Chapter 29

A Foreign Official Shows Skill in Rhetoric
The Wu Clan Takes in an Orphan

The Colony followed the English system of education, in which there were two levels of general examination: Ordinary, taken usually at age fifteen, and Advanced, taken at seventeen or eighteen. William sat for Ordinary that summer, the summer of 1973, in nine subjects. All through the month of June he was taking examinations. It was grueling, and he knew had had done badly in his weak subjects—History, Biology, English Literature. Still, he found the two math papers absurdly easy, and coped well with physics, Chinese and English Language. When it was all over, the remainder of the school's summer term had a perfunctory air about it. The most diligent of the students started work for their Advanced courses, to be examined in two years' time. Most, like William, goofed off.

It was on one of these bright, lackadaisical summer days that the Immortals above next turned the wheel of William's fate. He had been goofing off altogether—playing hooky, that is—with two other classmates, riding a bus up to the amusement park in Laijigok. When he got back to the apartment he was surprised to see the street door open. Ascending the stairs, he saw that the inner door, the door of the apartment itself, was also open. Still, so easy and settled had his life been for so comparatively long, he experienced no apprehension. Only when, as he neared the top of the stairs, a policeman appeared in the apartment doorway, did he feel

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a mild chill of disorientation, of events out of joint. Surprised, the policeman stared at him. William stared back. It was a Chinese policeman, somebody of rank apparently—wearing an officer's long pants instead of the constabulary shorts. There was a sound on the stairs behind. Turning, William saw a foreigner, a man of thirty or so wearing a civilian suit, black hair cropped short, staring to go bald on top.

"Hello," said the foreigner in English. "Come visiting, have you?"

"No," said William without thinking. "I live here."

"Is that so?" The foreigner raised his eyebrows. "I think we'd better have a little chat."

William never did, ever again, see the inside of Gordon's apartment. The little chat took place at an office in Honghom, an office to which the foreigner drove him in a spotless late-model sports car that had been parked in the street outside the apartment building. William sat in the front with the foreigner; the Chinese police officer sat in the back, wordless. The building they took him to was ordinary-looking and featureless. The rooms inside it were likewise featureless: whitewashed walls, spare tube-steel tables and chairs. The room where they had the little chat did not even have a window, though it shared the coolness from the air-conditioners elsewhere. The Chinese policeman disappeared somewhere in the building, and William was alone with the foreigner.

The little chat consisted mostly of the foreigner asking William questions. The questions were insistent but not over-intrusive, and William felt he managed them quite well, using the tale he and Gordon had worked out, one warm evening in bed the previous summer. He had been staying with Gordon some months (was the story). Gordon's father had been a policeman in Shanghai, back in the thirties. He had known William's family. William's family had recently smuggled him out of the mainland. He had got in touch with Gordon, and Gordon had put him up these few months while he sought some more permanent arrangement. No, he had no Hong Kong i.d. card (In fact, he kept it in his school locker.) Yes, he had swum from the mainland. Deep Water Bay, one night in late spring. Where did he sleep? On the couch. No, he didn't attend school. The money in his pockets? Gordon had lent it to him, while he looked for work. Hadn't Gordon told them these things?

The foreigner smiled. "I'm afraid Mr Macleod had no time to tell us anything. He had an urgent appointment elsewhere."

Elsewhere? Where was he, then? The word *elsewhere* pierced William right through, a shaft of icy fear. *Was Gordon Dead?* No, no, no, no. Let it not be, let it not be that he was dead.

"Oh, South America, possibly. Indonesia. Malaysia, perhaps. Perhaps Taiwan. Who can say? There are so many opportunities, for a chap who's been augmenting his salary to the extent Mr Macleod has."

William breathed again. Was Gordon in trouble, then?

"Oh, probably Mr Macleod isn't suffering any particular trouble in his new country of domicile, wherever it is." The foreigner seemed determined to mine out his little vein of sarcasm to the last troy ounce. "Probably Mr Macleod is quite comfortably accommodated in his new circumstances."

Would he soon be coming back, then?

The foreigner laughed. "Not soon. Oh, dear me no. Not any time soon. Not if the daft sod knows what was good for him."

William did not altogether follow this. He grasped, however, that the foreigner was some kind, some special kind, of policeman; that this place was some kind, some special kind, of police station; and that Gordon had left the colony and would not come back. At once his mind cleared, and everything seemed very simple. *The wood has been made into a boat.*

The foreigner excused himself. He left the room, then came back almost at once carrying a black plastic folder. Printed in yellow letters on the cover of the folder was ICAC. William remembered having seen something on the TV news: Independent Commission against Corruption. He put on an eager, accommodating sort of expression and said: "Do you mind if I use the toilet?"

The toilet was along a corridor, past a front desk with a uniformed officer at it, and round into a corridor at the other side. The officer at the desk followed William with his eyes as he walked round. They were on the ground floor, and the toilet had a window. However, William, now only four months short of sixteen, had started to bulk up, and the window was too small for him. Of course, the officer would have known that, or else would have had him accompanied to the toilet. Irresolute, William

went back. The officer at the front desk was taking a phone call. The officer's eyes followed William coming out of the corridor—then suddenly bulged, staring down at the telephone. *"Dead?"* said the officer into the telephone, speaking in Cantonese. *"How can it be?"* So stricken was the officer's expression, listening now to the phone, William stopped in his tracks. *"Oh, Heaven,"* said the officer—a young fellow, no more than twenty-five. *"Is it really true?"* He put down the telephone and stared blankly at William.

"He's dead," he said, not so much to William as through him. "Where's the sense in it?"

"Who's dead?"

"Li Xiaolong. Found dead in his apartment!"

Even in his desolation, William was stunned by the news. He had, of course, followed Li Xiaolong's career very closely since their encounter on the road from Dapeng Bay three years before. Li Xiaolong had made his Chinese movies after all, and become the sensation of the Hong Kong box office. A much-loved local character, too, often wandering unannounced on to the sets of the local Chinese TV shows to joke and ham around with the performers. William had seen all three of his movies, standing on line for hours in the patient crowds when each one came out, always remembering that first kindness. Sprung steel—how could one so full of life, be dead?

The desk officer ran from his post, back into the recesses of the building, shouting in Cantonese: "Li Xiaolong is dead! Li Xiaolong is dead!"

The front door was opposite the front desk. William did not think it was locked. It wasn't. He stepped out into suburban sunlight, closing it quietly behind him. He walked to the corner; then ran as hard as he could for as long as he could, zigzagging left, right, left, right at intersections.

William had nothing but the light summer clothes he was wearing: red T-shirt, jeans and underpants, white socks and an old pair of soft-leather casuals he had bought the year before, now beginning to pinch. Handkerchief, house keys, a few dollars and change. Mother's red plastic hair clip, which he always carried as a mascot. In fact, he reflected as he now walked briskly away in no particular direction, he was back where he

had been three years before. This thought made him feel afraid, and hollow inside. He stopped, trying hard to think of some plan of action. Back to the apartment? Of course not—he would just get arrested again. He thought with a pang of all his things, especially his books. He had a hundred or more, in two wooden bookcases Gordon had got for him. William thought of them in their neat ranks; and of his father's books; and of the cribbage score sheets he and Gordon had used, now tallying games up in the high hundreds. He pushed the thoughts away. To the school? It was early evening already; nobody would be there. Then what? He considered for a moment, then turned south, into Kowloon. People were coming out into the streets, broadcasting the news: Li Xiaolong is dead!

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The door of Washington Guest House was closed. Papa Wu's youngest daughter, and his son and stepson, were all in there, eating noodles from bowls and watching TV. The youngest daughter got up and opened the door for him, keeping her eyes on the TV. Did William know that Li Xiaolong was dead?

"Yes," said William, I know. "Is your father at home?"

Father was out. Back later. No, didn't know when. Yes, William could wait in the lounge if he liked. Li Xiaolong dead! Who could understand it? She sat down again. William sat with them watching the TV, stills of Xiaolong's face, clips from his movies, the furrowed brows of the announcers. One of the announcers, a young woman, began to cry—still reading her teleprompter, but the tears running down her cheeks.

There was a figure at the glass door of the guest house, an *acha* woman in a sari. The daughter got up again to open the door; it was Bina.

At first Bina did not recognize William sitting there. She was asking for Papa Wu, then she saw William. She frowned at first; then the frown turned to delighted surprise.

"Is it really my little lookout? What a big boy you've grown!"

Bina looked exactly the same: all flowing muslin and spangles, bare caramel midriff. Her smell was the same, too, as she shook hands, William standing up by this time. That strange, remote musk. Bina smiled at him,

showing her small even teeth, like a monkey's. Papa Wu's various offspring barely glanced at her, intent on the TV.

"Such a big boy! And fine looking! How old are you now, my lookout?"

"Fifteen. Sixteen in October."

"Well! And shall you be staying with us again?"

"I . . . I don't know. I have to speak to Papa Wu."

Something in his manner betrayed him. Bina was at once concerned. "Are you in trouble, my lookout?"

It dawned on William at this point, through a rising fog of embarrassment, that Bina couldn't remember his name. "It's William," he said. "William Leung."

"Well, William. Why don't you tell me what's the matter?"

Bina sat down with him at the end of the sofa away from the others, and he told her. Not about life with Gordon, of course; only that his guardian had disappeared suddenly, that some officials had taken him in, and that he'd run away from them.

"Quite right, too," said Bina, much to his surprise. "They meant you no good, you can be sure. But now what will you do? Do you have relatives in the Colony?"

"No. Nobody."

"Oh, dear. You're from the Mainland, aren't you? And I'm sure you don't want to go back."

At this point Papa Wu came in. "Did you hear?" he asked the room. "Li Xiaolong is dead!"

"We know!" chorused the youngsters. Then the girl nodded to William.

"Leung Wailam wants to talk to you."

Bina jumped up before William could say anything.

"Papa Wu, Papa Wu! This poor boy is destitute!"

"What's the problem?" asked Papa Wu, looking at William evenly, a little warily, sensing that he was about to be imposed on. Then, nodding at the young ones: "We'd better step into the other place."

Once in the other guest house, William told him. When he spoke about Gordon vanishing, Papa Wu flickered a smile, suppressing it at

once. He sat down on the couch, lit a cigarette, and sat back, crossing one leg over the other.

"Strange," he said. "Since this anti-corruption drive started, so many of our fine English policemen have disappeared."

"The thing is," said Bina, "the poor boy has nowhere to live. No money either, right?"

"Yes," said William. "Nothing, nothing at all."

Papa Wu considered. He understood, of course, that Macleod the policeman had been playing with the flowers in the boy's back garden. The British were all that way inclined, so people said. You had to wonder how such a race of people managed to keep their country populated, let alone produce enough surplus human beings to go off colonizing all over the world. Well, so far as Macleod and the boy were concerned, it was nobody's business but their own. A handsome young fellow like that with no family to shelter him was probably going to be buggered sooner or later in any case. At least he had got some advantage from it. Certainly the boy had had a better life than he would have had in the mainland. Been attending a good school and done well, Papa Wu recalled from a previous conversation. Well, he could kiss good-bye to all that. Education was expensive. You could get by without it, anyway. Papa Wu's education had ended abruptly when he was twelve years old. This was in Shanghai, which was under Japanese occupation. On that day some Japanese soldiers had come to Papa Wu's school. They had ordered everybody into the street outside and made the teachers stand against the school wall, with their faces against the wall. Then they had machine-gunned them to death. When the teachers were all dead the Japanese soldiers, who were in a merry mood, laughing and smiling, had shooed the students away, saying: No more school now! Papa Wu had been too scared to feel anything at the time; but later, in long hours of boredom at home, he had wept to think of his teachers all dead, especially kindly Mrs Zhang, who had taught Chinese literature. Even now, forty years later, Papa Wu knew no more of *Red Chamber Dream* than the first five chapters, which was as far as Mrs Zhang had got with them. He could not bring himself to pick up the book and continue.

"Well," he said at last, "you're old enough to work. I can find you a job of some sort, probably. Won't be much—something in a store, perhaps, or one of the hotels. It's a shame, after you were such a good student. But . . . " he shrugged . . . "school costs money, and you haven't got any."

"I don't mind working," said William. "But I have no place to live."

Papa Wu exhaled long tusks of smoke. "I don't know there's much I can do about that. Certainly I can't give you a room. The tourist season's coming up. We'll be getting all the nightclub entertainers passing through, and the students from the West. It's the best time of year for me. But there are hostels, single men's hostels."

"Oh, never mind that. He can stay with me," said Bina.

Papa Wu looked across at her for a moment, then chuckled. He shook his head in mock, or possibly actual, disapproval. "Miss Bina, I'm ashamed of you. Making such a suggestion." He addressed William. "How old are you?"

"He is seventeen," said Bina, before William could answer.

"Seventeen? Hm." Papa Wu took another long drag. "Seventeen."

"What about Mr Gov," asked William, "your husband?" He had not liked Gov, and felt sure Gov did not like him, certainly to the point of not wanting to live in the same room with him.

Pap Wu raised his eyes to the ceiling. With his face still in that position, he took a drag on his cigarette, holding it vertical. Bina seemed embarrassed.

"Gov is not my husband," she said, in a rather affronted tone. "I am a single lady. Gov was merely a business acquaintance. He no longer lives here."

William did not know what to say to this. Papa Wu was still scrutinizing his ceiling.

"Oh, come on, Papa Wu," said Bina impatiently. "He'll be all right with me. You've known me long enough, haven't you?"

Papa Wu chuckled again, looking from one of them to the other. "Oh, I know you very well, Miss Bina."

"There's no alternative, anyway. He has nowhere else to go."

"That's true, that's true. What do you think?" (addressing William).

"I don't mind," said William, who in fact thought it would be rather nice to stay with Bina, amidst her fragrance of sandalwood and myrrh, so long as Gov was out of the picture.

Papa Wu considered a moment or two longer, then shrugged. "All right. But . . . " he wagged a finger at Bina . . . "no hanky-panky! I don't know anything! In the meantime" (speaking to William again) "I'll see if I can set you up with something."

Bina still had the room she had shared with Gov, right at the end of the corridor in Papa Wu's second guest house. Unusually for Chungking Mansions, it had a window looking out not at another wall a few feet away, but at empty space, the waterfront and the harbor, and so was full of light. It also had its own bathroom attached. When they were in the room Bina locked the door and went to start a bath. Coming out of the bathroom she smiled encouragingly at William.

"We shall take a bath," she announced. "In this hot weather, it's good to bathe twice a day. Come! Take off your clothes. Just put them on the bed there."

She put her sari away as she removed it. The drawers and closet were full of saris. So many saris! William had vaguely supposed she had two or three, but there were more than twenty of them—a spectrum, an alternative spectrum of pastels.

When they were both quite naked Bina headed back to the bathroom to adjust the water temperature. Her body was the same pleasant honey color all over. She was venturing on the edge of plumpness, her breasts somewhat too heavy for their size; but her body was well-formed, nonetheless, and the sight of her made William's *jiba* jump up. She saw this as he stepped into the bath, where she was already settled amid clouds of cyan foam. She looked at the *jiba* quite frankly, and made a little trilling laugh of pleasure. "Such a big boy!"

They did *tongfang* in the bath, then again on the bed after they had dried themselves. William slept after that. Bina woke him with a dish of rehydrated noodles she'd cooked on a hot plate. They ate noodles together, then did more *tongfang*. In the morning, William barely awake, she mounted him astride and they did *tongfang* again.

It was like that for the whole two weeks William stayed with Bina. Her appetite for *tongfang* was apparently without limit. Soon William was groggy with exhaustion, but there was no relief. She was patient and ingenious, and invariably had her way. She owned some peculiar devices, battery-powered or filled with a heavy, sluggish liquid, and showed him how to use them on her. Dimly aware that something was missing in all this, William at last, hesitantly, asked her to use them on him, too. This had some revivifying effect; but his own rallying only spurred her to greater demands, and soon William was back on the verge of exhaustion, lust rising ever more reluctantly from a slow heavy sea of satiation. Dully he watched Li Xiaolong's memorial service on the TV in Papa Wu's lounge, the whole family there, all weeping freely, twenty thousand people in the streets of Kowloon below.

It might have been better if he had had something to do, or someplace to go. Both were denied him. William never had a clue about Bina's financial affairs. She was involved in a business of some sort, no doubt with other *achas*, and kept fairly regular hours; but he never saw her spend money, and did not know where, or even if, she carried it. Certainly if she had any she did not share it with William. She fed him, at any rate when Papa Wu had omitted to, calling food up from one of the restaurants on the lower floors of the Mansions, or heating noodles on her hot plate. She clothed him, bringing back an armful of T-shirts from the market in Shanghai Street, and some underwear and white tennis shoes. She taught him to play an *acha* card game named "monkey business". And she stroked, squeezed, tickled, pulled, slapped, vibrated, kissed, licked, sucked, washed, powdered and oiled his *jiba* and its environs with all the patient assiduity of a Japanese sand-gardener. The rest of William seemed to have no functions or duties in her mind, except as a support system for the *jiba*. He sat in the lounge watching TV, chatting with Harry (who refrained from any reference to William's living arrangements, though he could hardly have avoided noticing them), playing solitaire, or taking aimless walks around Jimshajeui, the district of lower Kowloon in which the Mansions were situated.

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It was reaching the stage where William had begun to think of schemes for avoiding Bina's embraces when, one Saturday evening, Papa Wu called him into the family area. The family was eating—they seemed always to be eating—and watching a variety show on Cantonese TV. Papa Wu gave William a bowl of food—white rice with beef and green vegetables—and Mrs Wu poured him a glass of tea, and Papa Wu, without bothering to take him on one side, addressed him in Cantonese.

"There is a clansman of mine, Mr Ng Syuntoi." [Ng is the Cantonese pronunciation of Wu. Papa Wu, having been raised in Shanghai, and having dealt with foreigners a great deal, used the northern form because he knew it was easier on their tongues.] "He lives in Aberdeen, over on the south side of Hong Kong Island. He is a poor man. Works as a stock boy at one of the godowns on the Island, I don't know where. But he is very decent and honest. He and his wife live in one of the resettlement estates back of Aberdeen. They have a grade 2 government apartment, that's for a family with less than three children. However, in fact they have no children. They had one, a boy, but he died. He was eleven or twelve, I think—I'm not sure. He had a hole in his heart. The doctors were afraid to operate. They said the techniques were not advanced enough for his case. They told the Ngs: wait a few years till the techniques have improved. So they waited; but while they were waiting, the boy died. That was three years ago. They haven't had any more children, I don't know why. Probably they fear the heart problem is inherited. Perhaps it is, I don't know. Anyway, the long and short of it is, they're looking to adopt. They'd prefer a younger boy, but as I said, they are poor, and they can't be choosy."

Papa Wu paused to light a cigarette. The others were watching TV, paying no attention to them at all.

"You mean, this guy wants to adopt me?"

Papa Wu nodded. "Maybe. Of course, you should stay with them a while first. Make sure you can get on. Then, if they like you, and you agree, they'll adopt you."

"Does that mean I'll be one of the Ng clan?"

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Papa Wu laughed. "I don't know. That's for you and them to sort out among yourselves. Anyway, tomorrow's his day off. You should go round there and introduce yourself. Take your things. I'm sure you can stay for a few days, at the worst. And this situation here, with you and Miss Bina . . . " he shook his head rather emphatically . . . "I really don't like it. Not moral."

The youngest girl seemed to prick up her ears at this point. She threw them a glance, then turned back to the TV.

"Shall I be able to continue at school? I'd really like to do Advanced Level."

"I think so. I don't really know. You must ask Mr Ng when you see him. I'll give you the address. You'll have to take the ferry, of course, and a bus. Have you got any money?"

"No. Not a dime."

Papa Wu laughed heartily. "I thought not. Oh, well." He fished in his pocket. "Here's twenty. Pay me back when you can."

Bina was not altogether happy about the news. "I don't see why you can't stay here with me," she said, in an irritated tone.

Because I shall die of boredom, or general systemic collapse. William did not say this, of course. He only said: "Since Papa Wu has gone to the trouble to find this guy, I should at least give it a try."

And so next morning, after breakfast and a brisk *tongfang*, William put on a clean T-shirt and his clean white tennis shoes and took ferry and bus to Aberdeen.

The Ngs' apartment was in one of the big resettlement blocks built in the early sixties to house the refugees flooding over from the great famine in China. The block stood on a long steep hill—a mountainside, actually—a mile or so up from Aberdeen harbor. The Ngs' apartment was on the sixth floor. With the long walk up the hill, followed by five flights of stairs—the block had no elevators—William was hot and uncomfortable when he reached the door. He had hoped to cool off for a moment or two before ringing the bell; but the front door was open behind its metal grille, and a woman in the apartment spotted him at once. She came to the grille and opened it.

"Welcome," she said in Cantonese. "I guess you are Leung Wailam."

"Yes." Now there was a man present, too. He had been dozing, apparently, on the bottom of a bunk bed over in the far corner of the apartment's only real room. An opening with a plastic shower curtain over it led from the short entrance passage to a tiny bathroom. Beyond that, the third of a line with the passageway and bathroom, was an equally tiny kitchen. Everything else was this one main room, with a balcony looking out at the rocky mountainside. The mountainside blocked out much of the light, so the apartment seemed dark even now, at eleven on a July morning, the sun high and bright. The main room was not large. The bunk bed—double bottom, single top—occupied a full quarter of it. There was a wardrobe, a chest of drawers with a TV on it, and folding chairs and tables stacked against the wall by the kitchen entrance. An electric fan was going, without much effect. High up in the other far corner was a little red shrine to Guanyin, with a red light burning in front of it.

"I am Ng Syuntoi," said the man. "Welcome to our home!"

The woman had opened a folding table and some stools. She introduced herself, using her maiden name in the rather old-fashioned Cantonese style, then beckoned the men to sit down.

Mr Ng was a short, wiry man, who might have been any age from forty to sixty. He sat opposite William at the table, while Mrs Ng went to the kitchen.

"My clansman told you our situation?"

"Yes. He told me everything, I believe."

"Good. We are poor people, as you can see. We don't have much to offer you." Mr Ng waved at the apartment. "But we want a son. My clansman gave you a good character. If we can get on, and if you agree, we will take you for our son. We shall do everything we can for you. What is ours shall be yours. In return, we ask that you call us Father and Mother, and act as a son to us. Are you willing to try the relationship on this basis?"

"Shall I be able to go to school?"

Mr Ng sat back as Mrs Ng laid some food on the table: cold cuts, steamed buns, a plate of wrapped candy, and two glasses of tea. "Help yourself," she said. "Don't be a guest!" Her voice was light and pleasant, and the normal expression of her face seemed to be a good-natured smile.

"How far have you gone in school?" asked Mr Ng when she had stepped away.

"I did Ordinary Level last month. Nine subjects."

Mr Ng seemed impressed. "So? Got results yet?"

"Not yet. Next month. Math is my best subject. I've been published in the *Mathematical Monthly*, twice." He said the title first in English, then translated into Cantonese: *Sou-hok-ge Yut-hon*. "It's a scholarly journal published in London," he explained.

"So?" repeated Mr Ng. "Your English is pretty good then?"

"Yes, I'm fluent. *We can continue the conversation in English, if you like*," said William in that language.

Mr Ng laughed. "Never mind. My English is good enough to understand the boss at my godown, but I wouldn't boast of it. Come on, eat something."

William took a piece of jellyfish, and bit into a steamed bun. Mr Ng did not seem inclined to eat. Instead, he lit a cigarette.

"For our son," he said, while William was tackling the bun, "we shall make any sacrifices necessary. Education is the most important thing for a young person. Myself, I had no chance. In the war I had to run back into Guangdong to escape the Japanese. Then after the war I was too busy trying to make a living in Hong Kong. I lost all my chances. But my son won't lose his. Not so long as my wife and I can work. We will set your school fees before everything except food. Without food we can't work, and you can't study." He laughed. "Come on, eat more."

"There is only one matter," said William. He had been thinking about things, riding the bus around the Island from Star Ferry, looking out to sea from the upstairs window of the double-decker.

"Condition?" asked Mr Ng, looking at him evenly.

"I . . . I guess so. I mean . . . if you can agree."

Mr Ng said nothing, just looked steadily at him, waiting to hear.

"Suppose I stay here with you. And we get on all right, and agree to adoption. In that event, I will do everything I can to be a good son to you. You will be my father and mother in every way. I will honor you and respect you, and do everything I can to support you. However, I can't call you Father and Mother. Just the words—I can't use them for you. My own

father and mother are dead, but I remember them clearly. They were my dear parents. We were close, so close, and very happy together. I can never forget them, and I can never use these words 'father' and 'mother' for anyone else. But except for these words, I will consider you in every way to be my parents. These words, and one other thing. For the same reason, I want to keep my family name, Leung. I really don't want to change my name. I mean no disrespect to you, or your family, or your clan. It will make no difference to my behavior, I promise you. But my father was my father, and my mother was my mother. We were happy together, and dear to each other, *chan mat mou fong* [so close there was no space between]. Then they died unjust deaths. I can't forget that, and I can't forget them, or dishonor them by shedding their name."

William felt very nervous, saying this. He had worked it out on the bus, and it came out more or less as he'd rehearsed it to himself, as much as these things ever do. Still, he thought the Ngs might take it amiss.

To the contrary, both Mr Ng and also his wife, who had been standing behind him for most of William's address, seemed deeply affected by his words. Mr Ng was still and silent for a moment, looking at William with an expression of utmost gravity. Then he turned to look at his wife. She was biting her lower lip, as if restraining some strong emotion. He nodded at her, and she nodded back. Turning, Mr Ng rose from his seat. William stood up too. Mr Ng clasped his hands in front of his chest in a *bai* gesture, and bowed low. William did the same. Then Mr Ng reached across the table to shake William's hand.

"There will be no problem," he said in a low, firm voice. "Everything just as you have requested. We shall be one family now."

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