

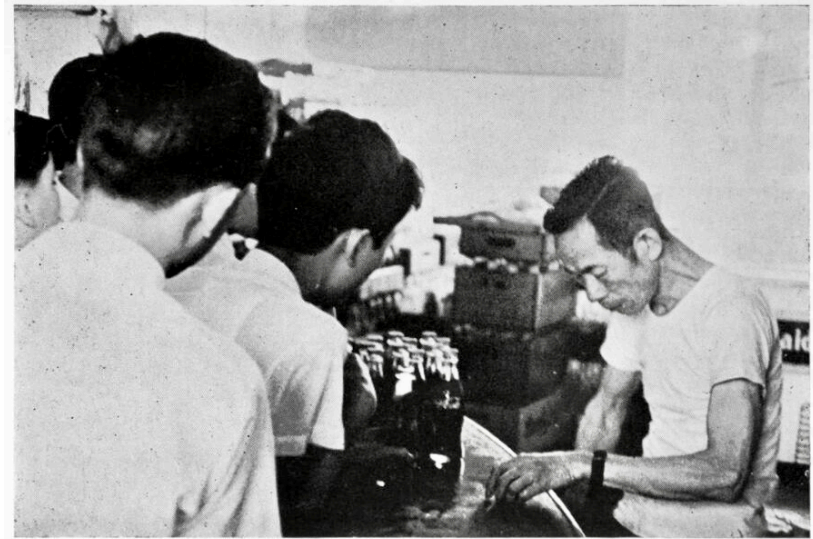
*LO CHAI 老柴 – By Gordon Ip*

*Firewood. And not just any piece: an old piece. The imagery is one of a leftover piece of wood, so dry that it is brittle, the bark so rough and old that most of it is peeled away, and perhaps the sole redeeming quality is that, if tossed into a fire, it might just burn. What a description for something that originated with roots spread out and attached firmly to the ground, with leaves reaching high into the skies seeking the warmth and the glories of the sun.*

*What a name to be called! Yet at the first-floor canteen in our all-boys school, Lo Chai presided as if he ruled it. If you wanted a popsicle, Lo Chai would wander into the back room and after a seeming eternity, he would slowly walk back out with your pick of flavors. If he got the wrong one, between the thought of having to endure another wait or being starred at with scornful eyes that seemed to imply that you changed your mind instead, you would hesitate and think twice before you would ask him to get the correct flavor.*

*How about a Coke or a 7-Up or the more exotic Ginger Beer? Better still, how about a malted Vitasoy or even just the plain one. Lo Chai would reach back to the modified chillers behind him that were really just large stainless-*

*steel sinks filled with water and ice and grab one of those long-necked glass bottles and hand it to you with the water still dripping off it.*



*If you wanted a snack item like the Zat Khea Mah, the original version of the ever-popular rice crispy bar (a.k.a. rice cakes in healthier circles), or a Chow Mai Baing, the pressed cookie with raised ridges and embossed Chinese characters, Lo Chai would turn away with a facial expression that suggested displeasure. Reaching up to the glass jars that sat on the flimsy shelves above the sodas, he would hand it to you grudgingly like he was Ebenezer Scrooge, and they were his private riches.*

*The generations of the boys that attended the school would all remember lining in front of Lo Chai & the canteen counter either before the morning assembly, during the fifteen-minute morning break, lunch time, or after school. I do not seem to recall many days that Lo Chai was not there. To me it seemed like he lived there at the school at the back of the canteen. The line was always long and during the wait we would banter with each other and cajole each other to call out his name. How brave we were until we were in the front of the line. All the laughing about Lo Chai would disappear mysteriously from our mouths even though we could still hear his name called and laughed at, not far behind.*

*Lo Chai was the only name we knew for him. Laughing at his expense was de-rigueur while waiting in line. Complaining about how long it took for him to get anything from the freezer was the only topic of discussion after he walked off to fill our order. Throwing our money onto the counter was the only way we paid him for the goods. Thinking back, I don't know how he took all our abuse, and never missed a day's work. He didn't look happy but he was always there.*

*A few years later, the school decided to open a snack bar*

*in the adjacent room next to the canteen. One could order the Dan Tse, the original Chinese version of the Egg MacMuffin sandwich or even certain types of fried noodles made from rice or egg noodles. Here at the new snack bar, you could order your cold drink also. As a result, Lo Chai's line was not as long. We liked that. Now we could laugh and talk about Lo Chai bravely while we were in front of the line - albeit a different line in a different room. The service was actually not faster or any more accurate. It was just that we did not have to look at him in the new snack bar. Outside in the nearby canteen, for some reason Lo Chai didn't seem to have as much energy as before, even though his work load, and his being the butt of our jokes had decreased.*

*The other night, my wife and I were cleaning out the pantry. We get into these modes sometimes even though it might be close to midnight. We were sorting through the many packages and boxes of things acquired from the grocery store half eaten or never opened, or gifts from friends like chocolates still wrapped in their boxes. For some reason, we must think of some items stored in the pantry as wine that must not be served before its time. Two trash bags later and a whole host of reminders from the past like the box of candy that were given to us when a certain friend from out of town visited only five years ago,*

*I came across a box of Chow Mai Baings. This one was actually a recent purchase. I took one out and tasted it. It has been a long time since I had this type of pressed cookie. It tasted just like the ones that we used to get in front of the line facing Lo Chai except that Lo Chai, for the first time, was not standing there. On the second bite, it did not seem to taste quite the same anymore. Some ingredient seemed to be missing. Maybe it was not as sweet as the ones before, or just a poor impostor from a West Coast bakery, perhaps.*

*About 10 years ago, I saw an article in our Old Boy's Association magazine. In it was a tribute to Lo Chai who had passed away. I did not think much about it then. I was probably reading it in a rush along with all the other mail that we get inundated with. But the taste of that pressed cookie late one evening released from my mind a clear memory as if it had been imbedded. Molded was not the ridges and the Chinese character but the memory of Lo Chai. How he endured us fifth to twelve graders I do not know.*

*Rather than what his name suggests, I think that Lo Chai was firmly rooted to the ground. I think that behind his frown and his sleepy motions lay a person that could stand resolutely still even when he was ridiculed. That he could*

*still be committed to work daily while we, as young chest pounders, would stay away from school at the hint of a runny nose. That he actually, deep inside, enjoyed witnessing the many generations who passed through the line, and of our metamorphosis from being small, insolent children to the young men who stood proud and tall.*

*Lo Chai was not at all like a piece of old wood, brittle and rough, destined to be discarded to the flames. Rather he was a piece of living root, grounded rigidly, immovably, woven together with the other roots that joined together in a vast network that gathered at the trunk of our young lives, supplying us with the necessary nutrients and sustenance, allowing us to reach up through the various branches of life to sprout out like leaves in spring, always reaching for greater heights and brighter glories.*

*Now I wish I had read the article more carefully. That type of cookie will never taste quite the same.*