

# Rotten Gambler Two Becomes a True American: A Boy's Journey of Surviving the Odds

Pages: 156

Publisher: Edward Lumsdaine; 1 edition (January 20, 2016)

Format: pdf, epub

Language: English

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**ROTTEN GAMBLER TWO**

**BECOMES A TRUE AMERICAN**

A Boy's Journey of Surviving the Odds

By Edward Lumsdaine

**ROTTEN GAMBLER TWO BECOMES A TRUE AMERICAN**

**A Boy's Journey of Surviving the Odds**

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For my family

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## Prolog

I sat in President Shapiro’s waiting room at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor in early 1988, expecting to be called into the conference room for a final interview with the Board of Regents. Since I was one of two finalists for the position of Chancellor of the University of Michigan-Dearborn, I was excited as well as under some stress and in great suspense.

At that time, I had already been Dean of Engineering on the Dearborn campus for five years and had given a campus-wide speech that was very well received. One distinguished faculty member came up to me after my presentation and said, “I was against you to be our Chancellor, but now I will support you.” I left the lecture hall that day feeling I had the backing of not only the engineering faculty and staff, but also my colleagues from the other colleges.

While waiting, my mind drifted back to when I was growing up in Shanghai in one of the poorer sections. I had been expelled from St. Joan of Arc School at age thirteen for playing hooky and fighting (being in Form 1 which is equivalent to grade 6). As I watched my mother cry in front of Brother Gilbert, the headmaster, I was overwhelmed with a desperate longing for America. The Communists had entered Shanghai about two years earlier, in 1949—thus this seemed to be an impossible dream.

This is the story of how I, as a biracial child, penniless, with little formal education, hardly speaking

English, and without a clue of how to go about it, got to America, pursued the American dream, and became a true American. By the way, I did not become chancellor, but that is a tale to be told elsewhere.

I have tried to be as accurate as possible in recounting the events of my early life. When in doubt, I have checked facts with my siblings, cousins, and additional sources. I have on occasion been astonished when others have perceived a certain situation quite differently from my perspective, but my goal has been to share *my* memories (and feelings) as truthfully as possible. If mistakes have slipped in, I apologize—I realize my own fallibility due to my young age at one end and my senior lapses at the other end. Thus I ask for mercy, not judgment. However, I thought it wise to change a few names, details, and some events where I felt identification could cause embarrassment to individuals or their families. My hope is that many readers will find the glimpse of history from 1937 to 1958 focused on China and the US interesting.

## 1 Chop off the Head: Hong Kong and Shanghai

*"Sah toh* (Chop off the head)!" I knelt on the dirty floor, with a thug shrieking the threat and his accomplice holding a huge knife to my neck. How did I get into this predicament?

At nine years old, I lived in Shanghai and had a large gambling debt (relative to my non-existent income). When I could not pay it, I was beaten. I could either find a way to earn money or steal it. I talked over my plight with my good friend Yu-Min who lived upstairs in our apartment building. His father worked for a bank.

Yu-Min confided, "My father has a lot of shirts we could sell. They are Arrow shirts, many of them new."

"Do you mean we steal these shirts?" I queried.

He explained, "No—we just 'borrow' them, sell them, and then buy back the same shirts later when we have the money."

I looked at him doubtfully. To calm my misgivings, he added, "My father has so many shirts, he will never miss them. Besides, he will be gone for several months to set up a bank in Nanjing and in another northern city."

That seemed like a good plan until I asked, "How are we going to get the money to buy back the shirts?"

Looking for opportunity, I noticed two husky teenage hooligans selling tickets across the street at the theatre where the Japanese had placed an *ack-ack* gun during their occupation. I later learned this was called "scalping." The theatre was always packed, and tickets sold out quickly. The scalpers would stand in line early and buy a stack of tickets, then sell them at an inflated price shortly before the show started.

I asked Yu-Min to fetch the shirts to get me the venture capital I needed. He did, and we sold a stack of shirts to an elderly, bald man who ran a clothing store on Bubbling Well Road East. He said very little and did not ask where we got the shirts. With an occasional *hmm* and constant rotation and click-clack of two walnuts in one hand, he gave us the money.

Yu-Min told me I had to sell the tickets in the street alone, as he didn't want to risk being seen by his family. After I bought the tickets the first day, I would walk away every time I saw one of the hooligans. I reinvested the first day's proceeds and bought another stack of tickets the next day, after giving Yu-Min some pocket change.

Just as I completed my second scalping transaction and turned around, one of the thugs grabbed me by the arm and squeezed so hard I thought my arm would fall off. He pulled me aside, and pointing at me with his index finger he said, "*Boo doong* (don't move)." He yanked the rest of the movie tickets from my hand and sold them while I waited on that spot under the watchful eye of his accomplice. Both spoke mainly Shanghai dialect, with some Mandarin mixed in.

After an hour or so—it seemed like a day—they grabbed me and took me to a dingy room in an apartment. One of them drew out a long knife that to me looked like a Samurai sword. He bore down on me and commanded, "Kneel!"

Numb with fear that he was going to behead me, I obeyed. He put the blade to the back of my neck and ordered, "Hand over your money!"

I emptied my pockets while begging, "Don't hurt me."

The other thug kept repeating, "*Sah toh, sah toh.*"

The knife wielder then grabbed me by the neck—he was the bigger of the two—and punched me in the face. As I keeled over, I heard him threaten, "If we ever catch you muscling in on our territory again, we really will cut off your head."

To me, this was no idle threat. When I was six years old, one of my cousins graphically described beheadings he had witnessed, where a Japanese soldier with a large sword killed several Chinese accused of being spies. The soldier would bang the back of the prisoner to straighten the neck before chopping off the head. This nightmarish image has stayed with me to this day.

If I had reported the hooligans who threatened me to the police (if police could be found at all), I would have been ignored. There were numerous gangs of thugs roaming the streets—it was a time of lawlessness. If they had carried out their threat and murdered me, there were simply no resources for an investigation. Too many people were dying and kids disappearing without a trace.

\* \* \*

My Cantonese mother was fond of quoting the axiom, "*Tsut soi ding tsut sup.*" Loosely translated, it says, "Whoever you are at seven, that you will be until seventy." Since most Chinese in those days died before reaching seventy, this saying basically indicated a predestined life pattern or self-fulfilling prophesy. My mother occasionally called me "*larn doe yee,*" which means "rotten gambler two." The number two son—the second male in birth order, which I am—is sometimes seen in China as the family's gambler.

I was born in Shum Shui Po, Kowloon, Hong Kong in 1937. My father had moved his family south from Shanghai to Hong Kong in 1933 after his father's import-export business failed. In those days, the free port of Hong Kong was a British Crown Colony that was booming with entrepreneurs despite the global depression. The city was overrun with cheap laborers from northeastern China who had fled south because of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931. My father readily found work as a bookkeeper, clerk or secretary. For example, I found a note stating that in 1935, he worked as a secretary for Paramount Studios. The photo shows my mother holding me (at six

months old), with my brother Charlie and sister Yao-tim. My seven-month old sister Anne died shortly before Yao-tim was born.

When I was about two, my parents decided to move back to Shanghai because of the increasing threat of an all-out attack on Hong Kong by the Japanese. Although the Japanese had invaded Shanghai in August 1937, the International Settlement had remained an island of neutrality with business as usual. Roughly 10,000 American and British citizens lived there and were protected by 1,000 US marines.

Since the Japanese had destroyed the rail line from Hong Kong into Mainland China, we had to travel by ship, a journey that entailed serious risks. My uncle (mother's brother) and his entire family left first—except one daughter, Ho Siu Hwa, who stayed with us to help my mother care for the children, including May born in 1938. (I was told that I was sick, hence the delay in our family's departure.) The ship with our relatives was torpedoed by the Japanese. Hundreds of people died, with only a few survivors, one of them the 14-year old son of one of my mother's cousins who was an excellent swimmer. He clung to a piece of wooden wreckage and was picked up by a Japanese patrol boat. The Japanese were so astonished that he survived that they did not kill him but instead ordered him not to say anything about the sinking of the ship, because killing that many civilians by mistake was not good publicity. This cousin later taught me to swim in Shanghai. He is over ninety today and still lives in Shanghai. Sadly, my little sister May died in Shanghai in 1939.

\* \* \*

My father had been called to China in 1929 to help in his father's import-export company. When it went out of business, his father left for Australia (where he was born in 1882 and still had family). My father fit right into the Chinese culture. He was honest and inscrutable, and these character traits were cherished by the Chinese. In 1932, he wed my mother Ho Miao Ying by marriage contract in a ceremony conducted by a Buddhist monk. This was at a time when marriage was taboo to a *bak guay* (white ghost)—or, as Caucasians were also dubbed, a *guay tzu* (ghost). Beyond the cultural difference, they were far apart in religious belief, my father being a Christian and my mother a Buddhist. Later, my mother would describe their early life as a series of train journeys by my father between Shanghai and Nanjing to escape his father's creditors in the two cities. Neither her father nor his approved of the marriage. His father stopped speaking to him, and her father disinherited her.

My parents made their marriage "official" in 1940 at the American Consulate General in Shanghai (shown in the photo in Western-style garb), so that their four children at the time would have US citizenship. This was the year my brother George was born.

My father was addicted to smoking, and my mother joined him when she grew tired of fighting his habit. He eventually died of lung cancer at age 86. But chiefly, I admired him for his courage. Going to China into a strange, turbulent environment with barely a high-school education (some obtained in Australia, some in Seattle, and some in San Francisco at Galileo HS), with only a bit of experience as a clerk and not speaking the language certainly took guts.

My mother who had grown up in a rural area around Canton did not have much schooling. She did not see a need for learning English, so it was my father who had to learn to speak Chinese: Cantonese to communicate with my mother and Mandarin (the common man's version also known as Putonghua) for his work. She would eventually have nine living children to care for in very

difficult circumstances, and in later years had to adjust to life in America. There was a hard core to her that enabled her to survive, and she transmitted to her children important Chinese cultural values. For example, it is the children's responsibility to take care of their parents as soon as they are able.

## 2 Life under Japanese Occupation

The US marines shipped out of Shanghai at the end of November 1941, not having lost a single soldier in the fourteen years they had been in the city. A few days later, the Japanese simultaneously attacked Pearl Harbor, invaded Hong Kong, and took over the International Settlement in Shanghai.

The Japanese occupied all of Shanghai and unified the city, although they were savage landlords. Shanghai had been carved up before that time because England had beaten China in 1842 in what is known as the First Opium War. That was a disgraceful period in the history of the British Empire because China was forced to take opium in trade for goods, such as spices and silk. After the Second Opium War between China, the British and the French (1856-1860), foreign traders could travel all over China. The previously isolated country had become open to the West.

Since then, many countries saw China as an easy mark, and foreigners—English, French, Germans, Italians, and Russians—overran Shanghai and sectioned the city into Concessions, which were areas under the control of the respective countries. We lived in the International Settlement in the center of the city and north of the French Concession.

In this period of white domination, my Australian-born paternal grandfather had gone to China from Seattle to set up an import-export business.

People often ask me, "Was your grandfather a missionary?"

To this, my usual answer is, "No, he was a mercenary rather than a missionary, since many foreigners in China at that time exploited the Chinese."

\* \* \*

In early 1943, my father, a Caucasian American, was taken by the Japanese to a concentration camp in Pudong across the Huang Pu River from Shanghai. Chinese people were not interned, and my mother could keep her biracial children with her because the oldest was only ten. Had Charlie been sixteen, he would have been interned. We lived on Bubbling Well Road, which is now Nanjing Road West and bisects the city from east to west for most of its length.

When I wrote to an organization called "Old China Hands"—a group of people who survived the Japanese imprisonment in Shanghai and kept records—I received the following information:

Your father was interned in the Pudong camp in February 1943. He was listed as being age thirty-seven (in 1945) and a merchant. He was subsequently moved to another camp, the Yu Yuen Road camp. In June 1945 the entire complement of the camp was moved to a complex that was the Japanese military barracks. The purpose of that move was to deter the US Air Force from bombing any barracks once it was known that it contained Allied prisoners.

During the Japanese occupation, even children came to feel that death was only one misstep away. The mere suspicion of having done something that offended the Japanese in some way could mean death on the spot. They had guard shacks manned by a single soldier every few hundred meters along Bubbling Well Road. We—from toddlers on up—were instructed to bow every time we passed one of these shacks. The Japanese soldiers ruled by absolute terror. The worst example (the Rape of Nanking) did not become known in the West until after the end of World War II. Terror was a strategy because there were 100 Chinese civilians for every Japanese soldier.

Here is an incident that happened to me in 1944 (when I was seven) and still puts a chill down my spine. My mother had asked my brother Charlie to pick up something from a friend's apartment nearby. I always liked to tag along with my oldest brother who was eleven at the time. As we ambled down Bubbling Well Road, we saw three Japanese soldiers marching towards us, one soldier in front, bracketed by the other two slightly behind him. Since the sidewalk was narrow, my brother moved over to the curb. I decided to scoot to the other side to clear the way for the soldiers. I must have been in some panic, thus moved too quickly, stumbled, fell, ricocheted off a wall and hit the leg of the nearest soldier. Terrified and trembling, I got up and bowed quickly, expecting some terrible punishment. However, the soldier simply kicked me aside, like a dog, and kept on walking. I could hardly believe my luck!

\* \* \*

By this time, my mother had become a frequent *mahjong* player, and she was exceptionally good at it. Even during the Japanese occupation of Shanghai, my mother would play *mahjong* with friends or relatives. I am not sure, but I believe she did make some money from gambling.

Every time four ladies were present, they would *hoy toy*, which means "open the table." That term was used for *mahjong*, not for setting the table to eat. By the time I was seven years old, I often stayed up late at night to watch (or until I was threatened with punishment if I didn't go to bed)—this game absolutely fascinated me. It is a complicated game of half luck and half skill and is far more difficult to play than poker.

We received large crates (each about one foot by one foot by three feet) of food from the Swiss Red Cross every month or so. These crates contained chocolate, spam, sauerkraut, canned cheese, and a few other items. A bottle of vitamins was supposed to be included in one of the corners, but it was always missing. We suspected that the Japanese soldiers took them during inspection.

The Red Cross gave tuition money for Charlie and Maria to go to school. At that time, Japanese was taught each day to all children in these Chinese schools. I believe my mother received some additional money from the Swiss Red Cross to support the family. I don't know if we would have survived without the help of the Swiss Red Cross, and we remember them with gratitude. They also took care of Australian and British children whose parents were in the concentration camp like my father.

I remember receiving these crates because the large sauerkraut can, when opened by my mother, gave off a terrible smell. This, in addition to the fact that the can was puffed up, made her believe that the contents were spoiled. One time my uncle, who was a chief engineer on a ship and was a world traveler, saw this and showed my mother how to cook the sauerkraut, because it was a vegetable with a lot of nutrients (especially Vitamin C) that all of us desperately needed. In those days we mainly ate plain *congee* (rice gruel) in the morning, with a skimpy meal at noon. There was no food for dinner.

The canned cheese (being an unfamiliar food item) also took some getting used to in our family. My uncle relished it, and he wanted to show us a special way to eat it—melted over a dish of

cooked cauliflower. We thought he had ruined our meal.

\* \* \*

About once a week during 1943/44, the Flying Tigers from Chunking would come and bomb Shanghai. We used to joke that every time our mother cooked sweet red-bean soup we would get bombed by the Americans. While she and her friends or relatives were playing *mahjong*, my brother Charlie and I would sneak out to watch the fireworks. As half-Americans we were thrilled to see our “half-brothers” strike at the Japanese. I had great admiration for those pilots and not surprisingly it made me want to become a pilot myself.

The noise of the explosions was our cue to climb the stairs that led to the roof. The sirens would usually go off late, after the bombs had fallen, and Charlie and I commented that the sirens were a send-off for the bombers. Our roof was flat, with a jumble of things stored there as well as laundry hung out to dry. Thus we were able to hide without being caught.

After we returned to the apartment from the rooftop, we would simulate an airplane by placing a plank crosswise on a sturdy bench. With Charlie sitting on one end of the plank and me on the other as bombardiers, we would invent English words and tell each other in Chinese what they meant. For example, *karabom* was “bombs away”—we did not know how to speak English during those years.

When the bombing was at night, we had to draw all the window shades. The whole city would be dark, except for the *ack-ack* guns and searchlights that lit up the sky. The Japanese had placed the guns in populated areas, and one of the guns was right across the street from us on the roof of a movie theatre.

Because I was always hungry, I would sneak out at night during blackout and scavenge for bits of food at a nearby market. I would hit a different stall each time and grab a handful of dumplings, a spring roll, or even a piece of barbecued pork from a pot, then run to a hiding place and quickly gulp down whatever I happened to snare. After a while, Charlie joined me on these forays, and one time Maria begged us to take her along. But she was almost caught, and also my mother started to get suspicious. Thus I decided to stop these risky excursions. My behavior was not unique. Many hungry children with clawing pain in their bellies were driven to search for food and steal only under cover of total darkness every time bombs were falling on the city from the Flying Tigers. We were like desperate starving little rats.

Sometime in late 1944 or early 1945, when Charlie and I were on the rooftop during one of those bomb runs, we noticed a Flying Tiger P-51 go down in smoke. I believe the P-51s were escorts for the B-25 and B-29 bombers. We did not see the pilot bail out. A day or two later, we were confronted with a horrible scene that is still etched in my mind. An American pilot with a rope binding his hands was dragged behind a truck through Bubbling Well Road. I am not sure if he was dead or alive. A loudspeaker kept blaring from the truck how this American had come to kill Chinese civilians. From then on, my brother and I stopped watching the bombing.

\* \* \*

In late August 1945, we knew something was afoot when we saw Japanese troops leave their posts along Bubbling Well Road. Rumors were flying about an invasion.

One evening, the phone rang in our building—we had one phone for four families—and the person answering the phone screamed and then whispered that the Japanese had surrendered. We could not believe it. We were afraid to even say it because the Japanese soldiers had killed

entire families at the least sign of disrespect. One of our uncles died from the effects of a savage beating he had received at the hands of the Japanese.

Although as children we understood that the United States had zapped Japan with a humongous "bright-bomb," we did not have a clue as to what that was. It was totally beyond our comprehension that two atom bombs were dropped with ferocious destructive power, one on Hiroshima on August 6 and one on Nagasaki three days later. \*

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### Book Description

This is the story of how a biracial child, penniless, with little formal education, hardly speaking English, and without a clue of how to go about it, reaches America and pursues the American dream.

His Cantonese mother occasionally calls him larn doe yee, which means "rotten gambler two." His American father is imprisoned by the Japanese during their occupation of Shanghai. After the Communists take over, his father reluctantly leaves for America, leaving eight children behind.

What perils does Edward face in a city during war, turmoil and terror (under Japanese, Nationalist, and Communist rule), being hungry, bullied, seen as unmanageable, and trying various schemes to earn money, one of which results in his being threatened with beheading?

Through the kind help of a priest, he leaves Shanghai alone at age 14. In Hong Kong he is hired on as a cabin boy of a Danish tramp ship. He eventually finds a home with a "friend" in San Francisco, then joins the US Air Force on an impulse and has more unexpected adventures and blessings that extend to his family.

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