

Interview from "Fathers and Sons" by Christine Williams.
Published by HarperCollins, 1996.



King Fong, businessman

King Moo Fong's father gave him the name 'respect', and as a highly respected member of the Chinese community in Australia, King has earned the name through hard work. As an eldest son, King became a support to his father, particularly when the family migrated to Australia at the end of WWII, when King acted as his father's interpreter in business and legal affairs from the age of eight. The close bond they shared grew out of the hardship they faced in turning misfortune into a success. King's father built up a business from scratch in a foreign land and taught his son to cherish his own culture but look outward for opportunities.

King Fong: About the age of six when I started school in a Fijian primary school, I can remember my father being one of the prominent Chinese leaders in Suva, and we'd go together in the mornings to pick up ice for our shop, a mixed grocery and milk bar. In those days there was no refrigeration so we had an ice-box. Sometimes I'd go alone with him and I'd sit in the back seat of the black T-model Ford while he talked to me.

My father was a carpenter by trade and he didn't have much schooling because he was poor. Two of his brothers had gone to live in Fiji so he went to Fiji too in about 1930. He befriended a lady and they had a child, a part-Indian well-educated woman. (Their daughter, who was seven years older than me, later became my half-sister.) About three years after the birth of their child the woman died, so my father went back to China and decided to marry my mother. My father then left the rural village of Chung Shan in China in 1935 with my mother to return to Fiji. Apparently my mother was promised to my father. My father was about fifteen years older than my mother.

Christine Williams: Yet they'd been promised when they were young?

King Fong: Yes, when my father was in his early twenties. In those days parents arranged marriages. So he fulfilled the family arrangement. I think they were only married about one year and then they went to Fiji together in 1935, and I was born in 1938.

CW: What did your father say about his feelings for your mother? Did he ever talk about that?

KF: Well, we've got a publication about their marriage. My father never talked about my mother. But I had a lot of chats with my father about other things.

CW: When you were in the back of the car, getting ice, for instance, what did he talk to you about then?

KF: I remember standing on the back seat and he would be in the front. He would talk about community, I think, I can't remember, but I do remember standing up, because one day I fell out and he didn't know. I think I may have accidentally opened the door when we'd reached the wharf; some Fijian ladies shouted and he stopped the car.

CW: Did you get into trouble?

KF: I don't remember that but I remember my father was fairly hard on us children. He said you must study hard and if you don't do well, you'll get a belting.

I remember my elder sister living with us, and it was her job to milk the cow. My job every morning was to open the gate and let out all the chickens and ducks to swim in the creek. We had a plantation of bananas and vegetables, and we kept a pig. We fattened the pig and every second month we had a Chinese community dinner and it was my father's job to help with the cooking of the chickens and ducks and the pig. We also caught pigeons. I remember my father making a timber frame with wire mesh, and we'd put a stick about twelve inches high under it to hold up the netting, and inside we'd catch about a hundred pigeons. We'd stand about a hundred feet away, in the kitchen, and I would watch the pigeons come down to eat the cooked rice underneath the frame. I'd pull a string and the frame would fall down to trap them. I was the one at seven years of age who had to go in to catch them. Then my father would kill the pigeon by tying a piece of string around its beak and it would slowly die of asphyxiation. Then it was boiled and plucked.

CW: What was your father's role in the Chinese community?

KF: I remember him working as an official in the Chinese consulate, which must have been 1944-45. The Japanese had occupied China and the Kuomintang wanted the overseas Chinese to raise money for clothing for the refugees from China, so my father volunteered his services. That left my mother to look after the shop with one of my uncles. We had another two employees. The shop wasn't busy until the American GI's defending the Coral Sea came to Suva on R & R and, fortunately for us, the Army camp was opposite our shop. So we had tons of business. My father became wealthy just from that, over a period of about a year. Every night my cousin and I were invited across to see the black and white newsreels in English, but my father couldn't understand English so he didn't go.

One American sergeant became good friends with my father and taught him how to cook hamburgers and make milkshakes, according to an American recipe. We didn't have Wrigley's chewing gum either, until the American troops arrived.

My father was only going to charge about two shillings for the hamburger but they advised him to charge three shillings, so he was very happy, busy cooking hamburgers all night. They had their own canteen but a lot of them just wanted to go outside for food.

I remember my father becoming prominent with the consulate, and joining 'high society' in Suva. One of my brothers was born during the War and became a godchild to the Consul-General.

CW: You were very proud of your father then weren't you?

KF: Well at the age of seven I don't think I knew what proud meant, but I felt good that he was so well respected. I remember he came to our school photos and was given a prominent position in the hall, as a merchant.

I was very close to my father, being the eldest son. For instance, he bred chickens and ducks, and at night I would have to collect the eggs and he would show me, with a light, which were close to hatching. He wouldn't use those to sell. I would then put them back under the hen. And sometimes when I saw the hen standing up ready to lay an egg I would put my hand under, and, pop, out would come a soft egg.

During the war, Fiji was considered the next target after the Solomon Islands, and my father built an air raid shelter in the back yard. I helped him dig and we had a pump to dry it out. There were steps down into the underground shelter, and we used to practice going down there at twelve noon, when a British plane would fly past.

Also during the war, there was an appeal from China asking for funds to fight the Japanese. Then in 1945 when the war ended, government war bonds were issued in China to help rebuild the country. My father invested five thousand Fiji pounds, which was a lot of money, almost all his life savings. Then in January 1946 he decided to return to China, to collect the war bonds. In March the American troops were ready to pull out and they left on a converted tourist ship, the 'Lurline', and we left with them, as one of the two Chinese families allowed on board. So we sailed for Sydney and we were to take another ship to China from there.

I remember standing on the deck, wearing white shorts, and seeing the huge Harbour Bridge as we came into Sydney. We stayed one week in The Rocks waiting for another ship, but my father found out that during the civil war in China the Kuomintang were losing and the Communists

were getting stronger and might take over. News also spread that the Treasurer had fled to the United States with the bond money. My father, being a capitalist, believed he would not have been accepted into the country.

CW: All that news was a blow to him?

KF: Yes, but luckily, through his connection with the consulate in Fiji he had a bit of status to visit the consulate in Sydney. So he was able to apply to the Department of Immigration and was granted a stay in Australia as a merchant on condition that he would import or export 10,000 pounds worth of goods for fifteen years before he could stay permanently. We children were classified as dependent students and could apply for citizenship after fifteen years when we'd finished our studies. So with 900 pounds in his pocket, my father befriended a distant relative, a Fong, who wanted to return to Cairns, and bought her fish shop in Ultimo.

CW: So at this stage you were eight years old?

KF: Yes, and I used to help my parents in the fish shop. I would make the chips every morning and afternoon and would go to the butcher's and do the other shopping.

CW: Were you very aware at that age that your father had had a terrible blow, losing the war bonds?

KF: Yes. My parents talked about it, and we all felt it was bad luck. But then my father said, "Look it's a blessing in disguise, because if we had that money we would have flown to China," and under Communism we would have been brainwashed". [Laugh]. So we were happy again.

CW: How did your father comply with the import/export conditions of his stay in Australia?

KF: Well, he had to maintain the fish shop business, so about three times a week he'd go to the market and buy boxes of fish. That didn't qualify as import business, but the Immigration allowed him to supplement our requirements through other business. We had the fish shop to survive on, but my father began to import from my uncle in Hong Kong Chinese groceries such as soy sauce, rice sticks, flour, and tinned and bottled goods. We only had a fish shop shopfront and there weren't many Chinese wanting Chinese groceries in those days. Even ABCs, Australian Born Chinese, didn't know how to cook Chinese food, so it was a small start. My father concentrated most of the quota on exporting. We'd case leg hams in the back yard; we'd re-salt and crate them. And with fish, we'd buy jewfish, which was very cheap, we'd salt them and hang them in the back yard, and export them by ship. Also Allowrie butter, we'd go to the export office in the Haymarket and order a ton of butter to be sent to an address in Hong Kong. About two years later we sent soap to my uncle who found there was a shortage in the textile factories in Hong Kong. I found a soap company in the phone book and we exported soap.

CW: You were very much your father's right hand man weren't you, because he didn't speak English?

KF: He never spoke more than a few words in English. I was fortunate in going to an English-speaking school in Fiji, taught by Fijians and Indians. [Laugh] Then in Sydney I did most of the business with my father. I went to the accountant and the solicitor with him; even the doctor, although at first he used Chinese business people. At the fishmarket he learnt from a few other Chinese merchants and then he began to bid. He didn't need much language because he would bid using signals. I remember going to the fish markets when he first found that the other merchants were leaving the abalone and scallops to be thrown out. The ABCs didn't know how to cook these delicacies. So my father asked me to go with him at five thirty in the morning to ask the Italian and Greek merchants whether I could have the seafood leftovers, because as an adult he couldn't bow down to pick up scraps from the floor. On later occasions he did it himself, because I was needed in the shop to cut the potatoes. I used to prepare breakfast for my brothers and sisters - there were seven of us eventually.

I remember in the early days that my youngest brother had to go into nursery and I had to be the parent or adult to accompany him. [Laugh] And I was only eight, taking my little brother.

We lived in Ultimo for two and a half years but my father realised that he couldn't improve Iris imports because not many people bought from our Ultimo fish shop. So he began to work as a shop assistant in Dixon Street on the fringe of Chinatown, which was based on Campbell Street in those days. He could only find one shop which was of the Chung San clan. In 1948 an uncle of mine was also able to migrate from Fiji, under my father's guarantee. Then in 1949 they opened a shop in Dixon Street in opposition to my father's former employer, two doors away from where he'd worked, and we transferred all the stock from Ultimo. I started to help him every weekend.

I remember I kept my pocket Oxford dictionary with me day and night because at first the Australian kids seemed to be talking too fast. I was eight when I arrived and was put straight into Second class, from First class in Fiji. I arrived in March and my first exam was in June and I topped the class. My father said "Are you sure?" I had to show him my report and he signed it. It shocked me. [Laughing]

CW: He must have thought Australians were pretty stupid.

KF: He said "What's the matter with these kids?". But I think the kids were a bit lackadaisical working class kids who didn't have much ambition, whereas I was keen. I played all the sports, cricket, football and marbles. Later, at high school, I played rugby league. My father said 'no' at first but I said, 'Look I've got to learn to grow up'. I assured him I was only playing in the correct weight division. He was worried I might get hurt and he said 'Watch yourself. And when we won the competition undefeated he felt real proud that a Chinese kid could play in the football team. And then I won the competition to design a badge for the school.

I remember giving my father the excuse that I needed to improve my English, in order to join the Salvation Army and the Sunday school at the Presbyterian Church because I wanted some social activities. You see, my parents weren't keen for me to play cricket with the kids in the street. They only allowed me to play on weekends. Week days I had to help in the shop. So I'd be with my little brothers and sisters, I'd have to wash them, help them with their homework.

CW: So you devised ways to get out?

KF: I enjoyed going to church picnics.

CW: Did you strike any racism?

KF: No, that's why I'm glad I did it. I felt that if I mixed with Australians I wouldn't suffer any racism. There were three other students from Hong Kong in my class who felt neglected. They didn't join the rest of us in social activities. They'd always stay away from sports and not talk to us during playground periods, so they suffered the consequences.

CW: So your father was happy for you to get out and mix?

KF: Yes, he wanted me to, to learn.

CW: Did your father suffer racism himself?

KF: No. He said that while he was in Dixon Street he learnt a little English, but when Caucasians came in there wasn't much chance for conversation. So he just went on his way. He didn't even eat with us at night - he'd come home late. He would work seven days a week. I remember on Sundays going on my little scooter from Ultimo to Dixon Street to pick up some Chinese lollies, so I'd see him then.

CW: You led quite an independent life as a child really.

KF: Yes, more outgoing than my brothers because I was the eldest. Then in 1950 when I was twelve my father told me to come and live in the shop because he needed me there. He still lived in Ultimo above the fish shop while I lived with my uncle. I thought this was a new opportunity to get out into the commercial world. Because everyone in those days was thinking about money. Money was their God. But I wasn't earning any money. I worked in the fish shop for four years with no pay but I got pocket money.

CW: But you were a child.

KF: Yes, I was a child and you were expected to do it. Never did I question it because in that process I was learning all the time and I was glad I was getting experience that the other kids didn't get. But I noticed that the other kids didn't have to help their parents, and in a way I felt I had an opportunity to get somewhere in the world and learn about adult life.

CW: So where did you go to school when you moved to live in Dixon Street?

KF: I was going to Glebe school and I used to catch the tram for a penny from Anthony Hordern's corner to the Sydney University gates near my school. I wouldn't see my father in the morning because he wouldn't start work until later in the morning, but I'd see him in the afternoon.

CW: So you didn't see much of your mother except at weekends?

KF: Not even weekends. I didn't see her for a while. [Laugh]. When I did see her, I'd say 'hello'. And the same with my brothers and sisters. We didn't even have a phone; we didn't talk to each other. I lived with my uncles and sixty five old people who lived in the boarding house above the shop. My father decided to take this over in 1951. You see in 1949 China officially became Communist and that was when my father decided his future was in Australia. At first he leased the shop and then in 1951 the City Council realised that the old men upstairs wouldn't be able to go back to China because of the Bamboo Curtain. But they were still smoking opium against the law. One night Customs officers got a fire brigade extension ladder and climbed up to smash the windows and get into the rooms and caught five men smoking.

CW: So was it a boarding house or an opium den?

KF: It was a boarding house. [Pause] It was also partly an opium den. [Laugh]. You see they were living on the fourth floor and they had a rope from the ground floor to the fourth floor and each floor had a trap door and you couldn't get in if they didn't want you to. When you knocked on the ground floor they'd pull this string which opened the latch so they could see whether you were Caucasian or Chinese. Then there was a tin at the end of the rope so they could hear. If you spoke in Chinese they'd open the door for you. If you spoke in English they'd ignore you. At this stage my father only rented the shop on the mezzanine floor and I lived above it. In 1951 the building was to be sold and my father was worried his former employer two doors down wanted to buy it. So my father took a big risk, took out a loan and bought the building for 27,000 pounds. It was to be condemned unless it was cleaned up so my father, being a carpenter, renovated it, floor by floor. There were 92 rooms, cubicles really, 8 foot by 8 foot, and because they had a 13 foot ceiling the council didn't require him to build the walls right to the ceiling, to allow for ventilation. And I had to number each room, one to ninety two, and I had to collect the rent, which went up from 5 shillings to 10 shillings a week because of the renovation. The health inspectors came and stopped the opium smoking then.

CW: Did you feel you missed your mother and brothers and sisters at that time?

KF: Yes. I often thought to myself that I didn't have a family life, that I had a commercial life. When I was at Ultimo we were able to play cricket with the neighbours but when I lived in Dixon Street there were no neighbours' children so my only sport was to play tennis with my sister at Ultimo which I did on Sunday. I ended up playing competition, otherwise my father wouldn't have allowed me to go out.

CW: When did you leave school and what was your father's view about continuing education?

KF: I finished at Glebe when I was fifteen and I had done well. My father was proud and told me he wanted me to go on for another two years. He wanted a son to have higher education because he only had six months of primary school education. So I did my Leaving Certificate at North Sydney Tech. But I told him I could only do that if I lived residentially, so he said the fruit merchant Gordon Fong would take him the next week to look at a house for sale in North Sydney. It had four bedrooms so the family moved from Ultimo and I moved from Dixon Street

back with the family. It was a bit strange seeing my mother every day. By then I was sixteen. After school I went to Dixon Street to help and would come home with him at night.

CW: What about your homework, when did you do that?

KF: In the shop. But after one year living at Naremburn, my father told me he needed me more in the shop. So I said that I couldn't unless I lived there, so for my last year at high school I lived in the shop, and I'd be doing my homework until about two in the morning. And it started to get to me and I suffered migraines. So I didn't go on to further study. My father semi-retired and I became the manager of the Dixon Street shop. I told my father about my headaches and I saw Western doctors and Chinese doctors but it didn't help. The next year my mother told me to take a holiday on the Gold Coast, but that didn't help. Then the following year my mother said I'd better go to Hong Kong to see a doctor. I spent about three months there, taking herbs every day. By this time I was twenty. And I got a telegram that my father had gone on a trip to Melbourne and had had a brain haemorrhage.

I was staying in a hotel in Hong Kong and would visit my uncle every day. One day he rang me and told me my father had taken ill but was getting better. But in fact my father had died. My uncle couldn't read English and his little daughter who translated it for him had made a mistake. When I went to my uncle's office I asked to see the telegram; instinct just told me. And it said that my father had passed away. Perhaps the mistake occurred in the girl thinking that the illness had passed away. I was shocked. My first thought was that I would have to arrange the funeral.

About three weeks earlier an auntie had shown me some photos to arrange a marriage for me. They arranged marriages for the daughters of wealthy Chinese in Hong Kong looking for wealthy counterparts either from the 'New Gold Mountain' in Sydney or Melbourne or the 'Old Gold Mountain' in California. I wasn't interested. I told them I was too young. But I had realised Sydney was very short of girls. Working amongst all the old men in Dixon Street, rarely did I see a girl.

CW: You intended to marry a Chinese girl?

KF: Yes, my father had instilled that in me. He didn't instruct me to, but the way I was brought up was to carry out the tradition and maintain Chinese culture. I remember that my father had allowed me to play tennis and watch soccer but he didn't want me to go to the beach to see girls in swimsuits, nor go ice-skating. He came to ice-skating with me once and saw all these girls in short skirts and said it wasn't good for me.

Then in Hong Kong I was introduced to a girl whose father I knew back in Australia. She was to migrate to Australia soon. I felt that was a different situation so I didn't mind meeting her. This was only a couple of weeks before my father died.

When I heard that my father had died, I knew that as number one son I would have to arrange the funeral as my mother couldn't do it. So I told the girl I would have to go back and I'd see her in Australia when she migrated. We were friends and would write to each other.

CW: There was a lot happening in your life? It was a very emotional period?

KF: Yeah. [Tears in his eyes] I said that if things turned out I'd like to marry her. I was very upset and everything seemed bound up together.

CW: So you came back to Sydney and took on all the responsibilities of the business?

KF: My father had only had two years of full retirement. He'd worked all his life.

CW: And he hadn't fulfilled the requirements to become an Australian citizen?

KF: That's right, so when I came back I was declared the merchant to fulfil the fifteen years requirement. If I hadn't taken it on, Immigration wouldn't have deported us because China had become Communist, but we couldn't have become Australian citizens. We were then called stateless; our passport was marked 'Alien'. So it was my job to carry it through.

CW: As a twenty year old that was a big responsibility, wasn't it? Did you feel it at the time, or only when you think back?

KF: At times I felt it. [Tears in his eyes]

CW: In the business you must have missed your father, as well as missing him emotionally.

KF: Yeah, all the time. Ah, I remember that when he was alive and I took over management of the business, he'd be there all the time. I'd ask him certain things and he'd say, "Oh, you're still too young yet." I thought of adopting marketing strategies and expanding, and he'd say, "Not too quickly, because we're still under the quota system and if you expand too quickly, what will happen if you can't sell the goods?".

CW: So what happened when he was no longer there with you?

KF: Sometimes I'd sit in the office and just talk to him. [Pointing upwards]

CW: As if up in heaven?

KF: [Nodding and tears in his eyes] I think I had like an inner voice.

CW: You felt that he was still around?

KF: Yes.

CW: And how long did that go on for?

KF: Well, even after my marriage to the girl I'd met in Hong Kong, which was a year after his death. I was in bereavement for twelve months. I think it lasted about five years. You see when I first came back I didn't want to get married. I felt too much stress. I wanted to get the business going because there were already rumours in the street that we would collapse, that King Fong was too young, you know? I had all this stress.

CW: Did you have the headaches?

KF: Not so much. I decided to challenge myself to beat it. So I read two books by Dale Carnegie : "How to Win Friends and Influence People" and "How to Stop Worrying and Start Living". And I listened to a radio program by Herbert W. Armstrong, an American evangelist with a thundering voice, who was very inspirational. I think I got a lot of confidence from those programs.

CW: And you married twelve months after your father died even though you weren't keen to marry?

KF: I wasn't keen the first six months because I felt the girl was going to migrate anyway, and I wanted to concentrate on the business. I met her father and wrote a couple of letters telling her that, later, if she couldn't come to Australia as a student, well, we could think of marriage and I could guarantee her to Immigration. After about six months I'd completed the death duties and got our business going again. Then I realised that my Chinese was inadequate and I needed someone who could write Chinese. My mother couldn't write Chinese and my uncles couldn't, fluently. I could write the orders but not business correspondence. And I was approached by business people to say that I should settle down and not stay single.

CW: Are you saying that at first you didn't love your wife, but you liked her?

KF: There was some love but I had had no experience of what love was because my father had been very strict about my social life and I hadn't had any girlfriends.

CW: So she came out after one year?

KF: Well what happened was that her father had been living here for twenty years and he wanted her to wait for an immigration pass because he said she was still too young to marry at nineteen. So I would write to her to keep up the spirit, and it helped me too because she would write back. I could concentrate on the business.

I built a special monument for my father at Rookwood cemetery. You see, when I read the telegram that he'd passed on I checked in Hong Kong on the style of monuments in cemeteries there, and I drew my own design.

CW: I want to try to get to the bottom of this now, how long it took before you really got over his death?

KF: I think it took about five years, because when I got married, my wife helped me in the business, but being a student she didn't really know what business was. So I was on my own. My Mum couldn't support me because she was always a helper in the fish shop, she was not the decision-maker. So there I was, the decision-maker, the merchant.

CW: So you missed him in terms of support in the business, but how long did you miss him emotionally. Many many years? Do you still miss him?

KF: Yes. [Laughing with tears].

CW: Do you have any sons?

KF: Yes, one son. He's twenty four.

CW: Do you think you have a similar bond with your son as you had with your father? Or not as strong?

KF: Not as strong because all my children have benefited with higher education. They enjoyed going to the shop when they were young, aged about five or six. But after the age of twelve they didn't want to come to Dixon Street anymore.

CW: Do you think it was the hard work together that kept the bond between you and your father close?

KF: Yes. You see I talk to some other children of merchants and they say they hated working in groceries. Their fathers forced them to do it, whereas my father didn't have to force me. I saw the situation, that he needed me, and I accepted it.

CW: So are you saying that the bond is not as strong with your son because he didn't share the hard work of building a business, as you had with your father?

KF: Yes, that's right. I worked in the grocery shop but I also took the opportunity to get involved in community work.

CW: Did you follow in your father's footsteps in that respect?

KF: Yes. He enjoyed community work.

CW: And what does your son do for a living?

KF: He works in computer business technology for an accountancy firm. So in a way that keeps alive the business tradition of the family, which originated with my father.