

## My Grandparents— Living Roots Sunk in Chinese Memory

By Emily Ge

**W**hen my grandparents are staying with us, there's no question who's the boss of the kitchen. My waigong 公 knows Waipo's in charge, but his disgruntled mutterings reveal him to be as headstrong a sous-chef as she a cuisinier.

His stubbornness belongs to a barefoot boy who walked down dark mountain slopes with a bundle of firewood strapped to his back, destined for a few coins at market. When he finishes peeling the bitter si gua melon later than she would have liked, my waipo 婆 asks him “*Ni ze me gao de?*” “What is your problem?”

Waigong replies with an eye-roll and a well-worn “Leave me alone. . .” Listening to their conversations, you might wonder how they ever got dinner past the refrigerator, but even though their mouths move faster than their hands, they have worked as a stove-front unit for more than forty years.

Theirs is a serious business. When my grandmother watches my sister and me chew our first mouthfuls of supper, her question “*Hao chi ma?*” “Is it good?” might as well mean “Do you love me?”

My grandmother was a sickly baby. In her China, sickly female babies were as valuable as dirty corn husks. After one month of life, my waipo was abandoned by her parents and left to die in a field. She would have fulfilled that fate had it not been for her second-oldest brother, who



rescued her and fought to bring her back to their parents' house.

Her parents died when she was young, so Waipo was raised by her brothers to be hard, smart and strong. Like my grandfather, my waipo grew up scrabbling around in the crumbly black soil, trying to seed enough so that she could eat enough.

My grandparents met while attending the same Shanghai University. They stayed to become professors, Waigong in botany and Waipo in microbiology. After the start of the Cultural Revolution, they were sent back to the countryside to work so that they could be “de-intellectualized.” They had once again dragged themselves out of that world, but now they were to be shoved down into the dirt once more, forced to learn to sympathize with a life they only knew too well.

I can see this time in their faces – the tan of sun-stoked labor, the cruel creases etched into their skin like bad omens.

Two years ago, after I took the gleaming gao tie bullet train out of Bengbu 阜, I stayed the night in Shanghai before flying back home. My grandmother cooked for me then, too, paying

special attention to make the sugary, salty, pan-fried corn fritters I treasured like December sunshine.

At dinnertime, I sat with my grandparents around a tiny table plastered with family pictures kept in mint condition under a layer of thick glass. A hot, oily-sweet fritter clamped firmly between my chopsticks, I surveyed 16 years of school photos, glamor shots and candid stills, full of gap-toothed grins and scraggly haircuts my mom gave us at the kitchen table with scissors my grandmother had resolved to smuggle through the airport metal detectors.

My waipo and waigong knew I was tired, so they let me eat in silence. Their stoic munching and chopstick jabbing served as steadfast companions, their Hui xi's, their I love you's, going unsaid but not unfelt.

While I was in the hospital in Bengbu, the IV pumping me full of man-made antivirals, I gulped down small white jars of herbal pills that I was too tired to question. That changed when my grandfather took the gao tie from Shanghai after a day and appointed himself as my official poison-checker.

He read those jar labels like they were life or death contracts, poring over them through his wire-rimmed glasses, his finger tracing each line of labeled species, rejecting unnecessary extracts and requesting those he thought were missing. After I was released from my hospital cot, my weigong never let me out of his sight.

Ever since I was little, Waigong has insisted on holding my hand when we cross streets. It's as if he was leading a toddler when he stepped off the sidewalk, and she grew up beside him while his eyes were still busy watching for the flash of speeding cars.

I like waking up early to watch my grandparents in the backyard practicing their tai chi. Their arms move through the crisp chill like patient oak branches in the breeze, painting qi where their hands, palms forward, move like storm clouds from their chests, balancing a

strange energy in their bent fingers. They move together with the practiced synchronicity of many, many mornings.

Their bodies flow as one, like two lotus flowers drifting on a lake: separate beings, yet connected beneath the pearly, rippled surface.

Read more here:

<http://www.thenewstribune.com/2014/07/21/3296889/my-grandparents-living-rooms-sunk.html#storylink=cpy>

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