

Untitled
Erik Tang Ly
Freeport High School

The last time I saw my grandfather alive was through the grainy video transmission of a webcam. The last time I saw my grandfather before he was buried six feet under the earth was at his open casket service. As we stood over him, my mother had remarked how handsome he was even in death. He died of emphysema related complications, surrounded by the people who loved him. He died as he lived, on his own terms, with dignity and grace. That was, perhaps, why his body appeared so pristine, affixed with the subtle illusion of a man dreaming, not dead. In any case, the undertaker did a good job. We were all pleased with their work.

The funeral service was not only emotionally exhausting, but physically exhausting as well. Chinese funerals, as I would discover, are much different than the conventional western style funeral. The day began at sunrise, and we ate a small meal before departing for the ninety minute drive to the funeral home. There, we donned the customary funerary garments. For the daughters and granddaughters of the deceased, pointed white hoods worn with a crisp white overshirt. For the sons and grandsons of the deceased, white square caps embroidered with red squares, and an overshirt as well. We threw them on over our street clothes (we were told to dress as comfortably as possible, with very good reason.) The juxtaposition was perhaps reflective of the Chinese family living in America. White occultic robes, vestiges of somber and rigorous tradition, but peeking out from underneath: sweatpants, Nikes, skinny jeans, rubber clogs. In the room where they kept my grandfather's body, the ancient, pre-recorded drone of Chinese prayer filtered out of a wall mounted speaker as we all sat on the floor playing with our iPhones.

The next fourteen hours passed with much to do. We, after all, were the children and grandchildren. This was his final test for us, an opportunity to demonstrate the strength and wisdom he passed down to us. Our responsibilities included preparing offerings for the shrine, organizing the meals, and greeting and consoling the hundreds of mourners that appeared to stream unyieldingly through the doors. The funerary rituals themselves were acts of faith, filial piety, and self-torture. Hour long sessions of prayer and funeral marches without our shoes left our feet and knees aching and stained with the ashes of fallen incense. We grew more and more listless as each ritual appeared to become increasingly convoluted, foreign, infinite. We broke for lunch, and I had the roast duck.

Later that night, we returned to the house of my oldest uncle, where my grandfather had lived, and where we also had stayed for the past few days. It was our responsibility to manage the remainder of his estate. My mother and I rifled through his cabinet. He was our family's official scribe, responsible for documenting the tribulations of our family history and keeping track of its current affairs. Located in an old cigar box was a frail, folded square of rice paper which contained a family tree scrawled by hand. In the same box, an archive of records, birth, death, divorce. Under a pile of folded shirts we found an address book. It contained names of family members and colleagues around the world. There were addresses from all around the world, and at the very back of the book was a familiar address. It was the street in Maine where

my family used to have a business almost twenty years earlier. In another, larger book were what my mother had told me were poems written by him. As it was all in Chinese, I couldn't read it, but I'm certain whatever he wrote, it was probably beautiful. Other pages were covered in torn scraps of old Chinese newspaper or books haphazardly pasted on, bits and excerpts of inspiration, vignettes of an intellectualism that we'd seldom seen or known of when he was alive. My mother stashed these both into a small paper bag.

Finally, we came upon something else. It appeared to be a small journal of some sort, bound in plastic and printed with large Chinese characters on the cover. I opened it, and found what apparently was a miniature Chinese chess set with small magnetic pieces enclosed. "Do you know how to play?" I asked her. She told me no, and began to put it into the paper bag.

"Wait." I told her. I took the chess set out again.

We were all asked to take something of his. My mother gave me an earnest smirk. "You can have it."

The chess set has found its place on my desk. I don't think I'll ever learn to actually play it. Once in a while, I hold it in my hands and stare at it for a long while. I suppose it's become significant to me for a multitude of reasons. More than anything, it's a symbol. A symbol of a man who knew and loved me. A symbol of a man who, like the chess set, I don't think I'll ever quite figure out.

The chess set no longer belongs to him. When you're dead, nothing belongs to you, not even your own body once you've left it. However, the only thing left behind besides a body is a memory. A body perishes, but it is through memory that you may live forever. It is through human connections that you may live forever. It could be said that the final and ultimate testament to your existence is really the body of people you have touched and changed. Once you think about it, nothing really belongs to you in the end. Nothing, except for the people who loved you.