

Walking Down Memory Lane

grown-up foundlings retrace their steps and share their experience without biological parents

by Nicole Pun

These children detached from their parents at young ages have adopted new identity and made light of their lives without family warmth.

To Chris Atkins, the expression “blood is thicker than water” is something she could only imagine as she never really knew her parents.

“I want to know why they couldn’t keep me, why I was left alone,” said Ms Atkins, noting the first thing she would like to ask if she meet her parents.

Ms Atkins was abandoned on the steps of a tenement building in the resettlement area of Wong Tai Sin, Kowloon, during Christmas 1962. She was not yet 12 months old when she was found.

She spent her first Christmas night in hospital and then was sent to S.K.H. St. Christopher’s Home in Tai Po, an orphanage which took care of homeless children, on Boxing Day. After staying there a year, she was adopted by a family from the United Kingdom (UK).

She did not blame her parents for abandoning her. “The circumstances must have been very difficult. I had never been angry with them,” she said.

Being a social worker, she works for the adoption team from the local government in UK, which supports adopters and adopted children.

Although she has lived in the UK all her life, she regards Hong Kong as her spiritual home and herself a Hong Kong native.

“As I was born here, I should have the right to return if I want,” she said. She has a Hong Kong Identity Card, so she can return to Hong Kong anytime she wants.

She even brought her daughters to Hong Kong, hoping that they would become more aware of Hong Kong’s history and understand more about her home town.

She has visited Hong Kong five times to trace her lost history.

“I am curious about that part of my history. I look like a Chinese but I don’t know anything about my birth and my family,” she said. “Probably I am not going to know, but I will try the best I can.”



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COURTESY OF CHRIS ATKINS

In 2007, she got in touch with the adoption unit of the Social Welfare Department in Hong Kong which told her about the time and place she was found.

She revisited the Wong Tai Sin police station and she was referred to the police officer, Chan Miu-fong who took care of her when she was still a baby.

Ms Chan recalled, "She rested in my arms as a little baby. We hugged each other when we met again – she's all grown up."

Taking care of the baby was the first task for Ms Chan who had been out of the Police Training School for just a week. According to Ms Chan, she fed the baby milk and changed her diapers at the police station. Then, she took her to hospital for a physical check-up. The baby was then temporarily sent to S.K.H. St. Christopher's Home.

Nothing was heard from the parents despite government announcements in the media, so the Social Welfare Department went to court to seek guardianship of the baby. Ms Chan and seven other policewomen brought Chris Atkins and other babies with unknown identities to the court.

"We held the babies in our arms and went to court together. Each one of us carried a bag with a bottle of milk and diapers. We were just like a group of nannies," she recalled.

Noting that abandoned babies were common in those days, Ms Chan suggested that lack of birth control and poverty were the two major reasons why people gave up their children.

"Contraception was not common. Giving birth was like a natural duty," said Ms Chan, adding that the Family Planning Association was not well-established in the 1960s.

She continued, "People were poor and couldn't look after their babies. They hoped that they could be adopted and have a better living conditions, so they could grow healthily," she said.

Unlike Chris Atkins, Liu Kwok-leung was admitted to S.K.H. St. Christopher's Home at the age of seven and remembered clearly what happened to his family.

His mother passed away and his father was too busy at work. He recalled the scene when his father brought him to the children's home by bus: the other passengers stared at him as he was only wearing a pair of pants without top.

"I couldn't believe my first T-shirt was not bought by my family," he said. Someone at the children's home was shocked at this and gave him a T-shirt to wear.

"My dad just left me there and he went away. I cried for three nights when I first entered the Home," he said.

At the Home, Mr Liu received shelter and also inspiration for rugby, which is now his career.

1. Chris Atkins (left) and retired police officer Chan Miu-fong (right) met again after 45 years.
2. The photo taken in Wong Tai Sin police station the day Chris Atkins was found.
3. Chan Fuk-ping decided to quit his rugby career for his family.
4. Chan Fuk-ping and his wife met in S.K.H. St. Christopher's Home, with his son and daughter.
5. Liu Kwok-leung (bottom left) and Chan Fuk-ping (bottom middle) lived together in the S.K.H. St. Christopher's Home.
6. Liu Kwok-leung, fulfilled his career in rugby, is now a full-time rugby coach.

"Because of the Home, I learned rugby. Because of rugby, more people have heard of my name," said the supervisor of King's Park Sports Ground at his 29, affirming that he would probably have not played rugby if he had not lived in the children's home.

He picked up rugby through a notice on the Home's memo board when he was eight. Led by a person from the children's home, he could leave the premises on the weekend and play rugby with foreign kids every Sunday.

"We didn't know how to speak English. All we knew was to chase the ball and we looked forward to the hotdogs after each practice," he said with a grin.

He kept on practising and received a scholarship from the Hong Kong Rugby Football Union in Form Four. He received formal training as an elite youth member of the Hong Kong team and became a full-time rugby coach after he graduated from Form Five.

He has always described himself as a "wild kid". He recalled he used to play with his friends on the mountain near the Home after finishing his homework. They often sat on cardboard and slid down the slope.

"I can't believe how I had the courage to slide down that steep slope, which really could have been called a cliff!" he laughed.

His personality allowed him to disregard fear and smash right against



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COURTESY OF CHAN-FUK-PING



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COURTESY OF CHAN-FUK-PING

enemies in rugby court. "I enjoy the feeling of bumping into others. I am not afraid of coming up against stronger foreign players," he said.

His nickname, Fei Gou, meaning "fat dog" in Cantonese, echoes his wild personality.

Living in the same part of the Home and practising rugby with Mr Liu, Chan Fuk-ping served as a role model as well as a brother to Mr Liu. Apart from playing rugby, Mr Chan met his first love and lifelong partner in the children's home when he was 11.

"She brushed her teeth in the washroom on girls' floor right below the boys' floor. She looked up from the window and I looked down. The chemistry then sparked off," said Mr Chan, with a bashful smile, referring to his wife. "We kissed and held hands secretly in the Home during weekends."

He said they understand each other well as both of them lived in children's home and had a similar family background.

He lost his parents at the age of six. "My brother went down a manhole to catch frogs and my parents went to save him. They all died," he recalled. Together with his two other brothers, he was admitted to S.K.H. St. Christopher's Home.

Mr Chan was the first Chinese rugby player at the Hong Kong Rugby Sevens, which is an international rugby competition held in Hong Kong every year. He often went abroad for rugby competitions representing the Hong Kong team.

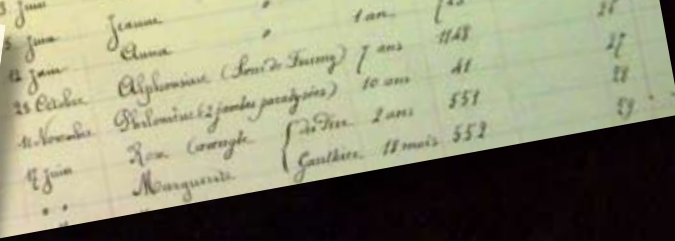
However, he decided to quit his amateur rugby career so as to take better care of his two children. He now works as a technician and cooks dinner for his family at night and spends the weekends with them.

As a father, Mr Chan said he wanted to give his love as much as possible to his kids. "As I lost my own parents, I hungered for parental love. Now, I want to give as much love as possible to my kids," he said while patting his four-year-old daughter in his arms. ▽



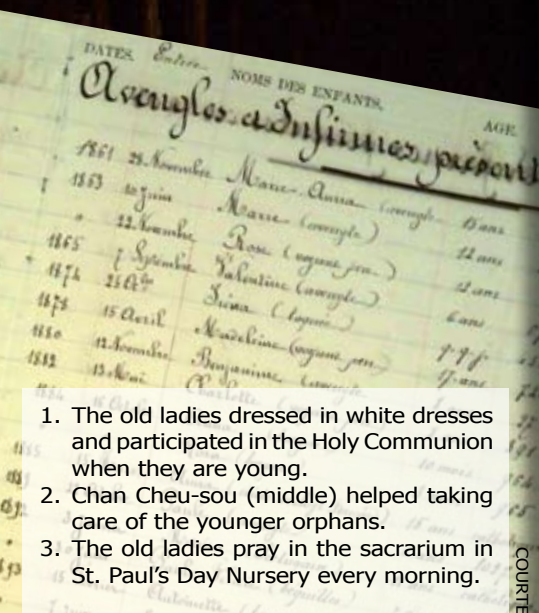
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COURTESY OF THE SISTERS OF ST PAUL DE CHARTRES

Record of orphans abandoned in Hong Kong in the 19th century from the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres. ▼



1. The old ladies dressed in white dresses and participated in the Holy Communion when they are young.
2. Chan Cheu-sou (middle) helped taking care of the younger orphans.
3. The old ladies pray in the sacrarium in St. Paul's Day Nursery every morning.

COURTESY OF THE SISTERS OF ST PAUL DE CHARTRES



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Shelter for the Homeless beyond History

Six ladies, who had undergone the hardships of wartime, lived a happy life at the orphanage for over half a century.

The ladies, each of who have different disabilities live at St. Paul's Day Nursery in Causeway Bay, which was once an orphanage before the Second World War. They have been living there since they were abandoned as children.

Leung Sai-kew, 85, is the oldest. She slipped through the edge of death during the Second World War.

On the evening of 4 April 1945, an emergency air-raid alarm rang. Sisters and children in the orphanage ran swiftly to the underground room.

"I saw a girl trapped under a pile of bricks when I passed by the laundry room," she recalled. She said she was too terrified to save her as she was with a blind girl. The trapped girl died.

Religious organisations were the main places that cared for abandoned babies and children, according to Susan Koo Sui-sang, who has been working for the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres in Hong Kong for over 30 years and is now the principal of St. Paul's Day Nursery.

"Orphans without names and identities were left in front of the entrance of the orphanage. Some of them were given away by parents who had financial problems," Sister Koo said.

"People despised females in the past. They regarded girls as loss-making goods at that time," she said. Therefore, most of the admitted orphans were girls, she said.

Sister Koo added: "No official procedure was followed at that time and no one cared because there were a lot of unwanted babies on the street."

The orphanage was built in 1916, founded by French nuns, the Sisters of St Paul de Chartres. Children learned reading, writing, sewing and religion. Some of them would be adopted by foreign families. When they grew up, they might leave the orphanage and get married.

The elder orphans took care of the younger ones. Chan Cheu-sou, 78, had close ties with some of the younger children. "One of the girls went to study abroad and she often writes to me," she said.

They were delegated different tasks such as sweeping the floor and sewing so as to kill time and earn a little pocket money. They often went on outings and the most distant one was a pilgrimage to Italy in 1993.

"This was the first time I travelled on a plane. I was scared to death," Ms Chan said.

Three of the elderly ladies went on the pilgrimage with some disabled, volunteers and doctors in an event organised by Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong.

In 1964, the Hong Kong Government opened a Children's Reception Centre and all private orphanages were then placed under the jurisdiction of the Social Welfare Department..

The orphanage was transformed into a day care centre and is now a day nursery. One of the floors in the nursery still serves as the hostel for these six old ladies who are unable to live on their own. ▼