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A GIRLHOOD AMONG GHOSTS, AN EXPERIMENTAL PROJECT

BY

MAPLE WU

A capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The city University of New York

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A Girlhood Among Ghosts, An Experimental Project

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Maple Wu

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

A Girlhood Among Ghosts, An Experimental Project

By

Maple Wu

Advisor: Nancy K. Miller

“If a woman is going to write a Book of Peace, it is given her to know devastation” –
Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*.

I do not believe I know devastation. I think to be devastated means one has to experience extreme pain, and live in the aftermath of trauma. I think of this in terms of war, famine, and immigration. A little self-reflection shows that in the twenty-something years of my life, I have not encountered any of the three things listed.

What I do recall, however, is the first time I picked up Maxine Hong Kingston’s memoir, *The Woman Warrior*. It was the first time I had read a text written by an Asian American author about an Asian American girl. The sense of attachment between reader and text was immediate; I was captivated by the narrative. Kingston writes about the experience of familial loss because of immigration, and it is a story about one girl’s recovery. As someone who claims not to have experienced devastation, I too, though, have lost parts of myself because of family history. This capstone project is a part experimental, part autobiographical piece that traces my memory of what it was like to grow up Asian American in New York City. I draw connections between my

life experiences with those of the narrator from *Woman Warrior*. Some key themes include oral history, haunting, and family.

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Part 1, narrative

1. first encounters

My first time was in the senior year of high school. Our English teacher, Mrs. Schwartz, had us take the books out of the back lockers in the classroom. We passed the books around, and there on my desk, was a copy of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. That was the first time I came across a text written by an Asian American author with Asian American characters.

I didn't know who Kingston was, nor was I familiar with the impact of *Woman Warrior* in the literary world. I just remembered I read through the first chapter, "No Name Woman," and thought, "This sounded familiar. I think I've read this somewhere before. I don't remember where." I decided I liked the story a lot more in my second read compared to my first. Over the years, I have also decided that the reading and writing experience of *Woman Warrior* is what drew me back to the text time and time again.

The Woman Warrior is about a Chinese American girl from Stockholm, California, who wanted to find a place of home in American society. Kingston used the story of five women, in five chapters, combined with her memories of childhood, to highlight the ways in which women stood up to cultural boundaries. Part nonfiction, part fiction, and part mythical, Kingston asked readers to challenge the authenticity of her writing, just as she had struggled to understand her childhood. That girl was, and sometimes still is, closely aligned with my life.

I didn't think about the "truths" behind Kingston's writing, nor did I question about the text's literary genre. I just read Kingston's stories as stories, wherein I felt a connection with the narrator. In the past, when I read books such as the *Amber Brown* or *Judy B. Jones* series, I also had a connection with the characters. While these texts played a very important role in my

childhood, I felt that the books only touched on topics outside of the home. Eventually, I moved onto books about vampires and werewolves, which included themes on romance, school life, and unsympathetic parents. These books usually brought me back to places in London or to area studies in Greek mythology. Then I walked Maxine Hong Kingston and, thanks to my high school teacher, *The Woman Warrior* landed on my desk.

Kingston's stories were about unspeakable ancestors, aunts you never understood, ghosts that were real, and language that you didn't know how to articulate. To be fair, most students in senior year of high school, including myself, could care less about an English elective course. It was a time when college essays, SAT retakes, or job applications took over our lives. We naively thought that the better half of life was only eight months away. Yet, the passages in *Woman Warrior* spoke to me. All of a sudden, I saw myself as Maxine, only the narrator was much braver. *Woman Warrior's* young Maxine dragged a girl into the bathroom and beat her up, cursed her out. She spoke back, even screamed, at her parents. These were things that I had thought about, but never carried through.

After high school, I had forgotten about *The Woman Warrior*. I was in college then. I had thought I would break loose from my family, but instead I ended up at a university that was only an hour train ride from home. The first semester of college was horrible. Nothing was wrong with the school, professors, or friends. Rather, I felt a sense of injustice. Why did my high school classmates get to go away for college? Why did the ones who stayed get to move out? Why did my parents have to be poor? Why was I stuck here with everyone? There was a time when I used to lock myself in the bathroom. And in that tiny room I called my own, I would sit on the toilet, do my business, and think to myself, "Is this life?" Life was so nebulous that even the light coming in from the bathroom window couldn't reach me. It was a tiny window.

2. second times

When I was in college, I received many flyers. Two to three times a year, students and faculty tabled around campus and promoted upcoming events, classes, and lectures. Given that my college was a commuter school, it was really hard to engage students' involvement (I had learned about this difficulty through firsthand experience later on). One time, as I went up the escalator to get to class, I saw a poster sign with two words written on the header: Asian American. My first thought was, "Not interested." Just seeing those two words threw me off. I didn't want to register those words: Asian, American, Asian American, Asian-American, or "Asian American." The words and the connotations of those words were too complicated. I have tried to figure out the hidden meaning attached to the binaries of "Asian" and "American" my whole life. Each time I attempted to crack the code, I somehow end up back in the bathroom of my family's one-bedroom apartment. Again, I would have a stream of questions, "Why was my ethnic community like this? No one liked us. They said we're dirty. Why were my community leaders like this? They're so old school. Nothing gets done." I didn't want to fall into a black hole when I was already rolling around in the dark. I thought I already knew about the history of "my people"; it was depressing. When a classmate in my English Composition course confessed that she was experiencing a difficult time in her Asian American Studies course, a couple of my classmates laughed with sympathy. They asked, "Why would you take an Asian American studies class?" To which she replied, "I don't know." Her answer proved I was right. I have accumulated, I realized later, a lot of anger. I was angry with a lot of things and people, and even with myself, for being angry and ungrateful for what I did have. My anger was internal, a virus that slowly ate away my life without my notice.

My second time with *Woman Warrior* was almost accidental. It was in an Asian American Studies classroom. I landed myself in that course because someone brought it up to me more than twice. So I signed up. I enrolled and intended to drop the course if things did not work out. I did not expect myself to open up to discussion or think much about reading materials. Here, in my second read of Kingston's text, I had a completely different reading experience.

In high school, I took Kingston's stories at face value. I didn't necessarily question or believe whether Kingston's narrator really saw ghosts, or if she really made a girl cry at Chinese school. I read the text as a book about a girl who was not happy. Perhaps, I did jump to a few conclusions here and there. For instance, I remembered that after I read "No Name Woman," I told myself gravely, "This is what happens in China! I'm never going there." I did not, however, try to look for meanings in the text.

One of my favorite chapters in *Woman Warrior* was "At the Western Palace." The story was about the narrator's aunt, Moon Orchid. Although Moon Orchid's husband had sent money regularly back home to his wife in Hong Kong, he had also cheated and remarried. His second wife was described as a more "Americanized" Chinese American. As soon as Moon Orchid's immigration papers passed and she came to the states, she was urged by Brave Orchid to confront the husband. In the end, Moon Orchid was hospitalized in a mental institution.

When I first read the story, I thought this was a classic storyline in almost every Chinese soap opera I had watched with grandmother. These storylines always have a husband, who went off to America or the city, and married a more educated, influential woman. The husband's first wife would look for him only to find out about his betrayal. And then the family drama would unfold. Sometimes grandmother would comment that this was what happened. So again, I didn't try to analyze the text. Rather, I found Moon Orchid's character funny. She was always so nosy.

She thought her nieces were talented and outspoken, but they also needed to be demure. Brave Orchid, on the other hand, thought her children were too quiet already.

It started when a classmate posted a comment on our discussion board about Moon Orchid and Brave Orchid. The gist of the post was that Moon Orchid represented old China and Brave Orchid symbolized an assimilated American. Moon Orchid couldn't assimilate into American society, so she had a mental breakdown; hence, she was hospitalized. I didn't know what came over me, but I was really upset when I read that post, and I wrote back. I still recalled the first words I wrote in my response were, "I disagreed." I started to write out of anger. Then as I continued to write, I wanted to start a dialogue with my classmate. I wanted someone to see what my thoughts were and why I thought a certain way. Of course, I also wanted acknowledgement. So I began to explain myself through the text. I wrote that the relationship between the two sisters was not a question about assimilation, but about class. I wrote that despite being a doctor in China, Brave Orchid had to work in factories and laundromats when she immigrated to the states. Moon Orchid, on the other hand, lived in Hong Kong for years and did not have to work a single day in her life. When she arrived at the airport, she wore pearls and dainty shoes. Since the sisters have been separated for years, they each needed to adapt to their environment and assimilate in their own ways. And then, I wrote some more. I didn't know where my ideas came from. Perhaps my ideas were thoughts I had buried within me for the longest time, only I couldn't find an outlet to bring these ideas to the surface. Then even when I did have my thoughts formulated, I experienced difficulty in translating my ideas into words, and words into sentences. This was why I think literature, and for me personally, Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, could act as a source of consolation.

If I had never been introduced to *Woman Warrior*, twice, I don't think I could have found first, the comfort I needed in that capacity (because there were other books) and second, a space to reflect on my prejudice, assumptions, and shame. In reading, and then writing, about *Woman Warrior*, I started to uncover my past and developed an understanding about Asian American as an identity.

3. reading and writing

There was no doubt that my academic coursework influenced the way I reinterpreted *Woman Warrior*. One of the first essays we read in my Asian American Studies class was Lisa Lowe's "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity." The reading assignment was divided into two parts, so we spent two weeks on the essay. Lowe's essay included a lot of history, terminologies, and references. I read the first half of the essay, and I had no idea what Lowe meant when she claimed that we needed a "vertical" and a "horizontal" reading of Asian American identity (64). How were we supposed to read identities in axis? There was no mention of anything math-related anywhere else in the essay. After our discussion in class, it seemed that one aspect Lowe emphasized on was the term, difference. While I had acknowledged diversity within Asian American communities, I did not verbalize those differences in my daily conversations. So if someone said, "Asians are this," or, "Asian Americans are like that," I silently accepted those assertions. Sometimes it didn't even occur to me that I had generalized an entire population of people based on my own experience. That didn't mean those differences were not there. A vertical reading of Asian American identity meant we believed identities are fixed categories. A horizontal reading of Asian American identity implied that identity formation was a process, and it called for a recognition of our difference, our fluidity. It must've been after I read Lowe's essay that I went and wrote my post on the class discussion board.

Through reading, I began to associate and identify myself more as an Asian American. This identity was a process, both in the sense that the term did not just pop out of thin air, nor did I simply come out and said, "Here's what you need to do to be Asian American." Asian American identity was born out of a political movement, which to me meant that the term belonged to a particular time and place. I chose to identify as an Asian American in part because

of my family's history in the United States. My family's experience was and is not necessarily my experience. Hence, my family's definitions on what it meant to be Asian American or Asian in the U.S. most likely differed from my definitions. I used to think plurality meant chaos. Somehow, along the way, I've learned to ask myself not to shy away from the chaotic. I used to ask, "Why was my ethnic community like this?" Now I've turned my attention to, "Why was he like this?" I don't know if the switch in tone and question was a good thing. Yet, I started to think that perhaps a little chaos was not so bad, that it was an almost necessity, because the identity of Asian American was born out of political chaos. Once I have accepted complications, I was open to the possibility of reflecting on my past.

When I first came to The Graduate Center, my goal was to further my studies in Asian American literature and theory. I had soon realized that creating my coursework around the discipline was difficult. I believe that this difficulty was due in part to the structure and academic emphasis of the university. Early on I was discouraged about my stay at The Graduate Center, and I had debated multiple times whether this was the place for me. Not only had I begun to feel lost in the academic world, but also I started to question my long-term career path. My dilemma was volatile. Some days, when I read through a great text, I thought I have made the best decision in coming back to school. Other days, I thought I should just run myself into a wall. "Should have done social work instead," I screamed at myself. One day my brother sat next to me, and in the midst of doing his homework, he paused, looked up at me and asked, "When are you going to start making money?" Was he kidding me?! I felt both frustrated and lost. I didn't think his question was literal, that his sister needed to make money; although, that could be it too. I think he saw I was in a phase where for the first time, I didn't know what I wanted. The notion of not knowing scared me, and I could see that it affected my family as well.

Despite my dilemma, I have met so many people, both in my program and at school, who gave me their advice and shared their experience. Someone really wise once told me that I should just pick up some Asian American literature whenever I felt lost. So that was what I did. Reading on my own was the last thing on my mind, but I remember there was some term paper I needed to work on, and I needed inspiration. Not surprisingly I went back to *Woman Warrior*, a text that brought me comfort. Although Kingston has claimed that *Woman Warrior* was a book of war (“Maxine”), I was not revolted by the text’s violence. Instead, I thought there was closure to Kingston’s violence. Closure, to me, did not mean the narrator found peace, or that she found her happy ending. I thought of closure, similar to identity, as a process, wherein the narrator thought about her problems, came up with plausible resolutions, and sat with those possibilities. Plus, the characters in Kingston’s book did find forms of closure: the no name aunt’s story was revealed through multiple lens, Moon Orchid felt safe with the other women, and the narrator found her voice. Granted, the process that led to closure was violent. I thought about the violence in Kingston’s book and about the violence in my life. And then I thought about the anger, and really grief, that lingered from my childhood.

When I started at the Graduate Center, I have been told that the point of reading theoretical texts was not for us to just understand theory. Rather, reading theory was supposed to help us understand literature. When I realized that all I had was this Kingston book, which brought me comfort, and an emotion called anger, I went and read Anne Cheng’s *Melancholy of Race*. In her critique of *Woman Warrior*, Cheng posed the question, “What if melancholia is a necessary, perhaps even continuous, stage of mourning?” (98). What did it mean, then, for us to mourn?

One of the scenes that stuck with me in *Woman Warrior* was when the narrator brutally bullied one of her classmates. Through the violence that took place, the narrator was able to mourn about her childhood. Kingston went into great lengths and described the scene. The narrator hated this girl from Chinese school. This girl never spoke and always followed her sister around. One day, in the bathroom, the narrator confronted and demanded this girl to speak up. The girl's hair was pulled, her cheeks were pinched, and her face was squeezed. When the girl cried, Maxine cried with her. When the girl sobbed, Maxine sobbed louder. Young Maxine couldn't stop crying. After the ordeal, Maxine informed the girl's sister that she only wanted to teach her how to talk. Maxine went home, and she was sick for the next eighteen months. This innocent girl became Maxine's rag doll. I had always interpreted the scene as our main character's way of dealing with self-shame. Kingston wrote, "I hated her when she was the last chosen for her team and I, the last chosen for my team" (174). Here was a little girl who is an exact copy of Maxine. She was quiet, like the narrator. She was the last person to be picked for the sports team, like the narrator. They became one and the same person, but Kingston's narrator didn't want to be this little girl. She wanted to be "assimilated"; meaning, she wanted acceptance in her family and in dominant society.

The more she tried to achieve assimilation, the more she realized assimilation was not attainable. She thought that she needed to vocalize her thoughts. Instead, she saw an image of herself through another person. She needed to eradicate this girl. Cheng claimed:

Abusing the other girl allows for a self-identification with whiteness/American pedagogical authority ('the white thumbprint of the self'), which serves to mask even as it exposes a racial identification ('by blood') between the girls. For Kingston's narrator, the act of assuming the position of authority simultaneously

projects a sick self outside and installs it within, in a coincidence of desire and denigration – literally, a malady of otherness. (78)

Through the act of abuse, the narrator identified with that of whiteness. There was a sense of dominance and authority when Maxine asserted her violence onto the girl. She felt almost empowered. For once, she “taught” someone how to behave. She thought that she had finally “assimilated.” The feeling of empowerment, however, was short-lived. Maxine continued to struggle with assimilation, and she realized that her authoritative role was not permanent. She was still the Othered; hence, she fell ill. She felt sick for her actions and her inability to assimilate. She was sick on the outside as much as she was from the inside. Sickness, and in thinking she was sick all the time, was a mental and physical state of racial mourning (Cheng 100).

It was only when Maxine left her community that she was able to turn self-grief into a form of public remembrance. At the end of “Shaman,” Kingston’s narrator claimed that she did not get sick when she was away from home (Kingston 108). Maxine’s mother then said that it was better for her daughter to just come for visits. Kingston’s narrator needed to leave in order to gain individuality, a sense of self. She did not see or hear ghosts anymore. She was able to visit home freely and step out of that community as she saw fit. Now, she could remember. Now she could recollect memories.

Cheng’s critique made me question about my childhood. I have never beaten anyone up. Yet, when I was in college, there were several instances when the topic of shame came up. I didn’t know why I experienced self-shame. The phrase “identity crisis” was too general of an explanation for reasons behind those feelings. Some of the things I had heard my friends say included, “Why did our parents have to speak like that? Broken English and loud.” “Who would

take extra grocery bags from the supermarket? So Asian.” “The White kids didn’t play with me. The Black kids pushed me up against the lockers.” “I pretended I didn’t know Chinese, but I understood everything they said.” At the time, I didn’t want to use the word shame to associate with my state of mind. “I was never ashamed of my ethnicity,” I said, “I just wished I had blond hair and blue eyes because I thought life would be easier.” The thought of having blond hair and blue eyes was, I believe now, the first and easiest way I had recognized racial difference and class inequality. I didn’t like my straight, dark brown hair and blunt bangs. I wanted wavy, golden blond hair. I hated my small, mono-lid, dark brown eyes. I wanted big, sea blue eyes, with voluminous eyelashes. I thought if I had those two facial features, life would be easier. Easier how? Well, my parents would speak fluent English; I would live in a house; I didn’t have to explain what I am or where I was from; I didn’t have to get asked why Asians took all the grocery bags; boys would like me. The list went on. I didn’t have an actual list back then. The thought that life would be easier was just that, that people would accept me without questions and predetermined answers.

Of course, I knew life was not easy. Just because your parents were Asian didn’t mean they did not speak fluent English. On the contrary, there were many Asian American parents I knew of who spoke either conversational or fluent English. The issue was that there were these stereotypes and conventions that categorized people, made people categorize me, in turn, and I categorized myself. I had this picture of an ideal being, and even though I couldn’t, I had wanted to live up to this ideal. Even if I could have blond hair and blue eyes, there were so many other stigmas, such as my height; “Asians were so short.” Assimilation was both a fantasy and a very real materiality (Cheng 73). I believe many Asian Americans wanted to repress memories about

our own shame and mourning. It seemed that just as in Kingston's memoir, it was necessary for one to leave one's community in order to return anew.

In order for a recovery project to take form, one's leaving and returning was essential. Recently, I realized I had always returned to *The Woman Warrior* because of the book's conclusion. In her memoir, Maxine burst out one night, not knowing what came over her, and vocalized her thoughts. Kingston wrote, "One night when the laundry was so busy that the whole family was eating dinner there, crowded around the little round table, my throat burst open. I stood up, talking and burbling" (100-101). Over the years, she had so many thoughts she wanted to express that she even made a list. When she actually verbalized her thoughts, however, she couldn't control what came out of her mouth. She said she would leave, go away for college, and she did. If I had to choose, I would say this was the most violent scene in the entire book. How was Kingston to recreate a world where silence was embedded in a toxic setting? How was she to give voice, give closure, to the narrator? It was through violence – an outburst that was coherent, but also in an almost rant. If she could rant, she could create a rant (to counter against all her ghosts). She could wipe out all her mysteries and allow the recovery to begin.

Contrary to Kingston, I never left for college. Over the years, my thoughts on that chapter of my life have changed, and it still changes. I had never got to physically leave the space I grew up in. I saw the same people and same family. There were some things I still couldn't let go of. At the same time, I enjoyed my college experience. I liked the people and friends I had met. I liked being in New York City. I had thought that part of recovery was about having an intellectual and physical departure; that in the absence of chaos, we could learn to heal. Just as Kingston later wrote:

Be careful what you say. It comes true. It comes true. I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing. I learned to think that mysteries are for explanation. I enjoy the simplicity. Concrete pours out of my mouth to cover the forests with freeways and sidewalks. Give me plastics, periodical tables, t.v. dinners with vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with diced carrots. Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts. (204)

The narrator gave us a warning, just as the mother gave her daughter a warning. The mother's warning meant finality. There was no turning back if the daughter became pregnant. Maxine's warning was different in that it gave readers possibilities. What she said came true; there was something powerful and mysterious about the spoken word. Maxine had learned to look for mysteries because they provided her with meanings. Once she began to look for meaning, life was simple. There was no ghost. Kingston could finally write about ghosts, different kinds of ghost stories. Perhaps I was and am in the process of healing. Physical and mental departure was one method of healing. The absence of mind, but presence of body was another kind of healing. In learning how to let go, I started to think about ghosts and hauntings.

According to Cheng, "Cultural assimilation may thus be said to be a form of haunting [. . .]" (72). Cheng argued that in our attempt, but failure to assimilate, we become haunted. Haunting was a strategy that told us something was missing. What was missing had to do with how we remembered. Memory is peculiar. We remembered because we chose not to forget; because, we know the person or event could easily be forgotten. So we tried to remember, and we tried to construct a narrative that makes sense. Memory is a social construct, but memory could easily be disrupted. What would happen if our memory were in fragments? What could happen if we tried to establish closure for memories that did not make sense? When I first read

Woman Warrior, Kingston's ghosts fascinated me. Her inability to articulate, understand, and assimilate in her community were highlighted through ghosts. She saw ghosts everywhere, through people and myths.

In reading *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth stated that trauma was the aftermath of an experience that happened too soon, too unexpectedly, for our consciousness (4). The experience would usually emerge again, in the form of nightmares or repetitions. Trauma was a belated experience (Caruth 7) that called for our attention. We become haunted by what little information we have retained and by the pieces of "truths" available. In Kingston's "No Name Woman," the knowing and not knowing of no-name woman's "reality" haunted Kingston's narrator. The no-name aunt embodied a reality that was still a mystery to the family. It became more taunting when Maxine realized that she could be this aunt, an outcast, shunned by the family. Her aunt's ghostly presence and silence followed her. In order to break the cycle of haunting, another "reality" was needed.

Cheng and Caruth argue that haunting may not be a bad thing. The act of being haunted was indeed scary and involved strenuous work. It required even more work to break free from that cycle. And yet, it is through the impossibilities of things that we are enabled to create possibilities. So in "No Name Woman," the narrator drew on multiple truths to recreate a different version of her aunt's story. She rewrote a story that was given to her in fragments. She tried to rework these fragments.

Kingston's narrator created multiple "truths," but some of these "truths" may have been worse than what had actually happened. Maxine pointed out that her no-name aunt could not have possibly had an affair; she had to be raped. Then the narrator thought the man in question must've participated in the raid. Then she thought her aunt must've fell in love with this man.

There were endless possibilities, but these possibilities reflected on how Maxine was haunted at the time. These stories enabled Maxine to think about why and how she was haunted. She tried to free herself from her community through art; but, Maxine needed to overcome her internal battle even through the creation of art. This internal battle was the process of haunting.

In retrospect, I would claim that the process of reading theoretical texts was a kind of haunting; at least, until an enlightenment takes place. Reading theory, just as writing essays, could wear me down. When I read, I have to figure out the definition of certain terms, both in the context of the discipline and in the author's argument. Once I understand the author's purpose, I needed to familiarize myself with the language and concepts. Sometimes I needed to review an earlier page. Sometimes I may skip to the conclusion first. Usually the hardest part was after the reading is completed. Now I had to ask myself which points made sense, which concepts I did not agree with and why. I found these questions to be a part of haunting because I had to always go back to them, and I would end up with more questions about the social implications of the text. Through these questions, I sometimes realized I have refuted a text because it touched on something on a personal level. And that was when the moment of enlightenment comes through. Reading and writing were an art form where being haunted was essential. It was essential for me to read theory in order to comprehend *Woman Warrior* through a different perspective, and henceforth, reflect on my childhood. Similarly, Kingston needed to rewrite the aunt's past, multiple times, in order to heal from trauma.

Kingston has brought her aunt to life, but she must place her back to death. As Caruth later noted, trauma was an experience twice lived (7). The first experience was the story told from mother to daughter. The second experience was told through Kingston's narrative. Closure, however, was needed as a part of Kingston's recovery project. Hence, Kingston offered her dead

aunt a story of her own through the niece's writing. In a way, there was nothing Kingston's narrator could've offered. As King-Kok Cheung pointed out in *Articulate Silences*, "It is impossible to retrieve an unadulterated past, one not always already mediated by language [. . .]" (12). The oral tradition presented by the mother was questionable. None of us know if parts of the oral story were falsified or dramatized. So Kingston needed to take what she had, which was literacy, and restore the aunt's history through language. She identified plausible missing parts and multiple what-ifs to the aunt's narrative.

4. the writing

When my advisor suggested that I write an autobiographical piece for my Master's thesis, I had thought that I was doomed to fail. My initial reaction was one of shock. I had never thought of myself as a creative person because my creativity could be so far off. I remember once when my friend bought a new phone case and I said, "Wait, I don't get this. So the girl is sitting on a bench that's three feet in the air, but the boy is on the ground. Does he need to climb up that rope to get to the girl?" My friend looked at me in puzzlement, "What? It's just a phone case. It's pretty." She meant that I should leave things as it were; a cell phone case was a cell phone case. So when I decided to experiment with autobiographical writing, I was afraid no one would understand my purpose or my allusions. How was I supposed to bring my reader back to meaning? What if I did not quite understand the meaning of my own work?

Another thought that surfaced was ambivalence. I was afraid that the thoughts I revealed now would not be the same thoughts I have in mind later, a different interpretation. What if I revealed too little details? Or too much? After all, I was to write something personal. I decided to look for Maxine Hong Kingston for some answers.

In her 1990 interview with Bill Moyer, Kingston spoke about writing as a way to find meaning. One of the frustrations Kingston experienced when she wrote *Woman Warrior* was she needed to determine what was considered common knowledge and what was exotic (*World of Ideas, Part 2*). What was common knowledge to her was considered exotic to most readers. She needed to take a pause in her creativity and move into explanation. She had to explain her myths, her history. She felt that some of the explanations took away the creativity and, at times, her voice as a writer. Kingston was also afraid that some of the dialogues she used in the text would not sound right to the reader. Yet, she wanted and needed those words to be there. So she went

back and translated as best as she could, the way she believed her mother should sound.

Interestingly as I started to write, I also noticed how language could be a trap.

At first I just wrote. I wrote in English as I reflected on my memories. Half of these memories, however, were in my Chinese tongue. My parents, my grandmother, and sometimes even my brother and I did not converse in English. So I wrote these dialogues and descriptions for them, about them, but it was not them. It was I who did the translation and in the process, distorted their language for an audience. It was something I did most of my life anyways. I needed to help them translate. So in this project, I had to go back to my writing and figure out, “Was this how grandmother sounded? Did I call my mother, my mother? No, that was too formal, but it sounded nice on paper.” I had to test out words and the order of words. In the process of playing with words, I had to build a bridge with my past. I had the opportunity to live through the voice of my family and listened in on the things they have wanted me to hear the first time. I had created meaning for myself rather than for my potential reader.

There were definitely things I had left out in my narrative, some on purpose, some unconsciously, and others because I still could not find the words. I believe Kingston experienced similar challenges in her writing. In her discussion with Moyer, Kingston claimed that she had left out parts of the Fa Mu Lan story in *Woman Warrior (World of Ideas, Part 1)*. She planned to restore that story in her next book, later titled *The Fifth Book of Peace*. In the original tale, Fa Mu Lan came back from war and revealed herself to the soldiers as a woman. Kingston said that because she was writing in feminist times, an ending with a woman dressed in flowers and with makeup was inappropriate (*World of Ideas, Part 1*). Years later, Kingston believed that a different kind of feminist story was asked for, so she needed to rewrite her story. Time, as Kingston commented, influenced our myths (“Maxine”). Writing was a form of

meditation. Sometimes the writing made it in. Other times the writing needed to be waited on, so that new meanings could take form.

In the first chapter of my narrative, for example, I had wanted to write about my aunt. Then I realized that there were a lot of things I didn't know about my aunt, and I wasn't sure how to depict her character. I didn't feel comfortable writing about her, but she was an important figure to my writing. So I ended up writing about something different, and I tried to fill in the blanks.

Another challenge I came across was I knew what I wanted to write about, but I wasn't sure about the content of my story. For example, in one chapter, I wrote about mothers. I didn't want to write about mothers, it just happened. When I reviewed what I wrote, I hated it. I wanted to paint a better, more benign picture, but that picture didn't surface. In her reading of *Tripmaster Monkey* in 1998, Kingston commented that when we wanted to write something, we see it ("Tripmaster Monkey"). I didn't see my story about mothers taking place the way I wanted it to, in memory or in present materiality. So I thought of several possibilities that seemed fitting for my characters, similar to what Kingston did. By the end of the story, I realized that there were memories. I did see something in my writing that meant something. I remembered.

5. conclusion

In the years since *Woman Warrior*, Kingston has worked to recover a history that was not told in her memoir the first time. *Woman Warrior* was a book of war, and Kingston has wanted to write a book of peace. I think it was important that we saw through different kinds of violence first before we could look for peace.

Perhaps one way in which Kingston tried to reconcile with the violence in her memoir was when she claimed in her interview that she wrote about Americans, that she wrote about this country (*World of Ideas, Part 1*). While I could see a prospect of peace in the embodiment of an American identity, I couldn't see how it would get us out of the racial haunting that Cheng referenced. Rather than pursue a fixed category, which is dependent on hierarchy, I believe I'd prefer a more fluid identity, one based on difference. Further, in my readings of Kingston's text, it was because of violence that I had begun to think through concepts about my identity, grief, and hauntings. Without the violence, there wouldn't have been possibilities.

In the first line of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston wrote, "If a woman is going to write a Book of Peace, it is given her to know devastation" (Kingston 3). I do not believe I know devastation. Perhaps, that is why I still couldn't figure out how to go from war to peace. I don't want chaos, but chaos was and is everywhere. Perhaps one day, in reading and writing, I would find the same kind of peace as Kingston writes about.

Part 2, the experiment

1. Family Album

When these pictures burst, the stars drew yet further apart. Black space opened.

Maxine Hong Kingston

When I was young, I found an old photograph of eldest aunt in an old photo album. The album was tucked in, underneath piles upon piles of other photo albums on the bottom cabinet of our television stand. No one had opened this cabinet in years, because we had not taken any photos in years.

There were photographs of dad when he was young, in Hong Kong. One was of him in a soccer field with friends, another of him camping, another at dance competition, at the pub, a temple. There were photos of him in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore; it never occurred to me that my dad had a life before us.

I had planned to reorganize a section of the cabinet, starting from photos of me. I took one album out, the bindings loose with some sections missing. In one album, I was supposed to be five, but when I turned the page, there was a photo of me when I was eight. I needed to reorganize my life. I even bought new bindings and labels. I did not expect that I'd be flipping through the years of dad's childhood. It was here that I found my aunt.

My father was born in the late 1950s in Hong Kong. He was the third eldest and the only son in a family of six. I used to hear him talk about his eldest sister, my eldest aunt, all the time. "Your eldest aunt taught me to swim, threw me into the ocean. She was a lifeguard." "That time when I lost my luggage at the airport, your eldest aunt helped me track it down with the ground people. Her English was very good." "Your eldest aunt could make the finest dresses with her sewing machine." Here and there, I would hear about eldest aunt, voices that tried to piece her

life together. Yet, in all the years that dad and eldest aunt have lived in the same city, I could count on two hands the number of times I've seen her in person.

When I found her photograph, I was immediately intrigued, and my original plan was forgotten. The black and white photograph in front of me depicted a woman in her mid to late-twenties. Her medium-length perm hair wrapped around her face, a few strands of wispy side bangs touched the high arch of her thick eyebrows; she had just got her eyebrows done. She looked into the camera, head slightly tilted, her smoky, luminous eyes inviting, yet daring you to look away. She smiled with her full apple bottom lips. A hint of a dimple made a small dip on the side of one cheek. She looked as if she could see me, past me. She was beautiful.

The woman in the photograph didn't look anything like the aunt I remembered seeing whenever she came over, but it was she. Her eyes were sharp and alert; I could recognize her. Through this woman's eyes, I could see an aunt I had not known before. I turned the page over and saw more photos, some printed in color now. In one photograph she had a flower in her hair. In another photograph her hand, her lotus hand, rested on the side of her face. She posed for the camera as if she were made for it.

"Your eldest aunt was beautiful when she was young," grandmother said, "When she married she wore eight dresses. She made them herself"

"How could she make eight dresses by herself?" I asked

"She had bridesmaids. The bridesmaids, the girls, all came. One by one they made the dresses," Grandmother then added, "Dowry cakes this tall," she held her hand out from her chest to show me, "were all over the house. Everyone came to take cake."

I had not heard grandmother speak with such enthusiasm about her children in a long time. The last time that happened, she talked about my parents' marriage ceremony. Talk about

my parents usually does not sit well with either of us. My parents' marriage did not turn out well. I have learned to walk away from it, the talks.

I stayed put for grandmother to finish her story. I had not heard grandmother tell a story about eldest aunt all these years. The longer I waited, the more I realized there was no rest of the story. I had hoped today would be different, but it wasn't. Grandmother said two things after the part about dowry cakes.

"Wasn't born with a good life. Husband died and didn't cry." Grandmother sat there next to me. I didn't say anything, and I don't know how much time had passed, but eventually grandmother got up and walked away. She went about her day again as if she never started a story and left the ending incomplete.

"We had lots of pictures and lots of dates." I was with my aunts at yum cha when second aunt retold grandmother's story. "Your eldest aunt, especially. She had so many. Mother would give our photographs to people. Men, suitors, lined up for her. I was already dating your uncle then, but your grandmother didn't like him. Said that his people hit wives."

Grandmother did mention uncle to me once. Uncle and his family lived in Hong Kong, but they were actually a part of a different ethnic subgroup in China. "They beat their wives. And different religion." Grandmother said as if religion explained all her reasons, "His dad was Buddhist; his mom Christian." Second aunt and uncle have come a long way before grandmother accepted her son-in-law. I once overheard someone say that it was not about ethnicity or religion. Grandmother disapproved uncle because he did not make enough money. I stuffed another shrimp dumpling in my mouth as aunt continued.

"How could he hit his wife? He saw his mom being hit by his dad when he was young. He hated his dad, he and his siblings. He swore he would never hit women. He took oath in front

of me and swore he would not hit his wife. It's been over twenty years, and not once did your uncle raise his voice or hit me. But your grandmother didn't like him. She passed guys onto me when I dated your uncle and hoped I would split with him."

"What? What did you do?"

"What else could I do!? I knew I was dating your uncle, but I had to date the others. So I went and dated them."

"Did uncle know what you were doing?"

"No!" She said loudly, "Till this day he doesn't know. I knew I was with your uncle, but I had to go with the others. To please mother, at least temporarily." She paused as if she was thinking whether she wanted to let her niece in on the next one, "One time I went with what your grandmother called another potential prospect. We went to a diner. Your uncle asked me out the weekend after. So I went obviously. We sneaked out while mother was busy with work. I took your uncle to the same diner I was at the other day, and in walked mother's potential prospect."

"What did you do!?"

"Nothing, I did nothing. We were seated against a side wall at the diner. As soon as I saw potential prospect, I looked at your uncle. I kept looking and kept talking to your uncle, telling myself to act normal. I thought to myself, "Can't let your uncle know. Can't let the other guy know. He better not walk over. I won't admit to anything."

"And then?"

"I assumed the other guy had seen your uncle and me, but knew better than to walk over. Regardless, I never saw him again."

When I asked if she went out with any other guys after, she replied, "Yes. Many others. And then your uncle and I got married."

“Your second aunt was the only one who did not listen to your grandmother.” That was the famous line we associated with second aunt. Out of grandmother’s four children, second aunt’s marriage was the only one that worked out. In the years I’ve lived under the same roof with my family, dad needed only to say, “Second sister was the only one who did not listen to you.” Grandmother could not come up with a counter argument. Perhaps, she could not deny this herself. Grandmother loved to play matchmaker. She did her research, handpicked her variables, and laid out her contestants. Each match she made was a success, and if there were issues, grandmother stepped in to provide free counseling. Despite her excellence as a matchmaker, grandmother failed to matchmake for her children; she decided to revoke her own licenseship. When I saw eldest aunt again, she did not uphold the image I saw from her photograph. Nor did she resemble the diligent yet adventurous sister that her siblings described. Her eyes, still luminous, were now spacey. When she smiled, which was a rarity, the corners of her lips never reached her cheek, the dimples nowhere to be seen.

Recently, grandmother thought about reinstating her matchmaking position. She wanted to ask for my opinion. She tread lightly, “A good friend of mine and I are going for yum cha. She has a son. Would you want to come? Meet a new friend?”

I told her I did not need friends.

I tried to look for the photo album again, the one with photographs of eldest aunt, but I couldn’t find it. I thought it was in the one with green flower bindings. I flipped through the pages; she wasn’t there. I dug deeper and pulled out another old, thick album. No luck. Perhaps she did not want me to find her. Perhaps I needed to look harder. We haven’t heard from eldest aunt in years. I dreamed about her once.

2. Fun Day

Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?

Maxine Hong Kingston

The day my brother came home, I was five years old. I was extra excited. Finally, I thought, I would not be the youngest in this household. I waited as patiently as I could behind the closed doors of our one-room apartment. Grandmother was preparing her herbs. “You Western ghosts don’t know,” she said and told me to leave her alone. I knew it was the announcement of the baby’s arrival the moment the doorbell rang. I practically ran out the door.

“Is it a girl or a boy?” I pounced up and down. I had to know, “Huh? Huh?”

“Shh.”

My excitement went down the drain. “Shh” meant quiet, but through my father’s mouth it meant, “You better behave.”

A bundle of red was wrapped in dad’s arms. Dad held the bundle not too far, but not too close to him. I knew that underneath the pile of red was my sibling. I learned later that I was also wrapped in the same red the day I came home for the first time. Dad didn’t want any sound or movement to disturb the baby. Even when he stepped through the threshold, he entered sideways so the baby could sleep as it was. Mom followed closely behind like she had a tired day at work. I watched my bundle of a creature being carried back and tucked away from the scrutiny of the world.

Disappointed, I thought, “I’m the older sister and I didn’t even get a peek.”

“Lock the door,” Grandmother called.

My parents went into the bedroom and closed the door. Everyone knew what he or she was supposed to do. They busily went about their tasks. I looked around, pulled my now lethargic self back into the apartment and locked our door.

Curiosity got the better of me the longer I waited. Why wasn't the baby making any noise? Quietly, I tiptoed down the hall to my parents' room. I was well trained by now to know how not to put too much weight onto the floor. The floors in this house liked to answer back.

I had thought that a creaking floorboard was a sign that someone from the other side has found me out. "A hungry ghost," mom once said. Hungry ghosts want food and clothes. If they found out about you, they came after you. "Hungry ghosts take children. When I was young, my grandmother didn't let us go out at night. A hungry ghost would lure you away from the main streets, and suck your soul away, and you're no more. Hungry ghosts prefer children because they're pure. They take children as substitutes for themselves."

When I was young, I was told to never answer or turn around at night if I heard someone call out my full name. It was a sign of the hungry ghost, and it wanted to take my soul. Instead, I was instructed to just throw some coins on the ground and walk away. Fast. Hopefully it was a benign hungry ghost that'll leave after I've offered my money. Until this day, I almost always carry some extra change with me.

Once a year grandmother would set the table: An incense bowl on the center of the table; a whole chicken for the entrée; some sweets on the side; two bowls of white rice; three cups of white wine, poured into three red drinking cups; and three pairs of red chopsticks. Grandmother made us each burn three-incense and bowed three times, before we stuck the incense into the incense bowl. Then we'd offer paper money and paper clothes, and finally three cups of wine.

The Chinese said this day was for the dead. Grandmother said it was for grandfather and the ancestors. Dad said it was grandmother put her husband to his deathbed; the ceremony was an act of guilty conscience.

I didn't know what my father meant when he said grandmother drove her husband to his deathbed. "How would grandfather's ghost know to come here for food and money?" I asked grandmother, "He died and was buried in Hong Kong. You've immigrated to the States."

"You just call him. He will come." She meant his ghost will come.

"Grandmother, how did grandfather die?"

"You die when you're old." Then she added, "Kids shouldn't ask so many questions," and went back to take out more paper clothes for grandfather.

Another time her response was, "He worked too much."

When I asked if she missed him, she did not answer me right away. Instead, she blinked her soft, almond mono-lidded eyes, eyes she claimed I got from her.

"Well of course I do," she sighed, "Raised four children on my own. Worked in the States for over a decade. If your grandfather were here, I wouldn't have had to work so hard, put up with your father." She unconsciously touched the gold band on her ring finger.

I never asked grandmother about grandfather again. I didn't bring up the fact that his ghost may not even know where to find us since his children and wife immigrated. He might even be angry that we never went back to visit him and pay him respect. Would he know about the time when I took a piece of chicken from his plate before the offering ceremony was over? "The dead always knows," A voice whispered in my head. You never bring up the dead without precautions because you never know the consequences.

I didn't believe grandmother when she said we could call for grandfather. His essence comes and goes over the years. Grandmother said he was watching over me. My aunt swore grandfather gave her his blessings when she got married. "Father told me to have children," she said. I thought he was waiting to throw me under a bus. He's been lonely, after all. The squeaky doorknob turned under my hand when I reached my parents' bedroom. Mother saw me standing there as if I had been caught in a bad act and waved me over.

There it was, underneath a bundle of clothes and blankets, a creature wrapped its hands into two stubborn fists. Its tiny mouth puckered out in the shape of the letter O, and when I stepped closer, its half-slit eyes stared back into mine. It was sleeping. Who sleeps with their eyes half opened? I thought.

I turned to my mother and in my half-whisper, half-loud voice asked again, "Is it a boy or a girl?"

She thought for a moment, "What do you think?"

I gazed intently at this creature. The same voice that told me the dead always know told me that I was gifted with a brother.

When I was older, mom said I had told her once, "I just wanted someone to play with."

3. Curses

I had vampire nightmares; every night the fangs grew longer, and my angel wings turned pointed and black. I hunted humans down in the long woods and shadowed them with my blackness. Tears dripped from my eyes, but blood ripped from my fangs, blood of the people I was supposed to love.

Maxine Hong Kingston

I remember I had wanted a sister to play with. I even made a list of all the things we could do together. She would want to tag along with me. We could braid each other's hair, play dress up, have tea parties, and in between free time, hunt for make-believe demons. Surely I would be a priestess by then and she could be my apprentice. That was my first dream job, being a priestess, not a teacher, as I've told my parents. We could explore all the mysteries there were to ghosts and magic. We'd be the only two Chinese priestesses in town and everyone would pay us respects. There would be so much to do with my sister. Then, I was given a brother.

For a while I was bitterly disappointed,] and all because of a boy. No more braiding hair, or dress up and tea parties. We might not even go demon hunting because my brother could not be my apprentice. What, I thought, was I supposed to do with a brother? I needed to deal with what my mother passed onto my plate. It is what it is – a phrase brother said to me one too many times over the years.

My first resolution was brother may have been born a boy, but he could easily be raised a girl. Brother went along with my plans. I tied his hair in pigtails and dressed him up in my old clothes. He accepted my gifts graciously. We had numerous tea parties where he offered to be the butler. We hunted for demons many times; he was the demon. We hunted so many demons and helped so many ghosts that I became a high priestess, and brother, well, he played multiple roles in his time training with me. I never made him wear a dress, to be fair; the adults would not have approved. I was sure he wouldn't have minded though. For a while, I forgot that I ever had

wanted a sister. Brother was too animated. Sometimes, however, brother's animation got the better of him.

The first time he attempted to cross the line, he was in second grade. He said his first curse. Mom told him not to say a word he does not understand. "But sister always said curses and spells."

He then decided to test the water with our ancestors. "Now that I'm here, Grandmother doesn't need you for any of our ancestral ceremonies." When I went running to grandmother. She professed that granddaughters are just as important as grandsons. I only wanted to know if I needed to train harder to maintain my status as high priestess. But for years I went from hesitancy to refusal to participate in ancestral worship.

Brother finally crossed the line. He told me about this himself. It was our usual night, after dinner, in the hours of homework and half-time online gaming. Brother said something to mother and to mother's mother, our maternal grandmother. Maternal grandmother was long dead by then. Brother was upset and said a few words not fit for a grandson. "No manners," as the adults would say. He knew he was not supposed to and he did not mean any of it, but the words were out; he could not take them back.

At five minutes to midnight, when everyone was fast asleep, maternal grandmother decided to visit her grandson. She was displeased with brother. She wanted to teach him a lesson, one where he would remember to mind his speech. Ghosts have a few tricks up their sleeves, female ghosts especially. Water ghosts, hungry ghost, family ghosts – I used to get the shivers every time a ghost is called; a female ghost even more so. "This one starved to death when the husband took in a second wife." "This one's mother-in-law forced her to go to the fields right after child birth." "That one's heart stopped working when the family ostracized her for not

having a son.” “And this little one jumped off the village’s well when she had to marry a man twice her age.” According to legend, maternal grandmother died from breast cancer. Our mother, the eldest of four children, was only ten years old.

Maternal grandmother did not mean the family any harm. She was just concerned for her daughter. She left her daughter at such a young age, with three brothers, an illiterate grandmother, a sailor father, and no one to fend for her. And now her daughter’s unfilial son thought that he could badmouth their mother-daughter relationship. He needed a lesson.

She stood by brother’s bedside as she devised her plan. His lips were still in the shape of the letter O when he was fast asleep. She has decided what she wanted and in she went.

He felt the force before he could register it with his mind. A rush of wind swept across his soles. He felt it climbed, then rolled over his body, and landed on his chest. There she sat, breathing airlessly, pressing him, and sapping him. He knew it was a sitting ghost before he came to full consciousness. He tried to move, but he couldn’t. He pushed himself against the force on the top of him, but the more he tried, the more maternal grandmother’s ghost absorbed the energy and turned it back on him. He couldn’t even move his fingers. His palms became damp. He was fully awake now. He wanted to scream, for my name, for mom’s name, but he couldn’t bring his tongue to the top of his mouth to roll out the sounds of the syllables. All that came out was a whimper. A single note that he held in his lungs, preserving it for as long as he could, until he let it out into the air. It was a whimper out of pain and desperation, one that he had hoped someone might have overheard. But no one heard.

Brother knew that he was alone on this one too. There was no prayer he could send either – we were not raised in any particular faith community. He told me later that he was too scared to even remember any of the names of the holy spirits, least of all the names of our ancestors.

There was no one to help him, no help that was within reach. So he chose to accept his fate. He thought that he wouldn't be able to live and tell his sister the tale of the sitting ghost. He refused to plead with his prisoner though. There was no point in hoping for mercy when a battle was already lost. It is what it is, he thought.

He ignored the ghost on his chest. Never once, he said, did he think it was maternal grandmother. It was afterwards, when he retold the story, he said that he had figured it out himself. His last thought was of the peanut butter and jelly sandwich that sat in the refrigerator, on the top right-hand corner; mom made the sandwich for his lunch the next day. As dawn came, maternal grandmother's ghost climbed off brother's bed. She had tormented him enough.

Brother never told anyone but me about maternal grandmother's visit.

"How did you know it was her?" I asked.

"Because, I cursed her."

"You cursed maternal grandmother? What for? Didn't I tell you to think three times before you act."

Brother swore that he would never curse another one of our ancestors. Do not speak of the dead lightly. You never know what the consequences will be.

My brother was gifted with the Chinese name Lok Tien; its literal translation means Fun Day. Dad once told me that he was not in the best stage of his life when brother was born. He had hoped that his son would bring joy and laughter to the family every day. For a while brother did do that. In the beginning, brother drank all the milk that was offered. We fed him with all we have, and he accepted without any complaint. He curled his hands into two strong fists, always ready and curious for the day. When it was time for his one-month celebration, we made boiled

red eggs and pig legs for our relatives and neighbors. Everyone came and everyone laughed. I was told that songs of the holy spirits were sung to him every night.

Brother was born in late June, and with his birth, the midsummer night's breeze found its way into the house. Fireflies glowed under the tall willow tree outside the apartment. Brother would lift his hand up, uncurl his fingers, and then close his pinky and ring finger back into his hand to catch fireflies. For one season we played catching fireflies. He tried to catch one, failed, then tried again. He was curious about the magic that brought stillness into the night, and I wanted to learn the spell of that magic. And then one day, the spell was broken.

I remembered the sound of broken dishes, the slam of a bedroom door, and poof, the magic was gone. The stillness was still there, but it was now masked by thick air. "Ancestors rested on bad mountain," I heard grandmother say in the kitchen. Father remained behind closed doors, and Mother cleared out the broken glass. The stillness never dissipated, but the dark magic into the house wanted to consume us. For many seasons after, summer night's wind did not find its way into the house. Brother's hand did not reach for a firefly. Fireflies were short-lived anyway.

I think that for some time brother wanted to curse all of us, not just maternal grandmother. I was partially responsible. After all, I was the one who taught brother about demons and magic. Maternal grandmother probably saw through it too, but she didn't come after me. She probably thought I would've confronted mom. Said more things, more curses to counter curses already made. Knowing myself, I probably would have. I would've contributed to the dark magic. Grandfather's ghost was most likely angry with me too, but he didn't come after me either. The family said grandfather liked girls more.

Grandmother said that when I was young, ghost played tricks on me, too. They came for me at night when I was fast asleep. “You woke up and cried, kept crying and crying nonstop. One hour. Two hours. We had to cry-scare you.” Grandmother said the ghosts had scared my spirits away, either in my sleep or when I first woke up. So she had to cry-scare my spirits back. “Pulled your earlobes and called your name,” she said. And so they called out for my name, called for me to come home. She pulled both my ears and cried out for me. Once. Twice. The third time I stopped crying. “Come back, come back,” she then soothed as I fell asleep in her arms. “Remember, this is how you call people back,” grandmother told me. Recently I remembered I forgot to call brother back after he told me about maternal grandmother. I had completely forgotten to call-scare my brother, to pull his ears and call his name. A ghost’s visit was bad luck. Ghosts, even benign ghosts, suck off all your life force; it was in their nature. They need it in order to survive, I was told. You could never tell when it happens. I was scared that brother’s spirits did not fully recover after the maternal curse. What if not all of his spirits returned after maternal grandmother’s visit?

I didn’t know when, but I believe it was after maternal grandmother’s visit, that brother tried again to break down some of the dark magic in our house. He tested out a spell of his own one night, without me, when he said, “Mom.”

As grateful as I was for maternal grandmother’s visit, I hope she does not come back. She sat on brother, taught him a lesson. She can’t come back again. I won’t let her. I would tell her to leave. I didn’t think she would want to stay anyway. She had traveled across ocean and multiple hills to fend off so many ghosts for her daughter already. Sitting ghosts, water ghosts, hungry ghosts, pulling-leg ghosts, you name it. She has followed her daughter for over forty years. Almost all the energy has left her ghostly form. She would have to suck the life force of her

daughter and grandchildren if she stayed any longer. It was time for her to return from where she came. Travel safe, maternal grandmother.

4. Mothers

'Maggots!' he shouted. 'Maggots! Where are my grandsons? I want grandsons! Give me grandsons! Maggots!' He pointed at each one of us, 'Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot!'

Maxine Hong Kingston

"It's an apple."

The three by four stock card stared right back at me, an apple smack in my face. I know, I thought. It was days before Kindergarten when dad took me to visit my new school. I was being tested in their piano hall. Tested for what, I had no idea. Not my piano skills, I know. I sat there and stared at the deep red of the apple stock card in front of me. The red faded into a softer tone towards the center and left a white spot on the top right hand corner. I was fixated on that spot.

I don't remember whether I answered any of the questions asked. I just remember I focused on the white spot and not the woman in front of me. She never got angry, though, my examiner, or asked why I didn't speak up. She simply sat there, across the bench from me, her back straight, arms rested on top of the table. She presented me with one picture, then two, then three: A girl stood outside a house; a boy used a paint set; a rabbit. Each time I didn't give an answer, she would tell me what was in the drawing, smiled, and moved on to the next picture. Her face never changed; the same smile plastered on her face.

The piano hall was too empty, too big and quiet. Dad sat next to me the whole time, but he might as well have been the invisible man. He didn't say a single word to my examiner or me. It was just the stranger and me. A dog; a rabbit; a trampoline, on it went. I wanted to say something. Not to identify the cards, but to say I wanted to leave.

At some point I had thought the woman was trying to host her own stand-up comedy and wanted to use us as practice. I wondered if she would let us leave if I answered one of her

questions. She was boring anyway. Her favorite line was, “What is this?” Where’s the punch line after that? Dad probably thought she was boring too. He was probably waiting for me to do something, as he usually does. A soccer ball; a man in his car; the color green, I knew the answer. I just didn’t voice them.

I knew something else too. Another thought came and the little voice in my mind whispered, “What if they left me with this woman for good?” I would have to look at stock cards all day. Our playtime would be a game of “What is this?” “This was your mom’s idea,” the little voice whispered again.

I knew this was mom’s idea. She never wanted me to begin with. She had wanted a son. I’ve heard people whisper their ghost voices before, “Your mother wanted a son.” Instead, she got me, the first-born daughter. “Better to have given birth to roast pork than to you,” mom used to say. The Chinese once said daughters were useless. She probably thought that too. Daughters couldn’t carry the family’s name. The Chinese are very serious about family names. In China, daughters could only hope to marry a rich husband. If not a rich husband, then a man who could bring the occasional chicken home. Otherwise, daughters could count on eating rice husks. “Aiaa, eat rice husks aiaa, eat rice husks,” grandmother used to say.

I used to hear stories about girls in China being sold off into marriage for chicken. A man twice a daughter’s age could walk in, say he wants her, put a fat chicken hen down, and snatch the girl away. A good chicken could lay eggs. The family could then sell the eggs for profit. A chicken was of more value than a daughter.

When I was a little older, I heard stories about daughters being sold overseas by mothers in Hong Kong. I knew there was a reason I became suspicious of my own mom. Families were

proud of daughters being sold overseas. The daughter, the poor daughter, would sometimes volunteer to be sold.

“A married daughter is like water poured out of a bucket.” I heard this phrase many times in the many Chinese soap operas I watched with grandmother. It meant that a married daughter is like an already used bucket of water. She is gone, and there was no turning back. There was no home to turn back to. I used to think mothers could be so heartless.

My mother was born in Hong Kong in the early 1960s. She was the eldest of four children. She was also the only daughter. My brother and I never knew much about mom’s childhood. All we knew was that her mother passed away when she was ten. Mom then had a stepmother, but only for a short while; the stepmother and her father divorced.

When I was young, I was tempted to ask mom about her past. “Mom, when you were young, what did you play with?” “Jump rope,” She answered. “Did you like to read books?” “Yes! Every time there was a test, I’d lay out all my pencils, pens, eraser, and books. But then after the planning, I’d get tired.” “Mom, how many boys did you dated before you met dad?” “One. He sold diamonds. I should have stayed with him and not your father.”

Each time I asked mom a question, she’d answer in her matter-of-fact way, but always with just enough details to satisfy my curiosity. But I chose not to ask mom about her family. I used to think, “What was it like to grow up without a mother? What was it like to grow up with three brothers, in a household of boys?”

“The Chinese sold their daughters, in China and in Hong Kong,” the voice in my mind whispered.

I knew mom did not want to talk about her mother. According to my grandmother (my dad’s mother), mom suffered from depression as a child. I don’t know why, for the life of me,

my mother consulted with my grandmother. I could never figure out the relationship between those two women. I would use the word civil at best to describe them.

“You have enough dinner? Not enough then make more” said grandmother. “Okay.”

“The person said it will be readied in three weeks.” Mom held out the receipt.

Grandmother took the receipt and said, “Three weeks. Okay.” Both women exchanged business, and both women departed ways till the next business exchange. There was a mutual understanding that only they knew about.

I used to think grandmother revealed my mother’s secret out of spite. Grandmother had probably predetermined that she’d lose the business to mother one of these days. Her old age was a weakness she did not want to acknowledge, yet used for her own advantage. “I am ninety years old,” was her favorite line. She has been ninety for quite some years now. “The Chinese like to round up our numbers,” she declared pointedly. She probably thought that after her death, I was the one to fulfill her role. She only missed the fact that if I did take her role, I would be doing business with my mother. I didn’t want to do business with my mother.

Sometimes I saw myself in my mother, and the thought terrified me. Did she think her mother abandoned her, just as I had thought my mother would abandon me? Did she ask where her mother went? Just as I used to ask where my mom went when I was dropped off at school.

Mom’s brothers didn’t treat her with the same respect that an elder member in the family should receive. They were three boys. She was one girl. It was three against one. They probably made fun of her for being the only daughter, the only useless one. “Should’ve given birth to roast pork than to you.” “We’ll give you away for chicken” “The chicken will give us eggs. What will you give us?” They probably took her jump rope from her and left her with all the house chores while they went out to play. When she told the adults, she was reprimanded for her childish

behavior. On good days they said, “You’re the big sister. Give it to your brothers” On the bad days, days they had no food for the table, they said, “Useless. Complaining about a piece of rope. Your brothers will carry out the family name. What will you bring?” Those were the days when she probably left home and went back to school. When she got to the school’s empty auditorium, she took out all her school supplies. Supplies that she hid away from her brothers. Not in her backpack or under her pillow. My mother was smarter than that.

Mother and her family lived in a small, small tenement, with no bedrooms. Mother and her grandmother took over a corner of the room. They placed a twin-sized bed and drew up a curtain for privacy sake. Her grandmother slept on the one bed they owned. When you’re old enough in the family, you get everything first, even if you were a woman. Mother slept on the floor, as did her brothers. Wooden floors were good for your back, she said. While the brothers slept in the living room, the opened-space as big as the size of one bedroom, my mother got an empty spot at the foot of her grandmother’s bed. She didn’t mind though. It was there that she found a loose floorboard, the piece of wood right underneath where she placed her pillow every night. She hid her most prized possessions there, her erasers and pens. She made sure to never take them out unless no one was around. Her brothers would have taken the pencils from her.

Now at the school, sitting all by herself, she inspected each pen and eraser she took out from her backpack. She placed the items carefully on the table. By the time she was done with her display, she was too tired to actually study. She packed up her things and went home. She made dinner for her grandmother and the three brothers. The next day at school, there was a test on essay writing. She did not have time to study. She got a C. She was happy.

“I didn’t know how to cook when I was young,” Mom told me once while she prepared dinner, “Back then your uncles did most of the work. They did everything.”

Maybe my mother lied, but maybe she told me the truth. Maybe she did not have such a bad childhood; she was their only daughter. Maybe her family treated her like a pearl from the black sea. Her mother passed away, she was sad, but she still has three brothers. Three brothers whom she loved and felt obligated to care for. She wanted to be their mother because she did not have one. So she told herself she would give them the best of everything. She spent all her summers with them. When all the other kids went on family trips to the countryside, she stayed home with her brothers. They played tag and house and jump rope. When the neighbors complained that they were too loud, she took them to the school playground. There, she disciplined them when they did not listen, “This one, stop running. This one, hold your brother’s hand, what’d I tell you.” She would save all her Lunar New Year money and allowance so she could buy each brother new supplies for the school year. Pens, pencils, and erasers all went to the brothers. She did not mind. In return, all three brothers worshipped her.

When the adults claimed she was useless, the eldest brother came forward and yelled back, “My sister’s not useless.” Then the second brother came forward, took her aside, and comforted her. He showed her his test paper; he got a B+. She had stayed up all night, helped him set up his paper and pencils, and tutored him. She was up all night that she didn’t have time to study for her test. That was the only reason she scored a C. Content that her brother was going to pass school this year, she sat with her youngest sibling on her lap and read him to sleep. Mother was a great story reader.

My own brother righteously told me once, “Mom doesn’t just read books. She changes the things that happen in books. Her voice changes too. Way better than you.” You, the sister.

The three brothers did not want or dare to upset their sister. They were afraid she would leave just as their mother had. So they did all the chores at home. Eldest brother learned how to

cook from their grandmother. Second brother learned how to sew and did all the dishes.

Youngest brother made sure to sweep the floor and cleaned up after everyone.

And so, as the years went by, the brothers and their sister grew up, but their bond was unbreakable. It was only after their sister got married that things changed. The brothers felt their sister left them, chose someone else, another family, over them. The truth was, however, their sister never left them. Even after their sister had children of her own, the three brothers were still and would always be her priority. Her ungrateful daughter blamed her mother for that.

When the sister's daughter turned five, second and youngest brother got into a car accident. A hit and run. It was an immediate death for youngest brother. Second brother was in a coma for six months.

Mother never got over the death of maternal grandmother or the death of youngest uncle. Some months after the tragedy of youngest uncle's death, someone with a bad mouth brought up his name. Mother remained silent, didn't seem as if she was affected; but I noticed. Out of the corners of her eyes, mother glanced down at the latest and last gift youngest uncle bought me. A teddy bear dressed in a pink and blue sundress. Mother remained silent and held the stuffed animal in her lap. The two held onto each other.

Mother didn't abandon me or tell anyone that I knew of to leave me behind. That day in the piano hall, days before my first day of kindergarten, I was asked a series of questions for reasons I didn't know. Most of them involved pictures. I answered some questions right, some wrong, but mostly I remained silent. I remember understanding what was asked of me. I tried to say what I knew, but no sounds came out. I was pretty sure my examiner felt pity for me. I took a dinosaur sticker she gave me. She helped me peel the sticker off and pasted it on my wrist. When

it was time to leave, I was so grateful that I didn't need to play with my examiner that I waved goodbye to her. She waved back and I thought her smile was genuine.

Later when I got home with my sticker and apple card, I told grandmother all about my day over sugar candy and apple juice. I left out the parts where I didn't speak up or about my anxieties about being an orphan. We watched another episode of Chinese soap opera.

Over the years, I would think back to that day and to numerous other days where mother could have left me behind.

5. Tongue-Tied

I could not figure out what was my village. And it was important that I do something big and fine, or else my parents would sell me when we made our way back to China. In China there were solutions for what to do with little girls who ate up food and three tantrums. You can't eat straight A's.

Somewhere in the dead land I lost count of the days. It seemed as if I had been walking forever; life had never been different from this.

Maxine Hong Kingston

“When your uncle was born, still a baby, my grandmother sliced his frenum with a pair of nail scissors.”

I stared at mother in bewilderment. “Why did your grandmother cut uncle's tongue?”

“So he wouldn't be tongue-tied. The frenum took up too much space. He wouldn't have been able to speak fluently. So she cut it.”

“Did it hurt?”

“I don't remember. He did cry, but not too loud. There was blood, but only a little.”

“Do I need to cut my frenum?” I asked, excited.

“No.”

Oh. “Why not?”

“Your tongue is fine. You talk too much already.”

I remember being a silent child. I never interrupted when the adults talked. Not that they gave me much chance to speak. Every time I asked a question their response was, “Kids don't know.” Which meant, “Kids shouldn't know.” But that was why I asked. “Who said if I don't finish my bowl of rice I'd marry an ugly man?” “Kids don't know. Eat your rice.” “Did grandfather's ghost visited aunt that time?” “Kids don't know.” “Were some of our aunts really crazy?” “Kids don't know.”

Eventually I decided to stop asking. I did just as I was told. Other times I chose not to do as told and walked away. I hid in the bathroom. The bathroom was my safe space. “What are you doing?” “Brushing my teeth,” I answered, I stayed in there, in front of the mirror, and put my face real close to the glass. Then I’d open my mouth, curl my tongue, and stretch my frenum into a white line. I saw multitudes of nerve endings underneath my tongue, all in shades of purple and red, like someone took my tongue out and bruised it before sticking it back in. I saw no cutting scar though. I guess my mom didn’t lie; my tongue didn’t need to be cut.

I did more than examine my tongue in the bathroom. Grandmother loved to make lots of food. She used to make lunch for brother and I every day. On weekends, she would make us breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks in between. She would make so much food that it was impossible for my brother and I to finish. “Eat. Back in China people don’t even have rice husks.” So we ate. We complied and ate as much as our stomach could fit. Kids needed to be grateful to grandmothers who made food. Some grandmothers only knew how to pinch their grandchildren; I’ve seen it with my own eyes. Whenever we were too full to eat anymore, we’d spread the food over our plates and hoped that it created an illusion of appreciation for grandmother. That was what Arthur and his sister, DW, did. One time, grandmother made so much food that I had to excuse myself. I went into the bathroom and spit out all the food in my mouth into a roll of toilet paper. When I came out, I told her I was ready for more food.

In the beginning, my plan worked out well. I didn’t tell brother in case he tried it too and we’d get caught. I excused myself, left for the bathroom, spit, and walked out, ready for more food. Grandmother said I was her compliant granddaughter. My plan failed to follow through eventually. Grandmother was furious. “Aiya! People in China don’t even have rice husks.” I tried to explain myself, “But I was –” “You’re going to marry an ugly man.” She silenced me,

and I sulked in my chair. I wouldn't want to marry a man who didn't want me, I wanted to scream back, and just because I didn't finish my rice?!

In first grade, we learned to draw lines.

“Draw a line to match the numbers with the words.” I looked up at the board. Straight down, on one side of the board, Arabic numerals from one through five were lined up. On the other side of the board, numbers one through five in English lined up. We were each called up to the board to match the number on one side with the word on the other. I raised my hand and volunteered to draw line. I was about to go back to my seat when someone shouted, “That’s wrong!” A Chinese girl with circular eye glasses sat in the back of the classroom, staring right at me, as she pointed her finger to the board and screamed, “That’s wrong! That’s wrong!”

I had mistakenly drew a line with numeral number four and the word five.

I stood there frozen, not knowing what to do. There was nothing for me to do or say. I looked back at the finger pointed in my direction, pointed at me, against me. All the other kids were already seated. I was the only one still up there. I felt it before it happened. The knot that tied my tongue tightened and I couldn't breathe. I didn't even look at the other kids or the teacher. It was that finger that got me. What happened after was the teacher sent me to the bathroom to “clean up.” I walked out of class with a bucket in hand, a bottle of hand soap and bathroom pass, and eyes full of tears.

The worse part about crying in class was after you cleaned up you had to walk back into class. How was I supposed to face everyone and the Chinese girl in the back of the room? Why did she call me out? She was supposed to be a friend, a family friend. Her grandmother and my grandmother were from the same village. Or was it a village separated by a river? It didn't

matter; they were considered cousins, which, in village life made us cousins. She was mean. She was smart. She has an older brother and a village full of older cousins. I had no one, but parents from the city. City people didn't know anything about village people. She was very smart, but very mean. That was what my mind screamed back, and I wanted to scream back. "Village girl! You and your gang of village cousins. I don't even know which one of them is your brother. You all live together." Instead my tongue played tricks on me again and I was tongue-tied. I was so caught up in what I wanted to say that in the end, I didn't come up with anything. By the time I walked back, class was as lively as ever. Everyone was busy chattering, busy with work. I slipped in invisible. I wasn't sure if I was grateful or disappointed that nobody noticed me.

Later, the girl apologized, and I accepted her apology in silence. In a few years, that same girl, along with some other Chinese girls, called me names. "Tree," they sneered. Every time I walked by, they would whisper the name tree. No one could hear it, but me. "Hi tree," I heard on the bus. "There's tree," they looked over. "Tree," at recess. Of all the things out there, my parents had to give me a tree name. Oh, why?

Dad said the maple tree was one of the prettiest trees he has seen, so it was a fitting name for his daughter. I have my doubts about his story, though; there has been multiple discrepancies. According to grandmother, the word maple rhymes with my Chinese name, Mei Bao, Beautiful Treasure. So it was an easy name for her to remember. Then mom claimed that they had wanted to give me an entirely different name, but the nurses at the hospital got it wrong. My name was a complete mistake. I really hoped I was simply named after a tree. I didn't want to take part in some rhyme scheme or be a mistake. Plus, trees lived a long, healthy life.

I didn't tell grandmother about the name calling at school. She and all of the girls' mothers were friends. I resolved it on my own. I went to my last resort: the teacher. My teacher

then went to their homeroom teacher, and we had this huge talk. All seven of us. We talked about why name calling was a bad thing and why we should apologize when we stepped on someone's shoes, even if it was an accident. I know, it was pathetic. The girls never called me names or talked to me again, but it was still awkward when I saw them. "Do you remember the Black girl who punched you when you were little," said grandmother. Honestly, I didn't remember. I remembered the Black girl and I were quite friendly. I remembered I swore I would not ever befriend another Chinese.

At around the same time I started first grade, my parents also sent me to Sunday Chinese school. Once a week, mom and I packed my backpack: Textbook, brown book, blue book, and pencil case. Nobody had to go up to the board and draw lines there. We all sang the same songs and recited the same lessons. We chanted about children in soccer fields, at swimming pools, in picnics. I saw a drawing of Confucius in our textbook and felt a sense of familiarity with the philosopher. His long robe and beard made him look majestic yet benign, like a Chinese opera singer. Confucius was much more handsome than Thomas Jefferson. It wasn't till I was much older that I learned Confucius was not so nice in his opinions about the role of women, just as Jefferson was not so kind when it came to slavery.

Not all the children liked Sunday school. Some thought that it was a waste of time to learn how to write traditional Chinese. Why bother with Chinese when English was a universal language. I have to admit, I have said that out loud once or twice. "What was the point? Everyone in American school spoke and wrote in English." Everyone in and out of American school pushed me to speak and write in English. The only time I spoke Cantonese was when I was at home. "But Cantonese is your mother tongue," grandmother said, "It's the dialect that

your grandfather spoke, and your grandfather's grandfather. You're only half a ghost. If you shed away your Cantonese, you'll be full ghost."

I wanted to tell grandmother that I won't forget. Plus, Cantonese was my mother tongue as far as my parents' and grandfather's generation. I was pretty sure that grandfather's grandfather spoke a different dialect. I wanted to tell grandmother, "You think you speak Cantonese, grandmother, but you speak a variation of Toishanese and Cantonese. I understand you perfectly. Why can't I speak a variation of English and Cantonese?"

Grandmother fled from Toisan, the village, in Southern China, to big city Hong Kong, already a British colony then, in World War II. She claimed that she was very young when she left her hometown, only sixteen, so she doesn't remember much about the war. Other times she claimed she was only eighteen. She picked up her Cantonese when she immigrated to Hong Kong and met grandfather. She was never able to shed her village tongue completely. At the dinner table once, grandmother spoke in excitement to one of our cousins who had flown in from another state to visit. Cousin confessed to me later that she did not understand half the things grandmother said. Grandmother's tongue was the most natural sound to my ears.

Despite my complaints, I secretly enjoyed Chinese school; at least, most of the time. The teachers made us copy texts and vocabularies. Each character went into a box already outlined on a sheet of paper. I had to think about every stroke I was about to make before I placed my pencil onto paper. If I pressed too hard or elongated a stroke, the character would not fit in the box. If I pressed too soft or tried too hard, then the character was too small, and I couldn't decipher what I wrote. I had to concentrate so that every line and stroke was made with precision. There were occasions when I felt frustrated because I had to focus so much of my attention in writing out

one character. I wanted to be done with writing already so I could watch television. Other times I found the solace I needed. I looked forward to the quiet that enveloped me.

When I was ten years old, I started to have friends with whom I spoke on the phone daily. It was also around that time that I realized the limits of my dad's English. He would ask me to use the house phone, call up so and so, and pretend that I was he. In this guise, I was told to ask for information, file a complaint, and even straight out yell at a person for poor customer service. He would give me his personal information on a slip of paper and I used to review the information before I made a call. One time it was a call to the bank because some money was moved to a different account without any prior notice of our knowledge. So in what I thought was my most convincing pre-adolescent voice I said, "Hello, I need to inquire about...."

Dad stood in the background and interjected not so quietly, "Yes, yell at him. Bad service." To which I then said into the intercom, "No, we were never notified of such changes."

Dad then decided that I was not aggressive enough and thought he should give his daughter a helping hand, "No need to be polite. Tell him you port him. Close the account," He said more loudly. That was what he and people from Hong Kong say when they want to file a complaint. Port him. Port her. I tried to stay calm because I could tell dad was about to get riled up. Also because the man over the phone started bringing up terms like money market account and equity, all of which I was not familiar with. I held the phone closer to my ear and tried to block dad's voice out. When I told the representative that I'd like to close the account, he asked, "What is the password you have associated with this account please?" That was the one piece of information dad had not written down on the slip of paper.

I was surprised, to be honest, the man still had not figured out that I was not who I claimed to be. “Am I speaking with Ms. Wu?” He asked.

“Yes,” I squeaked.

A paused. Then, “The account indicates that it belongs to a Mr. Wu. Are you Mr. Wu? I heard another person in the background.”

I swallowed. The knot on my tongue tightened. This time my stomach felt butterflies as well.

“No,” I answered the man and quickly changed tactics before we get into more trouble, “This is not Mr. Wu. I am his daughter.”

I pressed the mute button and said to dad, “He said you need to get on the phone.”

“Tell him I don’t talk English”

“Hello, he does not speak English”

The man asked what language my dad spoke. “Cantonese.” Another paused. “Chinese,” I cleared my throat and said again. After some back and forth, I was informed that they did not have a Chinese translator.

“Dad, he says he need to know you are who you are. Then he’ll talk with me.”

Dad took the phone from me, “You talk to my daughter, okay?!” He said in English.

The phone was back in my hand before I knew it.

After some time the issue was resolved, and I hung up, relieved. Dad wanted to know if I had filed a complaint with the manager.

“Yes,” I said simply, reluctantly, pointedly. Then I told him I had homework to do.

It seemed that in those days not a lot of people recognized the difference between Cantonese and Mandarin. Whenever I asked companies for a Cantonese translator, they replied,

“Excuse me, ma’am, can you repeat that?” It was not until I got older that they started to have Chinese, and most often Mandarin, translators.

As a daughter of Cantonese speaker parents, I didn’t think I was ever ashamed of my Canto-ness. I was glad my parents sent me to Chinese school. While I have forgotten many of my traditional Chinese characters, I would call myself a bilingual. There was a time, however, when I wished I did not know a single word of Chinese. That way, I wouldn’t have to translate.

These days my Cantonese and English act as they please. Some days my Cantonese decides to write a song of its own, its melody flows through my tongue. Other days I experience difficulty expressing a thought or term, things like “the intersectionality of gender and class,” and I feel the need to switch to English. The worst days are when I need to write an English paper, but my mind is filled with Canto idioms. Grandmother was right when she said I am only half a ghost. My Cantonese and English flow in me, intertwining to their own accord. I’m still not sure what I think about this. Perhaps, mother should have looked harder for a frenum to slice.

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