

NUMBER 8



Number 8 in the 1950s.

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In Hong Kong, the number eight is remembered as the car license plate that was auctioned off at five million HKD (worth about thirteen million HKD in 2023) to an industrialist tycoon in 1988, the highest record for a license plate up to that time. In the Cantonese dialect, the number 8 (八 *baat*) and prosperity (發 *faat*) are homophones and is regarded as a lucky number. To our family and our close associates, the number eight has a totally different meaning. It is the code or common name we use to refer to the Cheung family. Number 8 was more than the address of our family mansion—Number 8 Macdonnell Road—a road that was named after a former British colonial governor like many streets in Hong Kong. It was a household in the form of a microcosmic corporation. It was a stage of characters and lives. It represented an institution of feudalistic norms and rituals. It embodies our collective and individual identities. It recalls nostalgic memories of pride and joy, as well as threat and avoidance.

The Family Clan

Our family—consisting of my grandmother, my father, his three younger brothers, their wives and offspring—lived in the same house, a big mansion of five stories with an



Grandfather Cheung Chuk Shan's portrait in the living room of Number 8.

in-house elevator. Altogether, my grandmother had twenty-eight grandchildren stretched over three decades. By the 1950s, extended households like ours were disappearing except for a few old families.

The external architectural design of our house and the major pieces of furniture were in Western Art Deco style, but many traditional Chinese fixtures were embedded inside. Traditionalism was prominent behind the modern façade of the building. So was the family system, which preserved feudalistic values and traditional norms. The first object that greeted everyone when we entered our home was the large painted oil portrait of my grandfather, Cheung Chun Kam 張椿錦, alias Chuk Shan 祝珊, which was prominently displayed above the marble fireplace in the living room. Few of us in my generation had met our grandfather, as he died in his early fifties in 1936 in Guangzhou, before most of his grandchildren were born. My father and his brothers revered him as patriarch of the family, and the family's philanthropic foundation, Cheung Chuk Shan Estate, was named after him.

After my grandfather's death, my grandmother and my father, as the oldest son, took up the small rattan ware company he started called Cheung Kam Kee 張錦記. The first character was the family surname, and the second character

was part of my grandfather's birth name. The last character 記 *Kee*, which means "remember," was commonly used in old-style Chinese shop names. It could be used as a reminder and in a way, a trademark, for customers to remember the shop or the products they sell. Everyone in the family worked for the business. Through hard work and frugality, the family expanded its business and accumulated savings that were invested into properties in Guangdong. After Guangzhou was occupied by Japanese invaders in 1938 at the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war, my grandmother and my father escaped to Hong Kong in a wooden boat filled with water chestnuts to cover their hidden silver coin savings. Two of my uncles were dispatched to look after the family businesses in Macau and Guangzhou Bay, a foreign concession leased to the French Republic at that time. The family members remaining behind in China were all brought to Hong Kong one after another after the war. The last to arrive was my father's first wife, who had previously refused to leave Guangzhou because she enjoyed the comfort and status of being in charge of the shop there. It was only after being pressured by my father's second brother, who was fearful of communist rule, that she finally left with her two youngest children in 1950.

My father, Cheung Yuk Kai 張玉階, started a trading company in Hong Kong using the same family store name at Number 10 Wing Kut Street in Central. Although he only had three years of traditional education in the home village, my father was an astute businessman. He expanded the business to Western pharmaceuticals, which were very profitable during and after the war, and especially during the Korean War. He further invested in land and real estate development in the 1950s. The first major project was a newly reclaimed piece of land in Causeway Bay consisting of warehouses and shipyards, which was turned into a residential and jam-packed shopping precinct now known as Paterson Street.

As the oldest son and head of the family, my father upheld the idealistic tradition of keeping the extended family as an undivided unit with shared assets. Everyone living under the family household would be taken care of. He guided his younger brothers to join the family business and entrusted his youngest brother and his eldest son to be the joint executors of his will upon his death. We children were not told anything about the family business or decisions; those were adult affairs.



The Cheung brothers in 1950. From the right, Fanny's father and Uncle Four in front, Uncle Three and Uncle Two at the back.

Uncle Two, Cheung Yuk Ki 張玉麒, was the most educated and intelligent. He was the only one among my father's generation who received university education in China. He worked for the Guangzhou government for a few years upon graduation. After joining the family in Hong Kong, he was a capable partner with my father in business strategies. Tragically, he died young at age thirty-five in 1953 from drowning when he tried to rescue his wife's sister at Shek O beach during stormy weather. His twenty-five-year-old widow became a devout Buddhist and vegetarian. My father promised that the family would take care of her forever. Apparently, Uncle Two's smart genes were inherited by his sons. His oldest son, my first cousin, Albert, was a child prodigy who skipped grades throughout primary and secondary school, got into college at age fifteen and received his master's degree in physics from Stanford University at age eighteen. He inspired me to leave for the United States before finishing secondary school so that I could skip a couple of years in my education (eventually, I got my PhD degree slightly earlier than his doctorate at Berkeley). Albert was the idol in the family when we were young—the Einstein of Number 8.

Uncle Three, Cheung Yuk Luen 張玉麟, was more well-known in Hong Kong society because of his public roles in charity, for which he later got the honor of MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) from Queen Elizabeth II, the reward system handed out by the colonial government for contributions to the colony. He was more laid-back and enjoyed Cantonese opera and socializing. After my father's death, he took up a leadership role in the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals and the Five Districts Business Welfare Association, which represented businesses from the counties in Guangdong from where our family originated. He acted as the external affairs minister of Number 8. He seldom stayed around in the house. My most vivid memory of him was the fancy wedding ceremony of his second marriage in the luxury Baroque-style Peninsula Hotel. With blended traditionality and modernity, the bridegroom and bride marched down the banquet hall in Western tuxedo and wedding gown to bow to my father—who, as head of the family, wore the traditional Chinese jacket 馬褂 *magua* over his robe 長衫 *cheongsam*—and to the senior sisters-in-laws dressed in heavily embroidered formal wedding attire 裙褂 *qungua*. We young children all dressed up as flower girls and pageboys. Such a scene was the epitome of the blending of traditionalism and modernity among Chinese high society in colonial Hong Kong.

Uncle Four, Cheung Yuk Leung 張玉良, attended secondary school in Hong Kong and was the only son who knew English. He was disciplined to the point of rigidity. He disliked socialization and maintained a clockwork routine. He came home to greet our grandmother after work every day during our dinner time, but he did not eat with us in the dining room. He retired to his own room to eat his dinner alone, which consisted of the same simple dish of steamed fish and vegetables, plus a papaya for fruit. He was very health conscious and seldom ate out. The one time when he had to, he brought his own food with him. Our cook was alarmed by the awkward order to add the papaya to his rice and fish so that everything could fit into the thermos, which he brought to his dinner. My father entrusted him to run the family business after his death. As a shrewd businessman, he expanded and restructured the family companies into a conglomerate of subsidiaries upon further subsidiaries, an intrigue which emerged later in the lawsuit my Aunt Two brought against him in 1990 when Number 8 was disbanded and demolished.



Uncle Three's wedding at the Peninsula Hotel, 1958.



The Cheung sisters-in-law in 1959. From the right, Aunt Two, Fanny's mother, Aunt Three at her wedding, Big Mother, and Aunt Four.

Working Women

Following the tradition of my grandmother, who worked with my grandfather to start the small cottage business in China, the adult women in Number 8 all worked in the family business. While the adult men worked on the business development and external liaison, the women worked in the back office.

My Big Mother (大媽 *dama*, a term that refers to the principal wife of men with multiple wives), the first wife of my father, was illiterate. She was sent to look after the warehouse in Kennedy Town. The laborers working there were from my father's home village, so Big Mother could communicate with them in their dialect. She stayed in a bedroom on the roof of the warehouse during the week and came home on the weekends. When we visited her, the kind laborers would put us on a trolley and give us a joyride through the grounds of the three-story warehouse in and out of the huge goods elevator.

My mother, Aunt Two, and Aunt Four were literate and worked behind grilled windows in the back office of the retail shop, Cheung Kam Kee. The shop attendants would clip the invoice and the banknotes in a little gadget on a cable, pull the string, and shuttle the papers to the back office. My mother and my aunts recorded the sales, kept the bookkeeping and inventory, and returned the receipts and change via the cabled shuttle. Apparently, money matters could only be entrusted to family members. When I visited them in the shop, I always gazed at these flying shuttles with fascination.

For a few years when Aunt Four was recuperating from multiple childbirths and a few miscarriages (she had eight children), my big Sister Three was taken out of junior high school to take up her place. My big brother was already working with my father and uncles in the family business. Sister Two was the favorite of my grandmother who sheltered her from distractions from her studies. She was the first family member who studied overseas and got her medical degree in Ireland. Sister Three was initially reluctant and continued to attend school. Uncle Four went to her school principal who then told her to serve the family first. She took her unfair treatment in stride and continued to complete her studies in night school on her own. Finally, she was able to further her university education in Australia after five years' delay.