

## CHAPTER TWO

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## THE ORAL HISTORIES

### *Introduction*

This chapter explores the experiences of two female students while they were at Chefoo and then interned at Weih sien Camp in China during World War II. Their two stories are presented as edited life histories since the focus is on their student years, from childhood to adolescence. They are also, however, retrospective reflections by the women on how the events of those years influenced their lives. These reflections on how one's education affects one's life is the prime interest of this study.

The student in this first study is Mary Taylor Previte, great granddaughter of J. Hudson Taylor, who founded the China Inland Mission (CIM) in 1865, and the China Inland Mission Schools in 1881. The second oral history is of Kathleen Strange Foster, who is two years older than Mary and resides in England, while Mary lives in the United States. The first case study is a compilation of the transcript of two oral interviews with this student and of information from her autobiographical book, *Hungry Ghosts*. (1)

Recurring themes, or categories, from the interviews and the book were identified and combined by the researcher into a chronological, thematic format. The subheadings in this first oral history are the themes into which collected data were sorted.

### Oral History Concerns

Using oral history to gather and disseminate scholarly information raises a variety of ethical and research-based concerns. Though all research studies should be evaluated with scholarly rigor, there are areas of concern specific to doing oral history. Some of the considerations are as follows: First, each of the twenty-nine people initially interviewed in the fishnet and information gathering approach were informed of the purpose of the study and gave their verbal consent to being interviewed and audio-taped. Three women were selected as the main informants and were given a transcription of their interviews for review. The interviewees were informed of the purposes and procedure of the oral history and of their rights regarding reviewing, editing, access restrictions, and dissemination of the finished study. It is the researcher's intent that the integrity of the interviewees' voices be retained, without misrepresentation of their words or taking them out of context.

The interviewees were also informed that they had the right to decline to discuss certain subjects and to request anonymity if desired. Toward the end of writing this dissertation, one of the women no longer wished to be involved with the study, or to have her story directly used, for personal reasons. Though I regretted losing this woman's story, and believe that the loss diminished the study's impact, I consented to her decision and did not use her story. This issue as well as concerns specific to subjectivity, validity and reliability will be reviewed throughout the following chapter. Also, issues related to how the oral histories were collected and how ethical concerns were dealt with will be discussed in Chapter Three.

### Constant Comparative Method

A constant comparative method was used to analyze and compare the two women's stories as to how they support or differ from the study themes and the cultural themes presented in this work. The constant comparative method is

an effective means of grounding theory in the data because it "combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed." In this study the social incidents were recounted orally rather than observed. They were then compared by the researcher with related responses or actions described by the other informants in similar settings or circumstances. New events were continuously compared with previous events to discover new relationships which undergo continual refinement and feeds back into the process of category coding. (2)

The purpose of the constant comparative method is to identify recurring categories and relationships for the development of general theory. In this study, the oral histories were broken down into vignettes. These incident stories were then sorted into piles based on similarities of content. These piles of similarity became the emerging categories for each individual oral history and were then compared with categories from the other oral histories. (3)

Mary Taylor Previte's story was a shadow study that provided the researcher with a framework for future interviews with other Chefoo students. The categories derived from other's oral histories were analyzed for convergence and divergence to Mary's story. Finally the categories were sorted into the theme or construct groupings that became the sub-titles in the following oral histories. Each informant reviewed her story to determine if the grounded constructs or themes coincided with their stories.

## *Development of Themes*

### Introduction

A grounded theory is established by applying a systematic analysis of the data. The systematic analysis used by the researcher is detailed in Appendix C, Methodology. The following paragraphs will describe the constructs that were extrapolated by the coding of the shadow case study data. James Spradley defines a cultural theme as "any cognitive principle, tacit or explicit, recurrent in a number of domains and serving as a relationship among subsystems of cultural meaning." (4) Identified themes are not just experience specific. They are also universal with a high degree of generalizability and applicability to numerous situations. The connecting of specific research data through themes to the general human condition is what makes research of interest and of value.

### Thematic Invariance

Though the two women's stories differ in personal experiences and interpretations, there is an over-riding commonality of experience that enables the researcher to format each of their stories to the same framework. However, within this framework of *boarding, relationships, health*, for example, each

woman focuses and elaborates on differing areas of importance consistent with how it affected her. This too will be noted and analyzed to try to understand what contributed to the differences in the informants' responses.

Initially the sub-headings for the two case studies varied slightly or had different descriptors for organizing the vignettes contained within. As both case studies were analyzed and compared, the sub-titles were renamed or modified to better define what the sections were about. The same sub-titles were used in each oral history for the ease of comparison and extrapolation of themes across both oral histories. Though each woman's story may differ as to how they personally were affected by the everyday existence of the teacher-student relationship of schooling, *separation* and *schooling* were the overriding themes that each Chefoo student had to face.

### What are the themes

The themes identified from the research thus far revolve around two major constructs. The first is the long term *separation* of the children from their parents. The separation was due not just to the war, but was also inherent in the fact that the children's parents were missionaries. Prior to the Sino-Japanese war, the greatest period of time most of the children would have spent with their parents would have been three months every three years. With the start of the war in 1937, most of the children saw their parents for only two weeks in the eight years under study. The children not only had to confront separation issues related to the Japanese and the war, but also those caused by the Mission and their parents' life choices.

The second construct, *schooling*, is closely allied with the first since the reason for the children being separated from their parents was for their education. The two constructs are interrelated in this study because the informants were full-time boarders separated for long periods from their parents. This separation, due to boarding and then the internment meant that every aspect of the students' lives was related to schooling. Student conduct in daily life was seen as an aspect of the educational process and not as a separate entity. As one informant explained the situation existing for teachers, "Our poor teachers never got away from us. We saw everything they did and who they did it with."

The same could be said about the students by the teachers since the school staff truly functioned as in *loco parentis*.

### Thematic framework

Both Mary's and Kathleen's stories which follow are divided into sub-headings such as *boarding*, *discipline*, and *internment*, for example. These sub-headings were derived from the coding process used on the interview transcripts

and other related source material. Arranged chronologically, the sub-headings indicate generally the content of the vignettes which follow and are the sub-themes that make-up the constructs of *separation* and *schooling*. These vignettes express and bring to life how the larger issues of *separation* and *schooling* affected Mary and Kathleen and were dealt with on an individual level.

The sub-headings created the framework that was used to organize and present both Mary's and Kathleen's stories, and also to gather information from the other interviewees. The sub-headings are discussed in the order that they appeared in the shadow case study and in the second oral history. This order provides a basic chronological sequence that was common to all of the informants interviewed. All of the initial interviews consisted of the interviewees relating their childhood life stories from birth or arrival in China until their final leaving of China and then reuniting with their families. Following the title of the sub-heading is an explanation of what it encompasses and why it was included in the study.

*Family Background* -- "Family of origin," as one informant stated, "mattered more than anything in our responses to the happenings of war and internment." Prior to being sent to boarding school, most of the children spent the first five to six years of their lives with their parents on the mission field in interior China. There was little contact with other Western children, and the child's main spoken language was usually Chinese or the local tribal language.

How a child responded to being sent to boarding school may have been dependent in part on the family situation the child came from, how the parents prepared the child for school, and the events that preceded the child's separation from his or her parents, such as deaths of older or younger siblings. It may also be significant whether the informant was the first child in the family to go to Chefoo, or if older siblings had already been attending.

Not only will *family background* deal with how the informants' perceived their parents' relationship with each other and with their children, but it will also look at how the informants interpret their parents' reasons for coming to China. It is in this area that the families' values and beliefs as related by the informants will be explored. The informants' recollections will be used to paint a portrait of their family life prior to the boarding experience, and then compared later with how the informants perceived their family relationships upon reuniting five years later.

*Family, School, and War* - While this area may overlap with the previous one, it is focusing more on the family situation at the time of the informants' first attending Chefoo School, or of the last extended visit the children had with their parents before the escalation of the Sino-Japanese war,

or Pearl Harbor. It is at this point that the effects of the encroaching war are felt and where the motives for the parents and their children remaining in China will be investigated. This section is also where specific informant remembrances will be given regarding how parents prepared their children for entering Chefoo.

*Boarding at Chefoo* - A significant piece of this topic will be the informants' responses to being separated from their parents, and how they perceived their assimilation into the Chefoo School. In all the interviews thus far, the interviewees could distinctly remember their first time of separation, and often shared their memories with strong emotions, almost sixty years after the fact. It is the researcher's assumption that it was while at the boarding school that the children's true "separation anxiety" (5) occurred, and not during the internment. Ironically, life in the boarding school may have been the best preparation possible for dealing with internment.

Also in this section, the informants will relate the codes and expectations of behavior that were required of a Chefoo student, first by the faculty, and then by their peers. This section will detail the schooling structure through the informants' recollections. Issues such as how the informants made meaning of the rituals and daily routines of their schooling and those of relationships among the teachers and the students will also be explored.

*Discipline* - This theme will deal with the explicit and implicit forms of control used by the teachers to maintain the school's standards and expected behavior from the students. Though *discipline* is a part of the *boarding at Chefoo* theme, it has been isolated into its own category due to strong informant responses to it in initial interviews. Informants will discuss what they considered the just and unjust forms of discipline, how the students circumvented some of it, and the long term psychological effects some of the informants believe that the punishments had on them.

*Internment Camp* - Most of this subject will be covered in Chapter Three, Historical Context, which gives the history of the Chefoo School from foundation to internment. However, the informant's impressions of internment will be discussed on a personal level. For it is while interned at Weihsien that the Chefoo students and teachers were forced to exchange their "sheltered, Victorian missionary backwater" for a more cosmopolitan setting. (6) Did this change of environment adversely affect the students and impinge upon their belief system as represented by the Chefoo School? Was the faculty able to maintain control and supervision in this secular setting?

*School values* - This section will look at the curriculum and schooling process at Chefoo, and how they were adapted if at all, during internment. Some comparisons will be made between the Chefoo School and the other schools

that were organized in Weihsien Camp. As was stated in Mary's story, success or failure in academic studies did play a part in shaping the informant's self-image.

*Weihsien Camp* - This theme provides a background for what daily internment life was like. The intent here is to examine how even in general camp routines such as chores and recreational activities, the Chefoo school values were still an overriding force.

*Health* - The extent of this topic will vary with each informant as some had a series of illnesses and physical problems during and after the years under consideration, while others remained relatively healthy. Along with physical health, mental health also needs to be considered in terms of the counseling and psychiatric care that some of the informants received twenty to forty years after the internment.

*Peer relations and Relationships* - deals with the informants' relationships first with classmates, and then with siblings and those of the opposite sex as the informants become adolescents.

*Reuniting* - is about how the informants interpreted their transition from boarding school and internment camp, back to an unfamiliar country and family situation.

*Connecting past to present* - This last topic is an invitation to the informants to reflect on and identify any long term effects they attribute to their educational and early life circumstances and how they relate the past to the present. The informants will explore how influential they feel their teachers, school, boarding, and internment experiences were. And, though it is not the focus of this study, some discussion will deal with the long term effects they believe that their experiences had on their belief system, and their personal and family relationships.

### Universal theme

The constructs of *separation* and *schooling* that were gleaned from the oral histories are also relevant to the present day because they fit into what Spradley identifies as a universal theme. (7) That universal theme is *informal techniques of social control* which is how a culture group gets people to conform to the values and norms of the culture. Formal techniques of control would include obvious uses of punishment, such as caning. Informal techniques, however, might include the faculty not interfering when students sent other students "to Coventry," or the staff monitoring the students' weekly letters home. These actions of commission and omission sent a message to the students as to how they were expected to conform to the system of the Chefoo School. By

analyzing informant interviews on tangible sub-themes such as discipline and relationships, the universal theme of *social control* will be discussed.

## ***Mary Taylor Previte- A Biography***

### **Introduction**

The first interview with Mary was conducted in July of 1995, a few weeks prior to the fiftieth anniversary of the camp's liberation by American forces from Japanese control. The second interview was done three years later in July of 1998. Throughout the period between the two interviews Mary's input was provided through phone calls and letters as the interview transcripts were turned into the present case study. Mary is extensively quoted so that it is her voice that tells the story and not the researcher's. Quotations from *Hungry Ghosts* are footnoted. All other quotations are taken from the interview transcripts and will not be footnoted.

This issue of ritual, predictability and safety was our salvation. It made you feel safe because you internalized: 'oh, I know what's going to happen next.'

Anytime a teacher, a parent can create that feeling inside a child, the child carries a safe message inside them. It has been internalized. That was the extraordinary gift that these teachers gave us. The ritual and the predictability. (8)

The idea of ritual, predictability and safety were themes throughout the interview with Mary Taylor Previte. She learned this first at home, then at school, and experienced it while in an internment camp as a child. Mary has based her work as director of the Camden County Youth Center on establishing such a predictable and safe environment for the juvenile delinquents with whom she works. In her book, *Hungry Ghosts*, Mary sees herself as "a connecting link for that wisdom, one hand touching the past, the other holding the future. I was a link in a chain—from Mother and Father and Chefoo School teachers to generations they would never know." (9)

### **Family Background**

Mary's father, James Hudson Taylor II, was born in Scotland to missionary parents, but raised from infancy in China and became the third generation of Taylors to preach there. Her mother, Alice, was an American who had felt called to the mission field of China as a teenager. Her parents met at a Free Methodist College in Illinois. They were married in 1924 and held tent meetings on their honeymoon. They went to China as missionaries of the Free Methodist Church and were assigned to the Henan Province in central China in the late 1920's.

Mary was the fifth child born to James and Alice Taylor. Their first two daughters died while young children. Mary's sister Kathleen and brother Jamie were five and three years older than she. Her brother John was one year her junior. The youngest child, Herbert, Mary met only after returning from being interned. By law, Mary and her three siblings were recognized as British nationals even though they were born and raised in China.

In the Taylor home, "teaching values came first." Mary's parents taught their children that "a Taylor never says 'I can't.'" Mary wrote that "our value was never measured by what we wore or what we had. My father wanted character -- not show." This character was expressed by "achieving in academics, being polite, talking honest and clean. These were not a choice." (10) Their children's characters would be further developed at the China Inland Mission Schools commonly referred to as "Chefoo".

### Family, School and War

When Mary and her younger brother John were old enough to start at Chefoo, ages six and seven, their mother rented a house near the school compound. Mary and John stayed with their mother for a few months attending as day students. Their sister Kathleen and brother Jamie continued boarding at Chefoo. Even near Chefoo, the Sino- Japanese war raged with Japanese gun boats out in the harbor and Chinese guerrillas on the mountainside behind. The gunboats would shell into the mountainside where the guerrillas hid out. Mary recalled being able to look out from the house and see bloody soldiers limping along. "It was not a safe or tranquil place at all, though everybody had this view that [this] was China's war. 'We're British. Were Americans. It's not our war.' [There was] this feeling of immunity."

By 1940, Mary's parents decided it was no longer safe for them in China. Her father joined the family and bought boat tickets for them all to return to the United States, which was not at war. However, during family worship time her parents had a change of mind about leaving China. (11) Sometime during that daily ritual Mary's parents felt that God had called them to China, not just during times of peace but in all situations. They said they felt it was "God's will that they return the tickets" and stay in China. So her parents made the commitment to return to do mission work in Free China, which was not under Japanese occupation, and leave the children at Chefoo in North China, which was occupied by the Japanese.

Mary's parents prepared the children for what they knew "would be an extended separation. They didn't know if there would be war or not, but there could be war." Her parents' view, as it had been through the Taylor generations before them, was "anchor with the promises of God." Her mother provided this "anchor" of security and support by putting passages of the Bible to music

because "you 'learn by heart' when you sing." Everyday they would sing Psalm 91 and Isaiah 55, Bible passages extolling God's loving care.

Everyday, everyday, everyday at our family worship ritual we would sing the promises of God. Why would you question it? Your parents said it, you sang it every day by heart-- 'He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most high shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.... A thousand shall fall at thy side, ten thousand at thy right hand but it shall not come nigh thee.... He shall give his angels charge over thee to keep thee in all thy ways\_' It was some of the most extraordinary promises. Why would we doubt? This was what our parents anchored us with and then they left us.

### Boarding at Chefoo

When they left us, I can remember the emotional shock of it. It is still one of the most ignominious periods of my life. I was seven and a half in boarding school. Every day before breakfast I threw up. And it was sissy to feel homesick. You just didn't feel homesick. You didn't cry, you didn't mope, you didn't [act] like you wanted to be with your Daddy and Mommy because everybody else missed their Daddy and Mommy too, and no one would admit to it.

No one wanted to sit at the table with her. The teachers tried to make her brother Jamie sit with her. "That was ignominious defeat for him. He would have to leave all his peers and sit at the table with me to see whether being comforted by big brother would help me not to throw up." Mary thought that this vomiting stage lasted for a few weeks or months, though it "seemed like for years and years. But that was my way of expressing the homesickness."

Mary and her younger brother John were in the Prep School of Chefoo which was for children from ages six to ten. Her sister Kathleen was in the Girls' School. Her brother Jamie was in the Boys' School. The Prep School was both home and school for the younger children. For the most part the Prep School students were taught and watched over by single, female missionary teachers. "Many of them were tough cookies. Many of them were not gentle souls--not what I would call nurturing in a gentle way. Tough cookies, [but not] mean." There were exceptions. Mary described one as "a really gentle soul, sweet, nurturing person. [She] might have been American."

Most of the teachers at Chefoo, though, were British, which Mary felt made a difference in their approach to education and life.

They were reared in the British school of 'keep a stiff upper lip' in discipline and structure, which worked to a great advantage because this was not a time to be weepy, cuddly-pooch as your main style of dealing

with people. The teachers set rituals up that weren't always very comforting. They were intended to be comforting, but weren't necessarily comforting.

One of these rituals in the Prep School was that at certain times a student would "go and have prayers, one on one, with a teacher in her room. Well, that was pretty frightening. All of a sudden this tough cookie type person was supposed to be your substitute mom." Mary thought this was done as a way of providing a more nurturing individual contact between the students and teachers. However, the students saw their teachers as "awe inspiring figures" and would much rather have remained with their friends where "you felt safer."

Mary felt the teachers were more successful in nurturing the students by reading to them.

One teacher would sit at the head of the prep school dining room for supper and read to us. You would listen to them reading: Winnie the Pooh, The Little Princess, Wind in the Willows and these became our great loves. The teachers nurtured us with these stories and you felt safe every night. I can't tell you enough about how the structure, the ritual, the predictability were the hallmarks of their success, both in school and in the concentration camp. The structure, the predictability was something that created a sense of safety and I preach that from one side of America to another. [\(12\)](#)

Mary talked of other ways the teachers established predictable rituals by doing the same things in the same way everyday, from getting up in the morning until going to bed at night.

At the Chefoo school you went to the bathroom area where you had sinks and cubicles all in a row. You, all together, washed, brushed your teeth, and the day went through a very comfortingly predictable ritual. You went back to your bedrooms at nighttime in a particular way. They were the rituals.

Mary credits the rituals, predictability, structure and discipline with establishing a safe feeling and for holding their "spirits together." Aside from feeling homesick, she looks back at her time at Chefoo as "a time where I felt safe." But, if she felt safe, she sometimes felt the unhappiness of not being popular with her peers.

### Peer Relations

Mary perceived herself as an outsider because she was "the one picked to be in 'Coventry.'" Being "sent to Coventry" was "a British version of shunning—nobody [would] talk to you." Students did this as a way to "punish" you. Mary

thought she was sent to Coventry because she "was always trying to get noticed—wanting to be popular." She described herself as a shy type of kid who felt "very much like the outsider a lot of the time, but this was a ritual [of her classmates]—'oh, let's send Mary to Coventry."

Today, Mary feels her unhappiness was a normal part of growth and relational issues that most children go through as they move into adolescence wanting to be liked and accepted by the popular group. During this time, Mary bonded with another girl. The two of them "palled around together" and formed their own club to be like the other groups of girls.

You just palled around together and called yourself a club to meet the need of belonging which is very natural for children. So the normal unhappinesses and worries about 'am-I-popular?' were all part of growing up. This didn't have anything to do with being uniquely that you were in a school for missionaries' children, or that you were in a concentration camp. It was just part of the growing up process.

When it was your birthday you got to pick twelve of your friends to sit with you at supper time where the cake was brought and you got to blow out the candles. You always hoped you'd get picked to be one of the twelve. We had rituals that you would hold hands around the table. You will always be bonded by a ritual. It made you feel safe—the world was predictable.

### School Discipline

If ritual, predictability and safety were the children's "salvation," Mary admits that the rituals were "harsh" at times. Her younger brother has told her of times "where this discipline was almost brutal. The boys would get six of the best [caning on the buttocks]. Or, they would make you punch your fist against a gritty wall until blood would come." Mary concedes that there was "some very tough, what we would call abusive, type of discipline by these teachers. If you didn't do what you were told to, and fast, you were disciplined." At Chefoo there was a "typical British prep school seriousness, you follow the rules, keep a stiff upper lip. There was a strong standard of discipline."

The worst discipline Mary remembers receiving was when, at the age of eight, she and a boy exposed their bottoms to each other:

I took my panties down and showed my bottom. I didn't know anyone would tell the teacher. This is the wickedness I have thought of many times. It wasn't the showing of the bottom; the wickedness was that somebody told the teachers. They took me into their room and wanted me to confess. I didn't even know what you called these parts. You didn't have a word for a bottom and to sit with these teachers in their

room and be quizzed about lowering your pants to a boy to let him see your bottom [laughs]. That was one of the lowest points of my entire life.

All of these things were not just a breach of discipline. It was like you might go to hell. This was like you broke the heart of the Lord. These were not just an act of childhood. This was an act of moral turpitude. I have never looked at this as just a childish prank. This is one of the great scars of my life. I don't remember getting a punishment. It was so serious that I didn't get spanked. It was just the fact that you got called in to be spoken to by the Headmistress.

Mary remembered two other incidents where she acted inappropriately but did not get caught. The traditional attire for girls in the Prep School was a blue tunic with the school crest on the chest, over a white blouse. But on special days for assemblies in Memorial Hall, the children "were all in white. I remember deliciously, deliberately putting up my foot on one of the boys in front of me and getting a big booty smear on him. It felt so delicious. It was nice to be wicked once in a while." Another time there was a chicken pox or measles epidemic at the school. Wanting to get sick so that she could spend some time in the sanitorium, called the "San," Mary "licked tongues" with a sick child in her class. "I got sick and got to stay in the San. How wicked I was. But you were special if you got sent to the San.

### Internment

From the start of the war with the Allies on December 8th, 1942, the Japanese gradually commandeered parts of the school campus due to its excellent location on the harbor. After four months, Mary, aged ten, and the rest of the Chefoo staff and student body were rounded up by the Japanese and placed in an internment camp across town called Temple Hill. The children were taught to count off in Japanese. When officials would visit the camp the commandant would bring his guests to the Chefoo section because "you had all these little 'foreign-devil' British and American kids lined up numbering off and we were delightful, polite kids."

After ten months, the Temple Hill population was sent to Weihsien Civilian Assembly Center. Here they joined over one thousand other internees who had been Westerners living in North China, from the president of the Bank of England in China to college professors, priests, prostitutes and missionaries of every persuasion. The new internees had to learn that "the Japanese set certain rituals. You were going to have roll call. You had your own badge that had your designated section number and red Japanese seals."

Within the camp, the Japanese provided food and some coal dust for heat. It was up to the internees to distribute and prepare the food and coal, as well

as to organize and maintain the camp. Every person in the camp had some type of job to perform for the good of the camp. Though the children's primary job was to attend school, they also helped in other ways.

Our job was to carry coal dust. We had to mix it with dirt and water and everybody swapped recipes for that. Everybody did this. This wasn't just us. You would either do it with your hands and make balls and set them out in the sun to dry, or some people made little scoops out of tin cans.

The only fear Mary spoke of was of the Alsatian dogs. "That was one of the few [times] that I knew terror in that concentration camp."

Overall though, Mary felt safe, the creation of which she attributes to the teachers. We got no fear from [the teachers], none of what they may have felt because they knew about the horrors of war. We knew implicitly that our parents, our teachers and God were going to take care of us. That is such an astonishment how they protected and cushioned delicate psyches of children during the war.

It's this whole thing in the hierarchy of needs--you start with gut level survival-- and that is being safe. In the absence of parents they created a structure and predictability and a ritual that [made you feel] safe because they did it the same way everyday. Grown-ups leave an extraordinary imprint on the lives of children. What they believe, how they talk and act--what they say to children profoundly shapes them.

### School values

The Japanese may have had their rituals, but the teachers set rituals "separate and above what the Japanese set." Life in the camp took on a daily routine. "You got up, washed and went to the toilet\_ Everyday you had your breakfast the same way." It did not matter to the teachers if you were eating out of a soap dish or a tin can.

Our teachers insisted on good manners: 'There is no such thing as one set of manners for the outside world and another set for the concentration camp.' You were to be as refined as the two princesses in Buckingham Palace. 'Sit up straight. Don't stuff food in your mouth. Keep your voice down. Don't complain. We were God's representatives in this concentration camp, and God was not represented well by rudeness or grumbling.' (13)

After roll call and breakfast, "the teachers picked up the ritual of the school day." Most of the teaching was conducted by lecture as there were few textbooks.

The teachers made us go to school. Usually school was inside various dormitories where we sat on our steamer trunks. There was Bible, Latin, French, literature, math. We had one notebook that we could write in and then erased and went back and used over and over until the teachers gave us slates for Christmas. It was amazing that the teachers could give examinations and Oxford would accept the results at the end of the war. That's nothing short of miraculous [that] the kids passed their Oxford exams.

Mary attributes the success of the students on the Oxford exams to two things. "For the most part missionaries are not a normal group of people. You don't get to be a missionary if you're a dummy and not highly motivated and feel like you have the gift of God and God's guidance." The overriding factor though was the teachers themselves. "The teachers have to be the difference. You didn't see that same level of motivation happening in the Weihsien school."

The Weihsien School was the other school formed in the camp for the children who were not part of the Chefoo school. The parents of these children were either from the business sector or from other mission groups.

We didn't associate a lot with the godless kids that weren't part of our Chefoo School. We didn't have a lot of interaction with them. But people like Eric Liddell (14) and those people did work with them. The other kids mostly had parents, and we didn't, so there was an automatic division. Most of them lived with their parents in these little barracks.

Mary's words reflect the view the Chefoo staff and therefore some of the students, had of the majority of the camp's residents. The staff tried to keep the Chefoo group as separate from the rest of the camp as possible.

Whether at Chefoo or in the internment camp, the teachers maintained the same standards. "They were very strict. You did it by the book and if you didn't, there was a strong sanction that you got. In my recollections of terrors of these teachers, they did not have the warm, fuzzy, pedagogical system of American teachers." Once in a great while during the summers, the teachers "let the discipline down a little bit and let us go out under the trees and have our classes." She does recall though how on her birthday a teacher "created a celebration--with an apple--just for me. The apple itself wasn't so important as the delicious feeling that I had a 'mother' all to myself in a private celebration--just my teacher and I." To Mary, these teachers gave their students a lasting gift by "preserving our childhood in the midst of a bloody war."

Mary has positive and negative recollections of her academic experiences.

I had feelings of failure to begin with. I struggled with reading when I first went to Chefoo. I got my "b's" and "d's" mixed up. I may have been dyslexic. Having felt failure in school, I began to feel like, "is this a place that I feel safe?" I felt like I was going to be bad at something instead of good. My early Chefoo memories bring back more of the terror of what I failed than of the successes that I won.

I remember being terrified of having to go up to the front of Miss Stark's arithmetic course. I was caught with terror when I had to do arithmetic in front of the class. She would throw numbers at you to add, subtract, divide, out loud in front of everybody--I couldn't do that. All I remember of mental arithmetic is pure failure and disgrace.

Americans would have been accepting, giving some sense of success. I don't remember any of that. I only remember the terror of the classrooms. I'm sure these days people would say that's not the way to teach and nurture children, but it was very much the British prep school way. It's hard for a little kid. There was a lot of memory work. They were intent on nurturing and maintaining our faith in a serious way.

However, while at Weihsien, Mary experienced a significant turning point in her life. "They read off our scores and I calculated [mine] and came up with the highest percentage of points in the school!" This incident, along with a few others, let Mary know that, although she thought of herself as "the kid going to Coventry all the time--felt that I was always set aside--I wasn't a dummy and it felt so delicious."

Overall though, Mary found it hard to assess the teachers.

They were such idols—we held them on such a high pedestal and with awe. Maybe our older brothers and sisters had them in less awe because they were old enough—they knew things that we didn't know. We little kids were so protected in a way. But we looked at them as giants in our life. It was a superb school. At the same time that you're struggling with Coventry you just knew you were somebody special in the Chefoo School. We all knew that we were the best school east of the Suez. Every one of us that talks to you is going to use those exact words, 'the best school east of the Suez'. It's just like you knew that God loved you. You were God's child. You were in the best school east of the Suez. You were somebody special. You just knew it.

### Weihhsien Camp

Because they were God's representatives, the children were expected to keep themselves and their living space tidy. Inspections were enforced, not by the Japanese, but by the teachers.

Everyday there was the inspection in Chefoo as well as in the concentration camp. They called it "inspection and session" which was a time to do your mending. If you had holes in your socks, a rip in something, you had to mend it. Were you clean? Were you neat? Did you have your mending done? Unbelievable in a concentration camp that anyone would be worrying about that. But that had to do with the issue of the spirit. You don't give up. Nobody said it in those terms, it was the rituals that said how you looked, what your clothes looked like. You don't go out raggedy. You don't go out dirty, which is what inspection was about.

When we got to Weihsien concentration camp, we divided that [dormitory] room up into thirteen squares where every girl had her patch of floor to scrub every day. Now was that silly? Of course it was. Every girl scrubbed her patch of floor, the idea that you would make your room tidy every single day. Everyday two girls were assigned to get up early to make the stove heated. Marjorie and I were teammates and we had the record of getting it red hot more times than any other person.

Competition was used by the teachers as a way to get chores done. Within the camp at large though it helped to make the passing days and months more interesting. Various games were organized between the two kitchens, even down to who could catch the most flies or rats. The internees also organized men's and women's softball teams according to the sections of China the internees had come from, such as the Tientsin Tigers and the Peking Panthers. There were also lectures, concerts and plays.

There were incredible people that all chipped in. Eric Liddell of course would be athletics. There was a Catholic Priest by the name of Father Palmers who would teach French. Mr. Hubbard was tremendous teaching ornithology. Mrs. Bazire was brilliant in music. Sunday evenings she would gather people together and have a singspiration.

There was a group of people that put on theatrical dramas in the church. They did *Androcles and the Lion*. They used the tin cans from the Red Cross parcels and made exquisite armor for the centurions, I mean can you believe this? In a concentration camp! Isn't it amazing?! The issue of the spirit was paramount. In other camps prisoners held back from athletics because you don't have enough calories to be playing. The issue of the spirit was paramount—recreation was a big part of it. There were also a variety of religious opportunities in camp.

The interned children were also involved in Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, and Brownies. While waiting in roll call lines the children would practice their "semaphore and morse code messages." They would earn scout badges for being

able to build a fire and cook something in "tin cans [made] into stoves where you'd make a little opening with twigs underneath. These were big deal type things. They even set wilderness trails where you had to follow like markings," within the confines of the camp.

Mary believes this "issue of the spirit" made the difference in how the internees interpreted their experience upon their return at the end of the war.

Newspaper clippings that described the arrival of these prisoners were such an extraordinary contrast. You read about these Chefoo School teachers and kids arriving after this experience and it's all bubbly and delightful, like the tone I think you're getting from me—I hope you're getting from me. Then in the same camp, people who were not Christians, not with the Chefoo school, read their account. It's negative. It's like white and black. You have to think 'What is the difference?' They were in the same place under the same conditions, what could be the difference? It has to be the realm of the spirit! What else could it be?

I profoundly believe exactly what our teachers taught us. It almost brings tears to my eyes because there have been big gaps in my life when that was not the case. We were taught by our parents that we were in the hands of God and that the good hands of God guide you personally. Your life is not an accident. The teachers were the same way. Miss Pyle made us memorize whole chapters of the Bible—we were grounded in this belief that we were in the hands of God.

Say what you will about the stiff upper lip—here were people who grounded us in a faith in God and His goodness, profoundly felt it, and anchored us in times of potential terror. Instead of weeping and wringing our hands, we are singing from the Psalms believing it. Now that is an extraordinary gift that many people in the camp did not have. I believe faith and trust in God made a profound difference.

## Health

Though the internees realized the importance of recreation for maintaining a healthy mind, body and spirit, there were concerns for the health of the children who were not getting adequate nutrition. Some of the children had teeth coming in with improper enamel covering because of the inadequate food. On the rare occasions when eggs could be obtained at the canteen or from the black-market, the teachers saved the egg shells, dried them, "wound them and made us eat ground egg shell to keep the calcium. We also got peanuts. We'd grind them on a hand grinder and make our own peanut butter."

Although Mary did not have any problems with her teeth, she did suffer from severe asthma while in the camp. "It was agony for me. The kids would

complain that I snored. I would try to keep awake until everyone would fall asleep so I wouldn't bother them." Once she left the camp though, her allergies subsided. Mary claims no long term ill health effects from being interned and feels that overall her family has been "blessed with good health with the exception of Kathleen. She died of lupus six years after we got out of the concentration camp. Was there any connection to that? I have no idea. Doctors don't know how people get lupus."

The lack of appropriate nutrients and caloric intake caused other problems as well, especially with menstrual periods.

Most of us were delayed because of the nutrition level. These British spinster teachers certainly did not discuss these matters with us. I had never heard of having a menstrual period. That was not anything the teachers talked to us about and I have a feeling that was one of the reasons we were kept in separate dormitories. My bed was right next to Sandy's and toward the end of the camp there some secret thing that every month Sandy got taken aside, hushy-poo with the teachers and whatever it was we had no idea.

I didn't even know where babies came from. When we were in Chefoo before the war my sister surreptitiously wanted to know if I knew where babies came from and I had no idea. I had no idea when I got into the concentration camp, but all of a sudden Sandy had something happening to her that the teachers would take her aside. It wasn't until after we were out of the concentration camp I got fattened up with decent food that I started my period and my sister told me what had happened. Here, one girl started her periods before we got out. I think we were all retarded in our physical growth and development.

## Relationships

The internment provided the Chefoo siblings an opportunity to see each other more than they would have if they had stayed at the Chefoo School. At the Chefoo School, siblings traditionally only interacted with one another on Sundays during "family time" when they were allowed to walk home from church together.

We saw [our siblings] much more in the camp. When we all got put in the hospital building [dormitory] I didn't see Johnny as much because he was still housed in block 23, whereas Kathleen was on the same floor as I, and Jamie was one floor up. Our roll call was together. We didn't have classes together, but we would have hymn sings together.

Mary interacted enough with her sister Kathleen to know of her sister's crushes which Mary still talks of with school-girl secrecy.

I've got to tell you a secret. The older girls were beginning to have love affairs, my sister Kathleen was one of them. She was in love [and] even engaged to be married with Dougie. He was a 6' 6-1/2" brilliant athlete, and really a lovely person and that was, of course, terrible because he was not Christian as we knew it, [was not a Chefoo boy].

Although the siblings were able to interact more, classmates and peers were still the most significant relationships as they would have been at the Chefoo School. "The primary group was our classmates. The people that you were really close to were our dormmates and then the boys and girls that were in our class together."

### Reuniting

While most of the Chefoo students returned as a group by ship to their parents in England, Australia and North America, Mary and her siblings were flown six hundred miles into the interior of China where her parents were still serving as missionaries. After the flight, the children traveled over one hundred miles by train and then the final miles by mule cart and walking. Mary writes of their meeting as she and her sister and brothers were led by a student from her parents' Bible school to her parents.

Down the block, through the round moon gate into the Bible school compound he led us. There, through a back window, I could see them-- Daddy and Mother-- sitting in a faculty meeting. I began to scream. I saw Father look up. . . the student pushed through the bamboo screen. "Mrs. Taylor," he said, "the children have arrived." We burst through the door into their arms--shouting, laughing, hugging--hysterical with joy. (15)

The Taylor family stayed in the Chinese interior for another year following the end of the war before settling in the United States.

When we came to America we settled in a small town in southern Michigan where everything, all social activity, was built around the [Christian] college and the church. We went to the Free Methodist Christian high school. I think if we had not been cushioned in this small Christian school, we would have had a difficult transition [from] the concentration camp. From September of 1945 until we got to the States in the summer of 1946, we weren't in school. So the culture shock would have been incredible if we had not settled in a slow-paced, Christian, little mid-west, Bible-belt town. These God-fearing people were very much like what we had known in Chefoo.

## Connecting past to present

As the director of a juvenile detention center, Mary has seen herself implement much of what her teachers did for her at Chefoo and in Weihsien.

A whole lot of Chefoo and Weihsien come through here. Not consciously-- innately. And you won't have other people verbalize it the way I have, but when you write about something, you think about it deeply and say 'what did this mean? Why did it happen that way? Why did I feel this way?' I don't know whether I actually planned to do this, but if I put the two together, they're an awful lot alike. I have felt many times that all things work together for good to those that love the Lord. I feel the same way about losing my hand.

Mary lost her hand in an accident with a buzz saw while in Canada, a year after being liberated from the camp.

[Being] the lady with one hand gives me a connection with the kids that nothing else has. On the surface you say what a tragedy! I say, 'look what's come from that!' I know what I have become with one hand and the way my parents responded to that--'Take what comes as a gift because there is something hidden there.'

Just as Mary had to accept the loss of her hand, so she tries to help the teenagers to process and accept the tragedies in their own lives.

If we can accept and treasure their feelings, their tragedies, part of their life that is very real, then they begin to be open and to listen in other areas. We [Mary and a teenager] sit knee to knee right here [in her office]. I'll pull out an issue of the student newspaper and that primes the pump. As we talk I'll say, 'What's the biggest feeling that you have? That's always the best story, the biggest feeling.' They are so dumbfounded that I found something they said or felt important. They just can't believe that someone thought this was important.

That changes my relationship to that kid forever. Forever! Forever! Because they let me inside where nobody has ever been. And I put their feelings on a pedestal. When you get to the core of a child, if they will privilege you to get there because they let few people in, the relationship is changed forever. Then I can say, 'Do you know, child, what I see when I look at you?' And they want to know then. That's when the door opens, when I begin to tell them what they can be, the potential is already there if they want to make it happen. But if I were not accepting of it, that door would not open.

Mary admits though that no teacher at Chefoo made an attempt to touch "the core of a child" in her. "No, I never experienced or felt that at Chefoo.

The apple at the birthday would be the closest. The turn around for me was when I discovered my top grade but it wasn't that a teacher gave it to me." Mary looks at that time as an example of the "power of success," which is a theme strongly enforced at the Youth Center.

Find the success. We need to find those things for our children. Here our children are charged with murder, criminal charges, every one of them. In those classrooms you can hear a pin drop because they are productively working and teachers sitting knee to knee with them. It is unbelievable what our teachers get out of these children. And kids say, "If my school had been like this, I'd have never got in trouble in the first place."

Mary made a return trip to China a few years ago. In her book she wrote about being able to stand in her dormitory room at Weihsien and the memories it aroused.

It's funny what you remember about a concentration camp that ate three years of your life. I stood in one special spot [in the dormitory]. And I started to weep. Not weeping about barbed wire and guard dogs but about the years of feeling like the dunce, the misfit in the class. And now the tears streamed down my face as I stood on that spot. . . . another memory. . . . Top average in the whole Chefoo School. Top of the very whole school. My daughter, Alice, held me as the tears washed my cheeks. She took a picture. Mary and the starting point that changed her life. I was not dumb. NOT DUMB! That was the moment. From that time on, I knew that I always wanted to reach for the top. [\(16\)](#)

1 Mary Taylor Previte, *Hungry Ghosts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994). [↑](#)

2 LeCompte & Preissle, 256. [↑](#)

3 Merriam. [↑](#)

4 James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York, NY: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1979), 186. [↑](#)

5 Mark D. Bullock, "Separation Anxiety Disorder in a Missionary Child: Theoretical Considerations and Intervention Strategies," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 21.1 (1993): 37-44. [↑](#)

6 Bruce, 28-35. [↑](#)

7 Spradley, 200. [↑](#)

8 Mary Taylor Previte, interviewed by author, audio taped, Camden County, NJ, July 25, 1995. [↑](#)

9 Previte, 43. [↑](#)

10 Ibid., 84, 41, 43. [↑](#)

11 Family worship was held every morning. Her mother would play the pump organ and the family would sing, pray and read the Bible together. [↑](#)

12 Mary has spoken across the U.S.A. to promote her book and the work she has done at the Camden County Youth Center. Since this interview she has been elected as a New Jersey Assembly woman. [↑](#)

13 Ibid., 23. [↑](#)

14 The 1924 Olympic gold medalist in track who was later featured in the 1980's movie, "Chariots of Fire." [↑](#)

15 Previte, 29. [↑](#)

16 Ibid., 230. [↑](#)