

Reflections of Her

KAITLYN KUI



WRITER'S COMMENT: There was always this strange connection between my grandma and me. She could barely share her thoughts in English or Cantonese, yet she seemed to always know what to say to me with her gestures and her tone. Through my UWP 101 class, Dr. Gregory Miller offered me the opportunity to dive into that connection, seeking to bridge layers of my family history alongside larger social constructs. As I learned about her journey, I marveled at the kind of woman she was. She has shown me the value of resilience in the face of adversity, never allowing her circumstances to define her. Above all, in sharing her story, I hope others learn of the unmistakable power in the silence of the deeds that go unheard.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Inspired by Pam Demory, my recently retired colleague, I assigned a version of her family history essay, which asks students to write about a family member's story in relation to a larger social context such as class, culture, race, gender, immigration, education, and/or politics. Kaitlyn was a standout student from the beginning of our Zoom-restricted quarter, but even so I was surprised—and certainly delighted—by how much context this seemingly modest essay manages to impart. Taking us across decades and from China and Hong Kong to Australia and the United States, Kaitlyn tells the story of her “pau pau” (grandmother) and, by extension, of three generations of remarkable women. Kaitlyn's subtle accretion of detail and event opens up the world of this resilient pastry shop proprietor. Late in the essay, we learn that her grandmother encouraged her daughter (Kaitlyn's mother) to enter a competition, which ultimately led to a college degree in fashion design. Kaitlyn has had her own academic successes here at UC Davis, where she is in her fourth year pursuing a major in

pharmaceutical chemistry. Her accomplishments are not surprising, given the nine-year-old Kaitlyn’s self-portrait with her grandmother, a painting that plays an important role in this very moving essay.

—Gregory Miller, *University Writing Program*

Wrapped in brown paper and propped up near my bedroom was a painting of her and me. The topic that year for the Reflections program, an annual national art competition, was “Beauty Is . . .” My mom suggested, “Think about some people or events in your life that you find beautiful.” While I only got to see my grandma for a few weeks every other summer, I could envision her. I would hold her arm as we walked to the park and look up at her—the way the light would reveal the shades of gray in my Pau Pau’s hair. As she sat by me on the park bench, her favorite maroon knit adorning her head, she looked to me with her warm, affectionate smile and wrapped her arm carefully over my shoulder. A kindness that could not go unnoticed, yet there was something more. Even at eleven, awkwardly smiling while I sat next to my grandma: what had I yet to recognize?

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Lau Soon Wah was born on December 8, 1930, in Chaoshan, a linguistically and geographically distinct region in the northeastern Guangdong Province of China. Her childhood was consumed by the ongoing Chinese Civil War between the nationalists led by Chiang Kai-Shek and the communists led by



*My nine-year-old painting,
“Summer with my Grandma.”*



*Pau Pau and eleven-year-old
me at the park*

Mao Zedong. When the nationalists took control, corruption roamed free. Tax collectors were commonly reported by people as “blood-sucking devils” while the suffering of the peasants was ignored (Constitutional Rights Foundation).

Poor families, like my Pau Pau’s, rarely spent the little money they had for fear that others in the village would steal from them or report their spendings to the tax collectors. At a young age, my grandma was forced to quit school and thrust into household duties while her two older brothers continued their education. Food was scarce, and for every meal, her entire family of eleven would share one plate of rice and whatever morsels were available to eat.

By sixteen, she had an arranged marriage to a man she was fond of and sent to live with her in-laws, cold and calculating people. The next year, she gave birth to a daughter and, upon seeing a girl, her in-laws shoved her cold porridge to eat afterward. To them, the birth of a girl was unworthy of any praise—a grandchild who could not carry on the family name or support their family after being married off. My grandma felt alone. She was angry toward their sentiment and tried to shield this from her own daughter, treating her with utmost care.

At eighteen, her husband went to Vietnam in hopes of finding better business prospects; however, he was never to be seen again. What she had not known was that her husband had emphysema and a chronic heart condition. Her in-laws hid this fact from my grandma and hoped their wedding would serve as *Cung Hei*, a marriage to a terminally ill patient in hopes the joyous occasion would treat the disease. After their son’s death, her in-laws no longer needed her in the house, kicking her and her daughter out with only the clothes they wore and a picture of her husband. She would not allow them to look down on her for having a daughter and sought to make something more of herself.

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By 1949, the Chinese Civil War had ended and the Communist Party of China had emerged victorious. Mainland China became established as the People’s Republic of China, with Mao Zedong leading the single-party state focused on the suppression of individual rights and freedoms (Ghosh). The Guangdong province was marginalized by the new Chinese government, compromising its historical commercial prominence and heavily limiting its trade (Johnson 125). Contrastingly, Mainland China was beginning to divert business and entrepreneurs to the relatively safe and more stable British colonial port of Hong Kong (Schenk).

Due to a growing fear in communist rule, my grandma's father was driven to escape. Finding a more stable source of income as a silk trader and herbalist in Hong Kong, my Pau Pau and her daughter went along with him. She could not speak Cantonese or English, the two predominant languages in Hong Kong. This gave native Hongkongers more reason to see her as inferior, since mainlanders at the time were treated as "outsiders." Instead of allowing her circumstances to discourage her, she sought out opportunities to educate herself and earn a living. While she tirelessly practiced learning Cantonese, she found herself more interested in forming social bonds through other methods.

By 1961, after attending vocational classes in dressmaking, my grandma was granted a certificate in sewing apparel. She had managed to make friends with Teochew speakers and other members of her dressmaking classes. A few years later, she met my Gong Gong. While he was blunt and headstrong, she saw my grandpa for who was—an honest and hardworking man. With my Gong Gong, she had two daughters: my Yee Ma and my mom. Now my grandma had to care for three girls and an elderly man, the in-law of my grandpa's previous marriage. My Pau Pau was adamant about finding ways to make money. While my grandpa was gone for months at a time as a seaman on a cargo ship, my Pau Pau looked into ways her skills could be used.

In the 1960s, Hong Kong was on the rise as one of the Four Asian Tigers, a high-growth economy in East Asia powered by exports and rapid industrialization (Bloomenthal). The textile and manufacturing industries were especially prominent at the time. My grandma would bring home clothing consignments every day from garment factories so she could care for her children and not have to face Hongkongers' scorn toward mainlanders. At a young age, my mother and her sister remember helping their mother cut overlocking threads and going to bed to the whirring of their mother's sewing machine. She also found work piecing together plastic flower molds, as artificial flowers made from plastic were in high demand by the West (Lo). Food was always a pressing issue, and at times she would go to nearby restaurants and pay small amounts for their scraps. Her tireless efforts and frugal budgeting proved to be extremely effective. Within a couple years, she saved 1000 HKD, a considerable amount of money at the time. With her and my grandpa's savings, their family sought to leave Hong Kong.

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During the early 1960s to early 1970s, Australia was undergoing a series of changes. By 1974, The Immigration Restriction Act 1901, an openly racist policy designed to deter non-White immigrants, was abandoned. Nonetheless, the Migration Act of 1958 was still present and actively sought to give immigration officials discretion in choosing who would be accepted to enter Australia (Gao 105).

With sponsorship from Grandpa's stepson, Uncle Tony, my grandpa, my grandma, and their two daughters were able to immigrate to Australia. Those left behind included my Pau Pau's eldest daughter, who had gotten married in Hong Kong, and my Gong Gong's in-law, who had passed away before they could make the journey. Since my grandparents could not afford to buy their own home, they had to live with Uncle Tony's family. Feeling obligated to help, my Pau Pau would care for Uncle Tony's three young daughters while the rest of the family, including my mom and my Yee Ma on weekends, would work at Uncle Tony's restaurant.

In order to not be burdensome, my Pau Pau sought to buy her own food for her daughters and husband. One day, my grandmother brazenly chose to ride the bus all the way to the city in order to buy groceries. As the sun went down, my mother and my Yee Ma waited at the bus stop, fearfully crying. "*Will she ever find her way back home?*" my ten-year-old mother thought. Only when the last bus arrived were they relieved to see their mother carrying two big bags full of food.

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By 1975, a flood of Vietnamese refugees arrived in Australia due to the aftermath of the Vietnam War (Phillips and Spinks). With them brought a vast array of knowledge. While my grandma would try to communicate with them, her genuinely kind-hearted personality was what shone through to others. The friends she made would teach her how to make a variety of foods, including my grandma's well-known pastry, the dau saa bang, also known as mung bean mooncakes. Unlike the traditional soft and crumbly dau saa bang, what made hers special was the crispy, flakey texture she strived for. With my grandma's love of cooking and the accumulated knowledge from her friendships, she set out toward a new dream.

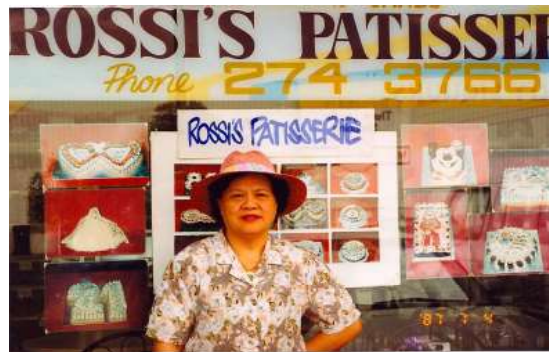
Many immigrants who arrived in Australia had little money. With some of the Vietnamese friends she trusted, they would microfinance among themselves, as banks would not loan money to individuals

with no credit. A head person would offer a lump sum of money for the month, and every individual would write down a number with the interest rate they'd be willing to pay. The highest bidder would get the money and have to pay off the loan with interest regularly (Kagan). While this financial business had its risks, my grandma was always cautious, yet compassionate. She would bring on others who needed help with paying for medical expenses or needing some extra money to buy a home. Even then, any money she earned in the process would sometimes be lent to others. The money would also be used toward her love of cooking for others. No matter where she was, my Pau Pau would offer her baked goods to her close acquaintances, whether it be her local butcher or the kind civilian willing to drive her home from the bus stop.

My grandpa despised her generous money lending habits, often leading to quarrels in the household. The times when the money she lent would not be honored, my grandpa, being someone who worked tirelessly at the restaurant cooking and coming home to peel garlics to sell, would feel this as a huge financial burden.

Nevertheless, had it not been for my grandma's magnanimity, she would not have been able to open her pastry shop. Her bakery brought the family together so my Gong Gong could stop working at my Uncle Tony's restaurant. My mother would help on the weekends, learning all sorts of recipes from her mother in the process.

As the bakery was thriving, my mother decided to enter a national fashion designing competition. The theme was "What inspires you as



*My Pau Pau standing outside of her
pastry shop*

an Australian?" As an immigrant, she thought about her family's journey and the awe she felt arriving in a new country. With those thoughts in mind, her design became a finalist in both garment and fabric printing for Western Australia. The pride in her mother's eyes was apparent in the warm, wet stains on my mother's dress as she hugged her tightly. However, had it not been for my Pau Pau's encouragement, she would not have been there. My mother had not done as well as she would have

liked on her college entrance exams, and my grandma sat her down and asked in Chiu Chou, “What are you passionate about?” When my mom had first arrived in Australia, the principal of her elementary school exasperatedly remarked, “You can’t read, you can’t write—what can you do?” Grabbing a piece of paper, my mother drew a beautifully designed interior of a home that left him stunned. While she may not have been the smartest academically, design was her passion. With support from her mother, my mom decided to enroll in fashion design.

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Every summer I had the chance to visit my Pau Pau, the memories we made were simple yet unforgettable. We would stay at my grandparent’s home and make dau saa bang in her backyard shed. A celebration of being together as one.

By 2011, my Pau Pau was unable to cook the large meals or create our celebratory dau saa bang. The love she had for cooking seemed to fade, dementia raging away at her brain. My mother had ushered me to hold her hand, giving me the photocopy of my artwork I had done two years ago. As my eleven-year-old self held my grandma’s hand, I showed her the painting, saying, “This is the painting of us. I won the competition for California that year!” She would close her eyes and nod—a gesture the eleven-year-old me interpreted as her sign of understanding. Unbeknownst to me, this would be the last time I would get to speak with her.

On July 11, 2011, she fell asleep and peacefully left. My mother had told me, the night before, my Pau Pau had gone to the kitchen to check if the stove and appliances were turned off. Being a light sleeper, my mother awoke to the sound of her walker scratching the floor. Half awake, my mother bluntly said in Chiu Chou, “You’re gonna wake up everyone in the house with your noise!” Just as she said that, my grandma promptly lifts her walker and quietly walks back to her room. I think about this moment, a woman putting others before herself, regardless of her condition. A woman who waited a whole year for us to come back to see her off.

As I walked up to her casket, there was the picture of my watercolor artwork in her hand. My mother had brought the photo with her to leave in my Pau Pau’s arms. At nine, I couldn’t grasp the gravity of my painting, her beauty, kindness and occasional inflexibility were the only traits I knew. At twenty-one, I have a deeper understanding of what she

meant to me—what she meant to the world. She was a woman who was deeply loving and generous, all while being able to adapt and stubbornly strive to attain the best out of the life she was given. Above all, she is the woman I seek to become. In her life, she met many obstacles, yet she found strength from those situations. She's taught me the importance of persistence and perseverance—action and endurance. Even through my failures and setbacks, I choose to see opportunity in every situation. To find my worth. I stare at the painting, dusted off and in the corner of my room. There she is, reflecting back at me.



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