



## Looking Back at My Years at Harvard (1968-1971)

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(For my 50<sup>th</sup> graduation anniversary from the National Taiwan University Medical College)

After serving one year of compulsory military service at Chiang Kei-Shek's Navy, I arrived with excitement and expectation in Boston to start my graduate program in Physiology at Harvard Medical School in the summer of 1968. However, it didn't take too long for me to realize that I was ill prepared to come to the United States. I could not speak in English and could hardly understand others' spoken English. I could not stand American food in the cafeteria and I hated anything with cheese. I was the only foreign graduate student in the Department and probably one of the very few foreign students in the entire Harvard Medical Campus. I was isolated, lonely, and home sick.

My mentor, Dr. Thomas Hastings Wilson, who invented the everted sac technique for the study of intestinal absorption and was the Department Chair at that time, took me to Boston Chinatown for a dinner a few months after my arrival. I was so happy to see that there were

other Chinese in town and places to eat good Chinese food.

Even though I was given a desk in Dr. Wilson's laboratory, I spent most of the first year taking graduate courses. Because of the language barrier, I could not understand the lectures,



This picture was taken in 1970. The one on the left was my mentor, Dr. Thomas Hastings Wilson. The one on the right was me. In between was Louis Pasteur, a 1-year old male Scotch Terrier with the genetic disorder, canine cystinuria. Louis Pasteur was my research subject.



particularly when the professors were talking about the latest information that had not been incorporated into the textbook. I had to rely on self-studies and went to the Countway Library of Medicine frequently. I was amazed to see how hard American students studied. They were at the library studying before I got there and were still there studying when I left. On the way back to the dormitory, Vanderbilt Hall, I passed by the Biochemistry building. I saw most of the lights were still on. It was almost mid-night and they were still doing experiments. I could not help but wonder whether they ever went home to sleep. This was totally different from what I saw in the movies while I was in Taiwan about American students partying all the time.

One day after the mid-term exam, Dr. Wilson asked me how I was doing. I told him that I didn't know, because I could hardly understand what the professors were talking about. He suggested that I see the Chair of Biochemistry and ask him for advice. So, I did. However, after the Biochemistry Chair looked at my records, he told me that "you are all right, don't worry about it." I left his office without knowing exactly what he meant.

The biochemistry final exam had six questions from which students were asked to choose five to answer. One day I was passing by the Biochemistry Department Office, I saw quite

a few students were looking at the bulletin board making a lot of commotion. Out of curiosity, I joined the crowd and saw they were looking at the best answers to the biochemistry final exam. If your answers were like those posted, you would get full marks. So, I started to read the answer. The first thing struck me was that the handwriting was terrible. I was thinking that whoever provided these answers should at least have the decency to write clearly, so that others might understand. As I ran down the list, the handwriting in the second question was even worse. When I finally got to the last question, I told myself, my God, at least the handwriting in this one was better. The answer also somehow looked familiar. All of a sudden, I realized that this was actually my answer. How about that, one of my answers was chosen as the best answer!

Dr. Wilson told me that I was the first graduate student from the Department of Physiology to get an "A" in Biochemistry. As a matter of fact, with the exception of Bacterial Genetics (which I received an "A-"), I got "A" in all other courses. Dr. Wilson told me that I was ready to take the qualifying exam. He gave me a few books to prepare and I passed the qualifying exam 2 months later, becoming a Ph.D. candidate. All I needed then was to come up with a dissertation. He also told me that as part of my graduate training, the Department was going to



hire a tutor to teach me English.

Over the next 2 years, with some luck I managed to publish four papers, two from Dr. Wilson's laboratory and two from Dr. Richard D. Berlin's laboratory. These four papers formed the basis of my Ph.D. thesis.

The 1960's were exciting times in the US, in part, because President John F. Kennedy decided to send Americans to the moon and then back to the earth safely. To achieve this goal, the government provided a lot of money to support research. Harvard was able to pay for an English tutor to provide me with private lessons. For more than 2 years, I went to Mrs. Helen Rochfort's apartment in Cambridge once a week to learn English. She corrected my pronunciation and improved my broken English.

At the Department of Physiology, graduate students were allowed to invite a scientist from anywhere in the country to come to give a seminar once a month.

After the seminar, the Department paid all graduate students to take the speaker out for a dinner to get to know him/her better. We ate at the best restaurants in Boston and Cambridge. In

2006, I was invited by the Stanford Immunology Graduate Program to give a seminar. I was delighted to find that Stanford was able to keep this tradition and pay for a limited number of students to take me out for dinner.

The 1960's were also troubling times in the US. Because of the unpopular Vietnam War, there were widespread protests and campus unrest. The existing social values had been shaken, but the new value system was not yet established. At the Department, graduate students were insisting to call their professors by their first names.

Tom Ukena was one of the few friends that I had during my 3 years at Harvard. Tom, the son of a practicing dentist, was a medical student from Iowa. He was friendly to me and took me to my first and only rock concert at the Harvard Stadium. I didn't particularly enjoy the concert, because the music was too loud and most people were drinking. Somebody brought a big one-

gallon bottle of wine to the concert. They passed it around and drank directly from the bottle. For some reason not clear to me, whenever it got to me, it just by-passed me. I guess I was not considered to be one



This family picture was taken in 2016. From left to right: Gloria, Min-Fu, Linda, Grace and Richard.



of them.

Tom told me that he could only afford to buy two sets of clothing on sale each year, because he was poor and had to take out student loans to support his medical school education. I asked him why his rich dentist father didn't give him money to go to Harvard Medical School. He said, "Oh, no. We don't get along. We don't talk to each other, because we don't agree with each other." I was flabbergasted!

I told him that I couldn't imagine if my father and I were not talking to each other. I told him that throughout my medical school years, I wrote to my father each week and in return, he wrote to me each week. Even after I came to Harvard, we continued to write to each other. Each day, I looked forward to receiving my father's letter. It was a great source of support not only to me, but also to my father. I told Tom that if you don't talk to each other, how would you expect to resolve your differences.

A few months later, Tom came to see me and wanted to show me something. He was wearing a brand new suit and drove a new sports car. I thought he must have robbed the bank or won the lottery. I asked him what had happened. He smiled and said, "I have been writing to my father." Since then, Tom has never been poor again.

After my graduation, Tom decided that he

wanted to get a Ph.D. degree also. He continued the work that I initiated with Dr. Richard Berlin, got his Ph.D. in Physiology, finished his M.D. degree, and went on to become a pathologist.

Three years of Harvard experience has profoundly transformed how I think and how I view this world. While I didn't go to the Rockefeller University to do a post-doctoral fellowship as suggested by Dr. Richard Berlin, instead I completed my clinical training at the Johns Hopkins University, pursuing the truth and excellence through research has been a major part of my career. I felt so blessed to have the opportunity to study at Harvard. In appreciation, I have become a member of the 1636 Society for the last 30 years. 1636 was the year that John Harvard founded the university. When you make annual contributions to Harvard for more than 10 consecutive years, you become a member of the 1636 Society.

Booker T. Washington once said, "Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed." In that sense, my 3 years at Harvard was quite successful.

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