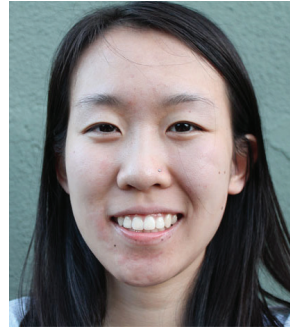


A Modest Man

JESSICA XIE



WRITER'S COMMENT: My UWP 101 class was centered around the idea of "documentary work." In this essay, I was tasked with writing about something from my family history, whether it be an event, person, or heirloom. I knew immediately that I wanted to write about my grandfather, whose memories I cling to dearly. My grandfather is someone I look up to, and whom I inspire to be. As a child, I brushed off a lot of his teachings, chalking them up as frivolous and unimportant. I never appreciated his words until years after his death, and I hope that by sharing a part of him in this essay, I can remind others to be thankful for what they have.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I structure my advanced composition courses around the idea of "documentary work," as defined by Robert Coles, for whom "documentary" refers to "any attempt to engage, represent, and understand the lives of others." I challenge my students both to analyze documentation produced by others and to become documentarians themselves. For their final essay, I ask the students to write a "family history paper," drawing on both primary research—interviews, photographs, family lore, objects, official documents . . . whatever they can find—and secondary research (online or in the library) to set their family story in some sort of larger context. It's a challenging assignment—figuring out how to focus the essay, identifying story elements and narrating them in a compelling way, and integrating secondary research that supports and explains the story without taking away from the narrative flow. Jessica's essay excels in every way. When I first read it, I wrote in my notes, simply, "Wow."

It's a beautifully written essay that superbly integrates information on communist China to help us understand the character of this "modest man"—and in the end a remarkable tribute to Jessica's grandfather.

—*Pamela Demory, University Writing Program*

My grandfather was a humble man. Born on November 11, 1929 in the Guangdong province of China, my grandfather spent his early years as a farmer. As a man born with practically nothing, he was familiar with the gnawing hunger pains associated with a season of failed crops and learned to appreciate what we consider the conveniences of life. A couple of discarded grains of rice may be of little importance to us nowadays, but he learned the hard way that those grains of rice could calm his sharp hunger into a dull pain. Despite his poor upbringing, he hungered to further his education. When I was younger, I recalled him telling my sister and me the horrible methods his teachers would implement to ensure that all students were retaining the material. Back then, educational abuse wasn't frowned upon, and he would chuckle as he remembered the times his classmates would get a sharp rapping on their hand for any incorrect answer. My sister and I would warily stare at each other in disbelief.

My grandfather was a product of a different time, and his mannerisms, speech, and attitude demonstrated this. In my preteen years, I dreamed of careers that other kids typically dreamed about: physician, astronaut, mathematician. My grandfather dreamed of breaking away from the confines of a farmer, which his father, and to which his father's father were ascribed since birth. He didn't dream as big as I did; everything about him was modest. His love for words led him to dream of being an author, a poet.

As a kid, I never appreciated the lyricism of his writing nor his longing for us to enjoy poetry as much as he did. In my broken Mandarin, I would tell him "*Ye Ye*"—grandfather—"I don't see why these poems are important." He'd laugh that raspy laugh of his that made it seem as if he were perpetually happy. "*Yi Jing*," he would call me by my Chinese name, "one day you'll appreciate the poems I've made you memorize. In a few years, you can impress your classmates by reciting these poems to them. They'll look at you with respect." I would roll my eyes and tell him, "This is America, not China," to which he would embark on a long spiel on

the importance of being proud of one's culture. As an 8-year-old, I had a hard time grasping anything other than the multiplication table, and thus zoned out.

Besides his love for words and writing, my grandfather was passionate about his time in the military. I always enjoyed listening to these stories more. In my adolescent mind, I painted him as a hero who protected his people from injustice. His eyes would light up behind thick, wire-rimmed glasses, and his arms would swing dramatically as he enthused about his patriotic duties to the People's Republic of China.

"Nighttime was important," he would begin. Though I had heard this story multiple times before, I always got a kick out of hearing him describe his experience again.

"During night, you have the most cover. Darkness is your best friend. This is when we'd go and collect water and eat our food. But sometimes we were not lucky. We didn't have water, and we were starving. When you're dehydrated and hungry, you must satisfy your thirst first. When the Japanese were hiding, we would drink our own urine if we could not find an adequate water source."

Upon hearing this the first time, my nose wrinkled, and I made a noise of disgust. After listening to this story multiple times, I would still shudder at the thought of him drinking his own urine, yet feel amazed that he lived through a time that I had only briefly learned about in history books.

"It all worked out in the end," he mused. And it did. On September 2, 1945, Japan surrendered to the Allied powers, and the Chinese rejoiced. This was not the end of my grandfather's time in the military, however. The Second Sino-Japanese war resulted in China splitting into three regions: government-controlled Nationalist China, Communist China, and those areas occupied by Japan. My grandfather, like many commoners, voluntarily fought under Mao Zedong for Communist China. Those raised in poverty saw communism as a way to rectify the income disparity between the impoverished and the rich. Fighting for Mao, as my grandfather would say, meant fighting for his people.

Ye Ye's desire for equity under the communist rule translated to his life after the military. Despite his impoverished background, he always found ways to give. Whether it be lending a hand to a neighbor, teaching people in his village how to read and write, or donating money to those less fortunate than him even when he himself had barely any money to

his name, he always found a way to help others in need. I witnessed his charitable personality constantly when I was a young girl. He'd hold my hand as we walked down the street and would pause to stuff a dollar bill into my hand.

"Go give that dollar to the man over there."

He would point to a homeless person in raggedy clothes, tucked in a corner on the street. The first few times he told me to do this, I blatantly refused.

"It's dirty," I'd say. My young, ignorant mind could not comprehend why my grandfather would give his hard-earned money to some stranger he did not know. After refusing a couple more times, my grandfather would look over his glasses at me, piercing me with an exasperated look.

"Why does it matter?" he would begin. "Some people are not as fortunate as us, and it takes someone with a kind heart to help others in need."

Kindness. Charitability. Humility. These attributes described my grandfather perfectly, and looking back at his actions, I could only hope to emulate his kind gestures. So, after my childish mumble and grumble, I would listen to my grandfather and hesitantly approach the homeless person, drop a dollar into their discolored tin, and scuttle back to my grandfather. *Ye Ye* would stroke his chin, nod approvingly, and we would continue our way back home. It only struck me a few years ago why he made my sister and I do this. Rather than him stepping aside and giving his money to a homeless person, he would make us give the money ourselves so that we could condition ourselves to be more kind. For that, I greatly appreciate my grandfather's sense of good.

Knowing that my grandfather was a military man at heart, I shouldn't have been so surprised to learn about his occupation after Mao Zedong came into power. In a phone conversation with my mother, I discovered that my grandfather worked in a prison. Due to translation issues between me and my mother—she had a hard time figuring out the exact English phrase for his job—I gathered that he had held a supervisory position in the prison.

"But, what exactly did he do in the prison?" I asked my mother over the phone. She sighed and made a frustrated sound.

"It's—how do you say it in English—" she mumbled to herself in Cantonese, which I had a hard time following. "He looked over the patrol men in the prison. But, during the time he was in the prison there

was a—” she switched to Cantonese which left me confused. I asked her to speak English and I could practically hear her shrug over the phone.

“People fought a lot. His job was necessary because after Mao was in power, there was still a lot of unsettlement within the people. Everyone had to watch their back.”

Her words left me with more questions in my brain that I knew could never be answered. If my grandfather were still alive, I would have asked him to explain. How did he not turn out to be jaded after witnessing people around him fighting each other? How could he still believe in the goodness of people after witnessing the actions of the criminals in his prison?

I can only ponder these questions without hope for an answer.

Hoping for an end to their poverty, common folk were disillusioned by Chairman Mao’s broken promises. Mao’s rise to power left China in a state of disarray and terror. The Red Guard was formed to quell any dissent against the Chairman. When my mother said that “people had to watch their back,” she described the state of unrest created by the Red Terror. My grandfather never joined the Red Guard and thus never participated in firsthand violence against dissenters; however, he was not exempt from the violence against Rightist organizations. As someone who worked in a prison, he had to witness the ill treatment of those arrested. Did he turn a blind eye to the violence that these prisoners probably faced? Did he tell his subordinates to not enact violence onto these prisoners? Or did he think the prisoners were deserving of their treatment? Like his peers, my grandfather was heavily influenced by the Chairman’s promises of a better China through communism. In their eyes, they probably saw the Rightists as deserving of their punishment—after all, didn’t they selfishly live luxurious lives while the lower class had to scrape by to survive? With Mao’s influential logic, the lower class was swayed into action, and my grandfather followed suit.

The months leading to my grandfather’s death were filled with sorrow and regret. I felt regret for not taking his words to heart. I may never be an author like my grandfather, but I grew to appreciate detailed diction and whimsical words thanks to him. I remember stepping into his hospital room, days before he passed away, dreading to see my grandfather on the stark white bed surrounded by beeping machines. How could a man with such energy, such vigor to do good to the world, be reduced to a trembling man staring blindly at the wall in front of him?

I held his tanned, wrinkled hand, full of age spots that signified a life of manual labor, and I wondered how he was able to survive everything life threw at him. His strong jaw, previously peppered with coarse hair, was sunken and hairless. His normally sharp eyes remained watery and distant, his Adam's apple more prominent, and his body an emaciated shell of its former glory. My grandfather opened his mouth and his lips twitched but no sound came out. After a few more tries, he found his voice and weakly told my sister and me this:

“I wish I could live long enough to see you two grow into strong women, full of kindness and humility, because the world needs people like you.”

His body, ravaged by lymphoma, did not survive long after, but his words ring true every day. Recently, I found a photo that I had long forgotten about—a photo with my sister, my grandfather, and me. It swept me with a large sense of nostalgia as I stared at the three of us. My grandfather, a man who could have committed to a life as a farmer, yearned to do better for him and his family. A couple years after my

parents immigrated to America, my grandparents followed. They were one of the few lucky ones in their village to scrape together enough funds to prompt such a large upheaval of their life. But they did it, and my parents and grandparents became American citizens. While he never lived a glitzy, glamorous life, he was content with simple things. Perhaps if my grandfather chose to live, breathe, and die a farmer,



From left to right: Jessica's sister, her grandfather, and Jessica.

he would never have come to America. If so, then the moments we shared, like the photograph of the three of us, may have never happened. His thirst for knowledge, desire for positive change, and willingness to help others make me proud to have called him *Ye Ye*.

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