

Mother Tongue

TINA TIN-YEE CHENG

Cet article débute avec la grand-mère de l'auteure qui lui a parlé dans un dialecte chinois qu'elle ne comprend pas. Elle décide de réfléchir sur le verbal et le non-verbal dans sa relation avec elle ainsi que sur la dynamique à l'intérieur de la famille.

We are on our way out, saying our goodbyes, when my grandmother says something to me in her Chiu Chow dialect that I cannot understand. Usually I nod to let her know I'll be careful and won't stay out too late, so that I won't be attacked by perverts or other predators. But this time she's asked me a question.

She turns to say something in Chiu Chow to my mom who responds in Cantonese, "Aiiya, ah mah, of course she can't understand. She doesn't know any Chiu Chow, only Cantonese."

My grandmother lets out a "hmpf" and turns her head away.

My mother reminds her that my dad barely understands any Chiu Chow either, defensive against her implicit criticism that I should have been taught some Chiu Chow and now it was too late.

My grandmother can speak Cantonese. That's how we used to communicate when she first immigrated to Canada to join my family when I was 8 years old. That's how I picked up the small measure of fluency I have in Cantonese. But lately she's been speaking only in Chiu Chow, her first dialect, even though everyone will respond to her in Cantonese.

My most vivid memory of my grandmother is actually of her learning to speak English. After school each day, I'd go over to my grandparents' place where I'd find my grandfather watching *The Price is Right* or *Three's Company*, the only TV shows he'd watch because the price of household items and physical comedy were the two things that could cross the language barrier. And there was my grandmother—constantly knitting. Sometimes the blur of her knitting needles would put me in a trance,

while she'd ask me again and again how to pronounce the English words she needed to pass her citizenship interview. I learned more about Canadian politics from my grandmother's questions than I did at school during that time. Unlike my grandfather who can read Chinese, my grandmother is illiterate, but she worked much harder than he did to pass the citizenship interview, learning far more than what she needed to, while bearing my arrogance as a little teacher. How she was able to memorize a bunch of random questions and answers in a foreign language should have filled me with pride, but instead I would become impatient with her.

To refresh her memory, each day we'd start again with the last few questions from the previous day. "In Canada, who is the leader of the New Democratic Party?" I'd ask loudly.

"Ek Bok Bang!"

"Nooo. Ed Broaaaddeennt." I'd say this slowly and carefully, correcting her. I knew that "bok bang" meant a thin cookie or pastry in Cantonese.

"Ed Broadbent."

"Ek Bok Bang!"

"Ed Broaaaddeennt!" I'd repeat, annoyed because we had already gone through this so many times the day before.

Shamefully, on a few of those days when I got really bored, I'd get out my yellow ruler to point to the script and wave the ruler around for dramatic effect. When my parents found out, I was soundly scolded.

I did teach my grandmother some practical words like "Dun-dah-see" and "Spah-die-nah" and "Fin-chee", so that she could check with strangers that she was on the right subway, streetcar, or bus, going toward Chinatown and then back to her home in the suburbs that had not yet been Asianized. At the beginning, she'd practice these words the most often, as though the confidence with which she could make these street names her own would help to root her in this new place. Her proud pronunciation would eventually inflect my own remembering of those streets.

Now these memories feel so far away. Now my grandmother can hardly lift her hands from her lap, and she depends on my aunt to help her move around the house.

Earlier in the evening, my uncle had lectured my grandmother for falling earlier that day. She'd fallen after returning from lunch, unable to wait for my aunt to come help her move. I could tell that my uncle was making her sad, because her head began to droop lower the more upset he grew over her swollen face, over his guilt for not being there to prevent her fall, over my grandmother's insistence on taking steps once so easy to her without depending on my aunt for help all the time. These steps were steps she had once taught him and her eleven other children; she'd watched them crawl, stand up, walk towards her, allowed them to run faster than their legs could manage because she knew they'd learn.

But her bones are frail. My uncle's reminder of her frailty has drained her. It has sapped her of whatever energy she might've had to lift her breath out of its sunken sigh. It's Mother's Day but she can't enjoy the presence of her children and her grandchildren. Her falling, the attention to her falling, have made her a distant and quiet spectacle, shrunken by children who worry about her like she is a child.

As I watched my grandmother's building sadness from across the room, I felt my throat grow hot. I walked over to sit beside her and take her hand in mine, hoping to warm it. Her thumb pressed gently against my palm in response, as I tried to smooth away her sadness with the tips of my finger.

The simple gesture of reaching out to hold my grandmother's hand was new to me, opening me up to both our sadnesses. Touch doesn't occur enough in my family, not since I was much younger. We are too hesitant to cross personal boundaries, to risk the expression of caring not couched in terms of worry or correction.

Later in the evening, as I sat on the couch eating my dinner, squeezed between my brother and a cousin, my eyes searched for my aunt, the one who takes care of both my grandparents. I know she often tries to be inconspicuous, seeming to appear only when my grandmother calls for her help. She wants to remain small, not compete with my other relatives whose voices can fill the room, although in recent years, she has grown large from the leftovers she finishes, leftovers from cooking for my grandparents and all my grandparents' visitors—my married aunts and uncles, their children. I don't remember seeing her wear anything but old house clothes at my grandparents' home, even on festive occasions like Chinese New Year, when everything is red and gold and new.

I eventually spotted her sitting alone at the top of the stairs, away from our separate commotion. Another aunt beckoned at her to come and sit with the rest of us, but she shook her head and stayed where she was.

Everyone's plates were full of food that my aunt had carefully prepared, so I winced when I heard my uncle

exclaim that my aunt shouldn't have done so much deep-frying, that it was unhealthy and stank up the house. And I thought of how the world has sounded to me the times I've wanted to put it on mute, and of how I don't want anyone to talk to me when it's my life I'm unhappy with.

My grandmother is saying something again to me, her hand motioning towards my aunt who has brought out a big container with red bean dessert.

I hear my brother's name and realize that my grandmother wants us to take the dessert back home. I know that we won't finish it all, but I nod in gratitude. She says something else to me that I don't understand. But I can hear her voice has relaxed now, and I can tell she is ready for us to leave.

Tina Tin-Yee Cheng is a lawyer and writer living in Toronto. Her family immigrated to Canada when she was one-and-a-half years old.

SOPHIE TAMAS

You Are Still Talking

we lie in the graveyard of love, our children
playing among the tombstones.

mostly I stare up through the shifting
screen of branches where blue
sieves down or snow
sieves down like icing sugar
making this all seem sweet and cold and neat

the children leave tracks like
rabbits or squirrels and their foot prints
here and there seep up blood
like water from moss.

Sophie Tamas is a playwright raising three girls in small town Ontario. She is in the third year of a PhD in Canadian Studies at Carleton University. Her dissertation will involve autoethnographic, arts-based, and participatory action research with survivors of spousal abuse, exploring the use of theatre to facilitate trauma recovery, deepen understanding of recovery needs, and promote community education.