

April 11, 2008

### **Zhang Pei Eulogy**

Dear Family and Friends,

Zhang Pei was born August 6, 1921, in Xi'an, China, to a prominent family. Her father was a Chinese doctor. She was the youngest in the family of six and as a testament to perhaps the good relationship between her father and mother all her siblings were from the same parents. Her father passed away early as well as the oldest son leaving the second brother and his wife to raise Zhang Pei. From the stories I've heard, Zhang Pei's second brother doted on the young girl as there was a lot of guilt of not having the father around which did not really help the precocious young girl from not growing up extremely spoiled by the attention. Years later she would confide in me that one of her largest regrets was the trouble she gave her brother and sister-in-law.

As was more typical of the time, Zhang Pei married in her teens to a member of the Bei family, a very prominent and at that time reputed as the wealthiest family in Suzhou. The head of the Bei family was a banker and one of the early directors of the original Bank of China. Their most famous offspring is international architect I.M. Pei. Zhang Pei knew of this family from her 3<sup>rd</sup> brother who was himself very accomplished. He worked for Li Yoren, who was a central figure in KMT. (The third brother also supposedly penned Sun Yat Sen's proclamation which has been repeated several times throughout history. He was also among 12 people to be selected to go to Russia for studies. Chiang Ching-Kuo was in this group as well.) She was only around 15 or 16 years of age when she married the first time and traveled with a theater group to places far and wide...Kunming, Yunan, Shanghai, Xianggang (Hong Kong), Annan (present day Vietnam), etc.

These five years were an exciting time and I am sure there are many stories that I know not of. She told me bits and pieces about it though...how she would entertain the Japanese and then being approached by them after the show to sit with them for drinks, watching people beheaded on the streets and airplane bombs landing above her. By her accounts, her husband was not around much and very much a philandering playboy. She said he knew how to

dress, knew how to play every single gambling game and was a frequent user of opium and other drugs. She had a daughter with her 1<sup>st</sup> husband during this time. The two did not have much time together and it appeared that once the husband had contracted a STD, she soon left the marriage and went back to Xi'an and joined the cultural arm of Huangpu (Whampoa) Military academy. This is where she would meet her 2<sup>nd</sup> husband, my grandfather, Wang Chaofan.

Wang Chaofan was enamored with Zhang Pei. He would sit and watch her perform night after night. He himself already had a daughter just a few year's younger than Zhang Pei. Zhang Pei agreed to finally marry Wang Chaofan without the full support of her family. They did not think a military man was a proper husband for the Zhang family. In their wedding picture, only 2<sup>nd</sup> brother is present from her family. About one year after marriage, Zhang Pei delivered Wang Shihong and the following year Wang Shiyi, my father. A year later China fell to the Communist and the family fled to Taiwan. The year was 1949 and Zhang Pei was just 28.

The Taiwan years while important can be told easily by my parent's generation well enough. Zhang Pei had her 3<sup>rd</sup> child, a daughter. During this time, the three kids studied and received the best of the Wang family's resources. Her oldest son was the first to leave Taiwan and went off to MIT to study and later becoming a professor at Kent State and a renowned scholar in his field. Her second son stayed in Taiwan and studied architecture, married my mother, a beautiful Sandong woman, and then also immigrated to the US in the late 70's. The youngest daughter married a Guangdong Ren who would open several restaurants and other business ventures in the greater Boston area. Years later with all of her children in the US and her husband long past, Zhang Pei would have a 3<sup>rd</sup> leg in her life becoming a US citizen. Jumping from her children's household to household, she was also able to see as much of America as she did of China.

Seeing that her kids were busy with their own lives and wanting to be reunited with her ancestral home and in particular with her 1<sup>st</sup> daughter with the Bei Family, Zhang Pei returned to China upon the time Deng Xiaoping opened China to the world once again around 1980.

Her last 28 years was primarily spent in her hometown of Xi'an and is the final chapter in Zhang Pei's life. Here she reacquainted herself with old family and friends and made just as many new friends with her magnetic personality. I had the opportunity to make several visits here during this time and while all of her immediate family was ½ way around the world, we all knew that she was having a grand time with her social circle.

The story I tell you is just a brief gloss of a woman who truly lived an extraordinary life. My grandmother, Nai Nai, was a "larger than life" figure with a brain and wit that moved as quickly as a humming bird. She either respected you or did not (and there were only a few that she respected). She could as easily make you laugh or cry. You knew where you stood with grandma at all times. While she held little interest in books or other scholarly endeavors, you only need to meet her to know that she was a woman of high intelligence. She could outpace most people by 3 steps. And you do not need to look far from her off springs who are all highly intelligent and accomplished men. She was progressive and also yet a traditionalist. Her own vices included drinking, smoking, gambling, vanity and, yet she was a traditionalist in that she would have none of that for her children, none of them pursue these hobbies. She like many other traditional Chinese women also favored her 1<sup>st</sup> son and her 1<sup>st</sup> grandson, me, over the growing pains of other siblings and grandchildren. And I can safely say that many of her daughter-in-laws don't have many positive things to say about grandmother.

But ultimately "what of it all?" Nai Nai never played the quiet dutiful wife role very well. Her influence for better or for worse may have been the single dominant force in her family's life. We all think of ourselves as being a part of "Wang Jia" but ultimately it may be more aptly called Zhang Pei's jia.

About five years ago, Nai Nai made one of her rare US visits. As she had gotten older, she traveled less and less. I made the journey to Kent, OH, where I had lived during my early teenage years. It was her birthday and she was visiting Uncle Paul. Knowing that most of her years were already behind her, I took the opportunity to write her a thank you letter. I wanted to make sure that if I never had a chance to see her again that she would know how much I appreciated the love that she showed me and what she has meant to me. Doing so made all the difference for me as I write this today.

As I rushed off the airplane from Xi'an airport, my father and I rushed to the hospital to find Nai Nai unconscious and on a breathing tube. The next morning after some standard care of her body by the nursing attendants, her body began to reject the oxygen that was delivered by the small tube through her nose. It was to be her final moments. In just less than 10 minutes later, grandma's heart gave way and she passed from us.

As for me, I am at peace with it all. I am glad that I was able to make it here in time to see grandma off. It felt like she was waiting for her family

to come. I am so happy and grateful that Nai Nai lived a full life and that her final days were largely without pain. I'll remember the small things like how she liked spicy foods, dancing, playing mahjong, clothes, jewelry and all things of beauty. She also loved to watch the machinations of J.R. Ewing of the famous soap opera Dallas and tennis star John McEnroe throw his temper tantrums and her fears of snakes and for that fact worms which made her knees weak or how she lacked any sense of direction and was always impatient. But most of all I will always remember the love and care of a woman who doted on me the day I came into the world. Much of the happiness of my early childhood is due to my grandmother. This attention and love enriched me and is a part of my own growth and development. I have so many warm and funny memories of my Nai Nai some shared in our private talks throughout the years. Still today I can hum the lullaby that she sang to me every evening as a child. Even as a young adult, she would come in and out of my life when I needed her the most and played the role of a surrogate mother when my mother was not around. In my visits to China, I was hoping to take care of her more, but she continued to take care of me by cracking fresh walnuts for me or having a doctor make a house call and putting me on IV when I caught my regular Xi'an fever. It was as if this was one of her duties in life. In all, she saw to it that I would lead a good life and have a good future, and this I will never forget.

In the fall of her life, her hearing was nearly gone and communicating with her difficult. We would communicate primarily with me sending her photos of my travels and the occasional holiday phone call. Although details of my life were probably not fully absorbed, she was always happy to hear from me. Her last words to me were over the phone. She asked me if I knew that she loved me and I would say "yes Nai Nai, yes Nai Nai" She would call out my name "Xiao Yong Yong, Xiao Yong Yong, Nai Nai ai ni, Nai Nai ai ni."

My answer today and forever...

"Nai Nai, Xiao Yong ai ni..." Rest in peace dear grandma.

Your grandson,

Wang Ji Yong

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Final thoughts:

I want to personally thank all of those who brought much happiness to Nai Nai.

- Uncle Paul, thank you for taking care of grandma for most of her life. You are the oldest son, and she was so proud of you. I know that you

have your own very special relationship with grandma and probably know her better than anyone.

- And also, thanks to my father, who despite past arguments with grandma and receiving less as a child, in her final 4 or so years, you offered your own conciliatory tone with her. You were also the first to rush to grandmother's side. You are truly a good and dutiful son.