

ONE

THE PETITE BIKING GIANT

Yun had a whiteboard at home in Tin Yat Estate. On the day of the interview, it was marked with the tiny characters meaning “Happy Father’s (Mother’s) Day to Mummy”. This very first of our interviews took place on Father’s Day of 2005, and the line was written by Yun’s 12-year-old daughter, who grew up in a family where mum doubled as dad.

When Yun’s husband took off in 1997, their three sons were aged 16, 15 and 14 respectively while the youngest daughter was only four.. To feed her family, Yun took up everything on her own shoulders and began shuttling between Tin Shui Wai and Yuen Long on her old Phoenix bike for her eight domestic helper jobs. With so few families who could afford a domestic helper in the entire district, Yuen Long was the nearest she could find work. On cooler days, she would go home between jobs, do a little housework, check on her daughter and then head back for Yuen Long for her work. That meant two hours’ bike ride, day in and day out.

Although only four feet nine inches tall and 94 pounds in weight, Yun was a giant in our eyes.

“My man made 116 trips to the Mainland in 1996. I could tell

because the Home Visit Permit was still in use in those days. In the morning of Chinese New Year Day, I told him there is no way for him to take off like that. Do it one more time and the family will no longer be his. I then made him lunch and he took off once he was done. I thought he was out for a chess game but he did not show up until 4 p.m. nine days later.

“When he came in, I flung two bags on the sofa. ‘Just go. Do you really think you have the means to be two-timing? You may as well forget about us. I’m taking baby (their little girl) to the park for half-an-hour. Do me a favour. Pack up and go.’” Go he did.

“He came back once some five or six years ago. The moment he stepped in, he snapped at our son, ‘Just look at you.’ I was next: ‘That’s how you have raised him!’ Our son yelled back, ‘Leave Mum alone! If not for Mum, who’s so strong, we could have starved to death like nobody’s children.’ That made a clean break and he was gone for ever.

“My neighbours asked me how come they never heard us fight. They didn’t because I seldom fought with him. I was so afraid that people might know about it. Nobody could have been of any help anyway. So, what’s the good of crying. I rarely mentioned it to my employers either. Sympathy was the last thing I needed.”

Yun used to cook for a full-day kindergarten. When the kindergarten switched to half-day, she lost her job and became a domestic helper after retraining. Although having four children to feed single-handedly, she did not want to live on welfare.

“I simply had no choice but to work. My boys were growing up, looking up to me. What if they did as I did, staying home living on the Government instead of earning their own living? Back then, the boys

were in secondary school and could take care of themselves. As for my little girl, who was four, I either took her to a day nursery or left her in the care of some neighbour.”

However difficult things were, she never gave up on her children.

“They had no father already. They could not afford to lose their mother too. I know just how miserable it is to be without a mum since I lost mine at birth. So, I must hang in there.”

ROUGHING IT SINCE CHILDHOOD

Yun’s own childhood was more tear-jerking than some melodramas. Shortly after her birth, her mother died and her father gave her away. A few years later, her foster-mother died also and she was sent back to her natural father. When she was barely in her teens, the Cultural Revolution began to rage and everyone was to be judged by their background. Her natural father being a rich peasant, Yun was likely to be severely criticized under the political sentiment of the day. In order not to implicate her, her father sent her off once again, this time to a lowly peasant. This was how she came to join a working team, dredging rivers and pounding stones until she was 16. As soon as she turned 21, she climbed over Mount Wutong and sneaked into Hong Kong.

“I don’t mind it that much perhaps because I have been roughing it since I was small.”

Here went her daily regimen. She left her home in Tin Yat Estate at seven in the morning and worked for three hours in Palm Springs in Yuen Long. Since those townhouses had rather high ceilings, she needed

to climb up a ten-step ladder whenever she did the ceiling lights or the spandrels. After work, she would go to Yuen Long to grab a bite. If it was not too warm, she would then head home. When the weather was really sweltering, she would “loiter around” in Yuen Long instead, her favourite hangout being the library. At four, she would peddle her way to Yau Tin Village for work until seven. Since the two jobs left a wide gap in between, it was well past nine when she finally sat down for the dinner she made herself. Life went on like this for at least six days of the week.

It was only after dinner that she could have time for housework. While it was perfectly understandable that her eldest son, who was an accounting clerk, should have his office outfits neatly ironed, Yun insisted on doing the same with her little girl’s school uniform.

“The instructor for my domestic helper course said teachers know from their students’ uniform what sort of a family they come from. From then on, I make it a point to iron my girl’s uniform every night. When everything is done, it’s already one in the morning.”

Doesn’t that make only some six hours of sleep every day?

“I don’t know why but I am never in want of sleep—never tired. Now and then, I even have to take my girl swimming.” Her eyes were reduced to slits from her hearty laughter as she spoke.

“You can always work out a bit when you get tired. In the night, you won’t be seen in all that dark. So, I would do some exercise while riding my bike.” The 47-year-old even gave me a demonstration there and then, steadying the handlebars with one hand while stretching out and circling the other arm, laughing to herself all the while.

Yun often split her sides with laughter, the least to be expected with all the miseries being poured out. Our interviews were often punctuated

by her saying, “It’s funny, isn’t it? Hahaha....” She told me, laughing could hide her ugliness. That explained why she laughed all the time, especially when her bike came up in our conversations.

PHOENIX BIKE AS PAL

Although petite and out of proportion with her bike, which measured 26 inches high, Yun was as steady as a rock when she was mounted on it. She could steer her handlebars with one hand and hold an umbrella in the other. One at the front and another at the rear, the two baskets were good enough for carrying the shopping for two families’ dinner. Neither was the hoisting of tropical cyclone warning signal No. 3 ever a problem. Grab a raincoat and out she went. It must be for real when she said she could have a workout while biking.

“I am lucky to have my bike. It’s so fast, just as fast as the bus K73. I once raced a West Rail feeder bus all the way to Long Ping Estate and I beat it since it had to do its round before heading for the estate. Hahaha.... I got myself this bike, a Phoenix, 22 years ago. They are hard to come by these days. I think I’ll donate it to the museum some day. It’s my real pal.”

Yun was aware of accidents involving Tin Shui Wai women biking to work but she believed it was alright so long as you were careful enough, especially as she rode mostly on cycle tracks. Since she had her “pal” to keep her company, she had nothing to complain about the district. Here they had much more space than the incredibly small unit they had had in Long Ping Estate and her sons could each have a room of their own, and that meant less friction.

Her sons were now 24, 23 and 22 respectively. The eldest was an accounting clerk, while attending evening school at the Polytechnic at the same time. The second boy did odd jobs at construction sites and the third learned plumbing at the Vocational Training Council and was on some maintenance assignment at Princess Margaret Hospital at the moment. Both the eldest and the youngest took home some of their pay to help support the family. Her little girl was now in Form 1 and loved her mother best. She would not kiss her mother in front of us though, and would only stealthily give her two kisses when we were already in the doorway.

It happened that her daughter saw some pitiful victims on TV and her heart went out to them. She suggested to her mother that they should donate money to them every month. This was how Yun came to be an Oxfam Friend, making a monthly donation of HK\$50. As for herself, it seemed that she could hardly be associated with the word “pitiful”. She dismissed the whole thing by saying, “They are behind me now. Things always change for the better after a downpour, so they say.”

The day of the interview was the first fine day after an entire week of rain.

(Note: Yun insisted on using her real name for the story, although we told her that all the other interviewees would appear under false names. Her wish is respected, naturally.)

TWO

HAD JIN SHUYING KNOWN ME

Troubled by a dull pain in her abdomen and overdue periods, Zhang Wenyan recently parted with as much as HK\$1,000 to consult a private doctor. The report that came back said she had a cyst measuring 5cm in diameter in her right ovary.

This was an untimely coincidence with her long-awaited admission to a retraining course. In the end, she gave up hospitalization in favour of the course. She had to, if she was to stand any chance of getting employment.

The only thing she could count on now was her own perseverance. As a child, back in her home village in Sichuan province, she was the only one among her siblings not to dodge her mother's floggings, albeit muffling her sobs while tears streamed down her face. In her mother's words, this girl of hers would make the best underground Communist since she would never surrender, not even in the face of death.

"Had Jin Shuying known me, she might not have died," said Wenying.

(Note: Jin Shuying was killed along with her children in a shocking family tragedy at Tin Heng Estate. Like Wenyan, she was from Sichuan.)

JOB-HUNTING FRUSTRATIONS

On the third day of my arrival in Hong Kong in 2003, I started selling boxed lunches at China Resources, a supermarket at the rate of HK\$20 per hour. Before long, my boss fled without paying me my hundreds of dollars of wages and I had to go everywhere looking for a job, swallowing my pride. Neither Café de Coral nor McDonalds would take me on. In fact, few would hire a little educated person like me who spoke Cantonese with an accent, let alone any English. As for working at restaurants, that often needed connections. Where on earth could I get any? It is said that it is unimaginable for a thirty-something not to find a job but employers think otherwise.

In the end, I managed to land a job at an electronics factory in Tsuen Wan where I stayed on for more than a year. It was seven o'clock to three with wages at HK\$4,100. Every month, however, there were bound to be a few days of stocktaking when there was no work. To my dismay, wages were to be deducted for those days and I was left with no more than some HK\$3,000. Getting to Tsuen Wan from Tin Shui Wai alone cost over HK\$12 and a round trip HK\$30. While lunches could be packed to save money, the transport fares could not be cut. It takes simple arithmetic to work out how much was left at the end of the day.

Not that I wanted it to be, but my girl had to start coming home on her own after school, and to stay home all alone on Saturdays, as soon as she was six. I had hoped to take her to a day care centre for her summer break but it cost more than HK\$2,000 a month. How could I afford it with the HK\$3,000 or so that I made? I thought long and hard about it and finally decided to quit my job in the middle of June (2005), so that

I could take care of my girl on the one hand and to enroll in retraining courses for a restaurant job on the other. Who could have known that my husband was to lose his watchman job just two weeks later?

There are no savings to speak of when making ends meet with an income was difficult enough. All that we are left with is five to six hundred dollars. It's been hell, these past few days, and we have not yet paid our rent for the month. Even if my husband were so lucky as to have a job right away, it would take over a month before he got his pay.

I cry and cry and can't sleep. However much I cry, life will have to go on. There are times that I think I will have a nervous breakdown from all that worrying.

These few days, I have been looking for a job for my husband, going to those recruitment expos day after day. Although he is just 44, it is difficult for him to get a job since he speaks no English and cannot use computers. He used to be a machine worker and did work on the Mainland for a while when his factory was relocated there, but he got fired soon afterwards.

Every position requires a diploma these days. So, I tried my luck with retraining courses. It turns out they are not meant for me since priority is given to people who are on welfare. The domestic helper course, let's say. I applied in August, got an interview in September but wasn't notified of the result even as late as December. In the end, nothing ever came from them. Do I really have to get comprehensive assistance to convince people how desperate I am? As far as I know, many housewives apply for the course simply because they have the time to spare. But not I. I really need a job. Even so, a staff member told me, "There is no guarantee that you'll get a job after taking the course!" He sounded as if it was the

money (retraining allowance) that I was after. Isn't the Government trying to help those people who are most in need? What wrong have I done to deserve such treatment?

It is really difficult to get a job when you live out here in Tin Shui Wai. People complain about the lack of banks here. Yes, banks are a necessity but what's the use of banks when you don't even have money to put into them? When you have to go hungry most of the day, what you need most of all is a job.

The next best thing after that is to have someone to look after my child. My girl didn't go to kindergarten. When she was in Primary One, she did pretty badly in school. English is, of course, beyond me. Other than that, I was too tired to help her with her schoolwork, leaving home before six in the morning and coming off work at half-past-four in the afternoon with the market to go to, housework to do and dinner to make. I will be most happy if there is someone to keep an eye on her and help her with her assignments without costing me too much.

MARRIED LIFE

My husband couldn't get over losing his job at the machinery factory on the Mainland. For a while, he hid away on the Mainland and would not come home to Hong Kong. I had huge fights with him and even went so far as to have filed for a divorce on the Mainland. I said: "I don't think it's fair that our little girl should suffer just because you as a grownup, cannot deal with the realities of life". She was about to go to kindergarten at that time but it suddenly became out of the question. She

was a Hongkonger after all and had to be educated in Hong Kong. That was my belief.

I got my one-way permit and brought my girl with me to live with my mother-in-law in Hong Kong in 2001. "Your husband has ditched you," she said and I got very upset. Why should she be such a bully when her son was already such an asshole? Couldn't she keep an eye on the girl, her grandchild after all, while I was out struggling to earn a living? Yet, my girl had to wait till I came home from work for just a piece of fruit and fell sick four to five times a month. Of the HK\$4,000 I made, I gave my mother-in-law HK\$3,500 to cover our living costs. God knows how I managed to have money left for the commute. Before leaving home for work in the morning, I would boil water for drinking, mop the floor and do the laundry. But when I came home from work, my mother-in-law would complain there was no more water to drink and ask me to boil some more. She was home all day long. Couldn't she do it herself? So, I ended up working from morning till night and could get no more than a few hours of sleep.

The girl is mine and it's on me to raise her. It has never crossed my mind that I should end my life. I have been strong all along.

We moved into Grandeur Terrace in 2003. Finally, we had a place to call our own. At long last, my husband agreed to come home to Hong Kong to find work as a watchman. It was I who scanned the classifieds and dialed the numbers for him before he would make the enquiries on the phone. Back then, the two of us were still fighting all the time. Although both of us were working, I was the one to do the housework -all of it. It was always I who should try to be understanding while he never bothered to show he cared.

We hadn't spoken to one another for half a year and had been sleeping separately. So much for a couple. I sought help from social workers in Tin Shui Wai but they couldn't care less and even looked down on me as if we people from the Mainland did not deserve to be helped. There was this man who made me feel that going to him was to ask for humiliation. This is why I don't want to be on welfare. I too have my dignity. I would rather stay away than to lose it.

That homicide case in Tin Heng Estate happened a few months after I had gone to that social worker. It struck me deeply since that woman (Jin Shuying) was also from Sichuan. Tin Shui Wai was really shaken up. Wherever you went, you heard people talking about it. This started my husband and I thinking. "How much pressure can one withstand?" I asked him. No one knows what will happen when one is blinded by rage. I dare not think what will happen if either of us can no longer control ourselves. "We may as well get a divorce if we can't get along," I suggested. "Since women can endure hardship better than men can, it's better for our girl to stick with me. You can still get to see her after our divorce. It's alright not to pay me anything if it gets too difficult for you". A peaceful separation, so to speak.

It was then that I got this call from the social worker. The whole thing was so ridiculous. I told him that things had worked out with my husband and his help was no longer needed. I strongly feel that the Government should investigate thoroughly into the case. I am sure social workers were of no help to Jin Shuying.

My husband and I are somewhat doing fine now. I am happy enough that he is at least willing to keep looking for a job. No more talks about divorce for the time being, I guess.

UNIVERSITY DREAMS

There is one thing good about Hong Kong. You can go to university even if you are way past your youth“Maybe I’ll join you when you go to university”, I said to my girl.

I got educated up to secondary level back when I was on the Mainland, rather well-educated by the country folks’ standard. I did rather well in school but didn’t have a chance to continue studying since priority always went to the boys in an agrarian society. I love reading and have a wide interest. When still in school, I often read Shiyue (October), a magazine about Chinese society in the 1940s and ‘50s. As thick as an inch and densely printed, the magazine had little appeal to most, but it had, for me. In my school days, my essays got put up on the wall (the board in the case of Hong Kong) for all to appreciate and even earned me a prize.

When I first arrived in Hong Kong, I didn’t know how to get along with other people. So, I went to the library to read up on interpersonal relationships. When my girl got a bit rebellious, I read to learn about how to deal with her. I read too whenever I am unhappy. Now, I am learning to read complex Chinese characters.

Whatever job I have and whenever there are Hongkongers among my co-workers, I would go out of my way to talk to them, to learn more about the territory and to practise my Cantonese.

I love reading the local newspapers too, so as to get to know more about Hong Kong society. I discuss the news with my daughter and find out what she thinks. Let’s say, the news yesterday about a girl from the Polytechnic University who killed herself over her love life. I said

to my girl, her parents went to such lengths and spent so much money and effort to raise her and to give her an education, and yet she just succumbed to the slightest frustration. It’s an end to end all things for her now that she’s dead but what about her family? How are they supposed to take it?

With so many boys and girls barely in their teens hugging and kissing in the park here in Tin Shui Wai, I asked my girl what she thought. There are simply too many problems surrounding teenagers in Hong Kong with their parents so much tied up by work. I’m so worried for my girl. So, I have spent a lot of time and effort on her these past two years. I talk to her whenever I have the time. She isn’t much of a materialistic girl and toys that are a few dollars a piece are already way too expensive for her. She is contented just to have me to talk to.

Mine is a good girl. Whenever she goes out to get her boxed lunch, she gives me a call before and afterwards. She mops the floor for me whenever I have to work overtime. Although her performance in school is poor, her conduct is flawless.

I have taught her the importance of being responsible. Today, it is I who support you; tomorrow, it will be your turn to support me. But adults must practise what they preach. The way I’m treating my parents-in-law has got her to agree that I’m selfless. Whatever upsets me at work, I share it with her so that she will understand life is not all smooth sailing, and so that she can cope with her own problems when she comes to it.

In the countryside, mothers are lousy with their daughters, beating them up and telling them to go to hell all the time. A girl I knew did just that, plunging herself into the river. But I am one of those die-hards who simply will not yield, however hard you beat them up. My mother used to say I was as annoying and as tough as rocks in a latrine (a common

Chinese saying of being hard and stinky) and said I was born to be an underground worker who would never give in. When she beat me with the rubber sole of a shoe, I winced not a bit. I just stood there, arms folded, without making the slightest sound of sobbing although I was all tears.

It is perhaps destiny that I should end up with this husband of mine. But I will not allow myself to be a prisoner of my destiny. I will never regret having come to Hong Kong in the first place. Nobody has his life wasted here whereas people can amount to nothing all their lives on the Mainland. Little educated as I am, I understand what is meant by “Life will take an unexpected turn when you least expect it”. With every ordeal, I gain in maturity.

There are many women from Sichuan here in Tin Shui Wai and yet I have few friends. People go to tea in the afternoon but I can’t afford to do so. We belong in different worlds and there are few that you can pour your heart out to.

Had Jin Shuying known me, I would have talked some sense into her and she probably wouldn’t have died.

THREE

BYE YU KEE, HELLO CBD

Typical of married women, Luk Mei-ken was a smart home economist and knew exactly how each and every penny added up.

“A job in Central pays HK\$6,000 but transport costs you HK\$800 a month. Money wise, it’s the same as making HK\$5,000 in Tin Shui Wai.

“What’s more, you have to take into account the two hours spent on the road. This is what puts many people off. But not me. I prefer gaining more exposure from what I see on the way. The MTR is crowded, sure it is, but the crowds there are more civil. Although I can save on transport if I keep within Tin Shui Wai, I get to meet none other than the same type of people over and over again.” With this, she pretended to stretch out and to have a cigarette dangling from her lips in disdainful mimicry.

Thus, the married woman who used to rub shoulders with her own kind outside Yu Kee, a popular chain store selling low quality and cheap foodstuffs, finally made it out of Tin Shui Wai and into Central at the other end of the world, geographically and hierarchically, working as a security guard at a Grade A commercial building. The people she got to meet every day were invariably the smartly dressed, English-speaking cream of society.