

# ADRIFT

My Childhood in Colonial Singapore

A Family Memoir



David T. K. Wong

# **Adrift**

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David T. K. Wong



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## Explanations

FOUR GENERATIONS AGO, some of my ancestors—for no obviously discernible reason—decided to leave various parts of Kwangtung Province in China to head for the newly established British Crown Colony of Hong Kong. Those decisions, made independently and without knowing one another, must have been quite extraordinary, for the enclave was at the time little more than a malaria-infested island, populated only by a few isolated fishing villages. It held out no promise for riches or for an agreeable future.

Those ancestors did not fit the profiles of conventional Chinese immigrants. They were not peasants, seeking to escape from the hardships of poverty, crop failures, onerous taxation, unsustainable debts, conscription, war, banditry or localised breakdowns in law and order. Nor were they freebooters or soldiers of fortune; or even commercial chancers or budding entrepreneurs in pedestrian trades. They were for the most part sober and cautious individuals, with enough education to curb the wilder instincts for risk and adventure. Though none might be exactly living in the lap of luxury in their native places, they were by no means hard-up, jobless or leading uncongenial existences.

My great-grandfather, for example, had been a school teacher in a village in Hsin Hui, a district once reputed to produce the sweetest oranges in the whole of China. He continued with his profession after arriving in Hong Kong. There was certainly no upward mobility for him.

So little about him had been handed down in oral history that his very name has been forgotten by members of my generation. No one is now privy to what his private motives might have been. What could be deduced is that, although he might not have been directly affected by many of the rebellions and foreign wars in China during his lifetime, he must have felt sufficiently disheartened by the decline and humiliations of his nation to seek an alternative solution. Perhaps he had even concluded that the situation was indeed as stark as made out by various foreign predators, namely, that China was a melon, ripe for carving up and parcelling out as colonies or imperial possessions among Western powers.

On the more personal level, he might have concluded that his own Confucian upbringing, with all its moral precepts, had been little more than a fraud that he had been passing on to his students. All the sagely observations about justice, righteousness, moderation, individual conscience and the rest, endlessly recited and reiterated, had been worthless against the acquisitive Western appetites of the nineteenth century—the pursuit of self-interest, the survival of the fittest, the scientific and technological power to re-shape the natural environment, free trade under the barrels of gunboats and, to top everything off, the renewed drive to spread an alien religion which had come and quietly faded away from his country centuries ago. The main question occupying his mind must have been how he might help his sons find accommodation with so many foreign ideas.

The foregoing speculations offer only a plausible explanation for two decisions he subsequently took. First, he insisted that all his three sons should pursue studies in Western scientific subjects and secondly, that each of them should, after his university education, head to distant parts of the world to make his living. Those decisions, for better or for worse, altered our traditional family structure and condemned his descendants to become partially Westernised Chinese wanderers, forever rootless and homeless, roaming uneasily in far-off lands.

My great-grandfather also had three daughters. Girls were then considered to be economic encumbrances, to be disposed of as quickly as possible. So far as anyone can determine, they had been given sufficient education and then married off. That was the last anybody in the family heard any mention of them.

My grandfather was the youngest of those six children. Although he had been brought up in Hong Kong and had enrolled in the Hong Kong College of Medicine in 1893, his life developed in ways contrary to the expectations of my great-grandfather.

For a start, my grandfather got himself married while still a student, to the eldest daughter among nine children of a long-established family from Tung Koon. That family, which boasted a recorded history stretching back for 26 generations, had converted to Christianity a couple of generations earlier and the father of the bride had come to Hong Kong as one of its earliest Methodist preachers. He and his wife had founded a school at Caine Road and ran it for a number of years.

It has remained an enduring mystery as to why such an august family should have allowed its eldest daughter to marry a young student without qualifications or means of support. While it cannot

be ascertained whether the Christian faith which the young man in question had professed had been sincere, my guess is that any astute observer might have detected a heretic streak in him even then.

As the years rolled by, I was to learn that my grandfather had many intriguing and unusual aspects to his character. Unlike his elder brothers, he did not turn his back on his motherland, either politically or emotionally. Instead, he became an ardent republican during his medical studies in Hong Kong, convinced that the Manchu Dynasty had to be overthrown before his country could be made strong and united again. To that end, he surreptitiously threw in his lot with one of the burgeoning Chinese revolutionary movements.

After graduating in 1900, he immediately moved abroad, accepting an appointment as a “Registering Medical Officer” with the British Colonial Service in Singapore. But he never forgot his patriotic and republican ideals during his stint as a colonial doctor. He spent much of his spare time preaching rebellion among overseas Chinese and raising funds from them to finance the revolutionary activities of his friend and associate, Dr Sun Yat-Sen.

The success of the Revolution of 1911 must have disappointed him, for the old factional rivalries and perennial disease of disunity came once more to the fore once the Manchu Dynasty had fallen. Although he had spent most of the rest of his life in Singapore, where my father was born and brought up, his thoughts remained firmly focused on the recurring trials and instabilities in his motherland.

He had another contradictory streak. Although he was an ardent revolutionary, he remained a conservative in certain social attitudes. For example, he continued to adhere to the former Ching Dynasty’s provisions for a man to acquire as many wives as he could afford—or at least as he could put up with. According to family mythology, he

acquired a total of nine wives. That could not have gone down very well with either my grandmother or with his Methodist in-laws.

Regrettably, I had arrived on the scene too late to bear witness to the full glory of his *ménage à neuf*, thus leaving me hankering to know how it had all been made to work. I did arrive in time, however, for another “grandmother”—who had been installed in a different house farther along the same street I was living in—to give birth to a son for him, which also meant giving me a brand new baby uncle!

I did not know how to take that bombshell at the time, for I had only just turned six. My grandfather did not look like a womaniser, not that I had the slightest idea how such a man should appear. He was in fact tall and wiry, with an elevated brow and a receding hairline. I remembered him as remarkably spritely for a man of 59, with dark mischievous eyes and an easy smile. His teeth were large, irregular and stained, probably through smoking too much.

Attempts to get pointers from my grandfather and my father on how to integrate myself into such an intricate family were more difficult than present-day youngsters might imagine. Both of them were about as talkative as Trappist monks. To gain whatever snippets of enlightenment I could, I took to inferring what I could from their actions and keeping my ears open to the conversations between adults. But sometimes I could only half-divine what they were up to and at other times I got hold of the completely wrong end of the stick.

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The backgrounds to my forebears on the maternal side of the family were much less complicated. My mother’s father had been

the son of the proprietor of a village provision store in Tseng Sing. He was brought up in the classical Chinese tradition until the age of 15. Over the centuries, Confucian ideas had been heavily influenced by Buddhist ones and he no doubt absorbed some of those too. According to the Buddhists, the world had already entered a prolonged Dhamma-Ending Age, during which human conditions could only get progressively worse. The increasingly chaotic situation in China must have given some credence to that view. So when a relative suggested that my maternal grandfather should go to Hong Kong to broaden his horizons, he moved there in 1881 and enrolled at the St Paul's Secondary School.

The school's system for Christian instruction must have been very effective, for my maternal grandfather quickly realised that, contrary to the long drawn-out trials and miseries foretold in Buddhist scriptures, the imminence of the Christian Second Coming held out the possibility of a short cut to another form of Nirvana. By the time he graduated, he appeared to have made up his mind to convert to Christianity. He proceeded to deepen his understanding of Christianity by undertaking theological studies and volunteering to become a lay preacher.

During that period, he met a woman from Chung Shan who had come to Hong Kong to take up a teaching post at a girls' school. He discovered that she shared his religious enthusiasm and his passion for evangelical work. He courted and married her and they produced a total of eight children, the fourth of whom was my mother.

He was ordained as a priest in 1902, in the immediate aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion and the indiscriminate slaughtering carried out by all sides. He was quickly sent back to Canton to start a new ministry. He founded the Church of Our Saviour at No. 184 Wanfu

Road, which is still in use today. He then set about establishing schools, clinics and shelters for hunger-pinched refugees.

His unstinting charitable endeavours caused him to rise steadily through the Anglican hierarchy. His devotion to his work was such that he required all his children, once in gainful employment, to contribute a part of their earnings to the church.

I never got to know my maternal grandparents very well, for I spent only about a year and a half with them in Canton when I was a child. I remember my grandfather as a diminutive man with a pair of grave bespectacled eyes and a firm, fervent voice. His sermons seemed earnest and workmanlike rather than flamboyant and crowd-drawing. The only impression I have of my grandmother is of a small desiccated woman with a wrinkled face and a pair of work-worn hands.

While my memories of them are faint, what I can vividly recall are the stories they used to tell me from the Bible and their efforts to convince me that Christianity was the genuine article. Though I was not aware of it at the time, they had me baptised in Hong Kong after birth, so convinced were they that I carried part of Adam's original sin. If left unbaptised, they believed that my soul ran every risk of heading straight for hell.

One consistent trait I noticed among the elders on both sides of my family was their reluctance to explain their inner thoughts and motivations, particularly to children. None attempted to write a memoir. I drew the conclusion that it must be considered bad form to gab about oneself or one's private affairs. I accordingly developed a laconic disposition myself, keeping such secrets and puzzles I had bottled up inside.

In reality, apart from the women I had loved and managed to lose,

I had few secrets really worth keeping. I had been more of a rolling stone than most, but my life has been little different from that of the legions of Mr Joe Everymans inhabiting our world. Divorced parents, childhood insecurities, adolescent angst, jobs not particularly to one's own choosing, one or more busted marriages, bungled attempts at single parenthood, chronic shortages of money, and a lengthy catalogue of missteps, misjudgements and missed opportunities. Through all of that, I had never been able to settle upon a true profession. I merely tried my hand as a Jack of several trades and ended up without distinction in any of them. Silence, therefore, seems the better part of discretion.

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A reader who has been following my narrative up to this point must be scratching his head. What is this man up to? He has made clear his own and his family's inclination towards privacy, yet he presents the first volume of what promises to be a very lengthy work. Though the first volume might be described as dealing essentially with a Singapore boyhood, with all the evocations of simpler and more halcyon times, why does he now want to disclose the antics of his ancestors and himself? Is he now prepared to parade a string of neuroses, paranoia and repressions, like a patient lying on a headshrinker's couch? Is he trying to cash in on the rage for saucy scandals and human perversions filling tabloid newspapers and reality television shows?

I fear I must disappoint the reader in such expectations. I am as committed to personal privacy as ever. Besides, many secrets are not mine to tell. All I can promise is that on those matters I am prepared to recount, I will do so with as much frankness and fidelity as my

memory can muster. Writing this account at all has been a pure accident, brought about by a long chain of events late in life. If the reader will bear with me, I shall explain how it came about.

The chain of events began in Hong Kong, so I shall take the liberty of touching a little upon that place, though not necessarily in strict chronological sequence. I was born there, when it was a sleepy little town, and had returned there years later to work for 35 years—five as a journalist, two as a school teacher, 20 as a senior civil servant and eight as the managing director of an international company trading in mass consumer products.

I shall deal much more fully with the administration of colonial Hong Kong in a subsequent volume. But it was a fascinating and magical city during the decades I was there immediately after the Second World War. The subterranean tensions crackled intermittently throughout that modest little enclave, with the tiny British ruling elite effectively cut off by race, language, culture and habits of thought from its hordes of Chinese subjects. Those being ruled were divided among themselves also, through politics, class, provincial loyalties and resentful displacements. Though the mixture was volatile, compromises were somehow arrived at out of the sheer necessity of mutual survival. Very few really understood how things sometimes worked out. In any case, a *modus vivendi* somehow managed to emerge in fits and starts.

Today, that former city of living on raw nerves is no more. Its structures and buildings might remain but its thrusting and venturesome spirit has started to fade long before the Union Jack was lowered over the colony for the last time. The reason is because many of the main actors in that old drama, those who had the verve and instinct for exploring the unorthodox, had begun

slipping away. What stands there today is but a superficially richer, cockier, more materially endowed but less tolerant city, one spiritually and sentimentally a mere mimic of its former self.

There is no doubt that tales, books, films, myths and legends dealing with that bygone era can be found aplenty. Many are amusing in their own way. But my impression is that those who had purveyed such stories had generally seized upon only one or two aspects of much larger truths and had extrapolated those elements to explain an inexplicable whole.

Take for example the case of the British Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher. Her own predilections had caused her to swallow the official propaganda that Hong Kong's economic success had been due to the gutsy operation of a free market system under sound British administration. Therefore she tried to negotiate on that basis the termination of the 99-year lease on the New Territories with the Chinese. She offered to return the whole of the colony to Chinese sovereignty in return for 50 more years of superior British administration. The Chinese leadership, not surprisingly, gave her a flea in the ear.

Likewise, when expatriate businessmen waited for membership to one of the racially segregated Hong Kong clubs, they would be in total ignorance of the anticipations of yellow men on the verge of moving up to be White Paper Fans or Straw Sandals in Chinese triad societies. And vice versa. For what does each know of the other? Myths had to be invented. Yet each group was in its own way an essential counterpoint in the complex workings of the colony.

To illustrate how the place has changed since, perhaps I can recount a recent story. In an election for a Chief Executive under Hong Kong's new Chinese constitution, investigative reporters

unearthed the embarrassing fact that both candidates had made illegal extensions at their homes. In order to explain away the awkward situation, one candidate stated with uncommon gallantry that his wife was responsible for the lapse. He did not win the election.

To describe precisely all the intricate inter-connections and sharp practices in the decades after World War II would be harder than to unravel one of the 170-odd mind-defying *koans* which have been handed down by Chinese and Japanese Zen masters since the start of the seventh century. One day, a truly great poet might come along to sing of the sorrows and the defiances, the tragedies and the successes of that once fabled city. Otherwise, all that would be known by the jet-setters of today would be the astronomical prices for a square footage of prime property there or how many of Asia's richest tycoons lived there. After all, would anyone be moved nowadays over a sordid little tale of royal adultery if Homer had not come along to sing so sweetly of the Trojan Wars?

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In 1989, after reaching the age of 60, I reflected upon my experiences during my years in Hong Kong. I found a sentimental attachment to many of them, as if they had been fragments of coloured stones or unusual pebbles I had picked up while beach-combing with some fair maiden. Was I reading too much into them? Could they not simply be part of the usual sentimental junk a man accumulates over a lifetime? I concluded that if they were worthless, then someone else could get rid of them after I am gone. In the meantime, I wanted to retain them, and perhaps to fashion a little sliver of memory out of them.

I decided to relocate myself to London, to gain some distance and detachment, and then to relate my experiences as fiction. No one's nose would be put out of joint that way. Besides, I never expected anybody to show the slightest interest in my efforts, for Hong Kong represented something of a literary Sahara in European circles. I would simply write for my own amusement.

But I yielded to temptation. Just for the fun of it, I sent a story to a short story competition organised by the University of Hong Kong in conjunction with the British Council. To my surprise, I found myself winning the first prize. The following year, I sent another entry to a competition held by the *South China Morning Post* and Cathay Pacific Airways. I unexpectedly won the first prize again. When my entries got published in the local press, magazines started asking for more stories. The first request I received was from a magazine in Thailand. Then other requests followed. *Short Story International* in the United States liked them so much that it published more than 10 of them in successive issues. Even the BBC broadcast a number of them.

After about 50 short stories had been published, a couple of publishers became foolhardy enough to suggest putting out collections. I was dubious because short stories were not a popular genre, but I went along. In the end, I think it was only the pure generosity of friends buying more copies than they required that saved those publishers from seeing red ink splashed over their corporate accounts.

Then it became my turn to be foolhardy. I decided to try my hand at a novel with a Hong Kong setting. *The Evergreen Tea House* was published in 2003. Again, friends came to the rescue.

By then, writing fiction had become an addiction and I was

hooked. I wrote a few more stories for a new collection and then began another novel.

However, I fell seriously ill in June of 2008. The doctors at the Royal Free Hospital in London told me I was suffering from cancer of the pancreas. They strongly recommended a surgical procedure known as a Whipple.

I had little idea what the procedure entailed, except that it was quite invasive and risky at my age. The doctors indicated that, without the Whipple, I would probably last no more than six to nine months.

I was not at all fussed about dying, for I was then approaching 80. I had led a full and eventful life and if I had to go, 80 appeared as respectable an age as any. Furthermore, I had a sneaking curiosity over what might be waiting on the other side of death. Lazarus was one of the few reputed to have returned from the dead but there was no Sunday tabloid in those days to offer him a fabulous fortune for his exclusive. So he kept his trap shut and left everybody wondering.

When I die, would I be reincarnated into a lower life form after death because of my sins, as the Buddhists have held, or would my spirit simply be reabsorbed into the great Nothingness of the Taoists? One thing I was very confident of was that I would not be heading for the Christian heaven where, if it existed, my maternal grandparents might be waiting. Even though baptised, I would probably still be destined for the other place.

But I was also dead keen to finish my second novel before passing on. I estimated it would take me at least another 18 months. An unfinished novel, unlike an unfinished symphony, was no good to man or beast. I had already devoted four years to it and I hated to leave loose ends.

About 10 per cent of patients did not survive a Whipple, the doctors explained, because it was a major procedure. They performed about 60 a year. On the other hand, if successful, a patient might live on for a good many years.

I have always been sceptical about statistics of every type, unless I had some notion of the methodology for their collection and how they were interpreted. If, for instance, the patients lost had all been men around the age of 80, that fact would suggest I should not submit myself to it. I asked for the age, sex and health profiles of all those who had undergone the operation but was told such information was not available.

Prudence told me I needed another opinion. I consulted two friends, one a retired doctor and the other a retired surgeon. The doctor said he thought a man my age would probably have no better than a fifty-fifty chance of surviving a Whipple and advised me to put my affairs in order before getting on the operating table. The surgeon, on the other hand, told me to forget about statistics. It all boiled down to fate and a person's will to live, he said.

A gambling man by nature, I decided to risk the Whipple in July, since it represented the best chance I had for finishing my novel. It was not that I had any illusion I was engaged in some work filled with deathless prose. I had started the second novel to amuse myself and I wanted to get as much amusement as I could out of it.

The procedure took more than five hours. Afterwards, I was in hospital for two months, most of the time weaker than a kitten and slipping in and out of a mental blur. I left hospital more than 30 pounds lighter and with a nine-inch scar across my abdomen. It took another two months or more before I could begin to move about unaided.

Having survived, I was not about to waste any more time. I quickly set up a home in Kuala Lumpur early in 2009 in order to finish my novel. I had chosen Malaysia because I had neither friend nor relative there; hence I could count on not being distracted by birthday parties, wedding anniversaries, marriages of children or funerals. Its medical facilities were also reputed to be good and it was handy for Singapore, where two of my ailing sisters, Helen and Pauline, were residing.

By the middle of 2010, I had completed my novel and my cancer had not returned. I had come out a winner on both scores. *The Embrace of Harlots* was published by Marshall Cavendish, an old established Singapore publisher, in January of the following year. I became thoroughly relaxed and contented after that.

I settled down to savouring what some mystics have called one's "daily dose of death". Wistfully, I recalled lines from the Diamond Sutra:

This earthy life may be likened to a dream,  
It may be likened to a bubble;  
It may be likened to the dew and lightning,  
For all sentient life must be so regarded.

How very true, I thought. My own life of 82 years had indeed flown by like a dream. I reflected upon my childhood and my wanderings around the world and the great variety of people I had encountered along the way. Then it came to me how undeservedly blessed I had been. Not only had I lived to a considerable age with my faculties in reasonable nick, but I had at every stage happened upon wonderful souls, both from within my family and outside. Such a great number of them had been in a variety of ways kind, generous, loving, helpful, patient and illuminating. They had willingly eased

some of my worries and brought me insights and understandings I would never otherwise have attained.

Virtually all of them had since shed their mortal coils but in my heart and in my mind, they remained as ever alive, animated, endearing and sharply delineated. They constantly invaded my thoughts and filled my idle hours with wonder and joy—my elders, wry and wistful; my teachers, harsh or long-suffering; my wives and lovers, each with her individual personality and brand of magic; my stout-hearted friends and supportive colleagues, *mah-jong* addicted or otherwise; and strangers in many lands, lavishing spontaneous kindnesses upon me.

By simply walking around my home, I could catch glimpses of paintings on the walls some of them had done for me, books resting inside bookcases others had written and presented to me, and here and there, on ledges and side tables, a vase, a bowl, an antique wine vessel, a butterfly mounted inside a perspex box, all standing as tokens of affection and enduring friendship.

One day, in the midst of my reminiscences, it struck me like a thunderbolt that when the time came for me to quit the earth, they would all have to vanish with me, for I was the sole keeper of the flame of their memories! With me gone, no one would ever know the splendour of their deeds, the kindness in their hearts or even their names.

A nameless anguish swept over me. I desperately wanted for them to live on somehow. The fact that such decent human beings could have existed in our kind of topsy-turvy world was no mean achievement. They had been sterling examples of lives lived with dignity and purpose, even as they searched for their own individual meanings. They deserved to be known and recognised. I thereupon

decided I had to write about them, no matter how inadequate I might be for the job.

But to make such an attempt requires providing the appropriate settings and the relevant contexts, details of time, place and circumstances. That in turn implies descriptions of how each of our paths came to be crossed and how we had interacted with each other. A compromise had to be made. In spite of my strong inclinations towards personal privacy, I had to reveal something of myself if their stories were to be told.

Of course, apart from dealing with admirable people, I had my share of rascals, frauds, egotists and racists as well. But there is little need to mention them. They might have angered or irritated me at particular moments but only juveniles would gain much satisfaction from settling scores with those who had already turned to dust. The only exceptions might be where the public interest or inaccurate historical accounts required rectifications.

In the next two volumes, I shall set out some wonderful and some not so wonderful aspects of my 20 years as a senior colonial civil servant. In doing so, I will have to touch upon some matters which may be yet covered by the provisions of the British Official Secrets Act. Governments are secretive organisations and they always prefer to hide from their citizens how decisions are arrived at. It is frequently the case that those running governments do not relish their cock-ups to be exposed or for their citizens to realise with how little wisdom they are being governed.

To be open and accountable is essential for any democratic society to flourish and endure. I have kept silent for 35 years over some of the mess I have been involved in. During that long lapse, most of the main players have passed from the scene. Anything I

can say at this stage should be incapable of causing anyone much harm, except perhaps a dent or two to their historical reputations. Those events, nonetheless, should be on record for others to make impartial assessments on their roles.

In the fourth volume, I shall relate some of my experiences in the Hong Kong private sector and some of the deviousness and unbridled greed that pervaded and still pervades it.

I shall also record an epic struggle I had with the Communist bureaucracy in China for the right to marry a Chinese girl I had met there. The ramifications for gaining fulfillment to a quite ordinary and everyday desire took years to run their course. Success came only after the involvement of friends and supporters in the National People's Congress and in the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party itself. It may perhaps show that even Communist Party members had not been without their touch of Chinese humanity.

The events I am writing about, of course, all happened a long time ago, back in the era of fading Western colonialism. That era is now happily over. There are very few former colonial subjects now who can write at first hand about growing up and working under foreign rule. This work might therefore be of some small use to future social scientists investigating the broader features of that bygone era.

Would new forms of globalised colonialism and exploitation take hold in the future? No one can be very sure. Present trends are not encouraging. Some changes steal upon us very subtly and we discover too late that vital parts of our lives have been lost, such as the loss of solitude, peace, quietness, the leisure to contemplate the beauty of mountains or the gnarled magnificence of a solitary cypress and the casual connectedness with neighbours, family members, friends and fellow human beings.

Many decades ago, when the British writer Aldous Huxley noticed the bluebell woods, hedgerows, ponds and streams disappearing from the British countryside to make way for so-called modern progress, he remarked that half the subject matter of English poetry was being lost. This could happen almost unaware in all societies. Vigilance in guarding what a people hold most precious should never be lowered.

If I live long enough, there might be a fifth volume on the literary life in Britain. But that is more in hope than in expectation.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David T. K. Wong** was born in Hong Kong and received his early education in China, Singapore and Australia. He has degrees in political science and journalism from Stanford University in America and a post-graduate diploma in public administration from the Institute of Social Studies at The Hague. Later, he also became a Fellow in Economics at Queen Elizabeth House at Oxford.

He worked as a journalist in Hong Kong, London and Singapore for a number of years before joining the Administrative Service of the Hong Kong Government. After retirement from public service, he became the Managing Director of an international trading firm for eight years before emigrating to London to embark upon a writing career.

He has published four collections of short stories and two novels. His short stories, some of which have earned him a number of awards, have appeared in various magazines in the United States, Great Britain, Hong Kong and other Asian countries.

Many of his stories have been broadcast by BBC Radio 4 in Britain, RTHK in Hong Kong and other stations in Ireland, Holland, Belgium and elsewhere. A number of his short stories have appeared in anthologies.

He is now resident in Malaysia where he is currently working on a multi-volume family memoir, of which this is the first volume.

He is the founder of the annual David T. K. Wong Fellowship in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia in the UK. The Fellowship awards £26,000 to a successful candidate to write a serious work of fiction set in the Far East.

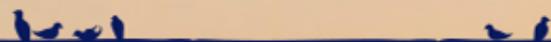
All Wong's fiction is available for free download at his website, [www.davidtkwong.net](http://www.davidtkwong.net).



**In 1935, six-year-old Tzi Ki was taken away  
from his mother in Canton, by his grandmother,  
to live at Blair Road in Singapore.**



This is the first part of David T. K. Wong's multi-volume family memoir. It traces his tumultuous growing-up years from his birth in Hong Kong, his early years in Canton, his childhood in Singapore—living with the complicated extended families of his polygamous grandfather and father—to his lean and turbulent early teenage years in Perth after escaping the Japanese Occupation. This is a unique psychological journey of a young man in the twilight of colonialism, searching for where he belongs.



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