

God's Grace

By Jacob Louie

This is the story of my maternal grandmother . . .

In 1946, on the tenth day of the ninth month of the Chinese lunar calendar, a baby girl was born to Hung and Ping. Prior to the birth of this girl, Ping had borne children, but they did not survive childbirth. Shortly before she became pregnant this time, Ping had become a Christian. Grateful for the gift of a daughter, they named her Vai Yen, which means "favor and grace."

The Chan family, headed by Hung, lived in Ha Chat, a small market village on the southern coast of China. It was post-WWII, and China was rife with poverty and internal political rivalry. Hung was a scaffolder, and he made a living through building huts. He himself had erected the hut where the family, along with Ping's two orphaned nieces, lived. Ping raised pigs, grew vegetables, and sewed clothes for others to supplement the meagre family income. After Yen, Ping gave birth to a boy whose name meant "heaven's grace" and another girl.

As a child, Yen made up games out of pebbles to play with her friends. Scattering a handful of pebbles on the ground, Yen would toss one up in the air, pick up another, and try to catch the falling one in the same hand. The game continued until she caught all the pebbles one by one, or when she lost her turn in a missing catch. Ping sewed rag dolls from saved scrap fabrics for her daughters. Clutching her precious doll, Yen beamed with joy and pride. Yen enjoyed going to church with her mother and singing hymns every Sunday. At night, children gathered at the outdoor village square to hear the story man tell ghost fables. After listening to the stories, Yen often ran away with fright. Teasing her, Yen's father would say, "Look, Yen, you choose to listen to the stories, and now you are scared."

Yen's elementary school was walking distance from home. At school she practiced math, singing, geography, gym, and history. She excelled and learned quickly in all areas. Unfortunately, she was forced to stop school at the end of 6th grade because the family could not afford to pay tuition for secondary school. As a young teenager, Yen joined the labor force. By now, the Communist government had outlawed the act of going to church, destroyed many churches, and carried the pastors off to labor camps. Both school and church life came to an end for Yen.

After the takeover by the Communist Party in 1949 and the organization of local co-operatives, jobs were assigned. One of Yen's early job assignments was working in a wood shop which made coffins. Yen and other adolescent

apprentices felt scared when they were told to fill in the many holes in the low-quality wood boards of the coffins. Their master made them lie inside the open coffins to overcome their fear. Over the years, Yen also worked in a daycare co-op, taking care of toddlers and young children, and labored in the rice and vegetable fields.

In the late 1950s, Yen's mother sought medical treatment for her declining health in a peninsula named Macau outside the jurisdiction of China. In 1962 Yen acquired a temporary visa to "visit" her mother. There she decided not to return to China. To escape detection by Chinese officials, she changed her name to Vai Kun. She claimed she was two years older than she actually was in order to make it easier to find work. Yen "Kun" started ironing handkerchiefs and taking other unskilled jobs in garment factories for twelve hours a day. At the end of the day, Yen's feet were often swollen due to prolonged standing. There was no time for entertainment or going to church on Sunday.

With the meager combined wages Yen and her mother earned, they could only afford to buy just enough rice to last for two days and one log for stove-cooking at a time. Everything they had was used or salvaged from someone's discard. Mother and daughter rented a room in a small apartment with no running water, no bath or shower, and no toilet. Everyday, Yen fetched water in buckets from the communal faucet and brought the water up two flights of stairs. Yen and her friend always pooled their money to buy two breakfast buns together in order to save five *avos*. In addition to supporting themselves, they saved money to help Yen's father, brother, and sister who still lived in China with much worse conditions. At that time in China, many essential supplies, from oil to sugar to towels, were rationed.

Once a year at the Ching Ming Festival when the Chinese government temporarily opened the border zone between Macau and China, Yen and her mother visited with separated family members. The Chinese government did not want any outside "contraband" inside its borders, and dress codes were very strict --no jewelry or "fancy" raiment, like pointed shoes and flare pants. Risking being caught, Yen "smuggled" clothing through by wearing numerous layers of clothes and unstripping them for her sister once she safely walked past custom guards.

Life got a little better when Yen learned to operate a sewing machine and could now be employed as a seamstress. An older acquaintance from her home village introduced Yen to a single man named Shing Yeung, who was thirty at the time. Ping had agreed to the matchmaking with the hope that her daughter would have a more stable life. Yen and Yeung took a liking to each other and got married in 1964, six months after they first met. Yen was eighteen.

With savings from his lifelong work in America, Yeung's father had bought a three-bedroom apartment for the young couple to live with Yeung's parents. Their apartment was one of the first "modern" apartments in Macau. With cold running water and a flushing toilet, it was considered as "luxurious" at the time. Yeung became licensed as one of the first taxi drivers in Macau. Yen continued working as a seamstress, and with both incomes, life was not affluent, but far from impoverished.

About a year later, Yen gave birth to her first child. All her friends and family rejoiced at the sight of the newborn baby girl, whom Yeung's father named Lai Fan. Fan cried so much that Yen had to carry Fan on her back and sleep standing up against the inside of a closet. After the tumultuous political time in Macau in late 1966, Yen gave birth to another girl named Lai Fong. After the birth of the third girl, Lai Kit, gossipers started to jeer Yen's mother-in-law over Yen not bearing a boy. With no one else to turn to, Yen looked to her mother Ping for comfort. Ping prayed for her and encouraged her. Two years after the birth of a fourth girl, Lai Ching, God blessed Yen with a boy named U Lam. For the next two decades, Yen dedicated her time to supporting her husband and taking care of her five children and her parents-in-law. She worked in a garment factory housed in the same building as their apartment so she could stay close to home.

Hung, still living in China, became sick. One sad day in 1976 Yen received the news by telegraph that her father had died in China. An even more heartbreaking loss came seven years later when Ping was diagnosed with lung cancer and died shortly after. For more than three years, Yen and Yeung took care of Yeung's aging father, who had Alzheimer's Disease, until his passing. Her mother and father-in-law were the elders she had most respected and loved in her life.

By now Yen and Yeung were empty-nesters; all their children had gone abroad to college or had begun working. Yen and her husband could spend more time with friends and each other. They played badminton daily with friends, and they traveled to other parts of China and abroad. Around this time, Yen started noticing tremors in Yeung's hands when he used his chopsticks and a shuffling gait when he walked.

In 1998 Yen and Yeung traveled to the U.S. for the wedding of their second daughter, Lai Fong. When Fong gave birth to her first baby, Yen wished she could be there, but Yeung's more pronounced symptoms made the trip impossible. Yen had her apartment cleaned and ready for the visit of her daughter's family; she and her husband were excited to meet Lok-Sun (Joshua) for the first time five months after his birth. Yeung suddenly became ill and was hospitalized the day before their daughter's arrival.

Yen walked into the hospital room. “Mom, Dad just accepted Jesus!” said Lai Fong, “Do you want Jesus in your life, too?”

“Yes,” Yen responded.

So half a century since she went to church with her mother in China, Yen could now worship regularly and freely in church again, this time with her husband and two adult daughters who lived with them. Yen and Yeung got baptized together in a local church, which soon became their second family. Soon after this, Yeung’s symptoms were properly diagnosed and treated as Parkinson’s Disease, and he was well enough to travel to America with his wife for Joshua’s first birthday. A year later, Fong had another child named Jacob, who is dexterous as his grandmother. Yen enjoyed teaching Jacob how to make cookies and sew during her grandsons’ biennial visits from the United States, and he became the grandparents’ favorite.

Yeung’s Parkinson’s disease eventually progressed to a stage where he had to be confined to a wheelchair and later to bed. Yen’s care-taking role increased in burden. Early each morning at 5:00 when she woke up, she prayed, first, for blessing and endurance for her husband, and second, strength and sufficient grace for herself. Then she went about washing, changing and feeding him. Only after that would she eat her breakfast and go swimming, a daily exercise to relieve her bodily and mental stress.

On July 10, 2013, Yeung, having seen his two grandsons one last time a day ago, slipped peacefully into eternity. Painfully and slowly, Yen learned to live without her spouse of forty-nine years. She picked up Western-style baking and dessert-making, Chinese calligraphy and painting, digital photography, and enrolled herself in a college certificate program for senior citizens. She never expected to be back in school after she was forced to drop out in 6th grade. She had more time to serve in her church, particularly in interceding for others. As her mother had prayed for her, she prayed for her son and daughter-in-law for a child, and God blessed the family with Chi Hong, born the day after Christmas in 2014.

Yen now spends her time watching Chi Hong part-time, and traveling when she can with friends and family. She visited the Holy Land, Yellowstone National Park, and went on a cruise to Northern Europe and Russia during the past three years, and she is planning to go to Alaska with her daughters and grandsons. She is thankful for God’s grace in her seven decades of life, her five children and three grandchildren who surround her with love.