

永恒—Yǒnghéng (*Eternity*)

By Jeffrey Jiang

It was mid-afternoon in Dingyuan. I stepped outside and looked at the sky. It had been raining through lunch, but now, all that remained was an endless stretch of grey. A large puddle had formed near the pot plants. I took in the quiet. Grandma was taking her afternoon nap, mum and aunty had left to repair some trousers, and everyone else was working. I could go walk around, clear my head. No more questions about marriage or children; just quiet. Closing the kitchen door, I walked past my Grandpa's study to go out onto the street before I stopped. The door to the study, a small, cement hut-like structure with a steel roof, was unlocked; someone must have forgotten.

I walked up close to the door and pressed my hand against it, the cracked paint and rough wood underneath my fingertips. Grandpa passed away four years ago now. Each time I came back after, I hadn't dared enter, no matter how much I wanted to. Now, something within called for me.

I closed my eyes and breathed in. With one push, I stepped inside.

It was the familiar odour of old paper which greeted me first. Opening my eyes, every item was just as I had remembered, illuminated by light entering through the door and the window on the right. The pull chain for the light near the doorframe, the display cabinet to the left filled with books of old Chinese texts. Hung on a nail, two badminton rackets which he and I played with. This was my childhood, where I was born and grew up. The brightly coloured crayon landscapes I drew stuck to the wall. One I remembered having brought one back when I was six years old, crying after having lost all hope for my art class. As he always did, Grandpa told me I had something special, to keep trying, and he stuck it up on the wall.

Our goodbyes were always tough. After dad, mum and I moved to Australia when I was eight, we'd come over during the summer holidays to see each other. At the end of each visit, we would hug, part ways, and then I'd cry the whole taxi ride to the airport.

Newspaper clippings hung on the wall alongside pages of Grandpa's calligraphy (*shūfǎ*), each character written uniformly in neat columns. I turned to look at the desk. Cut-out family photos lay underneath the glass tabletop, like moments trapped in time. On the window sill was an old radio player, a pot holding four or five brushes, empty metal mugs, an inkstone and two inksticks.

Regret washed over me as I vividly remembered. It was December 2009. I was fourteen and we had flown over for holiday. Just like always, I found Grandpa in his study, practising calligraphy whilst the radio quietly played Chinese folk music.

"*Wàiwài*, what are you doing?" I had asked.

"*Shūfǎ*, Li Xin," he responded. "Would you like to join me?"

I nodded and stood between his legs as he remained seated. He grabbed a new piece of paper.

"Did you know *shūfǎ* can teach you many life lessons?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Like the start of life's many journeys, the blank surface of Xuan paper holds the potential for the unknown. It is up to you to decide the narrative." He gestured to the brown paper. It looked raw, unprocessed.

"In many ways, it is also like skin. It appears fragile but is strong and resistant. Your skin must also be like Xuan paper."

He dipped the brush in the inkstone well and placed it in my hand.

"Hold it like this," he said, adjusting my grip, and moulding his right hand around mine. He began to talk as he guided my hand, beginning the first strokes of a character.

“*Shūfǎ* is an art of expression. The brush is an extension of oneself and your spirit. The rhythm and strength of your writing can reveal your emotions and integrity.”

He dipped the brush into the ink again and continued.

“Through lines and sequence of strokes, reality is reduced to its purest form. What is this character?”

“*Yǒng*.” Eternity.

I could hear his warm laugh behind me.

“Well done! I see the West hasn’t blunted your Chinese. *Shūfǎ* is about permanence; ancient *shūfǎ* has been preserved for centuries. The character *yǒng* contains eight common strokes required in *shūfǎ*. Paying attention to detail and taking time to put effort into learning your art will ensure beauty in your work lasts.”

I practised writing the character until the whole page was full. Afterwards, feeling a bit bored, I suggested we try write poems. We were laughing at some nonsensical rhyme I had suggested when mum and aunty came back with baked sweet potatoes from a street vendor.

“Let’s go eat them whilst they’re hot,” said Grandpa. As we packed up the calligraphy paper and tools, he sighed.

“Li Xin, you’re growing up so fast. Make sure you don’t forget about your heritage, about your *wàiwài*. I don’t want to be just a memory. Will you practise your Chinese when you go back? Will you write to me?”

I promised I would. But I never did. Not once, not twice.

The light rain, which must have started sometime earlier, had grown heavy. The pitter-pattering language of raindrops against the hut’s metal roof made me acutely aware of the present. My throat felt tight, my hands clammy. And deep inside, I felt a yearning. A

compulsion wanting me to move. Not registering my thoughts, instead of resisting, this time, I listened. I felt around, searching. The radio player on the window sill, no doubt having already played its last song. *Wàiwài*'s calligraphy plastered on the walls. From years and years ago...

My eyes settled on the untouched calligraphy tools on his desk. *I won't forget, wàiwài.* From a bundle lying on top of a paper stack, I took a sheet of Xuan paper and smoothed it out on the desk. Running my fingers across its fine-textured surface was like touching skin. *His skin, his touch. Warm, soft, strong.*

Water. For the ink. Grabbing an empty mug, I went outside into the rain and held it under the hut's slanted roof to catch rainwater spilling off. It was cold, splashing onto my hands, face, everywhere, yet I couldn't help but smile. It felt refreshing. Like release, washing everything away.

Rushing back into the study, I sat down at the desk. I prepared the ink in the inkstone, grinding the inkstick into the rainwater, then chose a brush. The thin bamboo handle felt weighty in my hand, hefty with possibilities. What did I want to say after all these years? A proverb? His voice echoed in my head. *Shūfǎ is a long-lasting expression of spirit.* I inhaled. No. I think I'd do something I should have done long ago.

I dipped the brush tuft into the inkstone and pressed the brush against the page, dragging the black ink across the brown emptiness with care. After a minute, I had written only five characters. The lines were shaky, some too thick, others too thin in places, but it was a start. 亲爱的外外. *Dear Grandpa...*

