



Wong Taitai

(Wong Siu Chao 王小秋)

While teaching at June Kwan's tutoring center in the Western District of Hong Kong, I met Wong Taitai, a force of nature in her own right. Wong Taitai (Mrs. Wong) was engaged to teach me Mandarin. These were lessons in addition to coursework I was undertaking at The Chinese University of Hong Kong Chinese Language Center. In the course of these lessons, Wong Taitai told me her story...in Chinese of course...she doesn't speak a word of English. So fascinating it was I hung on every word!

Wong Taitai grew up in Shanghai. During the Cultural Revolution, Wong Taitai's parents, Chinese opera stars, were sent away for reeducation. As a young teenager, Wong Taitai was left to care for older uncle, younger sister and other family members. She sold all the furniture in the house. Then, practical being that she is, she became a young cadre of the Cultural Revolution. Time passed, Wong Taitai married a rather high-up official. A daughter was born. More time passed. The country began to open up. Wong Taitai sprang into action and started a business shipping fresh seafood from the Shanghai area up to Beijing. She was successful and started buying up real estate in Shanghai. Her husband, a good Communist, embarrassed at his wife's business success, wanted a divorce. This was done. Wong Taitai gave him all her assets, but retained custody of her daughter. She said: "Money comes again, but a daughter never."

The two relocated to Hong Kong. Wong Taitai knew not a word of Cantonese, so she took the only job she could find, giving baths to seniors in a retirement home. She learned Cantonese in six months. She earned a degree in nursing. When I met Wong Taitai, she had remarried happily, and had retired from senior care. She did retain one patient, Mr. Zhao. Mr. Zhao's home was located in Western District. He allowed us to hold our lessons in his home on the days Wong Taitai

oversaw his care. Mr. Zhao (pictured below) had great charm and was of a great age. Every time I visited, he searched deep into his memory to bring up a few words of English for me learned from his childhood in Hong Kong public schools. He was always so polite to say: “America very good! Much obriged!”

In this way, our lessons were tinged with a quality of joy and novelty. Wong Taitai in her perfect Mandarin accent, helped me learn to get my tongue around pronunciation. It was like mother to baby. Eventually, I was able to pass the oral and written exam at Chinese U, which could never have happened without her instruction.

Wong Taitai introduced me to Chinese cultural life in deep and unexpected ways. She took me on various outings, as a sort of mascot. She was quite proud to show me off as her American friend. She especially liked Chinese cultural gatherings. She would burst into a Chinese opera aria. Then she would make me sing a Western opera aria. She knew all the prominent artists of the mainland. At one gathering, the premier mainland artist depicting shrimp gave me a scroll (see above). His technique apparently is unparalleled.

Wong Taitai has relocated to Shanghai. She encouraged my husband and me to buy a property there and retire...the lifestyle is pleasant and inexpensive. We returned to the US instead. There are many more stories and adventures with Wong Taitai, but let it just be said that her kindness, directness and fun have made her a friend and mentor beyond compare.

