



MOTHERS

TRANSLATED VERSION
ART AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY
YUTING FU



All my memories of my great-grandma gather around
the strength of her hands.

Each time I went back to see her, she would clasp
mine in hers and say,
“Come back soon. Come home and take care of your
mother.”

And I never knew what to say.



My great-grandma- my mother's mother's mother- will be turning one hundred next year.

My mother says her faith lies in two things: her land and her children.

She has spent most of her life working in the fields, turning the soil.

What she wanted was the quiet certainty that comes from seeds- enough food, warm clothes, and the blessing of many children.

That was the pursuit of her entire life.



Many of the elderly in the village gradually passed away or moved to other places. grandma and her siblings discussed bringing great-grandma to the city to live with them. But she said, “What’s so good about the city? There are no vegetables I’ve grown myself, no good air. You don’t know the neighbours, no one talks to each other. And who would feed my chickens and the big yellow dog...?”

The city life her children and grandchildren longed for held no appeal for her at all. Particularly the toilet, raised, and deeply uncomfortable.





Great-grandma's chickens and the big yellow dog.



My grandma remembers her mother through a haze of hardship and quiet sorrow.

Eighty years ago, there was no such thing as family planning. One child followed another. Housework was endless, and so was the labour in the fields. As the eldest daughter in a rural household, my grandma was expected to keep the home in order and care for the younger children.

When the school term began, she was only eight or nine. One day her schoolbag was thrown into the manure pit by my great-grandma, and with it went her chance to continue schooling. It was as though everyone had forgotten that she too, was still a child. At an age when her hands were scarcely big enough, she had to stand beside her mother and help carry the weight of the whole family.

Those years forged in her a fierce strength and endurance. Even after she started a family of her own, the old beliefs remained etched deep within her bones: to endure hardship without complaint, to be a dutiful wife and a devoted mother, to raise children so that someone would care for you in old age. In many ways, her life was the truest portrait of countless Chinese mothers who lived through that time.



Grandma's marriage was arranged by her father. My grandpa worked for a state institution, and the reason he chose to marry a farmer's daughter like my grandma was simple: in the countryside she was known far and wide for her beauty. In those days, having a husband employed by a government unit meant crossing a social boundary.

Their family lived between farm and wage work. There was a steady income, and my grandma moved constantly between the fields and the household. Later, through a government arrangement, she began receiving a fixed monthly salary.

From then on she left the fields and took charge of the kitchen. She was the embodiment of a traditional housewife- rising before dawn, making shoes, knitting wool jumpers and cooking meals for the entire family. Those meals left my mother with childhood memories rich with the ordinary smoke and fire of everyday living.

My grandma is seventy-nine this year. I think in her later years she finally could be happy. Her children and grandchildren all have respectable jobs, attended well-known universities and moved into new homes. And yet she always seemed troubled, often complaining and bantering with my grandpa. Sometimes it feels as though she is trying to reclaim something from the years of her youth.



My grandma struggled constantly to make a living. All the hopes of the family rested on one thing: that her three children might change their fate through education; leave the harsh countryside behind and go to the provincial capital to live and work.

Under the weight of expectation, my mother hardly dared to laugh; in fact, she had almost forgotten how. The road to school, with its changing seasons, was the only place where she could feel a rare flicker of happiness. Year after year, exams and scores became the one fragile lifeline everyone clung to.

In those days, if you failed to get into university, you would likely end up like my grandma-married off early and become a housewife.

So my mother walked that road to school day after day. She walked it through harassments of village men, through the embarrassment of arriving in class with rubber shoes caked in mud, through the tears that followed low scores and harsh scoldings.

Yet it was that very road that carried her beyond that piece of land- beyond the fate and resignation that awaited so many women there.

My mother was nineteen when she left the countryside. Before graduating from university, she enrolled in an additional specialised programme and eventually earned two diploma certificates.

She even attended night school after work, just to earn an undergraduate degree. She later became the youngest manager in a high-end department store. Never willing to fall behind, she sat for more examinations and went on to pursue a masters in business administration.

But money was still tight. With a mortgage of 110,000 yuan hanging over the family, she continued to work while studying, striving to reach the national level of professional management certification, completing the thesis defense whilst heavily pregnant. That year, across the entire province, only nine people earned that certificate.

Then in 2003, I was born at what could have been the beginning of a new chapter in her career. But she chose to give everything up and care for me full-time.



But I don't think my mum ever truly enjoyed motherhood. I remember my biggest wish in kindergarten was for her to be happy. Back then I couldn't understand why she so often frowned or sighed.

Only later did I begin to understand that this story is not just about my mum or me.

The story long before us- in the life Grandma lived, and the life Great-Grandma lived before her. We all carry what the women before us could not put down.

Perhaps this project is my way of understanding your love, and gently letting go of what no longer needs to be carried.

A letter from my mum to me-

I want to try understanding this relationship without wrapping it in the language of love. Raising a child is, at its core, a duty and a responsibility. It doesn't need to be made into something grand or heroic. Before a child becomes an adult, so much of what they receive is simply accepted passively.

Saying this does not mean I am a rational or detached mother. In truth, I spend every day helplessly thinking about my child.

From the moment you were born, I made the firm decision to become a full-time mother. And yes, full-time meant twenty hours a day without proper sleep. It meant often being dishevelled and exhausted. Full-time meant learning every possible skill: cleaning, feeding, preparing baby food, watching over you constantly. By the end of each day I would feel as though my bones had fallen apart. I'm not exaggerating. Before you turned one, my days were like this every single day.

After your first birthday, I tried hiring a helper. But I found myself worrying about everything. If the baby was held the wrong way, I worried her waist might be strained. If a single ingredient was missing from her meal, I worried about nutrition. If we stayed indoors for a day, I worried her cognitive development would fall behind. In the end, I did everything myself, throwing all my strength into every day.

All because I had read that before the age of three, a child's brain develops seventy to eighty percent of its adult capacity. I did not want to waste a single day. When you were nine months old, I took you to your very first early-education class, waking before dawn. Until the day we left the country, those playful learning courses never stopped.

But my daughter, I want to apologise to you. A child's classroom should live in the warmth of a home, in the turning of the seasons, in streets alive with the smoke and bustle of everyday life. It should be in the faint trails left by crawling insects, in the laughter of children playing together.

But I tried so hard to place you inside "education", inside endless attempts to shape and mould you. I'm sorry, an anxious and unknowing mother needed to grow first.

Those early years we spent together were filled with joy, but also with a kind of relentless striving. I remember when we travelled to Namtso Lake in Tibet- you fell asleep. I remember the beach at Causeway Bay in Hong Kong- you fell asleep. I remember taking you to a theatre performance at the Hefei Grand Theatre- you fell asleep. With all my heart, and with all my effort, I tried to give you every experience I believed was good for you. Yet I forgot that so much beauty in life is free. If I could begin again, ninety per cent of those early years would come from ordinary life and from nature itself. Only then can life grow with both depth and breadth.

And so I believe I owe you an apology. It is also the reason I must keep learning. Love must grow, and it must reflect on itself.

A letter from my mum to my grandma-

When I was young, I sometimes tried to believe that I had been adopted. It was the only way I could explain why life felt so hard, why everything around us seemed dirty and chaotic, and why poverty was filled with ignorance and greed. To a sensitive little girl, the world often felt unbearably heavy.

I imagined that my mother might be a tailor, so I could have new clothes each season. Or a teacher, so I could walk into school with confidence and dignity. But I could never accept that you could not read or write, that you did not know how to say the words that nourish a child. You were always busy surviving, always keeping life running, and you could not see the quiet resentment growing inside me.

I never fought back when you scolded me under the weight of your own hardships. I knew that one day I would leave this place that never truly felt like mine. Being a girl meant I could never hold the same place in your heart as my two brothers. I understood early that studying and leaving through education was my only escape.

For many years, half of my sadness came from the distance between us; the other half from fear and uncertainty about the future.

You never knew any of this. Perhaps you never thought it mattered. Only later did I understand that you were shaped by the life your mother lived before you. You simply carried forward what she believed, that raising children was the greatest achievement a woman could have.

Unlike you, I did not begin life simply trying to survive. I began with dreams of a better future, of a life different from the one you lived. Between reality and those ideals, I built quiet standards in my heart, measuring you, judging you, even keeping my distance. I was afraid that if I came too close, I would become like you, enduring everything in silence, unable to see the struggles of your own daughter.

And yet I longed to be seen by you. I longed for you to notice how hard I worked, how well I did at school and later at work, how careful I was not to trouble you. Only later did I begin to understand. A mother who never received warmth from her own mother often learns to love in the same quiet, distant way. In the harsh logic of survival, love can become something that almost looks like indifference. Once I understood this, I was finally able to let go.

Love must be felt, learned, and expressed. No one is born knowing how to love, except through the instinct of motherhood. My mother had little education, yet she insisted that I study. In those days, when money was scarce, sending three children to school was already an extraordinary effort.

Only then did I realise how unfair I had been to her. I never saw how every coin for our education was saved. I never saw how she cooked for us even when she was in pain. I never saw how she endured my father's temper, day after day. I complained that my mother did not know how to love me. But had I ever tried to love her in the way she understood? Life requires us to see from another's place. And love requires understanding, and the willingness to look a little deeper.

A photograph of four women walking through a field of tall, dry, golden-brown grass. The women are dressed in winter clothing; one wears a white puffer jacket, another a dark blue coat, and a third a bright blue coat. They are walking from left to right. In the background, there are bare trees, a brick wall, and a utility pole under a pale, overcast sky. The ground in the foreground is dark and appears to be recently tilled soil.

Only later did I understand,
every generation lives inside its own cage.
My great-grandma's cage was the homeland;
my grandma's cage was the household;
my mother's cage was a distant land.

One guarded her roots, yet could not step beyond them.
One guarded her home, yet could not step outside it.
One chased her dreams, yet could never return.

Each believed she had chosen her path—
yet each was, in her own way, a prisoner of her time.

Within their separate lives,
they struggled with all their strength,
and still walked on, dust-covered by the long road.

(Written by Mum, 3 April 2026)

A letter from me to my mothers-

Only after growing up did I realise that within you are the shadows of generations of women before you. Women who were daughters, mothers, sisters, and wives, each carrying the weight of those roles in her life.

There was anger that was never spoken,
tears swallowed in silence,
and the numbness that comes from years of exhaustion.

Yet, we also carry something else:
the resilience to endure hardship,
and the courage to break through
time after time.

Mothers,
let me step in your footsteps and walk on.





热烈祝贺下塘镇万岗社区









MOTHERS

TRANSLATED VERSION
ART AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY
YUTING FU