

Observing Spring: Oral History, Language, and Translation as Possibility

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为了春天

To Spring

“It's enough for me to be sure that you and I exist at this moment.”

— Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

01. Introduction

There is a window in our apartment in Shanghai, where one end of a pole sits. Clothes hung along its line, swaying gently with the light breeze, extending, extending, extending into the kitchen. It was always bathed in a light warmth, the stove on, the plastic tub of hot water on the floor, the sounds of my grandma's slippers lightly shuffling. I sat by the window, hearing people speaking outside, playing with toys that my brother left behind, and asking her questions about the world, our family, what we would do that day, what things mean. Trying, trying, to understand it all. My ears followed the sounds through the line of the pole, from the window, to the breeze, to the warmth of my grandmother.

Time passes. I left Shanghai to return to America. I turned five and was put into English Second Language classes. I directed my questions to someone else, I listened out a different window, and there was no line to hang clothes anymore. All the previous sounds and warmth blurred and bled into each other, becoming barely decipherable flashes of light. The things that were said become forgotten, the tones from the window become voiceless. And yet they feel familiar all the same.

“You pile up associations the way you pile up bricks. Memory itself is a form of architecture.”

— Louise Bourgeois

02. Language as Possibility

To begin: I will attempt to condense the language situation in China. The earliest form of our written language was pictographs, drawings representing ideas, thoughts, and objects in the world. Throughout the years, the lines have straightened, sharpened, and merged to create more complex definitions and sentiments to parallel the evolving need to communicate. Unlike some languages with alphabet systems, the Chinese written language has never been solely phonetic; the characters rarely hold any autonomous instructions for pronunciation. Because of this, linguists are only able to theorize what Old Chinese/Archaic Chinese¹ sounds like.² Chinese phonology starts, then, much later with Middle Chinese³ due to the existence of the *Qièyùn* 切韵, a rhyming dictionary. The *Qièyùn* was an instructional manual teaching how to recite poetry. Subsequent rhyming tables, like the *Yùnjìng* 韵镜, gave us more in-depth information about the phonological systems of this time period, which charted where in the mouth these sounds should originate, the placement of the tongue, and the flow of air (place of articulation and manner of articulation).⁴

However, Chinese was not a standardized language until recently. While these rhyming manuals existed, most of the general population was not reciting poetry or verse, nor able to read. China also encompasses a diverse range of terrains, where two regions with minimal contact could

¹ Chinese historical phonology periodization. Relates to the language found in the *Shijing*, a collection of poems that dates back to around the 11th to 7th centuries BCE.

² Norman, Jerry. *Chinese*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

³ Around 600 CE.

⁴ Norman, *Chinese*.

develop mutually unintelligible dialects. Different periods of rule, changes in the country's capital location, environmental differences in temperature or humidity,⁵ international exchange, etc., all influence language and cause multiple unique situations of dialectal development. And sometimes, no matter the closeness of two cities, something like the presence of a river could cause completely different phonological patterns, as is the case with the Yangtze River, which generally divides dialects that follow Northern language conventions with dialects that follow Southern language conventions. Different regions also retained or lost elements of Middle Chinese phonology. For example, the fifth tone in Middle Chinese, the *rù* tone, is kept in Cantonese, changed shape to a glottal stop in Shanghainese, and is lost completely in Mandarin.⁶

The May 4th movement and the formation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) set the tone for how dialects were to be treated in the 20th century. Both undertook language standardization as a key component of modernization, nationalism, and unification. Multiple conferences, meetings, commissions, and debates took place regarding the national language, with many people promoting their own dialects for standardization. Eventually, in 1955, it was decided that Putonghua 普通话 (lit. common language), a language based on northern dialects with a Beijing pronunciation standard, would be the national language.⁷

Even after this establishment, however, dialect usage still remained strong. Many regions developed diglossia systems, where two distinct languages are used by the same linguistic community. It wasn't until 1984 that Putonghua made its appearance in law in the Constitution of

⁵ Wang, Shuai, Yuzhu Liang, Tianheng Wang, Wei Huang, Ke Xu, Aleksandr Mitkov, Shuting Yuan, et al. "Unraveling the Influence of Essential Climatic Factors on the Number of Tones through an Extensive Database of Languages in China." *Journal of Language Evolution* 9, no. 1–2 (January 2024): 29–48. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jole/lzae009>.

⁶ Norman, *Chinese*.

⁷Ibid.

the People's Republic of China. Article 19 of the Constitution declares: “The State undertakes the development of socialist education and works to raise the scientific and cultural level of the whole nation.... The State promotes the nationwide use of Putonghua/国家发展社会主义的教育事业, 提高全国人民的科学文化水平... 国家推广全国通用的普通话.”⁸ And then, in 2001, the Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language of the People’s Republic of China came into effect, which expanded on Article 19 of the Constitution by discussing implementation and defining the spaces in which Putonghua would be used. Article 9 of this 2001 Law confirms Putonghua’s use as the official language for state institutions. Article 10 states that it will be used as the basic language in education and teaching. Article 12 says that it will also be the language of broadcasting and TV stations. Article 13 encourages service trader workers to use Putonghua in their work. Article 19 stipulates the necessary level of fluency for those who will use Putonghua as their working language (such as broadcasters, actors, teachers, state officials) and how extra training would be given if the individual does not reach this standard. These articles solidify Putonghua’s dominance in spheres of education, labor, and news. The only article that directly mentions local dialects is Article 16, which states:

“Where the relevant provisions of this Chapter are concerned, local dialects may be used under the following circumstances:
 (1) When State functionaries really need to use them in the performance of official duties;
 (2) Where they are used in broadcasting with the approval of the broadcasting and television administration under the State Council or of the broadcasting and television department at the provincial level;
 (3) Where they are needed in traditional operas, films and TV programs and other forms of art; and
 (4) Where their use is really required in publishing, teaching and research”⁹

⁸ “Constitution of the People’s Republic of China.” National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China. Accessed September 23, 2025. http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/zt/qt/gjxfz/2014-12/04/content_1888197.htm.

⁹ “Laws and Policies.” Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China. Accessed September 23, 2025. http://en.moe.gov.cn/Resources/Laws_and_Policies/201506/t20150626_191388.html.

The law defines the breadth of Putonghua usage and its promotion, as well as defining the confines and constrictions of dialect usage. Article 16 seems to name the allowable spaces for dialects, but it would be more accurate to say that this law questions the necessity of dialects in any space.

The situation with diglossia systems, however, is that there is a High variety language (“H”), which is for formal and standardized use, and a Low variety language (“L”), which is used more informally or in specific circumstances.¹⁰ Because of this separation, it becomes a competition for space. *Where* do we speak Putonghua, the H language, and *where* do we speak our dialects, the L language? Quite bleakly, it has also been remarked that diglossia “will not survive beyond a three-generational span if H and L are unable to carve out non-overlapping functional niches within the communicative ecology of the community.”¹¹ In China, research has supported this three-generation marker. Xiao Lan Curdt-Christiansen and Weihong Wang found that the grandparent generation (born during the 1950s) mostly spoke dialects at home with minimal Putonghua usage in public, the parent generation (born in the late 1970s) spoke dialects at home and Putonghua in school, and the third generation was educated solely in Putonghua¹².

There have been many articles written about an inclination towards extinction for most Chinese dialects, conversations about the changing dynamics of linguistic capital, and the weakening of variant languages in a ‘unified’ China. As a result, there have also been grassroots organizations

¹⁰ Su, Jinzhi. “Diglossia in China: Past and Present.” *Transcultural Research – Heidelberg Studies on Asia and Europe in a Global Context*, November 25, 2013, 55–63. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-03521-5_4.

¹¹ Alan Hudson quoted in Li, Chris Wen-Chao. “Shifting Patterns of Chinese Diglossia: Why the Dialects May Be Headed for Extinction.” Essay. In *Divided Languages?. Transcultural Research – Heidelberg Studies on Asia and Europe in a Global Context*. Springer, Cham, n.d.

¹² Curdt-Christiansen, Xiao Lan, and Xuesong(Andy) Gao. 2020. “Family Language Policy and Planning in China: The Changing Langscape.” *Current Issues in Language Planning* 22 (4): 353–61. doi:10.1080/14664208.2020.1819049.

promoting the cultural and historical value of dialects, archives created for preservation,¹³ and linguists conducting endangered language fieldwork. All these efforts seem to engage with the inevitability of dialect death. How can we preserve something that will soon be gone?

My family speaks Shanghainese. A dialect that has also been following this three-generation decline in usage. I've returned to Shanghai at various points in my life, and every time it seems to sound less and less familiar. I see my grandmother, who can speak only Shanghainese, struggle to navigate through the streets that used to be home. I have felt the placelessness of dialects personally.

I felt compelled to this dialogue between preservation and extinction, past and future.

Surrounding myself with questions of what if we lose the words? What if our muscles forget how to form these sounds that only we know? What if my grandmother has no way to speak and for me to understand? And maybe more importantly, how can I remember the warmth of my grandmother's hands if I lose the words to feel it?

I initially thought I had to keep the form, I had to cement the words, the inflections, the speech patterns in history so that this language could still be taught, learned, and passed on. I was pulled to create dictionaries, romanizations, and phonetic charts, slightly altering and reshaping Shanghainese's form so that it had a better chance of permanency. But is it enough just to say that Shanghainese has 28 consonants and 15 vowels? Is it enough to know that we have a

¹³ Zuo, Xinyi. "Effects of Ways of Communication on the Preservation of Shanghai Dialect." *Proceedings of the 2020 3rd International Conference on Humanities Education and Social Sciences (ICHESS 2020)*, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.201214.465>.

three-way laryngeal contrast in our obstruents?¹⁴ Is that all Shanghainese is? And within that, where do my grandmother and I appear? The issue with these linguistic tools is that eventually, I will have to standardize the language enough to generalize about it. I will have to erase the accents my grandmother and I have—the influences of my grandmother’s Ningbo dialect and my English. I would have to remove all the particularities, all the things that make this language move between us. Would this not be a reproduction of the same erasure China’s languages are experiencing? Am I fossilizing the language rather than preserving it? And will all this help me remember the warmth in her hands?

In an interview with *The Independent*, Director Céline Sciamma said, “You’ve got the jokes, you’ve got the songs, you have this anecdote that’s going to make you laugh three years later. It’s this language that you build. That’s what you mourn for when you’re losing someone you love. This language you’re not going to speak with anybody else.”¹⁵ Her take on language is one that is more personal than public. Language is something that is built between people, and that it is unique and specific depending on who you’re speaking to. This, more than any of the historical and linguistic sources I have cited so far, has given me a better understanding of how language feels. My grandmother and I have accents. We misuse phrases. And we still understand each other. The language we have together is something that is resemblant of Shanghainese, but more resemblant of who we are to each other. This is not something that can be repeatable, taught, or learned. It is something that has been built. Language has turned away from being an entity and transformed into a bridge, a practice, a muscle.

¹⁴ Chen, Yiya, and Carlos Gussenhoven. “Shanghai Chinese.” *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 45, no. 3 (2015): 321–37. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025100315000043>.

¹⁵ Pollard, Alexandra. “Portrait of a Lady on Fire Director Céline Sciamma: ‘90% of What We Look at Is the Male Gaze.’” *The Independent*, March 2, 2020. <https://www.the-independent.com/arts-entertainment/films/features/celine-sciamma-interview-portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire-adele-haenel-tomboy-girlhood-a9365411.html>.

I'm tired of talking about inevitably. I'm tired of feeling like I'm recording at the end of the world. I want to talk about possibility and vitality. About the magic of this language being alive because we still speak it. I want to know what it means to study it as a living, breathing entity. I want to understand how it acts now, how it travels between conversations with family members, how it communicates when to eat, how to care, how to scold, and how to laugh. In studying it as it is now, all these spaces of recollection open up. The work I want to do is not about Shanghainese as a dialect, but Shanghainese as a relationship, as a conversation, as memory.

Vladimir Nabokov engaged with a similar pursuit in his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*—how to reanimate memory so that it can continue to live in the present. This reanimation is captured in a multitude of descriptions, metaphors, and synesthesia. Most notable is his love of butterflies and how catching them seems to parallel the pursuit of chasing and catching memories. Both hold fluttering natures and intricate, individualistic beauties. Which means that their capture must be precise and gentle. Towards the end of the book, he writes:

“Whenever I start thinking of my love for a person, I am in the habit of immediately drawing radii from my love—from my heart, from the tender nucleus of a personal matter—to monstrously remote points of the universe. Something impels me to measure the consciousness of my love against such unimaginable and incalculable things... It cannot be helped; I must know where I stand, where you and my son stand... I have to make a rapid inventory of the universe... I have to have all space and all time to participate in my emotion, in my mortal love, so that the edge of its mortality is taken off, thus helping me to fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. Vintage International, Braille International, Inc, 1989.

This refrain is written ardently and almost desperately about needing to remember how we experience love. “An infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence.” Love feels monumental and all-encompassing, but its existence is small and inclined to become lost in the expanse of the universe. What Nabokov says about drawing radii, measuring, and making inventory are all his attempts to locate this love, these sensations, and find a place to hold them permanently. To understand its relationship with the space around it, so that these sensations will always have a home and always be revisited. It’s about securing some type of stronghold against the erasive beating of time. These techniques of localization and mapping will be the ones I employ in this study of Shanghainese and its relationship with my grandmother and me.

Thus, I turn to oral history. Because it is a practice rather than a science. Because it might speak more about how to remember than about how to preserve. In “Memory as Both Source and Subject of Study: the Transformation of Oral History,” Lynne Abrams writes:

“Memory stories are constructed and narrated in the context of the oral history interview. That is, the selection of memories told to an interviewer and the ways in which they are narrated are influenced by the intersubjective relations between the interviewer and the interviewee. Intersubjectivity refers at the most basic level to the interpersonal dynamics between the two parties and the process by which they cooperate to create a shared narrative.”¹⁷

The basis of this co-creation is that while one person reminisces, two people are creating something new at the same time. In remembering, we also reflect on how we remember, why we remember, and what is truly important to remember. In an interview with my grandmother, I am unable to separate the influence that we have on each other. We can never be strictly interviewer and interviewee, because in front of those roles we will always be grandmother and grandchild.

¹⁷ Abrams, Lynn. “Memory as both source and subject of study: The transformations of oral history.” *Writing the History of Memory* (2014)

And our intersubjectivity makes it so that we are speaking to each other through these familial positions. This sentiment creates three different layers of remembering that this project will analyze: one in the interview itself as my grandmother reaches into our past and brings it into this encounter; one in me listening and following alongside her in recollection; and the final one in co-creation. Oral history as memory work can analyze this interaction and also record it in practice.

This act of creation I also view as one of the strongest ways to keep language alive. To continue making space for it, to continue creating with it, to continue building with it is like continuing to breathe life into it. In her book, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart writes, “we do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather, we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative.”¹⁸

What Susan means by this is that ordinary objects transform into souvenirs because of the meaning and story we attach to them. A Buzz Lightyear action figure doesn't become a souvenir until I tie it back to its place of origin. That it was initially left behind by my brother when he immigrated to America, and only became mine a decade later when I was sent to live with my grandparents. And with that narration, the action figure becomes metonymous to that memory and if I hold it, I can be pulled back to that same origin. And in turn, that origin point can transcend the issue of materiality and not being materially in the present.

¹⁸ Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1993.,

My attempts to translate will actually be attempts at meaning-making. Attaching the signifier with the signified. Doing what Stewart writes about in tying things back to their origin by description and memory. There is so much that is revealed in the words themselves, there are so many associations to be made with common phrases alone, and there are so many ways to read what has been spoken. So in this work, translation will be a process, an ontological investigation, of the linguistic, the literary, and the metaphoric.

So if dialects, Shanghainese, and my grandmother and I are without space, then I will carve one out. I will regasp the materiality of these memories, of these temporalities, so that it can be revisited, reanimated, and resensitized. I will tie it down with as many associations, with as many memories, and attempts at understanding as I possibly can, so that it can be anchored to us, to space, to time. I will translate and retranslate and untranslate as many times as I can to understand the material it takes to build our language and uncover its architecture, so that nothing will ever feel singular again.

“And all the rooms of the house made full of life—the drawing-room; behind the drawing-room the kitchen; above the kitchen the bedrooms; and beyond them the nurseries; they must be furnished, they must be filled with life” – Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

“I would have realized that what I saw was not a town at all, but something as different from anything I knew, something as delightful, as might be, for a human race whose whole life had been spent in the late afternoons of winter, that unknown marvel: a spring morning.”

– Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

03. On Shanghai and Mountains*Translating Home*

To start: I want to trace back to origins, to where it all begins. Home.

Q: Do you remember our home in Shanghai?

This interview begins with a misstep. My grandmother thinks I am asking about her childhood house and corrects me by saying that her real home or original home is in Ningbo. We do not have the same tools to translate as Putonghua, and so when we don't understand each other, we are left with only ourselves and our existing knowledge to translate the world. We find alternate ways to describe what we mean—we shift and transform these concepts into simpler words, simpler phrases. In the audio, there are many of these moments where we speak, then pause, and in that pause is where we take the time to consider the other, to figure out the best way to shape our words in our language. In order to make her understand, I pull together the things that make that home unique, specific, and focused. I clarify by saying that the one I mean is the one where Grandpa, her, and I stayed. And only with the inhabitants defined does the apartment become a home.

She repeats the words back to me slowly, turning my question into a statement, as if she is trying to teach me. She says, “the three of us together.” I tell her, “Yes.” She asks back, “Right?” And I

reply, “Right.” All the same character *de*¹⁹/对. In this context, it means right, correct, or true. But as a verb, the same character also means to face or to bring two things together. Or when used as a measure word, it makes a pair. She often ends sentences like this. With “right” or an “ah”? Head tilting up, as if she is reaching up to pass these words to me. More than an actual question, it is a check-in, it is a light tap on my hands to continually remind me of my presence when she is speaking. Implicitly always asking, “Do you understand? Are you listening? Are you still with me?” And only after that check-in does she begin to narrate our origins.

Grandma: Our home was close to Hongkou Park. You never wanted to walk straight; you always wanted to climb the hill. Eh, your favorite was to climb hills with stones. When you climbed to the top, you were very happy. But when I looked at you, I was worried you would fall. I would tell you to go slowly. But you would demand to hold us. Eh, you were very smart. One hand holding Grandpa, one hand holding Grandma—to go to the top of the hill. To look below. To look at the garden. The garden used to have so many people... You loved to watch people. People singing, dancing, anything. Looking at flowers and butterflies. You wanted to catch them.

The issue when memory is kept only by one person, is that it is elastic and easily permeable. False memories become true because they have never been proven false, and what I thought I remember is not what is real. I believed that we lived near Changfeng Park, that its terrains, gardens, and ponds were where I would play as a child. But when my grandma places our home near Hongkou Park, it shifts my memories across different districts, roads, and temporalities. Hongkou Park isn't called Hongkou Park anymore; it was renamed to Lu Xun Park in the 1980s and is referred to as such by people closer to my age. It's why when I hear about it from my cousins, it sounds unfamiliar and foreign—a place with no ties to me. But once it is called in the only name I knew it as, the park becomes resuscitated. It is these terrains, these gardens, and

¹⁹ All Shanghainese pronunciation will be written in my best attempts at IPA since there is no standardized romanization

these ponds that we have walked across. And with this, a new landscape has suddenly become accessible.

And as my grandmother reminisces, she immediately pulls me into frame with her. It seems that the recorder has been forgotten and that the parameters of an interview have faded into the background. She is speaking only to me. She is trying to explain to me who I was and who we were to each other. Her recollections are always ones where we're together, ones that she thinks are important for me to know too. Here, Abrams' description of intersubjectivity becomes central. And because this moment is still one of co-creation, I can piece together what it can mean to me now.

When I think of hills, I think of mountains, I think of Liu Zongyuan, who climbed his own mountain centuries ago in the Tang Dynasty. In his essay, "My First Excursion to West Mountain," after wandering across streams, forests, and springs, he pauses at the mountain and is moved by almost compulsion to journey to its top. He describes the view from its height as: "The steep prominences and sunken marshlands of the terrain were like anthills and holes, hundreds of miles packed into feet and inches, with every detail exposed to our sight. The ribbons of green hills and the winding white waterways extended to the horizon, whichever way you looked."²⁰ This quote makes me think about the desire to see everything at once. To have to reach a certain height until things can become clear. Or until these massive incomprehensible spaces transform into things now manageable, now graspable. The last line can be translated in a few different ways; the Kekenet version translates it like this: "Encompassed by white clouds

²⁰ Pollard, David, trans. *The Chinese Essay*. Columbia University Press, 2002.

and azure sky, the hill merged with them into one single whole.”²¹ This translation offers an interesting point about nature and fauna. That it can meet and merge with the sky. The differing translations of the colors are due to the fact that the original text uses qīng 青. A color that is blue. Or green. Or a blue that’s so blue it’s green. It is the color associated with the wood element in Chinese philosophy, which is also the element that represents vitality and growth. It’s associated with the East, whose original pictograph was a drawing of a sun rising behind trees. Its pronunciation is identical to 清, which, in the *Yùnjìng*, refers to a pronunciation of words (manner of articulation) that are clear, piercing, and unclouded. In looking at old paintings, we frequently see mountain tops lined in this qīngsè 青色, this verdant color. When I consider where this color comes from, it makes me think of the blue of the sky meeting the green of the mountain. Just as described in Liu’s essay, where the sky and hill merged into one whole.

I mention all of this because my grandmother’s name means Spring. It means bloom, it means when the snow melts on the mountain tops and the green or blue or both are revealed. It means when the sky re-meets the Earth. Whenever I climbed a hill, a mountain, in the past, I was always holding Spring in my hands.

I can’t remember any of these moments. I don’t remember the hills, I don’t remember the park, and I don’t remember the view. But on the level of the interview, my grandmother is still holding my hand and guiding me up the mountain to see into the horizon. She is asking if I remember. She is repeating things that I have already experienced. She is painting the view for me. She is telling me the location of the first home that we created together, she is telling me its proximity

²¹ “诗歌翻译:柳宗元-《始得西山宴游记》英文译文.” Kekenet, May 27, 2016. <https://m.kekenet.com/kouyi/201605/445929.shtml>.

to other spaces, as well as describing our place in it. We have lived in these spaces. We have created our own time here, seasons change because of our presence.

And alongside the descriptions of the physical space, she also narrates the origins of our linguistic space.

Grandma: When you came to Grandma's house you weren't able to speak yet. Your mom was very worried, "How could this be, how could you not be able to speak yet?" Later I said, "Don't worry. Certainly they'll speak. Once they learn, they'll speak all the time." And after some time, more than twenty months... after one and a half years, you started speaking a little...

Q: When I first spoke did I speak Shanghainese or English?

Grandma: When you lived with me you spoke Shanghainese. We all spoke Shanghainese. You never spoke English. You were little... But you were smart, very smart. If Grandma was folding wontons, you would be by my side, watching. After watching for a bit you would pick one up and start folding. "Grandma, I can also fold." Then you would fold.

This is also unfamiliar to me, to hear that I learned how to speak from that apartment, from my grandmother. To hear that when I came to live with them, I had not yet found a voice. I had not yet known how to form my words, how to verbalize my thoughts. Communication, in the beginning, would be at most grabbing my grandparents' hands and bringing them up to the top of the hill with me. When my grandma says, "Certainly, they'll speak," she says, "肯定."²²

Something that I couldn't capture is a more direct relationship with time. 肯定 means certainly, absolutely, definitely. But its usage here is closer to my grandma saying that me speaking is a future that must happen. That it is an eventuality, a future that will certainly come.

I also learned that it is through mimicking that I was able to pick up skills, that I was able to form my words, and to fold wontons. Watching the creases of my grandmother's hands along the thin paper of the wrappers and knowing to move my hands like her, to follow the same steps as her.

²² Same pronunciation in Putonghua and Shanghainese

Over the course of the interview, there are many moments where I clumsily sentence my questions or thoughts, and then she repeats it to herself, correcting all my errors. Then I repeated it all back to her the same way she said it. Mimicking, learning, or more accurately, mirroring. All these small adjustments, taking the same cues I took as a child even today. Thoughts, feelings, questions continue to be refashioned with her words, with how she sees them.

Grandma: As soon as you learned, you could speak completely. And Grandma would teach you. “This is a finger. This is a chair. This is a sofa.” And then you would say it. You started crawling on the floors. Climbed onto the chair. “Time to eat. Plate. Eat food.” Back then we would say, “Come eat food. Would you eat some fish? Fish. How about we mix it with fish? Eat your vegetables. Meat. How about you eat some meat?” Then you would say meat or whatever else, all together. And that’s Shanghainese isn’t it?

In this section, I want to pay attention to the cadence and pitch. She is offering a sonic way to return to that origin point and to hear all the ways that she taught me how to speak. It’s clear in all the shifts from when she is telling me what happened and then when she is reenacting how things were said. When she tells me about the finger, the chair, the sofa, she begins to speak a bit slower. Each phoneme is distinct and emphasized, easy for someone to clearly hear the divides in sounds. The tones also become much more apparent. Shanghainese’s tonal structure is complicated by its tone sandhi, which changes the tone of a morpheme depending on the tone that precedes it in a sentence.²³ With my grandmother’s emphasized enunciation, she is teaching me about not just vocabulary, but the relation between one morpheme to another. In these cases, they follow a common rising then falling contour, like climbing a mountain and coming back down. A high tone into a middle one. Each sentence is also elongated at the end, turning the sentence into music, turning into a song, turning into a gentle, playful call. There’s a uniquely Shanghainese word that rarely appears in the other dialects, *dia*/嗲. It means cute, childish,

²³ Chen, Matthew Y. “An Overview of Tone Sandhi Phenomena Across Chinese Dialects.” *Journal of Chinese Linguistics Monograph Series*, no. 3 (1991): 111–56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23827037>.

fashionable, or great, fantastic, aspiring. When you call someone 嗲, you are calling them cute. When you call something 嗲, you are calling it pleasing. When I asked my mother how many tones were in Shanghainese, she said too many to count. She said that Shanghainese also has a specific tone in how you speak that is 嗲, that curves, that goes up and down, that elongates. Not knowing the right terminology, she is talking about the tone sandhi that feels like a curve more than a transition between tones. So, for my grandmother to start speaking in these exaggerated, playful tones she is also teaching me the unique way that Shanghainese moves in a sentence.

What wouldn't be clear in the English translation is my grandmother's use of reduplication. Reduplication is common when speaking to children and creates a cutesy tone. This is also the first time in a while she has reduplicated anything without the intent of emphasis. She is calling out to a younger me, a me that is still learning to speak, and so she simplifies things. We are reverted back to the dinner table, and when she says these things, I can see the motion in my mind. My grandma reaching over with her chopsticks to put fish into my bowl. Her mixing everything with rice to trick me into eating it. Her sweetly asking, "How about we..." when mixing fish or meat into my dish. And then putting it in anyway, even if I say no. These are not far distant phrases, though, she still says "time to eat/ㄊㄞˋ ㄨㄟˋ ㄨㄟˋ/吃饭饭" when placing down a plate of dumplings in front of me. The tone is more joking now, but it is also clear that she is reminiscing about an earlier time when she said this. Or maybe pointing to the fact that even though all this time has passed, we can still meet at a dinner table, and she can still cajole me into eating more than I intend. She smiles, and the kick up in her voice asks if I remember too.

And then in content, the vocabulary she chooses to teach me first are the ones in the physical space around us. She uses our home as the basis of language acquisition. I learn by seeing, by touching, by being placed somewhere, and then these things become named. And she says, “And that’s Shanghainese, isn’t it.” Not a question, but a remark, that a language can be just this. Her speaking and me repeating, her caring enough to make me understand, as well as the tiniest, most used phrases in the language. Always “time to eat,” always “have you eaten,” always “do you want?” It means that with these sentences, with these few words, you already know Shanghainese. You can speak. You already know the language, you can move in its curves, you can intone in its phonetics. This is a simple phrase that she says that can be gesturing to a multitude of other readings. “Isn’t that Shanghainese,” referring to “isn’t that how Shanghainese people speak to their children?” Or “Isn’t that Shanghainese,” referring to, “isn’t that a very Shanghainese way to say things?” Or “I wasn’t just teaching you how to speak, I was teaching you how to speak Shanghainese.” Or even more simply, “aren’t these words Shanghainese?” Or possibly answering a previous question I had about whether I spoke Shanghainese and English first, with her answering, “Don’t you see? Of course it was Shanghainese.”

She also tells me more uniquely Shanghainese phrases, “You opened your mouth very late. Shanghainese people say this, ‘You opened your mouth very late.’” She tells me that the Shanghainese I speak is specifically my Grandfather’s Shanghainese. “With Grandpa, you all spoke his Shanghainese often... Grandpa is a native Shanghainese person. A Shanghai native. Grandma came from Ningbo. Grandma was already eighteen before coming to Shanghai. The Ningbo language already took root.” The last sentence can be translated a couple of different ways: “the Ningbo language paused and settled.” Or the “Ningbo language burrowed in.” Both

speak to this idea that first languages live in our body, that once we know it, it has burrowed its roots into our throats. It also speaks to the fact that the language never left, that it had just stopped in motion, but is still alive within us.

Then she says, “Now you can understand, right?” The gesture is wide-reaching. It could relate to language: “Now I can understand the language.” Or temporal: “Now I can understand the timeline she paved.” Or just in general: “Now I understand what she is trying to tell me.” This is the sentence that has been repeating in my mind throughout this process. A question to always return to. Now you can understand, right? 听懂了? This version of “understand” is used most frequently with speech. Did you understand what I said to you? The first character, 听, means to hear. The second is the character 懂, which means to understand. I heard you and I understand. Now, I’ve heard you and I understand.

Can you not see that little light up there?

Where?

There.

Where?

– Kate Bush, “Waking the Witch”

04. On Dreams, Fairytales, and Folklore

Translating Heaven and Earth

The most interesting turn our interviews took was towards reenactment. The interview is set like this: my grandmother and I sit at the dinner table, and she tells me the same fairytales she used to tell me as a child. And all these stories carried within them hidden lessons: how to be a good person, how to be a kind person, how to honor those separated from us. In breaking down and closely inspecting the details in these stories and how my grandmother chooses to convey these elements to me, I believe that even more hidden lessons could be revealed about our language and our relationship within it.

Chang'e Jumps to the Moon

Q: You told me stories? [Crosstalk]

Grandma: Yes.

Q: Or you didn't tell me?

Grandma: Didn't tell? You've forgotten already. They were told, heard, and forgotten. You were little.

Q: Right. But you really told me?

Grandma: Really I told you. I told you and you've already forgotten. So many things have already been forgotten. Wouldn't you say so? That time you were so little. Isn't that so?

Q: It is. When I was little, what stories did you tell me?

Grandma: Oh, I told many stories. [Pause]. How about I give you one to listen to now?

Q: Okay. Either my favorite or your favorite story.

Grandma: Now, Grandma will tell you *Chang'e Jumps to the Moon*, is that okay?

Q: Okay. You can tell it.

Grandma: I can, right? Chang'e Jumps to the Moon. Grandma needs to think a bit. Now, one day suddenly...

Now, to point out what can't be easily seen. "How about I give you one to listen to now?/现在说一这给你听听好吗?" Reduplication is also present here. Just like before, when my grandma

settles into the practice of storytelling, she also subtly reverts back to how she would speak to a younger me. And for a moment, this isn't an interview, for a moment, all we do is sink back to the people we once were. My grandmother then proceeds to tell the story of how Chang'e jumped to the moon, one of the most famous Chinese myths. Her voice weaves and threads; she builds suspense, she breathes during all the pauses, she builds us a mountain, she sounds out the shooting of an arrow. There are moments where it feels clear she is telling this story to a child; the villain never has a name, he is called "wa niu/坏人" which simply means "bad man." Then she says, "dubi ton/腹痛" which means "he has a stomach ache," instead of saying that he was ill or physically injured. The words and story are gentle. Never too graphic, never too severe. My grandma jovially describes Chang'e rising and rising, out the window, to the moon palace.

She tells me, "The moon palace just means the moon/月宫就是月亮." Moon Palace is part of the set of vocabulary that is used only in stories about ancient times; its use is antiquated today, replaced by the more commonly used moon/moonlight 月亮. When she uses Moon Palace, she is emulating a sense of fantasy and history. When she explains that the Moon Palace is just the moon, she is building me a bridge to understand this. Following the logic of the story, Moon Palace is also used to represent a physical location in Heaven. It is Chang'e's immortal status that ascends her to the moon, to a home fit for a god. She continues and paints Chang'e's loneliness: the moon is a cold, dark place, but she chooses to stay there because it's the closest she can be to mortals. The moon then becomes a place between gods and mortals.

But even the loneliness isn't lingered on in a children's story, because my Grandma quickly remedies this by saying that she is accompanied by the Jade Rabbit, a rabbit who is also a god.

She builds up the reveal, placing him around the corner of the question, “But ehh? A small rabbit has emerged.” Vocally, she emphasizes the words for little rabbit 小兔子.²⁴ Physically, she leans in closer to me, eyes widening in excitement at the reveal. Without direct words, she gestures to another bridge we have built in what we know about each other. And for a second, I remember being a child and her telling me this story. She has used this same inflection before; it is practiced. She did not tell me this story because she was trying to teach me about the Mid-Autumn Festival; she told it to me because it featured a rabbit. My grandma has always taken immeasurable joy in the fact that my mother and I are both born in the year of the rabbit. She has always described us as a “house full of rabbits.” Without having to say these words, I can hear, “A small rabbit has emerged. Just like you. Just like your mother.” I feel the memory of other stories she would tell me all with the same reveal, that it turns out that while she was telling this story that my mother and I were always already in it. My grandma says, “The rabbit accompanied Chang’e/兔子陪伴嫦娥.” The word for accompany, be bu/陪伴, means to stand by, to spend time with, to look after. My grandma frequently uses the same word when she asks me to sit with her or when she scolds me to look after my mother more.

She continues, “But what about her husband?” When he returns home, he searches for her all over the house before going outside and looking up at the sky. And at the same time, Chang’e is looking below, searching for him too. She says, “He saw that in the moon there was a shadow. It resembled his wife and he was certain, this was Chang’e.” To translate what we use for shadow, jin t̃sy/影子, in this context, it refers to the shadows on the moon. In Shanghainese, the pronunciation is nearly identical to 印子, which I could use to describe “marks left on your skin.” This close association can create two possible routes of translation: “the shadow of

²⁴ Same pronunciation in Putonghua and Shanghainese

Chang'e" or the "image of Chang'e impressed onto the surface of the moon." To build on this motif of "impression," the moon is changed because of Chang'e's presence on it. She has left a mark on it, and when Hou Yi looks at the moon, he sees his wife. On the level of the interview, my grandmother and I have also left similar impressions and shadows onto each other and onto the conversation. In recollection, our course falls back into the familiar marks that we have already impressed upon each other. These impressions are memories, their ridges are the path we take to remember, and their reflective nature shows that when I remember her, she is looking back. When Hou Yi sees Chang'e in the moon, he is comforted; he has found his wife, and she is near him, looking down on him too. Always looking into the sky for answers, for family, and the possibility that they look back down for us too. For him, the moon also offers an access point into Heaven, to his wife, who can't be with him anymore. It's an entry point, a portal, a space above us that we can peek into Heaven.

She says that Hou Yi's story was spread "zi wu ^{te}i/传下去" or more literally "passed *down* from one to another." The common people began to make the same offerings to the moon, in memory and honor of Chang'e who had jumped to the moon. "And so" she tells me, "us common people, us under Heaven people, know this day to be the Mid-Autumn festival. Everyone reunites." The word she uses for reunite, "du ju/团圆," means to make a complete circle. The Mid-Autumn festival is a holiday for reunion because it is the time when the moon is at its roundest. This process of circling and reunion could also relate to the moon's cycles or its orbit around the Earth. That the moon will always return to where it once was, that its path forward will always be a path that goes back to the beginning. Here it is, the summit of the mountain, where sky meets the Earth, where Heaven meets the Earth, where she meets me.

There are many versions of this story; there are many versions of the meaning of the moon during this holiday. There is the belief that my grandma described, that we look at the moon because Hou Yi looked at the moon to see his wife, and we are honoring that tradition. But others say that we observe the moon because our family, that is apart from us, observes the same moon too. Showing the endurance of relationships regardless of distance. Others also say that we look at the moon because it represents harmony, a successful cycle complete. That we, just like the moon, have traveled back to each other successfully. This experience of her retelling the same stories from my childhood also repeats that cycle. We have travelled back to this sense of home, to family, to the same voice we have always used to speak to each other.

This instance is an ode to that value. Just as the moon metamorphoses into different phases, my grandmother and I have changed; our faces reveal different shadows of time having passed. Things are forgotten and lost as we become anew. But as we travel forward, we reunite at the beginning. The same lesson retold and relearned. The story repeats: a grandmother and a grandchild sitting at a dinner table, listening to fairy tales.

Niulang and Zhinu's Magpie Bridge

Chang'e Jumps to the Moon is a myth that explains the importance of the moon. But what of the stars?

Q: Can you also tell me the Niulang Zhinu story?

Grandma: Niulang Zhinu? You want to hear Niulang Zhinu?

Q: Correct.

Grandma: Ah [said in a vocal contour similar to ascending and descending a mountain]. Niulang
Zhinu's Magpie Bridge

The story starts with the same gaze as ours, by looking below. With Empress Wangmu's
daughter, or granddaughter, in Heaven, Zhinu (lit. Weaver Girl). Who grew bored of always
staying in the same place.

Grandma: But there was a day when her courage was big and she ripped apart the clouds. After
she ripped the clouds, she saw all the Earth below. The Earth, with all these people's lives, was
very beautiful. It seemed to be even more beautiful than Heaven.

She saw the Earth populous, with people cultivating the soil, farming, and all other varieties of
life. My grandma says that "Zhinu saw this and her eyes itched." This is the closest to a direct
translation I can get. In English, this can only be read as a verb, but in the original sentence, it
functions closer to an adjective. "Zhinu saw this and she admired them." Or closer, "Zhinu saw
this and was very envious." This is also a uniquely Shanghainese phrase that wouldn't translate
well into Putonghua. The phonetics of the translation are off; eye (yǎn/眼) sounds too similar to
the word for itch (yǎng/痒) for it to be efficiently utilized in Putonghua speech. It's clumsy and
uncomfortable. It only works in Shanghainese because our pronunciation of eye, ŋɛ, is variant
enough for the metaphor to sound smooth. This phrase defines envy as something that originates
in our eyes and that pulls us to find a way to feel relief. And what she found beautiful was not
solely the Earth, but all the life that the Earth brought. She was not compelled to a place, but by
life itself and what can be created in that place.

And then, she saw Niulang (lit. Cowherd Boy). A young hardworking farmer with a difficult life,
and the sight of him moved her heart. She came down from the sky and met Niulang at night,

where he told her all about human life. Eventually, she had to return to Heaven, and Niulang was left with only his cow for comfort.

Grandma: Niulang spoke to the cow, but cows can't speak. But Niulang didn't have anyone else to talk to, and he was always by the cow's side. So the goddesses sent him a golden cow who still couldn't speak, but would be able to understand Niulang's words. In his heart, the cow understood him. Niulang thought this was very strange, that suddenly this cow could speak with him. "Can a cow really speak?" His heart thought. But he knew that his life was being blessed.

These two instances show a connection being formed in the setting of a conversation. The first shows Zhinu coming down to Earth and Niulang teaching her about life there through a quiet conversation. He shares about his own life, family, struggles, and the plights of the common people. He colors and enriches her understanding of things she has only witnessed from afar, and teaches her about Earth and the life on it. Zhinu breaks through the clouds because of boredom, monotony, but also loneliness. And as soon as she reaches Earth, someone reaches out to her and guides her through it. The second instance showcases conversation as catharsis, that even when we have no one to speak to, we desire to speak. Or even if we have no one to understand us, we desire to speak anyway. The goddesses didn't just send Niulang a speaking cow, but one who could understand him, one whose heart could understand him. And it's a miracle. To have someone or something that can really understand you. I can't help but draw parallels, how Niulang and Zhinu's first conversation is like the ones I had with my grandmother, who also explained all the things I saw from afar and helped me put words to them. Or the feeling of devastation when you have no one to speak to. Or the amount of care involved in trying to understand someone else's words. Trying to make sense of what they are saying and trying to actually hear how they are said. And how that, in itself, is a miracle. It's magic. To finally speak and be heard after a period of silence is as magical as a golden cow speaking.

Grandma: After he met Zhinu, he didn't know she was a goddess. He told the cow that he liked her... So one day, the cow carried Niulang on his back and flew to Heaven.

The cow, after hearing Niulang's words, knew what his heart wished for, and that conversation allowed them to cross through worlds, universes, skies, clouds. Through conversation, they were able to travel upwards.

Grandma: And this is how they reunited and she told him little by little her story. They fell in love.

Zhinu began to live with Niulang and they soon had children. But gods are not supposed to live in the human world. And upon realization of Zhinu's situation, Empress Wangmu returned Zhinu to the sky and separated them. Zhinu in Heaven, Niulang and their children on Earth, and an unpassable Heavenly River between them. In the Han Dynasty poem that first narrativizes the pair, 迢迢牵牛星, it says, "So wide is the stream here, They can gaze at each other, But cannot speak and hear!"²⁵ The separation and grief between the two lovers is one that is also specifically linguistic. Because conversation was what brought them together, made it so they could meet, and granted them solace, the greatest form of separation is being unable to speak and be heard. Other translations change the last portion to: "Yet their affection can never speak."²⁶ This gestures more to what is felt, that because of their separation, they are also unable to actualize their feelings for one another. This, too, is a silence that the lovers experience when their affections are unable to reach each other.

²⁵ Quoted in Xu, Ping. "All the Way to the Altair and the Fable of Cowherd and the Weaving Maiden." *Proceedings of the 2016 2nd International Conference on Education Technology, Management and Humanities Science*, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.2991/etmhs-16.2016.156>.

²⁶ "迢迢牵牛星 Translation - So Remote, the Draught Ox Star." East Asia Student, December 19, 2010. <https://eastasiastudent.net/china/classical/%E8%BF%A2%E8%BF%A2%E7%89%BD%E7%89%9B%E6%98%9F-cowherd-star/>.

This story is the cosmogonic basis for the stars Vega and Altair, who are separated by the Milky Way in the night sky. Zhinu is associated with Vega, Niulang with Altair, and the Milky Way with the Heavenly River. The origins of this narrative come from people looking up at the sky and trying to understand the existence of these celestial bodies. Trying to make sense of the world around them by interpretation and creation. Xu Ping, in their article, “All the Way to the Altair and the Fable of Cowherd and the Weaving Maiden,” says, “Through fantasy and bold imagination, the weaver girl and the cowherd have been successfully transformed from constellation to god and finally to human beings. They are becoming more and more close with people. And hence the images of the two constellations have no longer been mysterious, vague and remote, but instead friendly, life-like and vivid.”²⁷ With this interpretation, this story really becomes one of transformation and translation. Translating the boundless, inexplicable world around us and making it something tangible. “Becoming more and more close with people” can be understood as these celestial bodies have been translated so that they have become more resemblant of humans, but also that through this translation, they are emotionally brought closer to us. Their physical distance—their remoteness from us, or them from each other—becomes diminished through this narrativization.

This is not the end of the story, however. Empress Wangmu eventually took pity on the lovers and allowed magpies to come together to reunite them once a year.

Grandma: Magpies would gather and pull them together like matchmakers. In Heaven, every year on the 7th day of the 7th month, magpies would build a bridge. Many many magpies came and clung together. Starting from Zhinu in Heaven to Niulang on Earth. Their pathway back to each other was created by magpie steps. Every 7th day of the 7th month, Niulang would carry his children and they would walk up to reunite with Zhinu.

²⁷ Xu, “All the Way to the Altair”

This story also has many variations. My grandma says that it was because of Empress Wangmu's mercy that the magpies came to reunite the pair. However, other renditions say that magpies were so moved by their story that they decided to build this bridge themselves. Or that the magpie's tears and sorrow over the story created this bridge that brought Niulang back to Zhinu. No matter the reason, I can't help but think: how beautiful—a bird bridge. There are many things I appreciate about how my grandmother phrased this section. She says that the magpies *pulled* 拉 Zhinu and Niulang together. Or that the bridge was built because the magpies *clung* or were *glued* 拉紧 to each other. What I appreciate about the verb to pull is that the bridge was in active motion, bringing the pair closer together. Bridge is not meant only in its noun form as a crossing, a joinder, but also as a verb. Bridge meaning to connect one thing with another. Bridge meaning “merged [into] one single whole.” Pull also means an active effort of drawing force to a singular destination. It's magnetic. It's gravitational. It also immediately brings me back to when my grandmother spoke about Hongkou Park and said, “But you would demand to hold us... One hand holding Grandpa, one hand holding Grandma.” In these sentences, I translated 拉紧 to hold because the second character 紧 changes the meaning slightly; it turns the verb to mean 'pull closer to you' or 'hold tightly'. In these sentences, I held onto my grandparents' hands and pulled them to the top of the hill. Or I held their hands tightly so that I could bring us all closer. The birds held onto each other when they pulled Niulang and Zhinu back together. They *clung* together, they held each other so tightly that even their steps merged to create one single bridge.

The myth is the origin for another Chinese holiday, the Qīxī Festival. This is a holiday for lovers instead of family, but what I like about it is that it talks about a physical and direct reunion.

Unlike the path of the moon, we are not meant to continue forward to re-commune; we are meant

to walk towards the destination to each other. Chang'e Jumps the Moon tells the story of lovers separated by Heaven and Earth, and how they are able to stay together through a symbolic site of memory and worship. Niulang Zhinu tells the story of lovers separated by Heaven and Earth, but who build a path back to each other. Similar to how my grandmother and I built a language to connect to one another. More than symbolic, the physicality of it is what compels me. That I can take one step forward, and another, and cross over the path that was created to reunite with what was pulled apart.

“My sense of home begins with the spoon knocking against the rim of the pot of lentil soup and spreads like ripples in the village ponds and licks at the edge of the duwara and limns the view from the southern window and touches my skin from within. All of the houses I’ve lived in since then have hardly touched me... and for the first time in all these years I feel that I can conjure up the house of my childhood in the village, the smells and the sights and the textures...”

– Anton Shammas, *Arabesques*

05. On Hands, Inheritance, and Fortune

To Define Where We Come From

To end: we return to the beginning with hands, our first interview.

When I presented the idea of interviewing her, she asked herself, “What is something good I can talk about,” while absentmindedly patting my hand, the sound of which can be heard in the recording. She bursts once she decides on a path:

Grandma: Smart genes! What does the word ‘smart’ mean?

Q: I know the word ‘smart.’

Grandma: Aye. Smart inherited gene. I’m saying that this hand is very “*ㄊㄨㄛˊ*.” Which means that they’re very smart. [Aside to my mother] What does “*ㄊㄨㄛˊ*” mean in English? [Back to me] These hands are very thrifty, they can do anything. You understand my meaning? Us, Chinese people, call these hands “*ㄊㄨㄛˊ*,” very capable. Capable in writing, capable in creating.

The first thing she does is try to teach me. “*ㄊㄨㄛˊ*” what does “*ㄊㄨㄛˊ*” mean? She briefly tries to ask my mother who is busy in the background, but quickly turns back to me to attempt defining it herself. She connects “*ㄊㄨㄛˊ*” back to a series of other words she knows I know. Smart/聪明.

Capable/能干. Capable we sometimes say as a compliment. “Oh you’re very capable” or “oh you’re very impressive.” “*ㄊㄨㄛˊ*” could best be translated as “skillful,” but what isn’t clear in the English translation is that it is specifically associated with hands. Hands are frequently “*ㄊㄨㄛˊ*,” people could be “*ㄊㄨㄛˊ*,” but this use is more infrequent. It means that the skill is specifically in the ability to craft, to materially create something with deftness. When she tells me that my hands are *ㄊㄨㄛˊ* it means that my hands are meant to craft, sculpt, reshape.

Q: You can see all of that in my hands?

Grandma: When I look at your hands. This is family. This is Grandpa's hands, Grandpa's genes.

She tells me that Grandpa was "a mechanic. Working with his hands... Hands were very skillful, he could do anything. That's my meaning... This chair or stool he would be able to make. A sofa he would be able to hammer out."

She repeats again, "ten, smart." Then she takes one of my fingers and wiggles it. "Look. Your fingers are all thin and nimble."

I ask, "Like Grandpa's? Like Mama's?"

She replies, "Grandpa's genes. You are your Grandpa's genes. Your Mama takes after your Grandpa. And you take after your Mama."

How beautifully she traces our path. My mother to my grandfather, then me to my mother. "This is family." When I speak of directionality throughout this paper, about people up above and people down below, I am talking about a direction of lineage. We gaze up at the sky to look for insight, for connection, and at the same height, our loved ones and elders parallel our gaze. If I raise my hands up to see them more clearly, I can also see this climb: me to my mother, then my mother to my grandfather. Our relationships and family history flow in a teleological path, where each conversation, moment, memory can be placed in a wider overarching course. Past towards future, future towards past. All these gestures, turns, apostrophes (in the literary sense) where we turn to address someone whose materiality might not be there, but that doesn't need to be in

order for us to speak to them. Because we are a point in a path, a moment in a process, a word in a language. This is a path she builds generationally when speaking about my hands. But there is also the path in memory that is made clear.

She takes my finger in the same way she did when she first taught me how to speak. She says that I have my grandfather's hands, who used to be a mechanic, a maker, a handyman. Who is able to make chairs, tables, and sofas just like the ones she placed me on to teach me how to name them. She says that he created them with his hammer—the same hammer that I used to take as a child and pretend that I was creating the same things he was creating. Even not directly named, our first interview pulls us back to our first home, our first conversations. Skillful hands built the furnishings of our home, and those furnishings built the language we speak. When my grandma tells me that I have the same hands, it means that I can build all these things too. That I also have this capacity to build this language alongside them.

But hands as objects, instigators, and metaphors have seeped into our lives more than what my grandmother says in this interview. When I think about hands, a multitude of associations cascade and overlap with each other. I think about how when we pray, we have to pay special attention to our hand placement. When we bow to Buddha, we are supposed to bow with our hands turned up to receive her fortune, then turned down when we reach the ground to keep it. When we bow to our ancestors, we are supposed to keep our hands down so we don't take fortune away from our loved ones. Palms up, palms down, rituals after rituals, changing with intentionality. Changing direction and changing what is held and what is given. These rituals also show that hands have the capacity to receive and give what is not materially there. That even

physically, it is possible to reach for something with your hands, and have it extend and connect with whoever is above.

I think about being young and having family members read my palms. How hands can carry your fortune. The lines on your hands already build a path themselves of who you are, how you will love, or even what is to come before you are ready to face it. They bridge space and time; fortune and luck; future, past, and present. They can do all these things, but you need to be able to understand how to read them. You need to follow the path of these lines and understand what meanings they extend to.

I think about how, in moments where we can't understand each other, my grandmother would write the characters on my hand so that I can feel their shape and maybe recognize the strokes.

I think about how every time I sit down next to her, she reaches over and pulls my hand into hers. And we repeat the same conversation:

Grandma: Your hands are so cold. Freezing.

Me: Your hands are just very warm.

Grandma: I'm always warm. Look how much I'm wearing, I'm always warm

To translate one last time: the word for warm in Shanghainese is 热/热. The same character/word is sometimes used to say love: 热爱. This means to love warmly. Or to love ardently. Or to love fervently. It translates the same from Shanghainese to Putonghua. Warmth modifies love. Or warmth raises the level of love. So with all of these associations now uncovered, how can I describe my grandmother's hands?

I could say that they are hands that will lend their steadiness to you when you climb new heights. I could say that when I look at them I can think of the past and really talk about the future. I could say that those hands are always warm and possibly mean that those hands are always loving. I could say that their warmth feels like when you press your hand to soil and you can feel the beating heart of the Earth. And that feeling can be even more beautiful than the Heavens. Or I could say that their warmth feels like when the sun begins to rise outside your window and sunlight hits your skin for the first time.

“Where our imagination led, our dreams followed. On waking we rose, and on rising returned.”

– Liu Zongyuan, “My First Excursion to West Mountain”