

BEST

Note from an Old Friend

Veteran journalist Osman C.H. Tseng has had a front-row seat to many of the crucial events that have shaped modern Taiwan and thrust it into the global spotlight. Over the years, he has been a sharp-eyed observer of Taiwan's economic coming of age and its transformation from authoritarian rule to a vibrant democracy. In his autobiography *A Self-Made Man*, he traces the compelling story of his own journalistic career and offers his keen observations of key political figures and the policies they put in place.

His personal story is an unlikely one. Born into a poor farming family in China's Hubei province, he joined Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist (Kuomintang) army as a teenager, following it to Taiwan as the mainland fell to advancing Communist forces. He arrived at the port of Kaohsiung with only a straw mattress and two sets of worn-out army fatigues.

During his nearly two decades in the army, he taught himself English starting with the ABCs and aided by little more than a battered Chinese-English dictionary and a deep well of determination. That ultimately paid off as he qualified as an army interpreter and later, after the conclusion of his military service, landed an entry-level reporting job with the English language daily newspaper, the *China Post*.

This is where he began to acquire the fundamental journalistic skills of gathering facts, ensuring accuracy, and making careful observations of events. His career path led him to the helm of one of

Taiwan's foremost business news organizations, the China Economic News Service, where he also crafted editorials and commentaries.

Fittingly, his career took him back to the China Post once again, where he continued to hone his skills as an opinion writer. His widely read commentaries for these two media organizations ranged from the ambitious democratic reforms of Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan's first popularly elected president, to the policy chaos under his successor, Chen Shui-bian, eventually jailed for corruption.

A Self-Made Man will be of interest to journalists and non-journalists alike. Its publication is particularly timely in an era of pervasive accusations of "fake news" that have undermined the traditional respect for the profession of journalism in the public eye. Hopefully, this account of how a persistent individual overcame considerable odds to follow a passion for journalism will contribute to restoring some of that public trust.

William Kazer

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Introduction

I was a little bit hesitant at first to choose the term A Self-Made Man for the title of this book--my autobiography. A self-made man generally refers to an individual who rises to success from humble origins through his efforts. I was hesitant because I was not sure how to define success. Nor was I sure about how much success was required to deem someone a successful person. In my case, I wondered whether my modest accomplishments could be considered a successful life. I am still unsure about that. On reflection, I chose to call my autobiography the story of A Self-Made Man, leaving the above question to the readers to judge after they finish my account.

I think I do meet the other element of being a self-made man: rising from humble origins. I was born in 1933 into a farming family in a small Chinese village beside the Yangtze River. My parents owned a small farm that allowed them to grow just enough to feed our family members. Both of my parents were uneducated. They could not read or write.

I received only six years of village school education in my life. Unlike primary schools in the educational system in the bigger cities, those village institutions taught only Chinese. No other subjects, like math or a foreign language, were part of the curriculum. But even this limited formal education was disrupted by the disastrous Yangtze River floods in 1947. Due to the significant damage from the flooding, my parents could no longer afford to continue funding my schooling. Without their financial support, I finally chose to join the army despite

my young age. Although soldiers were poorly paid at the time, they at least had enough to eat.

I was only 16 years old when I came to Taiwan with the military in mid-1949. This was about the time Chiang Kai-shek and his government and military forces retreated to the island following the fall of the mainland to the communists. I remember when I disembarked from a ship in the southern port of Kaohsiung, my only personal belongings were a straw mattress and two sets of worn-out army fatigues.

In Taiwan, I served the next 18 years in grassroots infantry companies, rising from private to captain. I used my free time in the military to study English, which is not my native tongue. I started learning the ABCs at the age of 20.

I studied English the hard way. In the first 10 years or so of my studies, I pressed ahead with my task in army bunkers, barracks, or in the field. I spent weekends and all other available time studying this difficult language. The only learning aid I had was a Chinese-English dictionary.

Yet I had never anticipated that my rudimentary style of learning would be so fruitful that it enabled me to pass a crucial test 13 years later, allowing me to join an English-language newspaper as a reporter. At this point, I was 33 years old.

What I also never imagined was that English would become a language tool for me to practice journalism for the next half-century. I wrote news reports, features, commentaries, and editorials in English. And after I retired from the journalism profession, I also used this

acquired language to write my autobiography as well as a book about former President Chen Shui-bian during his eight years in office.

Furthermore, I never expected that I would be able to achieve the status of a professional journalist, given my lack of formal education and journalism training. It was very fortunate for me that I was able to climb up the ladder of journalism. During my decades-long career in this field, I played various key roles from reporter to city editor, editor-in-chief, and editorial writer.

The successes of my effort to study English and my striving to become a professional journalist and writer were made possible, simply put, by hard work, perseverance, and a strong passion for journalism and English writing.

The story of *A Self-Made Man*, Osman C.H. Tseng, is a chronicle of my life and career. It recounts important events in my life. The story consists of 10 chapters, as set out below.

Chapter 1

Falling Leaves Return to Their Roots

Paying Tribute to My Late Parents

In 2017, I brought my family to visit my hometown Liubutou -- a small village sitting beside the Yangtze River in Hong City in the Chinese province of Hubei. This was the second time I had visited my birthplace since I left for Taiwan as a teenage soldier more than six decades ago. My previous visit was in 1992, without my family accompanying me. Political and personal reasons prevented me from visiting my birthplace more often all of those years.

The main purpose of this trip was to honor my late mother and father, using the occasion of an extended Tomb-Sweeping Day, a traditional Chinese holiday that fell on April 4 that year.

The visit allowed me to glean more information about my ancestral roots and recall the days of my youth. It also gave me a chance to personally view some of the mainland's dramatic economic development at the local and national levels. In this chapter "Falling Leaves Return to Their Roots," I will describe these and other related events.

My wife Lei Yen-ming, daughter Wen-yi, and I left Taipei for Liubutou on March 30, four days ahead of the holiday. We took a morning China Eastern Airlines flight from Taipei Taoyuan International Airport to Hong Kong. By the time we arrived in the city--a former British colony and now a special administrative region

of China -- it was well into the afternoon. We made only a brief stopover there, before riding a bus to the neighboring city of Shenzhen for the night, as scheduled.

Regrettably, our schedule was tight, and we couldn't stay in Shenzhen for a longer look around this modern Chinese city. Shenzhen owed its present-day prosperity to its status as one of China's first Special Economic Zones--a bold social experiment launched in 1979, with the blessing of reformist leader Deng Xiaoping.

The next day we three took a high-speed rail from Shenzhen to Wuhan, where we met with my son Tseng Wen-chieh, as previously planned. Wen-chieh, a software engineer at a Taiwan technology company, had to go to work on weekdays. So he came to join us in Wuhan two days later on April 1 at the start of the Tomb Sweeping Festival. Also known as the Qingming Festival, the holiday is observed in both Taiwan and the Chinese mainland.

Traditionally, people on this occasion visit gravesites to pay tribute to their ancestors or their dead relatives. There, they sweep the tomb, offer sacrifices and burn "spirit banknotes" in the hope that the dead are not lacking food and money. They also kowtow and say prayers before the tablets that are set up for the deceased.

Nowadays, with cremation more common than burial, however, many of the above-cited traditional rituals have been simplified, especially in cities. Tomb sweepers now mostly only present flowers at the resting place of their deceased relatives in performing the tomb-sweeping day ceremony.

The tomb-sweeping day rituals we followed in remembering my parents on that trip were a combination of both old and new. We

Chapter I
Falling Leaves Return to Their Roots

offered flowers and burned “banknotes” and incense at the gravesite of my parents.

As mentioned above, we made a brief stopover in Wuhan. During the stay, my family and I visited a number of scenic spots, including Wuhan University, East Lake, and the Wuhan Yangtze River Bridge. This bridge became a tourist attraction because it was where China’s revolutionary leader Mao Zedong staged his historic swim in the mighty Yangtze River in July 1966.

Besides Wuhan, we also took time out to travel to Beijing to see the massive capital, rich in historic attractions. The Beijing leg of our hometown journey came after we visited our Liubutou relatives and paid respects to our ancestors. Regrettably, Wen-chieh, my son, was unable to join us for that leg. He flew back to Taipei in the afternoon of April 4, because he had to get back to work the following day.

In Beijing, my wife, my daughter, and I made visits to the famous Great Wall, Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square, and the Temple of Heaven. We would have stayed in Beijing longer to see more famous places if only we had time.

Now I must return to our trip to Liubutou. The Liubutou journey and my reflections on it are the main subjects that I am going to discuss in more detail in this chapter: *Falling Leaves Return to Their Roots*.

Liubutou is a small farm village situated on the northwest bank of the Yangtze River, about 80 miles south of Wuhan. It is very close to the historically important Red Cliffs across the river. The Red Cliffs are the battlefield where Cao Cao, one of China’s most controversial politicians, was humiliatingly defeated in the year 208 AD by a

coalition of his arch-rivals Liu Bei and Sun Quan. Liu and Sun later founded the states of Shu Han and Eastern Wu respectively, heralding the tumultuous Three Kingdoms period of ancient China.

Liubutou now is under the jurisdiction of Honghu, a county-level city in Hubei province. The city took its name from the adjacent Hong Lake. Honghu is known for frequent flooding. This occurs during the summer months of the year when the Yangtze River often overflows its banks.

Years before Mao Zedong took control of the entire mainland and founded the People's Republic of China in 1949, Honghu City and its surrounding areas were a communist stronghold. The communists came to power after they toppled the beleaguered Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang and his armies retreated to Taiwan.

It is easy to see why Honghu became a communist stronghold. Left behind economically as a result of the frequent flooding, people in these areas were easily convinced by a catchy slogan of the communists: "help the poor turn rich."

Leaving Home in My Mid-Teens

I cited the above two events, the Yangtze River flooding and the communist revolution because they combined to play a role in my departure from home at such an early age.

Why was this the case? To begin with, the swollen Yangtze River in the summer of 1948 caused floods in my hometown and many other places along the river, resulting in extensive crop and property damage.