

NAI NAI/ ABU

By: Rayee Wang



My maternal grandmother has been learning English for years. She keeps countless notebooks filled with rigorous notes on reading, writing, and pronunciation, each page filled to the brim with words written in thin black ink, characters written in both Chinese and English.

My grandparents live in a retirement home, which is a 15-minute drive from my house. Because I live so close, I'd sometimes come by to drop off groceries and stay for a quick lunch or a lesson on how to make stir-fried shredded potatoes (Tudou Si). When I started college, I found it difficult to reach out to them and call weekly. I value my time with my grandparents, as they have done so much for me, and it's important that I build a closer relationship with my roots and culture by learning their life stories. I need to know what they have gone through to be where they are in life, as they're a

part of crucial history. We trade stories as they tell me about aspects of their lives in China, recalling how they met, working at a factory together, or talking about when they made the big move from Shanghai to Luoyang, where my mother was born and raised. In my freshman year, when I came back home from school for spring break, I visited, telling them all sorts of stories about things like my first interview with an artist, or how my commute to class would be five minutes longer due to closed-off streets that were being filmed. These stories truly bonded us.

When I asked my grandmother if she wanted me to buy more of the Muji pens she was raving about a couple of months before, she had no idea what I was talking about. I looked over at my mother with a confused look, and she simply said, "She probably forgot, just get them anyway." This puzzled me, as it seemed like my

grandmother had forgotten about a lot of things, and it hit me that she had been learning English for years, but was making little progress in retaining the language. I asked my dad why she seemed to have forgotten a lot over the past couple of months, and he told me that she most likely had dementia. I asked him how that could have happened. "Your grandparents don't have anyone to talk to," he said.

"Your grandparents don't have anyone to talk to,"

Being back at school, I only got busier and busier. I rarely had time for myself, much less time to call my grandparents. On the rare occasion that I would be able to, my grandparents would end the call by telling me that they loved my calls and had wished that I called more often. On the other rare occasion where I'd call my

mother, she would remind me to talk to my grandparents, and that they had been asking her about me, asking about how exams were going, and if I was eating enough. I wanted nothing more than to catch up with them, but I never had the time or energy to.

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Last winter, my paternal grandmother had a pulmonary embolism. I found out after a biology midterm while I was walking to the NYU bus stop, when my sister called me, “I want you to know that I don’t think it’s anything you need to be panicking about right now, but mom and dad flew home from my place last night, and they’re leaving for China soon.”

Stepping into the shuttle bus that would take me to my dorm, I tapped my ID and mindlessly sat down at my usual seat closest to the door, frantically trying to contact my parents. Feeling helpless and unavailable, I pressed my phone firmly against my ear, waiting impatiently for the call to go through, hoping they hadn’t already left for China. In speaking to them, I realized that I had nothing to offer, and I couldn’t do anything.

Over the course of the following week, I thought more about how I wished I had spent more time with my grandmother and my father’s side of the family. I rarely made the effort to reach out because they live in China, on the other side of the world, and speak a dialect that I could barely understand. I thought about how unfair it was that I was thinking about this now, thinking about how limited my time with my grandmother was, as she was in the ICU.

In thinking about what efforts I’ve made to connect with my grandmother, the first memory that popped into my head was from the summer of seventh grade, when my mother and I visited my

dad’s hometown, Jiyuan, Henan. I had just gotten into fashion and sewing that year, and only produced three handmade articles of clothing, one of which was for my grandmother: a pink, Mickey-printed sweater with black sleeves. I was so incredibly excited to give it to her and to bond with her after not having been in China in years, but I hadn’t taken into consideration my inability to communicate with her. I remember spending most of that trip on the couch, silent and staring out the window or on my phone, racking my brain in trying to form simple sentences, upset that there was nothing that I could talk about. I left the trip with only a couple of short conversations in my memory, things that you could easily say over the phone,

“You’re so skinny, you need to eat more!”

“I do, I do.”

“She said that she could tell that you had a lot to say, but couldn’t say any of it.”

A couple of weeks later, my dad told me that my grandmother had called about my visit. “She said that she could tell that you had a lot to say, but couldn’t say any of it.”

Rayee is a junior majoring in Neural science with a minor in math and computer science and chemistry. Rayee loves the season of fall and loves to knit and cook.

