

Offerings

Henry Yu

April showers bring May flowers. The road is wet and black as I drive to my grandfather's grave, a pot of yellow flowers sitting on the seat beside me. I don't know what they're called—I'd forgotten to ask. It bothers me that I don't know.

I've done this for almost three decades, sometimes from different places but always at the same time, back for this ritual. It's called *ching ming* in Cantonese (清明), when the gates of the underworld open, and it's possible to commune with the spirits of ancestors. Sweeping the gravesite and pulling weeds after a long winter is the practical component of this spring rite, but there is something deeper triggered by this annual pilgrimage to the cemetery. I'm going home.

My grandfather is buried in Vancouver. For several weeks the doors to his world will be open. It is important that I visit him. Gifts will be brought, paper money burnt as offerings. There are no stores in the underworld; every year the essentials of life must be symbolically burnt and transported for his use. No expense is spared to provide all the luxuries and comforts possible. In Hong Kong I've seen huge paper models of BMW's, complete down to the smallest detail, sent as offerings. We are not so rich, but a banquet of food is still prepared for my grandfather—boiled chicken, *gai bow* (steamed buns with chicken filling), three shots of Johnny Walker whiskey. In addition, special money for the underworld, with bills in outrageous amounts like \$10,000, will be burnt for his use. My grandfather worked hard all his life just to earn a living. He can be a rich man in the underworld at least.

It's drizzling with the grey mist that envelopes Vancouver for much of the winter. True Vancouverites would never carry an umbrella in this kind of weather. Only tourists and those who have come to the city later in life feel the need to be protected from a little rain. I spot the familiar tree that marks his headstone. I had stood beside it over twenty-five years ago as he was being lowered into the ground, and ever since it has been the beacon for my journey home.

I'm visiting alone today. Tomorrow I'll come again with the rest of my family, but today is special to me: he was special to me.



Photograph courtesy of author.

My grandfather, 1962.

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I remember the times he would take me to Chinatown, a place of wonderful and exotic smells, full of noise and people. For lunch he would buy me fancy sweet rolls, smiling as I wolfed them down. Refilling the gas tank he called it. And when I grew tired, he'd coax me on with sweets, bribing my sore feet to walk a little farther. But my feet would always betray him, and he'd end up carrying me home. At night he'd bounce me up and down on his knee, making me scream with fright. I remember climbing on him as he sat, tugging his ears for support. I'm sure it must have hurt. But he never complained.

I lived the first six years of my life with my grandparents. Whoever I am is partly their doing. My parents were both busy at work, struggling to make do in an alien world—my mother cleaned motel rooms after the guests had paid and gone; my father was a mining engineer, rarely sighted because he had to travel to faraway places digging for someone else's gold. For most of my early childhood, my parents were forced to leave me with my grandparents. They were happy to have me, particularly my grandfather, who had spent most of his life living alone without his wife and child. My grandmother barely knew him when she came over with my mother and father in 1965. They had not seen each other for almost three decades. The first time he saw my mother had been when she was twenty-seven years old. I became the child he never had, showing me off to his old-timer friends in Chinatown.

Photograph courtesy of author.



My older brother George and me with our grandparents.

He's buried on a hillside overlooking Burnaby, a short drive from East Vancouver where we used to live. It's a beautiful view, and I'm sure he'd enjoy it if he could. But who knows. For most of the past twenty years, there was an empty plot beside his grave. It's so much like his life had been, waiting for decades for his wife to join him. She had raised my mother alone during the worst of the war years in China, gathering twigs to sell as firewood so she could buy food for her child. As she grew older, I tried to see her as often as I could, coming back to a pot of her homemade wontons or heaping pyramids of steamed *gai bow*. She'd awaken before sunrise to chop meat and fold wontons, though as the years went by her eyes began to bother her in the failing light. When my grandfather was alive, he used to chop the meat for her. His cleaver would thud with a butcher's sure rhythm, waking me from my sleep and making me think of his long voyages on the sea.

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Years ago, I would ride the ferry between Vancouver and Victoria. It is popular with tourists, who love the ocean passage winding through rocky islands, but the residents of Victoria also use the ferry, sharing the decks with the hordes of sightseers. Growing up in Victoria, my friends and I disdained the visitors much as a farmer would a plague of locusts. When I was seven, my parents had moved to Victoria to open a corner store, leaving my grandparents in Vancouver. I began to regularly ride the ferry to visit my grandparents, quietly enduring the tourists and the ninety-minute voyage. There wasn't much to do except sit in the cafeteria and eat—slowly. I always ordered French fries with gravy and the clam chowder.

Family rumour passed down said that the clam chowder became so popular because in the early years a Chinese cook had realized that they could use the abundant giant mollusks called geoduck (pronounced *goeey duck*) to pack the chowder with meat. Geoduck is a local marvel that the Chinese had learned to eat from the aboriginal First Nations populations.

It is quite possibly the ugliest animal alive—a huge misshapen lump of meat with a vestigial shell, as if the inside of a clam had mutated into a clubfoot large enough to wear a human shoe. It is ugly enough that for years no one except Natives and the Chinese (who will eat anything) touched it. But chopped up with a cleaver and put into chowder, it is indistinguishable from clam bits and considerably cheaper. By the 1980s, geoduck had become a specialty in the high-end Chinese seafood restaurants that began to proliferate, and very quickly was driven toward extinction. The rarer it became, the more expensive it got and the more the Chinese wanted it, further exacerbating its demise.

Sitting in the ferry cafeteria several years ago, I picked through my clam chowder and noticed how few pieces of clam there were. It seemed bland and lifeless. Poking at my fries, I could hear the cooks, all old men, chattering in Cantonese. They were haggard and worn, the weariness etched into their faces. If you ride the ferry nowadays, you won't hear their voices anymore—they're all gone, that generation of old-timers. My grandfather lived the same life as these old men once, working as a butcher on a cruise ship between Vancouver and Alaska. I looked into their faces, tried to read their weary lines. What dreams did you have, *Ab Gong*? Why did you slave all those years to die a broken man? What drove you when you were tired and worn? These men knew the answer.



Photograph courtesy of author.

My family at Christmas. Standing—my father and mother; seated—my grandmother, me, my great-grandmother, my brother, and my grandfather.

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Photograph courtesy of author.



Gong Gong and his brothers.

My mother said that when they first started living with him, my grandfather had an unnatural quiet about him as if he didn't know what to say. She thought it was because he had been alone so long, his only company a constant fear of being deported. My grandmother said that he wasn't the same man that she had married so long ago, that he didn't like to laugh anymore. She liked to tell me that I was the only thing that made him smile, and that this was the real reason my mother left me with them.

This morning I ate a bowl of milk and cereal. Its cold texture reminded me of the lost warmth of earlier years. If my grandmother had still been alive I would have begun this day with her *jook* and steamed buns. She would have kept cooking and cleaning, leaving me to watch and listen to her as I ate at the kitchen table.

I remember the year she had worried because my grandfather had been buried without a belt. She told me how she had awakened at night thinking about my grandfather walking around in the underworld having to hold up his pants. That day, I made a belt out of cardboard so she could burn it and send it to him.



I plant the flowers and clear the debris that has cluttered his plot. Some leaves and twigs, some weeds. The grass is well kept and healthy; the wild geese help keep it cropped. I kneel and *kow-tow* three times in respect.

I'm back.

The words on his gravestone read Yeung Sing Yew, a name I still find jarring. He had lived all of his life with the name of Low Jang Yit; all of his mail was addressed that way, his number in the phone book. At the age of thirteen, he had entered the country under someone else's name, and he had kept his own a secret for almost his entire life. It is strange to see it finally revealed in the letters marking his death.

Sometimes people ask me why I work so hard, why I hate to make mistakes. I shrug and smile. I'm not sure they'd understand.



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I remember his funeral. Everyone was crying—some wailing hysterically, some with silent tears. Everyone was mourning for him in their own way. Except me. I guess I hadn't fathomed what had happened yet. It seemed so unreal that he could die. I'd had relatives die before, but they were only occasional faces, nobody whose absence I really noticed. He wasn't like them. He was the person who was there when I woke every morning, there when I went to bed every night. He could never die.

Then I saw his face. It was the same face I'd known all my young life. The same frown which he'd given me when I'd done something wrong, the same ears I'd pulled. But the eyes were shut, and I knew then he wouldn't be there anymore. Wouldn't be there when I'd fallen down or when my feet were sore or when I needed his help. Wouldn't be there. I cried.



Those old cooks on the ferry—what dreams could have driven them to work so hard? Why would they have made themselves such weary men? For their children.

Because if they sold their lives and souls doing a lifetime of backbreaking labor, maybe their children wouldn't have to. Maybe their children would be better off, have better lives, be what the men could only dream of. They traded their lives for it.



Twenty-five years after he had died, I took an Alaskan cruise with my parents and my pregnant wife. The glaciers were startling, but much of the rest of the voyage winding along tree-lined fjords reminded me of the countless ferry rides of my youth. Eating at the obscene buffets that filled the days, I felt my Gong Gong's constant presence. My mother and I didn't talk about it, but we both knew that my grandfather would have found it fitting, that his three decades below working in the kitchen would somehow be honoured by our riding in leisure above deck.

No matter where I am living, I come back every year, to show my grandparents I'm well, let them look me over, see how I'm doing. I think that's all he'd really ask of me, just to visit once in a while. But I'll do more. Because I owe it to them, and I owe it to my children.



Photograph courtesy of author.

My grandparents in Hawaii, year?

Henry Yu

Yeung Suey Fun's Wontons

5-6 large dried Chinese black mushrooms

1 lb. ground pork (ground turkey or chicken can be substituted)

1 tbsp. Chinese roasted sesame oil

2 tbsp. soy sauce

$\frac{3}{4}$ tsp. black pepper

1 tbsp. tapioca starch

1 lb. shelled shrimp (1½ lbs. with shells)

1 package wonton skins

- 1.) Re-hydrate mushrooms by soaking them in warm water overnight.
- 2.) Dice mushrooms into small pieces. Set aside.
- 3.) Mince the pork until it becomes a gooey mass.
- 4.) Add sesame oil, soy sauce, pepper, mushrooms, starch, and shelled shrimp, incorporating it into the pork with further chopping. (The starch incorporates the filling's juices when the wontons cook).
- 5.) Using a teaspoon, fill a wonton skin with the meat mixture, sealing the skin by drawing a wet line on the skin with a fingertip dipped in a bowl of warm water, and pressing it closed as if you were sealing a licked envelope. Repeat for all the skins.
- 6.) The wontons should be cooked in gently boiling water until they float (about 6-7 minutes, but don't overcook!) and immediately removed and drained. They can then be served with any broth, along with noodles or vegetables.

HENRY YU is an Associate Professor of History and Director of the Initiative for Student Teaching and Research on Chinese Canadians (INSTRCC) at the University of British Columbia. Professor Yu was a guest speaker during the workshop, discussing the meaning and importance of family history and offering tips on how to research it.