

Ah-Ma's Friday

By Daniel Tan

[Printed cut-out of Ah-ma and printed cut-out of Guanyin statue; Underlay of receipt from Hong Kong supermarket]

[Printed cut-out of a screenshot image of an audio media player, with 41:54-minute-long file entitled "Guanin"]

[Printed cut-out words: "This zine was made possible by a 40-minute phone call with my mom and Google Drive memories."]

I start this by professing that my family is a family of hoarders, which I've come to understand as symptomatic of our immigrant experience. The logic is thus: we don't know what we'll need in the future, so we save everything and make use of everything. As this proto-ecofeminist lifestyle (before "sustainability" became a buzzword), my grandpa re-used eggshells as fertilizer for bonsai trees; my aunt saved extra plastic utensils from takeout in the kitchen cabinet; my mom kept every review book and notebook of my sister's ("just in case"); and I now maintain the tradition by religiously cross-saving every photo and screenshot between my Google Drive and my local laptop storage.

I say this because, for all the hoarding that's been impressed upon me, I realize there's this anomalous paucity of photo memorabilia in my family. This was my first difficulty in pursuit of my grandma's old recipe, quickly realized when I began looking into my family's archives, seeking 雜菜, a Chinese cabbage stir-fry recipe. For all our acculturation into this embossed, "official" immigrant image—our frugality; our crammed classes (SAT, swimming, Chinese) during weekends; our language switching among white people; & our stuffy ceremonial family get-togethers—we're a family that does not have many imagic keepsakes. I've had to rely on my

mom's own (self-admitted) faulty memories of her now passed mother, and my own disparate memories.

[Printed Snapchat message, with sepia school photos of my mom, captioned "Mom's old pictures"; Printed screenshot of Wikipedia page for "Cap cai"; Underlay of collaged text]

My grandmother's formal name is Tan Dili, but I call her Ah-ma. Ah-ma's story is in the context of my childhood is one of two towns in Queens: Flushing and Elmhurst. I attended a Catholic middle school in Elmhurst called St. Bartholomew School. Every first Friday of the month was a "Half-Day"—students walked in queues, sat for morning mass, and were dismissed early. My sister and I, garbed in maroon and gray uniforms, would normally get picked up by mom & walk together to Queens Public Library, where we'd do our homework until my dad picked us up by car after work. But on first Friday's we would instead walk to grandma's house: with our rolling backpacks, we'd make the trek through Queens Boulevard to 51-14 Haspel Street.

[Printed screenshot of Google Maps directions from St. Bartholomew School to Queens Library at Elmhurst and to 51-14 Haspel Street.]

My Ah-ma's story is also a story of motherhood and matriarchy. As a mother to 4 daughters, Ah-ma fostered a strong familial love that was trans-continentally felt. Every one of my mom's sisters chose to immigrate to the Americas to start their families, with Ah-ma ping-ponging between Asia & North America to visit her daughters. Though scattered across North America—in NY, PA, and Canada—every family reunion on my mother's side was punctuated with joy.

[Printed photograph of two of my aunts, my mom, my sister, and my cousin in Pennsylvania; Printed Snapchat message of Ah-ma wheelchair-bound, smiling and clapping, receiving presents from my aunts, with caption "*when you are pleased with how many gifts you have :)*"; Underlay of collaged text.]

But Ah-ma had a greater story before she permanently immigrated to NY to live with us, in Elmhurst. My Ah-ma immigrated from Fujian, China with her parents to the Philippines as a high school student, through a lottery system. She was an honor's student who was hired

immediately as a teacher after she graduated. She taught at a Buddhist school first, before becoming a Chinese language & math teacher at a Christian co-ed private school in Manila, started by English missionaries: St. Stephen's. It was here that she met my grandfather, who would become the principal of the school.

The primacy of education has been imprinted upon my family, passed down from the maternal side. Every one of Ah-ma's daughters except for my mother holds a doctorate degree: my eldest aunt is a doctor, my NY aunt is a dentist, & my Canadian aunt an optometrist. (My mom reminds me that she was just one class requirement away from getting her Masters in Accounting at Baruch, but attending school while pregnant with my sister-to-be became too difficult).

[Printed screenshot of Wikipedia's page on St. Stephen's High School; Underlay of collaged text]

I had 雜菜 every time I came to Ah-ma's house, but the dish was always completed before I arrived. I never knew much about the dish—in all honesty, I knew very little about Ah-ma too.

[Printed screenshot from Disney's *The Little Mermaid*: Ariel sits with Flounder at the bottom of her underwater grotto; underlay of collaged text.]

Ah-ma was a quiet woman. We used to watch old Disney movies on the VCR machine, while Ah-ma would clean or water the plants. She would greet me and my sister with curlers in her hair, alluding to an unknown beauty ritual unseen by me. I used to sneak into Ah-ma's room and look at the ephemera locked away in her Chinese cabinet: souvenirs and photos from Asia, perfume bottles + medicine that smelled like ginseng, and silken pantsuits. Ah-ma's room was an arcane place to me—in many ways, it was the equivalent of Ariel's grotto in *The Little Mermaid*: full of objects foreign to me.

雜菜 to me represents both mystique & familiarity. Though I've actually seen the dish completed before me, and the meal itself was another of Ah-ma's arcane rituals, I remember it in personally-held visceralities: the creaking of the wooden steps down to the kitchen basement, the crinkling sound of Chinese newspapers-as-placemats, the shafts of sunlight splayed across

hanging laundry, & the steam suffused with oyster sauce. The meal was a language familiar to me: it was utilitarian (Ah-ma repurposed leftovers as soup). 雜菜 stands in for both immigrant efficiency and but also a love language of routine devotion. I think I recognized this love tacitly as a kid: in calling my mom, she remarked that I always ate the dish despite being a fastidiously picky vegetable eater (she used to convince me that peas were Cinderella's pearls in order for me to eat them).

The difficulty of recovering these images of Ah-ma is that I remember her only at her most recent: wheelchair bound, with waning recognition of me as her grandson. I have no memories of a younger Ah-ma writing short stories for a Filipino newspaper competition; I have no memories of Ah-ma practicing calligraphy and writing Chinese poems; I have no memories of Ah-ma stitching stuffed animals for her church group. These are all secondhand reconstructions of Ah-ma from my mom. The difficulty is confounded by the fact that, with my limited Chinese and Ah-ma's limited English, I had difficulty learning much about Ah-ma.

Who was Ah-ma?

Before America? Before Manila?

Did Ah-ma reminisce walking to the wet markets in Manila when she crossed Queens Blvd. (always through the subway underpass to avoid traffic) to get to Kam Lun supermarket? Who did she speak to at the market? What groceries did she buy on a weekly basis?

[Printed screenshot of lyrics from Raveena's "Mama":

Looking through your photos

I imagine all of your dreams, mm

I will always wonder

Who you really were before me, mm

What did you lose?

I hope nothing too soon, mm

*Mama, who were you
Before your man, ooh
Know you had some of those
Bigger plans, mm*

*1989 on 85th and Lefferts Avenue, mm
CVS lipstick, you would
Go to school and work at the bank, mm
Many men were chasing
But you'd never have it that way, mm yeah
What kind of tears did you cry
On your wedding day?]*

[Printed screenshot of Google maps directions from 51-14 Haspel St. to Kam Lun Customer Parking Underlay of collaged text]

At times, I feel like Ah-ma's diasporic life in America was one of loneliness & isolation. In the January of the year my Ah-ma passed, I happened upon a Taiwanese film: *Yi-Yi*, by Edward Yang. The film touched me deeply not only because it was spoken, in parts, in the Hokkien dialect of my household: I cried because it came into my life at such an apt time that it told my story—the growing pains of being an adolescent, and the overlooked pains of my grandmother. I related most with the character Ting-Ting, the granddaughter: while developing crushes and friendships at school, she busies herself and forgets to throw out the trash. Her grandmother does this for her, but falls and remains in a comatose state for the bulk of the film. Ting-Ting feels the brunt of the guilt, blaming herself for the mishap. In a later scene, Ting-Ting dreams her grandmother resuscitates, stroking her forehead and forgiving her for her mishap. When she wakes, Ting-Ting finds out her grandmother has passed.

Ah-ma passed in the December of 2017. In the year preceding, my grandma fell, lost mobility, and was moved to a new apartment overlooking Queens Blvd. While her health deteriorated, my family was strewn into a dervish of events: my sister's graduation from Cornell, my college apps and decisions, and moving into NYU. Often, my grandma would be left in her wheelchair with a

hired nurse and a TV, in a sterile apartment that looked like a fishbowl: wide views of the outside world, but a trapped lonely space.

Did we remember Ah-ma? Does she forgive us for growing up without her?

[Printed screenshots from Edward Yang's *Yi-Yi*

1. Ting-Ting overlooks Taipei from her apartment balcony

2 and 3. Bird's eye view of traffic intersection in Taipei, with text: "It's like you can see everyone from up here but no one can see you"

4. Ting-Ting rests her head on the lap of her grandmother in a dream;

Underlay of collaged text]

I don't think Ah-ma's life in America was marked only by sorrow and longing. I choose to remember Ah-ma's with America: she found rituals that echoed past lives in Manila (and perhaps too in China). She found routine among new faces. She made do with the little English she spoke, and furnished her garden—both the lines of plants alongside 51-14 Haspel Street's windows, and her metaphorical garden of memories and olden acquaintances.

[Printed image cut-out of panels of Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis*: the narrator recounts her grandmother's habit of placing lavender petals in her bra, and of her grandmother embracing her

[Printed photograph of Ah-ma in a wheelchair, with my dad in her new apartment; underlay of collaged text]

When I think of Ah-ma, I'm reminded of the grandmother in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*—full of maternal sharp wisdom, arcane ritual, and implicit love. My Ah-ma was the one who taught me how to correctly use chopsticks (she told me to grip them higher, to have greater control). She always had this smell of Chinese medicine, redolent now whenever I pass Chinatown herbal shops. She would tell me to sit straight, stand tall; she would offer me bowls of rice she could not (or would not) finish. Even in her old age, she would collect all the scraps of food on her plate to one side at restaurants, refusing to leave a mess. Though the world that orbited around her

shifted, she had a permanence, a deep-set sense of propriety, and an inner constancy that I admire.

In writing my rationale and sieving through East Asian art history slides to desperately find texts that qualify as “premodern,” I re-encountered an image of the bodhisattva Guanyin. In the age of early colonial explorations, Portugese missionaries would arrive in Japan & discover the Buddhist Guanyin. Convinced that this was a reincarnation of Mother Mary from Catholicism, they went on, ecclesiastically proclaiming the Japanese were already one foot into the divine salvation of Jesus Christ.

This anecdote is surely a fascinating case of misrecognition of the self-through-the-Other—but it registered much more deeply for me. My mom recalls that Ah-ma used to dorm with her richer cousins in the city; they used to claim Ah-ma had the face of Guanyin.

I keep an image of Guanyin (a serendipitous find from a museum ticket) with me in my phone case. I’d like to think that remembering Ah-ma as Guanyin is something like a prayer in a threefold sense: the image recalls a younger Ah-ma’s visage as recognized by her cousins; it signifies her acculturation into Christianity and Westernization; & it reminds me of her familiar face.

Whenever I’d greet Ah-ma, she used to smile at me—beaming, even when she no longer remembered me. Perhaps when I entered the church every first Friday as a child, the statue of the Virgin Mary was really Ah-ma’s face smiling down upon me as another manifestation—and when I’d come back to her house on 51-14 Haspel, on those Friday’s, I’d see her smiling at me in the real.

Ingredients: Chinese cabbage; Mushrooms; White onion; Vegetable oil; Sugar; Sesame oil; Carrots; Dried shrimp; Garlic; Oyster sauce; Shaoxing cooking wine

Recipe

1. Wash cabbage + carrots. Julienne into long strips.
2. Soak mushrooms in warm water; remove once soft; julienne again into long strips.

3. Wash dried shrimps and soak in clean water to soften.
4. Mince cloves of garlic; chop ½ or ¼ of an onion.
5. Put a tablespoon of vegetable oil in a pan.
6. Add garlic at medium to low heat. Add onions for 2 seconds; then add carrots.
7. Add mushrooms w/ soaked water for flavor. Do the same w/ shrimp + water.
8. Last, add cabbage and fry for a few seconds.
9. Put in 1 tablespoon of oyster sauce. Stir, add 1 teaspoon of sugar. Add a little Shaoxing cooking wine and a drizzle of sesame oil.
10. Serve while hot.

[Printed cut-out of fortune cookie message: “To love and be loved is like feeling the sun from both sides.”]