

## A SIGNIFICANT DAY – AN INTERVIEW

It was after a hearty dinner and while going through old photo albums with a family friend, Christine, I found a very old-looking black and white photo.

"When was this picture taken?" I asked Christine.

"Oh, this was taken a long time ago. This was taken in 1963, so...I was about nine," Christine frowned slightly. Then her face lit up. "Oh yes! This was my grandmother's funeral. I recall having to wear those strange, uncomfortable mourning clothes."

They did look odd; all females wore a hood of some sort and males wore funny-looking cylindrical hats that were dented inwards.

"What were the clothes made of?" I asked curiously.

"Traditionally, I believe we were supposed to use sackcloth, but there were so many of us; five generations all together so we used rough linen instead!"

I gawked at this. "Five generations??!"

"Yes, indeed!" Christine smiled. "I remember feeling so lost; I had never experienced so many people in such a chaotic environment! My mother introduced them all to me by title; by the time she had finished with the tenth person, I would have forgotten the seventh person and all the previous people!" she chuckled.

"By title? What do you mean?"

"For the Chinese, everyone in the family has a title, and each title is different; depending on whether the person is on the father or mother's side." She paused, a little out of breath then continued. "Not only that, your blood and non-blood relatives have different titles too!"

"What was your impression of the funeral at the time?" I asked.

"Well, I was overawed actually! Being a village girl, I led a simple life and the funeral all seemed very grand. The monks chanted prayers endlessly; for a while, we could chant along...but after that we couldn't -- it was much too hard. Just as I was about to doze from boredom, a lady came from behind and pinched me hard! If I remember rightly, she was the person who organised the funeral. She came behind all us children, pinched them; simultaneously saying 'Cry, cry!' We didn't need the encouragement; not after the way she pinched us!" Christine shuddered a little. "The fact is, in a Chinese funeral, the more crying, the better; it shows how loved and respected the person was. But soon enough, I forgot about that awful pinch momentarily because the coffin was being loaded onto a truck. As some people left, others started getting into cars to follow the truck, someone realised that there wouldn't be enough space for everyone in the cars."

"Why not? Didn't most people drive to the funeral?" I cut in.

Christine smiled knowingly; like she was amused. "It's a village in 1963, not everyone had a car! Plus, my grandmother's gravesite was going to be further out in the woods; we couldn't walk that far."

"Oh right," I said, feeling a bit silly. "So how did all of you get there?"

"Several children, including myself, we were loaded onto the truck where the coffin had been loaded. We were told to make room for ourselves around the coffin and ..."

"You got into the back of a truck and were asked to sit around a coffin?? Wasn't it spooky sitting next to it?"

"Honestly it wasn't spooky at all to us; we just followed instructions blindly!" Christine chuckled gently. "After the burial, we headed back home. Exhausted and weary, I recall having a very deep sleep that night!"

"How did it impact you?"

She contemplated this then slowly spoke, "I knew my grandmother as a person, not just as my father's mother. Though I didn't realise it straightaway, her death led me to realise that inevitably, everyone will die someday -- and we don't know when. That realisation helped me to treasure the people I love and care about even more. Even now, almost fifty years later, that is something I have always tried to do; to constantly remind the people I love how much they mean to me. I really like this quote: Love your family; make no room for regrets because tomorrow is not promised and today is short!"

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