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Charles Patrick FitzGerald
1902–1992

Foundation Professor of Far Eastern History
Research School of Pacific Studies
Australian National University
Two autograph pages from C. P. Fitzgerald’s diary of February 1928, reproduced with the permission of his daughters, Mirabel and Antbea.

February 25

Temp 50. Sunny. A very warm, the best day so far, quite extraordinary for February. The stream down 1 inch. It’s very little over the banks now, only just around the middle bridge and greenhouse and by the weir bridge.

In the morning we went into the woods for primroses. Christopher arrived in time for dinner. The morning have at last held a plenary session of the Central Committee, at

Handing which definitely. select th' stamp of legality, on their government, as opposed to the clergy in Hankow or Canton.

This is a great political triumph for Chiang, who position is thus consolidated. Teng is reported to be attacking 大明.

The 11ford eye election resulted in the town, losing 1000, out of 1500 of the previous majority, of which were to the 11ford.
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Cover calligraphy  Yan Zhenqing 颜真卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman

Cover photograph  Rubbing of a bas-relief, Hsin-ching, Szechuan Province
   (C. P. FitzGerald, Barbarian Beds [London: Cresset Press, 1965])
When people come to judge my life work after I am dead and gone, they should remember that I have had to fight my life battle all alone. A Europeanized Chinaman, I could not naturally get sympathy from my own countrymen, and from foreigners I have not had one hand stretched out to help me, but instead cantankerous opposition. You do not know how lonely I am.

— Ku Hung-ming, 1906

For my name and memory I leave it to men's charitable speeches, and to foreign nations and the next ages.

— Francis Bacon, 1626

I

Ku Hung-ming, according to his own account, was in China before the end of 1879. This would suggest that he stayed only briefly in Penang on his return from Scotland. He no longer had a place he could call home on the island, and his birth-place and childhood playground was only the first stop-over in his homecoming:

His father, as well as his uncle and adoptive father, as mentioned elsewhere, were both long since dead. So, too, was his grandfather, the one star in his otherwise lacklustre branch of the family, who died, as did Ku's guardian in Scotland, Forbes Scott Brown, in the very year of his matriculation at the University of Edinburgh. There was, in fact, not a single male member of his father's or his own generation of the family older than himself left in Penang, except the son of a concubine of his grandfather's, then a mere boy of fourteen (who, as it would soon become evident, was no more capable than Ku would have been of performing the periodic sacrifices to their ancestors or keeping their graves in good repair). Ku's mother, too, would certainly have died by then. No mention of her by Ku has so far surfaced—strange, to say the least, for one who was dubbed 'the last Confucian'.

This chapter on Ku Hung-ming, like a previous one ("Ku Hung-ming: schooling," henceforth "Schooling") which appeared in volume 38 of Papers on Far Eastern History (pp.45-64), is in draft form, and suggestions or information of any kind will be greatly appreciated.

1 "Schooling."

2 Details of this nature throughout this article are derived from inscriptions in the Penang Ku clan cemetery and the Brown family cemetery at Longformacus in Berwickshire, Scotland, as well as the archives of the Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh.

3 Since Lin Yutang applied this description to Ku Hung-ming, various people have used it for others, a notable example being Guy Alitto in his biography of Liang Shu-ming, a colleague of Ku's at Peita from 1917 and one of his ardent admirers, whom the author interviewed in Peking in 1983. Something of the man in his ninety-first year may be gleaned from the quotation and calligraphy shown below.
Ku would undoubtedly have been apprised of these happenings while still in Europe. Yet his actual confrontation with the changed scene seems to have aroused in him a feeling of desolation as he contemplated "The Days That Are No More," a sentiment that became all the more poignant as the dilapidated remains of his former home were brought into sharp focus by the bright light radiating from the family of his first cousin, Koh Seang Tat 姚尚達, Penang's leading opium farmer, who was then, as he had been since as far back as Ku could remember, riding on a crest of good fortune with all its accompanying opulence. Nowhere is the contrast that existed between the two cousinly branches more glaring than that preserved for posterity in the Ku clan cemetery. This, having successfully fended off for more than a century and a half not only the relentless march of the dead down the slope of the hill at its rear, but the even greater threats of the land-hungry living encroaching upon it from all other directions, has survived as one of the island's oldest and most extensive private burial grounds. In it, the dominance of Koh Seang Tat's branch of the family over the rest of the clan is so striking as to attract the attention of even the casual visitor. Nothing is more eye-catching than the well-crafted granite stele engraved with his name in vermilion which Koh Sin Hock 姚申福, Koh Seang Tat's grand-nephew, on becoming head of the clan, set up on the strategic site within the ground selected for the eventual repose of his wife and himself more than a quarter of a century before his actual demise. In contrast to this ostentatious expression of authority, the burial-plot of Ku's parents is nowhere to be found, while it took two men several days' labour with mattock, scythe and other implements to unveil the grave of his adoptive father from beneath layers of tangled brambles located apologetically only just within the confines of the cemetery, its headstone so worn that the inscription is barely decipherable.

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5 As with the names in written Chinese of members of the Ku family, in which free use was made of homophone characters irrespective of their origin or meaning, so were the English transcriptions of their names in the Amoy dialect often erratic. The two most

**Figure 1**
A photograph of Ku Hung-ming presumably taken soon after his return from Scotland, published in Wen-t'an kua-i-chieh Ku Hung-ming (Ch'ang-sha: Yueh-lu Shu-shu, 1988), a collection of essays on Ku by Hu Shih, Lin Yutang and others. As it is unverified, two other signed portraits of Ku in later life are shown for comparison, one of him in middle age from the G. E. Morrison collection (Figure 2), and the other a sketch made in Peking in 1925 when he was nearly seventy (Figure 3), copies of which Ku presented to a number of his friends including Satsuma Yuji, delegated to look after him during his stay in Tokyo in the mid-1920s at the invitation of the newly-founded Tôyô Bunka Gakuin 東洋文化学院 (now 大学), then at Kudan (reproduced from the original presented to the author by Satsuma Yuji's widow, Mrs Satsuma Kiyoko, when he visited her at her home outside Tokyo in June 1983)
In an article published in 1924, Ku Hung-ming recalled how, on first returning from abroad, he went for a tour of the Penang hills with an old friend of his father’s, who explained to him the meaning of what Ku described as “the Chinese religion of culture” as revealed in the pieces of red paper with Chinese characters pasted on humble dwellings—the culture which “poor Chinese coolies had carried to the hills and jungles of Penang and the Tropics.” But though he made much of this, Ku did not even mention the more prominent display of this culture in the clan cemetery which he would undoubtedly have visited as someone newly returned home after a long absence. His curious silence on this might, of course, have been due to his ignorance at that time of the true significance of this ‘religion of culture’ of his ancestors which continued to mean as much to emigrants abroad as it did in their country of origin—the importance of which he would go to great lengths to emphasize and elaborate on nearly half a century later. Certainly he showed neither envy nor resentment at what he had witnessed there, saddened though he was by the general devastation he found on his return. Instead of allowing himself to become etched with bitterness, he blamed the changes that had taken place in himself for his reaction to the changed scene, so that:

Faces familiar in my infant years
But now grown alien to my travelled eyes
he attributed to his having become “accustomed to foreign sights” and “foreign skies.” Thus Penang, in spite of the initial pain that overwhelmed him, survived untarnished in the limpid pool of his memory to the very end of his life, undoubtedly helped by his never having to return to live there again.

Ku’s uncharacteric introspection occasioned by his unhappy encounter with his childhood home, however it may appear, was not escapism—a state of mind hardly compatible with the life-long fierce and querulous stance he took over any subject, no matter if it be as small and insignificant as a sesame seed (a tiresome and much-deplored characteristic of his on which account his company was shunned by many who otherwise prided themselves on his acquaintance). His perception of the changes he had undergone in Europe did, however, seem to have helped insulate him from the harsh reality that he encountered in Penang and would have to face during the protracted homecoming that lay in front of him and, indeed, endure after he had attained his chosen destination. It spared him the emotional excesses that bedevil many in his plight, helping at the same time to dispel any suspicion of something unthinkable for a would-be Confucian: that he might have become (whether through circumstance or because of

7 “Schooling.”
Figure 6
Koh Seang Tat surrounded by thirty-eight members of his immediate family, a photograph taken in 1902 to mark his seventieth year and the golden anniversary of his marriage to a sister of the 'Captain China' of Dili (Sumatra)

his temperament) an alienated, marginalized outsider—an unwelcome notion that showed itself all the more strongly in the vehemence of his self-deprecation and protest, blinding him to any appreciation of cynicism and depriving him, therefore, of a cushioning sense of humour. Even a modicum of this might have helped foster in him that elusive quality embodied in the Confucian 'doctrine of the mean', a virtue he later extolled as uniquely Chinese but to which he never could nor did lay claim for himself.

Whatever was responsible for this idiosyncrasy of his, it certainly helps to set Ku Hung-ming apart from the host of Chinese students of his age sent to study in various foreign countries at about the same time as he went to Scotland, many of whom returned to China when he did. Irrespective of their family background, these "imitation Western men," as he indiscriminately labelled them, had all had undergone a traditional Chinese education which they maintained in varying degrees while pursuing their foreign studies abroad. Some were already considerable Chinese scholars before they left, notably men like Yen Fu 袁緝, who was attending Greenwich Naval Academy at the time Ku was in Edinburgh, and with whom Ku's name was often linked. Another was Ma Chien-chung 馬建忠, who went to study in Paris at about the same time and who was unwittingly to exercise a decisive influence on Ku's life. Designed as pioneers who would play a leading role in their diverse fields in China's efforts to gain wealth and power, these contemporaries of his were encouraged to study the subjects it was thought would best equip them to help their country realize its avowed aims. This meant, then as now, predominantly, if not exclusively, technological subjects of all descriptions. Employment for these students was assured, even though some of them might, in the words of an unkind foreign observer, "regard the triumph of western science with indifference or stupid wonder" and, though "affect[ing] to be immensely impressed with the undoubted advantages of foreign laws, foreign wine, Harvey's sauce and French tinned mushrooms, [be] very silent
about these when they find themselves under the shadow of their ancestral hall. Many of the returned students took on positions of great power and influence, and some also acquired personal wealth long before their country itself became powerful and wealthy. Return to China was for these students a return not only to a secure career but to a proud and welcoming family with multiple arms, ever ready to sustain them and cushion their transition, however protracted, from a foreign culture and environment back into their own.

The influence of the family ancestral hall that enabled these sons, so long lost to foreign culture, to reappraise their experience back in the home environment (regarded by some as an intellectual handicap) was denied to Ku Hung-ming, who came to that state in a round-about way, with consequences that made him the peculiar figure for which he became known.

A great-grandson of one of Penang’s earliest Chinese settlers, Ku lived all his childhood, until he left for Scotland, in a plantation in which conditions had changed little since the time of his first Penang ancestor. He hardly knew the more recently arrived Chinese in the immigrant community which congregated mainly in Georgetown, some distance away, and was thus immune from whatever cultural influences those Chinese peasant migrants might have brought with them. In these backwoods of the island he was surrounded by people, including his parents, who knew next to nothing about China or Chinese culture beyond fanciful hearsay and dubious versions of occasional rituals performed by hired Tamils (substitutes for the Chinese performers who had abandoned this for more lucrative occupations). Thus, this otherwise intelligent and receptive boy was even more ignorant than a poor peasant child of his age in China would have been of the rudiments of his ancestral culture. The first language he learned to speak was Malay, while the Amoy dialect which he next acquired was that as spoken by ‘babas’, Chinese settlers on the island from an earlier period like the three generations of his family before him, who had developed over time and in their isolation from new waves of Chinese immigrants a mode of speech and daily habits sufficiently distinct to be regarded disapprovingly by the newcomers. He knew not a word of written Chinese and would certainly have been unable to recognize his own name on the wooden tablets in the ancestral hall or on tombstones in the clan cemetery.

Two years at an elementary school that gave him a smattering of English was all the formal education Ku had had before he was plunged into the utterly strange environment of provincial Victorian Scotland. Left to do his best in the lonely depths in which he was submerged, he took in whatever he was fed and liked practically everything. He not only survived but thrived like a fish in water of its chosen climate, until he knew nothing else but the classical European culture and tradition of

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Figure 8
An oil painting of Glugor House built in 1812 by David Brown, founder of the Penang Brown dynasty. One of Penang's architectural showpieces in the early years of the colony, it is depicted surrounded by the spice plantation where Ku Hung-ming's father worked and he and his elder brother were born and grew up. ("Prince of Wales Island: Glugor House and Spice Plantation," by Capt. Robert Smith (1787-1873). 69 cm x 100 cm. Penang Museum Collection)

9 He also ensured the boy would grow up a good Confucian by giving him the Chinese name Shou-yung 修身, without apparently worrying that he might end up a schizophrenic.

the educated that survived in Carlyle's Edinburgh. So much so that three years after leaving Europe Greek and Latin authors remained his favourite bedtime reading, and it was the voice of Ovid, rather than the equally sympathetic voices of Ch'ü Yuan 屈原 (c.346–278 BC) (the Roman poet's Chinese senior) or Chia Yi 竺誕 (200–168 BC) (his near contemporary), he invoked when Penang became for him a mind-sapping, humid Tomis. And instead of turning to the incarnated heroes of China's long history who had helped prop up many a tottering dynasty and rescue many a declining family, he expressed his hope for a better future for his newly born (and only) son by calling him Ascanius,9 more than a decade after abandoning his Troy on the Malaccan Straits. And, after having appointed himself the first Confucian missionary to spearhead the conversion of Christendom to the cult of the Celestial Empire, as if belatedly answering the call Leibniz had made some two and a half centuries earlier, he set out to enlighten his countrymen (more than eighty percent of whom were illiterate peasants) with English essays modelled on Arnold, flagged by Latin titles and supported by an assortment of classical and modern European references as if the significance of the Chinese topics under discussion might otherwise be lost. Such attributes, if they may be so regarded, being cherished by few, if any, in China at a time
when modernization was synonymous with Westernization (as indeed it still is), it is not hard to imagine the reaction in Penang’s immigrant community of self-made men, to whom has been attributed the folk-wisdom that “only aspiring clerks need learn to read and write.”

Ku Hung-ming made only an oblique reference to his reception in Penang by his clan headed by the above-mentioned cousin, Koh Seang Tat. There was apparently an instant and mutual disenchantment between host and foreign-garbed prodigal son when Ku arrived to pay his respects. Though foreign costume in Penang, even then, was not an uncommon sight, such attire could have made the boy the home-folk used to know hard to recognize. But the shock was rather the queueless head!—something they could not easily associate even with a face much changed by the passage of time. Writing many years later in an attack on his fellow returned-students now turned Republicans, Ku, who in the meantime had come to regard the queue as “the badge and insignia—almost a religious symbol, the flag of Chinese nationality” and had reinstated it, against the tide of the times, onto the back of his head, described himself on first returning from Europe as being “as silly and imbecile as the Republican Chinese today, choosing to remain an imitation Western man.” Though he was no doubt exaggerating here in order to heighten the effect of his attack, the reaction of his kin at home to the apparition that presented itself was quite understandable.

It would be too simplistic, however, to attribute their mutual disenchantment to mere appearances, or even symbols, important though they may have been. The alienation was caused, rather, by the cultural gap for which neither was prepared—a seemingly unbridgeable gulf between those for whom culture was at best an appendage and a scholar, for all the noise made about him, a mere hireling and one for whom everything this society held in disdain and rejected was his very life. The fact that his cousin and head of the clan happened to epitomize the philosophy and aspirations of the very society in which he was an exemplary success and in whose midst Ku now found himself, was unhelpful except, perhaps, as a contrast and a cautionary tale for one who had, in the eyes of his kin, gone astray.

Because of his addiction to “Liebfraumilch,” the German beverage then little known in Penang first recommended to him by a doctor for some now forgotten ailment, Koh Seang Tat was jocularly referred to by his friend Sir Archibald Anson, for many years Lieutenant-Governor of Penang, as “Tit for Tat,” a quip that soon won wide currency with the spread of Koh Seang Tat’s reputation as an opium farmer and philanthropist.10 It was Tat—as he was also popularly called—who, whatever his foibles, succeeded in restoring the family fortune of the Penang Kus. But for him, what little is known of his now celebrated great-grandfather, Koh Lay Huan, might have been forgotten, along with the tales of the accidental exploits of many an illiterate and reckless Chinese peasant migrant of the kind that he was.

For despite the claims of local historians and of Koh Lay Huan’s descend-

nants, the Ku family in Penang, like many Chinese migrant families in South-east Asia, was not quite what it was sometimes made to seem. In the case of the Penang Kus whose fortunes were closely linked with Captain Francis Light, who had claimed Penang for the British East India Company, eclipse came over the family with Light’s passing in 1794. The part played by Koh Kok Chye 翁國彰, the elder son of Koh Lay Huan and Tat’s grandfather, in Stamford Raffles’ occupation of Singapore failed to stem the family’s decline. Quite the contrary; so extravagant was this inveterate adventurer that he soon squandered what his father had managed to accumulate in the old man’s own lifetime, and Kok Chye, on whom the welfare of the family had come to depend, was obliged, through impecuniosity as much as questionable dealings, to retreat with his young brother, Ku Hung-ming’s grandfather Koh Leong Tee 翁龍池, to the family’s old haunts and pre-Penang base in Kedah. There they remained in relative obscurity, though unchecked in recklessness, until they thought it best to remove themselves once more, this time back to the off-shore island on the approach, to claim his rightful seat, of the Sultan of Kedah, in whose dethronement the Kohs, buccaneering busybodies of those shores that they were, had apparently played a compromising role. This second crossing by the family over the narrow stretch of water separating Penang from what later became known as Province Wellesley was to prove as significant and decisive as the adventure undertaken by the founder of the original Penang Ku family some fifty years earlier—due, unknown to anyone in the hastily organized party of exodus, to a child in their midst.

Born in 1833, Tat was at that time even younger than Ku was when he went to Scotland. He was the first in the family to have some education, which, though rudimentary, had been denied to the two generations of his family before him, not so much through lack of opportunity as through not needing it—hence the folk-wisdom referred to above. He became the first of his clan to attend that venerable institution of the colony, the Free School, the earliest English school to be founded in the Straits Settlements. Though no scholar, even by the local standards of the time, he soon become the best-known benefactor of his alma mater, having a large wing of the school as well as scholarships named after him. The family had, in the meanwhile, renewed its contact with those who mattered most on the island who had not forgotten the pioneering goodwill and assistance the founding-father Koh had offered the British in the difficult early days of the colony. Even though by this time many other Chinese had replaced the Kohs in usefulness and governmental favour, the family was not overlooked when suitable opportunities occurred. Tat’s father, Koh Teng Choon 翁登春, profited by being appointed a law-court interpreter, more for old time’s sake than for his
formal qualifications—for of these he had none, except a speaking knowledge of Malay and the Amoy dialect as spoken by the majority of Chinese immigrants on the island. This post, though the lowest government-gazetted position, was the only one in government service then available to Chinese. The Kohs were among the first to profit from this lowly-sounding but strategically important post in the community, and many after them managed to make something for themselves out of it.¹¹

No one made better use of this post than did Tat when, without finishing school, he succeeded his father in that position. Superior to most occupants of the position in his ‘academic’ qualifications as well as in his use of the extended function of his office as an unofficial intermediary between the government and the Chinese immigrant community, Tat did his best to maximize his community role among his compatriots, thereby strengthening his usefulness to the government for whom the Chinese immigrants played a unique role in the colony’s well-being and prosperity. So successfully did he make this otherwise insignificant post the means to an end that he emerged in no time as Penang’s leading opium-farmer and the unrivalled leader of the Chinese community there, with power and influence that far exceeded that of the then government-appointed ‘Captain China’, a sister of one of whom he married.

Opium-farming yielded Tat wealth none of his ancestors would have dared to dream about, and with it came power and influence not only in Penang but throughout the whole of the Straits Settlements. When a Singapore opium-farm was opened to bidding, the governor there, a family friend, came down in his favour against local tenderers. This success was soon followed by another, which extended his operations to Hong Kong. As skillful and shrewd in business as he was in government service, he brought these qualities as well as foresight to his investment in community goodwill, maximizing the return on every penny he spent on public works and other charities. The main building that bore his name at his old school, to which anyone in Penang aspiring to respectability sent his sons, was superseded in popular fame by many others. Most conspicuous is probably the fountain with cattle trough at Balik Palau, his estate where he entertained a succession of governors and other notables. Though some fifteen miles outside Georgetown, the fountain was renowned throughout the island. No-one passing through that busy intersection missed the monument, nor the fountain outside the Town Hall in the island’s capital, and all sang in praise of their donor.

Tat’s fame and prestige reached dizzy heights on the occasion of the visit of the Duke of Edinburgh to Penang in 1869. Of all the places of accommodation, including Government House, available for his reception, Tat’s mansion on Leith Street was chosen. It served, during his sojourn on the island, as His Royal Highness’ official residence where he entertained dignitaries at formal dinner parties and receptions, and was allowed by the Duke to be known henceforth as Edinburgh House, in acknowledgment of the

¹¹ The Chief Minister of Singapore before Lee Kuan-yu came to power rose from just such a humble position.

Figure 10
Recording headstone inscriptions in the cemetery
See part V below (to appear in the next issue of this journal).

Ma Chien-chung, Shib-k’o-tsan chi-hsing.

Anson, Others and myself.

Wu Lien-te, of Manchurian plague fame, himself a scholar at Emmanuel, Cambridge, regarded Koh Kheng-seng as "even more brilliant than Ku Hung-ming"—whose admirer he was. See Wu Lien-te, Plague fighter: the autobiography of a modern Chinese physician (Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1959).

Ma Chien-chung was among the international notables passing through Penang who called on Tat to pay his respects. Though he made no mention whatever of Ku Hung-ming, who considered meeting him on this same trip the most momentous occurrence in his life, Ma recorded in his diary his impressions of his visit to Ku’s cousin, describing Tat as coarse and ignorant, a judgement apparently shared by Tat’s friend Sir Archibald Anson as well as Sir Frank Swettenham, to whom Tat was simply an uncouth bore. Anson, who chaperoned Tat in Europe during his round-the-world tour in 1874, mentions in his tactful memoirs that all Tat was interested in when visiting St. Peter’s in the Vatican were its measurements and cost of construction, reflecting a rather curious business-mind unusual amongst tour-a-day sightseers. Few in the Chinese immigrant community would have understood the meaning and nuances of the remarks made by Ma, Swettenham or Anson had their attention been drawn to them. They nevertheless illustrate the gulf which Ku Hung-ming had to cross to gain acceptance. He opted instead to take the way of Joubert, the French thinker whose acquaintance he had undoubtedly made through Arnold, to “accustom mankind to pleasures which depend neither upon the bodily appetites nor upon money, by giving them a taste for things of the mind,” and left for Foochow.

Thus was Ku Hung-ming mercifully spared having to witness the full cycle of destiny that would soon overtake his seemingly invincible cousin when, according to a third-generation descendant of Tat’s own brother, his grandson Koh Sin Hock, whose equally long reign as head of the clan was also not free from blemish, Tat, not content with appropriating to himself the next best burial plot after that of their founder, over which he erected a similar pavilion, had tempted providence by having a pool dug in front of it to collect all the nearby streams, as so many sources of good luck. Misfortune, instead, struck when his long reign as clan head came to an end with his death: he was buried with a tombstone having an incomplete inscription; his descendants were dogged by insanity and other ill-luck; and the brilliant promise displayed by his grandson Koh Kheng-seng, a Foundation Scholar of St John’s College, Cambridge, went unfulfilled when he died a displaced person. All this left not a single one of the thirty-eight members of his immediate family that had surrounded him on the occasion of his seventieth birthday celebration as recently as 1902 to tend his grave or repair the once imposing pavilion, now reduced to ruin over his burial mound.
Ku does not seem to have been even aware of this untoward turn of events, and so could continue to refer to himself with some conviction and pride as “a penniless lad with a long pedigree,”—not so much to advertise his poverty as to glorify the family line which Tat had helped to prolong and, in the eyes of the immigrant society at large, make illustrious.

II

Foochow, Ku’s next port of call, was where his elder brother Ku Hung-te had been since Ku was six years old, and whither the younger boy had made a special trip to farewell his brother before being taken to Scotland some ten years earlier. Born in 1843, the year after the Nanking Treaty that concluded the First Opium War, Hung-te was fourteen years older than Hung-ming, born during the Second, and was looked up to by his younger brother as a kind of surrogate father—a close bond not uncommon in China when, as in this case, siblings were widely separated in age and one or both parents had died when younger children were still in need of parental care. But though Hung-te left Penang for Foochow to earn his living before he was twenty-one and only saw his small brother when he went back to Penang on infrequent home leave, Ku Hung-ming’s attachment to his elder brother grew rather than diminished with the years. His concern for his brother’s welfare, when he himself was deep in perennial penury and barely able to eke out a living, resembled rather that of a filial son towards his father.

Foochow would undoubtedly have been Ku’s destination as he set sail from Scotland, and his experiences in Penang would only have hastened his journey thither. But whatever he may have expected of their reunion, Ku could not have anticipated the events that awaited him, which, though they took place in Foochow, were of national and international significance with personal ramifications for them both. One of these concerned the status of the so-called Anglo-Chinese in which Ku Hung-te unwittingly played a central role; the other was the Wu-shih-shan incident, in which Ku Hung-ming made himself prominent just as the whole matter was virtually settled. The first would end in Hung-te’s displacement from the home and business he had built up over two decades, while the second was to serve as a trial run for his younger brother in his attempt at “becoming once again a Chinaman.”

Hung-te had started his working life when very young. After spending some years, like his cousins and his younger brother after him, at Penang’s Free School where he acquired a good command of English, he served an apprenticeship presumably in the shipping-agency firm of the Brown family, at one of whose plantations, Sungei Nibong, his father Koh Chee Hoon worked. It was most likely through Brown business connections that Hung-te, whose family originated in the Amoy district, went to set up a similar business in Foochow in the northern part of Fukien province, with whose
inhabitants southerners from Amoy-dialect districts entertained, for various reasons, a mutual antipathy that occasionally surfaced as hostility among emigrants from the two districts in British and other colonies.

Together with Amoy, Foochow was one of the two Fukien ports out of five along the China coast opened to foreign trade by the Nanking Treaty of 1842. Provincial capital as well as the seat of the Viceroy of Fukien and Chekiang (the province immediately to the north), Foochow was the collection and distribution centre of the Min river system that drains the richer part of this otherwise impoverished province, and figured prominently in China’s domestic and foreign trade. It was one of three Chinese ports where the Portuguese had set up a trading-station some forty years prior to settling for Macao in 1557. For the British, the port’s added attraction was its vicinity to tea-producing districts whose yield in their heyday accounted for half of China’s total export trade. In securing the opening of Foochow, therefore, the British had every good reason to believe they had chosen a key point for their enterprises.

They were soon to be disappointed, however; Foochow’s performance fell so far below expectations—more so than at a number of other treaty ports—that there were even suggestions it should be abandoned or exchanged for another location. New tea-growing districts were, however, ‘discovered’
nearby before any such precipitous action was taken. Revived by the boom in the tea-trade that followed, the port was soon further enhanced by changes brought about by the Taiping rebels, who, having ravaged the middle Yangtze, moved downstream and overran the rich seaboard provinces to the north, diverting the traditional trade from rebel-occupied outlets to Foochow which, after some false alarms, escaped the fate that had befallen cities and towns in the central and south-western provinces. It was in the wake of this fortuitous upheaval wrought by the Taipings that Ku Hung-te made his first appearance in Foochow.

1864, the year of his arrival, was otherwise of no particular significance, except, perhaps, for the fact that following the Peking Convention (which had concluded the Second Opium War) four years earlier, Foochow, together with other southern treaty-ports such as Amoy, Canton and Swatow, had become a collection-point for impoverished peasants and surplus town-dwellers in their exodus as China's first-ever sanctioned emigrants to the lands of the 'Southern Ocean', among which Penang was a favoured destination, an exodus which reached a new height at about the time Ku Hung-te chose to venture in the opposite direction to that taken by his great-grandfather nearly a century earlier. For Hung-ming, the six-year-old brother marooned on a spice plantation, Foochow would from now on begin to replace the ancestral home near Amoy whose location had become vaguer with the passing of the years until no-one in the whole Penang Ku clan—even its head—knew for certain where their founder had originated; it become the chief source of fresh, if incoherent, rumours from 'the mountain of the Tang唐山 conjuring up in the mind's eye of the child the colourful and often confusing and contradictory pictures that constituted 'China'. Ku Hung-te's success in establishing a foothold on the bank of the River Min thus came to exercise an unforeseeable influence on his younger brother in what the latter described as his "rebirth" as a Chinese.

One can hardly, however, speak of Ku Hung-te's move to Foochow in remotely the same terms as one might, for instance, of Jardine and Matheson, foremost among the British traders who had flocked there to profit from the

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**Figure 13**

*The Fooksang, a hybrid sail and steam tea-clipper commissioned by the Indo China Steam Navigation Company, a subsidiary of Jardine, Matheson & Co., soon after its formation in 1881. Sails were retained on these vessels, which continued to serve the tea trade into the early years of the twentieth century, to ensure the ship could still make headway if her power failed through poor-quality coal. (Source: Maggie Keswick, ed., The thistle and the jade [London: Octopus Books, 1982]*)
new trading opportunities, and in so doing helped bring into play the tea-clippers in their last glory. The colourful, magical sails of these vessels billowing in the wind would undoubtedly have stirred the quixotic imagination of Ku Hung-ming, unfurling before him the long and twisted chain of events that had marked China’s steady decline since the demise of the ‘Great Ships of Zayton’, rulers of the waves until the middle of the fourteenth century. The sense of humiliation thus engendered might have been what drove Ku to his habit of charging against whatever windmills happened to appear on his horizon.

Unlike his younger brother who remembered his Penang years as idyllic, left alone as he was to do little else but climb coconut trees, sing Malay songs, and indulge in harmless pranks, Ku Hung-te, the first-born, had more serious things to worry about. Growing up in languid economic times on the island which had lost its trade to Singapore (following the British acquisition of the latter), Penang, the oldest of the three constituent territories and capital of the Straits Settlements, was reduced to being nothing but a spice plantation. The precariousness of its economic base soon became evident in the crop failure of 1846 followed by an even greater one in 1860,\(^\text{17}\) four years before Ku Hung-te became the first of the family’s Penang clan to venture to seek a living in the land from which his great-grandfather had illegally absconded to escape poverty. That he should have headed towards that very land about which he knew nothing but which so many, for the same economic reason, had been obliged to abandon, suggests that he was not doing as well in Penang as might be expected of someone with all his local connections.

If Ku Hung-te made the headway he did in Foochow, it was due more to his British-subject status than to the particular time he chose to take the plunge and go to China. To be recognized by the Chinese authorities as

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a non-Chinese British subject had many tangible benefits, by far the most important being freedom from the Chinese judicial system—and the imprisonment and torture that went with it. As a businessman Ku Hung-te had an important added benefit: exemption from obnoxious exactions, the worst and best-known of these at that time going by the name of likin, a levy of one-tenth of one percent on goods of any kind transported between any two points local authorities thought fit to nominate, on land and over water.

Also known as a transit due, this levy first came into operation in 1853 at a small but important junction near where the Grand Canal crosses the Yangtze. It was a brilliant invention by a local official of Yangchow prefecture, and was designed to help finance the suppression of the Taiping rebels, whose devastation of the greater parts of southern and central China had brought the government to unprecedented financial straits.\textsuperscript{18} So successful did this impost turn out to be, not only for the imperial treasury in Peking but for local governments—from viceroy down to yamen-runners at a district level—that it soon spread to most parts of the country, including areas not directly affected by the rebellion, and became a scourge for all those engaged in trade.

The worst feature of the levy was undoubtedly its ad hoc and unregulated nature, since not only did the assessment of the value of goods depend entirely on the arbitrary dictates of the local official in charge, but collection-barriers proliferated, in some districts separated by only a few miles. According to one study, five percent was added to the cost of goods moved within a province and as much as twenty percent for goods crossing provincial boundaries. The burden of this levy on the populace at large, and on commerce in particular, may be judged by the fact that though the revenue from this source reaching the imperial treasury represented only thirty to forty percent of the actual collection, it nevertheless amounted to between one-fifth and one-sixth of the total revenue of the central government—not taking into account the cost of greasing the palms of officials at various levels, a practice essential to ensuring smoothness and speed in passing the barriers. This fact may help to explain, on the one hand, the unpopularity of this tax with foreigners and Chinese alike, and on the other, the strong opposition, particularly from local authorities, to its abolition. It was largely due to that opposition that compromises reached for its abolition, containing concessions favouring the imperial treasury and enshrined in more than one international treaty, were repeatedly aborted, so that this temporary exaction succeeded in surviving the Taiping rebellion (for whose suppression it was invented) for a further sixty-five years.

\textsuperscript{18} For a comprehensive treatment of this subject see Lo Yu-tung, Chung-kuo li-chin shih [A history of likin in China] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1936).
With import and export duties regulated by the Nanking and various subsequent treaties at a uniform rate of five percent *ad valorem*, foreign traders were exempted from further levies by paying a transit surtax of 2.5 percent (plus an indeterminate sum for palm-greasing). Being recognized by the Chinese authorities as a British subject, Ku Hung-te, like other returned Chinese of the same status, enjoyed the immunity enjoyed by all treaty-power traders, to the resentment not so much of the Chinese merchants, whose disadvantages as a result of this unequal treatment were more apparent than real since the paths of the two rarely crossed, but of local officials whose pockets were directly affected. So, while accepting with resignation the exemption of ‘foreign devils’ from this levy, local officials refused to tolerate ‘pseudo foreign devils’ (foreign-naturalized Chinese), whose physiognomy was hardly different from theirs, getting away with the same immunity.

All kinds of difficulties were therefore put in the way of these Anglo-Chinese merchants aimed at getting rid of them. Persecution intensified over time, and many unfortunate traders were imprisoned and subjected to cruel treatment on the slightest technical pretext. Ku Hung-te was lucky to escape anything worse than monetary loss, aided by not having to confront the *likin* officials in person and even more by not living in his ancestral district of Amoy. In Foochow, though he looked Chinese, he spoke a different dialect and was treated as at least a semi-foreigner, thereby avoiding the familiarity-bred contempt that the Chinese usually reserved for their own people. This hatred was well illustrated by a much publicized case involving a Singaporean of Amoy migrant descent who was then working as an interpreter at the British Consulate in Amoy. For his audacity in claiming British protection, the otherwise innocent fellow was beaten to death in the local government *yamen*, while the British Amoy Consul was in another room of the very same building protesting against his ill-treatment on an earlier occasion. And to
drive the point home, the mangled corpse was dumped at the door of the British consulate for the Consul to find on his return.  

As the longest-resident British-protected subject in Foochow, who had by that time expanded his business to become a general merchant and was one of the chief beneficiaries of likin exemption, Ku Hung-te thus became one of Tso Tsung-t'ang's earliest targets when this formidable soldier-official took up the reins as Viceroy of Fukien and Chekiang at Foochow. Destroyer of the last of the Taipings in the south and of remnants of the Nien rebels in the north, who could soon boast of having reduced the largely Moslem population of the north-western provinces by twenty-four million in an eight-year suppression campaign against Mohammedan rebels, Tso Tsung-t'ang had had too much experience of his unruly compatriots to be bothered by a handful of 'pseudo foreign devils'. He lost no time in ridding Foochow officialdom of irritating thorns of the kind represented by Ku Hung-te and his fellow merchants. On his orders, none of these Chinese renegades' goods were to be allowed to pass through likin barriers without dues being paid in full. Battle was thus joined over what was to be a test case, a battle quite out of proportion to the sums of money involved.

It was, of course, not merely a question of money, nor even of principle, but one of 'face', and not just any face but that of China's greatest living hero. Neither side could afford or was prepared to compromise. So the battle dragged on long after Tso Tsung-t'ang had left Foochow, until suddenly, in its seventh year, the new Viceroy, tired of the persistent jabbering of the British Consul on behalf of two British-protected subjects, decided to bring an end to the squabble and refund the whole sum the likin office had forced out of Ku Hung-te and his fellow merchant. The Foochow authorities, however, took pains to point out to the British Consul that the refund came not from the Chinese government but from the pockets of individual yamen officials, and there was naturally no question of the admission of any wrongdoing on their part. The refund the claimants received was correct down to a fraction of a farthing. Ku Hung-te's share amounted to 1244 taels, 5 mace, 6 candareens, 4 baou and 2 sze, roughly approximating £414. 6. 0, the gross value of the goods for which this sum had been exacted having been judged to have been some £10,000 short of half a million pounds over a period of seven years.

The refund thus effected after such protracted wrangling, in which the best diplomatic language could barely hide the underlying bitterness, was hardly a satisfactory settlement. Ku Hung-te was made to realize soon enough that the Chinese government was bent on seeing the back of the likes of him. A relentless and simultaneous three-pronged attack was launched by the Chinese government: Ku Hung-te was told, through the British Consul, by the Grain Taotai in charge of local foreign affairs that, according to the report of special investigators sent to the ancestral home of the Penang Kus in Hailcheng county, just across the narrow water from the island of Amoy, the names of the Ku great-grandfather and his descendants (whose names these were was not specified, nor whether they included those born in Penang)
were still inscribed in the local register; moreover, the Kus, when they had left their ancestral home, had failed to report their (illegal) change of domicile as required by law. He hinted darkly that Hung-te's ancestor had left the country when such a movement was explicitly forbidden by imperial edict, though he refrained from mentioning that such a crime was punishable by death. He merely stressed that, with facts as they stood, no matter how long the Kus might have allowed themselves to be removed from His Imperial Chinese Majesty's grace and protection, they and their descendants would remain forever Chinese subjects no matter where they happened to be born—thus turning the very basis for Britain's recognition of place of birth as a qualification for the status of British subject on its head.

If it be argued that a Chinese by birth becomes British by the mere fact of his having been born in a British port (said the Grain Taotai, opening his second line of attack), I would ask what, then, are English children born this year in Chinese ports, as often happens? It would be absurd to say that because they are so born they are therefore Chinese subjects.  

So irrefutable did the Chinese regard this argument that it was repeated by ministers of the Tsung-li Yamen, who conveniently ignored the all-important extraterritoriality clause in what the Chinese considered 'unequal treaties', to the British Minister in Peking some years later in a case involving a certain Wang Ju-yu, another Penang-born Chinese like Ku Hung-te, except that he had been foolish enough to confront the likin officials by acting as an agent for British and American traders, and ended up languishing in the Chinkiang jail accused of having “assumed a false identity” by claiming to be a British-protected subject.

Not content with their strongest argument so far, the Chinese sought to make short shift of their undesirable compatriots in the third prong of their attack by invoking the ‘costume’ stipulation in the so-called Alcock Notification which the then British Minister in Peking had concluded in 1868 with the Chinese government. According to this, British subjects of Chinese race, in order to receive British protection, were required to discard Chinese costume for foreign dress to distinguish themselves from local Chinese while in China. The Chinese government would waive all claims over those individuals who complied with this stipulation and treat them as British subjects.

Alcock, in devising this condition, was anticipating the possible complication of an influx of emigrants, sanctioned by the Peking Convention, returning to China for business or other reasons, without, apparently, pausing to reason that because of the requirement that two previous generations be British-born, none of these emigrants would be entitled to be classified as British subjects and enjoy British protection until the third generation, well into the twentieth century. Thus, far from being an instrument to facilitate Sino-British relations, the Alcock Notification created endless wrangling over the so-called Anglo-Chinese question, making it one of the most tiresome preoccupations that dogged the China desk of the Foreign Office until well into this century.
Ku Hung-te, like most of his fellow Anglo-Chinese, treated the matter with surprising frivolity, to his eventual great cost. The arguments he put forward to justify his aversion to the costume stipulation were jejune and irrelevant. His suggestion, with which he was apparently greatly pleased, that they should be allowed to don Chinese attire from Ming times (as did the Taipings) if the Chinese government continued to insist on compliance with the Alcock stipulation—a suggestion the Foreign Office dismissed as unhelpful and provocative—was cowardly and childish, trying as he was to play the hero sheltering behind the British shield to mock at the Chinese, though it might have won him some applause from fellow patriots; it may have been the likes of these Dr Johnson had in mind when he made that well-worn but still pertinent remark, “patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel,” which Ku Hung-ming was to quote with increasing frequency in his later years. In the meanwhile, Ku Hung-te reaped the just reward for his insolence and stupidity: the Chinese government simply refused to handle any of his transactions requiring its sanction and approval; intercessions on his behalf by the British Consul were rejected with the comment that Ku Hung-te should go to their office to apply for whatever he wanted, like any other Chinese. The enforcement of this work-to-rule procedure had the inevitable consequence of obliging him to give up everything he had laboriously built up in Foochow for the benefit of his family and, as he added to the British Consul, his younger brother, who was then “in England in English dress, receiving a thorough English education.”

Hung-te went on to try his luck at a number of other ports but never recovered from his Foochow débâcle and finally died a broken man at Hoihow (Hai-k’ou 河口) on Hainan island, a place of exile in earlier times for second-degree ‘criminals’ where the T’ang statesman, Li Te-yü 李德裕 perished but the great Sung poet Su Tung-po 蘇東坡 just managed to survive. The humidity of the place would no doubt have reminded Hung-te of his birthplace, Penang, where his body was subsequently interred with, apparently, age-old Chinese pomp and ceremony.

Ku Hung-ming was not with his brother when he died, nor did he return to Penang for his burial in the Ku clan cemetery. He certainly left no record of his feelings on Hung-te’s conduct in the affair that led to his departure from Foochow. Knowing, as we now do, however, what was becoming his increasing preoccupation at that time, one cannot but wonder whether he did not feel divided loyalty and discomfort at having to live with a compromise so ill-suited to his character and convictions. He was no doubt greatly relieved, therefore, when the Wu-shih-shan affair, which had dragged on for decades and begun to ferment in the previous few years, should have come to a climax as he set foot on the Chinese soil for the first time since leaving Scotland. It enabled him to become himself again and give vent unambiguously to his thoughts and emotions as he took his first steps along the path of the foolish saint and saintly fool celebrated by Turgenev in his poème-en-prose “Threshold” the year before Ku left Europe for home, an act overseas Chinese youth from South-east Asia, sons and daughters of migrants...
Threshold (A Dream)

I see an immense building . . .
At its front is a narrow door and beyond it gloomy darkness.
Before the high threshold stands a girl . . ., a Russian girl.
The pitch darkness exudes a frost, and a slow muffled voice issues from the depths with an icy blast:
"You who wish to cross this threshold, do you know what awaits you?"
"I know," the girl replies.
"Cold, hunger, hatred, ridicule, contempt, resentment, prison, sickness, and death itself."
"I know."
"Complete alienation, loneliness?"
"I know. I am ready. I will endure all suffering, all blows."
"Not only from enemies, but also from relatives and friends?"
"Yes, from them, too."
"Good. Are you ready to make sacrifices?"
"Yes."
"To make sacrifices anonymously? You will die, and no-one, no-one will even know whose memory to honour! . . ."  I need neither gratitude nor pity. I don't need a name."
"Are you ready to commit crimes?"
The girl nodded her head. "I am ready to commit crimes."
The voice did not resume its questioning immediately.
"Do you know," it finally asked, "that you might regret what you believe in now; do you understand that you may be betrayed, and at one stroke your young life ruined?"
"I know this. All the same, I want to enter."
The girl crosses the threshold and a heavy curtain falls behind her.
"Fool!" comes a voice from behind.
"Saint!" answers a voice from elsewhere.

I am grateful to Bobo Lo for his assistance in rendering the aforegoing into English from the original Russian. (Turgenev's collected works, 12 vols [Moscow: Government Publishers of Literary Classics, 1956], vol.8, Tales and stories 1871–1883, Poèmes-en-prose.) He is not responsible, however, for alterations made according to what is remembered of a Chinese version that moved a school-boy so long ago.

Lo Hui-min

Division of Pacific and Asian History
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies
Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200

APPENDIX

Letter from C. P. FitzGerald, 25 October 1988

25 October 1988
4 St Pauls street
Randwick NSW 2031

Dear Hui-min,

Thank you very much for sending me a copy of Chapter 1 of your Life of Ku Hung-ming. At first I was told you'd known him briefly in Peking in 1925. He used to spend weekends—perhaps longer—at one of the monasteries there. That was where I came to know him and enjoy his stimulating company. But I am sorry that I cannot remember any bon mots!

I was most interested to see that he was at Edinburgh University in the 70s of last century. So was my father! He was a medical student, enrolled in 1871 and probably graduated in 77 or 78 with an MD.

So he and Ku must have been contemporaries. My father never mentioned knowing a Chinese fellow student—although this must then have been rare, if not unique. That is a pity! Of course medical students were, then as now, rather cliquey and, I suspect, did not mix much with the arts crowd.

As it is far too late to ask my father about it, he died in 1939 on the eve of the 2nd War."

(The above reads in part: “As I have told you I knew him [Ku Hung-ming] slightly in Peking in 1925. He used to spend weekends—or perhaps longer—at one of the monasteries there. That was where I came to know him and enjoy his stimulating company. But I am sorry that I cannot remember any bon mots!"

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Alas, it is far too late to ask my father about it. He died in 1939 on the eve of the 2nd War.”)

[The continuation of this article will appear in East Asian History 7. —Ed.]