

Despite the lingering effects of childhood abuse, Lu Chi Fa created good fortune in the U.S. He has owned a restaurant in Morro Bay since 1990. The central message is that success is possible despite poverty, hardship and poor education. Setbacks will occur, but if we set aside negative excuses and work hard we can fulfill our dreams.

MY GOOD FORTUNE: Memoir of a Chinese Orphan's Success in America

by Lu Chi Fa With Dr. Lorin Lee Cary

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My Good Fortune

Memoir of a
Chinese Orphan's Success
in America



Lu Chi Fa with Dr. Lorin Lee Cary

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-64438-609-5

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-64438-610-1

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2019

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Lu, Chi Fa

My Good Fortune: Memoir of a Chinese Orphan's Success in
America by Lu Chi Fa

BIOGRAPHY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY/Cultural, Ethnic &
Regional/Asian & Asian American | SELF-HELP/Personal
Growth/Success | BUSINESS & ECONOMICS/ Entrepreneurship
Library of Congress Control Number: 2019903748

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1

BE OPTIMISTIC

I was barely three years old in 1944 when my parents died within a few months of each other. A careless herbalist poisoned my father. Malnutrition took my mother, though perhaps it was really grief. These were crushing events for a little boy. It was a time of war, starvation and homelessness in China. Japanese troops occupied our country even as a civil war raged.

For a while I lived with my big sister. She loved me and always encouraged me to be strong, but her husband abused me and considered me a burden. To protect me she often hid me in a dark storage room where I huddled, sad, lonely and fearful, between layers of prickly straw crawling with bugs. That early experience scarred me for the rest of my life.

None of my father's kin or even my own three other adult brothers and sisters could or would take me in for more than a few days or months at a time. They had families of their own and not enough food, or in some cases compassion, to feed another soul. No arms comforted me when I was sad, lonely or fearful. And I was painfully hungry almost all the time. So were a lot of other people in China in those days, but I believe a child's hunger hurts more.

When I was five my sister-in-law sold me for two sacks of rice to a Communist village leader. My Oldest Brother assumed I would have a good life with this man. His wife just wanted to get rid of me. Looking back, I know they desperately needed the food and the money the rice would bring when they sold some of it. At the time I hoped that at last I had found a family of my own. I could not have been more wrong.

My new "father," a middle-aged man, had just married a woman with a twenty-year-old son and he wanted a younger boy he could train to be obedient to him. Since he now had two sons, he said he was twice lucky. That was how I got the nickname "Double Luck."

Yet I was anything but lucky. For over a year I was my adoptive parents' slave. I slept on the cold kitchen floor and had little to eat. Hunger filled my days and nights, even when they took me with them as they confiscated food from slightly better off folks in the village. I tried my best to do all that they asked of me, but they complained that I was lazy bad boy. They punished me harshly.

Terrified and alone, I comforted myself by recalling that Big Sister had told me I was a good boy and that I needed to be

strong. I chanted these words to myself, and when the opportunity finally arose I got word to Big Sister of my horrible conditions. When I was six she found and rescued me.

This did not end my problems. For the next several years, as the civil war raged and the Communists ultimately triumphed, I bounced from family to family, person to person. There was no stability, no calm. It was a terrible time. Being hungry, even starving, was the central fact of my childhood. I drank a “tea” made from dried lima bean shells sprinkled into warm water and often ate scraps wherever I could find them, even rotted food that made me ill.

In 1951, two years after the Communists had ousted Chiang Kai-shek, I fled with Oldest Brother and his family to Hong Kong and then Kowloon city for a better life. We joined thousands of other refugees in crowded camps. Although now free and safe from the Communists, my trials were not over. My brother could not find work and I supported the family by begging.

That's when my dream of going to America began. When an old man in our refugee camp urged me to give him some rice, I hesitated. And then I remembered that once someone who had saved me from starvation said that caring for others served heaven. It turned out that the man had sons in America, a place, he said, where people were well-fed and didn't need to swallow sorrow in order to survive. When his sons sent him a ticket to join them he told me he would never forget my kindness and that someday I too would see America. I cherished the idea of living where food was not a problem.

For the next two years I continued to beg for the family, but the dream of America never left me. In 1953 we, along with thousands of other Chinese, managed to make it from Hong Kong to Taiwan. Although poverty was widespread there, things were better and I attended school for the first time. My oldest brother taught me the characters I would need for that, and beat me harshly when I made mistakes. Now twelve, I was the tallest boy in second grade. I did well in class although the other kids teased me about my size. A target in school and at home, after only a few months I quit and went to work.

My first job was in a factory that made high heel shoes for women. I hoped to learn some valuable skills for the future and instead endured constant abuse. My boss was a loud, nasty man. A heavy smoker, he often made me fill his lighter with gasoline. Once it did not work and I refilled and tested it, only to have it burst into flame and ignite a nearby gas tank. The owner of the factory kicked me viciously and stopped only when an American Chinese customer intervened.

When the fire truck came the boss hissed at me. "Don't tell how the fire started," he warned. "It was an accident." I realized he just wanted to avoid a fine since I was underage. I knew I needed to find a better job.

In the meantime although my earnings helped the family, my eldest brother often beat me. It didn't matter why, or if there was a reason. Even then, I think I realized he was angry with himself. Born with one leg shorter than the other, and forced to walk with an odd gait, I believe he hated his life and took that self-hatred out on me. I still bear scars from the bamboo stick he beat me with.

When I was fourteen some of my brother's friends in construction needed an errand boy and I secured a job with them. I ran errands, cleaned the premises and kept office supplies on hand. I got along well with the workers, men who came from various parts of China. I picked up another dialect too, the fourth I learned.

Although my earnings helped the family, my eldest brother often beat me. It didn't matter why, or if there was a reason. Even then, I think I realized he was angry with himself. Born with one leg shorter than the other, and forced to walk with an odd gait, I believe he hated his life and took that self-hatred out on me. I still bear scars from the bamboo stick he beat me with.

There was a strong class system in China at the time and that caused me to have a big argument with a construction worker. People in the office used glass vessels for tea, while others used regular cups. Well, when this guy took his tea in a glass I tried to stop him. Eventually another man told him to leave me alone, that I was just a little kid. I felt badly about this argument and wanted to apologize to the worker the next day, but learned he'd secured a job at a club for American officers. When he did not respond to written apologies I tracked him down, hoping to apologize, and angle for a better position. By now I desperately needed one.

The man accepted my apology and when I wondered about a job at the club he asked if I could speak English. I didn't answer, just lowered my head. "Okay," he said, to my surprise. "I'll teach you. Here's some money. Go get a haircut." He told

me I'd have to talk with the master sergeant and had me say over and over things like "How are you, sir?"

It worked and the sergeant hired me as a busboy. It was a busy place, with bingo every Wednesday and various receptions and parties. In addition to mundane tasks such as cleaning and polishing silver ware, folding napkins and cleaning ash trays I periodically had to mix drinks even though I was only fourteen. That hadn't been one of the skills I'd expected to learn, but it served me well in the future.

By now I was living in my own place, a small rented room without any facilities. I showered in the courtyard, which was no fun during the winter. But I was free from my Big Brother's cruelties, had a phonograph and even a bicycle.

After a year I began to work as a waiter at the swimming pool. You had to be clean cut, smile and know basic food items. By now I'd learned to smile even if I did not understand the English. I tried to learn the language, yet it was so different from the Chinese and Taiwanese dialects I understood that it was difficult.

The Americans had a language problem of a different sort: they had difficulty pronouncing or even remembering our Chinese names. They solved this in an imaginative way: they put name tags with American names in a basket and had each of us chose one. That's how I got the name Gordon, which is what many of my friends call me today.

I had my own language issues. My long hours prevented me from taking much advantage of the English classes offered. Yet I picked up a few words and did my best to be useful.

I also had my first experience with coffee, which all the officers drank. Excited to try it, I filled a glass half full and added lots of cream and a stick of butter. I was so skinny I thought that the combination would beef me up. Weird, I know. In any case, I drank the whole thing. My stomach was not happy. It was a while before I tried coffee again.

Taiwan at the time was still quite poor, and what I saw while working at the officers' club confirmed what the old man at the refugee camp had told me about Americans. Most important, I encountered a level of living that I'd never before experienced. They lived well.



Image 1 Lu Chi Fa, far right, with other busboys and waiters at Taipei officers' club about 1959

Seeing parents with their children as I worked next to the base swimming pool also made me crave a sense of family. I envied the affection and love so evident and imagined that my life would be better with such folks. Big Brother's abuse and theft of my wages stood in sharp contrast to what I witnessed every day. In time I moved out on my own, saved money and continued to fantasize about going to America.

The dream persisted when I entered the military in 1961, something all boys in Taiwan had to do for two years. After that I worked in Taipei briefly and then as a waiter at a club for American noncommissioned officers on the huge airbase in Taichung. Once I passed an oral "conversation test," I became a bartender (and eventually the chief bartender) there. And I faced a hard truth. Even if I set aside enough money it would be nearly impossible to get the papers required to leave the country. The government restricted immigration; men younger than forty-five could not emigrate. I accepted this with a sigh and focused on making a good living.

There might have been an obstacle to leaving the country, but not to making money. My years of begging had instilled in me the ability to seek for and spot opportunities, and that's what I did now. The salary at the NCO club, equivalent to fifty cents an hour, was pretty good. The tips were not. Still, the GIs liked me. They were young, close to my age, and they were lonely.

I became friendly with the guys who worked at the base as well as with those who came in from Vietnam for rest and recreation and just wanted to have a good time. I didn't speak English that well, but I tended the bar they frequented. I liked

people and used the international language of “smile” well. Sometimes, if we rode the same bus, we’d stop at roadside eating places and I’d introduce them to the local specialties. Watching them maneuver chop sticks was always fun.

Occasionally these friends bought me things at the military Post Exchange, which I sold to wealthy people. But this was not the biggest part of my income. I made myself useful to the soldiers at the club. A notice on the bulletin board let folks know that I could line up taxis or rental cars or suggest places to visit. Doing such favors rewarded me well. If I arranged a taxi ride from the base to Taipei, for instance, the cab driver paid me a commission. I began to accumulate a good amount of money at a time when Taiwan was still quite poor.



Image 2 At age 23

And this set the stage for another important development in my life. One of my army friends invited me to his parents' home in Taichung. He had two sisters, one of whom his mom wanted me to marry. But when I met a neighbor's daughter, everything changed. Vivian was seventeen and I was twenty-four. Her Chinese name, Lai Juie Ying, meant "handsome flower." She was a tall, full-figured country girl, uncomplicated and innocent, and very attractive, a handsome flower indeed. I fell in love and wanted to be with her all the time.

As was the custom, I met her parents at her older sister and brother-in-law's house. Vivian and I got together there many times before we had our first date by ourselves. We rode bikes around Taichung; the first American movie we saw was *Goldfinger*, subtitled in Chinese of course. After the movies we'd go to a Szechwan restaurant where the food had lots of spices to warm one up in this cold province. Every now and then we'd go to a Taiwanese place which featured plain food with little oil or a Cantonese restaurant which featured simple food, steamed or stir fried with little oil. Sometimes we'd just have rice porridge with some side dishes such as salted fish or scrambled eggs with soy sauce.

A few times we experimented by stopping at a coffee shop named South America. Coffee was new to Taiwan at the time and all the young people wanted to try it. Having worked with Americans for so long, I knew how to handle the beverage and so did not repeat the embarrassing disaster of my first try with it years before. Little did I know that decades later I'd own a restaurant with the word "coffee" in its name.

It might seem odd that I'm talking about food as I recall us dating. But remember my childhood. Hunger defined it. I was always hungry. I think that's why to this day I remain so conscious of food.

In any case, after outings with Vivian I'd hire a three-wheel pedicab to drive her home. At the time it might have seemed an extravagance to others. To me it was a way of showing my feelings for her, and making a statement of my good fortune. I had come from nothing and had little education, and now look at me. I was proud of my success and to be with her. I'd been unwanted and unloved as a child. Now it was different.

We dated for six months and got along well. Her parents liked me and my healthy income surprised them because I was still so young. They saw I had ambition and would be a good provider for their daughter.

We were married in 1965 at a fancy restaurant as was the practice then. It was an exciting day. Eighty guests attended, including many of the American servicemen I worked with. During the wedding and reception, Vivian changed her dress five times, in keeping with a Chinese custom for brides. Also in line with tradition, we received a lot of red envelopes with money; the closeness of the relation determined the amount given. Most of this went to pay for the banquet.

Many of my American buddies asked if they could kiss the bride. I agreed after talking with Vivian, although I had my doubts about what kind of kiss they had in mind and whether this was okay for my culture. I remember feeling as if I lived in two cultures at once, the Chinese and the American, and that

softened my doubts. Vivian thought it only polite to do as they asked, so she let each of them kiss her on the cheek.

At first we rented a tiny place, maybe 450 square feet. But a year later we built a house of our own on a lot I bought in a suburb of Taichung. This was just the first of my moves into real estate. It was a simple house, compared to the properties I'd later buy in the United States. Construction was relatively cheap then, yet I was only twenty-four at the time and that made it unusual.

"You are so young," a neighbor twice my age said. "You must be very lucky. Good fortune shines on you."

I agreed that it did, and I knew that it was hard work rather than luck that made it possible for me to buy a house when that was beyond the reach of most Taiwanese. The house had about a thousand square feet with two bedrooms, one bath, a great room, a nice kitchen and a big yard. Although we had our own well and running water, uncommon for the time, we had to boil it before drinking. We had a refrigerator, but laundry had to be done by hand and hung up outside to dry. The best thing is that we'd paid the full cost of the house and thus had no mortgage. As a result, I felt accomplished and prosperous.

Vivian's widowed mother moved in with us. Lin Lai Hau was a kind and attractive woman, then in her mid-fifties. She helped clean the house, cook and take care of our two children when they were born. In her free time she often went to the nearby Buddhist temple. Each day we put a small plate of food in front of our own picture of the Buddha as a sign of respect. This was the custom in all Chinese homes. Even my cruel adoptive parents had done it.

Looking back I can see that although I don't do this practice now, many Buddhist notions shape my life. And, of course, I realize that the Confucian values and traditions so central to Chinese culture—especially filial piety and humaneness—also influence me.

Lin Lai taught me a lot about cooking. I can still smell the sesame oil she sprinkled on top of dishes. The food she prepared was so good that I began to invite my American friends to the house for simple dinners. My co-workers often came as well. I was pleased and even excited to share our space with everyone. On those nights my mother-in-law made dishes with American tastes in mind: sliced beef cooked with tomatoes, jumbo shrimp, plain steamed rice.

Sometimes the GIs brought liquor. After dinner they'd play their guitars and sing Western songs or ones they'd written about their home towns, their girlfriends or growing up in America. It was a wonderful, fun time.

I loved the easy friendliness these guys had. These evenings gave me a chance to practice English, and also deepened my desire to get to the United States. Although I told Chinese friends that I understood everything said in English, the truth is that I did not. I have to admit that this was my way to show off. In retrospect I can see too that inviting people to eat with us hinted at the path I would follow later. Back then I just wanted to enjoy myself.

As my opportunities at the NCO club mushroomed, I kept an eye out for other investments. I promised myself that never again would I live in poverty, and neither would my family. Once I'd saved enough money, we bought another

house. This one we rented out to Americans for \$115 a month, a sizeable sum on Taiwan at the time. Now I was a property owner and a landlord and this deepened my sense of well-being.

Meanwhile our family grew. At the end of 1966 our first child was born, a strong, healthy boy. His Chinese name was Jiun Ming. Jiun means “handsome;” Ming means “intelligent” or “bright.” Later he adopted the name Jason. Our second son, born a year and a half later, we named Chia Wen. Chia means “gentle;” Wen means “refined.” Later he called himself Kevin.

I was thrilled and proud of my sons, not because they were boys instead of girls, but because they were fine and healthy. Above all, I wanted them to have a normal childhood and not have to experience the kind of cruelties I’d faced. I wanted that for all children.

Around this time I encountered a man whose best friend had immigrated to America. I asked how he’d done that. “I’ve always wanted to go there, because I’m sure I’d find my good fortune in the U.S.” He directed me to Mr. Ching and Good Auntie, my mother’s younger sister, predicted that he’d set in motion events that would change the direction of my life. And she was right.

What had merely been thoughts or a wish now became an action plan. I believed that going to America would set our family on a path to a much better future. I knew that we were doing well; I just wanted us to do better. Vivian, by then twenty-two, agreed. She knew I was responsible and trustworthy and at this point she encouraged me to act on my desire. Little did we know how hard a long-distance marriage

would be, how long we would be apart, or how this decision would affect both our relationship and the family.



Image 3 In his office at the Taichung NCO club about 1967

My Good Fortune

With a Taiwanese passport in hand, I bought a one-way ticket to the United States. The visa I'd acquired with Mr. Ching's help, I thought, would be good for five years. I was sure it wouldn't take that long to acquire the funds necessary to move Vivian and our two sons from Taiwan to America.

If I had known then how long the separation would be and the strain it would place on our marriage, I might not have left Taiwan. Yet that is what I did.

2

RESPECT YOURSELF

On the way to the airport Good Auntie told me I could choose to forget the difficult times of the past and be happy, or remember them and be sad. I vowed to live by those words.

I was twenty-seven and it was October 29, 1969, the year of the Rooster. I was going to fulfill my biggest, brightest dream and finally go to America. Grandma had told me that dreams could carry you anywhere you wanted to go. “Follow your dreams,” she told me, “and go where your heart leads you.” I smiled to myself as I boarded the plane, thinking that this was exactly what I was doing.

I was going to a country where people ate three meals a day and if they worked hard they could be a success. That’s what I believed, and I knew that if I labored there as hard as I had in Taiwan then I could save enough money for my family to

join me. We could all be free and have a higher standard of living.

The plane from Taiwan took off late, and the engines sounded like demons fighting. Nothing in the world could have dampened my spirits that day. In my childhood dreams, at a time when I'd been helpless, alone and hungry, a mighty silver dragon had swooped down and rescued me. I'd imagined then that the powerful dragon would protect me, and that is how I felt now as this big silver airplane carried me high over the clouds.

I smiled as we hurtled toward distant Honolulu. There I'd go through immigration, then on to Los Angeles where Philip, who I'd met in second grade, would meet me. I had a Taiwanese passport and, most precious of all, a business visa good for five years. It declared I was in the importing business. I was not.

Really, I was just a little Chinese boy inside the body of a man desperate for a chance at a new life for my family and me. Freedom, prosperity and security would be ours if I persevered and worked hard. I had plenty of experience doing both, so I was confident that despite going into a new culture I would be able to make it. My success in Taiwan reinforced that belief. I was so excited I had difficulty keeping still.

I sat in economy class, wearing my best clothes. A reserved Taiwanese army officer sat next to me. We exchanged only three or four sentences during the trip, so I had no way to share my exhilaration. Dinner, to my relief, provided a good distraction. The attendants gave us typical American food, and utensils. I knew how to eat Western style, without chopsticks.

As I cut up my meat, I realized that the officer had not touched his food. But he watched me out of the corner of his eye. I slowed my movements so he could see how to use the knife and fork to cut his meat and spear his vegetables. I gave no sign that I observed his discomfort. I wanted him to save face.

The flight from Taipei to Honolulu took a long, long time. I looked it up the other day; we'd flown over five thousand miles. When we were finally over Hawaii, I looked out my scratched window and saw a river bending and twisting as it flowed to the sea. It reminded me of another lesson I'd learned long ago.

My Favorite Uncle once told me that some people are like rivers: they get broader and deeper as they meander toward the sea. "You are like that," he said. "I promise, as you age your many experiences will make you wiser, and one day you will find your home."

He didn't know that home for me would mean the United States. I did.

As the plane descended to Honolulu I realized I was closer than ever before to my goal. Tears streamed down my cheeks. My good fortune lay ahead. I had \$300 in my pocket. My name, Chi Fa, meant "new beginnings." And I had high hopes for the future. I didn't know it as the plane landed, but I also had a very bad piece of news coming my way.

As we exited the plane, my knees stiff from sitting so long, I thought I smelled freedom in the air. My spirits soared. We had only twenty five hundred miles to go to Los Angeles. People seemed friendly, especially toward young children. This was not what I'd experienced as a child. The Americans I met

also seemed patient with my limited language skills and eager to help.

I joined the other passengers in a long line to have our papers examined. When it was at last my turn, I learned that my visa would allow me to stay in the U.S. for only thirty-eight days, not five years as I had thought. To do that, the customs officials politely told me, I'd have to have a different kind of visa. I was frantic. My heart beat fast and my mouth went dry. By law, in less than six weeks I would have to return to Taiwan.

Confused and beside myself for a moment, I wondered if I should turn around and go back. I took several deep breaths to calm myself. I had a plane ticket through to Los Angeles. I was halfway to success. And Big Sister had assured me often that I was lucky. "Chi Fa," she'd told me, "Good fortune will find you." I believed that.

I took more deep breaths and made my decision. I'd continue to Los Angeles, handle whatever came up and find a way to stay legally. That, I figured, would be easier to do than fixing things if I was illegal and then caught.

Childhood hardships had trained me to be strong and I'd demonstrated many times that I could overcome obstacles. I would have to have hope in myself. I would become fluent in English, save money and send for my family. Life is a chance, I thought. If I didn't seize it I'd lose it. And good fortune, I was sure, would be mine.

When we landed in Los Angeles, the number of planes at the huge airport amazed me, and I was a bit in awe as I gathered my bags and met Philip. We'd become acquaintances in second grade when he was seven and I was a young teen. I

had reconnected with him when friends gave him a going away party at the hotel where I worked as maître de. A tall fellow, calm and mature, he'd come to Los Angeles and invited me to stay with him temporarily. I'd gladly accepted.

Still a bit dazed, we went to his studio apartment at Wilshire Boulevard and Vermont Street, a half block from Bullocks Wilshire, a high-fashion department store. I stayed with Phillip for several months, grateful for his pull-down Murphy bed and the low rent of \$32.50 a month. In time he moved to Canada and I lost touch with him. But that was in the future, and I was grateful to have a friendly person to host me during those early confusing months in the U.S.

I'd been around Americans before, but not like this. Now I was in a locale quite different from what I was used to and in a culture where people did things in unfamiliar ways. Los Angeles was far bigger than Taichung and much more spread out. Cars seemed to be the major form of transportation, and everyone drove so fast it frightened me. At first, even crossing streets seemed like a dangerous thing to do. In time I got over that fear, but it took me awhile before I bought my first car and explored the area a bit.

What impressed me most at first, though, were the super markets. Taiwan at that time had nothing comparable, and of course I'd not been able to shop at the Post Exchange store on the U.S. military base. Now I wandered in local markets stunned by the sheer abundance of fresh produce and its affordability. And a seemingly endless bounty of many different products filled shelf after shelf. All of this staggered me.

What surprised me too were the homeless. The old man who had told me about America so many years before had not mentioned anything about poverty, so it shocked me to encounter homeless adults in the streets. I remember thinking, how could that be in such a super powerful country? Although I saw no children panhandlers, seeing these men and women triggered memories of living in Hong Kong refugee camps and begging for change and food.

In Taipei the distance between rich and poor seemed small by comparison with Los Angeles. Huge mansions surrounded by beautiful grounds graced one area of the city, while in another people lived in small houses or rundown apartment buildings. Yet no matter where I went in those early days, most people were friendly and in general the living standard seemed much higher than in Taiwan. This was indeed my good fortune.

After one week, I started looking for work. Thanks to the busboy and bartending jobs I'd had at American military clubs in Taiwan, I spoke and understood English just well enough to get by. For now, I thought, English language lessons would have to wait. In order to succeed, work was the priority. That was the key to success, and I was determined to do that. I just knew that I could.

I went to a private employment agency, worried they'd ask for my work visa. Fortunately, they did not. They didn't even ask about my experience. They simply sent me to be a houseboy for two wealthy men who owned an elegant home in Coldwater Canyon. They must have figured that being Chinese I looked like a houseboy and thus would do.

Things went well at first. My employers were polite, but loneliness was my constant companion. I am a people person and since both men were out during the day, I was alone in the big house for hours. Although they never specified what I was to do in more than general ways, I dusted, vacuumed, cleaned, polished, mopped, made the beds and did the laundry. I missed my family.

Two weeks after I started, the men threw a big Thanksgiving party. I knew about Thanksgiving food and traditions from my jobs at the officers' club as a teenager. I'd thought of the officers then as father figures. They had looked proud and important in their uniforms, and I'd vowed respect one day would be mine too. I'd not give anyone an excuse to look down on me. So when some fifty well-dressed and friendly men arrived for cocktails at my new job, I had warm memories.

Two other employees helped with the party. I served drinks and took care of the buffet table. After two hours the first round of guests left and we served a traditional turkey dinner to twelve close friends. Name tags at each chair indicated who should sit where. One of the two at the head of the table said "Mrs.," which confused me as only men were present.

"There's no Mrs. Here," I said to one of the other helpers.

He smiled. "You'll understand soon enough."

I was twenty six and naïve, but eventually I did understand.

The party didn't end until around one in the morning. After the men went upstairs I washed the dishes, put them away and straightened the kitchen and living room. I went to sleep at

three and rose at seven to complete the job. The living and dining room floors were still a mess, so I started vacuuming. I thought seeing everything clean would please my employers. That was a huge mistake.

A few minutes later, the angry husband stormed down the stairs, his face red. Jabbing his hand at me, he shouted at me to stop. “Didn’t you hear me page you?” he yelled. “I paged you twice! You woke us up! What’s the matter with you? Don’t you know any better? Are you stupid?”

Of course I hadn’t heard the pager beep because of the vacuum. A flush of shame crept over my face. I recalled my adoptive father yelling at me and Number One Brother calling me stupid when I couldn’t learn Chinese characters fast enough before my first day of second grade. The rough language also made me think of all the other people who had told me I was a useless, no good, bad boy. I recalled too the cold faces of some people when I’d begged as a child. My head drooped and I felt smaller and smaller.

Then I remembered that I was a grown man and living in America. Big Sister would assure me that I had gotten myself here. I was free. I had overcome obstacles before. I’d stood up for myself in the past and I’d do it again. I didn’t have to put up with such cruel and unfair words. This job clearly was not the “good fortune” I’d hoped would be mine.

I raised my head and straightened my shoulders. “I quit,” I said. “I’ve worked hard for you, and should not be disrespected this way.”

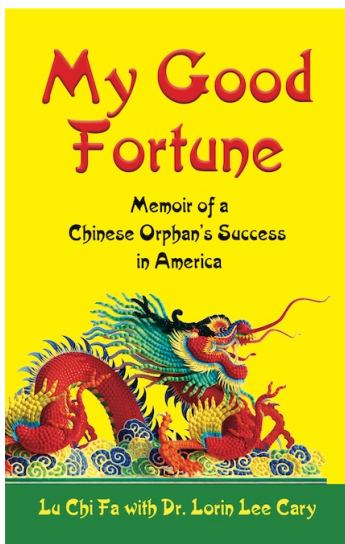
The man gritted his teeth and paid me \$90 in cash for my two weeks of employment. “Go ahead, leave,” he said. “Get out.”

I gathered my few things and left the house. It occurred to me that while the money seemed like a lot compared to what I’d earned before, that he’d paid me in cash so there’d be no paper trail. I didn’t care. I knew I’d been right to say what I said. I’d lost a job, and they had lost an opportunity.

As I walked the twelve miles home to Phillip’s apartment, I thought about Good Aunt’s suggestion not to remember bad people. I thought too about Big Sister’s advice. “Your hardship is just temporary,” she had said, “and it will make you stronger.”

I sighed as I trudged along, lugging a suitcase that contained everything I owned here in America. This was not the best start to my new life. But I would not let nasty people hinder my success. I would do well in all that I did, I vowed, and then no one could look down on me. First, however,

I had to get another job. And I had to extend my visa so I could stay legal. Or I would be deported. Time was running out.



Despite the lingering effects of childhood abuse, Lu Chi Fa created good fortune in the U.S. He has owned a restaurant in Morro Bay since 1990. The central message is that success is possible despite poverty, hardship and poor education. Setbacks will occur, but if we set aside negative excuses and work hard we can fulfill our dreams.

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by Lu Chi Fa With Dr. Lorin Lee Cary

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