

Kao Shih Ti, 1939-1942

By Elinor Reed Knight, 2021

The happiest days of my childhood were spent at Kao Shih Ti, a small conglomeration of summer cottages on the low hills rising up from the Szechuan plains. It was to Kao Shih Ti that we escaped each year in advance of the searing summer heat. Mother and Dad had rented a cottage there during the 1929-1937 years. It was here that Malcolm was born in July 1934. In 1939 Dad had bought the cottage that I remember. Mother named it Eldoma, after the three of us. So it was that each summer we returned to this special spot to escape from the searing heat and the frequent bombings and gunfire.

Preparations began well in advance. Each spring there came a day when Mother would climb the attic stairs with us in tow to gather the summer clothes from the trunks. We spent a day or two trying on familiar pinafores, bathing suits and short pants. Then we made another trip up the stairs to pick the fabric for each new garment. We knew exactly what was there, what had been brought from Home and what had been bequeathed to us from departing missionaries. It was an annual coming-of-age ritual of decision-making. Another day we helped Mother pack the winter woolies all freshly washed and carefully interlaid with tobacco leaves to deter any clothes moths.

Soon the tailor came to help with the production of new summer clothes, made to order from patterns brought from Home. One year Dorothy had written her letters on the pattern pieces. How eagerly we had awaited each mail! I remember once that some pieces didn't arrive and friends gathered around the dining room table drafting the missing pieces on rice paper. The tailor would cut the fabric so carefully that leftovers were either big enough to do something with or less than the size of a hand. Our da niang would take all the small trimmings of cloth and paste them in layers on a very thin wooden sheet, similar to balsa wood. The final product, maybe twenty layers thick, would be carefully eased from the board. She would cut the soles for new shoes and slippers from this, stitching through the layers with a heavy twine. Sometimes she had to borrow Dad's pliers to pull the twine through. During the summer she would make the uppers so we would have new house slippers for the coming winter.

We had new sandals every summer, with straw soles and flat braid straps, a welcome change from our sensible leather lace-up shoes. Sometimes the ‘pu kai’ quilt maker would be summoned. He would come with his long bow and wads of cotton waste. Seated on the concrete top of the cistern, he would twang away, fluffing up the cotton into an airy rectangle, ready to be inserted into an envelope of cotton or silk. Now we call them duvets!

The countdown for the trip to the cottage began with the cow. She went first, two full days before us, with our cowboy and a carrier with enough fodder for the trip. Dad gave firm instructions that when we arrived there must be milk for the children and for Si Mu’s tea. Dad emphasized that not a drop of milk was to be sold or bartered away.

Actually in the next two days activity rose to a feverish pitch. Loads were packed so that each bundle was about 40 kilos. Two of these would be slung on each carrying pole, carefully balanced for weight and size. Dad hired the bearers, haggling over the size and weight of the loads, agreeing on the wages, negotiating both the number of tea breaks and the *cha chan*, the tea money. The head bearer would look over Mother’s sedan chair and Mother, and talk loudly. “*Si Mu definitely needs three carriers.*” Further discussions involved the *wha gar*, the hammock-like slings that Malcolm and I would ride. Could they agree that Malcolm and I would only need two men for each of our conveyances? Or perhaps five for the two? The bargaining would take all morning. Then they would come to the loads. Mother insisted upon taking her organ, a little collapsible box, that would be tied between the poles. She also insisted on her box springs, three sections encased in blue-striped denim. Every year there was a prolonged discussion about the impossibility of combining the compact heavy organ with the bulky light springs. I think Dad always won in the end – perhaps having added a bit more *cha chan*!

Finally the zero hour arrived and the expedition was ready to go. The bearers were extremely adept at estimating the weight of each bundle. They would line up with their loads of clothing, chamber pots, bedding, pots and pans, school books, games, jackets, and a small wind cupboard. Bringing up the rear were Malcolm and me in our *wha gars* and Mother in her sedan chair. Dad always walked. We would bid Perpy a tearful good-bye and we were off, down the garden path, along

the harbour, through the gate, and into the noise and bustle of a Chinese street.

And what adventures we had on the way! The footpaths edging the terraced rice paddies were seldom more than 24 inches wide. Skirting the rice paddies, we learned to be very still, especially if there had been rain and the footing was soft. Sometimes we heard the firecrackers preceding a funeral and our bearers would step into the paddy in deference to the mourners. Sometimes we encountered a wedding party and tried to catch a glimpse of the red-garbed bride behind the curtains of the bridal sedan chair. All along the journey there were roadside shrines, sometimes just a niche, sometimes quite ostentatious. On land too poor or too hilly for cultivation there were humpbacked earthen graves with prayer flags fluttering in the breeze. And always we watched Mother's precious box springs perched precariously atop the equally precious organ.

At noon we would stop at a roadside inn. The coolies would slurp gargantuan bowls of noodles and broth while we drank hot tea and ate boiled eggs and tangerines. Then we were back on the road for the part of the ride past the graveyard of "dragon bones". It never failed to excite us when we would see a thigh or a jaw bone jutting out of the hillside. I begged Dad to allow me to walk for a bit, promising that I would not dawdle. Little did we know that half a century later the anthropologists of ZiGong and Drumheller, Alberta would work together, examining these "dragon bones" and rewriting the story of the age of dinosaurs.

We always spent that first night at the mission station at Junghsien. Mr. and Mrs. Bridgman were close friends and there always was a special meal. One year we had canned peaches from Home, a treat reserved in our family for Christmastime. The next morning we started the climb to the cottage, about 10 miles uphill. One year Malcolm stepped into an ash pile that was still smoldering. He got to ride the rest of the way while I walked. I was so proud – and maybe a bit obnoxious as I gloated about my luck!

The cottage was H--H shaped , built of clay and wattle, white-washed with a red clay tile roof. It sat on a hard baked flat space on the side of the mountain (Was it really a mountain?) The right leg was the kitchen, the *mai-fang* (the one-holer toilet), and the servants' quarters. Here too was the pantry which also housed the round tin bath tub and the jerry cans of kerosene for the lamps.

The left leg had two small bedrooms, one for Donald and Malcolm, one for Edith and me, with a closet in between. Occupancy varied depending on who was there and for how long. The last summer in 1943 I moved into Malcolm's room when Edith and another nursing student came for the summer. Tall pines grew at that end of the cottage and made the most delicious soothing murmurs in the night breezes. My clearest memory is falling to sleep watching the lizards on the outside of the mosquito net and praying that they not find a hole and get in.

The parents' room and the living room were in the elongated centre. Here also were our school books and games, the dish cupboard, and Mother's organ. Roofed verandahs filled in both sides of the H--H, providing shade from the sun and shelter from the rain. The back verandah faced the cliff and, at the front, there were two steps down to a clay patio ringed with the plants and trees growing on the slope.

On arrival one of our first chores was to bring the dining room table out to the front verandah. A few days later Malcolm and I had the responsibility of rubbing it down with green walnut husks to bring out the rich dark grain of the wood. I remember our benches at the sides and Mother's and Dad's chairs at the ends. There, as in Tzeluitsing, there was always room for one more.

Setting up the wind cupboard was another chore, early in the routine. After the perishables were safely stowed away, a clean (and I mean clean and ironed) white cloth was dampened and spread over the wire netting. Heaven help you if you touched that cloth without washing your hands in true operating room fashion. Someone would walk down the path with a bottle and pail to the clear mountain spring that flowed between two rice paddies. Water would be boiled, some for a cuppa tea and the rest allowed to cool for drinking. The stove was the traditional Chinese peasantry stove, a raised brick square with a circular hole in which nestled the 'goa' or 'wok'. Kindling was thrust in the squarish opening at the front. We ate a lot of Chinese-style meals at the cottage. I do remember Dad and Donald making a fire in a trench in the yard and cooking supper in a frying pan. Bacon and eggs, corn on the cob and watermelon for dessert is my memory, especially spitting out the seeds to see who could spit the furthest! That must have been 1941, just before Don left to return to Canada.

On arrival Mother carefully checked for mouse intrusion and the cottage was well swept. Certain surfaces were scrubbed with soap and water before the goods and chattels were put away. By this time the bearers had departed after long harangues about the exhausting trip, the heavy loads, the inadequacy of ‘*cha chan*’, and anything else that they deemed germane. Mother’s box springs were set in place on the slat-bottomed bed. Poles at each corner held the cotton mosquito net near the ceiling and the bottom edges well tucked under the straw mattress. Her beloved organ was in its place against the wall in the living room. She would smell the milk to see if it were still sweet and sit down for a cuppa tea. It was already quite a day and soon it would be suppertime.

The whole process of meal preparation was quite visible at the cottage. The vendors brought their produce to the kitchen and Mother and our da niang bargained for the best eggplant or beans or even a live chicken. We were allowed to help with preparation, a thing unheard of at home. We watched the slaughter and pondered how could a chicken run around without a head. Just like Anne Boleyn we decided “with her head tucked underneath her arm”. Tsoa Da Niang would give us each a chicken foot and we would chase each other, shrieking with delight, pulling the tendons to make the toes claw up. At the cottage we could even eat uncooked vegetables as long as they had been grown in rows that were not fertilized with “night soil”. There was nearby farmer who knew about the queer ideas that foreigners had and he catered to those that trusted him. Dad had supplied him with seeds from Home.

The back porch was where I ‘helped’ Miss Highbaugh play solitaire. Miss Highbaugh didn’t come from Home. She was American and read books when she wasn’t playing solitaire. She was very tall, taller than any other woman I had ever seen! She knew about Cornell because she had gone to school there, just like Dad but not in agricultural science. When she was reading I was not to bother her because she was preparing lessons for her students. Miss Highbaugh’s school had been in Hankow. When the Japanese overtook that city, the school, students and all, moved into the vacant Boys’ School in Jenshow. When she taught students she was Dr. Highbaugh. She was not a doctor like Murray and Peter’s mother was. Their mother, Mrs. Dr. Webster, was a real doctor.

Miss Highbaugh and Miss Darby lived in the cottage up the path at the back

corner of our cottage. We could walk up there all by ourselves without anybody with us. Mother could watch us to see that we were safe. We played Go Fish with Miss Darby, perhaps to rescue Miss Highbaugh? Miss Darby was also unique because she didn't come from Home, either. She came from Newfoundland! I never was quite sure if these different places were as good as Home or not. However, the map that illustrated one of my earliest fantasy stories was suspiciously shaped like Newfoundland with a Prince Edward Island look-alike close by.

At the back of the cottage there was a sandstone/limestone cliff. It was quite soft and there was a fair-sized space without vegetation. Malcolm and I continued carving the city that Newton and Donald had started. It was a combination of mesa cave dwellings and free-standing buildings. We added a hospital with a helicopter pad, a school with a playground, and a city hall. There were roads and stairs and towers and wells. Most importantly, the fairies lived there. So, very shortly after arriving we would visit to see if they were well. We would make plans for repairing any damage caused by the winter rains. Each summer we would make new corn silk mattresses and new picnic tables replacing the ones that had been blown away. We dried corn silk and peach skins for clothes, hollyhocks for skirts, orange peel for baskets.

Of course, ours was not the only cottage. There were two close by us that we were allowed to walk to without chaperones. Then some distance away, at the end of a very lovely stone path, were other cottages, the church and the playing field. Since these families had gathered from various places in the mission field there was lots of visiting and companionship after what I surmise were lonely times. One doesn't always cotton to the people in one's workplace, even in the mission field! It must have been difficult when dissimilar people were together for months at a time. Summer was a reprieve.

There were wonderful times at the annual July picnic when the adults let down their facades and dressed and played like children. Mr. Day with a huge red handkerchief around his big toe complained that he had been mortally injured in the potato sack race. Another was dressed as a gypsy with a big white balloon and foretold fortunes. Dad, as Gandhi, sat cross-legged, dressed in just a white cotton dhoti around his hips. Mother was Sister Anne in a play about Bluebeard and all

his wives – Mrs. Sheridan, Mrs. Dr. Webster, Mrs. Stinson, Mrs. Hibbard, Mrs. Bridgman, such staid matrons –hanging by their hair against a ‘wall’, round-eyed, their bodies vanishing behind a white bed sheet. Mr. Birtch led us kids in ‘Follow the Leader’ and we crawled under a table, sat on Miss Sparling’s lap (!) and mussed Dr. Meuser’s hair (!!!). In 1943 the Play Day was on Malcolm’s 9th birthday and everyone joined in singing Happy Birthday.

Several times each summer we would go swimming. There were two swimming holes. The Buffalo Wallow was nearer, and well-named. It was a largish pond with sloping ends. We were told that water buffalo did cool off at the far end after a hard day’s work. I never saw them. I learned to swim in the Buffalo Wallow. The bottom was slimy and always stuck between my toes. There were cliffs on both sides and the big boys reminded us each trip that the water was deep because the cliffs went “way down”. The big boys, and that included Donald, would cut through the trees to a spot some distance away (150 yards?) where there was a good jumping off spot. We little ones would marvel at their daring and wish the time would hurry up when we could jump. I hoped that by that time the rules would have changed and girls would be allowed to jump, too.

The other swimming spot, also aptly named ‘Children’s Delight’, was quite a distance away. I remember steep grades on the walk. It was a day-long excursion and we didn’t go very often. Children’s Delight was a sequestered rock-lined bowl of clear icy water. It was about 20’ x 25’, the size for one or two families at a time. The rocks were black and smooth and water-slick. One learned to step carefully without haste. There were trees all around and the rocks became warm only around mid-day. After a bracing swim on arrival, a picnic lunch, a sunbathe and another swim, we would walk home. Mother once said that a body was warmer after going to Children’s Delights than before, despite the frigid water.

My own special spot at Kao Shih Ti was just under the lip of our front yard. There was a sheltered nook screened from a little brother’s eyes and a mother’s daily expectations. I would go there with a book or a piece of paper and a piece of charcoal for sketching. Sometimes I would wheedle a cucumber and a knife from the da niang and have a private feast. Like Christopher Robin, I firmly believed that ‘nobody knew I was there at all’.

School work continued with reading, writing and arithmetic – and so much more. On starlit nights lying on our backs on the patio watching the heavens, Dad pointed out the constellations and told us the Greek myths – Cassiopeia, Orion, Taurus the Bull, The Lyre, Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. During the summer storms we would sit in wicker chairs on the verandah and watch the lightning, counting the seconds before the thunder reverberated through the hills. We counted the seconds between cricket chirps and cicada trills to estimate how hot the day would be. One year (August 16, 1942) there was a total lunar eclipse of the sun which we watched, staring into a wash basin filled with water, tilted just so.

One Wednesday night prayer meeting ended with the hymn “Abide With Me”. For some reason I burst into tears and wept inconsolably, Mother gathered me up and took me into the cottage. She told someone – another missionary woman – that I had not been myself for some time. The prescription was worm medicine the next day. No matter whether these two were linked in actuality or not doesn’t really matter. The annual de-worming day was part of each summer. Tea that day was heartier than usual – a sure indicator. Supper was replaced with a powder concoction served in an intricately folded paper. We were treated to another of these at bed time, Breakfast consisted of a good dose of castor oil. We didn’t go far from home that day. However, after a summer when a cucumber or two escaped even Mother’s vigilance, it was a necessary potion. Never again have I sung “Abide With Me” without thinking of castor oil and worm medicine. Even decades later when worming cats or dogs I have found myself humming the tune!

The summer of 1940 Donald came straight to the cottage from the Canadian School in Jenshow. The school had been relocated from Chengtu for the safety of the children. He returned with a dislocated elbow. He and his buddies had been playing leapfrog over the desks in some “wild game”. He had to soak his arm in warm water three times a day. This greatly fascinated us because we could get him to tell us the adventures of the fairies and Brownies who lived in the homes carved on the cliff behind the cottage. When he returned to school he sent us a map of Fairyland. It was surprisingly shaped like Australia with territories labeled Brownieland and Elfland. Close by there was another island named Ku Klux Klan Land where miscreants were sent for punishment. The goblins were in charge there. The worst punishment was to be put in a crib and not allowed out to play

soccer. As for Don's elbow, it was sufficiently damaged that it kept him out of active service in WWII.

In 1941 we left home for the cottage early. The air raids were happening earlier and more frequently. Donald joined us as soon as school was over. One July afternoon we watched five squadrons of nine planes each fly over en route to Chengtu, then wheel around and head for Tzeluitsing, Sitting on the packed earthen patio we could hear the thuds of the biggest bombs and see the glow in the sky. When Chou Yin Jin stuck a knife in the ground we could feel vibrations. The fires destroyed the business section including several banks. Smoke was in our air. Dad was there in the thick of it all and we prayed that he was safe with Perpy in the bomb shelter. It was three days before a runner arrived with the news that all were safe.

Just days later in August, halfway through the summer Donald and three of his schoolmates left for Canada to continue their education in the Ontario system. They sailed from Hong Kong, stopping in Honolulu enroute to San Francisco. Three months later in December the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and captured Hong Kong. - 5 hours 2 miles an hour.

It was the next year, 1942, but a fortnight later, that I left the cottage to go to Jenshow for school.

High Bluff, Goa Shi Ti, Sept 4, 1942

Dear Mother, Dad and Malcolm.

Miss Holt and I did a big washing this morning. Miss Holt washed two sheets and her apron and her bag and various other things. I washed my dress, my pants and wash cloth and towel (the former smelled like APPLE HELL!) I've just gotten home from a little walk with "my grass sandals" (as Murray says) in shreds and my "wa dz" dirty so I'll have to put them to soak!!

On Sunday we're going to invite somebody and have sliced pineapple!!!

Stinson's are going down on Sunday, and Outerbridge's and Birtchs are

going down tomorrow. Webster's are going down on Monday. Days, Mrs. Meuser. Miss Holt and me, myself and I are going Tuesday. Miss Hambley and Miss Sparling are going down on Wednesday or Thursday. Saturday 5th

Last night it was so cold Auntie Jean said I had better get out my pukai so I did. It has been cold the last few days.

I will be sending back my two clean dresses and three clean panties with Miss Sparling.

Mrs. Edmonds men came back at three thirty yesterday with two books, the V grade Reader and another book with Mrs. Stinson. Love Elinor OOXXXXOOO
P.S. Auntie Jean is enclosing a letter, too. EMR

P.P.S. We are learning the chorus of 577, the Hymnary as a blessing, Malcolm.
Love, EMR