A Mosaic Memoir of Leo Yao

*“About fifty years ago, Mao Zedong unleashed the Cultural Revolution, a decade-long upheaval that had dramatic, violent effects across China. Young people battled Mao’s perceived enemies, and one another, as Red Guards, before being sent to the countryside in the later stages of the Cultural Revolution. Intellectuals were usually deemed as “class enemies,”, associated with the West or the former Nationalist government. Many were killed, committed suicide, or were left permanently scarred”.1*

**Unfortunately, my grandfather, one of the closest people to me in my 20 years of life hitherto, fell into the category of the targeted intellectuals.**

*“In Moscow the Grand Duchess Catherine Alexeyevna was buying presents.*

*A length of muslin for Countess Rumyantseva; a marble egg on a golden base for her mother.*

*A china vase, a porcelain figurine of a ballet dancer. A necklace of peacock feathers. A set of birch boxes, one nestled inside the other, smelling of mushrooms when you opened the lid to sniff them. A riding habit with tapered coattails and long, cuffed sleeves”.2*

For as early as I can remember, I have been living with my grandfather. My grandfather would play around with me all day when my parents go to work and are away from home. He walked me to school in the morning and walked me back home in the evening. He taught me to play cards, chess, and table tennis. We played against each other almost every day. It wasn’t until years after he passed away that I discovered the mysterious stories behind my grandfather.

*“‘The Russian people are watching, Your Highness. They must not see Your Highness in the same dress twice. Simple straight sleeves are no longer in fashion.’*

*She could not afford to be outshone or thought of as stingy. Her new friends were expecting tokens of her affection. Her servants’ loyalty, too, had to be bought. If she didn’t do it, someone else would”.3*

My grandfather earned his degree from one of the most prestigious elite universities in China back then. He had profound knowledge and owned properties such as houses and farms, but he was **never** associated with any foreign hostile power. Nor did he commit treason in any form. People’s accusations against him were ridiculously **fake**. Regardless, he was targeted. His house was burned. His collections were robbed. His properties were destroyed. People were coming for him. He had no choice but to **flee** to the Soviet Union. That way, he could at least **save** his loved ones and keep them out of his business (from being targeted too). He had to **stay** in the Soviet Union for **decades** until the end of the Cold War for a chance to return home.

*“In the first weeks of 1755, right after Krieszczenskije morozy, the icy-cold days of mid-January, talk of the coming war had intensified.*

*The way she saw it, an insolent bully trumped a scheming hypocrite.*

***… What mattered was that he would not spend his best years entangled in ‘the battlefields of the boudoir’****.*

*… His* ***honors*** *would come from the heat of* ***battles****, from* ***victories*** *that would bring Russia her* ***glory*** *and him the rank of at least Lieutenant Colonel.* ***Advancement*** *was possible at a time when the maps of Europe were constantly being* ***redrawn****. ”.4*

I have become increasingly interested and curious about my grandfather’s experience in the remote Soviet Union. He never talked about it and managed to keep it secret forever if my mother did not tell me any of this. However, as I ruminated on my time with him, I recalled an incident when we were watching a historical documentary on the Anti-Japanese War (the major Asia battlefield of WWII). My grandfather told me he had fought in the war as a teenager, which was about the same age as I was when he passed away. I can never imagine myself fighting against armed invaders as a middle schooler.

*“How can we not talk about family when family's all that we got?*

*Everything I went through you were standing there by my side*

*And now you gon' be with me for the last ride*

*So let the light guide your way, yeah*

*Hold every memory as you go*

*And every road you take*

*Will always lead you home, home*

*It's been a long day without you, my friend*

*And I'll tell you all about it when I see you again*

*We've come a long way from where we began*

*Oh, I'll tell you all about it when I see you again*

*When I see you again”.5*

The relationship between my grandfather and me is much like companionship. *See You Again* is written to mourn for Paul, one of the leading actors in *Fast and Furious* who died in a car accident. His death was only a few weeks from my grandfather’s. I shed tears as I watched the film. What the lyrics describe echoed the time spent with my grandfather.

*"Emotionally, traditional Chinese fathers have the image of being distant, strict, and nonexpressive".6*

My relationship with my father is completely different from my grandfather. In some aspects, they are two extreme opposites.

*"If father involvement is evidently important, what does the literature say about ways to enhance levels of fathers’ engagement with their children? Evidently, time resources are a significant predictor of parental involvement. Several studies with Japanese families have concluded that availability is reliably linked to the amount of time spent with children. Fathers who work shorter hours tend to spend more time with their children (Ishii‐Kuntz et al., 2004; Ishii‐Kuntz, 2013). In South Korea, father involvement is similarly dependent on available time away from work (Kim & Ho, 2012); however, the 1997 Asian financial crisis affected fathering roles as Korean men felt they needed to devote more time to work and professional development in order to maintain job stability (Kwon & Roy, 2007). Xu and Yeung (2013) observed that fathers’ long working hours, occupational status, and household assets negatively associate with the amount of time spent with daughters. In families where fathers held higher administrative positions, earning income is rationalized as a way to express love for their children and to contribute to children’s educational success (Xu & Yeung, 2013). Similar findings about work as a barrier to father‐child engagement have been found in research with Taiwanese families (Ho et al., 2011)".7*

My father indeed works hard. He consecrates such a large portion of his time in life to work that we barely spend time together. Even when we do, neither of us speaks but we rather keep silent. Despite my father’s few words of concern as well as financial support for the family, which he might regard as the proper expression of love, it is almost as if I am from a single-parent family and my mother solely raises me up.

*“Do you mean he’s just died? How can that be? He was born in 1901, for Christ’s sake. He must have been dead for years.*

*He died on the 25th of February, the voice was telling me – apparently this was my father’s lawyer. … My father’s funeral had been yesterday – a Masonic service conducted by my father’s lodge in Escondido, California. My father had been cremated and his ashes scattered at sea. He’d been a remarkable man. He’d died just a few months short of his 96th birthday. He’d never lost his memory. He was lucid right up to the end.*

*‘Oh is that right?’ I said. Why, I thought, should I give a shit whether or not he’d been lucid right up to the end?*

*… ‘I’m sorry to say that he didn’t leave you anything.’ ‘Uh-huh.’ Was I supposed to be surprised by that? Disappointed? If I’d known about my father’s existence, I would have expected exactly what I’d always got from him – nothing.*

*… How strange, I thought – how meaningless and useless and anticlimactic. I’d never known my father, had never felt any personal connection to him, so it really shouldn’t matter to me at all, but I seemed to be stuck at my desk”.8*

My father goes to work so early every morning that I never managed to encounter him in the morning, no matter how early I wake up. Around midnight, or sometimes even later, he comes back home. My father treats me much more strictly than my grandfather, in an attitude that I suspect to be exactly how he treats work. All of which contribute to the detachment between us.

*“It is said to be believed that children who take music lessons get better grades in school and are likely to be more successful in life. Learning an instrument teaches you how to focus, be patient, and work hard. Music stimulates creativity among children and makes them even more self-expressive.*

*…Piano lessons for kids also offer opportunities for them to showcase their talent. It allows them to practice the joy of playing the piano and increases their confidence after mastering a piece. Warm applause from an eager crowd is definitely going to make your child the happiest.*

*…Piano lessons help children learn about quite a number of feelings and empathy. Research shows that children who have taken music lessons are better able to sense the subtle differences in tone – in both music and speech. It makes them become better listeners. This develops a better understanding of emotions in them that people normally try to convey through conversations.*

*…Practice makes the man perfect – That’s a fact. This is why to be good at playing the piano, learners have to keep practicing. Early age is a very good time to teach your kids the importance of setting a daily schedule or a routine that involves something other than gaming or relatively unproductive. It takes discipline and responsibility to keep up with a routine, and to start your kids young will leave a positive impact on their life.*

*…Discipline, confidence, concentration, and active listening are skills needed for learning. These skills are necessary to learn anything in life whether it is Math, Geography, Science, and so on. In order to further move on in life your child’s skill set matters the most. Practicing music will practically enhance their learning ability. The sooner you start your child with practicing these learning skills, the more productive they will be in their life”.7*

When my mother returns from work every evening from Monday to Friday, my grandfather takes his break and my mother and I will spend the rest of the night together. She encourages me to try out different things in life from physical sports activities such as basketball, swimming, and tennis to liberal art practices such as reading, visiting museums, and playing musical instruments.

This is the most grateful thank I wish to offer to my mother. She cultivates my interest in all these activities after countless attempts at random activities. She never gives up encouraging me to try new things. Once I show some enthusiasm after a try, she pushes me forward. I gain more and more interest thereafter, until a point that I start to naturally love it.

Among them all, I especially enjoy playing the piano. It has brought me so many invaluable gifts that my mother might even not expect in the beginning. Over the weekends, she escorts me to piano lessons. During weekdays, she encourages me to play and practice every night. This implicitly cultivates a sense of routine and responsibility in my early childhood, something that I did not even realize until much later.

I also gain resolution and confidence as I manage to make my performance perfect. Before I start playing a new one, I will never stop practicing a piece until I make it perfect. It not only strengthens my memory but also shapes my mind to be concentrated and devoted to one job at a time.

Growing up, I start to notice another benefit: playing the piano also cultivates my talent for empathy and creativity. Though I lack the proper ability to express such complex thoughts and mixed emotions well, I am able to strongly empathize with the characters in a book or a film. All ofa sudden, I may have some random, bizarre thoughts too, which some people may find interesting while others may find ridiculous.

*“Loving can heal, loving can mend your soul*

*And it's the only thing that I know, know*

*I swear it will get easier*

*Remember that with every piece of ya*

*Hmm, and it's the only thing we take with us when we die*

*Hmm, we keep this love in a photograph*

*We made these memories for ourselves*

*Where our eyes are never closing*

*Hearts were never broken*

*And time's forever frozen, still”.10*

I go to high school and college in the United States, separating me from my family, the most memorable part of my life. My negative impression of my father starts to fade away. Instead, I realize my father works hard to pay my tuition. He loves me as much as my mother and grandfather do. Whenever I missed them, I will look at a photograph of me playing the piano for all of them and my grandmother as well. This photograph that I bring with me across two continents becomes my grandfather’s only legacy. His stories in Cold War Russia will forever bury in the dust, but I will never forget my family and what they have done for me.

**Endnote**

1 *The New York Times*

2 Stachnik, 94

3 Stachnik, 95

4 Stachnik, 238-239

5 Khalifa and Puth

6 Yeung, “Shanghai Fathers”

7 Ho and Lam, 334

8 Maillard, 2

9 Moderntone

10 Sheeran, “Photograph”

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