

齊邦媛：《巨流河》  
*The Great Flowing River: excerpt*

By Chi Pang-yuan

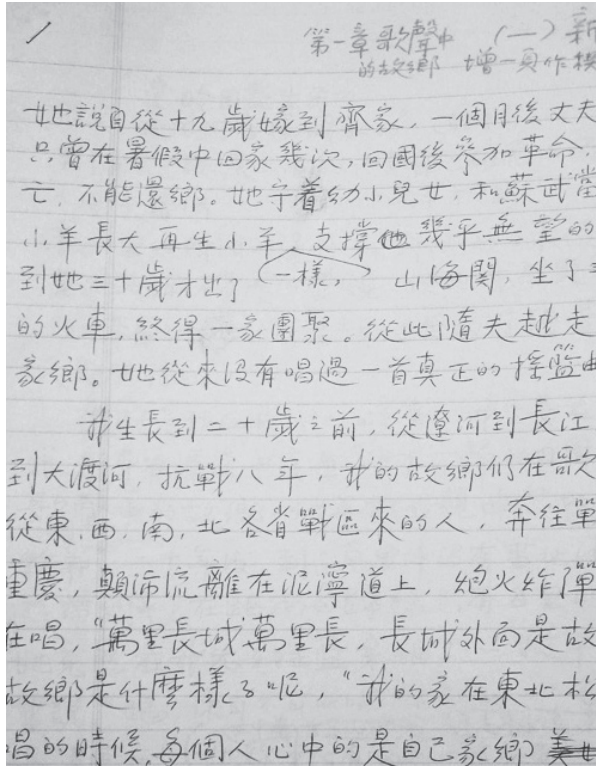
Translated by John Balcom

**Chapter One**  
**My Homeland in Songs**

**The Beginning of My Life**

I was born on the day of the Lantern Festival in 1924 in my home province of Liaoning. At that time of the year, the temperature is often minus twenty or thirty degrees Celsius, or even as low as minus forty. My mother was ill during her pregnancy, so I was born a weak and sickly baby. One day when I was about a year old, I developed a high fever that would not abate and my breath grew so faint that it seemed on the verge of stopping altogether. Sitting on the *kang*, a brick bed heated by the kitchen fire and used in north-east China, my mother held me close to her and refused to let go. A relative who had come to our house to celebrate the festival said, 'The girl is as good as dead; there's barely any breath left in her. Why do you cling to her so? Let her go!' My mother kept crying and refused to release me. By then it was already midnight and my grandmother said, 'Okay, have one of the hired hands ride to town to find a doctor who can ride a horse and see if he can't come save the girl's life.' The hired hand went to town, which was about ten *li* from where we lived, and actually found a doctor who not only could ride a horse, but was also willing to brave the subzero temperatures in the middle of the night and come to our village. He came into our courtyard, and I was brought back to life. The lifeless child my mother had refused to part with became a child filled with vitality, which lasted all her life.

Statistics have it that the infant mortality rate was around forty per cent in those days. My life was like a small oil lamp in the wind, and the protection of my mother and that of my 'guardian angels' was like the glass surrounding it, preventing it from being snuffed out.



A page from Chi Pang-yuan's manuscript of *The Great Flowing River*. Courtesy of Chi Pang-yuan

Shortly thereafter, the doctor returned to our village to treat a patient. Carrying me in her arms, my mother went to see him and said, 'You saved this child's life. Her father is studying in Germany and hasn't yet named her. Please do give her a name to mark your predestined affinity!' The doctor named me Pang-yuan 邦媛 and thus bestowed a double blessing on me at the beginning of my life.

Growing up, I learned that my name was derived from a line in the poem 'Junzi xielao 君子偕老' [She who is to grow old with the lord] from the *Shijing* 詩經 [Book of songs]: 'Oh, bright are your eyes, well-rounded is your brow! Truly a person like that, she is the beauty of the country.' A few years ago, a reader sent me a photocopy of a page from an essay in Fan Chengda's 范成大 *Minghu wenji* 明湖文集 [Clear lake collection] from the Song dynasty that contains this line: 'Chi Pang-yuan, a woman of virtue ...' I actually possessed the same name and surname as a virtuous woman who lived several centuries ago, something both an honour and a bit terrifying. In this new world of ours, in which I have spent half my life struggling between family and career, I often think of that doctor in the mountain village of my old home. I hope he knows how hard I have worked to be worthy of his blessing in an age when a girl's life was considered a mere trifle.

## **The Chi Family of Tieling**

My childhood was a world without a father. At the age of two, I caught a fleeting glimpse of my father returning home at night during a snow-storm, and then fleeing once again early next morning. Two days later, my grandmother and my mother fled with me and my older brother to a nearby village, even smaller than ours, to hide there at the home of a relative for several days. We fled because the troops of Zhang Zuolin 張作霖 were trying to capture Chi Shiyong 齊世英, who had participated in Guo Songling's 郭松齡 mutiny. They wanted to apprehend and execute his entire family. While we were there, I cried and shouted every day when it got dark: 'I want to go home! I want to go home!' This compounded the difficulty, and fearing that others might be dragged in, it was decided that we should go home and accept our fate.

The Chi family of Tieling arrived in Fengtian (Shenyang) from Xugou County (now incorporated into Taiyuan City), Shanxi Province in the eighteenth century, first serving as civil officials there and then settling down. By my father's generation the family had been there for eight generations. The family estate was situated on Little Western Hill west of Fanjiatun, about five *li* from the Luanshi Mountain Train Station on the Chinese Eastern Railway. The family property consisted of about four thousand *mu* of farmland, which made us an average large-scale landowner.

My grandfather Chi Pengda 齊鵬大 had four brothers. As a young man, he did not wish to stay in the countryside and farm the family land, so he left to study at a military academy, and graduated from the old Baoding Army Accelerated School. Later, he began as a battalion commander in Zhang Zuolin's Fengtian Army, and then rose from regimental to brigade commander. He served Marshall Zhang loyally for more than twenty years. My father was his only son and after studying in Germany, he returned home with his head full of new ideas about saving the country and the people, so he took part in Guo Songling's revolutionary activities against Zhang Zuolin. It took only one month from when Guo's troops were deployed from Tianjin to when they were defeated outside Shanhaiguan. At that time, my grandfather was garrisoned at Baoding in Hebei Province, unaware of what had happened. Everyone in the Fengtian Army thought Marshall Zhang was certain to have my grandfather executed, but to everyone's surprise, he told his subordinates: 'The father is of one generation, the son another and I'm

not interested in settling any score on that account. Chi Pengda has been with me many years and is loyal. His son is a scoundrel who went overseas to study and came back muddle-headed, but that doesn't mean I should kill his father.' Later, my grandfather suffered some minor wounds during a skirmish, caught a chill, and died. He was only fifty years old when he passed away. Zhang Zuolin was of humble origin, but he had the gallantry and the spirit of righteousness of the rough and ready woodland heroes of his time, and refused to appease the Japanese. He was killed in an ambush when they blew up his train at Huanggutun, and so ended the legendary age of the warlord, leaving the north-east in a perilous situation. His son, Zhang Xueliang 張學良, assumed his title, power, and wealth, but lacked his intelligence or sense of honour. North-east China's hopes for sovereign prosperity were never to be realized.

My grandmother Zhang Congzhou 張從周 was Manchu. She married into the Chi family from a neighbouring village at the age of eighteen, and bore one son and two daughters. In the early days of my grandfather's military career, she accompanied him to wherever he was garrisoned, but later, because someone had to look after the family property, she came back to settle down, all alone taking care of the big estate that she called home. She and my mother, two lonely women who kept watch all year long, along with three young children and twenty hired hands, passed their days with the spring planting and the autumn harvests. I ran all over the mountains with my older brother, picking self-heal on Little Western Hill and cucumbers and blackberries in the back garden. In winter we would skate on the frozen stream, impressions still vivid today. My grandmother was a dignified, generous, gentle, and benevolent person, who had much sympathy for and took pity on my mother, her daughter-in-law, who had married her only son. But in that age, she too had become a mother-in-law through enduring life as a daughter-in-law, and thus knew which rules were unalterable; so although she treated her daughter-in-law well, and would go out of her way not to cause her trouble, and always spoke to her in a tender voice, rules were still rules. Even though there were a number of hired hands and servants in the house, when the husband's mother sat down to eat, the daughter-in-law would stand attentively to one side, hands at her sides. That's how things were done in a family of position. My grandmother had a most tender regard for me and it was she who had actually saved my life. Later when I went to the Western Hills Sanatorium in Beiping, she was reduced to tears, the memory of which makes me feel guilty to this day.

It was a big event whenever grandfather came home. He was a powerful official in those days and had four guards standing at the door. Dress codes and table manners were of particular concern and if something was not up to his standard, he'd throw a fit. No one in the family could breathe easy until he returned to the garrison. My father said that grandfather was quite open to the new thinking, but was a person of such authority that no one dared argue with him. Shortly after I was born, my grandfather came home from the garrison, and took a glance at the infant wrapped in a quilt on the *kang*. With an imposing manner, he took a seat in the main hall and said, 'Grab that little kitten and bring her here so I can have a look!' For some unknown reason, the little baby that didn't even weigh two and a half kilos and wasn't worth being 'carried' had aroused fierce protective instincts in him. He ordered, 'No one shall bully this granddaughter of mine!' (This meant especially my older brother, that sturdy grandson of his.) Although it was an age when men were valued over women, the Chi family was small and all children were treasured. That military order only enhanced my position at home.

While in the military, my grandfather received a gift for his fortieth birthday: a delicate and graceful twenty-year-old concubine. Whenever he was garrisoned someplace new or went to war, he'd send her home. It wasn't long before she developed tuberculosis and died. My grandmother treated her well and raised her newborn son (who was named Chi Shihao 齊世豪). I was the same age as this little uncle, so we often played together and were teased by my older brother and cousins. My little uncle grew up under the blessed protection of my grandmother. After north China fell to Japan, he graduated from high school and was conscripted, and one day, while walking down a village lane dressed in a Japanese military uniform, he was shot in the back by the Chinese anti-Japanese underground.

Grandmother was sad and lonely her entire life. Her only son left home at thirteen for Shenyang to study, then to Tianjin, then Japan, and then to Germany, and only came home during summer breaks. After returning from studying abroad, he joined the revolution and thereafter lived a life on the run to the far corners of the earth, to be parted from her until she died. After the Mukden Incident in 1931, she took two of my aunts and my little uncle to live in Beijing. Later, in her middle-age, she was often ill and confined to bed. My two aunts did well after they got married. The older, Chi Jinghuan 齊鏡寰, called Fourth Aunt according to the ranking of the whole family, who accompanied her husband Shi Zhihong 石志洪 to study in Japan, was intelligent and brave. After 1933, my father

returned to the north to organize and lead the underground resistance against the Japanese. During that time until just before the Japanese were defeated, she went to the Beiping Train Station and other locations many times to help members of the underground get in and out of Shanhaiguan. Every time she met or saw off someone, she would say they were a cousin. Once the people at the railway station got to know her better they asked her, 'How come you have so many cousins?' In all likelihood, they knew what was going on, but since everyone hated the Japanese, no one revealed what she was up to. Moreover, she was usually carrying a small child, and surreptitiously gave out gifts on New Year's Day and other festivals. Later, in Taiwan, many of these 'cousins' remembered my aunt with gratitude and admiration. My two aunts' husbands couldn't remain in Japanese-controlled territory after the start of the war because of their anti-Japanese activities and so accompanied my family to the rear. Later, they both fell ill and died in Chongqing, while my aunts stayed behind with their seven children in Beiping, where they lived with my grandmother and performed their filial duty. My grandmother died of cancer when she was only sixty-four, in the first year of the War of Resistance. We fled to Hankou twenty days before Nanjing fell into Japanese hands, and after catching our breath a little, we were off to Xiangxiang in Hunan, where we stayed for half a year. From there we trudged thousands of *li* over the Hunan-Guizhou Road, overcoming great difficulties to arrive in Sichuan. Only after we made it to Chongqing did we hear about grandmother's passing, and a year's time had already elapsed, and for this my father felt great remorse his entire life.

### **The Crying in the Forage Grass**

My maternal grandfather Pei Xincheng 裴信丞, was Han Chinese; my maternal grandmother was Mongol. They lived in Xintaizi, a small village twenty *li* from our home. My maternal grandfather was a wealthy gentleman who owned a mill and lots of land. In 1904, he accompanied a prefectural educational inspector by the name of Jiang to inspect Fanjiatun Primary School. He was deeply impressed by the Chi boys from Little Western Hill Village, Chi Shichang 齊世長 (Shiying's second eldest cousin) and Chi Shiyong. The two of them were determined to advance in school and serve their country when they grew up. That day they were studying civics and my grandfather and Mr Jiang heard the small, thin Chi Shiyong ask his

teacher why the Japanese and Russians were fighting in our homeland (The Russo-Japanese War, 1904–1905). When he was young and in a tutorial school, he saw the artillery action on Southern Mountaintop in which the Russians were routed and the Japanese victorious. Before the fighting ceased, the Japanese bivouacked at our estate for a month or two, until my grandfather sent men back home. Several years later, the Pei family and the Jiang family requested a respected local person to propose marriage. Educational Inspector Jiang's daughter and my second uncle were the same age while Miss Yuzhen 毓貞 of the Pei family was the same age as my father. The boys were handsome and the girls beautiful and their family backgrounds were well matched, so the heads of the families agreed to make the engagements. At that time, my father and my second uncle were in high school in Shenyang, so they had no opportunity to express their opinion. During the summer break, my father accompanied the family elders to the village of Xintaizi ostensibly to see the grape vines planted by the Pei family, something rarely seen in north-east China, and it was then that he saw my mother, who was only fourteen. She was favourably impressed by her fiancé, whom she saw only once, and thought he would make a far better husband than someone from the country. She probably had fond dreams and saw only the good side of things and from then on imagined the outside world with longing.

My second uncle had a huge influence on my father from an early age. He was four years older than my father and filled with new ideas. When news of the Revolution of 1911 reached Shenyang, he cut off his queue, with his envious nine-year-old cousin following suit. He went with his cousin to the governor general's office where they knelt for several hours as part of the effort to petition for the establishment of a parliament. Dissatisfied with the curriculum in junior high school, the two cousins went to Tianjin without permission, where they passed the entrance exam for Xinxue College, run by English missionaries, and from there they went to study in Japan. My father, owing to his outstanding test scores, was awarded official funding and entered Tokyo First High School, from where he was assigned to the Kanazawa Fourth High School the following year. During the summer of the year he turned nineteen, he was called home to marry, because grandmother was sick and needed someone to run the household. My father refused to return home, so my grandfather dispatched an uncle to Japan for the sole purpose of bringing him home, either by persuasion or by force. My father always told us that he had then several conditions that had to be met first if

he were to be married: no kowtowing, no red clothing, no face covered with red cloth, riding a horse instead of being carried in a palanquin; moreover, he wanted to take his wife abroad to study with him. If these conditions were met, he'd go home; if not, he would not return; the family agreed. After his return, however, everything was done according to tradition save his riding a horse. One month later, he returned to Japan.

After marrying into the Chi family at nineteen, my mother never stepped beyond the tangible or intangible entrance of the estate compound for the next ten years. My father was the only son, so my mother had to do all the things expected of a daughter-in-law; if she had any free time, she had to sew clothes, stitch shoe soles, embroider shoe tops, and, most pleasantly for her, embroider pillow cases in patterns of her own design. She had no friends, nothing of what we call social life, and was immensely grateful to be allowed to return twice a year to her parents' house twenty *li* away. As I recall, my mother's life at home was spent standing respectfully attending my grandparents when they ate, or crying in the forage grass. In those ten years, my father came home during four or five summer breaks and stayed at most two or three months. Once when my mother was pregnant, she had a craving for cherries, but there was only one harvest a year in July or August, and in the countryside peddlers carried them on their shoulders, selling from town to the villages. One day a peddler arrived at the entrance of our village and my twenty-one-year-old father ran out to make a purchase. Not having a bag with him, he wrapped the cherries he bought in his long scholar's gown and carried them home. That bunch of cherries, carried all the way from the village entrance to our house, supported my mother through nine years of loneliness.

That year he came home from Japan during summer break and said that her name Yuzhen was too common and so changed it to Chunyi 純一.

Later, he went directly from Japan to Germany. Letters and photos sent home were addressed to my grandparents and always began with 'Greetings Dearest and Respected Parents' and ended by mentioning my mother's name and sending his regards to her as well. In those days, a man was either embarrassed about or dared not write a private love letter to his wife. And so two people of the same age were taking two entirely different paths in life. Women stayed at home and were busy with the unending household duties at the estate—cooking three meals a day, polishing the sacrificial vessels for the New Year and preparing for the endless



festivals, washing an unending stream of pots, pans, and dishes, and sweeping up the dust that was always blowing in from beyond the Great Wall. In October she watched the hired hands place cabbages and carrots in the cellar, and another year had passed. All the while that young man of nineteen out in the wide world devoted himself to books and ideas, taking part in the society and activities of young people. The paths of the two of them diverged ever more and she was no longer capable of imagining how broad was the world that beckoned him. Even if the two of them had wished to pour out their feelings to one another, they no longer shared a common language with which to recount their vastly different life experiences.

The principle support for my mother in the loneliness of life was the birth of my older brother and me. My father returned every year during the summer break, and after a baby would be born, as if it were a token of his affection or a double of himself. The second spring after father came back home, my older brother Zhenyi 振一 was born; two years later in the spring I was born; and the following spring, my little brother Zhendao 振道 came along. In the small Chi family, our births took on a great deal of significance. In those days of undeveloped medicine, the child mortality rate was high and when my little brother was three years old, he was cavorting inside the house and burned his hands on the stove. He was taken to Shenyang for treatment and while staying with our aunt, he caught meningitis from our cousin and died two weeks later.

My mother could not accept the fact of the death of her youngest. She cried and blamed herself and gradually slipped into a state of mental confusion. In traditional society, a young daughter-in-law crying for ‘no reason’ was looked upon as inauspicious, so all she could do was avail herself of the time after serving dinner to hide in the forage grass as the sun was going down and cry. The empty yard behind the house was overgrown with grass as high as a person. From when it grew a tender green after the snow melted in the spring until its vast expanse at snowfall, it provided refuge for her suppressed sobbing. After the snow melted, she took me to the family cemetery one *li* away, where she fell atop the small mound that was my brother’s new grave and cried bitterly. I recall that the cemetery was planted round with pine trees that swayed violently in the early spring wind. Pink flowers blossomed all around the cemetery, so I went and picked a big bunch amid the sound of my mother’s grief-stricken weeping. Returning home, my grandmother told me they were herbaceous peonies. Later, when I grew up, every time I saw peonies, I would always seem to hear my

mother's suppressed weeping. That large expanse of petals, semi-transparent and seemingly so fragile, possessed a noble and delicate beauty so different from the other wild flowers thereabouts. Later in life, they, for me, came to represent images of the unending, undying beauty and sadness of much of life, especially the sufferings of the women of that past age.

Returning home from the family cemetery, my mother would sit listlessly on the *kang*, staring blankly out the window and sometimes even when grandmother called her, she would fail to hear. Every year after the Tomb Sweeping Festival, the land thawed and ferns would sprout. There was one kind called 'fiddle-heads', which were bitter but fresh and tender, and the village women all went to the vacant land by the riverbank to dig them up; naturally I was happy to go along. When we got to the vacant land, we would see flocks of geese flying back in their V formations from the south, their calls bleak and sorrowful. My mother would stand and stare for a long time, returning home only after everyone else had left.

## **Leaving Home**

One morning, my maternal grandfather paid a sudden visit to my paternal grandparents. Someone had gone to Xintaizi and told him that his daughter Yuzhen had become so absent-minded and out of sorts that when she was cooking breakfast for her in-laws she felt no pain even when she put her hand into the wood-burning stove when adding firewood, and that she had been in this state for some time. Moreover, he had heard someone from Nanjing say that my father had taken up with some fashionable students who had studied abroad and was living with them, men and women together. My maternal grandfather finally obtained my paternal grandparents' permission to have my mother and us two children sent to Nanjing to be reunited with my father. If father wouldn't have us, then he'd take us all back to his place. I clearly remember the autumn of that year—the trees had shed nearly all their leaves, the sorghum had been harvested and two hired hands readied a horse-drawn carriage and took us to the Luanshi Mountain Train Station five *li* away—the stones from mountains of that area were used in laying the Chinese Eastern Railway. For the trip to Nanjing, I wore a long cotton wadded gown of blue flowers on a red background which had been specially made in Shenyang. I was extremely excited.

Not long after our horse-drawn carriage had left the village, we saw rows of barren hills just outside it, stony and rugged where not a single tree grew. I asked, 'Ma, what is this hill called?' My mother, who had been listening to my noisy questioning all morning, replied, 'This is called the Hill of Weeping Ghosts and Howling Wolves.' The name of the hill along with my mother's look left an indelible impression on me.

Now she was setting off with two small children to rejoin her husband, who had been away from home for years, in a big, unimaginable city thousands of *li* away, where she had no family or relatives. Wouldn't she be confused and fearful, exactly like entering a world of weeping ghosts and howling wolves? She knew the future remained uncertain, but she was no longer willing to return to that small village out in the middle of nowhere, where she had been lonely and cut off for a decade, living the life of a widow. My passion and sense for literature actually came from my mother, who had never received an education above middle school level. She turned the natural phenomenon of the vast earth, the threats of wild beasts, and the unspeakable loneliness of life into many a story on a summer night, providing me with instruction and inspiration for a lifetime. Some of her rural tales were gentle longings and sorrows; others were filled with terror, like the Hill of Weeping Ghosts and Howling Wolves, unembellished, powerfully symbolizing her fear of a big southern city as well as her anxieties about her fate.

The clearest memory I have from childhood is my maternal grandfather taking my brother by the hand and my mother taking me, riding the train from Shenyang that travelled without stopping day or night. Outside the train window, there was no end to the fields, long harvested and cleared of wheat and sorghum stalks. In addition to the sparse windbreaks of trees, there was the dark brown soil stretching all the way to the horizon. My maternal grandfather said that ploughing would commence the following year only after the thaw in the third month.

Arriving in Beijing after passing Shanhaiguan, we switched to the Tianjin-Pukou line to get to Nanjing, a trip that lasted three days and two nights. As we pulled into Xiaguan, my mother looked out the window and through the thick white steam, she saw him, the stranger, handsome and confident, with spirited eyes, standing ramrod straight on the platform. Even late in life his back was always straight and he never stooped. As the steam slowly dispersed, the wife he had been forced to marry at nineteen stepped off the train, her footsteps hesitant,

and her hand that held mine trembling like an elm losing its leaves. A shy look on her pretty face masked her joy. Standing beside her on the platform were two country kids dressed in brand new wadded cotton gowns.

My maternal grandfather stayed in Nanjing for about ten days before getting back on the train and returning to his home beyond Shanhaiguan. At his departure, my mother cried, reluctant to be separated from him. My maternal grandparents had four boys before they had a girl and she was much cherished as she grew up, and now he had to leave her behind in this vast southern sea of people, with no family. In those days, my mother often told my brother and me, 'If you don't study hard, your father will leave us.'

From a very young age I had learned to worry and never slept soundly. Sometimes I would awaken at night and hear my father talking softly to my mother. His voice was warm and steady, and I would peacefully go back to sleep.

Soon after arriving in Nanjing, I was sent to the local elementary school for first grade. Recently arrived from rural north-east China, I was skinny and very rustic, and could not understand the local dialect. The only thing I understood my teacher say on the first day of school was, 'Drinking one moment and peeing



Pei Yuzhen (centre), with her eldest son Chi Zhenyi (first right) and her eldest daughter Chi Pang-yuan (third right). This photo was taken in Nanjing to be sent back to their homeland to comfort Chi Pang-yuan's grandparents. Courtesy of Chi Pang-yuan

the next is not allowed.’ I found going to school frightening and I had a hard time making the few friends I did. Once a classmate, in a friendly gesture, gave me a colourful red and green eraser, something I had never seen in the countryside, and which made me really happy. Two days later he got upset for some reason and demanded the eraser be returned, which made me feel terribly sad. To this day I still remember that eraser, so when I began to travel, I have always bought pretty erasers.

One other thing that left a deep impression happened early one spring when the snow was melting. To get to school, I had to walk down an alley called ‘three alleys’, which was all mud save for two dry strips on either side that had to be tread upon with caution. Having always been curious, I looked around at everything as I walked. That day, as I was walking to school with my brother, I stepped into the mud by accident, and my cotton shoes sank into the muck. My brother, afraid of being late, hit me and I started to cry. At that moment a car pulled up and stopped, with my father seated inside. He told the driver to pull my shoes out of the mud and help me put them on, after which they drove away. When he returned home that night, he said that children were not allowed to be taken to school in a government car, nor were we allowed to use paper with an official letterhead. This was because we had to distinguish public and private affairs, and also because a child shouldn’t develop a desire to show off.

When I was spanked for the first and probably only time, he informed the six-year-old me in the same tone of voice that I shouldn’t run wild as I did in the countryside, I shouldn’t pick the flowers in the parks, and even if I did I shouldn’t lie about it. He said, ‘The reason I spanked you is so that you will remember.’ This very early impression made me rarely ever tell a lie. Even if I had to tell a little white lie, I always felt guilty.

### **The Great Flowing River that Could Not Be Crossed**

My father Chi Shiying, as I remember, was a gentleman of mild temperament his entire life. He said that was the real wellspring of his ideals—to be a man, you had to comport yourself like one.

In his youth, he had accompanied my grandmother to stay where grandfather was garrisoned and there got a taste of barracks life as well as the chance to see