

## A Tale of Women

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When my grandmother told me the story about my great-grandmother, I kind of doubted its credibility. Therefore I came up with many suspicious. “If grandma’s family was a landowner, why could she still survive in the Cultural Revolution? How could the family of her original husband accept her re-marriage? Where did your father, I mean my great-grandfather, actually go?”

But my grandmother said she did not know the answer either. All the things she knew that she told me were from my great-grandmother’s statements. Both of us knew that these word told on my great-grandmother’s perspective were subjective, for sometimes the events and results changed when my great-grandmother told them to her different offspring. Also, as she was getting older (90 years old this year), she didn’t remember and even didn’t care (I guess) what she once told us. Frankly speaking, the only objective things we hold were some of my great-grandmother’s dowry when she married to Kim’s family.

Great-grandmother was brought up in a wealthy landowner’s home. She was the youngest girl among her six brothers and sisters. Her father had three wives and she was proud that she was not the daughter of the two concubines. She led an extravagant life since she was young. A well-decorated room which was separated from her sisters, a girl servant of her own, several trunks of clothes and boxes of exquisite accessories were her properties. Where she brought up was rural areas, thus she did not have the chance to get any education. Even so, she enjoyed everything that affluent city girls possessed. She got her feet bound when she was only five years old, which she said a symbol of elegance and decency.

“Labor women never bind their feet. They will lose balance when they work in the farmland. But it is different for girls who don’t need to work. With a pair of small, new-moon-like feet, girls look extraordinarily graceful and depending on that, others know your family environment.” When I looked at great-grandmother’s deformed feet, even with socks on, I felt I could see the distorted bones. While thinking at that, my own feet soured and ached. Great-grandmother said she wanted to go to the toilet and asked me to help her put on her shoes—they are as small as my palm. She grabbed my arm—her long nails hurt me, but I didn’t tell her. “Binding feet, keeping long finger nails are the girl’s manners at that time. Men love that.” She said.

Great-grandmother’s marriage was arranged when she was not even born, with Kim’s family in Peking (the old name of Beijing used from 1928 to 1949). Kim’s family had a royal background, for the Ancient Lady was the descendant of Manchu Royal Family, Asinholo. When it came to the generation of the Ancient Lady’s son, there was actually no bound between the family with the Qing Dynasty which was ended almost 20 years ago. The Master ran a machine factory which was owned by foreign people and he was the one who determined to let his son marry to my great-grandmother. It was weird that such an honorable family was willing to arrange the child marriage with a landowner in the rural area of Peking. But according to my great-grandmother’s statements, this consideration aimed at repaying her father’s kindness, for he saved Kim’s Ancient Master while the old Master traveled to their village. How real this explanation was is not important. No one knew why the wealthy Kim Master went to countryside for travel. No one knew whether he was attacked by robbers or attacked by wild animal. No one knew that the one who saved his life was my great-grandmother’s father, instead of the servants and slaves of Kim. Anyway, the result was, great-grandmother

was married to the youngest grandson of the Ancient Lady in Kim's family, who was even two years younger than her.

My great-grandmother never worried about anything before she was 14. In her 14<sup>th</sup> birthday dinner, she found her elder brother who had the same mother with her, failed to show up. Later she knew that her brother had been addicted to opium for half a year. As soon as she knew the fact, she felt a huge cloud began to shadow her life and future which once should be as prosperous as the life in the past fourteen years.

Within one year, her brother had wasted most of the family's wealth on opium. Later, he sold the land and the antiques without telling his parents. Subsequently, they had nothing to sell and the family forced to move to a smaller house. Afterwards, he tried to deprive the dowry of my great-grandma, who was his dearest little sister previously.

He broke into her room when he was out of opium, regardless of his sister who was scared to death. He pulled out all her drawers and kicked over her wooden case. "Where is your dowry?! Where do you hide it?" he yelled at her, with his red eyes, like a beast. My great-grandmother of course wouldn't tell the place where she hid the only valuable things she owned. The brother suddenly grabbed his sister's shoulder and shouted to her in a crazy, mean tone. "Why don't you marry to Kim now? In doing this you will get money from your husband for me to buy opium!" My great-grandmother, under a dreadful pain in her shoulder, shivered like a leaf. "Brother, I am only fifteen this year. It is illegal to get married at that age. I have to wait one more year until I am sixteen..."

"After that he hit me in my face and I fainted." My great-grandmother recalled. "I hate opium. It ruined my brother and my life."

Great-grandmother ought to have more than three trunks of dowry.

However, when she finally married to Kim, she only brought half a trunk dowry with her. Kim's family was a respectable household which had a great dignity in the city, so the Ancient Lady didn't break the betrothal even if my great-grandmother's family corrupted during the years.

My great-grandmother never met her husband and knew nothing about him or his family. Rich, rich, rich—this is the only thing she anticipated her future life. Her husband had one elder brother and one elder sister who had married to Zhejiang province two years ago. When stepped into Kim's household with no servant and only a half-empty trunk, my great-grandmother felt she did not dare to rise up her head before her mother-in-law, father-in-law, and especially the wife of her husband's brother, who came from another wealthy family in Peking.

The most impressive thing in great-grandmother's memory was Kim's expressionless face on the wedding. His body seemed stiff when the new couple bowed to each other. Great-grandmother stole a glimpse and found his round face showed constraint, which made the bride more nervous. After they finished all the ritual and went to their own bedroom, she noticed the only expression on her husband's face had gone. Eyes half closed, lips tightly closed, hands rested on the edge of the bed, the groom looked like a plaster sculpture in a red wedding robe. "Blow out the candle." He said. "It's time for sleep."

My great-grandmother was an intelligent girl who got accustomed to her new life in the first year of her marriage. She learned to make the traditional Manchu dessert to please the Ancient Lady. She learned how to play mah-jong and often helped her mother-in-law to win when they played with other wealthy ladies. As for her sister-in-law who was a snob, she helped her to paint the nails using the pink garden balsam and bought dress materials for her to make chi-pao. She seemed to have the innate ability to be a wife in such a great household like Kim's.

My grandmother said she had no impression about her father. She only remembered her mother told her that he was a journalist. My great-grandmother gave birth to her first child, which was my grandmother after one year of her marriage. It was the third girl infant in the family and everyone, especially the Ancient Lady and the Master expected for a male infant.

I remembered when I was young and was the only child in my family, my grandmother looked forward to a grandson eagerly, which I guessed was exactly what my great-grandmother's thought at that time. As a pair of couple could only have one child in 1990s, my grandmother put all her hopes on my aunt, who was the younger sister of my mother. The tune she used when she complained to my mother that she didn't bear a male child, later I figured out symbolized the sense of insecurity.

“Do you remember when you were in elementary school, your grandmother repeated the same thing when we visited her that she never have the fortune to possess a grandson or a son in her life?” This summer vacation, my mom asked me when she helped me to cut my hair. “She was such an intolerable old lady at that time. I think it was partly due to your great-grandmother. Till now, she held the opinion that girls are inferior to boys.”

“That's how she influenced my grandmother. Did this kind of mentality ever have an impact on you?”

“Absolutely not! I am satisfied to have a daughter who achieved even more than her male counterparts. However...”

I already knew what she was going to say and I interrupted. “Mom, why don't you let me to wash my face and neck first? The dropped hair makes me really itch.”

Women should be accompanied by men, or it was essential in a woman's life to have a complete family. That was what my mother told

me since I grew up. “Don’t perform so harsh in college. You need to get a boyfriend to marry!” It was a pity that neither my grandmother nor my mother had father’s company in their childhood. My mother explained that it may attribute to my grandmother’s flaws in personality which led to her divorce. My grandmother’s flaws may come from her no-father experience, but why it had such an influence? Nobody in my family could answer it. As far as I knew, it was the mark that great-grandmother left to her.

Great-grandmother’s brother died of excessive opium when her daughter was three years old. Till now, her only burden was to give birth to a male child. The first half of the year 1937 seemed to be her turning point which shifted from bad luck to a promising prospect. Firstly, she didn’t need to give money to her greedy, opium-addicted brother. Secondly, she found she was pregnant again.

This news lighted her hope, the Ancient Lady’s hope, as well as the Master’s hope, everyone apart from her husband, Kim. As a journalist who had an occupational sensitivity towards national situation, Kim knew it was definitely not a good year for the country. Since Japan intruded China and occupied the three provinces in the Northeast China six years ago, the rapacious Japan coveted more land during these years.

Kim spent a little time at home since the beginning of 1937. My great-grandmother stayed at home every day and made a girl servant read newspaper for her. She could hear Kim’s name every now and then as the author of the report she heard. When she visited her mother-in-law’s room every afternoon, she would explain that Kim worked hard and wrote lots of reports in the newspaper when the Lady asked her why she could not see Kim at home in most of the cases. After the three-year marriage, it was manifest for great-grandmother to know the reason why her husband didn’t stay at home was not only because of

his job. He didn't like to be alone with her. That's the root cause. Even though he didn't have to go to work on weekends, he seldom talked to great-grandmother.

I believed the longest conversation between Kim and great-grandmother happened not long before Kim's "disappearance".

"How did you feel today? My mother said she would give you more gen-seng and cubilose to add more nutrition for you and the baby." Kim said to great-grandmother while he was reading the newspaper.

"Pretty good. Tomorrow I will thank mother in person." Great-grandmother relied. She was busy with the embroidery on the clothes she made for the baby.

Long silence.

Great-grandmother strived to find a topic. "Have you seen our daughter today? Ying said she wanted to have dinner with you. Do you have time tomorrow night? If you can dine with us, I will ask the cook to make something you like."

Kim's tone altered tender when he mentioned the daughter. "Where is she now?"

"I guess she is asleep already. The Nurse has taken her to sleep before you were back."

Longer silence.

Great-grandmother felt exhausted at the feeling that no matter how hard she tried, she always failed to break the invisible ice between her and her husband. "O-Len!" she called her girl servant. "Prepare the bath water for me!"

As soon as she was about to stand up, Kim folded the newspaper and called her name abruptly. "I have something to say to you. Can you give me several minutes?"

It was utterly unusual. Nevertheless, great-grandmother sat down.

It was her first time to look into her husband's eyes directly. His black pupils seemed deep and mysterious when she stared at them, and brought her the ominous feeling.

“Today, a British journalist came to our office. When we chatted, I found their women were gallant when they made decisions. He told me that in their country, a woman can divorce a man if she feels the marriage is hopeless. I wonder if women in our country are brave enough to do things like that, I mean to manage their life and run away from the control of feudalism. Actually I believe many women in our nation have begun to follow the new trend in which female is an independent and free individual.....”

It was the summer night in June. Great-grandmother felt that it was hard for her to breathe in the hot, damp air. She felt that she couldn't hear what her husband said later. She just knew that her husband got gradually excited as he went on as if he was doing a speech.

Great-grandmother reached the tea cup with a slight-shaking hand. She gulped nervously and grasped her protruding belly unconsciously. “I am an ordinary woman, not the kind of female hero or female revolutionist you interviewed. “ She said desperately, “I don't know how British women do when she knows that her husband neither loves her nor cares for her. What I know is I can't leave the home. I can't get mad because I am bearing a baby. I can't decide what I am going to do. I can't do anything.”

Kim was eager to persuade her, “No, you can! You are smart and you can do all those things you said!” His voice was getting louder.

“No! I CAN NOT!” Great-grandmother said firmly, stood up and went into her bedroom without looking at her husband. It was difficult for her to hold her tears, but it was the last mark of her self-esteem and dignity. Kim was a self-centered coward. He composed the great burden to his innocence wife who struggled humbly to survive in this



complicated great family. The one who forced them to get married was not her, why she should be the one to ask for a divorce? The one who was well-educated was not her, why she should be the one to follow the new trend that she knew nothing about? The one who urgently needed to transform the situation was not her, why she should be the one to bring up the ridiculous idea which would brought her nothing else than humiliation and contempt?

When I asked my grandmother whether she had any impression of her father, she said no. “Your great-grandma said he died. Also, she once said he joined the army. There was another time that she said he went to abroad. After that, I never asked again.”

When I asked my mother whether she had any impression of her father, she said no. “Your grandmother divorced when I was five. I have never seen my father since then.” History was incredibly similar when it happened between the generations. “You are so fortunate that you have a father.” My mother said this to me for many years.

In June 1937, my great-grandfather disappeared from the family. As my great-grandmother said, he joined the military, or died, or went to abroad.

In July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1937, the Anti-Japanese War broke out. The great Kim family turned to be refugees and had to relocate to my great-grandmother’s hometown, the rural area.

In either August or the end of July, great-grandmother miscarried. It’s said that it was a male infant.

In 1938, great-grandmother remarried to a peasant whose family name was Lau. That’s why my grandmother’s first name was Lau, instead of Kim.

It was sarcastic that great-grandmother did the things her ex-husband asked her to do, however the man would never have the chance to witness the fact.

“Your great-grandma thinks they are useless. Why don't you keep them? It's said that they are from her dowry when she married to Kim.” When I went to grandmother's home this winter vacation, she gave me some small objects once belonged to my great-grandmother. “It's absurd she tried all efforts to keep these things during the Cultural Revolution, however threw them away now.”

Those objects included a few silver hair pins, a piece of embroidery cut from the wedding dress, a pair of jade earrings which were broken (I guess they once should be butterfly shape). The most valuable thing I believed would be the five silver coins used during the time of National Republic of China.

“I was born rich and later became poor owing to the opium. I married to the rich and later married to the poor.” Great-grandmother summed up her life experience briefly and plainly like this. “Man is not important. Money is not important. Reputation is not important. Decency never lasts long. You can never tell when they bring you fortune and when they bring you disaster.”

“It would be more perfect that I have a grandson. I bet your mother thinks so even though she never admits.” Grandmother regarded this as her unchangeable pity. “I wish you can bear a male great-grandson for me. But I'm afraid whether I can wait until that day.”

“I never mention my father before you. It's partly because I don't remember him, but it also because it hurts to think of the reality. You grandmother is not a good example as a wife or a mother, don't inherit her bad personality. It's your life-long obligation to give your child a father.” My mother never stopped to instill the family value, for she concerned about my disposition, sometimes as stubborn as my grandmother.

In the history of any household, there must be some women experience a fluctuated life; some women fail to get her husband's love;

some women grow strong in mind and harsh in character due to the lack of father's love; some women expect a male descendant; some women look forward to a completed family; some women who have an family bond with them, write down this tale.

The author's words:

Inspired by the anecdotes of my great-grandmother told by my mom, I composed this story. As it is a story, it undoubtedly combines truth and imagination. For instance, my great-grandmother never married to the royal family of Kim, and she was never dumped by her husband. But I'm sure I've seen some of her dowry and I knew she was once brought up in a wealthy land owner's family which, unfortunately, was later devastated by her brother's opium-addiction. In terms of myself, I always find family stories fascinating and attractive. The habits, repercussions and spirit that are passed down through generations are inter-related, which is exactly the way how they are kept and honored by the offspring. My great-grandmother passed away last year, on the age of 97. I'll remember her and miss her. May her rest in peace.