

Irene Chua Hwee Kee, *My Daughter, My Friend*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2013. 182 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-5830-1.

My Daughter, My Friend is a collection of 45 letters originally sent by the writer Irene Chua Hwee Kee to her teenage daughter, Ming. The letters span a period of over 42 months, from April 1992 to September 1995, followed by an additional entry in March 2013. The letters deal with many issues including studying for finals, having friends and boyfriend, dating, premarital relations and serving God. The letters are at times written in the form of narrative with stories injected to teach the teenager necessary lessons about life and the struggles that come with making life rewarding. Chua's voice and perspectives of life in these letters are clear as her cultural and religious sensibilities come through in the life lessons that she imparts. The epistolary genre works as the voice of the mother comes across authentic and believable. This is important as many of the initial statements made, albeit sounding didactic, when read as genuine letters written to her only daughter, helps readers get a sense of Chua as a mother of a teenager.

In the Acknowledgement, Chua states that her now adult daughter is her "sounding board." This simple act of recognising her daughter's significance in her life, tells the reader of the kind of mother Chua has become, one who is able to see her daughter beyond the person she is responsible for. This knowledge about the writer also helps readers read the letters with a kind of awareness of the evolution in the mother-daughter relationship that is ever developing and transforming. Chua's earlier letters which cover pertinent issues like love, peer pressure, self-confidence and being true to yourself, engage Ming as the dependent young adult who is learning to develop her own voice and personality. This type of engagement becomes less obvious over the course of the collection. In a letter dated 17 December 1992, Chua recalls a party that Ming wanted to attend despite having her finals round about the same time. Like most teenagers, Ming was pressured to attend by peer expectations. Chua's concern, as most parents would acknowledge, speaks to her need to ensure that her daughter learns the value between doing what is right and what is expected by others. As she advises her daughter: "You know the right thing to do and my saying no affirmed your inner voice. That is the privilege of being a child. You can depend on your parents to stop you from doing the wrong thing" (25). The strong role that the mother plays in her daughter's life is very evident in this statement.

In addition, the above statement by Chua assumes existence of an implied reader. Besides the intended reader of these letters, which is her daughter, by publishing them, Chua is beginning to engage the larger audience. In the above quote, for instance, the intended readers are parents whose children depend on

them as their guide. Chua's statement here almost challenges these parents to step up their roles and be the pillars that their teenagers can "depend on." It is in the unsaid, the role of the parents, that at times these letters appear to deal with. For instance, when she reflects in the same letter: "As a mother, I realize how true it is that children's behaviour instantly reflects on their upbringing. A child's bad behaviour brings shame to the parents. On the other hand, children's good deeds make parents feel proud" (26). In discussing the "shame" a child's behaviour can bring to parents, she is also addressing other parents who need to be cognisant of the kind of nurturing that they provide their children. Most times, as parents, we demand compliance from the child, without providing the right kind of guidance. What Chua exhibits through her letters is that, albeit she demands obedience from Ming, she also presents her daughter with the values that the latter should base her actions on: "You are armed with a whole value system which you have up till now merely accepted: what is right and what is wrong, what we believe in, your parents' point of view, the way things are done and what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. It is so because our family believes, thinks and does and perceives it this way" (25). These words clearly indicate Chua's cultural sense that she imparts to her daughter as part of her upbringing. Subsequently, Chua's advice to her daughter in this letter signals the existence of continued guidance towards Ming's independence.

Furthermore, Chua's morality and religious values are aptly captured in one of the letters dated 24 June 1993 about material gains and responsibilities. In answer to her daughter's usual question of "When will we be rich?" Chua reminds Ming of the Christian religious teachings, namely as "stewards of what we have" (46): "In the Bible, we are instructed to give back to God at least one tenth of what we receive. We are to look after the needs of other people too, which is the mark of true Christianity, namely widows and orphans and the less fortunate. We are also expected to honour our parents and to provide for the needs of our family" (46). As a non-Christian, I am drawn to these thoughts for it creates an awareness in me that like Muslims, Christians too are endowed with similar responsibilities. This entry is useful not just for teenagers to understand the value of money and their role towards ensuring the social well-being of the community, but it can also serve as a point of departure for inter-religious dialogue between Christians and people of other faiths, whose perspective on wealth and socio-religious responsibilities may converge.

In terms of exposition of the daughter's personality, these letters at times re-present her from the mother's point of view. For instance, in the 15th April 1993 letter, Ming is congratulated for her exam results. Yet, as Chua expands in the letter, Ming apparently had not been consistent in approaching her studies: "I suppose if you had put more time in your work especially in the first year of junior college you would have scored better.... Good thing you went into full

gear two months before the exams” (37). Parents of teenagers can empathise with this statement as many a time one is left asking the same question, would my teenager have done better had she been more consistent in her studies?

However, later letters begin to illustrate Ming’s developing independence, especially once she leaves home to pursue her college education. Through these letters we also get a sense of the interdependent relationship that defines Chua’s and Ming’s mother-daughter bond. In the letter dated 13 August 1993, Chua for the first time acknowledges her dependence on Ming now that Ming has moved to the university hostel: “I am glad you called last night. It is good to hear your voice, now that you are living in the university hostel. It has been a change not only for you, but also a great change for me. A void in my day. I kind of miss having you around, talking, perhaps nagging, telling you to go to bed, waiting up for you, telling you to take your vitamins and mushroom capsules. It’s like I have lost my job” (51). The empty nest syndrome is not uncommon as most parents of teenagers begin to feel this sense of loss and can empathise with Chua. Yet what is recognisable in Chua’s take on this “void” is its significance. As she acknowledges to Ming, this new phase in her life signals the start of a “life of independence” (51). It also signals a transformation in the mother-daughter relationship. Chua reminds Ming, and perhaps herself as a mother, that this new phase indicates a growth in her relationship to her daughter who is now a young woman: “Now we must learn to relate to one another, as two women, one younger, one older” (51). Chua’s realisation of the importance of evolving with her child as she grows up can clearly be seen in the following statement: “This new mother-and-adult-daughter relationship must be nurtured in the same way I cultivated the childhood bond with you. And talking and listening to each other is a necessary ingredient” (52). The promise that Chua makes to her daughter in the following statement also signals a growth in Chua’s character as a mother with an adult daughter: “on my part, I can assure you that I will never give up on you, though we will have to learn different ways of interacting” (52).

The theme of interdependence in a mother-daughter relationship is explored further almost two years later in the letter dated 9 March 1995 where Chua begins to reflect on her “demands” on her daughter over the years and experiences her learning curve as a mother. She ruminates: “... now on reflection, I have to ask myself what I hoped to achieve by insisting. These were really battles of wills.... I was really thinking of myself when I made those demands. If only I had put myself in your shoes. I admit I had imposed my will on you when it was most unnecessary and over inconsequential matters and we both were angry with each other” (124). Chua’s retrospective account of her part in her child’s upbringing reflects a genuine account of the struggles one experiences being a parent of a strong willed child. In this regard, she further elaborates:

It is these little tussles that get me uptight and make me think through how I relate to you and how it fits into my overall wish for you. You have taught me a lot about how to be a parent. When you say, 'It's no use talking to you, Mum,' inwardly I get mad. This is not the sort of thing a mother likes to hear. It hurts. What do you mean by 'no use talking to me'? People ask me for advice and my own daughter says there is no point talking to me. So I think about what you say.... So I had to change the way I relate to you. I learnt to listen to you. I actually have to tell myself to shut up and listen. (124-25)

These honest accounts of recognising her shortcomings allow Chua to understand the many challenges that come with being a parent and the need for the parent to reflect and grow with the child's developing personality. The subsequent letters from this point on reflect the transforming personality of the mother. Chua is no longer didactic in her tone, demanding obedience from her then teenage daughter. Rather now, as a mother of an adult daughter, Chua appears to take the role of the "lifetime caregiver" who continues to provide her daughter with "whatever suitable support" and becomes a "constant in [her] life" (146). This new role, as Chua aptly concludes in the letter dated 25 May 1995, is as follows: "There could possibly be ups and downs in your adult life – joy and sorrows, triumphs and failure – but we want you to know that you can always come back to us. Your interfering parents have an encompassing reason for finding out the seemingly bothersome details about your movements. We want to teach you accountability while we offer you a sense of security" (146). As a parent, these words from Chua provide comfort as they allow me to embrace my own limitations as I attempt to nurture my own daughter's strong willed self and find my abiding presence in her life.

An added bonus in every letter is the "Think About" section which identifies one or two issues that readers are encouraged to engage with on reading the entry. The entries dated 16 February 1993 and 18 March 1993 stand out for their "Think About" section for the way they deal with teenage sex. The letters bring to the fore issues of sexual relations, friendship with the opposite sex and premarital sex. The significance of these letters lies in the way Chua attempts to speak to her daughter on these issues, albeit at times demanding that Ming respects her wishes: "When you have a long-standing, close friendship with a boyfriend ... [s]tate that it is your wish (and your mother's) to keep sex till marriage, and that you want him to respect it" (35). Chua also attempts to coax Ming intellectually, as she explains in one statement:

You see, sex is a physiological process. Put simply, it starts with superficial skin contact as in touching and more touching. The nerve endings are stimulated and the heart rate increases. The mind, on the other hand, gets

more and more blurred. And, as it were, a powerful magnet brings the two bodies together. Good sense is lowest when bodily sensations are strongest. It is very difficult to stop in midstream and back off. (33)

Furthermore, she reminds Ming of the link between sexual relations and the mind: "... long before you face an actual sexual situation, you must have already made up your mind... because sex is actually an act of will" (30). In the "Think About" section of the letter dated 18 March 1993, Chua posts two questions for daughters and parents respectively, asking each to consider the issue of teenage sexuality and premarital sex. These two letters can be used by parents and teachers of teenagers to help them talk about the issue of teenage sexuality and pregnancy, which is becoming rampant in most developed and developing countries. These issues, when dealt with by parents and their teenage daughters, may allow for a more open and two-way relations between them.

The overarching concern raised in this collection of letters is succinctly summed up by Chua in the Epilogue: "Should we depend on our children to give us happiness?" (178). These letters act as a collective reminder of the many roles played by mothers and daughters everywhere. They also remind us that this age-old relationship is an inherent aspect of the human society, and that the relationship is reciprocal and mutual: just as mothers have a role in their daughters' lives, so it is the other way around. That being the case, readers everywhere with teenage daughters are likely to be drawn to the book, and also likely to benefit from it.

There is no guide book for mothers on how to raise a teenager who is developing a mind of her own in an age where friends matter more than family. Chua's thoughts, concerns and questions about what is important for her teenage daughter in most cases echo the universal concerns of mothers across time and space. These letters, although addressed to Ming, have allowed Chua to reach a larger audience. With the publication of the book, it can be used as a source to strike a conversation about the many issues that pre-teens and teens encounter, which at times may appear as foreign to adult caregivers.

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