

# Walking Down the Mountain Together: My Father's Legacy

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The heart of how we come to know ourselves is through our family of origin, the soil in which we are nourished. We are formed by the wisdom of our communities. Our knowledge *and* our wounds are generational. We become who we are from roots deep in the ground, in the water that courses through our capillaries, and in the warmth of the sun and air we breathe, as we thirst for abundant life.

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Their blood in my veins. DNA marking potentialities. I am the “spear” my parents send out into the world to fulfill their dreams, so they have said to me. Their dreams. My dreams. God’s dream for me.

I teach out of who I am and how I have been formed by those before and around me. I create. I curate. I convene.

My classroom is a physical meeting place or an online platform, a museum gallery or a public park, even the streets of the city. My students are urban-dwellers, ministry leaders and pastors, graduate students, high schoolers and retirees, families, artists, youth workers, and professionals. They are the priesthood of all believers. People who love God and the city. People who seek to know who and where they are and what they are called to be and become.

With them, I engage in and activate theological imagination and possibility. I become co-host, co-facilitator, and collaborator. Together, we make “good trouble” for a more just world.<sup>1</sup> Together, we inhabit place and opportunity to know, see, hear, and be. We become known, seen, and heard.

In my body, I enact an inheritance of generations on the move. My father’s legacy.

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It is December 2022. I am in Hong Kong visiting my parents after busy schedules and pandemic restrictions have kept us apart for five years. My seventy-seven-year-old father has been giving me HKD cash to spend every day since I arrived, as if I were still a child. I have to remind him that I have a job and am raising a family of my own. I have reached the age where I now sport black-rimmed progressives. He is proud that after corrective eye surgery, he no longer needs to wear the glasses that he wore for decades.

“We’ll be tourists together,” he says as we leave together in the morning. He cannot remember how to get around much independently beyond his daily routine now. As we walk to the ferry terminal to take the boat to Hong Kong Island from Lantau Island and once more as we sit side by side on the boat ride, he asks me what our destination is.

At the top of Victoria Peak, a densely populated hill on the western part of Hong Kong island, tourists

and locals alike come for breathtaking views of Central, Victoria Harbour, Lamma Island, and the surrounding islands. Small shops cluster on the many levels of the Peak Galleria and the Peak Tower. My father, as usual, is reluctant to part with the extra fee to go up to the top floor viewing deck of the Tower, but I insist that we go up together.

“We’ll be tourists together.”



The view of Central, Hong Kong Island, from the top of Victoria Peak

As we open the door and step out onto the deck we are literally blown away by the blast of wind that greets us. We maneuver tactically amidst amateur and professional photographers to find a place to capture the view. One hastily taken shot reveals matching alfalfa sprouts, with my shoulder-length hair blown vertically and the little hair he has left following suit.

There is something about being here together at the top of the world. The air is clear and crisp, even as we find ourselves holding on to any loose items so they are not whisked away.

Time stops just for a moment.

We return to the ground floor of Peak Tower and walk towards the scenic overlook areas. A walking path winds around the top of the mountain, following the twists and turns of the topography of the land. Going in one direction leads to a beautiful tropical garden and going in the other brings us down to the road where we begin to see residences in the most expensive neighborhood in Hong Kong. Movie stars and the elite live here amidst government buildings with stern-looking security guards and barbed wire that shield the view from the public. Rather than return to the shop area to take the tram down with the crowds, we choose to walk.

My father and I begin the walk down the mountain. Sometimes, I walk with my arm in his. Sometimes, I follow him. I find myself gently redirecting him as he is beginning to forget while I cannot help but remember.

At first, walking along the road seems safe enough. But it begins to get dicey when the road narrows and there is no accompanying sidewalk. It seems we have gone off course and taken a path not intended for us. We hurry to the side and a quick, cool, close breeze means the cars are faster and nearer

than we prefer. At one point, we opt to take the maintenance stairs for landscaping personnel with forbidding “no entry” signs because there really is no other option. But we keep going.

We walk for a while in silence.

“When I am with you, I think about 爷爷 (Yeh-Yeh; my paternal grandfather). He was a good father. He cared about his family. Family is important,” he says.

Taking part in the history of Chinese migration to the West, 爷爷 traveled alone from southeastern China to northern UK in the 1950s, working in a fish-and-chip and curry shop in Wallasey. The shop, now named “Big Fish,” is still there on Trafalgar Road, not far from where my late grandparents rest at Frankby Cemetery in Birkenhead. Like those of his generation, 爷爷 worked hard to send money home to his family: 嬷嬷 (Maa-Maa; my paternal grandmother) and his three children (my father and his two sisters). They joined him after six or seven long years, and my father began his university studies in Liverpool.

My parents, who met earlier in Hong Kong, married in the UK. And eventually our family of four, including my older sister, moved to America. My father, after finishing graduate school and patenting a new communications device while working for British Telecom, was sponsored by a defense firm looking for talent.

Does he want me to say he was a good father?



A Chinese banyan tree on the side of the road on the way down from Victoria Peak

Along the way down, we stop in front of a Chinese banyan tree. The roots come spilling out of its outstretched branches.

“This tree must have had a hard life. Look at that branch!”

He speaks to me in English, though he could very well speak in Cantonese. Years spent abroad in the UK and USA mean he is bilingual, but I think he still prefers the culture and comfort of the Hong Kong of his youth. So many diaspora Chinese like him retain the memory and imagination of what was even as they live in the present version of that first home.

Where is he living now? What vision of Hong Kong and China does his life experience evoke, even as he probably has not processed the racism of his immigrant life in the West? I begin to see, as I listen to him and my maternal uncle who has also returned from Canada to work in China, why this generation of émigrés don’t want to actually retire in the West. Perhaps it is just too hard to keep fighting and performing as if it were okay.

A branch has grown horizontal rather than vertical, indicative perhaps of a traumatic moment in its story. A drought? A moment that has changed its trajectory, literally.

Does he describe what is unspoken in his own life?

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I live in the tension of many worlds. Overlapping geographies, times, and spaces, form me into the dutiful younger daughter of two who anticipates others’ needs. The one who works hard without question and the one who provides before being asked. I have come to know what it means to be a Chinese American daughter. I have come to watch and learn through experience.

I am a 竹升 (Jook-Sing; “bamboo pole”). At least this is what they call me. Born in the UK, raised in the US, I am not as Chinese as our elders might hope. They shake their heads when we—my generation and younger—don’t understand and don’t do what is expected of us. The water enters one end of the hollow bamboo stick and comes out the other.

I grow up as an MK (“missionary’s kid”) in an affluent white town in suburban Long Island with “good” schools, wearing hand-me-downs with a whole world of mission work happening in our basement. My bi-vocational father, an engineer by day and a missionary by night, builds a recording studio downstairs to produce evangelistic programs in ten different dialects for the global diaspora Chinese community. First, it is through cassette tapes, then radio, and eventually, the Internet. My mother is the writer-editor, and my father, the technical producer. And for twelve years of my childhood, I negotiate the weekly Sunday suburban-Chinatown commute where I am majority-minority and minority-majority.

I am a TCK (“third culture kid”) who has learned what it means to exist in between and outside of spaces of belonging. I feel keenly that I am often in The In-Between. The interstitial place where it is sometimes okay to not be this or that, but to be who you are.

I travel the world, missing only the continents of Australia and Antarctica. I encounter with intention and curiosity diverse cultural geographies, siloed academic disciplines, and distinct social locations. I come to learn from and with others who are different. Because I am usually the one who is different.

And so, I become a maker of spaces. I create, curate, and convene others into process and discovery. I resist the usual categories. Brave space. Safe space. A space with porous boundaries. I cultivate room for opening up curiosity individually and together, for mutuality.

I lean into my father’s legacy...

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### *Leading happens in less obvious ways.*

Like my father, while some situations require it, I don’t prefer to be in the front of the room. I prefer to be behind the scenes. In my parents’ ministry that lasted some fifty years, he was the technical support making things happen. My mother was the charismatic speaker in the front.

I lead from other locations. Beyond the presentation with a slide deck or lecture from behind a podium, I prefer to move tables, chairs, bodies, and materials in a variety of configurations. I open up space for ways of being and knowing that push beyond word, text, and speech into bodies, feelings, and experiences that come from a more complex acknowledgement of theology, learning, city, ministry, family, and world Christianity. It is place-making.

We are all in some ways in a margin and in a center except in my world there are many centers. Not just one.

Like my father, I draw strength from silence and activity. Voice has its place, but it is not always necessary. Power does not always come from the loudest voice, nor is the most heard most wise. A multitude of possibilities invite the experience and wisdom present in the room to become known without a sound. My father uses his hands to make things. I also make things, spaces, possibilities with my hands. Method Kit Conversations. Chalk Talk. "Recalculating Route" WhatsApp Photo Walks. Image Reflections. The list goes on.

Like these tiny ferns we see as we pause on our walk, having found their way to live symbiotically on this tree trunk, there are places to thrive in less obvious ways.



Japanese beard fern, also known as "green penny fern" grows on the trunk of a tree

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### *Teaching means taking risks.*

Like my father, I have learned to take risks when there is simply no clear path ahead. I have had to figure out what to do in unknown territory, leveraging courage and creativity as ways to strategize and claim a place at the table.

As an emigrant from Hong Kong to Liverpool, my father was not unlike many young adults using the resources of a colonial legacy to access education and opportunity. But that did not make him immune to the challenges of being the first in his generation to attend college. He learned the ethic of working hard to get a scholarship by studying to be first place in weekly exams in the Catholic school in Hong Kong he attended. He took this ethic of pushing himself to survive with him to a new country and then another.

In the UK, he went to college and graduate school, worked for British Telecom, and invented a patented device. And then in the US, when the Cold War came to an end, he reinvented himself by teaching him-

self how to use computers and the Internet, becoming an early entrepreneur of the "paperless office."

And then, he kept going until it was too much to keep up anymore.

I know this drive. I often wrestle with what pushes me to keep going. I want to think that it is a desire to fulfill God's call, God's dream for me, my vocation to be curious about "what if?" But workaholism, a slippery family trait, can also be easy to justify.

Like my father, I learn on the move. My path into theological education has not been traditional, but perhaps like this walk, it is a gift. I don't take for granted the status quo is how it *should* be. Building a new institution and learning community for almost two decades at City Seminary of New York has been re-imagining what urban theological education can be—emphasizing how we encounter God in place, people, practices, postures, and creativity as a community, living into what *could* be; we are rebels and dreamers who cherish something new without casting the old completely aside.

It has begun with listening to our city, and sensing with our bodies as pedagogical practice what and where the Spirit leads. I have come to read the city as much as texts, and have come to be read by the city, as I walk with students and faculty from neighborhood to neighborhood in prayer and on pilgrimage. We live into where we are. And it takes risk to try new things.

So, on this day, I journey down the mountain with my father, carrying in these bodies of ours the willingness to take risks, to go where we might not be expected or are not allowed to be.



My father walks down the peak on one part of the road that has a sidewalk

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### *Resilience creates space for mutuality.*

Like my father, I am stubborn yet resilient. "Don't be a quitter." "No doesn't mean never." This can go well in some situations, and poorly in others. It can be difficult. And yet I persist.

My father and I don't agree on everything, that is to be sure. I have learned to avoid certain topics like politics to keep the peace, but continuing to be present in spite of differences means there is space for a relationship. We don't close the door. We are open to change, although the likelihood may be small.

Progress is not always linear, as it can seem in the Western imagination. Cycles and seasons, life and death come as part of who we are and how we might understand what it means to change and be transformed. Sometimes things have to die, to be unlearned. We need to be unformed and reformed.<sup>2</sup> We need to let go in order to grow.

But that can also mean staying. Remaining in a hard place and processing with others, and not running away. It can mean having difficult and awkward conversations, and agreeing that we won't always agree but we can find a place to exist together. It can mean embracing the notion that we need each other in order to be complete as the Body of Christ, and part of that is being made and seeing differently.<sup>3</sup> And in doing so, we might take a first step towards mutual learning with others.

I have been struck on this walk by the immense biodiversity we have passed along our journey down the mountain. Yet these three evergreen trees stand out because they stand together. These trees remind me of my children, and the legacy of resilience I pass down from my father and his father before him. They are different from some of the other trees around them and yet there they grow and stand strong, part of a bounty of green and beauty.

Like my father, being persistent and remaining can open up another way, other possibilities of being together. Or relishing in difference as necessary for mutuality.



Three evergreen trees growing on the mountainside on the way down

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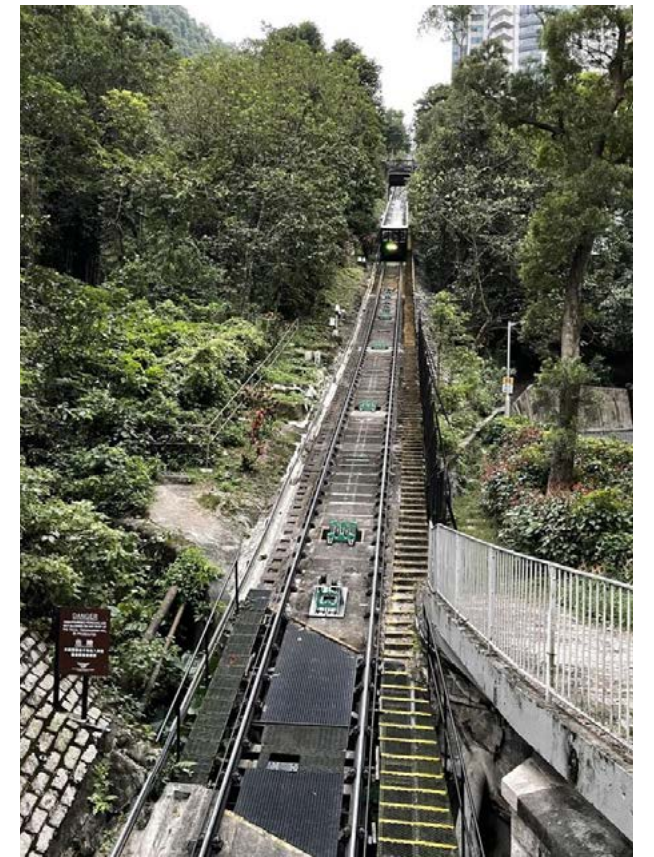
We finally reach the bottom of Victoria Peak, having followed the right direction, though perhaps not the designated path. Yet this is not our final destination. We see another possible destination, and begin to locate a way to get there. We continue on our journey of place-making, risk-taking, and resilience together, father and daughter, arm in arm.

As I have come to know it, formation is life wide, life deep, and lifelong. Teaching and learning happen in all kinds of places and ways. And the scholarship of this reality can be found in the deep praxis and recognition of expanded sources of wisdom and knowledge that come from many centers and communities.

Like my father, I continue to make "good trouble" on the move. I have come to also journey with a coalition of Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPIC) Christian leaders in New York City, who are making their way in the world, with a curriculum that is developing and unwritten.<sup>4</sup> I am learning to "Speak up, speak out, get in the way...Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America"<sup>5</sup> in the activity of public theology. This theological formation in practice breaks open the constraints of formal theological education.

We are a community on the move. And this public space is one that I cannot influence as I would a classroom with walls. We respond to the ways that the Holy Spirit is moving us out into the world. And learning happens not in a program, but in the posture and practice of activity in a world made by God, theological formation in the everyday.

I create. I curate. I convene. I teach and am taught by others.



Tram up to Victoria Peak, Hong Kong Island, or the route not taken



#### About the Author

**Maria Liu Wong** is Provost of City Seminary of New York, where she directs the Walls-Ortiz Gallery and Faith and Families initiative. She also co-directs the Ministry in the City HUB, a national learning network. She is co-author of *Stay in the City: How Christian Faith is Flourishing in an Urban World* (Eerdmans, 2017), and author of *On Becoming Wise Together: Learning and Leading in the City* (Eerdmans, 2023). She lives in the Lower East Side, New York City, with her family of five.

#### Notes & Bibliography

[1] This refers to the late civil rights leader John Lewis' quote: "Speak up, speak out, get in the way...Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America." While the context here is voting rights demonstrations in Selma, Alabama, in March 1965, I teach in solidarity with those who see the work of resistance as essential for a just world. The classroom, wherever it may be located, is a space in which the necessary work of cultivating imagination and engaging in liberative practices towards different futures happens in community.

[2] I take to heart the argument Asian-American spiritual director Cindy Lee makes in *Our Unforming: De-Westerning Spiritual Formation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022). There is a need to unform the ways a dominant Western paradigm has monopolized our imagination, and reform in order to transform a wider range of possibilities.

[3] This resonates with the notion of the "Ephesian Moment" that the late Scottish missiologist Andrew Walls advocated in reminding us that no one part of the church is complete without the others; the diversity of the Church is necessary. See Andrew F. Walls, "The Ephesian Moment," in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 72-81.

[4] Learn more about NY CAAPIC through this digital story map: <https://bit.ly/NYCAAPICstory>.

[5] Refer to the comment about the late civil activist John Lewis in endnote 1.