

Grandpa Hou, by Roseanna Mundell-Perkins

Allow me to introduce Hou Yeye (后爷爷); he is 87, originally from Shandong, but has lived in Beijing since 1950. I first met him at the beginning of February 2017, when I moved into his home, where I am staying until the end of my study abroad period in China. Looks can be deceiving; when I first met Hou Yeye I just thought of him as a kind old man. He reminds me to always take a coat when I leave the house and to eat more. However, over the course of many meals together, watching the evening news before bed (which, initially to my great embarrassment, usually involves being quizzed on what's been reported), and the occasional chess game, I have come to know him better. He must be one of the most wise and thoughtful people I've met in my life, more engaged with the society that surrounds him than most young people and, despite never attending school, he is surely more learned than many of the best educated people I have met. The following piece is based on a series of informal conversations I had with Hou Yeye (后爷爷) over a period of about a month.



Hou Yeye was born in 1935, in Shandong, two years before the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War of Japanese Resistance (1937-45) and fourteen years before the Liberation in 1949. He didn't go to school, which he regularly cites as a reason for looking so highly upon the opportunity to study. Being a privileged and lazy millennial, this is a useful reminder! As a young boy, he speaks of the lack of variety in the food he ate: zhou (粥) at every meal, a lot of the boring vegetables but none of the good ones, meat on rare occasions and fish only once a year, at Chinese New Year. He still drinks zhou for every meal, but he assures me the zhou he drinks now is much more delicious. It was as a young boy that he learned to play chess and weiqi (围棋, also known as 'Go'). To begin with he watched the adults around him play, and slowly got to know the rules, as well as how to win. He likes these games because you need to use your brain; when I asked if he played majiang (麻将), having just learned to play very simply myself, he dismissed the question with a wave of his hand and explained the majiang was more about gambling than thought or skill. Now he often plays chess on the household tablet, but he very kindly tells me he enjoys playing against a real opponent far more. I'm in two minds: I'm certainly a more boring opponent than the computer, but on the other hand he always wins. When he was younger he loved to climb mountains. Perhaps this is to be expected from a native of mountainous Shandong province. Now in China many hills and mountains have impressively constructed stone pathways and endless stairways, but when he was young, Yeye explains that it was much harder and more dangerous to climb mountains, but also more fun. Once, as a young boy, he and his friend went into the mountains and became lost, eventually returning well after the sun had set and dinner had been served, to face their furious mothers. He still goes to the hills surrounding Beijing now, although he can no longer climb as quickly as he used to. Nevertheless, if there's enough time he enjoys the challenge. During a trip home to Shandong in February he climbed a sizeable section of Tai Shan.

Yeye moved to Beijing in 1950, aged 15, and began work as a builder. He pursued this vocation throughout his working life, until his retirement in 1999. 1950 was barely a year after the establishment of Communism in China in October of 1949; Yeye explains that without the revolution



he would have never left Shandong, and his life would no doubt be different. I often ask him about life before the Liberation, and his answer is always the same: life was terrible before 1949, society was degrading, people were starving and poor, completely different to nowadays. You cannot imagine what it was like. He rarely elaborates much past this. 1950 was also the beginning of the Korean War. Since moving close to the centre of power in China and beginning his adult life, the Korean War, as well as the thinking and

decision-making at the time, have left a great impression on Yeye; the first, somewhat difficult to follow, conversation I had with him was about the Korean War. At that time, he couldn't read well - having never attended school, he only recognised a handful of rudimentary characters - and so it was from colleagues and the radio that he heard the Politburo had agreed to enter Korea. He says he found the leadership choice strange; why would Peng Dehuai lead the force, why not Lin Biao, a great military hero of the Revolution without equal? It was only later that he discovered Lin Biao had been asked first, but refused. Yeye says that it was around this time that he became interested in the world around him. Nowadays he watches three hours of television each day, partly to pass the time, but mostly to watch the news. To my great terror, the first evening we watched the news together he was curious to see how much I understood and to hear my opinion, but it is apparent how engaged and thoughtful he is.

Yeye met many foreigners through his work, as many of the projects he was assigned required him to work alongside Russians and Germans. For example, he participated in the construction of the Dashanzi (大山子) factory complex in northeast Beijing. This is now the site of Beijing's 798 art zone; the factories fell out of use during Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms during the 1980s. Upon visiting, I was struck by how much the site revealed about China's recent past. It was difficult to comprehend how different the original purpose for that area was to its use today. This was just one of many industrial cooperation projects between the Soviet Union and China, but it was the first to involve East Germany. Construction work began in 1954, but Yeye recalls with a chuckle that there were frequent delays because, despite being a project nurturing cooperation between the three states, all the different parties involved had quite different ideas about how to proceed. At the time, he picked up some of both languages to communicate with his colleagues, but he says he has long since forgotten what he knew. When asked, he said he preferred the Germans he had met to the Russians. He said that they were polite in everything they did, and always hardworking and efficient. Germany is still like that, he told me, and that's why their economy and government is strong.



Hou Yeye married in his early twenties. It was a marriage arranged by his and his wife's respective families, as was the custom at the time. She still lived in Shandong back then. He went home to celebrate the Lunar New Year one holiday, and they were introduced. He assured me that he was concerned that his potential wife think things over properly. Marriage lasts a lifetime, it's not something to take lightly, he told me. Moreover, she would have to move to Beijing if they were to marry. He said he didn't want her to feel pressured at all. But when he told her this, she smiled and replied that she knew all these things, she had thought it over, and was willing to marry.

Nevertheless, he insisted on giving her some time to be sure she was happy with her decision. I've no doubt he went to such pains to tell me this because he is aware of both our large generational and cultural divide. He seemed somewhat taken

aback, as well as amused, when I said this method seemed a lot less hassle than trying to find 'the One'. Together they had three children, two girls and a boy. He remembers fondly how studious his wife was. She encouraged him to read more and to write. He explains that after work, when his colleagues would go to watch a film, or to eat dinner together, he would spend his free time reading. He may well be the first person in my life to encourage me to study, study more, and then study again, with absolute no concern that it



might not be good for my mental health. It's refreshing, because for Yeye study isn't a chore, it isn't something worthy of stress, it's not necessarily a vocation but something you can pursue in your free time. When he tells me at the end of a meal to study hard, he often glances at the framed photo of his wife hanging on the wall; it was taken at the foot of Fragrance Hill in 2005. She passed away two years later.

Now Yeye lives in a residential complex in Northeast Beijing with his son and, during the academic year, a visiting student from Cambridge. His eldest daughter married a Cambridge student some twenty years ago; they now live together in America. They organise for one suitable Cambridge student to join the household for a year, and it was only due to chance, when this year's student decided to move out, that I had the opportunity to move in. On the day I moved in, Yeye joked that I must feel a lot of pressure, as they've met many Cambridge students but I am the sole representative of Oxford University. I felt the colour rising in my face as I stammered that Cambridge students are a year older than me during their Year Abroad. The first evening that we ate together, he told me he dislikes retired life because he has nothing to do, and misses his job. He drinks a glass of baijiu (白酒) with lunch and dinner, because he says it helps to pass the time. Nevertheless, he rises around five o'clock every morning, and takes a walk around the buildings or plays some racket ball. Now he has so much time on his hands, he enjoys watching the world around him: the people that live nearby, Beijingers city-wide, China and the wider world as portrayed through the news, as well as the China of the past, as seen through historical dramas. He is often critical. In the latter case, he says it's all good fun, but not accurate. Who wants accurate when they're watching the television in their spare time, he points out. The past was difficult and ugly. He is acutely aware of how much life has changed since he first moved to Beijing, and is especially critical of the wasteful attitudes towards food, amongst other things. In all the time that I have lived in their household, I have never seen Yeye or his son throw out food, which is certainly inconsistent with other Chinese households I have visited. Yeye visited Cambridge for a week several years ago, and tells me he was quite taken with the European style of serving food, where you have just one plate of food, and are expected to

eat what is on the plate. He encourages me to tell him about England and Europe, because he enjoys challenging what he knows. He often offers me the following advice, and I believe it says more about him than I could in two thousand words: Go out and observe. If you consider what you encounter to be good, then accept it. If you consider it to be bad, then dismiss it. The important thing is to be open to accept new things.