

# The Audacity of Selfless Giving

By Ken Ng

Chinatown, like any neighborhood in New York City, is full of stories. Stories that surprise you, shock you, and shape you. My family has many exciting, colorful, funny, and heartwarming stories. It is through one story in particular that I discovered their most valuable legacy.

It was 1939. The Japanese had been bombing Canton, China for two years before they finally occupied my mother's village, seizing my Grandfather's herbal medicine practice, home, and property. Broken by the loss, and the violence of the occupation, he died soon after.

Mama was still just a teenager, but she was already performing under the guidance of a renowned master of the classical Chinese opera. She was away when her family was forced to join the masses of people on the run from the Japanese.

As was the custom with people from the upper class, my grandmother, Popo, had bound feet. She couldn't run; in fact, she could barely walk.

***“I will carry you,” my aunt said to her mother, knowing full well it could be days, weeks, or months before they found a permanent safe place, before she would be able to rest.***

With the soldiers closing in, my aunt hoisted her mother on her back and carried her to a safe house, hiding her on top of a straw roof until the soldiers had gone. That was the beginning of their long, arduous journey through the Canton countryside.

Thinking only of her mother's safety, my aunt piggybacked her from village to village, from relative to friend, and from friend to acquaintance. When they ran out of acquaintances they stayed in sheds, in barns, in abandoned buildings.

***For almost two years they hid from the Japanese, homeless, hungry, lost.***

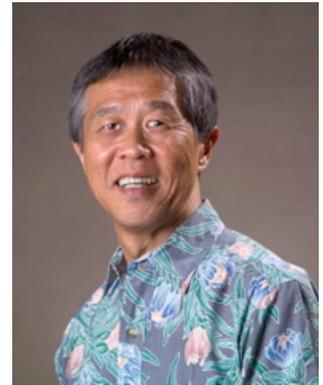


One day my aunt was captured while searching for food. She was imprisoned in a metal locker, alternately tortured and raped. Concerned for the safety of her mother, she fought to survive, enduring daily attempts by her captors to beat and humiliate her into providing information.

During this time Mama made her way to Hong Kong, where she performed in the opera - and worried about her family. She had lost track of her parents and sister after the occupation, and feared she would never see them again.

Meanwhile, the Japanese realized my aunt had no useful information. This made it easier for her to escape. Miraculously, she found Popo, safe with relatives.

“Leave me here,” Popo instructed her daughter. “Go find your little sister and take care of her.”



Knowing her sister had settled in Hong Kong, my aunt made her way to the city and found Mama. She told her the sad news of their father's passing, and that she had carried Popo on her back to keep her alive. She told other stories too, stories of the countless relatives, friends, and strangers who helped hide them from soldiers, feed them, keep them safe.

***In Hong Kong my aunt dedicated her life to caring for Mama, becoming her handmaiden, protector, and confidante.***

It wasn't long before Mama boarded the Coolidge steam ship with dozens of fellow actors bound for America. She soon found success, starring in leading roles in Chinese opera venues, earning the admiration of audiences, maestros and men, (including, eventually, my father). Ever grateful to her heroic sister, Mama helped her and Popo open a restaurant in Canton after the war, sending money to help support them and other relatives.

My grandmother died within a few years. She was not killed or tortured by the Japanese. She did not die of starvation.

***My aunt's supreme act of courage and dedication ensured their safety.***

But the story doesn't end there.

In the United States Mama became a diva of classical Chinese opera, famous in San Francisco and New York. She traveled, she performed, and somewhere in the midst of all that managed to have children.

Of Mama's many admirers, perhaps the most notable was a wealthy businessman from New York who owned half of Chinatown. One day he showed up at her apartment in San Francisco. Recently widowed, he was traveling to Hong Kong in search of a new bride to take care of him, and he had come to say hello on his layover.

"You must be very careful choosing a bride," Mama told him. "If you choose a pretty, young wife she may run around on you. If you choose a bride that is too smart, she may cause trouble with your family."

Mama handed him a piece of paper with a name and address. "Promise me you will go see this woman last," she urged, and he grudgingly agreed.

It was my aunt's name on that piece of paper. The businessman kept his promise to Mama. After he met my aunt, there was no need to search further; a few months later, they were married.



Mama knew that my aunt, who was twenty-eight at the time of her marriage, would not find a husband. She was too old; the hardships of war had stolen her beauty. She was damaged, used, washed up. And she was illiterate. When she entered the United States she could only sign an "X" for her name.

***Mama saw her chance to pay it forward by helping her sister live a life of peace and privilege.***

My aunt would become a hugely successful entrepreneur in her own right, parlaying funds from her husband's gifts into smart investments. She also helped raise me, and my siblings. We called her Yeemah, which means *second mother*.

It is the legacy Mama and Yeemah created that drives me today, their audacity of selfless giving. And it is that very attribute that brought them both much good fortune and happiness.

**I believe that women are the force and the leaders for a positive, constructive change on this earth. I believe that women will lead us to peace, and I am totally committed to accelerating that growth.**



Women have always been my mentors, friends, and confidantes. It began with my Mama and my Yeemah, two shining examples of an unbending will to succeed, to defy the odds, and to not just survive, but thrive.

Today, I pay it forward, helping women break through the glass ceiling. Helping women feel whole and worthy. Helping women get in touch with their passion and make the choice to go for it. Helping women discover and practice self-care, take control of their lives, and make the changes necessary to live the lives they have been longing for.

Yes, Chinatown is full of stories, but the best stories are those of ordinary people helping others in extraordinary ways. Thank you, Mama. Thank you, Yeemah.

*After 30 years in comprehensive wealth management, Ken Ng pursued his passion to serve senior citizens and empower women, launching the Hawaii Performance Magazine. He is a principal at LifeQuest Hawaii, where he helps individuals and organizations become navigators and champions of change by serving as a consultant and certified life coach. Inspired by his mother and aunt, Ken recently launched “Diva To Be,” a coaching program for women in search of power, passion, and authenticity.*