

## IN THE ABSENCE OF BLOOD: FORMING KINSHIP TIES THROUGH RELIGIOUS BELIEF

HILARY HO

### ABSTRACT

This is a personal reflection essay on my mother's experiences growing up with her foster mother and her biological mother. The relationship between mother and daughter challenge normative ideas of how maternal love is formed and understood. I first wrote this essay for my undergraduate course on kinship where I wanted to explore how larger social structures and beliefs can influence kinship ties between mother and child. I write this essay to reflect on the emotional labour involved as my mother navigated the social intricacies of her relationships with both of her mothers.

## INTRODUCTION

*“Every child is conceived either in love or lust, is born in pain, followed by joy or sometimes remorse” ~ Jennifer Worth, The Midwife: A Memoir of Birth, Joy, and Hard Times*

After reading a good number of fairy tales like *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, whose protagonists were punished by their stepmothers, one would think the statement ‘blood is thicker than water’ would hold true. After all, procreation and marriage are how kinship ties are formed. However, unlike those fairy tales, for my mother, her ‘true’ mother does not share her blood. My mother has stronger kinship ties with my foster grandmother (FGm). The kin relations between my biological grandmother (BGm) and my mother, on the other hand, are dynamic and fluid because at different points in time and under different circumstances, both mother and daughter did not acknowledge the kinship ties between them. How is it that water triumphs over blood? Janet Carsten argues that “nature cannot be regarded as having primacy over culture” (Carsten 1995: 690). I agree. Biological blood ties alone do not determine the relationship between mother and child. Carsten (1995) further explains that in the absence of blood that forms a ‘natural’ kinship relation between mother and child, time and effort are needed to naturalize this fictive relationship.<sup>1</sup> However, I believe that religion also played a role in shaping the relationship between my mother and my two grandmothers. Religious teachings such as astrology and karma, giving way to the notion of ‘fate’ or ‘God’s will,’ had an adverse effect on the way my mother perceived her circumstances and her relationship with both of my grandmothers.

In writing this paper, I wanted to understand my mother’s relationship with both my grandmothers. Specifically, using anthropological theories, I wanted to contextualize the grief and anger in my mother’s early life that she often relived. I write in first-person not to speak on behalf of the women I write about here, but rather to convey what I had witnessed and learned about the relationship between my mother and my grandmothers. I hope that I become a conduit through which you, the reader, can glean what love looks like for my mother, and

maybe for other families growing up in poverty in Singapore in the '60s.

## FOSTERING A CHILD

In a 'traditional' Chinese household in Singapore, a married woman is expected to become a mother. My FGM was unable to conceive during the first few years of her marriage. Adhering to local religious belief or superstition, my FGM fostered my mother in hopes that she would be able to have a biological child of their own. Such belief stems from Taoism that consists of certain Buddhist teachings, including the concept of karma and compassion. This means that when love and compassion are shown towards a foster child, merits are earned and my FGM would be granted her deepest desires of conceiving biological children of her own. Therefore, in recognizing my mother as her daughter, my FGM had to put in considerable effort into nursing my mother with little resources and help. In the late '50s, my FGM lived in a house with a thatched roof and a bucket for a toilet. Like most women living in poverty, she did various odd jobs. She was a housekeeper, a babysitter, a dishwasher, and a coffee picker.

The relationship between my mother and FGM was often challenged by poverty. My mother sometimes resented her responsibilities as the oldest child which included caring for her three younger siblings and buying the family's sparse dinner every day. Her protest on these matters caused my mother to be wacked by the bamboo handle of a feather duster. Upon completion of her O-levels (a national exam taken at grade 10), my mother was anguished and resentful when my FGM refused to support her postsecondary education. My mother felt like she was unloved and was entrenched in poverty. To pursue a postsecondary diploma in accounting, my mother got a job at the shipyard where my FGM worked. That was when my mother's feelings of resentment towards my FGM changed. After her children were older, my FGM had worked in the shipyard cleaning the fuel tanks of tankers for a meager pay of 7 dollars a day to provide for the family. This basic and mundane practice of making ends meet for her family was an act of maternal love. Carsten (1995) explains that maternal love is an abstract entity, which can be transformed into

tangible material through the production of bodily substance, such as sweat, and then by converting this bodily substance into money through the means of earning wages. The daily production of sweat was an everyday expression of love from my FGM where she hoped to meet the material needs of her children. This bodily substance is also seen as a form of maternal sacrifice and the daily production and circulation of bodily substances- from sweat to wage, and from wage to food- reaffirms kinship ties that strengthen through time (Carsten 1995). Over time, my mother began to recognize the sacrifice my FGM had made for her and her other siblings<sup>ii</sup>. Realizing that my FGM's lack of financial support stemmed from the reality of poverty and not bias towards her biological children, my mother began to acknowledge my FGM as her 'true' mother. Looking at the daily production of sweat had shaped my mother's understanding of what constitutes maternal love in poverty.

My mother reciprocated my FGM's love through filial piety by providing my FGM with her material needs through similar production of sweat. In Singapore, filial piety is understood as a Confucius ethic—a form of virtue that commands one to respect their elders. This is often characterized as duty, responsibility, and repayment (Lieber, Nihira, and Mink 2004). However, I would like to talk about the biggest act of filial piety and love as seen through the funeral of my FGM. You might assume that one's family members and community are homogenous in their religious beliefs. In Singapore, however, colonization and globalization have created a diverse social and cultural background within society, and it is not uncommon for children to convert to other religions such as Christianity. After attending Catholic school, my mother had converted to Catholicism during her 20s<sup>iii</sup>. When it came to my FGM's funeral she was in a dilemma because she had two particular tenets of the ten commandments that she had to obey:

'Thou shall have no other God before me'  
'Honour thy father and thy mother' (Exodus 20: 1-17)

Although Christianity demands that children participate in their parent's funeral, as stated in the second commandment, praying and

doing rituals of a different religion is prohibited. This is because praying in the ways of other religions would break the first commandment. The deep bond my mother had with my FGm led my mother to disregard this commandment and fulfil her duty as a daughter to her ‘true’ mother as a symbol of her love. This decision to carry out the last rites for my FGm was a form of respect, and perhaps even a form of repayment of gratitude. In a way, this was an act of abiding by both Confucian and Christian teachings whereby my mother honoured her parents. Performing last rites in Taoism is significant, as the funeral is a ritual that transforms a person’s physical death and reconstitutes them into ancestors (Mathieu 2008). Therefore, the participation of family members at the funeral represents the continuation of life for the deceased as an ancestor and prevents a social death from occurring. Although both women did not share the same blood, my mother’s participation in the funeral becomes proof that they recognized their relationship to be that of a mother and daughter.

#### THE DUTY OF AN UNWANTED CHILD TOWARDS HER MOTHER

My mother’s act of filial piety was very different when my BGm passed away. Despite sharing blood with my BGm, neither of them recognized the other as kin. In my mother’s opinion, ‘it was God’s plan’ that she was given away. My mom was the fourth of twelve children, and the only child who lived under a different roof. Legally, however, my mother was registered under the name of her biological parents. When my mother turned 15, she needed a parent’s signature to receive her government-issued identity card. My mother approached my BGm. She did not get a signature but returned home to her foster family after her biological mother cursed and swore at her<sup>iv</sup>. When I look back, it is as if my BGm wanted to sever this relationship. Avoiding putting her name on paper is a form of omission of her role as a mother. If maternal love is represented through sharing bodily substance between mother and daughter, this bodily substance moved in one direction. My mother was expected to help her biological siblings. When my mother became a certified accountant, she helped her biological siblings file taxes for their company. While

she was pregnant with my brother, she helped them with little or no compensation and often under tight deadlines. When my older brother was born prematurely with boils, my mother blamed herself for overworking and going to bed at three in the morning during her pregnancy. After that, my mother refused to help her siblings. For this, my mother was cursed and yelled at by my BGM. In my mother's eyes, she was seen as a daughter by my BGM only when she was needed. Their relationship was based on transactions, where my mother was bound by the duty of a daughter and yet received nothing in exchange for her moral obligation that was imposed onto her.

When my BGM passed away, my mother participated in some parts of the ritual, which she deemed to contain little religious significance. My mother excused herself from collecting the cremated ashes of my BGM and stowing them into the columbarium. This is a significant part of the ritual, which only people with kinship ties can participate in. This is because, through cremation, physical transformation takes place in which turning a corpse into ashes represents the spiritual or the social transformation from a disembodied spirit to an ancestor. The collection of the ashes represents the receiving and acknowledgment of the deceased as an ancestor. Since my mother is seen as non-kin, she is excused from participating in this ritual. In my mother's eyes, the physical death of my BGM also became a social death. My family is henceforth excused from ancestral worship. Therefore, my mother's participation at her funeral was merely to thank my BGM for giving birth to her. The lack of maternal love provided her with sufficient reason to excuse herself from full participation in the full funeral ritual. The social memory of my BGM will fade over time as no other ritual, such as ancestral worship will revive or rekindle my mother's social memory of my BGM. To my mother, my BGM will experience social death.

## LIFE AFTER THE DEATH OF BOTH HER MOTHERS

My mother's childhood was shaped by poverty. Religion gave my mother a new life with my FGM who cared for her the best she could. Arguably, religion saved my mother from an unhappy life with my BGM and it also became a tool for my mother to express her feelings

towards both my grandmothers. For my mother, religion allowed her to understand what love looks like in poverty. It has been ten years since the passing of my FGM and religion continues to play a significant role in my mother's life.

The role of religion in the everyday lives of Singaporeans remains understated. To the outside eye, Singapore appears modern and secular. However, by looking closely at the relationships between family members of a working-class family such as mine, you see how the legacy of colonialism and poverty continues to shape these relationships and kinship ties. The Singaporean pursuit of upward mobility and the status of a world-class city is accompanied by new ideologies and religions. Notably, this includes the introduction of new cultural ideas and values of family and childhood. While I understand my mother's love as being comfortably tucked into bed or going on a family outing to the beach with my new rollerblades, for my mother, having dinner in and of itself is symbolic of maternal love. As new values flow into the lives of individuals in Singapore, it also reconfigures relationships and notions of rites and duty between parent and child; and with that, new possibilities of expressing one's affection towards parents and children arise.

---

<sup>i</sup> Fictive kinship refers to ties that does not derive from the sexual ties, as a result of marriage or by birth.

<sup>ii</sup> My mother believes that my FGM worked in an extremely toxic environment as she breathed in the fumes of fuel that later resulted in cancer on the skin of my FGM's lungs. My FGM did not smoke regularly, perhaps only occasionally when she used the outhouse to mask the smell.

<sup>iii</sup> My mother attended a catholic school during her primary and secondary education, during which my mother attended mass during school hours and was met with a kind and compassionate principle that demonstrated the values of Christianity. This inspired her to become Christian. I should add that my FGM did not ban my mother from attending mass. Instead, she reminded her not to receive the host as she was not baptised. My FGM's respect for Jesus later influenced my mother's decision to perform the last rites for my FGM.

---

<sup>iv</sup> I should add here that my mother eventually did get her signature, from my biological grandfather and she received a watch for her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. Although I talk about women here, men in both families also shaped my mother's childhood experiences. You see, I should add here that my mother did not get a fairy-tale ending. Although my mother was generally accepted by her foster family, the relationship between my mother and my foster grandfather was poor and remained strained to this day.



## REFERENCES

- Carsten, Janet. 1995. The Substance of Kinship and the Heat of the Hearth: Feeding, Personhood, and Relatedness among Malays in Pulau Langkawi. *American Ethnologist* 22, (2) (1995): 223–41. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1995.22.2.02a00010>.
- Lieber, Eli, Kazuo Nihira, and Iris Tan Mink. 2004. Filial Piety, Modernization, and the Challenges of Raising Children for Chinese Immigrants: Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence. *Ethos* 32 (3): 324–47. <https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.2004.32.3.324>.
- Mathieu, Claveyrolas. 2008. Introducing Anthropology of Religion. Culture to the Ultimate by Eller, Jack David. *Social Anthropology* 16(3): 365–66. [https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2008.00043\\_5.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2008.00043_5.x).