

FEATURE

A mother dies, a way of life recedes

When his 89-year-old mother died, Peter Eng buried the last living link to his family's Chinese culture, save for a shoebox of old photos and letters in a forgotten language.

By Peter Eng

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NEW YORK CITY — A chilling wind at the start of spring whipped the cemetery as we buried our 89-year-old mother and helplessly watched an entire culture and way of life lowered into the shadows of the earth.

I and my six brothers made ourselves into Americans with little hyphenation. But through half a century in America, our mother, Lai Wau Chiu Eng, unrelentingly clung to the language, customs and attitudes of the poor village where she was born in Sun Wei county, Canton province (now called Xinhui district, Guangzhou), in the Pearl River Delta, southeastern China. It was in Sun Wei that the Song Dynasty in 1279 made its last stand against the invading Mongols.

My mother's death collapsed our last bridge to the old world; with no close relatives left, I and my brothers now have only a shoebox of silent black-and-white photographs and letters written in a language that we cannot read.



Lai Wau Chiu Eng poses with five of her seven sons in Hong Kong's New Territories. The family moved to New York City in 1962.

My parents fled Canton after the Communists won the civil war in 1949. They resettled in Hung Siu Kiu village near Yuen Long, in Hong Kong's New Territories, and with little education, they had to tend chickens for a living.

In 1962, they went to New York City to join my grandfather, so that their children would get a better education and future.

There my parents toiled long hours in a "Chinese hand laundry," an institution and rite of passage that is fast disappearing. I never

heard my parents complain about it. I and my brothers had to help out in the laundry after school. We complained all the time.

During decades in the U.S., my parents thought of the Americans as the foreigners, the invaders, not themselves. They had no non-Chinese friends. They resisted learning English. Every Sunday morning, my parents took us on the subway to Chinatown to eat dim sum and see

familiar faces, and to study Cantonese language and calligraphy.

But because of the pressure to be like everyone else — and not like our parents — we abandoned our Cantonese and moved on to Caucasian girlfriends and Sundays watching talk shows and sports. Some of us fled to universities outside of New York. We all did graduate from university, and pursued careers in information technology, engineering, journalism, public health, real estate, the United States Postal Service.

Because I was born in Hong Kong and grew up in New York, my mother gave a sense of unity to my life. With her death, my past has become unmoored from my present. In war, revolution, flight and two lands of exile, my parents kept the faith of their village in Sun Wei. They were family-centered, tradition-bound, strong-willed, stubborn, hardworking, simple, always scraping what's precious from the sere earth, always embracing personal sacrifice so that their sons would not suffer the hardships that they did. As a child, I rejected all this. Now I wish that I, too, could achieve such a life.

In recent years, I have been trying to relearn Cantonese, largely to hear more of my mother's memories of the old world. But I just could not relearn quickly enough.

My mother moved to Seattle in 2004 to join my brothers. As her heart condition worsened, she knew what was happening and where she belonged. Seven days before she died, when the doctor asked how she was doing, my mother said, "I like China. I want go China."

I stayed with my mother during her last night of life in a nursing home for Chinese people. In the shadows of her room I saw black-and-white scenes of the old-world retreat, drawn away by each repetition of labored breath. I yearned for her to say something to me, to keep China and Hong Kong here, but there were only shouts of delirium during that chilly night.

My mother was buried alongside my father, and my grandfather and his brother, in a plot in Cypress Hills Cemetery, in Brooklyn, owned by the Sun Wei Association of the Eastern USA. It was a traditional Chinese ritual. We offered a boiled chicken to the spirits and imitation money to sustain my mother in the afterlife, and we bowed three times before her casket with lit joss sticks. Carved on my mother's headstone are only her name, dates of birth and death, and then, only in Chinese: "Canton province, Sun Wei county."

My beautiful 11-year-old niece is only half-Chinese and she doesn't speak any Chinese. She is blessed with sensitivity but she does not yet have a history. Had they been able to communicate, perhaps my mother could have taught her how she lived life in Sun Wei, and why she had to preserve that in travels outside.

When my niece saw me avoid gatherings of people after my mother's death, she said, "I know that you are very sad. But I think we all have to move on." No, one day I hope you will understand why I need to stay here for a while, for if I can no longer see the shadows of the past, I can no longer see myself.

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