



A Proclamation of the Conspicuous Novel
H.R.H. Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn's Award 2007
(Chommanard Book Prize Project)



A WALK THROUGH SPRING

By
Judy Chan



WOMAN
PUBLISHER

A WALK


THROUGH


SPRING

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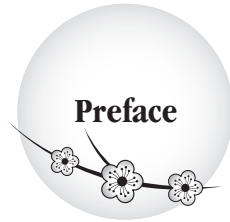
A Proclamation of the Conspicuous Noval
H.R.H. Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn's Award 2007
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Whereas, '***A Walk Through Spring***' is exceptional in weaving well-researched fact into a noval. The author has carefully selected a wise method to create lively characters and convey profound philosophy of life. The story reflects the artistry of commons and exaltation of odds and ends; and

Whereas, the reader would be enchanted by the charm of the tenderness and delicacy of human's heart and soul through the roles fo women, the art of cooking, and also the bonds between one's generation to the others which are likely mysterious as the nature of woman;

Therefore, the Committee of the 'Chommanard Book Prize' project hereby proclaims that the 'Chommanard Book Prize 2007' presented to

A Walk Through Spring



Chinese immigrants in Thailand are amongst the most written subjects for novels after the two World Wars. The rags to riches saga, the rising of Teochiew clans and the great patriarchal stories, are always captivating and good read for everyone.

I have read a lot of this kind of novels and every time I asked myself: why Teochiew, why men, and why success. Are there any stories about other Chinese dialects like Hakka, Fujian or Cantonese? Is there any adventure of women? Do all Chinese immigrants become rich and powerful? Then one day I looked around and realized that because these women could not read or write, their colourful stories died with them.

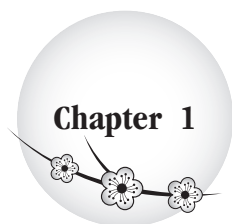
Here I am, a writer, a woman and most of all a

Cantonese, I ask myself why hasn't anyone written a novel about female Cantonese immigrants who are not included in the male dominated millionaire club. As a woman, I cannot ignore these female immigrants who were as brave, if not more, as their male counterparts. As a Cantonese, I simply cannot let this page of history pass by in a windblow. As a writer, I strongly believe I should voice the stories of my root.

As a result, I started digging into my "treasure trove". Along the way, I have shared childhood memories with many Cantonese families, their ways of life, their work ethics and philosophy. Walking down this very memory lane, along with many Cantonese immigrants, I have discovered joy, sorrow, disappeared values and cultural legacy. Last but not least, I have discovered myself.

Thanks to my mother who was so talkative like most of the Cantonese women, Thanks to my father who encouraged me to be a writer, Thanks to my family who allowed me "A Walk through Spring" And Thank God for giving me the power to write.

Judy Chan



Chapter 1

I feel quite out of step with my time or maybe, like most single women, I simply fret about my situation too much because I still live with my parents in our family home. Many of my friends, including Watthanachai, a university lecturer, have already left the nest to live by themselves or have formed their own nuclear family. My family has a large house in which four generations, over thirty people, live together. That is rather unusual today, and it is even more so because I have two grandmas on my father's side and I can speak Cantonese as fluently as I can speak Thai.

I am one of the two single women in this big house; the other one is "Big Grandma" whom I call

“Ah Gu Poh” or “great-grandmother” in Cantonese. She is not really my great-grandmother but the elder sister of my grandmother whom I call “Ah Mah”, or “granny.” Ah Mah – my granny – is eighty years old, while Big Grandma is two years older. Since our childhood we have often heard the two grandmas grumbled about the older people: “Old age is second childhood.” Now they themselves seem to experience just that, as they squabble about stories from the past even when neither exactly knows what really happened. Their stories of love, hatred and hard times in the past involve the four persons -- their “boat friends” who left their village in China’s Son Tak District of Canton Province together with my two grandmas for a sea journey to Bangkok during the early years of the Second World War.

Big Grandma always says that she has three friends who remain loyal to one another through thick and thin: her sister, Ah Geng; and their two friends, Ah Hou and Ah Gwai. So, when Big Grandma announced one day:

“Ah Hou and Ah Gwai are coming to visit Thailand!”

It sets the wheels in motion.

My grandmas prepared to welcome their friends and take them on trips. I had to run around to arrange

things for them. I was between jobs at the time, waiting to go to Australia to start my new job, and was therefore available for them for a whole month.

I have long and often heard my grandmas talk about Ah Gwai and Ah Hou since I was a child and therefore I feel that these two ladies are part of my life already. Although the stories are told in fragments by my two grandmas, without the chronological order and coherence of a novel, years of listening to these episodes of their lives affect me, leaving me with sadness for their misfortune. As I learn that they will meet again, I feel rather uneasy, as if nervous at the prospect of a gloomy experience.

“I told you already that Ah Hou is a perennial nutcase,” Big Grandma comments when she learns that Ah Hou wants to move to Thailand to live with her daughter, “She’s doing fine now, living with her son in Singapore. Her daughter and her son-in-law will give her a headache if she moves here. She’s really asking for trouble!”

“What trouble? There’s no better place to live in than Thailand!”

“Who says? Just look at Ah Gwai. She lives alone happily in Vancouver,” Big Grandma will not give in, “In Vancouver you have the social welfare and other benefits when you retire from work, and Ah

Gwai has large savings. Don't you remember? The money from her Japanese master?" Ah Gu Poh is referring to the Japanese money, with conviction, as always.

"There you go again, Ah Jae!" Granny protests to her elder sister, "No one knows whether there was any money."

"Of course, there was! Why not? After Master Yamada fled, Ah Gwai quit working and immediately returned to Hong Kong. Could she have gone there without money? Then she moved to Canada to live with her brothers and sisters. It takes money to do that, you know."

"I'd rather believe that her brothers and sisters helped. You just ramble on about things that you know nothing about."

"Ah Geng, you are too much! Really, you never trust me! You keep arguing even when I'm telling you the truth."

I can't help smiling as I listen to them. The two sisters never agree on any story from the past. Each believes that she has the correct version and can remember things more accurately. If she can't win the argument, Big Grandma gets it out of her system by commenting on the food during meal time. Such is the

case today.

“People today don’t know how to stir-fry vegetables and make them crunchy. They are too wary of the flame.”

The three of us usually have breakfast together. We usually have boiled rice and three side dishes that can be quickly prepared. Today we have stir-fried *Choy Sum*, Chinese flowering cabbage; simmered pork belly with pickled vegetable, which is a leftover from dinner the day before; and cold tofu in sesame oil. Big Grandma says we are more fortunate than the other members in the house because we have ample time on our hands to leisurely enjoy our breakfast. The others are *Mou Fok*, meaning that they have no good fortune. We Cantonese believe that “good” fortune is a different kettle of fish from financial fortune.

“Look at your daddy, child,” says Big Grandma, “He made a lot of money but he doesn’t have good fortune. Because of his work, he barely has any nice clothes to wear. They’re all dirty with lubricant and oil.”

I rather think that the other members in the household are more fortunate than I am because they do not have to listen to the old ladies fighting with each other. I can’t resist making a sideswipe at them

and say: “I can hardly wait to meet Ah Hou and Ah Gwai. I wonder if they are as argumentative as you two are.”

The two ladies then turn on me, their new victim. Big Grandma puts down her chopsticks on the rim of the rice bowl and, with a sigh, starts lecturing me.

“Ah Mui Mui , you must learn to respect older people. Ah Hou and Ah Gwai are in the same generation with your granny and I. Ah Hou is younger than I am by some months, so you have to call her ‘Ah Yi Poh.’ I was born on the second lunar month; she was born on the tenth. As for Ah Gwai, you have to call her ‘Ah Sai Poh’, because she is the youngest in the group, younger than your grandma. When you meet them, you must not call them by their personal names. For Chinese, that is considered bad manners. It’s a pity that people today do not show due respect for seniority!”

Ah Yi Poh means “second grandma”, while Ah Sai Poh means “youngest grandma”. Well, now I have two more grandmas! I can’t help wondering whether Ah Yi Poh’s two children wouldn’t be in the same boat as I am, having to listen to long lectures about proper respect for seniority. After her sermon, Big Grandma continues with her comment on Ah Hou -- Oops! Sorry! -- Ah Yi Poh.

“Ah Hou’s too carefree. Without me, her son, Ah Wah, would have had burns all over his body and the carer would have stubbed him to death with burning cigarettes already!”

Now, *that* is interesting. Second Grandma has two children -- Ah Yeng, a girl, and Ah Wah, a boy. I heard about Ah Wah’s mischievous antics, but it is not clear to me why his carer would want to jab him with a burning cigarette, because whenever Big Grandma begins, Granny always stops her.

“Oh, come on, Ah Jae! Ah Wah’s nanny -- Ah Son -- died several decades ago. Just let it go. She was as poor as we were. Ah Wah was so naughty. Ah Son never burned Ah Yeng with cigarettes, you know. I’m only worried that if Ah Hou comes back to live in Thailand, she would be unhappy with her son-in-law.”

“Look who’s talking! When I talk about it, you say I’m badmouthing her. Huh! What’s the use of worrying?” Big Grandma puts a piece of simmered pork belly into her mouth. I look at her with envy. She can eat anything -- in this case it is an oily piece of pork and lard -- without the slightest worry that it will make her fat or clog up her arteries and give her a heart attack. “How else would her daughter have found a husband in Thailand if she didn’t marry a Thai? Ah Hou is old-fashioned -- like that guy, the

soya sauce shop owner.”

The soya sauce shop is in the market in Yaowarat District, which is Bangkok’s China Town. I used to accompany Big Grandma when she went shopping there. She has never told me any story about this shop, but I noticed when I accompanied her to the market that she was well-acquainted with Ah Yip, the shop owner. After commenting on other people for a while, the two ladies now turn on me again and I am caught off-guard.

“Ah Mui Mui, does the professor have a Chinese parent?”

By “the professor” my grandmas mean Wat-thanachai, a university lecturer who has a very mild manner and is modest in his lifestyle. We have been seeing each other for several years -- actually almost “too many years.” My grandmas enjoy his company when he comes to visit us because they would have another pair of ears to listen to their old stories. He has become a darling to them and they both agree that I should marry him. It is not often that the two ladies agree on anything, but in this one rare case, they do.

“He’s a scholar, like a *zhuang yuan*, the Chinese scholar in old China. We have a saying: ‘To know one Chinese character is worth a bar of gold.’”

My grandmas probably do not realise that nowadays there are many eligible, educated men out there, but so few wealthy men. A teaching job at a university is an unrewarding profession, with a lot of hard work, low pay and hardly any prestige in society. Even the students do not pay due respect to their lecturers. Most people care less for knowledge than for social and financial status. Movie stars, pop idols, singers, famous athletes -- it is these who seem to command more respect from society than university professors, simply because they can make tons of money.

“His father is Chinese, but his mother is Thai,” I tell them again for the umpteenth time.

“*Hi Yah!* Aha! You see? There is no way a man can find a wife in Thailand if he doesn’t marry a Thai woman,” Big Grandma makes her point again. “From what region in China? Is his father Teochew?”

Chinese people often make the point of distinguishing people from different regions. My Thai friends don’t understand that there are many groups of Chinese from different regions, distinguishable by their dialects -- Cantonese, Teochew, Hakkian, Fujianese and Hainanese, for example. Most Thai people are well-acquainted with the Teochew dialect and borrow these terms from Teochew -- Ah Jeh for “elder sister”, Ah Muay for “a girl or younger sister

and Ah Hia for “elder brother” -- and apply them to Chinese people of any group. In my younger years I was rather annoyed when people called me Ah Muay because we Cantonese would say Ah Mui Mui. As a matter of fact, there is no offence at all in being called Ah Muay, but perhaps I was being fussy because I was too steeped in, and too proud of, my Cantonese ancestry.

“Yes, I think his father is Teochew, but I’ve never heard Watthanachai speak Chinese, so I don’t know if he can speak the language.”

“His generation probably can’t speak Chinese any longer,” Granny is convinced, “If you hadn’t been sent to Hong Kong, you also wouldn’t be able to speak Chinese. Living in Thailand, you would have spoken only Thai. Your parents wouldn’t speak Chinese with you either. In my day, I did not allow my children to speak Thai with me. That is why your dad can speak Cantonese.”

“Fogey! Today people learn to speak English,” Big Grandma counters.

“Who said so? Ah Gu Poh, don’t you know that today people are learning to speak Chinese?” I argue, “Many people go to study Chinese in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Yunnan.”

“Of course, I know,” Big Grandma is bluffing

her way out of a corner; she would never admit defeat. “I’ve visited China so many times but never once have I ever dreamed that I would live to see it so transformed. Seventy years ago people only wanted to leave China.”

Now I have to listen to my two grandmas recount their “boat journey” saga all over again ...





Judy Chan was born in Bangkok, Thailand in 1955 and grew up within a strong Cantonese atmosphere in Chinatown. She was the second generation of a Cantonese female immigrant from Shunde, Canton. Her first language was Cantonese and not before the school years in a Christian school that she had developed her Thai and English. She graduated from The Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University in Far East History and obtained her Master in European Studies. Chan started her writing from an early year in junior high school. But university activities, high responsibility job and daily busy mom task had dragged her away from writing for quite many years. Not until 1980s that Chan was able to pursue after her passion of writing again. She engages in both fiction and non-fiction and has gained many awards along the way. Some of her best selling books include 'Everybody Wants to Own a Bakery' and 'Everybody Wants to Own a Coffee-shop' as well as 'From Ah Sam to Yam Cha : The Cantonese Clan in Siam' and 'The Lighter Side of Being a Cantonese'.

Her insight of Cantonese culture is warmly welcome by readers both Thai and Chinese-Thai. Chan strongly believes in the power of writing and uses her books to navigate the better understanding among the old and the young, the Thai and the Chinese and the past and the present philosophy.

Judy Chan is married to a surgeon and has 3 children. She is now living in Bangkok.



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