

1-1-2012

Grandparental Death: Through the Lens of an Asian Child

Wing-Fu Lai

The University of Hong Kong, rori0610@graduate.hku.hk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Lai, W. (2012). Grandparental Death: Through the Lens of an Asian Child. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(1), 175-190. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2012.1813>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.

A promotional banner for the Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate at Nova Southeastern University. The banner has a dark blue background on the left with the NSU logo and text: "Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate", "Indulge in Culture", "Exclusively Online • 18 Credits", and a "LEARN MORE" button. On the right, a group of six diverse people are sitting on a stone ledge in front of a building with "NOVA SOUTHEASTERN" visible on the wall.

Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate
Indulge in Culture
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits
LEARN MORE

NSU
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

Grandparental Death: Through the Lens of an Asian Child

Abstract

Bereavement has been extensively studied over the years, yet scholarly work depicting, with the first-person perspective, the experience of childhood bereavement is severely lacking. The research question I set out to answer here is: What is it like as an Asian child to experience bereavement following grandparental death? As such, self-introspection was exercised, and this, together with the diaries and free writings generated at the time of my grandma's death, was used as the basis for autoethnographic reflections. It is hoped that my story presented here can offer a psychological portrayal of an Asian child enduring grandparental death, and illuminate the grandmother-grandson relationship in a Chinese society.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Bereavement, Grandparenthood, Narrative, Qualitative Research

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Grandparental Death: Through the Lens of an Asian Child

Wing-Fu Lai

The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China

Bereavement has been extensively studied over the years, yet scholarly work depicting, with the first-person perspective, the experience of childhood bereavement is severely lacking. The research question I set out to answer here is: What is it like as an Asian child to experience bereavement following grandparental death? As such, self-introspection was exercised, and this, together with the diaries and free writings generated at the time of my grandma's death, was used as the basis for autoethnographic reflections. It is hoped that my story presented here can offer a psychological portrayal of an Asian child enduring grandparental death, and illuminate the grandmother-grandson relationship in a Chinese society. Key Words: Autoethnography, Bereavement, Grandparenthood, Narrative, Qualitative Research.

This article is an autoethnographic portrait depicting my bereaved experience following the death of my maternal grandmother, which is my first memory related to the passing of a significant person. The objective of this portrait is not only to explore, with the first-person point of view, the profound experience of a child during such a critical period, but also to illuminate the grandmother-grandson relationship in a Chinese society. Readers are invited to tap into your emotional wealth, and feel my story by placing yourselves as a *wounded storyteller* (Frank, 1995). It is hoped that this article can provide you an insight into what would be psychologically needed by a child enduring the loss of a family member.

The Rationale of Using Autoethnography

Bereavement is a distressing experience in anticipating and adjusting to living after a significant relationship has been lost through death (Christ, Bonanno, Malkinson, & Rubin, 2002; Parkes & Weiss, 1983). It includes the internal adaptation of an individual, the mourning process, and alterations in external arrangements of one's living (Christ et al., 2002). Bereavement is a dynamic, rather than orderly and linear, process in which concurrent and overlapping reactions of an individual may recur at any time (Grossman, Clark, Gross, Halstead, & Pennington, 1995). During the process, individuals will experience grief with different intensity and duration, and discharge it through different means. In fact, grief and mourning are part of the healing process at that significant moment, enabling one to live with the reality of loss (Bowlby, 1980; Freud, 1957).

Over the years, much effort has been paid to understand bereavement and resilience (d'Epina, Cavalli, & Guillet, 2009; Paulsen, 2008; Pfund, 2005). For example, Barrera and colleagues (2007) have attempted to unveil the bereavement pattern of parents who lost a child to drowning and illnesses. Recently, Chapple & Ziebland (2010) also performed a qualitative study to understand the emotions of those bereaved in

traumatic circumstances, and to explore how they decided whether or not to view the body of the deceased. Despite these endeavors, most of the present studies mainly focus on adults' perspectives. How the bereaved process is manifested in children has seldom been inquired. One of the few scholarly efforts to this is Grossman et al.'s (1995) paper in which sixteen prepubertal children and caretakers were interviewed to examine their grief, trauma, and behavior within 25 months of paternal suicide. Another example is Iglesias and Iglesias's (2005) research, which demonstrated that hypnotherapy could alleviate the symptomatology of childhood posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by the traumatic loss of paternal figures and facilitate the spontaneous onset of the normal grief process among pediatric PTSD patients. No doubt, these works have furthered our understanding of various reactions exhibited during childhood bereavement (Irizarry, 1992). However, these studies were either on children of parental death (Grossman et al., 1995), which is an unusual traumatic death in the child's context, or on those undertaking psychotherapy during the course of the study (Furman, 1974; Iglesias & Iglesias, 2005; Irizarry, 1992; Kliman, 1977; Van Eerdewegh, Bieri, Parrilla, & Clayton, 1982). Attempts have seldom been made to research on the emotional tension borne by children following a more typical bereavement situation, such as grandparental death.

Further, bereavement is a painful life event from which few people are spared. It is not simply a research object that could be understood just by disembodied it on the bench apathetically. It is a manifestation of connectedness between humans, and an emotional process desiring empathy from us as living beings. Unfortunately, until now studies on bereavement have been confined mainly to the traditional logical-scientific mode of knowledge (Bruner, 1986), in which the investigators as *totally detached strangers* rely solely on realist forms of representation (Hayano, 1979; Sparkes, 1995; Van Maanen, 1988). As such, alternative interpretations are closed down (Smith, 1999), and subjects' emotional experiences in bereavement are flattened and buried. However, first-person accounts on such experiences are needed as they help to unfold the emotional core of the bereaved process. Here I choose to fill this gap by using the autoethnographic approach, which is a reflexive variant of the field research qualitative tradition. In autoethnography, personal accounts of the inquirer as an insider are used reflexively to gain insights into the broader culture in which the experience occurs (Denzin, 1997; Vickers, 2002). This can inspire readers to recontextualize another person's world of experiences, and enable knowledge translation between readers and the inquirer (Bochner & Ellis, 1996).

Over the past decades, topics of autoethnographic writings span a wide range, including prison life (Svensson, 1997), teaching (Pelias, 2003), self-identity (Berg, 2002; Jaffe, 1997), and alcoholism (Grant, 2010), but accounts depicting childhood bereavement following the death of extended family members (e.g. grandparents) are lacking. As such, the research question I set out to answer in this paper is: What is it like as an Asian child to experience bereavement following grandparental death? It is my intention to offer, with the first-person perspective, a psychological portrayal of an Asian child during the loss of one of his most significant family members, and to illuminate the Chinese culture under study (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As far as autoethnographic writing is concerned, a brief delineation of the inquirer's life that pertains to the research is always needed so as to allow readers to readily appreciate the context in which subsequent data is presented (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In the following section, I am

going to present a brief introduction to myself, and introduce the background in which I went through the passing of my grandma.

The Context of This Work

I completed my Bachelor of Science in the University of Hong Kong, and returned to my alma mater to pursue my doctoral studies. Throughout my tertiary education life, I have been trained not only in biological science, but have also exposed to a range of research inquiries in social and health sciences by working with my enlightening mentor, who has nurtured me with skills in qualitative research and guided me as both a writer and a scholar. During this process, I have read extensively on varied scholarly discourses concerning mental health, especially family bereavement. Family bereavement, though, is a concomitant part of each person's life, it is also "a darkness impenetrable to the imagination of the unbereaved" (Murdoch, 1976, p. 40) and has a strong impact on the social fabric as a whole. The latter is especially true in my living environment where familial relationships are heavily valued as the foundation of a society.

Since I was born, I have been living in Hong Kong and was brought up in the Chinese culture, which is widely deemed relational and interdependent-oriented. The relational and interdependent nature of the Chinese culture was depicted in some literature, which suggested that, compared to Western people, people from the East are generally more indirect in communication (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994), more aware of their public features (e.g., status and role) and relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994), and more social-bound in a way that they seldom demarcate clear boundaries between themselves and the others (Ho, 1995). In China, death is commonly considered as a negative life event unless it is what we called "*Bai Xi Shi*" in Chinese, which means the natural termination of a content life with no outstanding life regrets (Zheng, 1999). Contrary to the Western belief that death is the final station of life and there is a hope for a reunion of family in Heaven, the Chinese culture has been largely influenced by the Buddhist concept of transmigration. It views death as only an intermittent stop (Shuang, 1993), and the soul of the deceased needs to enter the nether world, receiving judgment from the god of death, *Yan Wang*. Those with merits will get reincarnated into a better life, and the sinful will be sentenced to tortures (Shuang, 1993). As the next stop of life after death is indefinite, the reunion of family is hardly possible. The death of a significant person to a Chinese equates to a perpetual loss of that relationship in one's life.

For this reason, "death" is a taboo in the Chinese culture, and a topic being intentionally avoided in conversations. This is especially true when someone is dying because discussing death itself is believed to hasten the person's death (Xu, 2007). Being fed on such beliefs by parents, friends and relatives since birth, my mind had been preoccupied with the Chinese concept of death even when I was small. Though I received Christian education from my kindergarten thereafter, the Western belief of death on me had limited impact. At that time, death appeared to be far away from my real life. I did not imagine that it could happen in my world someday. It was with this unprepared state of mind and the Chinese concept of death that I went through the bereaved experience as portrayed in this article.

Methodology

Emotional Recall and Thematic Analysis

As my grandmother's death occurred around twenty years ago, in order to reclaim some of the possibly incomplete memories, diaries and free writings (such as *spontaneous notes*) written at that time were retrieved to provide me not only valuable information to the mourning process (Smith, 1999), but also imagery to place me back in the situation and recall events, thoughts, and dialogues in that period (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Apart from this, self-introspection was exercised as soliloquy, and was guided by the following questions, which were modified from the questions used in Meert, Thurston, & Briller's (2005) previous study on bereaved experiences. The process of introspection was audio-recorded and then transcribed:

1. What was your grandma like and why she was important?
2. How did her death impact on you in the past and at the present?
3. What was the bereaved experience like during the loss of your grandma?
4. Thinking back to her hospitalization and the last days of her life, what psychological, physical and social needs did you experience at that time?
5. How much and what sort of information did you need in that period?
6. How did your significant others and those around react to her death at that time?
7. How was the event meant to you and what did you do to cope with your grandma's passing?

After introspection, words and sentences (which were referred to as *significant statements*) relating to the incident were extracted. Meanings were formulated for these significant statements, and the formulated meanings were conceptualized into themes. In total three main themes were identified: (1) recurrence of memories; (2) awareness of the fragility of life; and (3) adaptation to the reality. These three themes, together with my diaries and free writings, were used as the basis for subsequent autoethnographic reflections.

Poetic and Narrative Representations

Autoethnography takes different forms such as poetry, fictions, novels, photographic essays, social science prose, journals, and stories (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In this paper, I chose to translate my story, along with the meanings behind as formulated above in the analysis process, into poetic discourse. This approach has previously been adopted by various scholars to delineate their experiences and feelings (Brady, 2003; Sullivan, 2000; Tillmann-Healy, 1996). Borroff (1993) stated that, "poems exist in the realm of making (mimesis) rather than knowing or doing; they are representations of human experience" (p. 1032). Poems cannot only help to condense my lived experiences into a more explicit and figurative form, but can also chronicle emotional information

resonating with readers across regional boundaries. As noted earlier by DeShanzer (1986) “poetry is above all a concentration of the power of language, which is the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe. It is as if forces we can lay claim to in no other way become present to us in sensuous form” (p. 138).

Other than poetic representation, narrative reflection was also exercised so as to provide a fuller picture of my bereavement. Narrative reflection is a method to explore meaning as a social process (Feest, 2009), and a privileged practice to share the experience of embodiment (Frank, 1996, 1997). During the reflective process, the themes formulated during self-introspection, together with the physical details, thoughts, dialogue, and emotional profiles as depicted by my diaries and free writings, were integrated into narrative text. To help reconstructing details of possibly hazy memories (Jago, 1996) and enhance the trustworthiness of the account reported, details of some events happened in the period under study were confirmed from time to time by discussing with my mother, with whom I have gone through the emotional distress at the time of my grandma’s death.

As this paper adopted the autoethnographic method of inquiry in which I was both the investigator and the informant, no human participant other than my own self was involved as a research subject. Ethical approval was not applicable. Notwithstanding this, in order to ensure that those people who were mentioned in this article were well protected, their real names were disguised so as to lessen the chance of recognizability. Moreover, a draft of this paper was presented to main characters appeared in my autoethnographic account so that they could provide feedbacks if necessary.

Autoethnographic Reflections

Recurrence of Memories

In July, 1990, my grandma died of pneumonia complications after an acute stroke. *Wan Chai*¹, where she lived with my uncle’s family, becomes the monument of her absence to me. Even till now, on many occasions when I pass by, unsolicited memories of her also circulate around my head. The checked dark blue linen shirt she used to wear, her gentle voice in speech, and the time I have lost her...a torrent of scenes flash along.

In the past of China, perfumes were expensive imports that could only be afforded by the “higher nobility”. My grandma was brought up only in a destitute family in which earning enough to live was also a struggle. She, as many ordinary Chinese women of the older generations, loved to put the white champak blossoms into her pockets instead to scent her body with fragrance. The scent of the flower is rich and sweet. It was the aroma my grandma loved the most, and had accompanied her for much of her life. I can never forget the scent of white champak blossoms wafting up from her body, her skin and her hair. Sometimes one loves a flower’s aroma, a piece of music or something else is not necessarily because of the thing itself, but it is the story behind that makes one love it. White champak blossoms have become my favorite flower since the death of my grandma. I remember in the year after her absence, I felt the dolor and desolation surged within every time when I smelled that scent over the street. But I still loved it, as accompanying with my tears were vivid images of my grandma who would revitalize once again in my mind.

The White Champak Blossoms

*I can smell in every single minute
The scent of white champak
Blossoms wafting up
From your wrinkled skinny hands
To the dust suspending in the metropolis,
Escorting in every twilight
Our shabby second home in Wan Chai.*

*Anytime passing by, among the crowds
Flowing, in a trance
I always see a once familiar sight
Of your back, of a dignified matron
Who, wearing the checked linen shirt,
Hobbles along the Spring Garden Street
With the fragrance of the blossoms.*

*Are you vexed by squabbles
And doubts among the den in the city?
You departed in such a hurry, forsaking
The unfading blossoms
Of the melancholy white champak,
Whose fragrance lingers
Inside your sandalwood casket on satin.*

*Never can you give me the blossoms
As a present anymore,
But every time in our balcony
When the white champak watered
By your daughter burgeons,
I know it is you to remind me
Of the memento, our beloved fragrance.*

Awareness of the Fragility of Life

My grandma was one of my guardians in my kindergarten and primary school years. At that time, my mum and dad had to work day and night to get the family going. My kindergarten and primary school were half-day schools, and I took the morning session. Every day after school my mum would bring me to my grandma's house, where I spent the rest of the day to wait for my mum to pick me home in the evening. I admit I was a naughty kid, but to my grandma it seemed that I could do nothing wrong. She never scolded me in any way. More than this was that she was the one I sought whenever I was reprimanded by my parents. From her I knew I could find my shelter. No matter how strong the storm was, I felt safe as I was with her. However, to a kid like me at that

time, everything I had appeared to be taken-for-granted. I did have learnt about the concept of death from my parents, peers, and other information sources. However, death appeared to be so distant to me and to my family in my mind. I did scare I would lose my grandma someday and had this vivid imagination; yet I was still very naive when this seemed to be so remote from reality.

In 1990, it was a day of a summer. When my uncle came back home, my grandma was found fainted on the ground. I did not witness this happening, but was only told by mum who, catching my hands on the street as she received the phone call, burst into tears. She brought me to the hospital. But I was too small to enter the ward. I could only wait in the lobby and waited for one hour. That hour was the longest hour I had ever lived. Knowing that my grandma had fallen to the floor yet being kept away from the latest news was a torment to me. I was really too small to bear the sense of nervousness. I desperately wanted to cry. However, as a boy who was brainwashed by the saying “big boys don’t cry” from others, I attempted to suppress my tears. I did not want to show my weakness in front of others. I was a “big boy”...at least this was what I thought at that time.

Later from my mum’s mouth I knew that my grandma had a stroke. Definitely, I did not know what it was in those days, but I understood it was something *nasty*, *critical* and *dangerous*. As my kindergarten was a Christian school, on the first date I stepped into a school, I was already told by my teachers that we should rely on God. I did not know whether it worked or not, but since my grandma’s admission to the hospital, I kept praying every night for metaphysical epiphanies. “My Heavenly Father, please save my grandma. I promise I will go to the Sunday school next week if she recovers by tomorrow”. This was what being written in my diary³. The way to pray at that time seems to be slightly pragmatic, but to a powerless child who had no bargaining power to strike for any wishes, it was my sincere prayer. Aside from my prayers, I also followed my mum to make wishes and pay tributes in different temples. I was too small at that moment to sense the exclusiveness among religions. As long as my mum said a certain religious practice could possibly save my grandma, I did not want to discount it.

Over the next several months, everyday waiting in the hospital lobby became one of my routines. I worried about my grandma, but to a kid like me, waiting for hours every day was also a painful experience. My worry over my grandma was fused with a strong sense of boredom during the long waiting hours. Seeing inside the ward through the window of the lobby, I desired not only my grandma to be discharged sooner, but also my mum to finish her visit faster. In that period, my mum’s mouth became the only narrow channel from which I could hear about my grandma’s conditions. I could never hear anything more than what my mum was willing to tell. In June, my grandma’s conditions worsened to the point that she no longer could control her excretion. “*Po-Po*² has to wear adult diapers now. You have to be good. Don’t let *Po-Po* worry about you.” My mum uttered as she went out of the ward. Her eyes were bloodshot. Honestly, I did not truly comprehend what incontinence could mean to a patient having a stroke. But I was desperate. At that point I wrote in my diary the following sentences³:

I know Po-Po’s conditions have worsened. I know she doesn’t have any signs of improvement even in the hospital. She loses control over her toilet needs. I worry about my grandma. I really want her back and want my

mum not to cry so often. My grandma is wonderful. Heavenly Father, she loves me so much. I love her. I want her come to be with me again.

Facing the worsening conditions of my grandma, I perceived how a body could be deteriorating. I felt powerless but I did expect the “adults” should be “powerful” enough to do something to reverse the situation. However, my expectation was frustrated once again when my dad told me, “*Po-Po vomited white foam this morning. People vomiting white foam cannot live long*”. My tears rolled down my face. The following excerpt was written in my diary on that date³:

I really, really, really, really do not want my grandma to leave me. I do not want her to die. I need her to take me to school. I need her to accompany me. I need her to bring me to the park where we used to play together. I need her as I cannot live without her.

At the night of the same day, I was shocked by a call. My mum told my dad that my grandma had passed away. At that juncture, I stayed in my room in total shock. After having a short moment in silence, my face went flush. I cried for real. “Big boy don’t cry”. This is what everyone in a Chinese society has told me since my birth. But I am simply a human being. At that moment, I could not be impassive. I was not a “big boy” and I did not pretend to be.

This was the first death in my family I had ever attended and was also the first time I closely felt the fragility and impermanence of life. I blamed on the Lord for not harkening my prayer, but much more than this was that I blamed on the powerlessness of myself. I sat alone in darkness, thinking, “Why did I not be a good boy when she was still alive? I could love her more, treat her better, listen to her more....why didn’t I do that?” Many questions flooded my mind. Just like how my tears flooded my eyes. Over the next few days, a torrent of scenes about my auld lang syne with my grandma flashed along. This was especially true when I was in silence. I understood this would make me cry again, but I just could not stop myself from reminiscing. The following was excerpted from a piece of free writing³ written around that period:

Po-Po, I miss you so much. From now on I will listen to you on everything and be a good boy. Po-Po, could you come back to my life? Po-Po, I miss you and love you. My mum shed her tears many times and so did I. She was desperate. Me too. Every time as I saw her crying, I also couldn’t control my tears.

Do you know if you leave me, no one will love me and care for me anymore? Po-Po, I am still waiting for you to take me out, to play with me, and to accompany me till I grow up. Po-Po, I wish I can be with you again. Can you hear me? You were, are and will be my dearest grandma. I will not stop missing you and loving you as what you did to me. I love you!

After the death of my grandma, I did not tell anyone, including my teachers, about her passing. Though sometimes in class, tears suddenly formed in my eyes when

unsolicited eruption of memories came, I did not ever slip out any shards of secrets even when teachers inquired. The world looked the same as what it had been before the date my grandma was away. However, I knew something deep inside my life was altered desperately, and at the end I was still the only one to face that challenge and recover from the pain. No one could help. All others could only be outsiders. Since my grandma was certified dead, my world has already been changed permanently. My grandma's death can never be reverted, and neither can my life. This is a one-way journey. Both my grandma and I have taken this journey. Things can never go back.

One Way

*Driving towards an abyss,
A vintage car vanished
With you and me,
Being submerged by
Dead silence.*

*A meteor rain poured down,
Reminding me of the luggage
Used to be on my seat.
Thoughts of mine were resigned
By my bumping heart undercoat.*

*Struggling to alight from the motor,
Yet no struggle to see jealousy and rancor.
An empty seat and an empty hope
Emerged at the arrival
Of the terminal.*

*Vague memories and a torn diary
Burgeoned to fill the rusted jalopy.
Being inundated by a dark illimitable ocean,
Everything thereafter would only exist
In an endless dream.*

*Letters and words mounded invisibly,
Reaching the inferno and back, yet
You and I and the phantom wheels
Moored to nothing
But only a cycle of life and death.*

Adaptation to the Reality

Recovery from bereavement was not an easy process. This was especially true to a kid. I took more than a week to subside my sadness, to accept the truth, to suppress the eruption of unsolicited memories, to survive the tremendous change, and to restart a new

life in which my grandma would be absent. The following quote was excerpted from a piece of free writing I found being produced in Clear Bright Festival that year³:

Po-Po, How are you? Several months have elapsed. During these days, I felt like an orphan. Po-Po, do you know how much I miss you these days? I learnt from my mum that you have already been to an extremely beautiful place. Are you living happily? I wish I can see you again. I will love you forever. I promise.

Echoing with the excerpt above, I decided to put the poem “The *Pure Land Rebirth Dharani*” below. This poem reflects not only my sentiment towards the death of one important person; it is also a fusion of emotions depicting my solicitude for my grandma after over twenty years of sedimentation. As described by Ballard (2009, p. 478), “watching one die is watching the Infinite become temporal, watching God die. One moment there is Being, there is infinity, and the next there is nothing”. I would never forget the sense of hollowness during the loss of a family member. It is not a temporal event. Rather, it extends from the past, till the present, and to the future. The *Pure Land Rebirth Dharani*, which is also called the *Dharani for Eradicating All Karmic Obstacles and Attaining Rebirth in the Pure Land*, is one of the texts being frequently recited in daily services in Pure Land Buddhism (one of the popular branches of Buddhism in China) (Chen, 2001). Some Buddhist followers believe that enchanting this *dharani* can eradicate all karmas and spiritual obstacles made by the deceased in the past life, enabling the dead people to obtain enlightenment and reach the nirvana. I wrote this poem not only as a memoir of my grandma, but much more than this is that it is my blessings to her.

The Pure Land Rebirth Dharani

*At my childhood I beheld a departure
Of man in solitude, in silence, in serenity.
Thirsting for the distant dignity
From the abysmal propitiation,
I chant
The Pure Land Rebirth Dharani.*

*Gasps persist for hundreds of years.
The gleam snuffed out in a shadow
Of reincarnation. At times
In a room, painted all white,
I hear the murmur of
The Pure Land Rebirth Dharani.*

*Orations and the unidirectional odyssey
Shatter the same-old trifle tipsy,
Leaving all solaces, atonements,
The mien submerged by the leaking*

*Inside of mine, and
The Pure Land Rebirth Dharani.*

*Over the last twenty odd winters,
At times I hear the echoes
Eddied in the inferno, the staccato
Sounds of someone reciting
The Pure Land Rebirth Dharani.*

Discussions and Conclusion

Grandparents play an important role in a family. They on one hand bridge the family history of the past with that of the future through the transmission of family values, beliefs, and customs (McAdoo & McWright, 1994), and on the other hand serve as a comfort to both adult children and grandchildren in a family, providing support and wisdom in times of crisis (Hagestad, 1985). To members of a family, grandparents are companions, confidants and advice-givers (Dellman-Jenkins, Papalia, & Lopez, 1987). Earlier studies on a rural population in Gambia found that grandparenthood can positively influence the nutritional status and mortality of children (Sear, Mace, & McGregor, 2000; Sear, Steele, McGregor, & Mace, 2002; Voland & Beise, 2002), and this is partially explained by the fact that the presence of grandmothers can provide necessary support to nursing mothers who play an important role in enhancing their children's fitness (Blurton Jones, Hawkes, & O'Connell, 1999; Hawkes, O'Connell, & Blurton Jones, 1997). Despite the well-identified roles of grandparents in a family, the emotional influence of grandparental death on family members, especially grandchildren, has seldom been discussed in the literature. With an objective to shed light on this issue in the child's context, I have presented in this paper an account on my bereavement during the passing of my grandma.

As I have decided to engage in this autoethnography, two points I am aware of. First is the risk of getting emotionally naked (Tenni, Smyth, & Boucher, 2003; Vickers, 2002). But I am also a human being, one made from simply flesh and blood as anyone else. I have emotions, and it is these emotions that define me as a human. As suggested by Richardson (1990) who wrote in her book *Writing Strategies: Reaching Diverse Audiences*: "By emotionally binding together people who have had the same experiences..., the collective story overcomes some of the isolation and alienation of contemporary life" (p. 26). Engaging in this account not only could I connect my emotional experience to those who want to know (Vickers, 2002), but is also a healing process to myself (Richardson, 1994). Second, I am aware of the potential charge of self-indulgence and lack of objectivity of my work due to my using self as a data source (Atkinson, 1997; Grenier & Burke, 2008; Sparkes, 1996). However, it is the voice of the insider that could generate more authentic and in-depth information than that of the outsider in an area of inquiry.

Here it is worth noticing that my own circumstances and background may shape my perspectives during the writing of this autoethnographic account, and limit the generalizability of this paper. Therefore, this paper is just exploratory in nature, and can only depict the process of bereavement in a highly case-specific context (Furman, 2006).

It is hoped that the insights and reflections provided by this paper can further stimulate more follow-up discussions on childhood bereavement.

Notes

1. *Wan Chai* is a metropolitan area in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China.
2. “*Po-Po*” is how my mum and I called grandma in Chinese. It is intentionally kept in some dialogues and quotes in order to preserve the conversational tones, intimacy, and sentimentality involved.
3. The original text was written in Chinese. The quotation here was the English translation of the text. Here free translation rather than literal translation was used in order to precisely convey shades of meanings under the original text and to make the citation more easily understood by correcting grammatical errors of the original and by writing it in more natural forms of English language structure.

References

- Atkinson, P. (1997). Narrative turn or blind alley? *Qualitative Health Research*, 7(3), 325-344.
- Ballard, R. L. (2009). Granpa's call: Conscience, ethics, and aporias. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 15(3), 467-482.
- Barrera, M., D'Agostino, N. M., Schneiderman, G., Tallett, S., Spencer, L., & Jovcevska, V. (2007). Patterns of parental bereavement following the loss of a child and related factors. *Omega (Westport)*, 55(2), 145-167.
- Berg, D. N. (2002). Bringing one's self to work: A Jew reflects. *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 38(4), 397-415.
- Blurton Jones, N. G., Hawkes, K., & O'Connell, J. F. (1999). Some current ideas about the evolution of human life-history. In P. C. Lee (Ed.), *Comparative primate socioecology*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. (1996). Talking over ethnography. In C. Ellis & A. P. Bochner (Eds.), *Composing ethnography: Alternative forms of qualitative writing* (Vol. 1, pp. 13-45). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Boroff, M. (1993). Cluster on the poetic: From Euripides to Rich. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 108, 1032-1035.
- Bowlby, J. (1980). *Attachment and loss: Loss, sadness and depression* (Vol. 3). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Brady, I. (2003). *The time at Darwin's reef: Poetic explorations in anthropology and history*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Bruner, J. S. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chapple, A., & Ziebland, S. (2010). Viewing the body after bereavement due to a traumatic death: qualitative study in the UK. *British Medical Journal*, 340, c2032.
- Chen, P. Y. (2001). Sound and emptiness: Music, philosophy, and the monastic practice of Buddhist doctrine. *History of Religions*, 4(1), 24-48.

- Christ, G. H., Bonanno, G. A., Malkinson, R., & Rubin, S. (2002). Bereavement experiences after the death of a child. In M. J. Field & R. E. Behrman (Eds.), *When children die: Improving palliative and end-of-life care for children and their families* (pp. E1-E25). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- d'Epina, C. J., Cavalli, S., & Guillet, L. A. (2009). Bereavement in very old age: impact on health and relationships of the loss of a spouse, a child, a sibling, or a close friend. *Omega (Westport)*, 60(4), 301-325.
- Dellman-Jenkins, M., Papalia, D., & Lopez, M. (1987). Teenagers' reported interaction with grandparents: exploring the extent of alienation. *Lifestyles*, 8(3-4), 35-46.
- Denzin, N. K. (1997). *Interpretive ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DeShanzer, M. (1986). *Inspiring women: Reimagining the muse*. New York, NY: Pergamon.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 733-768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Feest, K. (2009). Introducing narrative reflection. In N. Cooper & K. Forrest (Eds.), *Essential guide to educational supervision in postgraduate medical education* (pp. 95-106). Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Frank, A. W. (1995). *The wounded storyteller*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Frank, A. W. (1996). Reconciliatory alchemy: Bodies, narratives, and power. *Body and Society*, 2(3), 53-71.
- Frank, A. W. (1997). Narrative witness to bodies: A response to Alan Radley. *Body and Society*, 3(3), 103-109.
- Freud, S. (1957). *Mourning and melancholia*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Furman, E. (1974). *A child's parent dies*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Furman, R. (2006). Autoethnographic poems and narrative reflections: A qualitative study on the death of a companion animal. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 9(4), 23-38.
- Grant, A. (2010). Writing the reflexive self: An autoethnography of alcoholism and the impact of psychotherapy culture. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 17(7), 577-582.
- Grenier, R. S., & Burke, M. C. (2008). No margin for error: A study of two women balancing motherhood and Ph.D. studies. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 581-604. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR13-4/grenier.pdf>
- Grossman, J. A., Clark, D. C., Gross, D., Halstead, L., & Pennington, J. (1995). Child bereavement after paternal suicide. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing* 8(2), 5-17.
- Hagestad, G. O. (1985). Continuity and connectedness. In V. L. Bengtson & J. F. Robertson (Eds.), *Grandparenthood* (pp. 31-48). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Hawkes, K., O'Connell, J., & Blurton Jones, N. (1997). Hadza women's time allocation, offspring provisioning, and the evolution of long postmenopausal life spans. *Current Anthropology*, 38(4), 551-577.

- Hayano, D. M. (1979). Auto-ethnography: Paradigms, problems, and prospects. *Human Organization*, 38(1), 99-104.
- Ho, D. Y. F. (1995). Selfhood and identity in Confucianism, Taosim, Buddhism, and Hinduism: Contrasts with the West. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 25(2), 115-139.
- Iglesias, A., & Iglesias, A. (2005). Hypnotic treatment of PTSD in children who have complicated bereavement. *American Society of Clinical Hypnosis*, 48(2-3), 183-189.
- Irizarry, C. (1992). Spirituality and the child. *Journal of Psychosocial Oncology*, 10(2), 39-58.
- Jaffe, A. (1997). Narrating the "I" versus narrating the "Isle": Life histories and the problem of representation on Corsica. In D. E. Reed-Danahay (Ed.), *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social* (pp. 145-168). Oxford, UK: Berg.
- Jago, B. J. (1996). Postcards, ghosts, and fathers: Revising family stories. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2, 495-516.
- Kliman, G. (1977). The children. In N. Linzer (Ed.), *Understanding bereavement and grief*. New York, NY: Yeshiva University Press.
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2), 224-253.
- McAdoo, H. P., & McWright, L. A. (1994). The roles of grandparents: The use of proverbs in value transmission. In V. R. Jackson (Ed.), *Aging families and use of proverbs for values enrichment*. New York, NY: Haworth.
- Meert, K. L., Thurston, C. S., & Briller, S. H. (2005). The spiritual needs of parents at the time of their child's death in the pediatric intensive care unit and during bereavement: a qualitative study. *Pediatric Critical Care Medicine*, 6(4), 420-427.
- Murdoch, I. (1976). *The sacred and profane love machine*. London: Penguin.
- Parkes, C., & Weiss, R. (1983). *Recovery from bereavement*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Paulsen, L. J. (2008). The bereavement of an adult child in the middle phase of adulthood. *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 62(3), 233-247.
- Pelias, R. D. (2003). The academic tourist: A critical ethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9(3), 369-373.
- Pfund, R. (2005). Using computer-assisted learning to gain knowledge about child death and bereavement. *International Journal of Palliative Nursing* 11(11), 591-597.
- Richardson, L. (1990). *Writing strategies: Reaching diverse audiences*. London: Sage.
- Richardson, L. (1994). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 516-529). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sear, R., Mace, R., & McGregor, I. A. (2000). Maternal grandmothers improve nutritional status and survival of children in rural Gambia. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London, Biological Sciences*, 267(1453), 1641-1647.
- Sear, R., Steele, F., McGregor, I. A., & Mace, R. (2002). The effects of kin on child mortality in rural Gambia. *Demography*, 39(1), 43-63.
- Shuang, L. (1993). The funeral and Chinese culture. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27(2), 113-120.

- Singelis, T. M. (1994). The measurement of independent and interdependent self-construals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20(5), 580-591.
- Smith, B. (1999). The abyss: Exploring depression through a narrative of the self. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5(2), 264-279.
- Sparkes, A. C. (1995). Writing people: Reflections on the dual crises of representation and legitimation in qualitative inquiry. *Quest*, 47(2), 158-195.
- Sparkes, A. C. (1996). The fatal flaw: A narrative of the fragile body-self. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2(4), 463-494.
- Sullivan, A. (2000). Notes from a marine biologist's daughter: On the art and science of attention. *Harvard Educational Review*, 70(2), 211-227.
- Svensson, B. (1997). The power of biography: Criminal policy, prison life, and the formation of criminal identities in the Swedish welfare state. In D. E. Reed-Danahay (Ed.), *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social* (pp. 71-106). Oxford, UK: Berg.
- Tenni, C., Smyth, A., & Boucher, C. (2003). The researcher as autobiographer: Analysing data written about oneself. *The Qualitative Report*, 8(1), 1-12.
- Tillmann-Healy, L. (1996). A secret life in a culture of thinness: Reflections on body, food, and bulimia. In C. Ellis & A. Bochner (Eds.), *Composing ethnography: alternative forms of qualitative writing* (pp. 77-109). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Van Eerdewegh, M. M., Bieri, M. D., Parrilla, R. H., & Clayton, P. J. (1982). The bereaved child. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 140(1), 23-29.
- Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Vickers, M. H. (2002). Researchers as storytellers: Writing on the edge-And without a safety net. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(5), 608-621.
- Voland, E., & Beise, J. (2002). Opposite effects of maternal and paternal grandmothers on infant survival in historical Krummhörn. *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology*, 52(6), 435-443.
- Xu, Y. (2007). Death and dying in the Chinese culture: Implications for health care practice. *Home Health Care Management Practice*, 19(5), 412-414.
- Zheng, X. J. (1999). *Good death: Chinese philosophy of death*. Kunming: Yunnan People's Publishing Company.

Author Note

Dr. Wing-Fu Lai obtained his Ph.D. from the University of Hong Kong, where he also received his B.Sc. with first class honors. He has diverse academic and research interests in fields ranging from biological science to humanities. Here the author would like to thank Ms. Yau-Foon Tsui for support and encouragement during the writing of this article. Thanks are extended to the editors and reviewers for their insightful comments which helped to improve this work. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to Dr. Lai at E-mail: rori0610@graduate.hku.hk.

Article Citation

Lai, W. F. (2012). Grandparental death: Through the lens of an Asian child. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(1), 175-190. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17-1/lai.pdf>
