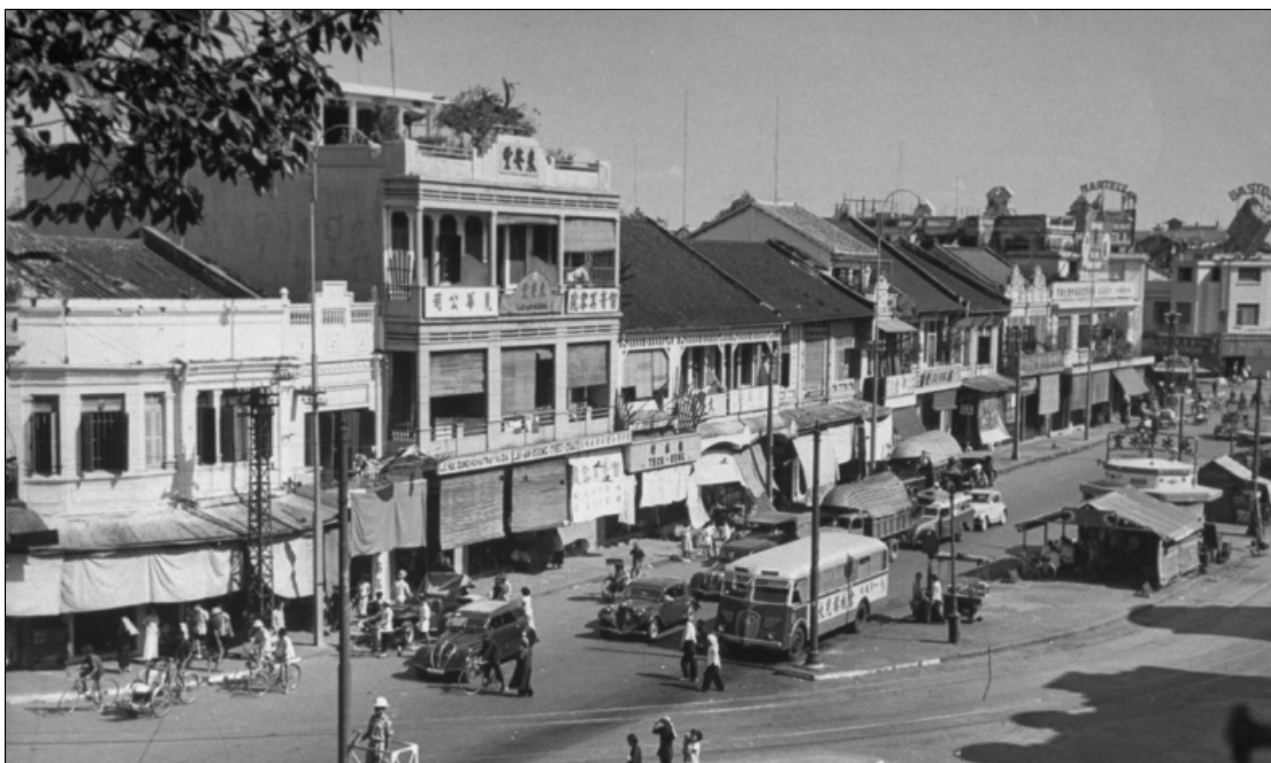


STARTING OVER

By Lawrence Tân JJR 69

Do I believe in destiny? Of course I do, but in a loose sense. I believe every one has a destiny. I believe that when we are born, we are already pre-programmed, equipped with certain genes, level of intelligence and a variety of intuitions with different potential degrees of intensity. I believe that is how destiny is defined. In other words, due to how we are equipped, we are pretty much limited in the extent of what we can do in a general sense. In addition to this fundamental premise, we should not ignore the environmental elements that influence our formation as a person.

As weak as we are as human beings, the external influences are the catalysts that promote certain traits that we had been born with and had been so far dormant. The level of environmental influences and



the degree of intensities of certain potentials that we are born with play a determinant role of our behavioral promotions. At times, these behaviors, once taken shapes, are very hard to reverse. As intelligent as we are, sometimes we can even manipulate and position others or ourselves under certain selected external influences. In that, we have some flexibility. This flexibility is in my humble opinion, often misunderstood as we are the masters of our own destiny. I believe that these thoughts of mine are very simplistic and fundamental; there must be other rules and exceptions.

We are Cantonese; my ancestors are from China and apparently came and settled in North Vietnam many years ago. It would not surprise me if some of them married Vietnamese wives along the ancestry line, besides their Chinese wives. The name in Cantonese is Tsaun (I make this spelling up myself, as close as I pronounce it in Cantonese), or Chin in Mandarin. I was told that this name actually derived from North of China and it bears the same official name of the era of the First Emperor. That was the guy who mistrusted the literates, buried the scholars alive, burnt a lot of books and united a big part of China and erected one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the Great Wall of China. Tsaun is a pretty rare name and who knows? We might be related to The Emperor!

Chin Tzu Nien named all his grandchildren. All of us have the middle name of Yat ('One', the simplest Chinese character with just one horizontal stroke). Within the context of the names, it means the only and the best. In the order of age, I am Yat Sine (One Goodness), followed by Yat Oi (One Love), Yat Siu (One

Smile), Yat Ming (One Brightness), Yat King (One Sacred Scripture) and Yat Yuen (One (good) Word). In the Chinese tradition, the ranking among all cousins are by age, in the Vietnamese tradition, the kids of the elder sibling are always ranked higher than those of the junior one.

Touched down in Saigon, we settled in a walled villa on Charles De Gaulle Boulevard. At the time, a number of major streets in Saigon still bear French names. Over time, they all changed to Vietnamese names.



Charles De Gaulle Blvd. extends from the Saigon centerville to Tan Son Nhut Airport. The majority of its length, towards the centerville, was lined with large and tall tamarind trees. The design of a lot of the major streets in Saigon had heavy French influence. The French had been in Vietnam for about one hundred years and exerted their influence in various aspects in the Vietnamese culture. From architecture, to food and the flair of savoir-vivre, the French culture was for a long while, regarded as prestigious and of a higher stature. I guess that was why my family sent me to a French school.

The trees on both sides of the streets formed a canopy of shades to the pedestrians as well as the traffic. It was

soothing to see the perspective formed by the symmetrically planted trees on the sidewalks. In my adolescent years, when I had to walk to and from school, I felt so protected by the shade of the canopy during those warm days. I felt so peaceful and soothing as the occasional gusts of wind rustled the canopy. To my pleasant surprise, I discovered many similar streets in Shanghai, however the sidewalks are smaller and the trees are just not as tall. The Charles De Gaulle Boulevard was later renamed to Cong Ly, meaning Justice. Not long after the American got involved in Vietnam, their civil engineers enlarged Cong Ly by cutting back the sidewalks. This decision might be due for practical reasons because the traffic had increased, but it really diminished its aesthetic value since a large number of trees were also taken down in the project. I am sure that the American advisor had also suggested to turn Cong Ly(Justice) into a one-way street. We called it jokingly the One-way Justice Street.

For the stretch of the street where we stayed, it was closer to the heart of the city rather than the airport. The Pasteur Institute was not very far from there. Most of the residences were of middle to upper class. Each villa was walled and gated; most of them are concealed behind some tall hedges for privacy. The house we stayed was also covered from the street by tall hedges, which are adorned by a decorative cement wall fashioned in the shapes of the fans just like what we would see in some of the deck rails in the United States, therefore it is very easy to spot. From the street, an iron gate on the right opens up to a gravel driveway. The house, concealed from the street, was actually situated in the far left corner of the lot. As I recalled, the lot size might have been a third of an acre, which I guess was the sizes of most of the lots on Charles De Gaulle, a pretty good size right in the city. Immediately to the left of the gate inside the lot, there was a real large tree. I had seen a variety of salamanders climbing that tree.



Apparently we shared that place with some other family friends of my grandparents. They also migrated from Hai Phong, North of Vietnam. I don't recall how long we lived there but it seemed liked a

relatively short time, may be a few months. I played with some kids around my aged that belong to the other family. In the monsoon season, there were a lot of heavy showers, we all liked to run out to the yard and played in the heavy downpour wearing only our shorts. After the rain, I liked to drag my toy car by a string around the yard, going through the potholes filled with rainwater, muddy sometimes. As the car disappeared under the water and emerged on the other side of the puddle, it made me feel it really came alive! There was a kid, a few years older than me, he likes walking around with his slingshot and he was good at it, hunting for chameleons and salamanders. I saw him shooting down some of these creatures from the big tree. It was so disgusting seeing those creatures destroyed and dying in agony. I don't know what it is but I recall there was one red creature with golden eyes. I don't think I ever saw something like that since then.



When we moved out of the house, I never saw those kids again for a long time. I had all forgotten about them, not knowing who they are. Over the years, their grandmother often visited my grandparents and I did not even know that she was related to those kids. Around fifteen years later, when I was in a military camp for college students (we were required to attend a military camp for about a month each year), I ran into one of those kids again. He was in my squad; he spoke Vietnamese with the northern accent. One evening, when we chat, we discovered that our families actually knew each other. He was a nice guy and we became instantly attached. His name is Phan.

A few years later, his older brother, the chameleons hunter, died of a heart complication at 24 years old. I was at my job when I heard the news. I did not understand why, but I dashed to the hospital morgue at



lunchtime and look for his brother. The morgue is air-conditioned and built with a number of cement beds. Most of the beds are occupied. Each cadaver is fully covered with a blanket. The guy who took me in there, walked around with me and uncover each one for me to find Phan's brother. I could not believe it; he was so young, lying there just like sleeping. I felt so sorry for him and his family, no one would feel comfortable lying on those cement beds, and it was so cold there. I felt sorry for his parents too. I went to his funeral. When the procession was heading down to the cemetery, his parents, according to our tradition, had to stay behind; all they could do was wailing and

crying, because parents are not supposed to bury their children. Phan dated his second cousin and later married her. I saw her only once when they dated. She was kind of short, even for an Asian woman standard, but she was very pretty.

I believe that Phan came to the United States in the early nineties and settled somewhere in Washington State. Some of my relatives told me about him and I tracked him down somehow. I talked to him a few times and now we have lost contact.

From there, we moved to 91 Testard St (Tran Quy Cap). That was when I believe I started attending kindergarten.

Lawrence Tân - 2002