Pong Suet-ling was born on 20 June 1955, the third of seven children, into a crowded public housing estate of post-war Hong Kong. An older brother died in infancy. She and her five surviving siblings lived with their parents in a two room flat having electricity but sometimes lacking indoor plumbing. One effect of this density and material poverty was that the (also crowded) public schools began to seem like havens of comparative security and nurturing.

Suet-ling was randomly assigned to a large first-grade where students were rank ordered and divided into dozens of sections depending on the student’s diligence and aptitude. Within two years she had lifted herself out the lower sections and up into the “Class A” with the best students. This pattern continued. Although her parents lacked formal education and could not offer much help with her studies, she passed the necessary tests to continue beyond fourth grade, beyond sixth grade, beyond 9th grade, and finally to become one of the 3% of children (2% of girls) who won a place to attend university. She studied Economics and Sociology, maintaining all the while her talents in literature and Chinese painting.

Although her primary and secondary and university studies were largely supported by government scholarships, during her student years she also supported her family with such jobs as sewing dolls for export toy companies; working on a radio assembly line and (while in university) working as a bet-maker and odds calculator for horseracing at the Jockey Club. One summer she worked as a research assistant for a Yale anthropologist investigating the production cycle of peasants on a Chinese commune (gifted in languages, SL learned the local dialect). Following her graduation, she taught in two very different secondary schools, one catering to Hong Kong’s poorest and the other to its most affluent families.

In 1982 Suet-ling won a scholarship from the American Association of University Women to continue graduate studies. She also received a tuition waiver from the University of Chicago. During her first semester in the US she nevertheless supplemented her scholarship with weekly housecleaning in neighborhood homes. By the end of the first semester, she had done so well in her Statistics class that she was hired as the professor’s research assistant. Thereafter she only ever needed to clean her own home (which was easy prior to her starting a family). After a short time working for that professor, Suet-ling was recognized as invaluable and was offered research assistance work first by the director of the NORC and then by the department chair of Education. She also received money from the Hewlett Foundation to write her dissertation; on marriage and income inequality. She subsequently won awards from the Rockefeller Foundation and Population Council to complete her studies. Even prior to finishing her dissertation – one of the first to process raw census data tapes of household characteristics in Hong Kong - Suet-ling was recruited for a job at her alma matter, Chinese University of Hong Kong. She returned there in 1986 to teach Sociology of Education.

It was also during the 1980s that she met and, after a few years, decided to marry David Post (who had been a classmate). Their marriage took place on 18 May 1986 beneath a portrait of Prince Philip and Queen Elizabeth, in the registrar’s office of an outlying Hong Kong town, Tai Po. After two more years in Hong Kong (while David wrote his dissertation in Peru), Suet-ling moved with him to Southern California. For four years she lived in Riverside and in Santa Monica,
while working as a researcher at RAND. Their only child, Sara, was born in 1991. Putting parenthood first, she and David searched for positions where they could work at the same place. Soon they accepted offers from Penn State University in State College, PA.

Suet-ling tried to answer many kinds of research questions, and she learned to use an array of methods, most of them cutting edge in the social sciences and certainly in the field of education. Her research won top honors in her field, and she received countless prizes and grants over the years. Her deep curiosities drove her studies of: social capital and single motherhood; the revealed sex preferences of different ethnic groups living in Malaysia; the impact of women’s earnings and increased education on household income inequality; immigrant destinations and strategies; family welfare policies and their effect on children, and many, many other topics. She enjoyed collaborating with some of the best scholars in the different fields of her effort.

In 1998 she was diagnosed with advanced breast cancer. Though doctors predicted she had only two years to live, she underwent treatment and a mastectomy, practiced Chinese Medicine, Tai Chi, and mushroom wildcrafting, and lived in good health another 16 years. She liked to advocate for other cancer survivors.

Suet-ling’s curiosity led her to often travel alone: to meet co-researchers in Burkina Faso, Japan, Italy, Thailand, Vietnam, Eastern China, and more. In 2011, she spent two years as a visiting professor at her alma mater in Hong Kong, during which time she took singing lessons and painting classes. Around that time she also became a devout practitioner of Qigong, and would practice for hours each day. As recently as February 2015 – when she knew she was terminally ill with metastasized cancer – she enrolled in an intensive French language course so that she could navigate Paris independently, where she was at the time staying with David. After a few weeks her accent was better than her husband’s.

But her concerns, passions, and curiosities were not only focused on her own family and friends. She was fond of quoting CW Mills about how, with some imagination, it becomes possible to understand one’s own challenges as part of larger social problems. Since her time in the Hong Kong student movement of the 1970s, she was intensely but quietly political. In 1982 she arrived at the University of Chicago with cassette tapes and song books from (among other things) the US civil rights movement. She learned to play guitar imitating Joan Baez. She never stopped donating money to progressive causes.

In the course of her life she became a beloved figure. Her humility downplayed her influence on the many people whose lives she touched deeply. Many of her students became very close friends; some even left their own families and came long distances in the last month of her life in order to help Sara and David care for SL.

As she aged, her curiosity and tranquility were satisfied more and more by the Buddhist orientation of her mother. During the last days of her life, she listened continuously to recordings of the Heart Sutra. She died on 12 May 2015 after three weeks in hospice care just the way she would have liked: at home, at peace, in her sleep, and surrounded by love and music.

David Post continues on the Penn State faculty. Sara Yin-ling Post graduated in Biology from Reed College, works as a caseworker for homeless teens in Eugene OR, and will continue her studies in Nursing at the University of Washington next fall. In recent years she and her daughter developed a powerful bond that was a source of strength for them both, making Suet-ling feel complete. Suet-ling’s ashes will be taken to her parents in Hong Kong. In addition to the public commemoration in Pennsylvania on 17 May 2015, there will be an important event at the Chinese University of Hong Kong on 25 May 2015, which also happens to be Buddha’s Birthday, a public holiday there.

“To everything; turn! turn! turn! There is a season; turn! turn! turn! And a time to every purpose under heaven.”