

Black Cobwebs

Sophia Chen

A year ago, my poetry teacher told me to pour my heart out on a piece of paper, over a food. It was a cathartic rush, a chaotic flurry about dim sum and pork fat and chrysanthemum and egg tarts and family. Well, all of it was about family. The exercise was intended to unlock some subconscious commentary on the subjective world inside a piece of food—for me, it unlocked all the insecurity I have felt, and continue to feel, about being Chinese American.

I first wrote about the insecurity back in high school, when my AP Psychology teacher prompted the students to psychoanalyze facets of their own identity. I remember expressing how I have never quite felt fully Chinese, nor fully American, largely due to sociocultural undercurrents forming rifts I have no control over, and partially due to my own inability to identify with either. These emotions loudly influenced my childhood, growing up in a predominantly white community in the suburbs of Clearwater, Florida.

The insecurity manifests most often in family settings and at Chinese restaurants. There is this terrible sinking feeling the moment that a waiter speaks to me in Mandarin. I stutter and stumble and apologize because I have no words. It feels like...guilt and embarrassment and humiliation. My appearance indicates that I *should* be able to speak Mandarin. But that's about it. I feel not only fundamentally alienated, but physiologically deceptive and the embodiment of cultural erasure.

After writing that poem and reflecting on the depth of my insecurity, I resolved that I would become fluent in Mandarin. It felt like a cultural reclamation. But it felt disingenuous. I struggled to differentiate myself from others learning foreign languages. What makes me learning Mandarin on Duolingo distinct from a Caucasian learning Mandarin using the same agnostic avenues? Would this be less so reclamation, and more so learning about a culture and claiming it as my own? Does my ethnicity inherently justify an authentic relationship to this language and culture? And after generations of assimilation, can I reconnect with a culture that has been lost within my family, and subsequently treat that culture as a genuine, possessed, and inheritable identity?

Unfortunately, I do not have the answers to these questions—but at the very least, my immigrant attitude is that no one can define my relationship with being Chinese, except me. And thus, I am redefining this relationship by learning Mandarin. But how so?

I decided that to become fluent, I had to live in a Mandarin-speaking country for at least a year. Duolingo was not working, and I was not able to take it seriously ever since I flippantly began four years ago. The time would be after college, but before starting a career. Therefore, as a fifth-year student about to graduate, the time *is now*.

At the end of the summer, I began an application to a two-year Master's at National Taiwan University's Global Health Program, which would prepare me for my intended career in medicine and aspirational specialty in humanitarian-based global health. At the end of January, I received a notification in my inbox. I was admitted to the program with a merit-based full-tuition

scholarship. I accepted the offer in early February. The program will start in September of this year.

The nice thing about applications is that they force you to deeply introspect about what you want and who you are and where you are going. In fact, this application granted me incredible clarity, in the way that you convince yourself of yourself in the process of convincing others. Yet the application also necessitated another self-interrogation: why Taiwan? I knew I had family in Taiwan, who I had never met before. I also knew that both of my grandparents fled to Taiwan during the Sino-Japanese war. But up until this point, these were casual facts and not lived realities. Thus, I began to confront Taiwan's known but little understood significance to my family. I decided to do some more digging.

I started with my great grandfather—the father of my paternal grandfather. In fact, I never knew his name until now: 陳海華 (Chen Hai-hwa). Growing up, I knew that he was an important figure in China's history; he created and served as the head of China's Kuomintang Air Force during World War II. A photo of him hung in our hallway, standing next to Chiang Kai-shek. According to my Yeh Yeh (my grandfather), he played a pivotal role in the Xi'an incident which changed the course of the Sino-Japanese war.

Hoping for official historical documents, I attempted to search his name on Google, and only one result in English popped up: a Columbia PhD student's thesis entitled "Bombing and Air Defense in China, 1932-1941: War, Politics, Architecture." I was a little surprised—it is well known that American-taught world history glosses over non-Western pasts, but *only one* result? Unfazed, I

cold-emailed the PhD student asking if he had any documents or resources about my great grandfather. He had one: a two-page biography written in Mandarin. I sent it to my Yeh Yeh and he confirmed that the information was sparse but correct.

Now what?

Resources in English were a bit of a dead-end, and my limited research skills further impeded any progress. I also knew nothing of Chinese search engines and databases. Reflecting on my quest for lived realities within my family, I then realized that the wealth of my search all existed within two people: my Nai Nai and Yeh Yeh.

And so began a multi-year endeavor that has only just begun. In December, I acquired a camcorder and asked my grandparents if I could interview them, piecing together over ninety years of lived realities. Throughout my childhood, my grandparents' weathered lives have been merely vague, non sequitur snippets of stories heard on occasion. I would not have been able to say where they were born. But now—our family history is finally crystallizing. It is a dimension of pride and self-discovery that I did not realize existed. My hope is to eventually write biographies, covering their early years, family ancestry, and adult life. My hope is to also *know them*—to know my grandparents not just as aging family members but as individuals.

Concurrently, the project has helped me indulge in Chinese history through the lens of two people I love, rather than through textbooks. As cliché as it sounds, the project has shown me

how history is not facts and dates and names, but lived experience. Not only that, but lived experience through which I was born.



“We worry about your generation.”

I remember not knowing how to respond. She continued: “You do not know about China. You do not know what we have been through. What we have lost.”

At the time, we were sitting on the sofa in the middle of my grandparents’ tiny condo, surrounded by porcelain figurines and dusty furniture. There was a long silence, broken at last by my Nai Nai’s sigh. “Are you hungry?”

In a milieu of eclectic artifacts, I felt empty. What have I inherited? Perhaps it is easy to inherit the color of your hair, but it is more difficult to inherit injustice. The other day, I was contemplating cycles of violence, and had concluded that one of the few passive ways to break such cycles is collective forgetting, through the process of time and generational change. I consider myself part of the generation that breaks the cycle. My Nai Nai is right—I don’t know about China.

That being said, my grandparents expect me to agree with them whenever they voice pro-China views, especially regarding a Chinese takeover (or takeback?) of Taiwan. Although I do not

agree with them, I can never actively disagree either. Who am I to tell them how to feel? To them, the independence of Taiwan is the epitome of unwanted and unwarranted foreign intervention, and a reminder of the painful losses China experienced during World War II. How could I ever truly understand their grief? How can I fathom what they lost?

In November, I visited the Objects of Addiction exhibit at the Harvard Art Museum. While I cannot say I liked the exhibit (admittedly, I am of the mind that Harvard did not do the Opium Wars justice nor did it address the Sackler family at all), it helped to provide some perspective. One could argue that China was a world superpower for millennia—with a largely sovereign existence and little foreign influence, if at all—up until the introduction of opium and subsequent Opium Wars, otherwise known as the “century of humiliation.” During this period, China suffered from exhaustive invasion and exploitation by colonizing powers.

My grandparents claim that modern Chinese nationalism is a wave born out of these losses, as China shakes off the setbacks and suffering from the past two centuries. They regard it as a return to power, a preordained status only briefly disrupted in the grand scheme of China’s thousands of years of history.

And so, I ask myself again: what have I inherited?

~~~~~

Well, what is in a piece of hair?

I started photographing my discarded hair on the wall, after a shower. Whatever clung to my body that would otherwise swim to the drain, pinched between two fingers. Sticky with water. Onto the wall, a veil of it. There's something gorgeous about black hair on white tile—it looks like calligraphy, thin delicate strokes of ink on a blank canvas. Some days the strokes would take shape into something, or someone—a person dancing, a preacher, a child running after their mother. I wanted to capture it, these ephemeral portraits. And then eventually I resolved that I wanted to *create* them and explore the significance of hair as a memento, a figment of identity, the expanse of a genome, and an expressive art form.

It is the middle of the winter as I start writing this, and my room is full of square tiles covered in hair. It is a bit of a difficult process—while I shower, I painstakingly collect whatever my scalp decides to purge, most often a few strands on my hands, or escaping down my shoulder. I usually have an idea in mind. I call them portraits of hair. Paintings. The subject is always someone in my family, or even myself—intimate moments minimally expressed with only a few pieces of hair on a white tile. The first one I made, I entitled “Sitting next to my mother while she tells me about her day.” Another one, more recent, is entitled “My great grandmother, pregnant with her twelfth child.”

Each is a declaration: *I am making portraits of my great grandparents and grandparents and parents out of my hair. But my hair is made out of my great grandparents and grandparents and parents.* Each is also a question: *What makes you? What are you made of? What do you make?*

Interviewing my grandparents has been a simultaneous endeavor that has become deeply intertwined with the process of making these portraits. Or, rather, they have become the same endeavor. They bring about the same questions. What do you inherit? Do you inherit a culture? Do you inherit embodied knowledge? Do you inherit the lives of those passed; do they live on inside of you, if not inside a piece of hair?

*What actually belongs to you?*

As I learn about my grandparents' pasts, it is as if I, myself, have come to encompass everything they contain. Their history becomes my history. It feels like it is inside of me. Has it always been there? Or is it imagined? And what of all the history that I will never come to know—is it still all here or does it no longer exist? Is it leaking out of me, slowly, silently, like the strands of hair that slip through my fingers?

When I move to Taiwan, I am bringing my grandparents with me. It finally feels like everything is coming together; all the stars are aligning in all facets of my life. And it is just the beginning.

For me, traveling to Taiwan will be part of a long journey to redefine my relationship with being Chinese, and to understand who I am. For my Nai Nai and Yeh Yeh, it will be catharsis. It will be the first time they have been to Taiwan in decades, since they immigrated to America. And it will also be their last.





In April, I held my own pop-up exhibition for all of these arising and persistent questions, expanding from the artistic process of making portraits of hair. Entitled *HAIRLOOM*, the exhibit was an exploration of cultural and familial identity, all through the interrogation of hair as an object. The exhibition questioned *where identity lies*: is it physiologically possessed, conflating with heredity? Is it learned or is it inherited—how, and to what extent, is it passed between generations?

A collection of portraits, prints, poetry, and video, the exhibit used hair as a medium. Historically, hair has been used as a memento: a tangible immortalization of loved ones. In my exhibit, with a unique materiality and almost calligraphic visual quality, hair was used to express emotion, to tell stories, and to obscure memory. The two main bodies of work served as foils to each other. The portraits of hair were “positives”: minimalist scenes solely made out of hair on ceramic tile. These forced an imposed interpretation of an event whose portrayal and retelling were largely projected and imagined. Second were the cyanotype prints, or portraits of erasure, which were “negatives”: real family photographs across multiple generations, but featuring various levels of obscuration through the use of hair.

Designed to be an experiential exhibit, I wanted to feature callbacks to my maternal and paternal immigration stories. In reference to the Chinese laundry my maternal family owned upon immigrating to America, the cyanotypes were washed and hung to dry along a clothesline. The clothesline itself draped across the exhibition space, such that visitors had to walk through the prints—ducking their heads. Meanwhile, chrysanthemum tea was offered to drink, harking back

to the Chinese restaurants my paternal family owned in New York (Soho, the Lower East Side, Flushing, and Queens).

Below are the exhibit paragraphs for both:

### *Portraits of Hair*

This series of portraits consists of events past and present in my life and family history. The simple yet vague, ambiguous scenes with only slight gestures to human form are contrasted with detailed titles. These are all “projections”; reminiscent of minimalism, the portraits are easily reduced to their literal materiality: just hair on tile. The process of making these involved wetting the tile with water, composing the portrait with hair, allowing the tile to dry, and then sealing the hair in place with a mixture of glue and clear spray-on adhesive.

### *Portraits of Erasure*

Otherwise known as Portraits of “Not Hair,” these cyanotype prints were made using family photographs of both living and deceased relatives. However, in the process of making them, the images are partially or wholly obscured with the fraying, effacing silhouettes of pieces of hair. In dialogue with the Portraits of Hair series, these prints are their antithesis. They feature family members in real moments, yet these scenes are distorted and erased. Unlike the Portraits of Hair in which meaning is projected, the Portraits of Erasure give an oppositional perspective on experience and memory.

Lastly, process videos of the portraits of hair, as well as the cyanotypes, were projected onto a white, suspended canvas. Adjacent to these videos were edited sections of the interviews of my Nai Nai and Yeh Yeh.

The exhibit was situated at the intersection of objects, identity, memory, meaning, and erasure. It questioned family, inheritance, and loss of culture. To what extent does anyone contain a cultural or familial identity? What are you made of? Are you a product of your ancestors and the lives they lived? What do you inherit?



I titled this whole essay *Black Cobwebs* based on another poem I wrote a few months ago, which I included in my exhibit. It goes like this:

these clinging  
    outgrowths  
    inhabit every surface

to gather in corners:

black cobwebs that capture  
    modern flies.

they shed in  
    calligraphic portions across  
    white shower walls

to spell out what I've lost  
    (at least for today).

they swarm  
    the drain  
    and clog the washing water  
    at my feet.

they ask me  
    to crouch  
    where my reflection is a  
    translucent ghost.

I pinch  
    each strand  
    with the soft flesh of my fingers  
    and drop my head.

these unremarkable spectacles that hold  
    everything in me  
and everything now gone.