told you before, my family became poor at that time. I had to do the part-time job to pay my tuition fee. Every day, either at school or at home, where could I find other children to fight with? But I think the main reason is that I began to know that life was hard and people couldn't do anything that they liked to do. Meanwhile, because I was poor, some of the children didn't listen to me again. I began to realize the importance of the money and its relationship with power. One of my teachers told me if I wanted to be the leader again, first of all, I should study hard. At that time, money was the main incentive of my study. Gradually, reading became one of my hobbies. I learned a lot from the books and my character changed from then on. I wasn't a naughty boy any more and became gentle and quiet. Of course, money is not the only incentive of my study and work now. But at that time, it was.

Wendy: Mr. Lam, when did you begin to live with your brothers and sisters?

Mr. Lam: After I was twelve years old.

Wendy: Did you get on well with each other?

Mr. Lam: Yes, we did. My second younger brother liked reading very much and he always got good marks at school. I think reading became one of my hobbies partly due to his effect.

Wendy: If your brothers and sisters made mistakes, would they suffer physical punishment?

Mr. Lam: Boys only. I never saw my younger sisters being slapped by my parents.

Wendy: Was there any discrimination in your family?

Mr. Lam: Yes, of course. My father was an old-minded man. He thinks boys are more important than girls. So, he seldom cared about my sisters.
Um..... Another example, he felt boys could get more toys and pocket Money, girls needed to do more housework, and so on.

Wendy: Do you think life in your childhood had any effect on your present life?

Mr. Lam: I experienced two quite different kinds of life, rich and poor. After going through hardships and tribulations, I became steadfast and persevering in face of difficulties. I think that is the main effect.

Wendy: That's the end of my interview. Once again, thanks for being my interviewee.

Mr. Lam: You are welcome.