

Who would record our family history?

By Tina Wang

[Image of a bowl of zhajiangmian]

[Image of my family, from when my mother was in her 20s]

Many family records were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. They were generally patrilineal, where only the males' names were recorded.

I suppose my family's was, too, although no one is sure if one even existed to begin with.

My mom wondered if our family past was even worth remembering.

I believe it is.

“It's easy to speak out our history to anyone, except my family.”

How can I bridge over a decade of lost time with my relatives? How can I emotionally connect to my ancestry when my Chinese is -broken- at best?

I spent the past few weeks and years gearing up to find out everything I can about my family. This process is not as simple as it seems. Our records may be gone forever.

And, thinking about our collective past brings me to tears every time.

Clearly there is some hidden sorrow that I can't pinpoint. Am I mourning some invisible break I'll never fix? Is there intergenerational trauma that haunts me still?

It took weeks simply for me to be able to ask my mom and 姥姥[grandmother] brief questions about their lives and this particular recipe, 炸酱面 [zha jiang mian]. It's a dish that is at the core of Beijing culture, and on three generations of women in this family.

This is an incomplete and disjointed history. Perhaps that describes my journey here.

Zhajiangmian is a Beijing and Shandong speciality. Wheat noodles topped with pork and soybean paste and various sliced vegetables.

My family owned a soybean farm. It was lost during Mao's rule.

Transnational + historical - its sibling, jajangmyeong, was brought to Korea and adapted. Just like me.

Simple and cheap to make, a convenient comfort food.

[Image of noodles]

Noodles symbolize longevity. It's something you eat on birthdays to ensure more to come.

I feel like the end of a noodle that stretches back in time indefinitely.

[Family tree image]

A family tree from memory. Each family member has a distinct title in relation to me, but I have forgotten some of them.

[Picture of my 姥姥]

王淑兰

I can write endlessly about what I don't know about my 姥姥, who helped raise me in my early years when my mother immigrated to the US. Always overshadowed by my larger-than-life 姥爷.

Mother of three strong women. Lover of bright sweaters.

My 姥姥's recipe was handmade and rich. She would knead the dough by hand and cut long, chunky strips with a sharp knife. Her own 姥姥 and mother passed this recipe on to her.

A genealogy of cooking.

[Image of my mother]

王梅

I asked my mom what her childhood was like.

"I don't think I have ever think about that...didn't always have enough food food or delicious food"

For her, food is nostalgia and an integral part of her identity.

Once a single mom.

She made zhajiangmian with pre-made sauce, noodles from C-Mart, and whatever leftover vegetables we had. Her late nights at work, struggling to earn more money in this country, didn't allow her the time to learn to be a better cook.

My mom is my role model. I am more similar to her than I think - even in the way we make zhajiangmian.

[Image of me as a baby]

Chinese food is one of the last connections I have to my culture. I feel like a mess of contradictions. I drift around - I've had 9 homes. I've loved them all, and the aroma of food in every kitchen.

"i love these noodles"

"the nostalgia"

[Image of noodles, leek, ground pork, bean sauce]

bit.ly/2JDDD3F

For an audio transcription (my 姥姥 herself!) of the recipe.

She adapted this recipe, passed down generations, to be accessible and easily improvised. A must try!

[Image of pictures of me, as a child, and family, overlaying the view from my grandparents' apartment]

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