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Daughter Aversion:

Rethinking Son Preference and Maternal Love

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP AND ORIGINALITY

I declare that all these electronic letters – a thesis -have been typed and crafted by myself and have not been submitted for any other degree. Any included publications that I use and engage in these letters are quoted and referenced.

Shin-Jong Ch

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Abstract

This research explores *Jung-nan-ching-niu* (重男輕女), a cultural tradition in Taiwan that means both son preference and daughter aversion. In English, people usually call it "son preference," but I feel something is missing when the daughter's side is not mentioned. This project is my attempt to look at what happens when daughters are not valued—not just in the past, but even now, in a modern society that says it supports gender equality. I use autoethnography and creative-relational inquiry to explore this topic, starting from my own lived experience as a daughter, a girl, a woman, and now a mother and therapist.

The tradition of *Jung-nan-ching-niu* is often discussed in terms of numbers—how many girls go to school, how many girls are born, etc. But these studies do not usually show how it feels to grow up as a daughter who is less valued. I wanted to understand how this tradition shaped my emotions, my relationships with other women, and my sense of self. I was also curious why this term is mainly spoken by women, used to complain or explain something unfair, but not something people clearly reflect on or try to change. It made me wonder: if we already know it is wrong, why do we still keep doing it? Why does it feel so hard to talk about our real experiences?

This research does not follow a clear hypothesis. It began from personal confusion, from trying to make sense of my own life and my mother's behaviour. I was told I was lucky to be born in a modern world, but I still felt something invisible was holding me back. Later, through therapy training and becoming a parent, I realised the influence of *Jun-nan-ching-niu* was much deeper and more emotional than I thought. I began to see this tradition not just as old-fashioned thinking, but as something that still lives in the way women treat other women—especially between mothers and daughters.

I use stories and memories as the primary materials in this research. These stories are not just facts, but emotional data. I look at how memories stay, repeat, and create meanings. I also compare them with patterns I saw in public Facebook groups, news articles, and my work as a therapist. These stories are grouped into four chapters, following a metaphor of a journey in a mountain, which is an common activity I did in Taiwan during my childhood. I move through different life stages—home, temple, school, and finally a lake—each place showing a different part of daughter aversion.

To describe this system, I use a term I created: *gen(d)erational loyalty system*. It means the way gender roles and family power are mixed and passed down through generations. Many women, including mothers and grandmothers, follow this system even if it hurts them. They may not know they are part of it. But when daughters become mothers, they may start to realise something is wrong—and feel confused or guilty about their feelings.

This research also talks about the role of language. I choose to keep some awkward English and stay close to how I think in my native language. I do this on purpose to show how cultural logic and meaning are sometimes lost in translation. I hope this style reminds the reader that we are entering a different way of seeing the world, not just a different topic.

In the end, I do not offer one solution. But I hope this work creates spaces for more reflection and honesty. I want to bring attention to daughter aversion—not only as a side effect of son preference, but as something serious on its own. I hope this research helps other daughters understand they are not alone, and that what happened to them matters. Through this, maybe we can find ways to stop the cycle and imagine a different future.

Acknowledgement

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Finally, I want to thank myself for not giving up.

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Preface:

The Wrong Baby

On December 23rd, 1980, near the end of Taiwan's dictatorship, at 7:24 in the afternoon, a baby girl was born in Taipei, the Capital city.

Later in the years, she would excitedly ask to hear the story of this day again and again. That was the day she surprised everyone. She tricked all the old wives' tales, fortunetellers, and signs on the exact day: the female post officer was replaced by another male postman; all phone calls received by the family were from men. She somehow managed to fool all of them and arrived as a girl.

Name long picked, presents and baby clothes long received. But sorry, the *girl* came. Unmistakably.

She'd love that story. Call it "the legend of my birth."

But it would be even more years later, when the girl had turned into a woman, before she finally realised the storyteller had told the story in a completely different interpretation. And she would wish she had known that many, many years before.

She might have been better prepared for her life.

In the first three years, she had her life. She was dressed like a boy for three years. She had no idea. Those were just her clothes. She didn't really have a key idea about the differences between boys and girls. Until the real boy came.

Before colour TV was invented, the term "black-and-white TV" didn't exist. Black-and-White TV knew itself as TV until another TV showed up with colour. That's when we know Black-and-white TV was less; TV could show colour.

Before that little brother, there were no children around her. She was one of the oldest children in both her parents' families, with only one older cousin who lived in a distant city. The way her mother acted and responded was how she believed a mother would naturally be.

After he was born, she learned for the first time that she had been watching black-and-white TV. She didn't know a TV could present colour. She didn't know her mother could be so attentive and full of smiles—but never towards her.

The girl began to ask questions. Flood of questions. Every "why" was answered with a beating from her mum. Not that the beatings hadn't started before her brother was born, but the "weapons" appeared soon after.

Belt. Hanger. Stick. Yellow hose pipe.

"Why?"

A harsh beating followed. And the girl would insist. She needed an answer.

"But you didn't say why!"

"If you ask 'why' one more time, I swear I'll beat you to death!" her mother would say.

And the girl would take a deep breath, look into her mother's eyes, and say again, more clearly than ever.

"Why?"

It was perhaps around then that she broke into two pieces. One keeps on asking why, the other bends down and obeys. And the girl gets stuck forever in the crack between the two, feeling extremely bold and scared at the same time. And she would resent herself so much for this unreasonable split of self.

Ch1 Introduction: A Letter to the Readers

Dear readers,

About Jung-nan-ching-niu

I am currently sitting in my own living room in Edinburgh, Scotland, watching the clear blue sky gradually turn into a refreshing grey, wondering how to introduce this research project properly. Eventually, I decide to speak directly to you.

As you've already read, this dissertation is about son preference—or daughter aversion—and it will be framed as an unexpected journey in Taiwan during a trip I take to collect more information. Before we dive into that journey, I would like to share a little more with you. Since what you are about to read will be more fluid, reflective and emotionally charged than a conventional dissertation, I believe a few words in advance might offer some clarity—especially if you find yourself, at some point, in the mist.

This is a research about a cultural phenomenon in Taiwan, from a girl who grew up under its impact, leaving the culture completely, and then coming to look back to make

sense of what happened to her and those around her, during those years developing physically and mentally on this small island, where it's located between Japan and China, and therefore historically and culturally significantly shaped by these two countries. (Li 2023)

Son Preference, in Taiwanese Mandarin, we say Jung-nan-ching-niu[1] (重男輕女). It's a term that contains four different characters: Jung (重） means value; nan （男） means male; ching （輕） means disperse; niu （女） means female. I grew up listening to adults around me, including this term, in their conversations. It often came up when they were discussing family matters or the others' family matters.

The term is usually used in sentences like these:

Those parents Jung-nan-ching-niu.

That family Jung-nan-ching-nius.

I understand this sentence doesn't sound natural to English speakers. However, I want to keep the translation this way, as it shows exactly how we use it back home—as a verb. Jung-nan-ching-niu is a series of actions spanning years. I'll explore the relevance of this more in conclusion, where I assemble and make sense of my explorations. For now, let's continue with my relationship with this term.

[1] The pronunciation is from the Ministry of Education, Taiwan. *Chinese Transliteration Conversion System*. Accessed August 2, 2024. https://crptransfer.moe.gov.tw/index.jsp

My earliest memory of hearing Jung-nan-ching-niu was when I was about six years old, from my ma[2]. I could still vividly see her squinting her eyes, flattening her lips, and speaking as if she was squeezing her voice out between her clinging teeth.

"Your A-ma[3] and A-kong[4]. They, oh they. They Jung-nan-ching-niu!"

She meant my paternal grandparents.

I remembered that moment very well, not just because she used a big word for a six-year-old, but also because I sensed very strong emotions. Strong and heavy. Like she was carving those words on a piece of stone with a knife. Her face, her tone, her speaking rhythm, and the strength with which she spoke all showed disgust. And contempt.

Yes. Contempt.

In the atmosphere I grew up in, it was shameful to Jung-nan-ching-niu. This term was never brought up in a positive or even neutral conversation because it is a symbol of an outdated tradition. In the textbook I was given at school, it even stated clearly that Jun-nan-ching-niu is a tradition from the past. We are now proudly a gender-equal society. People who Jung-nan-ching-niu are considered old-fashioned, outdated, and wrong. It's a term to help us identify the bad people, to determine who is immoral, or even evil.

My ma apparently wanted me to have a particular impression of my A-kong A-ma, her parents-in-law.

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[2] Mother in Mandarin. Pronunciation from the Ministry of Education. *Ministry of Education Taiwanese Hokkien Common Words Dictionary*. Accessed August 2, 2024. https://sutian.moe.edu.tw/zh-hant/.

[3] Grandmother in Taiwanese. Pronunciation from the Ministry of Education. *Ministry of Education Taiwanese Hokkien Common Words Dictionary*. Accessed August 2, 2024. https://sutian.moe.edu.tw/zh-hant/.

[4] Grandfather in Taiwanese. Pronunciation from the Ministry of Education. *Ministry of Education Taiwanese Hokkien Common Words Dictionary*. Accessed August 2, 2024. https://sutian.moe.edu.tw/zh-hant/.

“Especially your A-ma,” she would say.

As the term was mentioned so specifically, I wanted to know what it meant. But no one ever explained the meaning to me. Not once. Adults simply assumed I already knew or decided I would just know one day. Between them, they used it like a code. When an auntie ended an anecdote with “What is there to do? They Jung-nan-ching-niu." And this other auntie would respond with an “Ah” like a key piece of a puzzle revealed itself, and everything suddenly seemed self-explanatory. All the incidents following or before that sentence immediately made sense.

Why don’t you just ask? You might be wondering.

Here’s a bit of cultural context that may be helpful: We don’t ask questions.

It was a time when children were told “囡仔人有耳無喙” (Gín-á-lâng ū-hīnn-bô-tshuì), a Taiwanese term that means “children have ears no mouth.” We believe a good child is an obedient and silent child. Because such a child does not disagree with their parents, and will grow into a filial pious adult that knows “[p]arents are never wrong.” (Du 2022) A question means a child is processing what they’re told—a sign of potential disobedience that needs to be put off. So, asking questions will most definitely be met with a good beat from, as a recent post on the internet reminded us (TVBS News 2018): yellow tube, broom stick, hanger, etc., until we learn to shut up and keep everything to ourselves. I have yet to find a friend who has never received a decent lesson from these “weapons[5].”

Children in our culture know it better to keep questions to ourselves. And Jung-nan-ching-niu always carried that special atmosphere that made me avoid voicing anything. It

[5] It’s a post telling the most common weapon being used to hit children by parents in the 1980s. Even until now, we only have laws to forbid teachers from physically punishing children since 2006 (Liu 2024), but not yet parents.

was as if I had already been granted the privilege of being part of a secret; asking for an explanation would be crossing the line. (It's definitely a belt or hanger level crime!)

Jung-nan-ching-niu seems to be a shared secret among female adults.

By memorising sentences that include this term, identifying similarities in the contexts in which it was used, and storing details for future reference, I tried to figure out what was hidden behind this code.

But the more information I collected, the more confused I became. I was under the impression that Jung-nan-ching-niu is a term used to criticise the older generation, who favour boys over girls. A harsh criticism. I got that boys were preferred by most people. Growing up, I'd heard many conversations about measures people would take to ensure a boy in pregnancy, including drinking special, God-blessed water from famous and powerful temples.

In my six-year-old mind, wanting a boy felt like a natural desire. What's so wrong about it, especially for families that already have a lot of daughters?

Plus, A-ma was the closest person to me in the entire world. With her, I experienced a lot of laughter, curiosity, warmth, and connections. I couldn't link her to the image of an "old-fashion and gender-discriminating" person. On the other hand, I experienced my mother as distant and abusive. I'd been searching for reasons for her to treat me the way she did.

I remained very confused about what Jung-nan-ching-niu fully represents until one day, my mother passed away. Her death revealed she's been overproviding financially for her brothers and her mother for years—a typical ending of a daughter from a Jung-nan-ching-niu family.

Suddenly, the two major wonders in my life, Jung-nan-ching-niu and my challenging relationship with my mother, are humming a very similar tune. Are they actually stemming from the same theme?

Researching The Lived Experience

Son preference is not a new research topic. However, most existing studies focus on its systemic outcomes, such as girls having reduced access to education, healthcare, and other resources. While these works offer essential insights into the material disadvantages faced by women, they often overlook the deeper psychological and emotional toll son preference takes on individuals and families. As a result, much of the discussion remains centred on policy impacts and resource distribution at the governmental level (Moskowitz 2001; Das Gupta et al. 2003; Lee 2008; Purewal 2010; Anukriti, Bussolo, and Sinha 2021; Le and Nguyen 2022; United Nations Population Fund 2007).

Ever since I came to realise that how I was treated by my mother might be deeply connected to *重男輕女* (*Jung-nan-ching-niu*, or son preference), I started to notice how rarely lived experiences are mentioned in this research field. I also noticed that in English, the term is simply "son preference"—a direct translation of only the first two words (重男) from the Mandarin phrase. But something is lost in that reduction. To me, it feels like another sign of how little focus has actually centred on daughters' perspectives and experiences. In so many of these discussions, daughters are pushed to the margins.

Why is there such a reluctance to speak about mothers and daughters? Is it a deliberate avoidance, or unconscious neglect? What is it that makes daughter aversion so hard to name, so difficult to stay with?

I believe it's time we look directly into that void. It seems to be the space we've collectively learned to avoid. It's time to bring our focus back to the voices that have been silenced, ignored, and erased.

I suspect many of us have come to believe that daughter aversion is a thing of the past because we've been taught to measure its existence through visible indicators: access to education, improved birth ratios, or outward signs of gender equality. But these markers only tell part of the story. The part that can be tracked by what's measurable.

What remains largely unspoken and unexplored is the lived, relational, and affective reality of what it feels like to grow up unwanted, unheard, or conditionally loved as a daughter in this society. That part is still lost, still invisible. Just as the English term "son preference" leaves out "daughter aversion," the discourse continues to skip over what daughters have endured.

I don't claim to have a clear or complete picture of what daughter aversion looks like. In fact, that is precisely why I believe we need to look at it—because we know so little about it.

There is something, I think, that all the daughters in this culture already know. Something many of us carry, even without the language for it. Because even though we rarely speak about what daughter aversion *actually* looks like, so many of us instinctively feel we grew up in families shaped by it.

I could feel it in the quiet recognition exchanged between women who had no shared script, but who clearly shared an emotional logic. This work is not a conclusive mapping. It is the first excavation. Like brushing the surface of fossil fragments, or the tentative beginning of therapy, it is an attempt to knock on the sealed doors of the past and see what, if anything, emerges, and to sit with what appears—not to frame it too quickly, but to learn its shape by feeling it into language.

I want to make this ghost show itself. Because I want it to end, to be exorcised.

As Chesler (2009) wisely said, "It is impossible to change one's behavior if we do not first name that behavior. By acknowledging the shadow side of female-female relationships, I hope that women can begin to transform envy into compassion, betrayal into cooperation."

I've chosen to use both "daughter aversion" and *重男輕女* (*Jung-nan-ching-niu*) throughout this research. "Daughter aversion" will be used primarily in conceptual discussions to describe a moral attitude that shapes how older generations treat the women and girls in their families. *Jung-nan-ching-niu* will appear in the narratives and anecdotal sections to retain the cultural atmosphere and emotional resonance of the phrase as it exists in lived experiences.

This research intentionally turns toward perspectives that traditional research often overlooks. Rather than focusing solely on demographic trends or comparing across nations, such as the common links made with India or other agricultural societies, I focus on the texture and nuance of the cultural world I know. I centre the everyday experiences of daughters in Taiwan: the emotional weight they carry, the silence they inherit, and the slow, painful work of making sense of what they've been told is love.

As Lorde (1984) wrote, "My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinise the essentials of my living."

Bell hooks once said, "I was a lone voice speaking out for the rights of children." I want to stand beside her and speak out for children, too.

She also reminds me: "Without justice there can be no love."

I want to bring justice into the lives of these daughters, including my own. Because I want love instead of duty and loyalty for future generations, both sons and daughters.

Language, Cultural Translation, and the Framing of the Research

Taiwan is a small island with lots of high mountains. During the time martial law was in effect, we were not allowed to go near the beach (again, something I didn't learn until I was an adult). Therefore, my childhood was full of memories in the mountains, and this journey of exploration reminded me of my experiences of mountain climbing back home. Consequently, I decided to frame this research as a journey through the mountains, so you can witness the explorations. I will draw upon personal narratives from various stages of my life: daughter, girl, marriage and mother. I'll share with you how it feels to grow and live through these experiences, and reflect on how they connect to cultural and political perspectives.

Hope for this Research

Why don't we assemble a short conclusion here about this research?

My intention is to explore what is included within the concept of Jun-nan-ching-niu in Taiwanese culture, especially from the aspect of daughter aversion. Therefore, this research is not designed to test a hypothesis or prove a theory. Instead, it aims to map out possible elements that interact with the relational, cultural, emotional, psychological, political, religious, and historical elements that shape a person's sense of self. I explore how these elements impact a person's understanding of their own choices, their interpretation of their situation, and their capacity for reflection.

I am particularly interested in how such elements—often internalised in early life—are not only formative, but also generationally sustained and transmitted. Through family roles, cultural scripts, gendered expectations, and unspoken emotional logics, these restraints become part of what is passed down, sometimes unconsciously, from one generation to the next.

This research also examines how these forces interact and entangle, producing complex emotional, psychological, and relational consequences. Through layered

narrative, dialogical reflection, and creative-relational inquiry, I trace both the personal and intergenerational shaping of the self—and the ongoing work of making, unmaking, and sometimes resisting those inherited meanings. Rather than beginning with a fixed research question, this project emerged through lived experiences, cultural entanglements, and the struggle to name what felt unnamable.

As a therapist, a mother, and a daughter, I sincerely hope this research holds space for the full complexity of the issue, without flattening it into blame, simplification, or moral binaries. My aim is not to reach a single conclusion, but to open a dialogue —one that acknowledges contradiction, ambiguity, and pain. I also hope this exploration encourages more people to share their own stories, so we can collectively build a broader, deeper understanding of this phenomenon from multiple angles, experiences, and emotional truths.

Whenever you feel ready, we can begin this journey together.

Sincerely yours,

Shin-Jong

Something In-between

I am running out of time, and everything begins to reform and voice itself at the last minute, which is driving me crazy. Murray (2024) described creative-relational inquiry as a "long and hidden creative process." I guess I just have to accept the situation and start capturing as much as I can until time says, "Cut!"

So, forgive me. This dissertation will be messy. (Not the kind of messy like someone says, "sorry for the mess," and then leads you to a spotless and flawlessly organised house. The real "messy." *But even "messy" can have cultural differences. What's considered*

messy back home may not be viewed as messy... Ok. That's enough. Stop. It's going to be messy. Period.)

Messy because I need to capture the most up-to-date thoughts that emerge in my mind. But it won't be pointless. I can promise you that.

Ch2 Methodology

A Very Specific Sense of Reality

It takes me a long time to realise the kind of reality that contains the existence of daughter aversion. One that exists in a strange corner that doesn't seem to have a name in my current use of language. It's hard to describe. It's slippery.

So, I'm going to try Something else.

I'll bring in a few different situations. Not to define it precisely, but to circle around it. To see if, together, they can make the shape of this reality show up.

A Flickery Reality

THE COMPUTER APP KEEPS SHUTTING DOWN FROM TIME TO TIME, KEYBOARD RESPONSES LAG, OR IT HAS OTHER RANDOM ISSUES. IT KEEPS HAPPENING, AND IT IS SUPER ANNOYING. BUT WHEN WE FINALLY DECIDED TO TAKE IT TO THE STORE OR HAVE SOMEONE FIX IT, IT PERFORMED PERFECTLY NORMALLY, AS IF THE PROBLEM WE EXPERIENCED HAD NEVER EXISTED.

WE MAY COME ACROSS AS STUPID OR INEXPERIENCED. SOMETIMES KIND PEOPLE WILL TELL US TO BRING THE COMPUTER BACK IF IT HAPPENS AGAIN, BUT WE CAN TELL THEY ARE JUST SAYING IT; THEY DON'T BELIEVE THERE'S ACTUALLY ANYTHING WRONG WITH THE

COMPUTER. AND IT'S CHALLENGING TO COMMUNICATE THIS EXPERIENCE WITH OTHER PEOPLE, BECAUSE THE ISSUE IS SO MINOR, OR SO UNCOMMON, OR SIMPLY TOO ABSTRACT TO DESCRIBE. IF WE GOOGLE, WE'LL FEEL COMPLETELY INADEQUATE BECAUSE WE CAN'T EVEN FIND THE RIGHT WORDS TO DESCRIBE WHAT HAS BEEN WRONG.

This is what it's like, this kind of reality I'm talking about. It keeps glitching, slipping, never sitting still long enough to be "proven." We can feel it, but it is inconsistent—annoyingly so. Can't say there's nothing wrong, but can't say there's anything wrong, either. We are sure about how much this situation bothers us, but feel incredibly frustrated and helpless because there seems to be no way to make the struggles seen.

And there is another similar situation, but slightly different:

An Invisible Reality

THIS ONE-MONTH-OLD BABY HAS BEEN CRYING HYSTERICALLY FOR HOURS. HER FACE HAS TURNED BLUE, AND SHE'S VISIBLY SUFFERING. SOMETHING TELLS THE PARENTS IT IS SERIOUS. THEY TAKE HER TO THE DOCTOR. BUT WHEN THEY ARRIVE, THE BABY IS SOUND ASLEEP—LIKE NOTHING EVER HAPPENED. THE NURSE SMILED AND SAID, "THAT'S OK. A LOT OF NEW PARENTS OVERREACT."

Here's another thing about this kind of reality.

It's not just that the problem comes and goes, refusing to be pinned down. It's that it involves someone else—someone who can't speak for themselves. So now, the truth isn't just glitchy. It's relational. Moral.

It's not "I'm not believed about my broken device." It's "I'm not believed about someone else's pain—and I'm the only one trying to say something."

Think of a baby crying. From the outside, there's nothing. No fever. No rash. Nothing measurable. But the parents know. They *feel* the distress. And when no one else can see it, the focus shifts. It's no longer about the baby. It becomes: *What's wrong with the parents? Why are they so anxious? So unstable? So emotional?*

Now—flip it.

What if the baby is actually the *mother*, and the parent is actually the *child*?

What if the child is the only one who sees the chaos? The breakdowns, the yelling, the confusion behind closed doors. And when they try to say Something—try to get help—the parent straightens up, smiles, and becomes "fine."

And the child gets dismissed. Or worse—shamed. In my culture, that child isn't just disbelieved. We're called ungrateful. Dramatic. Disrespectful.

We're told: *You're making this up. You're the problem*.

Let's look at one last situation to show what this kind of reality feels like.

A Relational Reality

When my best friends decided to shun me out of the group, they tried every way to make my life difficult—but they know how to do it subtly. One day, one of the girls returned everyone's homework assignments. I noticed mine wasn't on my desk, but others around me had received theirs. I looked at the

GIRL, AND SHE GAVE ME A KNOWING SMILE. I REALISED IT WAS DONE ON PURPOSE. I WENT TO THE BOY NEXT TO ME AND ASKED HIM TO HELP ME GET MY HOMEWORK BACK.

"WHY DON'T YOU DO IT YOURSELF?" HE ASKED.

"BECAUSE SHE DID IT ON PURPOSE," I SAID, "SHE'D GIVE ME A HARD TIME IF I WENT."

"COME ON! SHE MUST HAVE JUST FORGOTTEN." HE SPOKE.

HE WENT TO GET MY HOMEWORK BACK. I SAW HIM TALK TO THE GIRL A BIT, AND SHE COVERED HER FACE WITH HER PALMS. THE BOY RETURNED.

"SEE? SHE SAID SHE FORGOT, AND SHE'S SORRY." HE SPOKE.

I SAID NOTHING AND SAW THE GIRL SMILE AT ME AGAIN BEHIND THE BOY. A TRIUMPHANT ONE.

Another quality of this kind of situation is that it "doesn't exist." Again, because there is no "proof."

The smile, both the first and second ones, from the views of others, would be merely a friendly, welcoming gesture—but not to the person to whom it is directed.

The smile is a clear message:

You are right. I did it on purpose. I know you know, and that's exactly what I hoped for. And I know there's nothing you can do but suffer, because nobody will believe what you see, what you feel, what you experience. After all, no one has ever seen this side of me. I kept it especially for you, kind of people—people I want to hurt.

This is a kind of reality that exists only between the two of us. It is designed to be unnoticeable or unbelievable to others. It relies on being subtle, deniable, and complex to prove.

When it's created with a positive intention, it becomes a little secret to bond over. A smile, a giggle or a nod to each other, when no one else notices, we connect so deeply like there are just the two or a few of us in the world.

When it's created with ill intentions, it becomes an invisible needle that stabs someone in the heart in front of everyone, but without anyone's awareness. The aggression is so privately coded that only the target can perceive it.

Chesler (2009) said, "To use indirect aggression, the individual must be able to put his/her intentions to harm another person in a favourable light. At the same time, s(he) has to interpret the reaction of others and accommodate his/her behavior for the social manipulation not to backfire." I'd say we are even more sophisticated than that. We know how to mask our behaviours so well that the receiver of the aggression stays silent, knowing that voicing it will only ruin *their* reputation because everything will sound too subjective, leaving too much room for different interpretations. Sometimes even the receiver would doubt themselves—whether the harm was intentional, or only an unfortunate coincidence.

I know all the above deeply. Because, unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, I have also mastered the skills. I have also become an outstanding magician who can create a "relational reality" the way I want, especially for my ill intentions. I've grown to play the game well, to watch someone's soul suffocate under my smile while still being the innocent sweetheart in other people's eyes. I know I enjoy every bit of those moments—and I disgust myself for that.

The Ghost of Daughter Aversion

These three stories sketch out a terrain I try to depict, one that exists in a reality shaped by physical or psychological encounters—encounters that live only between specific individuals, at particular moments. A reality not easily named, that lives in fleeting encounters, emotional undercurrents, and unspoken expectations.

Perhaps I will call it "relational reality."

Daughter aversion is a ghost that haunts this terrain. I call it a ghost because we have yet to see its physical form, yet we know it exists. We hear footsteps and voices, catch flashes of shadow, watch doors open on their own. We feel the goosebumps, the shift in atmosphere, smell an unfamiliar scent that doesn't belong…

Something exists.

Something is making our lives very difficult. But I don't know how to describe that *Something,* because each *Something* sounds like nothing when I voice it. And I don't even know if I believe in that *Something* myself.

It's relational. And it's invisible.

Like the Japanese horror movie, The Ring. We need to watch the video first, where Sadako climbs out of the TV to haunt us. For those who had never watched it, Sadako never existed. They will never meet her.

Some impacts emerge only within relationships, making them especially difficult to capture, name, or even substantiate. To look for them, one must begin with what is often disbelieved or dismissed.

As Ahmed (2017) puts it, "Something was wrong. How to acquire the words for this Something?" She invites us to consider "the kinds of experiences you have when you are

not expected to be here," arguing that these experiences can serve as a resource for generating knowledge.

In this spirit, I see myself as collecting a specific kind of experience.

Experiences in the Trash Bin

I look for experiences that are so fleeting, so small, so light, so awkward, so confusing, so painful, so shameful, so beyond description, so hard to believe, that we doubt anyone else could possibly share them. Experiences that are beyond words, barely processed—so elusive that we're not even sure we can capture them ourselves.

These are experiences whose existence feels certain to us. Yet, we convince ourselves or are convinced by others that they're irrelevant, insignificant, or can be dealt with by just ignoring them. We don't doubt that they happened—but we absolutely doubt whether anyone else could recognise them, or believe they matter.

These are the experiences that earn us responses like: "Look at the big picture," "It's all in the past," or "You should move on." Experiences that people—consciously or unconsciously—look away from. Experiences that are dismissed, devalued, and left unexamined by us. Maybe *especially* by us. In other words, experiences that get thrown into the trash bin.

I suspect that, as a collective shaped by a shared culture, we don't just embrace specific values or beliefs together—we may also reject and conceal particular values and beliefs together. It's never the right occasion. Never the right moment. Never the right person. So we don't bring these experiences up. They get tossed into the bin, shut down or gently erased—sometimes even out of good intentions.

Like how Snow White was initially horrified by her own mother, but the story was rewritten to blame the stepmother instead (Gidwitz 2013). Or like the renowned Taiwanese

novel *Ah Fei (Liao 2012),* where the author Liao, in a recent interview with He (2025), admitted that she chose to edit out the physical and verbal violence of her mother. She wanted, she said, to create the warm, loving mother she longed for in real life.

Van der Kolk (2014) writes, "Neither society nor individuals want to remember trauma." We look away. To me, that's no different from tossing it into the trash. And once it's thrown away, we lose the connection with it.

But what's discarded doesn't disappear—it begins to rot. It starts to haunt. They turn into ghosts. And because we never look at what we've thrown away, we have no idea why we're being haunted. As Menakem (2021) puts it, decontextualised pain and trauma begin to get recognised as our personality, our family traits, even our culture.

We need to create space and time for these stories to surface. We need to run toward them as if responding to an emergency siren (Murray & Wyatt, 2025).

Digging Out the Trash

At the beginning of Ju's (2021) novel *30,000 Feet Underground*, a character known as "the cleaner" is introduced. He has a secret hobby: going through people's trash. He believes that what people throw away reveals more about them than anything they choose to display. Their secrets, their shame, the parts of themselves they try not to become—these are found in the discarded. We come to know people through their negative space.

I think this is what I'm doing. I look toward the negative space because the system was never built to register these experiences. I attend to what has been left out, silenced, dismissed, untranslatable—what has been deemed "too subjective" to count.

I go where evidence fails. I want to recover the truth. I want to trace the outline of what was never allowed to appear.

I believe daughter aversion hides in these experiences—in flickering "relational realities," in gestures that disappear when others look, in truths too subtle or too uncomfortable to be named. I've waited long enough for myself to grow up, for the chance to no longer be a child, to become someone who can finally be credited when she brings up this topic. I will not let go of this opportunity. I want to know what's there. All of it. About everything.

I will enter the space we tend to avoid looking into, consciously or unconsciously.

I will be exploring what parents, especially mothers, do under the name of discipline their children (Miller 2008), "the spoken silence (the "public" discourse which both men and women articulate openly but which are more performative and streamlined into acknowledging what is supposed to be said)" (Purewal 2010), "unheard voices (private discourses which circulate within families, relationships, conversations and discussions which tell what people are actually thinking and feeling about the subject—stories of women undergoing the scan, or men feeling pressure from parents to have a son and the subsequent reactions to this.)" (Purewal 2010), female to female "indirect aggression," (Chesler 2009), "emotional abuse" (Mills 2009), and "traumatic memory" (Van der Kolk 2014).

But how? How do I explore Something that exists in the negative space, that's been unspoken but felt, that's beyond words? The trash. The ghost. The kind of existence that will most definitely be lost and missed when we pursue objectivity.

I jumped immediately into the arms of autoethnography.

Autoethnography?

Well, Autoethnography is a methodological response to the crisis of representation, which challenges the assumptions and practices of traditional social research—particularly its pursuit of universal truths in understanding social relationships. It questions whether we can make fixed, objective claims about people, experiences, relationships, and

cultures, and resists dismissing storytelling as a valid form of knowledge. (Adams, Linn, and Ellis 2015) It "involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience." (Ellis 2007)

Ettorre (2017) believes autoethnography positions the self not in isolation, but firmly within the cultural, social, and relational contexts that shape experience. Using narrative as a method opens pathways to generating knowledge that reflects not only individual lives but also collective struggles, emotional vulnerability, and the wounds often carried in silence. Through the act of writing the self, personal stories become a means of transformation—revealing the power imbalances embedded in relationships and surfacing the emotional landscapes that are often hidden within them. In this way, autoethnography turns private experience into public insight, allowing the personal to speak politically.

Emotional Resonance

Autoethnography! Autoethnography! Autoethnography!

So that's how my mind had been for the first four years whenever I tried to explore autoethnography, after reading some writings and definitions about it. It's so noisy that I had to shout, "Fine! But why?????"

And silence. Great.

I started to self-doubt: Must be my English level. It's not good enough to capture what I think. It must also be my culture and my studies. I've never taken philosophy. I've never taken English literature. I've never given essay questions in exams. I've never read anything in the field of social science. I was never encouraged to express my opinions. I read, but only novels…

Oh no, you're doomed.

Shut up!

I put this annoying situation aside and focused on reading, recording my thoughts, and living my life.

Then one day, I was inspired by Something tiny on the internet. I don't remember exactly what it was, but it was Something like someone shared an illustration saying Have you ever gotten so annoyed by your car? It's making all these weird noises, but when you take it to the mechanic, it just functions like normal. It wasn't even an issue about computers, but I totally get it!

That's how I began to realise some resonances, and perhaps "representations" come from experiencing a similar emotional logic. But it wasn't a clear idea to me then, just a vague intuition.

In early 2020, when the pandemic hit and the world came to a sudden pause, I found myself at home with my four-year-old child 24 hours a day. That period offered me a rare opportunity to closely observe the interplay between my inner world and my interactions with my child. I began documenting these experiences on a Facebook Page. At first, simply sharing moments of insight from parenting. But the more I wrote, the more I found myself drawn to articulating the deeper layers of these moments—the emotional struggles, the resurfacing of childhood trauma, and the quiet battles that parenting unearthed within me.

Readers responded in ways I never anticipated. Many wrote to tell me that my words gave shape to Something they had long felt but never been able to name. Some said they had never felt so seen and understood. I was astonished, because I had been writing from a place of deep privacy, simply sharing what was most personal to me. I began to wonder, maybe, what's personal might be snapshots of Something bigger.

In the third year of my training, I mentioned this writing to a lecturer, who responded, “That sounds very autoethnographic.” It was then that I realised I had already begun thinking and writing from an autoethnographic perspective.

That blogging experience quietly laid the foundation for my research. The resonance I received from readers gave me the courage to delve deeper into my own story and to trust that what was mine might also speak to Something larger in our cultural fabric. It revealed what Ettorre (2017) calls “the transformative power of ‘writing the self,’” where personal stories become political realities by exposing the power inequalities embedded in human relationships and the emotional cultures that sustain them.

I learned from my experience that it is often only when we begin to share our private frustrations that we realise how many others carry the same weight. There’s a kind of shared knowing that emerges through self-disclosure—a resonance that cannot be accessed any other way.

Finding “Us” through Emotional resonance

Two names keep coming to mind as I write this section: Martin Miller and Andrea Robin Skinner. They are the son of Alice Miller and the daughter of Alice Munro—both mothers being globally celebrated authors—and both children tried to reveal a version of their mothers that sharply contrasted with the public image they upheld.

When I encountered their stories, I immediately recognised something in their pain that mirrored my own. Like theirs, my mother was also accomplished, socially respected, and seen as a positive role model by many. I have also experienced that particular kind of loneliness—being the only one who seems to know the shadow side of a person so widely admired. The confusion, the sense of being mistaken or even cruelty for feeling differently. I can picture them standing at their mother’s funerals, as I did, watching people shed tears and say, “You’re so lucky to have had her as your mother. I can’t imagine your loss,” while feeling something entirely different inside. Feelings that didn’t match the room. Feelings that felt not only invisible, but perhaps even offensive to others.

Encountering their stories was the first moment in my life when I truly felt seen, when I finally felt that I belonged. Our life events were not similar, and the emotional resonance connected only fragments of our experiences. But even that partial recognition made me feel at home. The power of resonance was so strong that it felt as though my entire existence had been suddenly justified. We are the same kind of children—those who suffer a particular type of pain that is quietly dismissed, denied, or made invisible by the people and the world around us. And yet, we exist. There are more of us.

Their intention to break the silence gave me strength.

Martin Miller (2018) describes his book as "the demolition of the wall of silence," and that struck me deeply. I, too, have long felt there is a thick wall preventing me and children in Taiwan from speaking openly about the complex, contradictory nature of parent–child relationships. Andrea Robin Skinner, quoted in Ewe (2024), said, "My mother's fame meant the silence continued." The social status of their families erased their distress. No one imagined that women like their mothers could be the source of such pain. And I believe this erasure, this invisibility, is one of the reasons daughter aversion persists—it hides inside families that appear "successful."

I have a strong feeling that children like us are beginning to speak. In recent years, books have been published in Japan by female authors who reveal mothers who were abusive in ways completely at odds with the image of a "loving maternal parent"—a reality that remained hidden until these authors chose to share their stories. (Arai 2018; Himeno 2019, Kanno 2025; Saito 2024).

Thinking about the responses from my readers—and the resonance I felt when encountering stories like those of Martin Miller, Skinner, and others—I begin to see the transformative potential of autoethnography. It asks us to start with our own experience, not as a claim to universal truth, but as an opening. It brings to light emotional patterns that have long gone unnamed. It invites recognition through resonance, not through proof.

In this way, autoethnography becomes a method for making a certain kind of reality visible. It illuminates the hidden logic that many of us have been quietly living by. And when

enough of us come together to examine what we have carried alone, we may begin to uncover something significant—something that could not have been named without each other.

Studying myself

To figure out the emotional resonance of experiencing daughter aversion, we need someone to dig into their emotions and experiences first—to make sense of what's going on—and then share it to see who resonates. I am willing to be that person, and I can be that person. Like Martin Miller (2018), I am a "silent observer"—a child who "was forced to sharpen [their] awareness of everything around [them], developing an almost X-ray-like perspective that scanned nearly every action and word, determined to understand what was happening… No one explained anything to me, so I had to rely solely on observation to infer what was actually going on."

In a culture where obedience is seen as a virtue of a good child (Du 2022), grown-ups are not necessarily known for being reasonable or emotionally consistent. I was surrounded by conflicting, unstable, and confusing demands—yet still expected to obey or perform them fully. If not, punishment followed.

At first, I was simply trying to retrace whether I had been rightfully punished. I wanted to know whether the adults around me were as fair as they claimed to be. I remember that whenever I was told I was being ridiculous or unreasonable, my eyes would heat up like a machine being turned on. My whole brain would switch into a kind of video recorder, turning, turning, turning, making sure I remembered every. Single. Detail.

Over time, this became a habit of recording moments in my life. I developed a large body of archived memory, naturally and almost obsessively.

So, when I began to explore the impact of daughter aversion, I immediately thought of myself. Not out of self-centeredness, but because I have the materials. I've carried them with me. And while interviews and case studies also work well to study lived experience,

they capture only snapshots—moments framed by the context of a meeting. What I offer here is different: a long, continuous thread of experience that has been documented not for proof, but for survival. And now, for inquiry.

What About Creative-Relational Inquiry?

My heart was set on autoethnography almost immediately, but something else felt extremely unsettling—I couldn't find a suitable perspective to assemble my research findings.

I didn't even know this could happen. I began to doubt my English level again. Maybe it's just me and my poor writing skills.

Again???

I am sorry, but this is my go-to self-doubt.

Whenever I hit a wall, I doubt my English level. Writer's block? English level. Reading confuses me? English level. Getting tired? English level. You, native speakers, have no idea how lucky you are not to have this ghost always pulling you down. And you have no idea what the frustration is like knowing this ghost will haunt you your entire life, whenever self-doubt creeps in. Lucky bastards.

So, I couldn't figure out what's making it challenging to write. I tried to position myself as a critical autoethnographer,as my supervisor suggested. I did some reading, and they seem to speak to what I am aiming to do, or have been doing. But my brain refused to process any of it. It kept getting stuck at the word "critical."

What do you mean by "critical? Who do you think you are to stand in a position to critique? Critical? What critical??

But everything in the reading described sounds very much like what we are doing! We believe personal experiences carry knowledge, don't we? Aren't we trying to examine the culture and expose the injustice in society through storytelling? (Boylorn 2021) Isn't this what we want?

No!

I tried to shush the thought away, thinking it's my self-doubt making its regular presence again. But however I ignored that thought, it wouldn't go away. I tried putting writing together, but they completely collapsed, like trying to squeeze a shape from dry sand.

What's with you??? I screamed at myself.

That's not it!

What's not it??

No replies. I covered my face with my hands in frustration. Maybe I should sit with the word critical.

Ok. I guess you're right. I don't really feel connected to the word critical. Even though I might be critical about what I find, that's not where I am at this moment. What other kinds of autoethnography are there?

Analytical Autoethnography?

I am looking at dumpsters. I don't even know what's in there yet. How do I know what to analyse?

Evocative Autoethnography?

Nah. I will for sure feel emotional and have various responses to what I find, but evocative materials themselves are not my primary purpose or intention. I simply want to stay curious. To look at what I see with an open mind. And then see what will happen.

Not critical. Not analytical. Not evocative.

How do you know there will be findings?

There must be. Because these are not really trash. They are called trash because people don't want them, don't want to look at them, not because they have zero value.

Hey, you're describing daughters!

Shut up.

I was so stuck that I eventually turned to my friend for help, who I knew used autoethnography for her research.

"Oh, sorry, but I switched to creative relational inquiry at the last minute." She said, with a shy smile.

Creative-relational inquiry?

The word “relational” caught my interest, and I decided to explore this inquiry a bit more.

“Creative-relational inquiry seeks to explore how being-with can become a robust state of research that is, finally, truly focused on emergence, on the intra-action.” (Harris 2020)

I somehow felt very comfortable about this. My mind started to form an image of myself, picking up one item after another, just to see how I felt about them.

“CRI is an inquiry that pays close attention to the necessary awkwardness of fledgling knowledge and concepts striving to matter. It takes an interest, is curious about minor acts, and strives to create space to lay out the indeterminate, listening for unintelligible attempts to lure. In fact, creative-relational inquiry, as discussed below, is not just open to, but also invites, such lures.” (Murray 2020)

And it clicked.

It felt exactly like where I wanted to be to examine this whole pile of huge unknowns in front of me. It also felt like the perfect way to capture a ghost, to help me shift my gaze to the negative space.

I am not analysing a clearly named and established phenomenon. I am slowly approaching daughter aversion through the process—trying to make out its contours, understand how it operates, how it becomes justified, internalised, transformed, and even forgotten. I need an approach that “is open to receive, to metamorphose through relation. It cries out to be the soil for the dephasing of inquiries still to come, striving to matter, to bring each other into existence.” (Murray 2020)

You know. You shouldn’t be just quoting everything!

I am sorry! But all these statements resonate so much! I suppose it's because I am also a therapist, and I've been unconsciously interacting with my experiences through writing, as if I'm listening to my clients, sitting with narratives to uncover hidden beliefs, relational patterns, suppressed pains, and unprocessed emotions. These quotes resonate with my position when I am writing my blog posts, and I feel I am now approaching my research in the same way.

I'm also beginning to understand why my whole body now reacts so strongly against the word "critical." It's because I'm standing in a space where nothing has fully taken shape yet. From my own ethical position, I don't feel comfortable criticising something before I even know what I am truly seeing, or what I am trying to hold.

It isn't really about whether critical autoethnography can make room for what I'm doing. It's about the fact that I don't yet feel ready to speak from a critical stance. I am still in a phase of listening, sensing, and forming. And criticism, for me, belongs after that, not before.

I don't yet know what it will do to bring daughter aversion into language, into form. I don't yet know how my explorations might shift things—internally, relationally, culturally—when daughter aversion is named not through statistics, but through emotional logic and lived resonance. This dissertation is not a presentation of what I already know. It's the process of finding out. It is the act of tuning into something long dismissed, and letting it speak—slowly, shakily, but clearly enough to feel real.

I chose to engage in a mode of inquiry that centres on relationship, uncertainty, emergence, vulnerability, and presence. And I am willing to let myself be changed by it, and I offer the traces of that becoming. Because I am not trying to prove something. I am trying to understand daughter aversion as fully as possible, as I am trying to experience my client as a person. I want exactly a "research with social impact, not just economic impact." (Harris 2020) And if that impact takes me to be changed to manifest, so be it.

It now feels like Taiwanese divination bwa bwei, to interact with the spirit, an ancestor, or a divine being by dropping those two small wooden pieces on the floor and determining their responses by the positions of the pieces.

I know. It really does. And I can't wait to find out what we will discover.

Data and Memory work

So, this research project becomes an autoethnography research under a creative-relational approach.

In my blogging experience, I often don't finish writing until someone reads it. It's through their responses—when they tell me I've spoken something they could not yet say—that I begin to understand what my words have really done. The meaning doesn't all arrive in solitude; it partly arrives in echo. I believe this dissertation will be the same. I will try my best to expose what I've experienced, to give form to what has long been hidden or dismissed, through reliable storytelling and reflections.

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) draw on Bochner, Plummer, Ellis & Bochner, and Ellis & Ellingson to say that, for an autoethnographer, questions of reliability are closely tied to the narrator's credibility, sense of truth, and potential for generalizability. It's not just about whether there is factual evidence for what's described, but whether the narrator genuinely believes this is what happened to them. The aim is often verisimilitude—to evoke in readers the sense that the experience is lifelike, believable, and emotionally or culturally possible. In autoethnography, generalizability doesn't rest on statistical sampling but on resonance: whether the story speaks to the reader's own experience or helps them recognise something about the lives of others. It also depends on whether the writing can illuminate broader, often unfamiliar, cultural processes through the lens of the personal.

I follow the above guideline while gathering and rendering materials for this dissertation.

As part of this inquiry, I reflect on my life experiences and begin gathering moments that stand out—experiences that lingered, returned, or disrupted me in some way. I see these memories as "*not precise reflections of reality; they are stories we tell to convey our personal take on our experience. (Van der Kolk 2014) And* they are not simply events, but affective traces. I then group these experiences into four narrative categories or "sites": home, temple, school, and lake. Each site represents a different relational terrain, a different aspect of daughter aversion and relational oppression as I encountered it. This structure allows me to trace how the logic of aversion plays out across different spaces of socialisation, expectation, and identity formation.

Like the early therapy sessions—I don't yet know what each space holds, but I trust that something important will appear.

The experiences I grouped into these four sites—home, temple, school, and lake—did not emerge in a linear or orderly way. They came to me as fragments, feelings, memories that refused to stay silent. The grouping is messy and may not always seem immediately logical. But I trust they are there for a reason.

The structure of this dissertation follows the rhythm of a therapeutic relationship. In therapy, we don't decide in advance what's relevant. We welcome what emerges—stories, memories, feelings—not because we already know where they lead, but because we trust that their emergence carries meaning. We interact with what emerges through new experiences, new questions, and new insights from current life and other people's perspectives, observing various responses in these dialogues.

Only later, often at the end of a session, do we begin to reflect on the patterns, themes, or emotional logic that surfaced. Part of this inquiry is to sit with that mess, to stay with the uncertainty long enough for form to begin to show itself. I am trusting that what's been hidden will find its way into form, as we often say, "trust the process" (Murray 2020) in a therapeutic relationship.

And then, I want to see what it speaks to. I want to know whether what has been hidden and rejected in me might speak to what has been hidden and denied in you.

I am not seeking closure or fixed definitions. I am offering myself as a site of emergence, a first voice, a hand reaching out into the dark, wondering gently: *Is it the same for you? Do you know this, too?*

I want my research to become something more than research—it becomes an invitation, a witnessing, a shared act of recovery.

Ethics

People in my narratives

As I am both the researcher and the only research subject in this research, the ethical discussions will primarily focus on "relational ethics" (Ellis 2007) among those mentioned in my narratives and experiences. As this research focuses on aspects of the mother-daughter relationship, my mother will be discussed frequently.

I've often asked myself: Is this research driven by a desire to say, *I'll show your true colour to the world*?

To deny this would be telling a lie. Yes. My anger has been silenced for so many years that I can't be all kind and well-meaning. You're going to see my anger and frustration in this dissertation for sure. But only partly.

I'm also clear that my deeper motivations go beyond revenge. I'm not trying to destroy anyone's image. Like Skinner, as quoted by Ewe (2024), said she wanted her experience to "become part of the stories people tell about my mother." Martin Miller (2018), who wants to present a more wholesome description of Alice Miller as a person, none of us wishes to cancel or deny anything our mothers have achieved.

What I want is for people—me included—to expand our imagination around human complexity. Mothers can be both thoughtful and cruel. That both are true at once. Only

when we allow this kind of truthfulness can we begin to see what's been overlooked—and find new ways of understanding why people act the way they do, and how certain wounds get passed down.

This is why, as "this insider and outsider, I need to represent those people in my stories in the most compassionate ways possible—with care, humility and honesty and most importantly, with political and ethical sensitivity." (Ettorre 2017) I've already practised this in my blog, and it has changed me. Yes, it's shameful and vulnerable at times to reveal the darker parts of myself. But I've learned that authenticity draws authenticity. I've received so many sincere, courageous responses that I'm willing to take that risk again in this research.

I want to see who responds to my unmasked pain. And I know I'm not alone. I have my therapist, my partner, and my child—this net of support that allows me to be brave, even when I don't know what the response will be.

From the beginning of my blog, I experimented with many writing voices. Over time, I developed some core principles that let me stay honest while also protecting myself and my family. When I write about my ma, A-ma, or our relationships, I don't soften or romanticise the memories. I write them down as they felt—uncomfortable, painful, sometimes unflattering—to take responsibility for what I witnessed, received, and may have passed on.

And I don't exclude myself. I turn the same gaze toward my own actions, thoughts, and language. If we want to understand how daughter aversion shapes our thinking and relationships, we have to be willing to see clearly—even when what we see is hard to bear.

For others who appear in my writing—relatives, teachers, friends—I protect their anonymity by compositing or adjusting details, treating these figures as representing recurring roles in our society, not as individuals. As for my father, husband, brother, and child, I include them only when their role in a memory or relational dynamic is revealed. They're not subjects of study, but people who move through these stories with me.

This is my ethical commitment: not judgment, but truthfulness in relationship. To write without distortion. To let complexity stay complex. I believe, only then can we begin to get closer to the core of daughter aversion and the harm it causes—and how it might finally be interrupted.

Taking care of myself

Adams, Linn, and Ellis (2015) said, "By telling stories—often vulnerable stories—about aspects of our identities and experiences, autoethnographers purposefully open themselves up to criticism, and as a result to being wounded or attacked."

I am well aware of this risk from my experience of blogging on Facebook. These people on the internet, well, they can be mean and cruel, and I know I am touching on a culturally sensitive topic by reflecting on how I was brought up—even without mentioning Jung-nan-ching-niu!

I developed several strategies to help create a strong sense of how to write with care, clarity, and responsibility. I make a conscious choice to always use "I" in all reflections. I don't point fingers. I don't accuse. I simply show up as myself and talk about how "I" make sense of my experience.

I consistently apply the ethical approach I described above—fairness, truthfulness, and relational accountability in all my writings. And I would say they work very well so far. In a culture where people often comment on stories about childhood maltreatment with "you're ungrateful" or "you should be thankful your parents are still alive," I have never received criticism like that in the past five years. I don't think it's luck. I think it's because when vulnerability is shared without defence, it doesn't provoke defensiveness.

Instead, it invites recognition. And to my surprise, it opens space. It gives power to the reader—not to attack, but to feel, to reflect, to decide for themselves how much of my story resonates with their own. Ahmed (2017), Chesler (2009), and Ferdinand (2022) all mentioned the impactful experiences they had when sharing their authentic narratives with

others. I have also received many comments and messages that told me my words made them feel understood, and at the same time, they made me feel seen. These responses are the root of my courage to continue sharing my vulnerable stories now in my dissertation "in order to call attention to the vulnerability, questions, injustices, silencing and shame that others may endure" (Adams, Linn, and Ellis 2015) as an autoethnographer.

Finally, I am a firm believer that the more I care for myself, the more ethical my writing becomes. Therefore, throughout the process of this research, I work closely with a personal therapist, who helps me process emotionally overwhelming or triggering experiences as they arise. This support allows me to stay grounded while writing from painful or intimate places, so I can share with integrity without sacrificing my own well-being.

FB group and internet resources

A public Facebook group named "Daughters Raised in Son-Preferred Families, Let's Courageously Reject Parental Exploitation" (2024) is a treasure I found on the internet. The purpose of the group is stated loud and clear in the name, and it gathers daughters to share their experiences, ask questions, and even do simple surveys there. I draw on general themes from the group to connect my own experiences with those who identify themselves as being Jung-nang-ching-niued. When I need more concrete examples, I use news stories or published books, and if I mention how people responded to them, I just describe the overall tone or common reactions—not individual comments.

English as a Mediator

It gradually becomes clear to me why this research needs to be done here in Scotland, in English, when I think about my relationship with this language. Fanon (1952) says*, "to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture,"* and it feels profoundly true to me.

I believe that, for me as a researcher, it was an unconscious but ultimately necessary choice to conduct this study in English, because it is the language most capable of holding all the parts of me without dominance.

Mandarin, Taiwanese, and Japanese each represent fragments of my personal, cultural, and historical self, but they do not coexist peacefully. They carry hierarchies, trauma, political tension, and uneven histories of power and erasure. Within me, they are not equal, and when I speak or write in one, it often suppresses or reinterprets the others.

Also, each language carries not only history but also embodied relational weight. Each language is the dominant language of different characters in my story—my mother speaks Mandarin and Taiwanese, my grandmother speaks Japanese and Taiwanese, and I inhabit all three. Writing in English allows me to step slightly outside of those inherited positions. It gives me just enough distance to see each character not through the language of conflict, but through the emotional truth of what happened.

Choosing English becomes part of my methodology. It's a tool for balancing power among inner voices, a medium of translation—not just across cultures but across *selves* — *and* a way of protecting the inquiry from being hijacked by inherited scripts embedded in my first languages. English, being completely free from a direct relationship to my past experiences, also becomes a tool that provides me with a new framework for observing, interpreting, and re-examining my experiences from a different perspective, allowing new meanings to emerge.

And Scotland is a safe environment for me because of how people respond when I bring up the topic—not just in the academic field, but in my daily life. I am surrounded by people from various backgrounds and always feel met with curiosity and compassion. This is a kind of interaction I have never experienced back home. Together, English and Scotland function as a kind of mediating space, almost like a therapist's room—a place where emotions can be revisited without immediately collapsing into old hierarchies. I can talk about this topic more and more freely and without stress. I am finally able to listen to the message of my experiences—not with the ears of the past, but with the space and courage of my present self.

Theoretical framework

I now see this dissertation as a journey deep into a mountain. A cursed mountain full of mystery, where many women—including my own mother—have disappeared. It's become a habit to speak of this mountain as if it simply "eats people," and so we stay away. But I want to go in. I want to know what happened. I want to understand what called these women into its depths, despite its gloom, despite the silence that surrounds it.

Now I stand at the entrance—where everyone was last seen.

I've been preparing for this journey. The theories and references I carry are not fixed tools or instructions; they are *my "companion texts," as Ahmed (2017) has stated***,** and help me, as Murray (2020) described, "properly see what we have learned not to recognise, or to hear" throughout the journey. I choose to engage with these theories and references because they've said exactly what I've been thinking or shown me directions for things I haven't been able to name.

I carry Ahmed, bell hooks, and Miller, who have climbed mountains in other countries, drawing attention to the paths that mattered to them. I have Fanon, whose work speaks to the mental terrain of those forced to climb across thresholds of language, identity, and pain. Du and Hung remind me of the mountain's historical strata—of what's been sedimented into the soil. Yu Chian, Chen and Chang offer insight into the mountain's inner ecosystem—the species, cycles, and relational scripts that flourish within it. Mills, Chesler and Ferdinand reflect on how climbers make sense of their journey and how to record what they've seen. Van der Kolk and Fricker help me stay alert to what may not yet be nameable—to those experiences that hover just outside of language.

This is not a comprehensive account of all the thinkers I draw on. Rather, it is a way to describe the kind of guidance I seek from theory: not as a fixed map, but as a shared courage to enter a rugged terrain.

This dissertation would present this journey, as a hike lost in a mountain I visited often in my childhood, encountering mysterious places and revisiting various memories. As I begin exploring the topic and enter more deeply into the journey, voices in my mind become more vivid an developed, illustrating how knowledge emerges as I interact with different parts of myself, the thinkers, and the memories recalled along the way.

Final words before the journey

You might have already noticed that I struggle with the tension between being creative and fluid and being "properly academic" all the time, even though my heart screams to fly.

I want to "play" (Murray 2020) more through my writing, but I often get stuck and lost. Perhaps this is because I am a person at various levels of the "borderlands" (Anzaldúa 1987)—still in-between past and present, in-between expressing an unfiltered self and an accepted self, in-between dictatorship and democracy, in-between Chinese, Japanese, and Taiwanese, in-between East and West.

These senses of in-betweenness add to another aspect of "messiness."—messy in writing styles because I am juggling academic writing, creative writing, and writing that originated from different emotions, different languages, and different cultures.

Can we still call it "play" when it becomes a demand? I still hope it can be, at least to some degree.

This research is part of the emergent, part of the process of navigating messiness.

Let's begin.

Chapter 3: The Long Way to the Inquiry

A Flip in the Story

April. 6th, 2021—Note to self

I am here at Starbucks, with its newly renovated interior decorations. I like it a lot because it's now filled with wooden furniture and a warm orange tone. It feels somehow much more welcoming and open.

My heart is pounding fast. I think it has something to do with my trying to include my feelings and experiences in all aspects of this research process.

It feels right to do it, but I feel so exposed that I am a bit in shock. Or maybe that's not it. Perhaps I am just not confident enough with my English proficiency. I hesitate a lot when I am writing things down. Or I don't feel safe when I am writing things down. It feels like I am leaving some proof, some evidence.

With speaking, I can always alter my words afterwards to make me sound more innocent or knowledgeable, depending on what serves me better. Others won't remember exactly what I said, so there will be plenty of room for me to play the game. I know that very, very well, through experiences.

But not written words.

Words are black and white, with no grey area. Once they are written, printed, posted or published, I cannot deny what I said. And it is often a one-way expression, so there is no room to say I misunderstood you, or I didn't hear you clearly, to make everything sound more reasonable if people didn't like what I said. It's just me, and my whole opinion, lying there to be criticised, attacked or whatever people would say about me.

It's scary.

It scares the hell out of me.

I can feel my heart pounding loudly right now, and again that feeling of suffocation. This feeling seems to have become a form of guidance for me. Whenever I have trouble breathing, I know I am on to something important.

It's not pleasant guidance. It's painful and scary. But it's clear and unavoidable.

I am on to something important.

Am I really?

Not long ago, I couldn't feel pain. I remember once, after our listening practice, one of the pieces of feedback I received was that I missed the pain in the speech. It was mentioned several times, not directly, but quite obviously. I missed them all and kept on responding to something else.

I was surprised and immediately felt damaged. There it was then. I always knew there had to be something wrong with me growing up in the culture and environment, and it's finally clear—I cannot empathise with others' pain. What kind of monster am I?

In that moment of realisation, I could feel something heavy pressing my heart, and it was pounding very fast beneath that weight. I couldn't breathe.

I'd never felt like that before. At least I didn't remember feeling like that before. But the pressure on my heart that day was so clear, and it stayed. It stayed and started to ache, bit by bit, like a crack quietly cut its way into my body.

Every time I attended to my heart, the crack seemed to get deeper. The ache told me where it was. I didn't know what this crack meant and what it might do to me. Would I get crashed into pieces? I was terrified. But I also noticed that a part of me was inquisitive. The crack seemed to be looking for something, or going somewhere, as it got deeper. I wanted the message to unfold, if there is one.

Today, I believe it was linking everything for me.

I am thinking of the day of our psychodynamic group. Because of the pandemic, the meeting was online. Last time the group met, we were told to prepare a childhood picture to share as part of the activities to enhance discussions about primitive experiences.

I was quite troubled at first because I was far away from home and no one could email me a picture, especially within a week. Luckily, I recalled that I had created an album on Facebook when I was getting married. I put some interesting childhood pictures there to share with my cousins who couldn't attend the wedding. I found the album online, opened it, and scrolled through the pictures to see if there was anything usable—and I saw it.

Ohhhh, this one is perfect!!

It was me, about 20 months old, in a long white robe and a pair of sienna trousers, half leaning on a pile of pillows and blankets on the bed, as if I was leaning on a bench at a park, ready to whistle to any cute girls passing my front.

It reminded me how often I was told I looked and acted exactly like a boy when I was a child. I believed that experience shaped part of my identity, and it would be interesting to hear how others would respond from a psychodynamic perspective.

Oh, and I could also share my favourite story about my birth!!

Intuitively, I felt this story would be a great one for discussion. I heard it from my ma, and I've told this story many times to different friends because I somehow believe it reveals something about me as a person. I would agree that it shaped at least a part of my sense of self.

It's been a while since I last told the story, so I reviewed the details in my mind: It was the time before the ultrasound. Ever since my mother was pregnant, everyone who knew any "magic" tradition to tell the gender of the baby gave her the same answer. From everything like the fortune teller, the shape of her belly, her skin conditions, the level of activeness of the baby, the way she stood, the dreams the family had been having, the baby's a boy. It was so undeniably convincing!

There were even strong signs on the day I was born. For one, the female postman who always delivered the newspaper was suddenly off sick, and a male postman came instead. For two, the phone in the house didn't ring often, but on that day, it rang five times, and all from men. Everyone, including my parents and my grandparents, believed that's the God and ancestors' way to "break the news early." So, when my ma's water broke, everyone felt ready and confident for what was coming.

And the rest we know. Instead of a boy, they've got me.

I couldn't even describe how much I loved that story as a child. I would ask my ma, my ba, my A-ma to tell me about it again and again, begging for more details every single time. I especially loved the part when my ba went to see my mother after visiting the baby's room in the hospital, and my ma asked him,

"So?"

"A girl."

"Huh?"

“A girl. It’s a girl.”

I would giggle till I curled into a ball when I heard this, imagining the look on my ma's and ba's faces. Who else had the power to trick everyone on the day they were born? I believed it was evidence that I am unique and special, and I enjoyed reliving the moment whenever I told the story to someone new. I never got tired of it.

This time, I get to witness the expressions on faces from different cultures! I rubbed my hands, waiting for the moment to come.

When it was my turn to talk about my picture, I felt ready. I’ve been telling this story so many times that I knew the perfect tone, rhythm, and expression for the best effects—when to pause, when to tilt my head to hint at the dramatic turn—everything went exactly the way I wanted.

“And then when they arrived at the hospital….”

I was going to say “Ta-Daa” like I always did, to get a good laugh from my audience. But this time, something in my mind snapped, like the camera clicked and everything in front of me flashed white for a moment.

I froze.

After a long pause, I said to all the bewildered faces on the screen.

“I’m sorry. I think I just realised something I’ve never thought about before.”

I clicked off the share mode on my computer and sat back, deep in thought. A voice in my mind said: What were you excited about in this story? What makes you think you were even welcomed when they realised it's you?

The answer slowly came into consciousness, not until today, as if someone put on a different pair of glasses. I felt like I had been seeing everything in various colours.

Boys are favoured. I know that well.

So many times, when I grew up, I saw adults talking to women with a newborn, "It's ok. Older sisters help take care of brothers."

It's ok. That means don't be sad or disappointed. Giving birth to a girl is bad news. What makes me believe I was a different case?

This is the first time I shift perspectives to see the story from the other protagonist's point of view: the woman who got pregnant in the first year of her marriage and, by all appearances, was surely carrying the family's first grandson.

Born into a traditional family, she worked hard to rise above her circumstances, earned an impressive degree, held a prestigious job, and married a man who was equally accomplished and well-matched. And then, her first pregnancy was with a boy. In her family, she must have been a legendary figure. During those ten months of pregnancy, she must have been showered with admiration, the idol of all the women around her, living the life they had always dreamed of. Whether viewed from a traditional or modern perspective, she was the model woman. And once the child was born, she could walk with pride, a role model for all the younger women in the family.

But she didn't get to rise like a phoenix. The precious jade that Heaven had promised her turned out, once in hand, to be just an ordinary stone by the roadside. All those who

had gathered to watch her show off her jewel slowly walked away, smirking. What was, for me, an extraordinary story—for my ma, a cruel joke; for the family, a total loss of face.

I suddenly realise, for the first time, how wrong I have been for my entire life—Me entering this world did not fascinate anyone. It was a disappointment. A major letdown.

"There's no such thing as an infant." as Winnicott (1966) had said. The fun story of my birth turned out to be setting the tone for my childhood. What exactly does it mean? What is the scale of its impact, if there is any? Does it explain my complicated relationship with my mother?

I look out of the window at the familiar street that now feels completely alien to me. I am not sure if I know anything anymore. Have I been living in my own illusion my entire life? The crack cuts deep into my heart, and I feel something collapsing in the background, like a wall has been knocked down.

What's been hidden behind the wall? Will I regret it if I approach it?

Learning the Island

October 15th, 2021—diary

Dear you,

After the meaning of my *birth legend* flipped, I feel like I've stumbled upon something important! I can't quite articulate what it is, but a restless energy is swirling in my chest, telling me I am onto something. Am I really? I'm not sure, to be honest. But the pull is undeniable. There must be a solid research topic buried here somewhere—I just need to dig deep enough to find it.

There's no word to capture how I feel now. You know I grew up as a child overflowing with questions—questions about the people around me, about the world I lived in, and many, many more. They were never answered. They were never even asked. They only surfaced in my mind, bubbling from deep within, and were quietly guided into the closet in my chest. I know I've always been waiting for a day when I can pull these questions out and have them answered. Could this be the moment? Could this be the opportunity to finally uncover what I've been wondering and pondering, hoping to make sense of my whole life?

How very, very exciting!

I have no idea how to dig in or where to continue, though. But that's ok. Research takes time, and I'm only at the beginning of everything. The only thing I'm certain of is the entry point: Taiwan—the hometown that has always left me feeling sticky and foggy, elusive in ways I can never fully grasp, because of the people and culture there. And I have that new realisation of my birth story—son preference. With that small piece of new understanding, I can already see potential in exploring language, political changes, family ghosts, gender discrimination...layers and layers of possibilities!!

This will be the perfect opportunity to repair my lack of understanding about the island I grew up in—to catch up on everything I was never taught or told!!

You know how ridiculous I feel every time I think about how little I know about Taiwan. Beyond a vague "We were once colonised by the Dutch and Spain," I knew *nothing* about what happened before the Japanese arrived. And even my understanding of Japanese rule was patchy—just fragments from my A-gon, A-ma and the simple fact that Taiwan was handed to Japan because the Qing Dynasty lost a war. But why? What was the context? What actually unfolded between these countries? How did it shape the lives of the people on this island?

Nothing about Taiwan was in the curriculum when I was at school. Ma and ba never mentioned anything much, either. I didn't realise what was odd about it until I was in college. That was the first time I met students from other parts of Taiwan, and I realised—

when they told me where they're from—I didn't know where those places were, what they looked like or what they were famous for. I can still feel the uneasiness I felt when I said this...

But those days are over!! I'll become a Taiwan know-it-all after this research!!

Oh—and I think this research must be autoethnography research. Why? Well, it makes sense, doesn't it? I want to dig deep into personal experiences to understand our culture and our identities! Autoethnography would allow me to do exactly that. See? Perfect fit. A bright, smooth opening. A promising first step.

I've selected several books for us to get started with: Formosa Under the Dutch (Campbell 2017), Decoding History of Taiwan 1550-1720 (Wong and Huang 2017), and History of Modern Taiwanese Women (Hung 2017). I can't wait for that deep, dark hollow in my chest to finally get filled—overflowing with new knowledge and insights!

Totally excited about what's coming!!!

Love,

Your girl

...
I immensely enjoy them! She has always been a thirsty reader, and this time there's a lot of interesting stuff to learn. It was very eye-opening for me to read how the Dutch described the indigenous people of Taiwan. (Campbell 2017) I always thought Taiwan was a small and marginalised island that bore little importance in the world—at least that's what Ma and Ba told us. So, I never really thought about how we interact with the world globally.

///
Well, I don't know…All I remember is how uncomfortable I felt when I saw the priest reporting in his letter how the local people were uncivilised and needed to be saved by Christianity. It was so awkward. Also, the book we read was translated by a Scottish

priest, who translated the original text from Dutch. That's way too many turns. I don't know what to make of it. It's basically an interpretation of an interpretation of an interpretation of the original observation…

…
Yeah, that Christianity part was a bit clingy. Reminds me of what Adams, Linn, and Ellis (2015) were talking about—the objectivity of the researcher and observer in ethnography. But it's really strange, I kind of feel glad about it. Not about how people were viewed in the writing, but something else. It's almost like, for the first time, I saw us having a place in the global conversation. It's a feeling like, Wow, so there was a time when we were also viewed through a colonial perspective. Also, I feel like some people did see us. We're not that invisible at all. We really are part of the world. We existed!

///
It sounds a bit sad, actually…

…
Hmmm… Maybe yes and no…? I don't know. I guess I'm still processing…

///
Well, for me, it's more fascinating to read Decoding History of Taiwan (Wong and Hung 2017). Taiwanese society in the 16th–18th centuries was impressively vibrant! I never realised we had been such a multicultural environment—with Dutch and Spanish ships and businesspeople coming and going, priests from Scotland and other Christian countries, then Japanese, Han and Hakka Chinese, and more than nine different tribes of Indigenous people all active on the island.

It's basically a full-colour blend of all kinds of cultures and languages!! I can't imagine what life must've been like back then—seeing people from all over the world daily. That must be a hell of a time for interpreters! We would've loved to be living in that world! I suppose I just assume Taiwan has always been the way we are right now: We have people from different ethnicities, but the difference in appearance is blurry, especially for Han and Hakka. I can't tell without asking.

…
I bet that kind of vibrant mixture was mostly gone after 1895, when Japan began to rule the whole island of Taiwan. That kind of diversity was possible because the island was not under a single government at that time.

If it weren't for the book, I would never have known that the Qing Dynasty only controlled the northern part of the island. (Wong and Huang 2017) They were sharing ownership with the indigenous people at the time, as well as with the Dutch and Spanish. How bizarre—if they didn't have full ownership of this place, what gave them the idea and power to "give" Taiwan to Japan?

///
Yeah, I am also shocked when I read that part.

…
Right? Well, but a part of me was like, yeah, of course!

///
I know…

Anyways, I enjoyed Hung's (2017) book the most. Especially because our grandparents were from a class that benefited greatly from Japanese education, so I've heard a lot of good things about that time. Also, Taiwanese people generally have excellent impressions of Japan and Japanese people. So, I am particularly interested to know how we were actually treated or viewed back then. I thought it was brilliant for Hung to focus on policies and experiences among women because I felt I could immediately connect those changes to possible everyday-life impacts.

…
Yeah, I would never have given foot-binding--and how it disappeared—— another thought if it weren't for her discussions in the book. She gave an obvious explanation of how the local people and the Japanese government stood on opposite sides of that tradition. On the one hand, it was a very important tradition for Han and Hakka people to bind women's feet. It was a key part of ensuring their daughters' marriages. And, like Hung (2017) said, getting married was basically the most crucial thing in a Han woman's life.

///
I'll say that's still true even today. Remember how our ma was telling us when we were six that it'd be better if we married a doctor in the future, because doctors are "cleaner"?

…
I know. And it was years later that we realised that by "cleaner" she meant less likely to go to prostitutes, and hence less likely to catch "dirty diseases." I seriously don't know why she was saying that to a six-year-old.

Anyway, back to what we're saying—I thought it was very clever that the Japanese government didn't just make it a law to ban the foot-binding tradition outright. Instead, they began by targeting the wealthiest and most influential business owners in Northern Taiwan, inviting them to Japan and showing them what Japan was like at the time. (Hung 2017) I think this shows how confident they were in their culture and power. They believed these people—who had just been abandoned by a collapsing Qing Dynasty—would voluntarily choose to join Japan and embrace Japanese values and customs.

///
I honestly love the turn here: They did, but from an unexpected perspective—they were fascinated by Japanese women! (Hung 2017)

You know, in a way, I could really understand this. Back in 1895, women were mostly at home because of their bound feet. Also, they weren't allowed to be in the same room with boys or men outside of their family once they turned seven. And at the same time, they never went to school for knowledge. They only received moral education to teach them how to be good wives. You know, if someone never leaves the house and can't really move around much since childhood, I honestly don't think they'd grow up to be very interesting people to be with.

...
Yeah, I totally see what you mean, and I agree. I can really imagine how, when these men saw how well-educated and active Japanese women were in the workplace, they wanted their wives and daughters to be like them. (Hung 2017) And the first step to make it possible was to abandon foot-binding. No one can go to school with feet that can't walk! So, these men went home and demanded that their daughters give up foot-binding. They did it so eagerly that the Japanese government only needed to focus on building schools for women. And when it eventually became social consensus that foot-binding was outdated and harmful, they declared the law to ban it.

Like that, they gracefully avoided any massive conflict with the locals. I'm in awe.

///
I don't know... I mean, I agree that foot-binding is something that needed to be removed, and I'm glad it was removed without much resistance—but... I don't really know how to evaluate or judge this whole transition. I am unsettled with so many questions. Like, does it count as women's liberation if women themselves didn't ask for it, but were forced? What happened to the women whose feet were already bound, and now were seen as 'outdated' or 'old-fashioned'?

The most surreal thing is—I never realised it all happened in the early 1900s. That's our great-grandmother's generation. It's not even that far away, but I was completely unaware of any of these things. So odd. I can't believe history can be so close, yet feel so distant at the same time.

And there's more. These books also made me realise how unclear the idea of "Taiwanese" really is. See, there were more than just Han and Hakka people in Taiwan when Japan took us over.

We already know that, but Hung's book (2017) confirmed it again: the indigenous people were treated differently from us. They had a much more violent conflict with the Japanese government.

And even though Han and Hakka look very much alike and both came from the mainland during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, there were significant cultural differences that were never fully explored. Remember how mum always told us not to marry Hakka people? These two groups don't get along. And there was a class difference, too.

Our family was fortunate to belong to the group that received the highest level of education during the Japanese era—on both the ma and ba sides. Our great-grandfather even went to Japan for medical school. I don't think that was a huge group of people. Most Taiwanese only received a primary school education, while all our grandparents could work comfortably in a Japanese-speaking environment and earn good money.

It's such a fragmented society.

So, if we're going to talk about son preference as a tradition, whose tradition are we talking about? Is it even a tradition that's shared with all people in Taiwan? If it's not shared by all, can we call it a tradition in Taiwan? Or a tradition between Han and Hakka people? Or a tradition rooted in China? Or the Qing Dynasty? Or "the mainland"—because this tradition lives through centuries?

For one thing, I know the Indigenous people should be excluded because they have a completely different culture. But what next? How do we define "us"? Whose experience should we look at?

…
Why do you get so stirred up by these questions? That's just how things were back then. She's only trying to know more about the background. Her research is about her experiences and the environment she grew up in—not a historical deep dive.

///
I don't know. I don't think we can handle this. It's too complicated.

…
I am sure we'll be fine. We may not have answers yet, but we've got time to explore.

///
Says you.

The Collapse

June 13th, 2022—diary

Dear you,

I think I am screwed. I don't know exactly what, but I think I fucked up really bad. We've been too naive and too spoiled, considering it's fine to let our interests and curiosity guide us. Since we know nothing about Taiwan, and have only vague impressions about son preference, whatever touches on the topic may be helpful and may lead us somewhere—that's where we've been standing. I used to think it's a brilliant position.

Now I just feel very, very stupid. I think I totally humiliated myself today. I can't believe I even thought I was capable of doing research in my second language, and in a field I have only begun to step into.

I think I am fucked.

Sorry, you must be confused. Today, I met my critical friend.

It is part of an essential support in dissertation writing, and I apparently had no idea of it. He's a faculty member in the department, and the purpose of the meeting was to provide me with fresh perspectives or feedback on my research. So, before our meeting, I sent my critical friend a summary of what we've been doing and reading all this time, and what we thought our research looks like at this stage.

It wasn't an unpleasant meeting at all. My critical friend knows quite a lot about Taiwan, so when I shared everything we've discovered, we were able to have some deep conversations. We talked about 228 incidents; about White Terror and the political turbulence we've experienced in the past 80 years after the KMT party came to Taiwan from China in 1945. (Li 2023) We also discussed what I learned about the Japanese era and related traditions and policies. It was a satisfying intellectual exchange! But, at the end, he asked me, "So what exactly is your research about?"

I was genuinely shocked. I thought we'd just spent about 1 hour talking about my research. But no? I sat there, apparently not knowing what to say, and he prompted me by asking what my research question was. I panicked and squeezed out some question-like sentences to make it seem like I've done my homework. In the end, he scratched his head

and said to me, very obviously something he considered ultimately crucial to state before it's too late, "Well, research is about what you don't know, not about what you've already known."

I felt like my tongue was cut off at that moment. Or tied in a knot, if not cut off.

I remembered nodding, and then quietly sneaking out of the office, almost crawling like a tiny furball, making as little noise as possible. I wished I had been invisible. I wish this whole conversation today had never happened.

Dear you, I feel ashamed. I feel ashamed because I was doing exactly what he said I should be doing—reading and exploring topics I didn't know about. Every single material I shared in our meeting today was something I recently discovered. But my critical friend believed I was sharing basic knowledge about my hometown with him. I wonder if he said that because I was giving the impression of doing research about introducing Taiwan to the Western world.

It's not his fault.

How would anyone believe I grew up knowing little about my hometown? Taiwan is a tiny island with only 11 prefectures, but I couldn't even completely tell people their locations without mistakes. I've only read fewer than five books about Taiwan and fewer than five movies about Taiwan. I grew up feeling natural, seeing most characters in fiction and novels have Japanese, English, Spanish or even Russian names. The first time I read a story about Taipei, words describing the street I walk past every day made me extremely uneasy. The image that popped up in my head was too clear, with too many details that could trigger too many of my memories. And I remember I found it annoying because I couldn't stay with the story, almost as if I was also forced to look at things I didn't want to look deeply at or not allowed to look deeply at. And I felt uncomfortable.

We're the generation that was nurtured under the KMT party's "Anti-communist and pro-reunification with mainland China" discourse. I've only recently been able to link

exactly what happened in a wholesome way: After WWII, Japan no longer had enough power to retain control over Taiwan, so they left. There was a brief period when Taiwan had no ruler, and people on the island were eager to establish their own government. But that soon became impossible. Soon after WWII, a severe domestic conflict broke out in China between the CCP and the KMT. KMT lost completely, so they brought their family and a small number of supporters to Taiwan—and immediately became the new rulers.

It's not an exaggeration to say that, for me, whose family came to settle down in Taiwan during the Qing Dynasty, I was raised under a confusing mixture of multiple realities. At school, we were told, "We're the last hope of Chinese people and one day we'll take our homeland back to liberate our brothers and sisters in the mainland, suffering immensely under the Communist government," even though we're only about half the size of Scotland. The KMT government was established when Taiwan was under Japanese rule. To "correct" this, it became an emergency to make sure all people in Taiwan know "the truth" about "history" and our "great homeland": You're Chinese, not Japanese. And it's a mercy that we could come here to save you from them.

So, we spent our whole school life catching up with history and geography about the mainland. We learned how we were a piece of land cruelly occupied by evil Japanese, and we were so lucky to return to the embrace of the true family. But at the same time, this "family" is banning our language at school, arresting and executing people with different opinions. Whilst at home, my A-gon, A-ma speak the language of the evil Japanese and always get agitated when they see the President on TV, telling me one day we'll become who we really are.

But who am I really?

Am I the person whom I was told to be? Or the person who my A-gon, A-ma were raised to be? Or the person my ancestors were born to be? Or the person I want to be? What is identity? Is it inherited? Given? Identified? Is it changeable if I don't like it? Is it forcible by making up my mind?

I am now sitting in my room, looking at the trees outside my window. The bare branches of tall trees stretch high into the light blue sky—a scenery that never exists back home. This is the 18th year I have been away from the island. I thought I had already stepped far enough away from the ambiguity and complexity of Taiwanese identity. But maybe it's avoidance?

I recalled the first time I went abroad, to the US. After several weeks into the semester, a classmate asked me, "Are you Chinese?"

I was caught off guard. I heard stories about being asked by students from China, and I have been pondering whether I should prioritise relationship or personal truth. But I wasn't prepared to be asked by a white girl who could be completely unaware of the political conflict between these two places. A thousand threads emerged, began running, and rapidly began weaving in my mind.

What do I say? If I say no, I am from Taiwan. What will she say? If she says that's China, then do I agree? Do I not agree? Do I explain the history? What if she's not interested and gets put off?

Eventually, I said, quite hesitantly.

"Yes."

I believed that was the easiest and quickest way to end the conversation. No harm, no follow-up question expected. But the girl's face lit up.

"Oh lovely!! I'm going there with my family this summer; is there anything you recommend?"

Huh????

Fuck. Why didn't I think of that?

There's literally zero personal experience to share with her. I've never even been to China or seen a recent picture there. I couldn't share with her what I learned in school, either, because our KMT government insisted it was the legitimate China, so every change made after they left China was not acknowledged. The China I know is the One that exists only in the KMT's memory. I grew up in my government's hope and memories, not reality. My life was shaped by a discourse without a genuine connection to anywhere. All of that makes it impossible for me to answer a straightforward question, as if my tongue was trying to avoid touching too many obstacles that it tangled itself up.

"Oh…" I stammered, "So-sorry, I've never been to China. I looked down at the floor, "I don't know anything about it."

I knew I sounded ridiculous.

Dear you, do you know why that piece of memory came back right now? I think I do.

My critical friend's questions reminded me that this awkwardness existed in my entire life—not knowing how to position myself in this world, not knowing what the correct way is to introduce myself, or present myself, or behave myself when people come to disagree with my understanding of myself, or things I identify with. And I see that now this awkwardness is directly linked to how I see son preference as a tradition. If my whole worldview is built on someone's hope and illusions, not reality, can I trust what I know? Can I trust what I think? Can I trust how I feel? What is believable? What is a lie? It's not even about where I stand, but about whether there is a place for me to stand.

"Edge walker" is a term I encountered while reading Autoethnography as Method (Chang 2008). I found it quite resonating at first, but immediately shook it off. Edge walker would have had a concrete path to walk on. A clear sense of being on the edge. I don't. If I identify myself as Taiwanese, am I allowed to explore a tradition that is clearly Chinese? If I identify myself as Taiwanese, will I be viewing this tradition with bias because of my

personal connection with the KMT government and how they treated us? Will I be betraying my identity if exploring this tradition makes me feel connected to Chinese culture?

Dear you, I am so ashamed. I feel like a robot wrongly programmed to believe I am human, but I realise I have no human common sense or common experience. How can someone like me, with no understanding of the truth of my history, the complexity of my political reality, who I am, and the discussions about current global topics, figure anything out?

I know I am a joke.

Your girl.

///

I told you. This isn't the path she should take. It's not something she can figure out.

...

I don't understand why you've been so negative about what happened. If she's doing research by digging into her past, memories are bound to show up!

///

I am not talking about memories. I am talking about identity. That's not the place we should touch on.

...

She's only walking past it! It's not even the centre of her research. She just mentioned it because she was reminded of some experiences!

///

It's not up to us—or her. It depends on who she meets, who she speaks to, and the global political atmosphere. She brought up politics, and that's going to destroy her.

....

Why are you making it sound like we're doing some political challenges?

///

Because we are. And you know that. We're constantly under the shadow of the country that excels at making everything political, in every context. And people there never hesitate to confront anyone who dares to reveal that they identify as Taiwanese. Not just in political situations, but in everyday life as well. Do you know how every time our girl says "I'm from Taiwan" in the research group, I brace myself—ready for any kind of attack?

....

But everything is fine so far!

///

That doesn't mean it will stay that way! Are you playing dumb—or are you seriously telling me you don't see the risk? Have you forgotten how many of us were openly challenged when we say anything close to "Taiwan is not China?" Have you forgotten that, in all Olympic games, if we bring in any kind of image that can be interpreted as Taiwan, they'll be taken away? Not even words, just images.

....

But we did nothing wrong. Why should we be afraid?

///

So you're saying it's wrong to be afraid. That we should just ignore the danger and jump right in? I'm trying to protect our girl, and I honestly don't know what you're doing.

....

I don't get you. You're the one who always told her to leave, to go somewhere she can fully speak and live. Now she's here, and you want her to stay quiet? You're the confusing one.

///

She CAN speak! Just don't poke the beast.

....

You know that's not possible. You know that well.

A Tangled Inheritance

July 8th, 2023—diary

Dear you,

Remember, I started volunteering as a counsellor at a family centre a few months ago? Yesterday, because only three of us showed up for our monthly meeting, we had more time to share what we've been doing. My colleagues asked me about my dissertation, so I shared with them the tradition of son preference.

I told them in Taiwan, we value sons so much more than daughters because they bear the family names. I told them my focus is to explore this tradition in lived experience and disclosed my personal connection to it—how I realised my arrival in this world was a great disappointment. To my surprise, both responded, "Oh it's the same here."

I listened in disbelief. And they began to tell me that, back in their hometowns in rural Scotland and Ireland, their family also valued sons much more because they were more helpful on the farm. One of them said her parents really wanted a son, and the other said her grandmother said she was disappointed when my colleague was born. Both looked at me with an expression of understanding.

Dear you, in that moment, I opened my mouth but couldn't form anything into language. I felt completely useless.

I don't think it's the same. But I don't know how to explain it. Or am I wrong? Maybe they see something I don't? But even if it is the same, what's wrong with being the same? Why do I need it to be different? Am I trying to feel special?

///

It's NOT the same. It's not!

Me

I feel that way, too. But I don't know how to describe the differences.

///

It's NOT!!!!

Me

Stop screaming, this isn't helping!!

...

Oh, I am feeling very uncomfortable with this.

Me

Why? Tell me. I feel uncomfortable, too. But I don't know what it is. I'm so lost. I hate it so much when I realise my explanation falls short, and people didn't get what I meant. But how do I even explain something so phenomenal? Maybe it's too complicated for me to grasp?

August 13th, 2023—note to self

The conversation with my colleagues made me realise something is missing. I started to read Adams, Linn, and Ellis (2015) again, trying to figure out exactly how to do autoethnography. I noticed she kept talking about "fieldwork." I vaguely know what it means, but I don't know how to do it. I suppose it will be helpful to talk to people who believe they grew up in a son-preferencing family. But how do I find these people? I've talked to some female friends and relatives, asking them their thoughts about how they were brought up. Just as I assumed, the conversation mostly goes like this:

"Do you think you might have grown up in a son-preferencing family?"

"Um, I am not sure... probably not. But I know my neighbour's family is son preference! They have seven daughters!!"

"What do you think a Jung-nan-ching-niu family look like?"

“Um, well, they try very hard to get a son… um, and they will avoid leaving daughters' properties when the parents die.”

“So did your parents try very hard to get a son?”

“Well, they did want a son, but all families want a son, don’t they? It’s always better to have both a daughter and a son.”

“And your parents are not old enough to worry about their properties, so you don’t know their attitudes?”

“No, but I think even if they want to give it all to my brother, I don’t really think that’s unfair. It’s their money, and I think they have the power to decide who to give.”

“So, it sounds like you feel your parents don’t steep in Jung-nan-ching-niu value.”

“Um, I suppose not.”

I suppose not—never a clear yes or no.

I can tell from the tone that they are not sure how to handle my questions. It’s been like that since I was little. People refuse to process questions related to parenting. The only difference is that now I am also a grown-up, so it takes them more time to call me ungrateful or disrespectful. That’s basically why I believed autoethnography is the only way to go in the first place—I don’t know where to find people who will answer my question. And even if they exist, I don’t know what questions to ask. Jung-nan-ching-nui is basically never discussed. It’s only used to describe something we seem to already know.

…

Maybe it’d help to look at other research.

Me

But I don't think anyone has done anything from the perspective I am interested in. All the research will be about statistical measurement. I've read a news article saying son preference is "officially in the past" (Chen 2021) and (Choi and Hwang 2020) because in the past five years, the sex ratio at birth for firstborns has gradually declined to the natural human sex ratio.

///

Ha, that's totally ridiculous!

Me

Exactly.

...

Yes, but that's a news article, not a research journal. Just give it a try. Maybe not directly helpful, but inspiring?

///

They won't even include Taiwan. We're not a country. We'll just be looking at numbers and discussions about other countries. We're never a part of the conversation.

...

Still might be helpful! Look, I truly believe there's a way. We just don't know where. We'll find it.

I opened my computer, pondering where I should start. What I know for sure is that Jung-nan-ching-niu is related. What is the most absolute, undeniable form of it? What is it when I see, I will not hesitate a bit to say: this is Jung-nan-ching-niu?

Death.

Oh yeah, there definitely is a long tradition of drowning unwanted baby girls. That is an undeniable action of favouring sons for sure. Baby boys will never drown.

I tried out several different keywords on the internet, and finally realised there's a specific term for it: female infanticide.

But that's China.

It wouldn't hurt to read.

And I started searching, following the terms "female infanticide" and "son preference," for the first time after deciding to explore this topic, I finally began to listen to what others have said about it. Now that I've started, it feels like something I should've done in the first place. So logical. What took me so long?

There aren't numerous journals to read, but plenty. I download quite a few articles and book chapters and begin reading. I never knew it could be so reassuring to see something I've been sensing written in black and white words.

"Female infanticide happens in all classes in society." (Michelle Tien King 2014) –*Of course. Just as my family is undoubtedly in the upper class, it is still Jun-nan-ching-nui-oriented*.

"The number and scale of it is a myth because the Western scholars have no access to it, but the Chinese scholars don't speak about it" (Lee 2008*)—Exactly. We care about how people see us so much, and it's extremely shameful to admit we get rid of babies. I doubt that anyone will be able to know the exact number*.

"Raising a girl is not helpful at all. We give her so many resources, and then eventually she's given to someone else" (Lu 2010*)—I know. That's why we're called 賠錢貨 (*pei chian huo, *the money losing goods), aren't we?*

The title of the next paper catches my eye: “Why Is Son Preference So Persistent in East and South Asia?” (Das Gupta et al. 2003)

A string of muscle in my chest was flunked. I’ve been asking this exact question my entire life. When I was in the US, I noticed this tradition still persists in some families after they move to a different country.

I scrolled through the PDF and, surprisingly, realised that the graph they provide includes China, South Korea, India, and Taiwan.

Taiwan!

I was intrigued. The graph presents all four countries in a very similar pattern. The birth rate of boys remained relatively low, and suddenly, from 1980, the number of boys per year skyrocketed. I felt like I was struck by lightning.

That’s the year I was born.

I once asked my ma when the ultrasound was introduced to Taiwan.

“Oh it just came in when I got pregnant, so I didn’t ask for it.”

I have chills in my bones. I don’t need to read the paper to interpret the graph. We’re still killing baby girls, and becoming more efficient, leaving fewer traces and mess. And it’s not like I was not aware of it. I always knew, since I was very young. It was never a secret. Adults talked about these choices as part of the risk in pregnancy. But it’s only now that I realise this is a large-scale massacre, toning the background of my life.

What do we really know about the impact of this tradition?

September 21st, 2023—Diary

Dear you,

About two weeks ago, I was reading comments under a lawyer's FB Page. Someone named a public group with an interesting name—Daughters Raised in Jung-nan-ching-niu Families: Be Brave and Refuse Your Parents' Exploitation.

I know. It's a ridiculously long name. But I like it a lot. The message is to the point and not trying to soften anything. I've never seen anyone holding this attitude toward Iung-nan-ching-niu before. I joined the group immediately.

There are only three thousand members in the group. Every day, one or two people will share their stories, ask for suggestions, or raise a small discussion. Every day, I read along.

Given the group's clear, blunt name, it naturally attracted daughters who identified with growing up in a Jung-nan-ching-niu-oriented family. It's a feeling I've never experienced before… I've never felt so…*seen* in other people's stories, in other people's questions. Some I hold on to every single day of my life, some long forgotten but reminded of by others.

Why am I always responsible for my brother's behaviour?

Why do the rules only apply to me?

Why am I always called selfish, angry, and ungrateful?

Why am I the only one who needs to do chores?

Why am I always the one punished?

Why is my ma the one doing all these things to me?

Why does my ma hate her ma so much, but she does the same thing to me?

These questions keep on showing up in different people's stories. Dear you, it's such an odd feeling. I felt a sense of belonging and was acknowledged in these unpleasant stories. For the first time in my life, my intuition is proved—I am not alone. And these daughters, according to a casual survey in the group, range in age from their 20s to their 70s. I am 43, falling right in the middle.

Yesterday, one of the daughters initiated an anonymous survey. She asked if you could go back in time and choose, would you rather be born to this life, or be aborted?

A significant number of daughters voted and commented: I'd rather my parents had an abortion.

I stared at the screen, and a very familiar feeling came back to mind. For a specific period of time, especially when I was living at home, I would suddenly get flooded by immense tiredness. During this time, if I am anywhere on the street, I would pray for something to fall on me or a car to crash into me, to take me away. Or if I am home, I will have the feeling that my physical body is falling apart bit by bit, like a sand statue disappearing in the wind.

So, it's not just me then, I wish I had never been born.

Suddenly, I realised the difference between my experience and my colleagues'. It's the level of pain. When they said, "it's the same," I didn't feel the same level of wound in their soul.

That's why Purewal (2010) said it's necessary to change the lens to the unspoken, to the silenced, the voice in my head said.

That's it!

I think I finally understand what has been keeping me tongue-tied.

I couldn't explain the phenomenon because I was always looking at how sons are favoured. And that's only half the story. The other half lies in how daughters are treated.

And now, I can finally see it.

Undeniable patterns.

When these daughters' stories are laid side by side, something devastating comes into view.

This is the world behind the wall that has never been explored.

It is a blind spot we have yet to name. A tangled inheritance made of silenced, ignored, suppressed, and unprocessed emotions and experiences.

And then, the words came to me.

The question that has been hiding behind all the reading, listening, pain, and silence:

What happens when we look at daughter aversion rather than son preference, and at internal struggle rather than external oppression?

…

And I think we need to go back to Taiwan for more materials.

Me & ///

You said what???

…

Yeah, we need to go back, recheck everything from this new perspective, and see what emerges.

///

But we go back every year!

….

We do, but never go back with our current mindset. And it's very different if we're physically there. Every scenery, every sensation back home will bring back memories we wouldn't be reminded of if we stayed comfortably here.

True.

I sigh, and a plan is made.

Chapter 4-0: The Journey Back to the Past

Back to the borderlands

After a 16-hour flight, we arrive at Taoyuan Airport together. The prolonged sitting in the narrow seat makes every joint in my body creak, like an old wooden door that needs a bit of oil to move smoothly. I pick up my luggage, go downstairs for a bus ticket, and check the time—about 5 minutes before the bus comes, it should be ok to queue outside the station. I walk toward the glass door, and it slides open. The air from outside covers my bare skin, coating me with that sticky, warm, slightly sickening feeling I know too well. Yeah, the sense of home.

The air is so humid that I find it hard to breathe.

///
Told you not to come back. I never like coming back, and I know you don't, either.

...
But we're back for a reason, aren't we?

I did not respond to either of them. I don't know. I suppose I have a good reason to come back, to collect more materials for my research project. But if I get to choose, I will rather stay away. I don't mind simply visiting Japan and then going back to Scotland. Every year, I let my husband decide when to go back, telling myself he deserves to see his family and his family is expecting to see all of us. It's not because there are no people I want to see back home. There are. But I always need a strong, unavoidable reason to drag me back, like materials for my dissertation, without which I won't be able to graduate.

I could've chosen a different topic. A topic doesn't need me to fly all the way back to meet people I don't really want to visit, or to speak about aspects of the past I may not find pleasant. But a part of me is set on this and refuses to look away. I don't know what it is that makes me feel so important to keep on digging in.

The bus creeps into the station and slowly comes to a complete stop next to me. The door of the bus swings open with a “chi—” sound, and I watch the driver walk close, bend down in front of my luggage to tie a paper tag with a number on it, tear it in half, and hand me the half that is not attached.

We walk up to the bus and find ourselves a place to sit. I am reminded that a certain number of members in the FB group are living overseas. We discussed how meeting people from different cultures makes us realise what’s been happening in our family is odd. It became the first crack that allowed us to question what we’ve been told. I also remember many of them said they’ll try their best to avoid going back to Taiwan. The idea of hometown is heavy for them.

A small smile finds its way onto my face. I calm down a bit and can breathe a bit more. I watch the trees in the window move in and out of view.

…
Hey, since we are here, why don’t we find some time to go to the cemetery?
/// and I look at her.

…
I was just thinking, since we’re here… It’s not far from home and I suppose it’s always a good thing to… yeah, never mind.

We look back into the window, seeing the bus merge onto the highway and run straight towards the city centre.

…

I walk down the dark and cold stairs and reach the gate. My thumb presses the brown metal button, and the heavy red door unlocks with a noise. I pull the door open; the bright sunlight makes my eyes squint.

Stepping out of the gate, I let out a heavy sigh.

///
Well, that was a lot.

Me
I didn't expect her to burst into tears when she saw me.

...
It's indeed been several years since you last saw her.

Me
I don't think she was at the funeral.

///
Don't think so.

Me
I'm actually quite surprised she still remembers me.

...
Of course she does! You're her granddaughter.

Me
That's just a word to define how I relate to her. I don't think she even knows me as a person. When I used to see her quite often, she would just ask me if I've been obedient to my parents and if I've been taking care of my brother. She doesn't even know how old I am.

///
I think she was crying because her life right now is very different from what she had hoped for, and you made her feel she was still remembered.
Me
Or I reminded her of my mum.

...
But the uncles—
Me
Not now, ..., You'll only get me to say something really nasty.

... says no more. We hear the kids playing in the distance and walk toward the elementary school at the end of the road. Different from the memories, the walls have been lowered, and we can now see inside the school easily. A group of kids is playing dodgeball

on the playground. Cicadas are screaming loudly on the branches above us, making the weather sound hotter than it is. I feel sweat running down my neck.

Me
Summer here has become unbearable. I can't believe how I used to survive under 38 degrees.

///
The shades. Can't live without the shades.

Me
I don't think the tree's shades help much anymore. Nowadays, it's like walking through a steam bath. We'll have to hide in a mountain to get some cool air.

...
Speaking of which, didn't we use to go to a mountain nearby on Sundays? With ma, ba, A-gon, A-ma and Shan?

Me
Oh yeah, I think the entrance is just behind that side of the school.

I look in the direction, and we begin to walk. The closer we get to the back of the school, the more trees there are, and the noisier the cicadas get. After just a bit of a stroll, we arrive at the entrance. It's basically just a soil path, half-hidden beneath the weeds. Only the locals would enter through here. The main entrance is on the other side of the mountain, with a board map that makes everything look well-maintained.

With the trees above the path, I can already feel the cool breeze coming from inside the mountain. It feels so comfortable, I take a few steps in.

...
Wait, shouldn't we at least get some water or anything?

Me
It's ok. I brought my water bottle and I'm not planning to stay long.

We walk down the path. To be honest, I don't remember much of this part. Perhaps I was always too excited thinking about the lunchbox in my backpack. At first, the grass and soil under the steps feel hard and dry, but soon after we walk in, the ground becomes softer, and the smell of damp soil itches my nose. It also gets cooler and darker, as the trees and plants around us get fuller and taller.

...
It's such a different feeling compared to mountains in Scotland, isn't it? If we go to Holyrood Park, our vision will be wide open, and we can check the whole view along the way. But here we are surrounded by trees and plants, and it's like we are entering somewhere deep and secret.

///
Yeah, and there isn't really any vast scenery unless we walk up to a particular spot where there is a crack that allows us to peek outside.

Me
I'd say it's like we're the insects deep in the middle of a broccoli.

...
Pretty much that!

We all laughed. At this moment, we reached a slightly open area with flat stones around its edge. There are often these kinds of natural spots in Taiwan's mountains. They naturally become a resting spot for climbers. We sit down on a relatively large stone. A sense of coldness spread from my butt.

Me
Honestly, I don't think our visit today was helpful. I mean, it's good to see Wan-hwa A-ma again and get some impressions of her refreshed. But it's not like we can actually get any direct opinions from her.

...
No. We can't simply ask her, "Did you prefer your sons over your daughter?"

///
Well, we can, but it's more like we won't get the answers we want. I bet she'd be like, "I didn't! How could you say that??? What has your ma told you???"
Me

And I am too angry at her to be curious about her past, even though I know it might be helpful to get some information about that.

...
Why are you so angry at her?

Me
Well, it's probably fairer to say I am not close to her in general. And sometimes, she would just say something that rubbed me the wrong way.

///
Like the time you brought Toma to see her.

Me
Oh, my I was absolutely pissed that time!

...
What happened?

Me
Well, Toma was around two. The three of us went to visit her. I think it was around Lunar New Year, so there were some traditional candies on her tea table. Toma walked toward that box of sweeties, picked up a handful, and started to give one to each of the people around. And when she saw that, she happily said, "Oh, lovely, this boy knows sharing. That means his ma will give birth to another boy!"

...
Maybe she just assumes everyone prefers boys, so she thinks you like hearing that.

Me
It's not about me at all.

///
She said, "his ma." It's like she didn't know who his ma was.

Me
Anyway, that's the moment I decided I would never go back to revisit her.

No one says anything more. Everything gets quiet—but a bit too calm. I look around and notice that, at some point, the cicadas' noises are gone. I have a slight shiver and see it's getting a bit chilly. Perhaps it's time to go.

Me
Well, we can figure something out later when we get home. We could ask other family members what they remember, or look up records or documents at the national library? There should be plenty of things to explore while we are here.

I stand up and walk back the way we came, but something feels different. I could almost swear that the path should've been on my right-hand side if I were facing this way. But now it's straight in front of me.

...
What? Anything wrong?

Me
Nah, it should be alright.

We walk down the path in front, chit-chatting along the way. But after a while, we still haven't reached the entrance where we came in.

...
I don't think we've walked that far from the entrance.

Neither do I. I look ahead of the path, and it doesn't seem to get lighter as I expect it would. On the contrary, it looks deeper and darker. That's not the way we came from.

"No way. Kamikakushi?" /// says.

Kamikakushi. I first heard this word from my other A-ma. She was warning me not to wander into the mountains alone, especially without enough company. In a low, serious voice, she told me about a strange and quiet phenomenon—how sometimes, someone steps into a remote, forested place and simply disappears. Gone for days or weeks. Some never return at all. She said it happens when a person unknowingly crosses a hidden

threshold, slipping into a realm most people never see, or they're lured—or taken—by forces beyond human understanding. Only those in a certain state of mind, she said—unguarded, open, maybe even fractured—can pass through. And if they do come back, they're never quite the same. Touched by something the rest of us can't quite name.

My heart starts pounding in my chest.

Chapter 4-1: The Abandoned House

Home

We all look deep into the path, wondering about the same thing: what will we see down there?

I can't say I am not scared. Everything is so quiet and still that it feels ominous.

"Well, we're here either because we're directed or because we accidentally step into a realm because of the state we're in. So, the only way is to follow what's in front of us." /// says, and she takes the lead.

.... and I follow.

The air has become quite cold and misty. We stay close to each other. Suddenly, I spot something in the corner of my left eye.

"Did you see that?" I point at the greyish triangle stuck between the branches.

It looks like a house roof. The kind of Japanese house we sometimes see in the old neighbourhood in Taipei, low and small, with rooftop tiles almost as dark as black. Not sure if it's dirt or its original colour.

We walk up and indeed see a small house. Pieces of sticks were scattered next to it. There is no sign of people living there. It's extremely quiet and seems to be in deep sleep.

/// gets closer to the window behind the sticks, jumps onto a rock nearby, tries to peek in.

The house suddenly lights up. We all take a step back in fright.

Still, not a sound can be heard, but somehow it doesn't feel scary. We look at each other and nod.

I walk up and push. The door cracks open with a creak. The light comes from the ceiling in the middle of the space. It's fully furnished, reminds me of home.

Home?

How interesting. What makes me say that?

I look around the room. In front of me is a small living area with a sofa that could seat two or three people and a dark brown coffee table topped with a glass surface. Across from the couch stood an old television—the kind I remember from childhood, shaped like a bulky rectangular box that takes two adults to lift. A bit further back is a square wooden dining table, with one side pushed against the wall and a chair placed on each of the remaining three sides.

It is definitely a place that was once lived in. But does a place become a home simply because someone lived there—even if those people were related by blood?

What does home mean? We like to say, 家是避風港[6], but I've never really understood what that means. There was also a song that we learned to sing in our early primary school years. It's called 我的家庭真可愛[7], and the first part of it goes like this:

MY HOME IS TRULY SWEET,

NEAT, HAPPY, AND SAFE.

BROTHERS AND SISTERS GET ALONG,

AND OUR PARENTS ARE KIND AND GENTLE.

I hated that song so much when I was little.

If home is defined as a place where we live with our blood relatives, then mine was the centre of the storm.

Though maybe calling it the centre of the storm is too extreme. If it really had been that kind of place, I would perhaps have escaped sooner. Maybe I would have been able to see more clearly what was really going on.

How should I describe what home means to me? In terms of colour, it is grey; in terms of distance, it is far; and in terms of feeling, it is a place where I have to stay alert. And invisible.

---

[6] jiāshǐbì fēng gǎng. Home is our haven from the storm.

[7] wǒdejiā tíngjēnkě ài . My Home Is so Sweet. Here, I call it home instead of family because, in the language, the concepts of family and home are often interchangeable. And based on the lyrics I provide following this paragraph, you'll be able to see it'll be more appropriate to translate it as "home."

I remember sitting in my room, paying attention to what people were doing out there, just in case they might bump into my room. No one knocks in my family. Probably rare in the whole culture. I've never heard any of my friends' families knock. It's not helpful to keep the door shut either, because it draws parents' attention.

"What were you doing? Why was your door shut?"

"Nothing."

"Then keep it open."

I never knew what they were trying to stop me from doing. I don't think any of my friends knew, either. We never asked because asking would imply we intend to do something behind our parents' backs. And that itself is already a crime.

So eventually, I mastered it. I kept the door 1/3 open to let my parents' guard down. But I stayed alert. I listened to them talk and move outside my room. If I sensed any kind of noise approaching my room, I would quietly slip my "forbidden activities" under my desk.

But there was one time my manga was found. I didn't know it was found, but I saw it in the garbage bin, torn into pieces. That was the only manga I had.

I learned to hide everything even deeper.

Well, it's not true, I am not entirely unaware of what they want from me. It's just that those expectations were never clearly stated. I was expected to study at all times. If not, I should be helping with chores. I hated chores because they were always only on me, not my brother. So, I pretended to be constantly busy with schoolwork.

I did everything secretly. I woke up every morning earlier than everyone, tiptoed into my study room to listen to my favourite music on cassette and headphones, usually the latest Disney theme song, then I'd quietly sneak out of the gate for school, before everyone woke up.

My home was not violent. My home was not the centre of a storm. But my home was a black hole. It ate me from the inside.

"Well, Liao said in her interview (He 2025) that she had to do all the chores, take care of her younger brothers and sisters, and then find her own time to study. We were never bothered if we were sitting in front of our desks. We're actually pretty lucky, you know."... says.

I feel a wave of irritation rise in my chest, but I decide not to respond.

There's a door right next to the dining room, almost in the same position as my old room. I wonder what's behind it.

I walk toward it and push the door open.

Swimming Pool – the little girl

A bright light, accompanied by a wave of warm, humid air, comes through—carrying a faint smell of bleach. Once my eyes adjust to the light, I realise I am at the swimming pool of the guesthouse we are temporarily staying at. Toma and K are both in swimsuits, laughing and splashing in the water right in front of me. I notice that I have somehow changed into a sundress. Feeling a bit disoriented, I look around and see some tables and chairs nearby. I sit down to watch them play.

There are many children in the pool today, of various ages. Some still need floaties to get used to the water, while others are just playing with water guns. The pool doesn't seem very deep—when Toma stands up, everything above his chest is out of the water.

Amid all the noise and laughter, I see a girl.

I don't know what makes me fix my gaze on her, but once I notice her, I can't look away.

I remember now—just earlier, this girl had been in a corner, helping her younger brother change into his swimsuit. The boy looks about four years old. At the time, I had a fleeting thought: *Hmm? Did their parents not come with them?*

Now, both the girl and her brother are in the pool. The boy is clearly afraid of the water, clinging tightly to his sister like a soaked baby koala. She holds his head gently with one hand and cradles him as she slowly walks along the edge of the pool.

Something inside me—something profound—suddenly woke up in that moment. That gesture, that way of pampering her brother—it was too familiar, too fluid.

"Not something she does for the first time, does she?" /// voices next to me.

No.

And I suddenly have chills in my bones. Am I witnessing what I am thinking?

The girl is still carrying her brother, slowly making her way around the pool. She passes by Toma, who is laughing uproariously. The two children are about the same height. So… is this girl only around ten?

The big sister. My heart suddenly clenches.

Since I first noticed them, the girl has already carried her brother around the pool at least one and a half rounds of it. I once did the same thing for Toma when he was four or five. Even for me, an adult, that kind of distance was tiring and made me want to rest. Why is this child handling it all by herself?

Why is she alone in this? What if she slipped? What if something happened?

"Well you know why." /// chortles.

"Just shut up." I snap.

I start to feel anxious, scanning the pool and the poolside for any adults who might be their parents. I am not even sure why I am getting so agitated.

The girl must have been tired—she walks to the spot right in front of me and tries to lift her brother onto the poolside. But she isn't tall enough. No matter how hard she pushes, he keeps slipping back in at the last second.

As I hesitate over whether to step in, a father and his son, sitting in a car-shaped float, walk by. The father looks like he is about to help. I breathe a sigh of relief, thinking how lucky it is to run into a kind person. But to my surprise, the man merely approaches, pretends to reach out, and then, seeing that the girl doesn't notice him as she is fully focused on lifting her brother, pulls back his hand and walks away.

What just happened?

I begin searching the crowd for K, hoping to call him over to help.

While my gaze darts through the people, the girl gives up and resigns herself to carrying her brother in circles again. Just as they are approaching the opposite side of the pool, the man from earlier suddenly calls out to her. I couldn't make out the words clearly, but it sounds like he has called her name.

"XXXX, he can switch now."

Then I see the little boy from earlier splashing away nearby with arm floaties. The man approaches the girl with the car-shaped float, lifts the little boy from her arms, and places him on it.

"*That is her own father???"* /// and I both react at the same time.

The father then pulls the float away, taking both boys with him. The girl remains standing at the same spot, alone.

Fate of Big sisters

So, she is also the biggest sister. Oldest sisters' lives follow a very similar script. (Chang 2025) It doesn't really take any research or statistics to get to that conclusion. All we have to do is look at ourselves and all the other big sisters around us, no matter what generations we are.

Ever since my younger brother was born, my role in life was already decided for me. Perhaps even earlier, but I couldn't remember, as there was no one there for me to "know my place." The moment I became the older sister, I was told, "You have grown up now, so you need to be a model." So suddenly, I was expected to be independent, to help with household duties, and care for my sibling, at three and a half.

And it wasn't just my ma. Everywhere I went, people reminded me that things should never be the same. They asked me if I've been a great helper, if I've been sharing with my little brother, and if I've been proud to be a big sister. I asked why I should help, and was immediately lectured:

"How insensible! Couldn't you see how tough everything is for your ma? She works and does everything for you, and you don't even want to offer help. How ungrateful! What a waste to raise you!"

I stopped saying anything. I glared instead.

Swimming Pool –the mother

A woman approaches the father and the boy. I watch them closely, wondering who she is. She looks pretty delighted.

"Looks like you're having a good time!" She says with a big smile.

The girl comes close with her little brother still clinging to her body. The look on her face towards the woman makes me realise she must be the mother.

The woman turns her head to the two children.

"You're still scared of water? It's ok, it takes time."

And she walks away. The girl's eyes follow her to a distance.

“I can’t believe this. She didn’t even look at her.” /// says.

“It’s just a one-time thing. Don’t make a judgment so fast!”... nudges ///.

Money Losing Goods

“So 賤[8] (jiàn),” I say. Looking at the little girl and thinking about myself, that’s the only word I could come up with. “Why are we so 賤 (jiàn)?”

“Well, this is the culture where we have a tradition to drown or give away little girls if we have too many of them. Girls are useless.” /// replies.

Well, we daughters are called 賠錢貨, money-losing goods. I suppose that term itself says daughters are viewed as resources, and the kind that loses money every minute we are in our parents’ possession.

We take up space, and we have basic needs that must be met. And “before I could get any return from you, you are already thinking about leaving,” –Ma said so herself when she realised I had a boyfriend.

Raising daughters is basically helping other men raise their wives. I’ve heard various people say this when I grew up. In recent years, people have responded, “It’s not that bad. Nowadays, when parents are sick, daughters are very reliable. They will be the ones who take care of us.”

[8] 賤 (jiàn) is complex and highly context-dependent, often carrying strong emotional and cultural undertones. At its core, it conveys a sense of lowliness, shame, or a lack of worth.

But still, I've found it hard to understand what exactly they mean by "useful" or why it matters so much to them.

I don't think I am the only one who is very confused.

So many daughters I know have been trying to prove themselves "useful," including my own ma. She bought WanHwa A-ma an apartment, and she proudly told me, "I did this all by myself without my brothers' help."

But that didn't change a bit of how WanHwa A-ma saw her. She's still just a money-making machine. WanHwa A-ma took the house and gave all the money my ma gave her to my uncles.

Nothing changes for any of the daughters in the Facebook group (Daughters Raised in Son-Preferred Families, 2024), either. They make phone calls, buy gifts, stop by their parents' house every week, agree to pay the mortgage, take their parents to the doctors, listen to their parents' complaints about their boys…

Parents only keep on asking for more. Never have they shown any appreciation for anything they received.

I think daughters are trying very hard to prove they are not "useless." But after seeing story after story, I don't think anyone really knows what exactly this "uselessness" means, not even those who believe daughters are useless. Cause if we see the definition of it, then we would've already known how to address that discrimination. But no. Everyone is fighting a ghost without a form.

I remember reading *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (Cho 2020), her grandmother was so angry when she found Jiyoung and her sister eating formula milk powder—that's for her golden grandson.

There seems to be a hidden rule that anything given to daughters is a waste.

Raising a daughter is a bad deal, so it's better to "make the most of it." The moment daughters are "old enough," we are expected to stop causing parents, especially mothers, trouble by doing house chores and taking care of younger siblings. Make ourselves worthy. While at the same time, sons don't need to prove their worth.

When daughters grow up, nowadays they are more educated and more capable, so they are asked to give even more. Their money. Their time. Their emotional support.

A research article I read (Das Gupta et al. 2003) concludes that son preference can decline more quickly if society also supports daughters as legitimate sources of care for parents. The key is to reduce the motivation to favour sons by ensuring that daughters can still provide for their original family after they get married.

I don't mean to be rude, but I seriously started to laugh when I read this. The society has already welcomed daughters to contribute to their original families. But it's only making things worse. Daughters now need to please both their in-laws and their own families—seeking stability in one and maintaining dignity and support in the other. (Chang 2025)

And then people tell daughters that we shouldn't make a big deal out of it; caring for our parents is a karmic blessing, and we are fortunate to be in that position.

That one sentence silenced everything.

Swimming Pool –the double standard

"Ba, it's my turn! Tell her to let go!!"

The little boy's yell catches my attention. I turn my head to the right and see the girl holding the car-shaped float, while the boy pulls it away from her.

"Give it to him. You've played for enough time." Their father yells back in the distance.

"Let's see what he'll say when she wants her turn," I say.

As expected, about 10 minutes later, the girl asked for help.

"Ba, he has played for a long time!" she protests.

"Not nearly enough!" the boy screams.

"He says it's not enough time. Leave him alone!" the father responds.

Both me and /// look at ... with a smile. She looks away.

Piggy Bank

There was a vast difference between my brother and me. He seemed to always make my ma laugh, and I could never do that.

Once ma brought home two piggy banks shaped like bamboo, saying she wanted both of us to learn how to save money. She said she would start giving each of us a 10 TWD coin every day, and we're supposed to put them in the piggy bank. She would like to know who the bigger saver is.

So, this new arrangement started. However, it turned out that my ma wasn't the person who remembered what she promised to do. She often forgot. When she did, my brother and I took different actions. I waited, quietly. If ma remembered the coins, then great; if she didn't, it's just the way it is. That's fine.

But my brother was different. He would go and ask for his money, loudly, "Ma, you haven't given me the coin today!" Then she'd give him the money. At first, she would give it to me several times, but eventually I was no longer included.

Then my brother took his request to the next level. He had quite a sharp eye for coins, gleaming ones. He would catch a glimpse of a shiny coin whenever ma was emptying her purse, and immediately call out, "A shiny-shine-shine!!" And he'd got one, sometimes several ones. And he would come to me, showing it off in front of me like a winning cock, and tuck the coins into his piggy bank, one by one.

I didn't follow. I waited. I waited quietly and stubbornly. I didn't want to copy what my brother did. He was a cheater. What he did was cheating. Ma said she would give us the money, and that's the rule. It's about saving the money she gave us, not about how much money we could find for ourselves. I was following the rules, and my brother was cheating. I was right. He was wrong. I was good. He was bad. This would be proved when ma wanted to count the money in our piggy bank. Then I'd be able to prove how much "illegal money" my brother had unethically got.

The day finally came. Ma picked up both of our piggy banks. (Interestingly, she remembered the day.) Weighed them in her hands.

"Wow, Shan, look how much you saved! You almost fill up the whole thing!"

"Yes." I said hurriedly, "But most of them were from begging for extra money he shouldn't get." Hearing mum's tone, I felt a bit uneasy and decided to press on it myself.

“What’s wrong with asking for extra money?” Ma looked at me, her tone like, What’s with you even believing that’s wrong.

“Yeah, what’s wrong with that?” Shan took one step closer to ma, leaning on her thigh, a gesture I’ve never done in my life.

“But, but that’s cheating. You said it’s about the money you gave us!”

“Well,” ma started walking away. I think that only shows you didn’t care for money as much as your brother did. I can tell already by that attitude that you’ll never be as successful as him.”

I’ll never forget that moment. The two of them looked at each other and smiled.

I don’t understand.

I’d been good. I followed the rules. I did everything as told. Why is it never my turn?

An Argument

“But what’s wrong with asking more of the older child? It’s true the little ones need a model to learn from.”... questions.

“Seriously, it’s one thing to be a learning model, but it’s a different thing to ask a child to be another parent. It’s totally not fair if the big sister gets punished when the little brothers don’t behave. And they are never held accountable for anything they do!” /// fires back.

“Are you talking about the girl at the pool or us?”

“US! And all those girls mentioned in Chang’s (2005) book!”

“If you hated it that much, you should just voice it!”

“Well, we did. And when we were little, we got beaten. When we were older, remember what she said?”

“She turned to dad and said, Next time people ask us about having children, we should just recommend them to have one. Having two is such a pain in the ass.” I reply, slowly, word by word.

/// and … stop to look at me.

We didn’t even accuse her of being Jung-nan-ching-niu. We only said preferred.

It’s not just us. On the FB group, many people said they confronted their parents about Jung-nan-ching-niu. I’ve seen at least seven people share their experiences, and none of their mothers admitted it. And based on the comments, it seemed that more people tried something similar but failed as well.

A sudden wave of disgust surges through me. The feeling of that day came back to me. I couldn’t remember exactly what happened. The fight occurred over a trifle thing, so small I couldn’t even remember. But I know what led to the battle. It was a few days ago when I arrived at the airport. I jumped onto a 36-hour flight immediately after staying up for a week for my mid-term, because ma was sick, saying she wanted to see us home for this seven-day spring break. The moment she saw me, she gave me an odd stare and said, “I never knew my daughter was so ugly,” and immediately turned to my father to ask for Shan.

Ah. I remembered why the fight began. I told her what she said hurt, and she said she's only trying to have a conversation.

How innocent. Just trying to have a conversation.

Whoever we tell, they always say parents are just "mouth clumsy"—嘴笨(tzuěi bèn). Not quick with words. Not the kind who knows how to say the right thing at the right time.

And we had to shut up. Because if we have another word, it will look like we have a very narrow mind, can't even be empathetic, when my mother is trying so hard to connect, despite her weakness in starting a chat. We can't win.

It's not possible to change your parents. They are old. Old people can't change. And there aren't that many years for them to live anyway.

"But what if that's just her? She's just mouth clumsy?".... says.

"Why is it always us who have to tolerate everything?" /// screams.

My stomach starts to twist.

/// and ... start fighting. How familiar. It's always like this. Whenever we feel something is not right, something is not fair, something shouldn't be like this, if we talk to the parents, they say they've never done it. When we speak to people outside the family, they say we're overly critical.

Just like that time I wrote in my school diary—I said I didn't understand why, every time I tried to tell my mother about my day, she gave me nothing but a blank face. Sometimes she'd even pick up the newspaper while I was still talking. But the moment my

brother walked in, she'd suddenly come alive—like a functional human being, capable of holding an everyday conversation. My teacher wrote back: *"Come on, I'm sure she's just tired. She knows how well you're doing at school, so she doesn't need to worry."*

So, it's me being inconsiderate again. Don't be so critical. Nothing is wrong. Everything's fine.

Everything's fine, except for me. I am the problem. I am always the problem.

Swimming Pool –the Manipulation

Finally, the boy seems to get tired of the car-shaped float. The girl gets it and begins to drag it across the pool. She's slowly getting closer and closer to us.

"What are you doing?"

The mother's voice came from behind. I turn my back and see both parents and the youngest boy sitting there on a picnic blanket.

"What is it, ma?" the girl asks, her face clearly lit up.

"Why are you here by yourself? You should be protecting your brother! He's too young to be alone in the pool!" the mother screams again from behind.

"She just started to enjoy herself!" I grab /// in the arm, who almost jumps from the chair.

The girl says nothing, quietly turns back and looks at her brother on the other side of the pool. He is swimming like a dog in the arm floats.

“Hey, come help me put my goggles on!” the boy yells.

“Do it yourself. It’s on your head!” the girl talks back.

“What? Would it kill you to help him?” Father’s voice comes from behind us.

The girl walks towards her brother in silence. … puts her hands heavily on our shoulders, stopping us from standing up.

Fried Chicken

Girls on the Facebook group (Daughters Raised in Son-Preferred Families, 2024) mentioned a Netflix documentary about fried chicken in South Korea. In the documentary, they said that when KFC entered South Korea, it was very popular among female college students because you could choose which part you wanted to eat.

They said the girls would come to ask, “Is it true I get to choose whatever I want to eat?” They’d say yes, and the girls would confirm again, and again. And then they would all ask for the drumsticks—because many girls are not allowed to eat drumsticks at home. They are only for their brothers.

And I realised, I’ve never had drumsticks when I grew up, either. But I was told it was because my brother was younger, and drumsticks were easier for him to eat. I was convinced.

But now, at this moment of reflection, it suddenly occurs to me—if this were true, then I should have some memory of eating a drumstick myself. Or at the very least, I would have been told something like, “You used to eat them, too.”

But no. I was convinced, just like that.

I feel my chest burning.

Return

The girl is now dragging her bigger brother around the pool. We can still hear the parents’ laughter behind us.

“Nobody’s noticed anything.” I look around and say quietly.

“Of course not. They are not scolding her. She never argues. Nothing is wrong. People may even go to tell them they have such a sensible daughter,” /// says, “or we could go to the parents to say something?”

I look at her.

“Did it help when Foo’s (2022) neighbour warned her mother not to beat her again?”

“No.”

“Exactly.”

The girl is about the same age as Toma, so the parents could be the same age as us, or even younger.

And it's happening under everyone's eyes.

"This is too depressing. I can't watch this." I finally say.

Foot-binding

We all come back to the house. I close the door behind me, walk towards the couch and sit down on it.

One of our great grandmas had bound feet.

She always sat in the corner of the house, yelling and giving orders. I felt she was like a queen.

I never thought that bound feet had anything to do with how I experienced her. But think about it now, it might have a lot to do with it.

Foot-binding began early—so early that a girl's feet hadn't even finished forming. It usually started between the ages of four and eight. I knew this as a fact and knowledge before. Still, it was after I witnessed the growth and development of my own child that I really understood what it means to be a grown-up to hold a five-year-old's warm, tiny, fragile feet in my hand, and what it means to hold tight on those feet and break them in my own hands.

The process starts by soaking a girl's feet in a warm mixture of herbs and animal blood, making the bones easier to break. The toenails were clipped to prevent infection, as

the feet would be folded inward. Imagine, after the “crack” sound of the bones breaking, the tight bandages pulling the foot into an impossible shape, the toes crushed under the arch of the foot, then locking the broken bones in place. This process would be repeated every day as the feet were unbound, washed, and rebound tighter each time for at least six months to ensure the shape sticks.

And it’s done by mothers or female relatives in the house.

I cannot do it. I can’t even imagine what it would be like if my ma stood next to me and demanded that I do it. I simply can’t. It’s not even like getting tattoos, where everything heals after a while. Foot-binding cripples a person for life. I might attack my ma or take my child and run out of the house if I feel cornered.

But many generations of women did.

Isn’t this just like daughter aversion? Many generations of women have passed this tradition down, keeping their daughters in a role they hate so much.

Even if the law has already stated since 1926 that sons and daughters have equal inheritance rights (Awakening Foundation 2018), so many lawyers are still sharing stories of old A-ma asking how to secretly remove their daughters’ rights, and my friends are still invited to sign a statement to “willingly” give up the right. Parents, mothers, are actively reinforcing the tradition.

I want to know why.

I believe foot-binding breaks more than the feet of the little girl. It has to. Because beating children is already prohibited by many countries in the world, and that’s milder than breaking a foot.

Allow me to remind you that there was no anaesthesia. My child screamed and cried when he bumped his head. It was loud like the roar of an animal. I cannot even imagine the scream of the girls when their bones were snapped.

And the girls' voices and pain were ignored entirely. Somehow, it reminded me of my ma and WanHwa A-ma, gossiping and mocking any female friends or relatives who were said to scream very loudly in labour.

I wonder about the impact of foot-binding on how these little girls perceive their relationship to the world. Can they ever feel safe anymore? Can they still trust their mothers or other female adults around them? How do they make sense of what happens to them every day when the process is repeated?

I've seen photos of bound feet before. The feet were twisted into such unnatural, unbearable shapes that I almost wanted to look away. Some of them were so deformed I felt a scream rise in my throat. But then I read in Hung's book (2017) that during early Japanese rule, Taiwanese women actually believed bound feet were beautiful. That shocked me. I can't believe human minds can be shaped so much by a society to have such a different aesthetic sense of beauty!

These girls were taught early—how to conform, how to give things up, how to bear pain quietly if it meant gaining approval. Foot-binding wasn't just about shaping feet; it was about shaping obedience. It held the body still, yes—but it also held the mind. And the soul.

I understand the surface-level explanation. It wasn't only about beauty. It was about marriage. About ensuring that a daughter could secure a future for herself and for her family. That kind of logic makes sense when survival is on the line. But still—how do people come to believe in a tradition that mutilates a healthy child for life?

And what haunts me is this: I don't think we've ever really looked into the pain. Not collectively. Not deeply. When I searched for foot-binding online, the Mandarin Wikipedia

page gave just a short paragraph of the harm it caused. The English version, in contrast, had a whole section devoted to it.

If the pain has never been fully seen, how can we say the impact is behind us? How can we say we've truly recovered?

...

"I think we've seen enough about this house. Let's move on to explore what else is here,"... says.

She stands up and walks towards the front door.

"The place I grew up never felt like home." I say quietly, "It always felt like the three of them were a happy family, and I was just there."

"Well," /// takes up my hand, "Many families are willing to let some members be emotionally shattered, just to capture a seemingly perfect family portrait. (Yu Chian 2024)"

We follow ... out of the house.

Chapter 4-2: The Secret Girl's Temple

Ghosts and Traditions

The three of us continue along the mountain path. After walking for a while, a building gradually comes into view ahead of us. We push aside the tall grass and walk toward the building.

Oh, this is a temple, I think.

I haven't been to a temple for a while, since I began living overseas. We are not a particularly religious family, but we go to nearby temples to worship on important holidays. I've never seen my family *bwa bwei* like other people, though, holding the two wooden, half-moon-shaped pieces in their hands, kneeling on a red cushion on the floor with their eyes closed, mumbling some questions to the divine, the spirits, or the ancestors, and then dropping the wooden pieces to see their response.

Perhaps because we have this special way to "communicate" with the divine, the spirits and the ancestors, in our culture, they feel very present in our lives.

"I think our family don't *bwa bwe*i because we consider ourselves modern and highly educated compared to other Taiwanese people," /// says.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, both ma's and ba'[9]s families are well-educated back in the days of the Japanese rule. All of our great-grandmothers graduated from high school, and all of our great-grandfathers went to college. One of them even went to Japan to study to become a medical doctor. Especially ma's family always gave me the impression they were different from other people. Remember WanHwa A-ma always cared very much about accents, whether in Japanese or Taiwanese?"

"Yeah, she said if you speak the wrong kind, people will look down on you. Even when she heard I was going to Savannah, Georgia, in the States."

[9] Father in Mandarin

"Exactly, that's why I think they might consider *bwa bwei* too superstitious."

"It's a thought, but..."

"Hey!"

... has been staring at the temple for a while. And suddenly, she turns to us.

"Hey, I think I know why daughters are considered useless! It's the tradition, isn't it? Sons can hold the family names and do all the family worship and stuff, but daughters can't."... says, excitedly.

"Yeah, Lu (2010) summarises everything quite well. He mentioned that sons held immense value in traditional Chinese families, seen as essential for both practical and cultural reasons. They were expected to support their elders in adulthood and were even considered a form of old-age insurance. A son's success, especially as a scholar-official, brought honour to the entire family. Most crucially, only sons were believed capable of continuing ancestor worship, performing rituals like grave visits, offerings, and symbolic acts. Daughters, by contrast, were excluded from these roles entirely. We all know that, but it doesn't quite capture the atmosphere that's almost hostile toward daughters." /// replies.

I frown.

"What? What is it?"... asks.

"Well, it's just that. I feel there is something more. There are a lot of traditional beliefs that make me feel very uncomfortable, but I am not sure how they are linked

together," I say, "For instance, if a woman has 斷掌[10] (duàn jǎng), her husband will die early. A woman's period is impure, so when we are having our period, we cannot go to temples. It's considered disrespectful."

"I remembered when I read the book of our family tree, all the women had no names. Only last names. It's as if they are saying: I own this person. Don't mistake her for yours. That's it,"... adds.

"And later someone discovered to use the name as a wishing note, 招弟(jāudì)— bring a little brother. That's not even a name."

"Remember our history teacher's name is "Should've Been A Boy?"

We all fall silent. Not sure what to say next. /// walks into the temple, has a quick look around, and comes out again.

"Hey, this is actually a girls' temple." /// shouts.

A girl's temple?

I've never been to one because everyone said this kind of temple is full of negative energy, because the ghosts here are full of resentment, so it's better not to go near.

These are the temples that collect girls and women who die before getting married. They are not allowed to be buried with their family, so no one will be able to worship their

[10] A single transverse palmar crease, where the palm has one straight line running across it, instead of the usual two major horizontal lines.

spirit. If a spirit is not worshipped, it becomes 厲鬼[11] (lì guěi)and will start to 作祟[12] (tzuò suèi).

I don't get it. Who came up with this tradition about unmarried daughters in the first place? If that rule had never existed, we wouldn't have any vengeful spirits, would we?

There are so many traditions, rules, and beliefs that are blatantly unfair to women. And it's clear that people aren't happy about them—yet they persist.

Jung (2022) writes that in a loveless society, people begin to worship ghosts all around them. But those ghosts don't come from another world—they rise from the hearts of the unloved.

I believe that completely. So many of these traditions are so cruel, I can't even figure out why they existed to begin with, let alone how they've managed to survive until now.

"That reminds me of a ghost story I've read in a book. Have you ever heard of *"The Chair Sister?"* /// interrupts my thoughts.

Both me and ... shake our heads.

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[11] In Chinese and Taiwanese folklore, vengeful spirits (厲鬼) are typically the spirits of individuals who died violently, unjustly, or harbouring intense resentment or hatred. Unlike benevolent ancestral spirits or neutral ghosts, vengeful spirits (厲鬼) are hostile and dangerous, often seeking revenge or releasing their anger on the living. They are believed to be more powerful and difficult to appease compared to regular ghosts. Interestingly, in Taiwanese folklore, most vengeful spirits are female. (Chen 2019)

[12] 作祟 means a ghost or unseen spirit causing living people trouble, for instance, haunting, illness, accidents, or bad luck.

"It's a short ghost story, but it carries a chilling twist. It's about a six-year-old girl who lived with her older brother and their parents. One day, both parents fell seriously ill and passed away shortly. After that, people around them—relatives, neighbours—started saying the little girl was cursed, that she would bring death and misfortune to the family. Everyone began to avoid her. In the end, the Chair Sister died too. (Chen 2019)"

Brainstorming

"That's totally ridiculous!" I start to get a bit angry about all this. "You know, what puzzles me the most is, how do they get to place rules and traditions above something as fundamental as human compassion?"

"Let's play a little game,"... proposes, "Think of something you remember that made you go, 'This is ridiculous,' or 'How does that even make sense?'"

"I remember when uncle was cheating on his wife, WanHwa A-ma totally encouraged it. She even said uncle was wise to do so because his wife lived in a different city and couldn't take care of him. She failed as a wife, so there was no need for the uncle to be faithful. It's his right to put his own well-being first."

"One day at our family dinner, a lady I didn't know was there. Ma and WanHwa A-ma asked me to greet her. When I asked them who she was, they didn't say anything. But she came with a baby, so I soon figured out what was going on. Eventually, ma and WanHwa A-ma helped my uncle divorce his wife. I used to feel so confused because my ma hated those women who "steal people's husbands." Whenever a female celebrity was involved in anything like that, she would course them and shame them every time they showed up on TV. I thought ma would reject the lady as my uncle was having an affair with her. Years later, I finally realised the lady was welcome because she was holding a baby boy, and my uncle's wife at that time gave birth to a little girl.

"One afternoon, WanHwa A-ma and I were waiting by the roadside for Ba. A dad and his three-year-old daughter walked past, singing a song together. It was so sweet, I smiled

without thinking. WanHwa A-ma glanced at them and muttered, "Men these days are pathetic. Taking care of kids on a Sunday? What's his wife doing?"

"This happened when I was nine, at WanHwa A-ma's place. I was watching her interact with all her children, and for some reason, I turned to Ma and asked, 'Why does WanHwa A-ma like Older Uncle the most?' Ma shushed me right away. 'Nonsense,' she snapped. It wasn't until later that I understood: Older Uncle shares WanHwa A-ma's last name. Younger Uncle doesn't. And Ma? She's a daughter."

"One night at a family dinner, a woman I didn't know was there. Ma and WanHwa A-ma told me to greet her, but when I asked who she was, they didn't answer. She had a baby with her, though, well, so it didn't take long for me to figure it out. Not long after that dinner, ma and WanHwa helped my uncle divorce his wife and marry this woman. I remember feeling so confused. Ma always said she hated women who "steal other people's husbands." Anytime a female celebrity got involved in something like that, she would curse them out and shame them every time they appeared on TV. It took me years to understand. The woman at dinner was holding a baby boy."

Comparing Women's Lives

My mind starts to work. I begin thinking about foot-binding and tightlacing.

Yes, both practices of tightlacing (Wikipedia Contributors 2020) and foot-binding (Wikipedia Contributors 2019) involved physically reshaping a girl's body to fit societal ideals of beauty. They both are done to girls before they turn into adults, and they both cause physical distortion of a girl's body.

But they aren't the same.

Tightlacing typically began in adolescence when a girl's body was already developing. It was undeniably harmful, often causing long-term health issues by reshaping

women's bodies. But corsets were, at least theoretically, removable. Women could shed them at the end of the day or during periods of rebellion. Just like the girl Enola Holmes, she actively finds excuses to avoid wearing it (Blasco and Springer 2016). On the other hand, while still physically restrictive, tightlacing was more closely tied to fashion trends, fluctuating with societal changes and eventually fading out of practice after about a hundred years. The damage it caused was real, but I see cracks and room for women to challenge it and to take a break from it.

Foot-binding, to think about it now after what we've reflected before, was a lifelong sentence.

Girls, often as young as four or five, were subjected to this practice at the very age when they were beginning to form their identities. The pain was constant and inescapable. Once the bones of the feet were broken and bound, there was no going back. A girl's fate was sealed—her physical limitations would define her existence. Her future was locked into place by her bound feet, and by extension, her bound mind. This wasn't just about beauty or fashion; it was about control. Foot-binding ensured that women would be physically dependent on their families, particularly on men. They couldn't walk, let alone run, making it impossible for them to escape or rebel.

Once the bones were broken and the feet were bound, there was no going back. A girl's fate was sealed. She would never walk normally again, and her life would be one of dependence, not just on her family, but on the societal structures that deemed this practice necessary. We won't see any story about a girl who escapes foot-binding because it's impossible to get away with it.

And foot-binding lasted for over a thousand years. Ten centuries of women being systematically deformed, physically and psychologically. And in case you are not aware of it, the level of harm to a girl's body gets worse and worse over the year.

How did we eventually get out of it? It was never stopped because women wanted to be free from it. In Taiwan, foot-binding ended because the Japanese arrived and impressed

Taiwanese men with images of modern Japanese women. So, the men decided to ask their wives and daughters to stop binding their feet. (Hung 2017)

I've been thinking about how our society moulds girls collectively. At first, I thought it started from the very moment we begin to form a sense of self at age four or five, like when the practice of foot-binding begins. It's time children start voicing their opinions and asking more questions.

But now, I wonder if it starts the moment the gender is revealed. Daughters are never given a chance to know or to explore who we are. Someone else decides our fate and our place for us the moment our gender is revealed. And "thanks to" technology, the decision can be made even before we are born. We've even had to enact legislation to prohibit fetal sex selection. (Health Promotion Administration, Ministry of Health and Welfare 2012)

I find it easier to understand daughter aversion through foot-binding—perhaps because it offers a more concrete image. The shaping starts when we are so young, so unaware of what we are losing. How could we understand the weight of that? Feet crushed, mobility stolen, and being crippled intentionally. It was more than just bones being broken—it was their future being set in stone, like a fate they could never escape.

And yet, what shocks me the most is the normalisation of it all. The pain was constant, but the girls, the families—they accepted it. Society accepted it. Couldn't they see what they were doing? Didn't the mothers, the female adults, experience it themselves? Maybe they didn't want to see. Maybe the pain was so deep that it became invisible. I think about how daughter aversion works in the same way. It's invisible, but it's everywhere. We don't even know we're less than someone, and it's already been decided; from the moment we're born. It's not about who we are; it's about who we're supposed to be. It's about the role, not about the soul.

I find it difficult to believe people would just accept it for centuries—or maybe that's exactly the issue. None of us could explain why so many people would accept it, and

actively be the person who passes it on, so we tell ourselves there must be love. It must be love.

Is this what women have been doing for generations? Telling themselves that what they received was love—and telling their daughters the same, even as they break their feet, listen to their screams, and wipe away their tears?

Can someone please tell me? They also find it sickening, right?

What is the difference between this scene and the porn where a man is forcing a little girl, telling her it's going to be okay, you'll soon know how good it feels and how wonderful it is for you? Does that mean, when the context is different, when the goal is not sex but marriage, if the persecutor is female, not male, the abuse, the aggression, the manipulation to harm a girl physically and mentally is okay? Does that mean when there is no blood, no screaming, no physical wound, then the abuse, the aggression, the manipulation to distort a child's sense of self is okay?

I refuse to accept this.

"No one can rightfully claim to be loving when behaving abusively." (bell hooks 1999)

No one!

Differences in life

I think the gap between life under foot-binding and life under tightlacing runs even deeper than that.

When I read Sara Ahmed's analysis of Mrs Dalloway (Ahmed, 2017), I felt a disconnect. I couldn't quite figure out what it was. It took me a while—forcing myself to sit with that discomfort—before I heard the small voice in my mind whispering: *"She had a life when she was a girl?"*

That was the first time I connected with how I feel about my own girlhood—through contrast, by noticing the way Mrs Dalloway reflects on hers. She speaks of it with a sense of loss, as if she had once been free, and that freedom was later taken from her.

What freedom? I was genuinely confused.

I couldn't recall a time when I had ever felt free, cherished, or valued—at least not while I was living in that house, with my family.

I wanted to leave that place every single day.

I completely broke down when I found out my brother had been given the chance to study abroad—*and he didn't even want to go*.

That's how badly I wanted to leave.

I started noticing things, like when I watched children's TV with my son.

There are shows that tell kids it's okay to be themselves. It's good to be themselves.

We never had that. We were constantly reminded of our duties. My A-ma's greeting was always, *"Have you been filial? Have you been obedient?"* No one ever asked if I was happy. No one ever asked what I loved.

My sense of self was already gone by the time I was five. It had been taken from me so early that I don't even remember what it felt like to have it.

To be entirely honest, my experience with the story was a bit different. I didn't read the book. I watched the movie, *The Hours*, in my early twenties. The film made it easier for me to imagine the world Mrs Dalloway was living in. The flowers, the fashion, the streets, the houses—it was all so foreign to me. If I had read the book first, I think my imagination would've built an entirely different world.

Looking back on that experience now, especially while reading Ahmed, I realised, uneasily, that I wasn't really paying attention to Mrs Dalloway's inner journey.

I was too busy admiring the beautiful flowers she was bringing home. The house she lived in. The party she could host in her own home. The freedom she had to cook whatever she wanted to serve.

From my perspective, I thought *I'd be so happy to live Mrs Dalloway's life*.

Ha. I'd be living with my mother-in-law, cooking for *her* party, cleaning up afterwards, and being told how much worse I cook than she does. If I ever bought flowers, I might only be allowed to keep them in my bedroom—if she didn't ask me to throw them away for being a waste of money. And by default, we will be expected to live with our in-laws.

I've never lived my girlhood in a different culture. But I went to visit my cousin in the US in my teens, and she showed me a big file from a school project that asked them to plan their own future wedding. I was almost blinded by all the decorations, flowers, fonts, venues, selections of dresses and shoes… Back home, "A child's wedding banquet is the parents' graduation ceremony." (Yu Chian 2024) If we get to pick our dresses or venue, we'll be reminded to be grateful for our open-minded parents for the rest of our lives.

The kind of environment I lived in bears more resemblance to the world Han Kang (2016) depicts, where we are questioned and forced to prove ourselves sane simply because we lose our appetite for meat. And the interrogation comes from everywhere: our social network, our spouse, our parents and their families, our in-laws and their families. Getting married is not the beginning of our oppressed lives. It's an extension of it. I would also argue it's even more suffocating for women today because, in the old days, we were asked to abandon our original family after marriage, so we only needed to follow the expectations of our in-laws. But nowadays, parents expect daughters to remain on a string even after marriage, and daughters become caregivers and financial contributors to both sides of the family. The expectations double.

I really don't understand marriage and family in our culture. It always seems to be just about the name, about the blood, about the roles, about responsibilities, about contributions, never about how people feel in these situations. Like, no one cares if this is a thriving or nurturing environment for anyone.

When ma mentioned marriage in front of me, it was never about my future husband, about finding a suitable person, or even about maintaining a marriage. Everything she talked about was my future mother-in-law.

"How am I going to explain to your mother-in-law if this is how you do the dishes after you get married? You'll be such a disgrace!"

I remember being so annoyed. I don't even have a boyfriend. Why do we keep on talking about the mother-in-law?

I don't think our ideas of marriage have anything to do with 'the happiest day in life" or "finding Mr Right." It's about becoming another family's daughter, to become another "helper" of a new mother.

You might be wondering why I keep making these comparisons. I asked myself that a lot. *Questioned* might be a better word. I felt uneasy—sometimes even ashamed—as if I

were judging other people's pain and experiences. There was also a feeling of contempt, but turned inward: *Who do I think I am,* to feel differently from writers who've spent years exploring these topics? To disagree with someone speaking in their mother tongue? If there's any discrepancy between our feelings or experiences, maybe it's because I don't know enough. Maybe I'm trying to speak before I've earned the right. Maybe it's me who is deluded enough to think I can make a point with so little academic experience.

I finally broke free from this anxiety when someone in a Facebook group brought up a question: Why are so many members of this group either currently living overseas or have lived abroad?

The conversation evolved into a realisation that many of us had: what we experienced growing up wasn't "normal." That's the word people used—but I might rephrase it as '*unhealthy*'.

One woman said a coworker woke her up. After hearing how much money and how many caregiving duties her family demanded from her, the coworker said, "I think your family Jung-nan-ching-nius.

A surprising number of people said they didn't realise anything was wrong until they met someone from another culture. It was a strange expression on someone's face, a moment of disbelief— "*My parents would never do that. They'd never say that to me.*" Or it was the simple act of standing on foreign soil and watching how their friends interacted with their parents. That's when it hit them: there are different kinds of parent-child relationships in the world. And once that realisation sinks in, it gives shape to a long-held discomfort buried deep inside. A discomfort that had lingered for a reason.

I started to wonder whether my own experience is part of what makes it so hard to reflect on things that are fully normalised in the culture that raised me. Just as Ahmed (2017) said, "the hardest work can be recognising how one's own life is shaped by norms in ways that we did not realise, in ways connecting with others over or around something. We cannot 'not' live in relation to norms."

When I was still inside that culture, all I knew was that I hated it. I wanted to leave that place so badly.

And I noticed: all of them reached that realisation in adulthood.

I wonder if all of us were searching for answers all along—but only found them once we had stepped completely outside the culture.

Story of Lin Tou Jie

"This could be completely out of the blue, but," /// says, "You know the story of Lin Tou Jie, right?"

"Only vaguely," I admit.

Before /// could continue, ... breaks in.

"During the late Qing Dynasty, a widow named Li Zhaoniang lived near Chihkan Tower in Tainan with her three sons. Her husband, Chen Mingtong, had died in a shipwreck, and she used his inheritance to raise their children. A family friend, Zhou Yasi from Shantou, often visited and comforted her. Over time, Zhaoniang fell in love with him. Despite gossip, she married him after he promised never to abandon her.

But Zhou Yasi only wanted her money. He used it to trade camphor and sugar, became rich, and returned to Shantou—where he married someone else, abandoning Zhaoniang and her children. Unaware of the betrayal, Zhaoniang waited for him, growing poorer and more desperate. Two of her sons died from hunger. One stormy night, she killed her youngest son and then hanged herself on a pandanus tree.

After her death, ghostly sightings began. Locals built a temple for her, calling her Lin Tou Jie (The Pandanus Tree Lady). One day, a fortune teller helped her spirit cross the sea to Shantou. She arrived during Zhou Yasi's celebration for his newborn son, possessed him in front of guests, and drove him mad. He killed his family and then himself, fulfilling the curse." (Chen 2019)

"This is one of the most famous ghost stories in Taiwan. There were even several films about it." /// adds.

I nod.

"I'm not sure exactly where I'm going with this, but I've been wondering—

In these ghost stories, don't you think women, no matter their age, show almost zero mercy toward each other? Take Lin Tou Jie's story, or the Chair Sister's. If people had just been a little kinder—like, not gossiping about a woman remarrying when it's clear she couldn't survive on her own, or if someone had taken in the little girl, even as a servant—neither of them would've died." /// says, painfully.

"What you just said helped something click for me," I respond.

I am a slut

I was 10, in the fourth grade.

Our teacher loved to start the day with a 30-minute lecture about virtues. About manner. About being obedient. About knowing our place. About getting good grades to honour our parents, to repay everything they've done for us.

I can't recall what she was talking about that day—I remember the atmosphere, but not the words. Probably because I was too busy playing thumb war with Chang, the boy who sat next to me.

In our class, as in most others at the school, we changed seating arrangements every term. Boys in one row, girls in another. The shortest sat closest to the blackboard, the tallest in the back. We each had our own desk, but the first row of the boys and girls needed to connect their desks together, as if forming a two-polar magnet, then the second row, the third row, and so on.

Years later, whenever primary school time came up, I would hear my girlfriends proudly talking about how they set the rule about the line formed by the connected tables.

"If the boys dare to cross it, I hit their arms with my pencil box. Or if their stuff crosses the line, I just throw them out!"

And all the girls will burst into a triumphant cheer, taking turns sharing their creative ways to "punish" their classmates. I've even heard my mum having the same enjoyable conversation with her girlfriend. The only difference was that they didn't have separate desks. Back in their time, they shared one desk with a boy. So, they had extra "fun" in deciding where to draw that "forbidden line."

I never did any of that. Instead, I had memories of creating games with different boys around the line. We'd use our index fingers to "kick" our erasers into each other's territories, or we build towers together using all of our pencils and rulers. I didn't particularly mind if any of the boys' stuff crossed the line. It never happened often, and I could just make a request if I needed my full space back.

That term, I was seated next to Chang for the first time, and we clicked instantly.

Chang was a bit goofy, and I found that endearing. We would often fall into fits of giggles over the smallest things. Sitting next to him was fun, and that day was no different.

The teacher's lecture had become dull, the kind of quiet boredom that made my eyelids heavy. So, we started playing thumb war under the desk in our low voices. Chang chanted "one, two, three" in this weird, offbeat tune, and I could barely keep from bursting into laughter.

But I got too into the game, pulling my thumb too hard. I lost my balance, my body swaying forward. The teacher noticed immediately.

"Shin!"

I froze, my gaze dropping to the desk. I knew she was going to scold me. But instead of the immediate reprimand I expected, there was a pause. Finally, the teacher spoke.

"Ever since you started sitting next to Chang, you've become a total *sanba*! You're so easily influenced by him!"

The whole class erupted with that familiar "Wooooo" sound, the teasing tone kids used when they suspected someone "liked" someone else. My face flushed hot. Great. Now, everyone would think I liked Chang. I'd be teased for this for a very long time.

"I've been watching you for a while now. If you keep on being completely unaware of your own manners like this, I am not sure how much I can expect of your future."

A wave of anger surged through me, heat burning in my chest. But I didn't know what, exactly, I was angry about.

There was silence again. I waited for her to start on Chang. I felt bad, but I really wanted to be out of the hook. Finally, the teacher spoke again. She asked us to take out our textbook.

I looked at Chang in disbelief. He gave me a "victory" hand gesture under the table and a large grin, apparently celebrating his narrow escape. The burning sensation extended to my stomach. It started growling, more and more, until it became the only thing I could hear.

Looking back now, with greater cultural awareness, I understand what had been bothering me. There were implications in the teacher's words. Her accusation wasn't just that I had been distracted from her lecture. It was something deeper. She was implying that I was "the kind of girl" who let boys influence her, that I lacked the will to behave properly, to be a "good girl."

The word she used—*sanba*—hit me hardest. At the time, I didn't fully understand, but now I know. *Sanba* wasn't just a casual insult. It was used to describe girls who acted inappropriately with boys.

She was calling me a slut.

All because a boy invited me to a harmless game. And somehow, I was the only one to blame—blamed from a sexual perspective, at ten years old.

After The Incident

I was so full of bursting emotions that I really wanted the bell to ring. The minutes dragged on, each second stretching endlessly, until finally, I heard it.

I swam my way to Yu's seat, where the five of us typically gathered during recess. When I reached them, I threw myself into a nearby desk.

"How unlucky!" I mumbled, expecting some lighthearted response, or even some comfort.

But no one said a word.

I looked up, and there was something unsettling in the air. Yu and Li exchanged a glance, and I could have sworn I saw Li give her a quick nod. My stomach tightened. Then Yu turned to me, her face stern and unreadable. It felt like the moment before a summer storm, when the day quickly turns dim and the air becomes sticky. I didn't think I would like what's coming.

"We've been wanting to talk to you about this for a while," Yu said flatly, her voice devoid of emotion. She's the smallest kid in class, yet she always seems to have an overwhelming power to conclude and judge everything.

I stared at her, waiting for her to go on.

"We think you need to behave better," she continued. "You should stop hanging out with boys."

"Yeah," Li chimed in, her tone sharp. "Why are you even spending time with them? They're gross and filthy."

All four of them nodded at the same time.

I felt my pulse quicken. *Because they're fun*, I thought. I couldn't stand the so-called "games" Yu and the others came up with. Just last week, Li had suggested we play "lady game," where we were supposed to bow like we were wearing dresses whenever we saw each other, speak in ridiculously polite, high-pitched tones, and compete to see who could smile the sweetest. It wasn't even a game. It was torture.

When they're not playing the lady game, they're always gathering around the teacher's desk, asking if there's anything they can help with, or telling the teacher this and that about people in the class. I really couldn't bring myself to understand the purpose of that. We've only got 10-minute breaks in between classes. I would much rather play dodgeball on the playground or run about in the corridor.

But I didn't say any of that. They were right. I didn't know why they were right, but I knew they were right. Right in the way that, if any adult heard their request, they would join in and say, "Wow, they're such good friends. They know right from wrong and what's good for you. You'll be really stupid if you don't listen to them."

Things I enjoyed seemed to always be wrong. Things I hated seemed to always be right. I don't know why this keeps happening.

Four pairs of eyes were on me; the weight of their silence pressed down on me. Yu and Li were the teacher's favourites. What choice did I have?

"I'm sorry," I muttered, my voice small.

"Promise me," Yu said, her words sharp as a command.

I looked again at the four of them. No one's expression changed a bit.

"I will stop hanging out with boys during recess," I replied, low and shaky.

Men and Women Should Not Touch Each Other.[13]

I look at /// and .... both, and I decide to continue.

"I have a very weird claim I want to make," I say. "I'm not totally sure about this yet, but this thought's been nagging at me for a while now."

"It started with a discussion I saw in the Facebook group. Someone asked how daughters are usually scolded by their mothers, and I was shocked. So many women said their mothers called them 'chicken.'"

"Wait—'chicken' as in...?"

"Yeah. It's the worst word. The one used to mean whore."

"God. That's brutal."

"Right? I just can't wrap my head around why a mother would call her own daughter that. And then I started thinking about school. Gender-separated classes were everywhere. I was in one too. Parents always said it was 'to stop kids from doing stuff.'"

"And by 'stuff,' they meant sex."

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[13] 男女授受不親 (nán niǔ shòu shòu bù chīn) This phrase reflects traditional Confucian norms around gender separation and propriety, particularly in physical interactions. It was used to justify things like: Boys and girls not sitting together; A woman not handing something directly to a man (and vice versa); Avoiding any form of physical contact between unrelated men and women

"Exactly. And then there's this thing I keep seeing online—cases where a girl finally comes forward to expose a male relative who sexually harassed her as a child. And someone in the family always says something like, 'Wow, she could seduce men at three?'"

"I've seen that too. It's sick."

"Even in Lin's (2023) novel—we all know it's basically her autobiography—there's that scene where she tries to test the waters with her mother. She says, 'My friend is in a relationship with our teacher.' And her mother responds, 'What a slut, at that age.'"

"It's always the girl's fault."

"And then there's the term '狐狸精'—the seductive fox spirit. I remember Ma warning me over and over: never leave your husband alone with another woman. Not even a best friend. Not even your sister. 'You'll definitely catch them sleeping together.'"

"It's like every woman is a threat."

"Exactly. There's this strange, never-named assumption. I want to say it, but I know it sounds awful."

"Say it."

"Okay. What I keep sensing is this: The culture acts like *all* girls—no matter their age, no matter the relationship—have some natural power that makes boys want to have sex with them. Or worse, that all girls *want* sex, even when they're still children. So the only way to protect the family is to keep girls away from boys."

"I remember some girls in the FB group saying their moms wouldn't let them wear shorts or sit too close to their dads once they hit puberty."

"Exactly. And if that's the logic, then *any* female becomes a threat. Friends, sisters, daughters. Everyone becomes a potential 'husband-stealer.' Every woman becomes competition."

"No wonder no one saved that little girl. They probably thought taking her in would bring 'trouble' to their family."

"I'm thinking something even darker. In the FB group, so many daughters shared stories of being harassed or assaulted by their own brothers or cousins. And I keep thinking—when girls are treated as worthless at home, of course, boys start to see them that way too. Like they can do whatever they want."

"And the teacher just reinforces it all—subtly, beautifully, as if it's normal."

"Exactly. That's what I've been trying to put into words. And the terrifying thing is—my friends all picked up on it immediately."

And a year later, they bullied me for "getting too close to boys."

I am a slut.

Chapter 4-3: The Deserted School

School & Punishment

After pushing through the trees and bushes, the view suddenly opened up. Standing before us was a deep black, bronze statue of Chiang Kai-shek. The statue stood at the opening of a grey concrete wall, and through that opening, we could see a two-story house

inside the enclosure. I glanced at the statue—then quickly looked away. I was afraid I'd see his eyes glowing red.

"I don't like school," I say.

"But you did well in school. You're never in trouble," .... quickly replies.

I look at her.

"Okay, not never, but you're never a troubling student."

I feel annoyed. School was a place that took so much effort to survive. Being a "good student" didn't mean we enjoyed school or even thrived in it. It only meant we know our place—sit still, no questions, get good marks.

We enter the school gate and walk along the corridor, passing classrooms.

The corridor is the perfect place for public shaming.

In junior high, boys will be asked to stand in front of the girls' classroom as punishment. It's also the place where my mother and dad would be fined a coin and asked to hang a wooden board saying "I speak Taiwanese" in front of their chest, if they were caught using Taiwanese at school. I read once in a book (Griffiths 2021) that people experienced similar things in Wales as well. Oddly, this kind of similarity gives me a sense of relief—other people around the world would understand this kind of humiliation.

I make a turn and walk into a classroom.

It's the kind of wooden chair we had in all schools, from elementary school through middle school to high school. I've heard in some places that two people share one table. But ours are two tables placed next to each other.

I grew up during a time when physical punishment was a regular part of school life. Ever since kindergarten, anything we forgot or did wrong could get us beaten. Once, I was supposed to write my name 20 times. I forgot and only did two. I got hit 18 times on the hand. Other things like talking in class, not responding fast enough, or just not doing what we were told, are the same thing. We'd get hit on the hand.

Since junior high school, the worst time is when our test marks are given back. Full score is 100. One hit for every point missed. My friend told me boys' classes are even scarier. They got smashed by chairs, kicked in the stomach, or slapped in the face.

I was lucky that my grades usually satisfied my parents. A lot of my friends got beaten a second time when they got home.

"I hate teachers," /// says, "They are totally tyrants. I don't know why so many friends wanted to be one."

Maybe it was about power, I thought. Back then, many parents would literally tell teachers, "If my child misbehaves, feel free to hit them."

And it wasn't just about hitting. If I got scolded at school, my mother's first question was always, "What did you do to make the teacher punish you?"

Just as our parents were always assumed to be right, teachers were always assumed to be right. So whatever they did eventually became the standard. They became the rules themselves. Every teacher had their own rules. Every parent, too. No one cared if the rules conflicted. It was our job to follow. Theirs was to punish.

I pull out a chair, sit down, and look at the blackboard and the stage. I wonder if the stage is there to make the teachers look more powerful and scarier.

I bet it is.

Ever since I had Toma, I really have no idea how we survived our school years.

No drinking water, no slouching, no talking in class. No AC. Just a 10-minute break between periods, and half of it spent walking to the toilet. The only time we really got to move was during the two hours of P.E. each week.

/// says, “I still remember that time in grade 1, the teacher yelled and stormed toward us, screamed our name, and hit us fiercely in the palms with her stick.”

I rub my palm. Yes, that last beat hit the bone under my index finger.

“But it's necessary, because we're new,” … quickly adds, “We need to be disciplined. And we never got into that kind of trouble again. So, it worked, right? It only happened once.”

“I don’t know. I mean, you’re right. It only happened once, and I was never the kind of student who got into much trouble. In fact, I knew I got away with a lot because I had good grades and parents with high social status. If someone lost money in class, no one would suspect me. Even if I were the one who took it, my lies would be believed. And even if there was proof I did it, all I had to do was point to a classmate and say they tricked me into it. I knew exactly who to pick. I would face little, if any, consequences,” I reply, not quite sure.

“See? You manage the game!” … smiles.

I suppose I did.

But there’s no pleasure in managing that kind of game. School life was the darkest time in my life.

It's the time when I believe my anger would explode and destroy everything.

It's the time I always believed I was a monster.

It's the time I wish I could be like a sand statue and get taken away by the wind.

It's the time I would walk on the street, wishing something could fall from the sky to crash into me, or a car could simply run into me. And then I can die. I won't have to figure out how to live anymore.

It's a time that reminds me of a part in The Virgin Suicides (Eugenides 1993):

“What are you doing here, honey? You’re not even old enough to know how bad life gets.”

“Obviously, Doctor,” she said, “You’ve never been a thirteen-year-old girl.”

Every school I knew had ghost stories. I’ve asked friends in the US and Scotland. They don’t have the same thing. I guess we were just more afraid of school back home.

Back then, every campus had a statue of Chiang Kai-shek, and people said they moved at midnight. Some staircases led to other worlds. Doors that swallowed children whole. Hands that reached out from toilet bowls if you forgot to bring your own toilet paper.

Oh, and when I was thirteen, a girl at our school committed suicide.

The teachers banned us from talking about it, but the details still spread. She hanged herself wearing red.

In our culture, that's how you guarantee you'll return as a vengeful spirit.

I've been wondering all these years: who was she hoping to haunt?

A piece of memory comes to mind.

The Slap

There was a promise I had made to myself again and again as a child:

"I will never grow up to be an adult like that!"

But what exactly did I mean by *"an adult like that"*?

One memory in particular stands out.

Back in third grade, I was part of a close-knit group of five friends. We also got along well with a boy in our class named Ping. Ping had a soft voice, loved to sing, and wasn't the least bit mischievous. He didn't enjoy outdoor activities but preferred delicate crafts, like beading. He was small in stature, and when he smiled, his eyes would squint into thin crescents, disappearing entirely. On casual clothes day, he often wore a yellow jacket with blue polka dots that I could recognise from a distance.

I remember one long school break when I happened to attend the same holiday camp as Ping. We took some classes together, conducted science experiments, learned to play ping-pong… The details have mostly faded, but the joy of having lunch together, chatting, and participating in all sorts of activities is still vividly imprinted in my memory. Back at school, Ping also got along wonderfully with my other friends and was practically part of our circle.

But then, suddenly, everything went awry.

One chilly winter morning, I arrived at school around the same time as one of my friends, Ting. We were chatting as we made our way to our desks, preparing to unpack our bags. Almost simultaneously, we noticed an envelope in each of our drawers. Startled, we exchanged glances and shrugged, unsure of what was going on.

“What is it? What is it??” Our other friends immediately noticed and rushed over, curiosity shining in their eyes.

I stared at the yellow envelope in my hand, completely baffled. Finally, I decided to open it. Inside was a card that looked shiny and new, probably bought from a stationery shop. The cover featured a simple cartoon sketch of a boy wearing a baseball cap, standing against a dark blue night sky filled with stars and a crescent moon. Beneath it were a few lines of text. Most of the words have long escaped my memory, but one line is still clear: *“Ah, your eyes are as bright as the stars in the sky.”*

At the bottom was a signature: Ping. Ting’s card was the same.

It was only then that I realised the date—February 14th. Valentine’s Day.

Did this mean… these were love letters? I had never received a card bought in a store before, so that alone surprised me. Plus, at the time, Valentine’s Day wasn’t a holiday

that people celebrated in earnest. Everyone knew about it, but no one did anything about it. To receive a love letter—especially at our age—was beyond unexpected.

Perhaps because we felt awkward, the entire group of girls burst into laughter. At first, we just teased each other, saying, *"Oh my gosh, love letters, how cheesy!"* But then things escalated, and we began mocking the over-the-top lines on the card. One of my friends, Jen, dramatically recited, *"Ah, your eyes..."* at me, while I clutched my ears and shouted, *"Stop it! I can't take it—it's so gross!"*

We were having so much fun until, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Ping.

At some point, he had appeared nearby, standing not far from us. His face was beet red, and his expression was a mix of anger and humiliation, like he wanted to burn holes through us with his gaze.

Oh no. We had gone too far.

I quickly nudged Jen with my elbow, signalling her to stop, and tried to get Ting and the others to quit joking about the cards. But it was too late.

"Enough!!!" Ping clenched his fists, his voice trembling as he yelled, "Enough!!! If you don't want the card, give it back to me!!!"

"Why should I? Since when do you take back something you gave to someone else?"

Ting planted her hands on her hips, raising her chin defiantly. "You wrote something so disgusting, and now you can't handle being laughed at?"

I was stunned, staring at Ting. Was it really necessary to say something so harsh? Wouldn't this hurt him terribly?

My eyes darted toward Ping, just in time to see him reach into his desk drawer. He grabbed something and flung it in Ting's direction. My reflexes kicked in—I rushed forward and stepped between them. Whatever he had thrown hit my jacket and clattered to the ground.

It was a utility knife. The blade was out.

At that moment, rage surged through me, so intense I could feel stars bursting in my vision. I was completely, utterly furious.

"What are you doing?! This is a utility knife!!!"

This was beyond dangerous! Throwing a utility knife?! Someone could've been seriously hurt! No matter how angry he was, he couldn't just throw something like that!

But even as I was seething, I still had the clarity to understand Ping probably hadn't intentionally chosen the knife to throw—it was just something he'd grabbed from his chaotic drawer. And to be fair, we were at fault, too. If we hadn't teased him or mocked his card, he wouldn't have been humiliated to the point of wanting to lash out at Ting.

The situation was too complicated. This was beyond us. We needed an adult's help.

I ordered everyone to stay put and waited until the teacher arrived in the classroom. The moment he stepped in, I rushed over to report what had happened, hoping he could mediate and resolve the conflict.

The teacher listened intently, his brow furrowed in concern, before sending me back to my seat. I nervously watched him at his desk in the back of the classroom, where he called Ping, Ting, Jen, and the others over, one by one, to question them.

In the end, only Ping remained by his side.

“Shin, come over here.”

I walked over slowly, bracing myself for what felt like an inevitable judgment. I felt a twinge of guilt—I knew I’d done something wrong. I had mocked someone, and I deserved to apologise. But I also hoped the teacher had spoken to Ping about how dangerous it was to throw something like a knife when angry.

I stood in front of the teacher, quietly waiting.

“I want you to slap him. Twice.”

I stared at him, wide-eyed, unsure if I had heard correctly.

“Slap him. Twice.”

“I won’t.”

I shook my head, panicked, unable to process what was happening. But the teacher was resolute.

“Do it. If you don’t, he’ll think it’s okay to treat others like this in the future.”

But… I… I was at fault, too. We were the ones who started it… My mind was racing with questions and confusion, but none of it came out. I looked at the teacher, then at Ping, who seemed even smaller than usual as he stood before me.

The classroom was completely silent. Everyone was watching. Waiting.

In the end, I raised my right hand, unsure of what else to do.

Slap!

"One more time." The teacher, perhaps sensing my hesitation or fearing I'd back out, pressed me to follow through.

I raised my hand again.

The second *slap* landed, and Ping broke into tears, sobbing uncontrollably.

The teacher dismissed me and sent me back to my seat. As I turned, I saw Ting and the others clapping and cheering, as if justice had been served.

But I couldn't hear any of it.

I think a part of me was never the same again.

After The Slap

When I got home, I explained what had happened at school because the teacher had written a note in my student planner.

Ma was furious that I slapped the boy.

“You just do whatever the teacher tells you? Don’t you have any judgment of your own?”

I wasn’t guided. I was just wrong. I didn’t learn anything from the experience. Only confusion.

Sometimes I wonder if ma was angry because I hit someone else’s son.

Extreme Gendelizational Power

Yue Du’s (2022) book helped me trace my own experience back to its historical roots. It wasn’t a comforting realisation.

She talks about the laws and society during the Qing Dynasty (1622 -1900), and these need to be understood from the perspective of "genderlization"—both gender and generational perspectives. This is relevant because the Qing Dynasty was when my ancestors left the mainland and came to Taiwan—it is clearly stated in our family tree book. Therefore, my family had lived in the same environment for three or four generations.

Back then, children weren’t just expected to obey their parents—they had to surrender their judgment to them, too. Imagine that. Not just our actions, but our thoughts, our beliefs. Everything had to be in line with our parents. There was no room for questioning, for doubting, for negotiating, or even for just wondering. It wasn’t just wrong to disobey; it was illegal and life-threatening. Our own parents could have us dragged in front of the court. They simply needed to "feel" we're not obeying, and no one would question them. No evidence was required. Just their word, their power. And that’s how deep this goes—into the very structure of the law, the very foundation of the culture.

Children were bound by filial piety just like girls were bound by cloth, their feet crushed, their futures decided.

And daughter aversion goes alongside it. In the book (Lu 2010), they say, more than once in history, the government officials tried to kill the practice of female infanticide, but they couldn't. The whole collective just couldn't feel happy about the birth of a girl.

And it's not the kind of law that is more like stating a position without real action. It ensures practices are woven into children's daily lives in a gendered manner.

Do (2022) mentioned how the state would chase after unfilial pious children even across administrative boundaries, to ensure parents had the power to control their children. No cost, no questions. Just absolute obedience, absolute power. If we disobey, we are sentenced. Not just a quick, easy head chop, but slicing. The skin of a disobedient child gets sliced bit by bit, in public, until our last breath, and our remaining will be sent back to show the punishment is well completed. The public shaming is so effective that, even though only a few "slicings" have ever been recorded, children learn their lessons. And "children" here is completely relational, not literal. A child will always be a child of their parents, no matter how old they are. So the request to be obedient is lifelong.

Of course, there are benefits to this system. The state defines the parent–child relationship as the moral foundation of all relationships. Then, it conveniently extends that structure to all other authority figures: teachers are seen as “a parent for life after teaching for a day,” government officials are called “parental officials,” and so on.

In this way, relationships between teachers and students, officials and civilians, and ultimately the emperor and his people, are all modelled on the same hierarchy. As a result, everyone in the society—except the emperor—lives with a deeply conflicted sense of self and power.

When facing our children, students, or subordinates, we are powerful and unquestionable. But when facing our parents, elders, teachers, or officials, we are powerless—and always in the wrong.

How can anyone form a stable sense of self under such constant, opposing pulls of power? How can we trust our own feelings or inner guidance in a society like this? And how can we ever break free from something so deeply ingrained, so thoroughly normalised?

Sense of Self vs Survival Mode

You might notice that I keep saying "we" when I talk about social situations from over a hundred years ago, as if they're still around us, still around *me*. That's because they are. They're still here.

That’s exactly how it felt. The forms may have changed, but the structure remains the same.

We were still beaten and scolded at school, then came home to more of the same. No one ever asked what happened. We were simply expected to obey, to follow the rules. No questions asked.

It showed up in other ways, too. We were expected to greet adults properly and to remember their names or, if they were relatives, their exact title in the family. If we didn’t do it, or even if we did but they forgot, it was still our fault. We were rude, disrespectful, and disobedient.

But they could ignore us, call us by the wrong names, and say it was our own fault for having names that were too hard to remember. And the other adults would stand by them, no matter what.

I remember how much I hated WanHwa A-ma's greeting every time I saw her. She would always ask, "有孝順瞴?" (Ū iú-hàu bô?), which means "Have you been filial?"

I felt a burn in my chest every time I heard it, though I didn't understand why. It wasn't an unusual question. Many people wanted children to be filial. Being filial was supposed to be good.

It's only now I realise, what I was feeling was the real meaning underneath: *Have you been obedient?*

Every time she asked me that, I felt my sense of self flatten, then reshape itself again, forced back into the mould.

I would even say the whole society starts brainwashing children by glorifying filial piety. The book *The Thirty-six Filial Exemplars* is still available today, filled with stories of children—both young and grown—who cut their own flesh to feed their parents, warmed their parents' beds in winter, or even buried their own children to save their elders.

This expectation of obedience and provision has no expiration date. In our culture, it's considered normal that once children grow up and start earning money, they should give some of it back to their parents—as a way of showing gratitude for being raised.

But this becomes a giant trap for so many daughters in the Facebook group.

Some give their parents everything yet are still called ungrateful.

Some give so much that they end up falling ill, and their mothers still call to ask about the insurance payout from their illness.

Daughters are expected to be grateful just for being alive, because our parents chose not to discard us for being “useless.” And so, to repay that mercy, it somehow becomes acceptable to strip us of everything.

Wolynn (2016) said the impact of intergenerational trauma could be traced back to seven generations, whereas the Qing Dynasty is only four or five generations ago in my family tree. And he is only talking about one single incident that happened in one single family. What about a collective experience that has been forbidden to discuss and reflect on?

I somehow start to see daughter aversion as a twin sibling of foot-binding. One in the light, one hiding in the darkness. One is visible, to be targeted; the other hides in the dark to continue their will.

Where did the anger go?

The Angry Girl

There was an online news report (Temima 2020) several years ago. It was a news article about a girl in China returning home with her mother and baby brother. When they entered the elevator together, another lady living in the same flat was there. The lady smiled at the 5-year-old girl and said, "Now that your mom has your baby brother, she won't love you anymore." The little girl said nothing in the elevator. After they arrived home, when her mother was not watching, the little girl pushed the buggy, together with her baby brother still sleeping in it, out of the balcony.

This news went viral in Taiwan. Most of the people commenting under it seemed to be female, and they've all met that lady in the same building. Not literally the same person, but they've all been told by some female adults the same thing, including me. This article reminded us all about something we all experienced. I, and so many others who commented beneath the article, remembered how that anger and hatred had already existed before it was voiced. I personally remember moments when I was thinking exactly

like that little girl, wanting to push that disgusting thing out of the window—the thing that took everything away from me.

The Happiest day

They all said kids don’t understand, but I understood—I was six years old.

I understood what "difference was". The way you look at me is different from the way you look at “that kid.” You don’t see it, but I see it clearly. The way you call me is different from the way you call “that kid.” You don’t hear it, but I hear it clearly.

I know if both “that kid” and I fell into the water, who you would save. If you say, “That’s too terrible; you’re both precious,” I’ll be angry because you’re lying.

Even if I don’t understand, I’ll find a way to understand.

I was warned not to use violence and to let adults handle things. Really? Is it “kids” who aren’t allowed to use violence, or is it “me”?

The whole family went out, and “that kid” got a wooden “Green Dragon Crescent Blade.” A perfect chance to test you, dear adults, and see what you really think.

I presented myself as the most gentle, understanding, and obedient older sister. I quietly drew and read by the side of the sword-wielding “that kid,” frowning and softly protesting when I felt threatened, “You’re going to hit me!”

I carefully maintained a smile, made no mistakes, left no room for blame, showing the most aggrieved, low-key, harmless, and accommodating demeanour, patiently waiting for “that kid” to hit me on the head.

The first time, I cried, drawing adults over, and you said I got too close. The second time, I cried, drawing adults over, and you said I was overreacting.

See, I figured it out. It's not that violence isn't allowed; it's that "only I" am not allowed to use violence. In this house, everyone can hit me or yell at me, but I can't. I'm the older sister; I'm a girl; I must behave.

I won't.

I started fighting back. When adults weren't around, I laughed at "that kid" for being short, forbade him from touching my stuff or entering my room, pushed him, hit him, and yelled at him.

"That kid" wasn't stupid; he'd run to tattle to the adults when they got back, unable to beat me, letting the adults deal with me.

One day, while the adults were home, "that kid" smashed a model I'd just finished assembling right in front of me. I could read the smile on his face; he was saying, "The adults are home; what can you do about it?"

He thought I was helpless.

I took a deep breath, smiled at "that kid," pushed him to the ground, pulled off his shirt, bit hard into his bare back, then stood up to hit him with toys, kicked him, scratched him with my nails… until the screaming adults rushed over and pulled me off "that kid."

And I got beaten. Badly. For not being kind to my own sibling. But I was so happy. It was one of the best days I've ever had.

...

Miller (2008) believes that children, when they're hurt, can't express their anger. They're too vulnerable, too dependent on the very people who hurt them. And so they suppress it. They bury it deep inside, and eventually, they forget. But forgetting doesn't mean healing. It just means the trauma lives on in ways we can't see, ways we can't understand.

I believe that, as children, we all tried to resist at first. But we were in such a disadvantaged position that every act of resistance was temporary and often seen as the child's problem.

Sometimes I wonder if that early trauma is what makes us keep following the tradition.

Deviation

I resonate deeply when reading Alice Miller (2005), because she regards parental physical punishment as abuse, and requests obedience towards parents. She said, if children who are abused aren't given the chance to confront their pain, they grow up indifferent to the suffering of others. Worse, they repeat the cycle. They become parents who hurt their own children. Miller (2008) talks about how denying trauma makes it impossible to recognise it, to reflect on it. It makes it impossible for children to speak out, to say, "This is wrong."

I see that in how foot-binding and daughter aversion persist. How could we expect mothers and fathers to see what they're doing when they've been conditioned to believe that this is how it's supposed to be? It's terrifying, really, to think that a mother could bind her daughter's feet or look at her son as her saviour without ever questioning why.

I wonder if that's why it's so hard for daughters to speak out, to accuse the very system that oppresses them. Because we've been silenced, we've been asked to simply obey, never ask questions. Therefore, to survive, we had to teach ourselves to deny the pain, to forget it, to accept it. I wonder if we learned to believe that we deserve it, because it's too painful to believe that we don't, but we can do nothing about it.

Women were uneducated and were locked up at home. (Hung 2017) That makes the bar of reflecting our experiences even higher, I believe. I keep thinking about how son preference is still so ingrained in parts of East Asia (Cho Nam-Joo 2020). It's not just about overt discrimination. It's in the way we're taught to see ourselves. It's in the way we're valued—or not valued—from the moment we're born in every moment of our daily lives by the people we trust the most, who we rely on for survival, for both boys and girls, but girls bear more, because we witness other girls disappearing around us. Perhaps not how they are removed, but we know what happened to them. And it's mentioned and happening in our everyday life, even in my time. I think that's even more threatening than slicing. The scars are not on our feet anymore, but they're still there, deep inside, shaping how we see ourselves and our place in the world.

Du (2022) writes about how the body belongs to the parents. How do they have the right to decide whether their children live or die? That's the level of control we're talking about, and I still feel the impact of this mindset at play in the present day. If we disobey, if we rebel, we're not just disrespecting our parents. We're challenging the very order of things. And if we're not filially obedient, what kind of example are we setting for our own children? How will our children treat us in the future? It's this endless cycle, where rebellion is punished and obedience is rewarded.

I am wondering how you are imagining "rebellion" and "resisting" right now. Let me clarify for you, the definition of rebellion is simply "disagreement." And I am not sure if I need to quote Du here because it's still the same as when I grew up. We get beaten up for disagreeing with our parents. We are seen as bad children, as someone who needs to be punished, simply because we disagree. Obedience is the basic criterion of being an acceptable person. Under this system, both men and women, from the moment they are sons and daughters, must bend their souls to survive in this society.

Ahmed (2010, 2017) discusses "deviation" and "being directed" in her books and argues that happiness is deferred. As long as there is hope, people can continue to believe that happiness will come, as long as we keep on pursuing the same way, by living the same life. I resonate with the logic of it, but found the levels of power struggle quite different. She described being directed as being in traffic. I love it because it's such a description that I can feel. And precisely because of that feeling, I can realise the difference between our societies.

I used to have recurring nightmares of being chased by a whole city of zombies. That's closer to how I feel about the risk of deviation. When we try to be different, to cast out this kind of relational burden and expectation in our society, the whole world will come to actively drag us back into our place.

Both Du (2022) and Moskowitz (2001) noted that, in traditional Chinese families, mothers are empowered in the domestic sphere. Du (2022) also points out that the traditional concept that *parents are never wrong* and *it's human nature for parents to love their children* helps make parental power untouchable. Yu Chian (2024) also said, "Our society, due to an incomplete understanding of motherhood, holds an idealised notion of maternal love, that every woman possesses it, and that it is the most noble and kind form of love. This very imagination, however, makes us turn a blind eye to certain truths."

Their statements align closelyd with my own experience andobservationsn.

In the Facebook group, there have been several cases where daughters were brave enough to ask for help after being severely beaten, only to be told, "You must have done something wrong to deserve that," and then sent back home to apologise to their mother.

When a husband struggles to deal with conflict between his wife and his mother, people often tell him, "You can always get a new wife, but you only have one mother." In other words, the mother's opinion always comes first.

When my father suggested buying me a new car in the US because it was my first time overseas and he didn't want me to deal with the trouble of a second-hand one, my mother suddenly started screaming hysterically. She shouted things like, "Second-hand cars are the best kind of cars in the world. What's so special about her that she can't drive a used one?"

In the end, my father apologised to me.

I told him I understood.

I felt a wave of dizziness, started to feel like throwing up, and suddenly, there were so many voices in my head.

Very Noisy Thoughts...

And I thought we were liberated when schools and education were brought in. Even though it was brought in by the Japanese.

But was it really liberation?

Hung (2017) said very clearly. When foot-binding was banned, families needed a new way to "brand" their daughters so they could marry well. So education becomes their new brand, the new competition. The curriculum also needs to be helpful for marriage.

Now, women must be both smart and sexy.

Liberation? Or just a new form of control?

Yes, there's no blood, no screaming, no bones breaking.

But aren't we still crippled?

Our souls are still crippled.

It's been over a hundred years since foot-binding was officially banned in Taiwan.

But something else took its place.

The outfit of daughter aversion changed—but the ghost remains.

We are a collective of people who wear different clothes but carry the same wounds.

...

I think ma and ba's marriage didn't work out because they were both too filial. Too obedient.

She cared too much about what her mother thought;

He cared too much about what his father taught.

No matter how overwhelmed she was, she would do all the chores herself, because otherwise her mother would criticise her; No matter how good he is at maintaining the

environment, he doesn't do it, because his father told him not to take over women's responsibilities.

My brother once said, "Responsible people will have children." And when I asked what that meant, he acted like it was self-evident. I see this everywhere in our culture. When people can't explain something, they assume it must be right. They don't think to ask if we ever really processed it. Words like "polite," "respect," "responsibility"...we carry them like sacred truths.

But they're just unexamined myths.

They are the proof we've been well-trained in obedience, in filial piety.

...

Lu (2010) wrote that all the rituals meant to please ancestors were believed to directly affect the family's welfare. Ancestors could reward or punish as they pleased. Only sons were allowed to perform these rituals. That's why daughters held no importance in the family line.

Lee (2023), in *Haunted Modernities*, wrote about parents who couldn't break tradition to bury their daughters in the family grave. They were too filial.

So filial that they refused to welcome their daughters home.

They would rather *bwa bwei*, begging the gods to take their daughters in, than break with custom.

And I start to yell—

Isn’t this all just an extension of extreme parental power?

Why are they so obedient?

Why can’t these mothers feel what their daughters feel?

Why can’t they stand beside them, even *just this once*?

Why can’t they *do something*?

…

… yells back—

There are reasons for that!! Women were uneducated!

Think about it.

You’re uneducated. You can’t explain anything.

Your feet are bound. Your children run everywhere.

You’re the only one responsible for them.

If children misbehave, your mother-in-law, grandmother-in-law, and the whole household will blame you.

You'll be laughed at.

So you hit your children.

That's the fastest way to discipline them.

And you can't fight the tradition because you have no knowledge, no power.

See?

That's how it works. They've tried their best to be good parents.

It doesn't mean they were bad people!

...

I scream—

"Fine!

At the very least, give the younger generation space to feel.

Space to be upset.

Space to step back.

Stop judging people by how they treat their parents.

Only now can I freely say, 'I'm not doing anything on Mother's Day.' Because ma is dead.

Every time the day approaches, everyone in the Facebook group starts screaming.

If we lie, we feel guilty.

If we tell the truth, people lecture us about being grateful.

'What a pity. That girl's a good person, but doesn't know how to get along with her parents.'

If you can't keep your mouth shut, I suggest you listen to Mills (2009) and go deal with your own fucking experiences with violence and aggression. Don't come and tell other people how to feel about theirs!"

...

"Why are you so mad at me?" .... asks.

"Because you fucking sound like those people in my life, telling me to be more sensible, to be more considerate, to think more about others. **Where. Is. The. Room. For. Me?"** I roar.

Chapter 4-4: The Haunted Lake

...The Lake...

A sudden gust of wind sweeps by, blowing dust into my eyes and making me turn my face away. As I brush the hair off my cheek, I realise the scenery around me has changed. We're no longer at school. We're standing by the edge of a vast lake.

I feel uncomfortable the moment I recognise the lake.

It is enormous, very deep, situated directly in front of a dark green hill. The hill feels as if it is guarding something, emanating a strong, oppressive presence. The mist that drifts by from time to time feels like the breath of the hill itself. It's warm and sticky, and I can feel it slowly settling on my face, little by little.

... is still spitting everything out:

"Have you ever, even just a little, thought that maybe you're also responsible? That maybe other people really meant well, and you were just too arrogant to listen, too proud to reflect?

What's so wrong with respecting your parents? With respect to your mother? Didn't she give birth to you? Didn't she provide a stable, sustainable life? So now she wants something in return. So what?

Is it really so outrageous that she expects a little back?

You were always a difficult child. Always angry. Always stubborn. Always self-centred. All daughters help their mothers. Why should you be the exception?

Of course, ma treats other people better. They're grateful. They appreciate every little thing she does. You? You're just greedy. Always wanting more.

You always say you're the only one who sees ma's dark side. But what if it's the same with her? What if she were the only one who saw A-ma's dark side, and you never believed her? Is it possible that A-ma was kind to you, but not to her? Just like Ma is kind to others, but not to you?

How would you even know? Did you ever ask them?

You think you're so smart, assuming everything. That's precisely why it's dangerous to send girls to school. They don't even know how to use knowledge correctly. They only use it to go against their parents. They think they can outsmart everyone.

You're just a coward. You didn't even dare to ask. You didn't dare to find out!"

"You emphasise his sacrifices so strongly, as if to say that by providing a child with the necessities of survival and cultivating their ability to live, a parent is then allowed—occasionally, sometimes, even often—to inflict violence, control, or harm. And I'm supposed to weigh the good against the bad, to let go of past grievances. But may I ask: if someone repeatedly does things that make a child feel unloved—or even deeply hurt—yet claims to still hold love inside, then what kind of love is that, really? (Yu Chian 2024)" I burst out, "How much more do I have to do? Why is it okay for her to do nothing? Why is there no space for me to give up? Why is there no room for me to not care whether I have a good relationship with my mother?"

///'s voice breaks the glare between … and me.

“A-ma never said anything bad about ma.

Yes, she was traditional. She believed women should take care of all the household chores so their husbands wouldn’t have to worry about anything at home. So naturally, she expected my mother to do the same.

But she never criticised ma in front of me. She never used their stories to shape how I saw my mother the way ma did.

She wasn’t like WanHwa A-ma, either, who used to mock every single woman in the family with ma. I never saw her use relationships as a weapon. That’s why we believe she’s not as evil as ma described.”

"No. A-ma never did. But I did." I said, painfully.

“I do that. I tell my child stories about my mother-in-law and want him to feel the way I do. I want him to be upset by things she does, just like me. And what's worse is, I am better at my mom. I am very good at this. I trigger my son's emotions all the time.”

"But that's different." /// replies, "You did it to help him understand her whole personality.”

“You only said this because you don’t want to admit I’ve grown into the same kind of disgusting adult.” I look /// directly into her eyes.

"Ahahahahahaha!" ... bursts into sharp laughter.

"Oh wow, who would've thought? After all that, it turns out you're no better than anyone else. And you had the nerve to criticise others as if you were somehow superior. Wow. So this is the real you."

...

The lake's surface begins to grow restless. Waves rise in slow, steady surges, each one bringing with it a stickier, heavier wind. A faint, warm stench begins to creep into the air. Metallic, damp, and quietly rotten.

I start to feel dizzy.

I know. I've always known.

I'm no better. I'm jealous. I hate women. I brush off kindness. I see people struggle, and I choose not to respond. I tell half the story just to convince myself I'm the better one. I am cruel. I am aggressive. I am mean. I am disgusting.

"That's because you were powerless. You were left to deal with everything on your own. Of course, you need to fight back in some ways, to protect yourself in some ways. It's not ideal, but you're a child. It's not your fault." /// argues.

"Really? Try saying that to the girl who pushed her brother off the balcony. We all know it wasn't her fault. I'm so fucking sure *she* knows that too. But does it help? No. We already know what's coming. She'll be marked forever. People will call her a monster. And the whispers will never stop.

"The neighbour may not need to say that, but... she's scary, isn't she? What's with that child?"

“But you never did.”

“I did something else, and you know that.”

…

A year after I was bullied and isolated by all the girls in class, some of them started to come to me. They would come to say how difficult it is to be friends with Yu, then ask if we could be friends. Of course, I said yes.

Then I started to notice that my “new” girlfriends were criticising and mocking Yu. I got curious, asked some questions, and they began to say more. Then it became a kind of routine. At lunch time, girls would come around me and begin to tell me the kind of “miserable life” they had when they were friends with Yu. And I learned how to ask questions, how to poke, how to do a face so that everyone got more and more excited about sharing Yu’s “dark stories,” and I was simply their loyal audience.

I was doing the exact same thing. And I did it better, did it worse. This time, all the boys and girls were next to me. She had no one but one friend. Another year later, a boy spontaneously raised his hand in the class assembly time, asking Yu to apologise to me in front of everyone. I had a complete victory.

…

“But you never initiate anything!” /// shouts.

“What's the difference? I didn't help, either. I allowed things to happen. I smiled in encouragement. I looked completely innocent because deep down I knew it was the best way to get revenge without dirtying my own hands. I am way better than those girls. And above all, I didn’t even keep my promise to be a good mother.”

/// didn't reply.

“I promised I would never become the same kind of adult, but I failed. Didn’t I?” I shouted.

The waves grow heavier and heavier. Beneath ...'s hysterical laughter, a low roar begins to rise.

I feel water splashing against my face, thick with the smell of mud and weeds.

...Justice...

That evening, after dinner, I was lounging on the sofa, and Toma was walking back and forth behind me, holding a detective novel in Mandarin from the bookshelf. Just hearing his footsteps made me want to scream. I knew he wanted me to read to him, but I was hesitating about how to ask. The longer he paced behind me, the more I wanted to pull my hair out of my head.

What the hell is wrong with this child? What's this? Just standing there and expecting someone to read to him? What's there to wait? For me to ask what he wants? So, all he has to do is pull out a book, and I have to follow through? Why should I be the one to act first? To ask what he wants? Is he too gorgeous to open his mouth to make a request?

On the one hand, I could ignore him, pretend I didn't see him, letting him hesitate long enough until he ran out of time and needed to go to bed. That would teach him a lesson to speak up sooner next time. But on the other hand, I very much wanted to read with him and very much cared that if we kept wasting time, there would be no opportunity left. I knew how much he loved reading with me. And I did, too. I loved reading to him.

Either option was fine, to be honest. They simply served a different purpose, depending on whether I chose to parent him or to have an engaging time with him.

But that day, something sharp was scratching the back of my head. Scratching deep. I couldn't bear to listen to the footsteps a second longer, nor could I sweep my thoughts and feelings away and summon my loving motherly side to take over. I snapped, with a growling voice.

“What exactly do you think you're doing, standing there?” I managed to stop myself from spitting out “like an idiot” at the end of the sentence.

“Um… Mom, do you want to read a book…?”

“If you want me to read, say it! Do you think I can read your mind???”

So Toma anxiously ran over, and I roughly opened the book, almost tore a page. Not long after I started reading, Toma began to play with his toes. I glared at him and asked if he was even listening. Then he asked me a question at the wrong time, when I felt completely interrupted. I lashed out at him again and questioned his intention.

We didn't get to finish the book. I acted like a boiling kettle the whole time, spitting fumes and fumes of burning air at Toma. He ran away in tears, looking terribly hurt.

A strong sense of guilt surged within me, but was quickly swept aside by a feeling of righteousness. I will not apologise this time! I simply won't. It’s his own fault. He should apologise to ME! Who told him to act so presumptuously? Didn't even ask if I was free to read to him. Not even paying attention to the book! This child is totally spoiled!

But you're just hiding your true intention behind parental guidance. If your true goal was to guide him to correct such behaviour, you only needed to say, “I hope you ask me if I

have time first." That would solve everything. Even if he didn't remember it this time, after a few more reminders, he would eventually develop this habit. It wasn't a difficult parenting challenge at all. You've done this a million times. But you chose not to respond that way. You didn't want to. You rejected it. It was never about teaching and nurturing him. You wanted something else.

True.

It's justice. I wanted justice. Where the hell is that fucking justice???

I resent that young children are always accommodated, always pampered, and always get away with everything. The discipline is never implemented. No matter how I protested, no matter how much I explained the importance of fairness, I was dismissed. I desperately want these children to get their comeuppance someday, for justice to be served someday, to show them that they can't always get their way. They need to experience setbacks, face closed doors and rejections, and put others before their selfish minds!!

I've waited so long to become an adult, finally with the power to set strict boundaries, to set them straight!

He is your own child, don't do this. The voice appeared again.

Don't do what? Why not? Didn't I promise myself to teach selfish children a lesson when I grew up? Show them they're not the centre of the world? Didn't we agree to be merciless adults to enforce justice and fairness? What are you doing now? Why can't I do it to my own child? Have you changed, too? Become one of those disgusting adults who can't tell right from wrong? Are you going to cater to him in everything like everyone else did?

I finally realised that the "children" I referred to were actually just one person.

My brother.

I always thought having a son was my fortune. My relationship with my mother was too complicated, full of anger and resentment. If I had a daughter, I feared it would be hard to escape that tragic cycle. But with a son, I could build a parent-child relationship from a new perspective, take a different path. Unexpectedly, when I devoted myself to my child, it felt, in my heart's eyes, as if a new brother were placed before all my needs, as if the nightmare of my childhood were being replayed.

There's a type of child raised to nourish other, more critical children. Whenever that more important child needed something, my things didn't belong to me. Before that more important child, I was just a tool. I finally understood why I fought so hard to break free, why I got furious when my personal belongings were touched without permission. I just wanted to be seen as a human, equal to my brother. I didn't even need to be favoured. I just wanted to own something that truly belongs to me. Everything of mine, my time, my thoughts, my hope, my possessions, my talent, my worth, won't just be taken to nourish others, like food served on the table which the guests didn't even appreciate.

That summer, a student of ma's took my brother and me to learn how to use a traditional camera. It's something I've always felt passionate about. I never dreamt of this opportunity.

The year after the photography competition, my brother was admitted to the best high school through special admission. For many years, I analysed in my mind what "first place in the photography competition" meant on his resume. It was a terrifying abyss. I didn't want it to be a big bonus because then the pain of something being forcibly taken away would be deeper, but I also didn't want it to add nothing, because then it felt like what I valued had no worth at all.

I was stuck between those thoughts, climbing out of one only to fall into another, endlessly.

A swell of emotions flooded my body, mostly a deep weariness, as if complaining to me: “Please, I finally managed to fall asleep and forgot everything. You just had to wake me up, didn’t you?”

You had to. If you didn’t, you would continue to pass on unresolved hatred and anger to your child. We promised!! We promised we would never do that!!!

But I was so tired, so awfully tired. Why was I even brought to this world if I was never wanted? Would it have been much easier if I had been aborted? I wouldn't have to try so hard just to stop myself from hurting others. Will I ever stop responding to the scars and start making conscious choices? Will I ever stop disgusting myself? Will there be an end to this path? Is there anyone down this path ahead of me?

There's only silence and darkness.

...

When I read something that's “spot-on,” my breath breaks, immediately followed by a deep, body-shaking chest pain, as if a knife just stabbed into my heart or, as if the knife just turned around in my heart to create a hole in it.

I would panic, try to breathe, but it would fall short because of the pain. I felt locked by the pain. I cannot breathe because initially, breathing causes pain. And then I’ll feel cold. And then there will be an extra itching and burning sensation that emerges around the pain. I still cannot breathe. I'll force myself to stop whatever I was reading to stop the feelings. I would close the book or the computer screen.

The itch, the burn, the pain remains. I feel them more when I breathe the air in. They now have my full attention. I breathe carefully, to keep myself alive, and also keep the pain bearable. How did you know breathing works, Mum? I learned that from dealing with my period.

I see it now. Everyone is here. All of the women.

You've come to the right place, my dear. Welcome to join us.

That's the message I received from the pain. I've come to the right place.

They seem to all have been shut behind the same door, in the same room. The girls who were killed before birth, immediately killed after birth; the surviving girls who were mistreated in the family, the grown-up girls who continue to, or refuse to, mistreat new generations in the family.

The sensation descended. Now I feel a deep, heated pain slowly embedded in my stomach. It now hurts more when I breathe out. I wait for that heat to die out, like watching the dying coals in the fireplace. It's still red, still moving and making sounds, but it's dying. When it's dead, I can see what's there.

It smells disgusting. It smells sticky, damp, and rotten. This is how I smell.

I begin to walk into the lake.

"Stop! What are you doing?" /// grabs me by my arm.

"She's returning to where she belongs!" ... drag /// back.

...Doomed...

Justice.

That must be the secret behind the long life of foot-binding and daughter aversion.

Justice.

But not the kind that builds a more equal world. Not the kind that rights wrongs.

It's the justice that grows out of pain. The kind that festers when the harm we were told was *normal* didn't happen to others. That unbearable mix of grief and rage when we realise we were the only ones who had to endure it. And no one saw. No one cared.

There was a time Toma was sick. I took good care of him. I held him, comforted him, did everything a loving mother would. I thought I was doing great. Nurturing. Present.

But then I heard his grandparents ask if he had recovered.

And something in me shattered.

How?

How does he get so much? How does it all come to him so easily?

I remembered the one time I asked for help. Because I was so ill, I thought I was dying. My body was breaking down. I could barely move. My ma worked ten minutes away. After I called her, she came home eight hours later.

Eight hours.

And when she came in, she said she had to return a borrowed wok to A-ma downstairs. Another three hours passed.

By the time she came back, I was trembling. I asked for medicine. She threw the pills and a cup of water across the table. I had to slide down from the couch and crawl to get them.

It wasn't her who worried about me. It was my then-boyfriend, now husband, calling every eight hours from the military to make sure I was still alive. My ma never once came into my room.

That was the day I understood how little I meant to her.

But it wasn't until my own son got sick that I realised just how deep that wound went.

At dinner, while my husband checked in gently on our son, something in me snapped. I slammed my bowl down.

"You're just spoiling him. He's fine!"

I stormed off and collapsed in tears.

That scream inside me had never stopped.

It's not that daughters are treated miserably because we're "money-losing goods." That's just an easy excuse someone found in tradition. The truth is, I believe, mothers need

their daughters to stay broken. To stay small. Otherwise, how can they keep telling themselves their own suffering made sense?

That *Jung-nan-ching niu* is never gone. It's still fucking alive in my blood.

If that's how I react just from seeing my son being cared for, what would happen if I had a daughter?

...

And please stop telling me it's not my fault.

Because knowing it's not my fault makes it hurt even more.

If I had a choice, I'd rather it *were* my fault. If it's my fault, I can fix it. I can do something. I can say sorry. I can make it right. But if it's *not* my fault—then what? What am I supposed to do with that?

There's nothing I can change, is there?

And if it's not my fault, then maybe it's not Ma's fault either. Not WanHwa A-ma's. Perhaps none of us was the cause. Maybe we were all just hurt by something too big, too invisible.

But if that's true, then what's left for us? Just fate? Just the quiet sentence of being born into this? Is that all we get? Just this, passed down, over and over?

...One Day You'll Understand...

We were all told, "One day you'll understand." I am so scared. Because I am afraid that one day I really will understand. That would be a curse for me. I am pleased to hear that many people say that, when they have a child of their own, they finally realise their parents were wrong. And I am one of them.

I am furious. How could you do this to a little girl? I needed you, and I rely on you. I cannot change my gender. I existed this way. It was all of you who guessed it wrong, and you decided to take them. You ignored the fact that all these are simply guesses and decided to take on the guess. You created this illusion and then were disappointed by it. It was never me. It was never me who did anything.

But you. You could not bear the thought of accusing your mother, to be angry at her, to be angry at all the people who told you the wrong prediction, to be angry at yourself for taking the prediction, you decided to take it on me. The baby who did nothing wrong, simply existing. How is that fair?

I don"t even know what I am angry about right now. There are way too many things that pisses me off. I hated you and all of the adults in my life because you were all covering each other. When people asked me ridiculous questions, you didn't help me. You waited there for me to deal with it alone for a while, then criticised me as if I did it wrong. You never taught me anything; you simply asked me to "know" what the right way to behave, to respond, and to embarrass you less is.

I am so full of anger. Most of the time when I was with an adult, I tried to be fair. I tried very hard to take your views into account. I tried very hard to see whether or not A-ma is as bad as you said. I thought about maybe I was brought up by A-ma, so I've become accustomed to her. That's why I've been so "biased." So many people said there's no way to tell what's right from what's wrong, who's right and who's wrong, because people always take sides and are always biased. I cannot fully explain, but I disagree.

But it's not fair! Why do I have to do all the work when you never even look at me?

...

The whole lake started to scream.

It’s a terrifying sight. Tens of thousands of arms, heads, and bodies thrash on the surface of the water. Long hair tangles and coils, limbs pull at one another, mouths tear into each other, unleashing a chorus of muffled cries and piercing, maniacal laughter. I believe “I saw all the women who ghosted this document.” (Ferdinand 2017)

More thoughts flood into my mind as I descend into the lake, feeling the coldness covering all my body.

...

So eventually, I’ve become the same. I swore to myself I would become a different kind of adult, but I didn’t. I didn’t.

I cannot shut that voice in me. I could not abandon my conscience and follow that voice, either. I became something the worst. I got stuck in the middle. I am half zombie, half human. I am a monster.

I disgust myself.

No, you don't understand. You don’t know how many times I wanted something to happen to me. I couldn’t do anything for myself. I can't kill myself because I don't really want to die. I can't hurt myself because if people see me self-harm, I am doomed. I will never be able to be taken seriously. That's a path I can never take. But I don't know how to

live. I wish there were a wind so strong it would blow me into pieces. I wish there could be a car suddenly out of control and

I don’t know why I lived. I don’t know why I was even brought to the world if nobody cares if I exist.

I tried walking in heavy rain and got sick. No one takes care of me anyway. But I was so fucking healthy, I always recovered after one night's sleep.

The lake speaks.

You can let go... Say it. You knew it all along.

I was never loved, was I?

A feeling, several feelings and rising in my mind. They felt very familiar, and I could feel myself having more feelings towards these evoked feelings. I feel exhausted. Felt my eyes hot, fast running, exactly the mode I was in when I was in my childhood. The stickiness, anger, in silence. I need to write about this. I know. I need to write about this.

It’s about the most conditional kind of love in this world. You have no right to live if you were the wrong gender. And we all witnessed and shared the pain and fear together, living or dead. I see so many muddy colours mixing together, so much hatred and anger entangled. She said I need to make art to keep myself sane. Now I understand what that means. So many denials. So many rejections. So much pain. I can only repeat the word “Pain”. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain.

I cannot express how painful it is, but I have to. I have to write this. I'm the only one who can speak the truth at this moment. This opportunity is in my hands, and I'm not going to waste it. Why is there so much stress in giving Mother's Day presents? Because if I don’t

give anything, she will tell everyone I'm an ungrateful daughter, and people I care about will believe her and come ask me to be filial. But if I give something, she treats it as trash. It is those thousands of needles that stab you in the heart. In the end, not all the feelings remain; only pain and tiredness hurt.

And there's no way to pull the needles out because they do not exist.

We all live. We all go to school. Parents have the right to give their money to any child they want. So, stop complaining. It doesn't exist anymore. We are good. Everything is good. Let's move on.

How? How do we move on without admitting any sacrifices? How do I raise my child if I still look at this world through the lens of my pain? I have so much. I have resolved the anger toward my child, but he did not cause any of that. It's not fair to him, just as it's not fair to me to be treated like that.

You're doomed when you're born a girl. Look at your other female siblings; they're not even given a chance to live. They're not even given their own name. They're born as tools to summon more boys to the family. So, watch it. If you can't do that, you don't deserve anything. You should thank us for saving your life. We're good parents. I am a good mother. I did nothing wrong. I did everything as told. So shut up and obey. And be grateful. Be grateful that you're alive. You should be thankful even if you're treated worse than animals because you were not even supposed to be in this world in the first place.

Again and again, you see the double standard in every aspect of your life. Your expression, tone, and body language are different. He's the gold and I'm the trash, and there's nothing I can do about it. There's no support around me as a person. No celebrations around me for doing well. But when you see what I have, you take it, and you give it to him. My talent, my pride, my everything. In the end, I should never shine. I need to be lame to avoid things being taken for me, to maintain myself without being torn apart, to be used as food to bring him up. And you don't care. No wonder I don't want to go back. It's a place to wish me dead if I were not contributing to the family's gold. I don't know how to

map my emotions. What am I angry about? What should I be angry at? If everyone is forced, then everyone should be forgiven?

...Love...

What does it feel like—to be truly loved by your family? What does it feel like—to express yourself freely without fearing you'll be abandoned, forgotten, mocked, or hated? I used to think something was wrong with me—that I couldn't remember what that felt like because I was broken from the start. But the truth is, I never knew. I never had the chance to learn.

I feel such shame.

It's the kind of shame that feels like living an entire life, only to suddenly realise I'm a damaged person—and that someone else did the damage. Half my face has been destroyed, so disfigured it's unrecognisable. And yet, I walked around in the world without knowing—shamelessly believing I looked just like everyone else.

Yes, you could say it wasn't my fault. But what does that change? I still have to live with this half-destroyed face. I still have to carry the consequences of someone else's wrongdoing—alone.

If I could, I would love to know: What kind of person would I have become if that part of me hadn't been destroyed?

But there's no *if* anymore.

Even if I can find some comfort by becoming the kind of mother I once needed—by giving my child what I never had— The things that never happened to me... will never happen. They are lost forever. Even if I can find some comfort now by being the kind of mother I once longed for, giving my child what I never had, the things that never happened

to me will never happen. And I cannot lie to myself, every time I see a little girl with her family, my chest burns with jealousy. How do I admit I will never have another child because I am so scared that if I have a daughter, I will strangle her with my own hands.

I was reminded of that little girl's eyes when I saw her at the poolside. The eyes so desperately wanted her mother's eyes to meet hers. A poem by one of the daughters in a Facebook group (Daughters Raised in Son-Preferred Families, 2024) resonates so badly it hurts:

...Daughters...

You say that because my brothers, when they get married, will continue the family lineage.

You say that because I am a daughter, I will eventually marry into another family, so I will never get a share.

You gave birth to me, but cannot kill me, so every investment must yield a return. I strive, I bleed, I provide you with everything, hoping to redeem myself.

I work so hard, while he enjoys the fruits of my labour. I cried for a long time before I finally woke up.

It turns out that the things you don't give, no matter how hard I try, I cannot obtain. It turns out that from the start, I was never considered a person.

Since I am ultimately an outsider,

Always taking from me to supplement himself. Since I am ultimately an outsider, please let go and give me freedom.

Because I am a daughter,

Simply because I am a daughter,

Because I am an outsider.

An orphan.

(by Maggie Liu, with her permission)

...

I finally can see things more clearly, but only to see I am way too late.

From the beginning, I told K I was a bad person and asked him to think it through. Everyone has negative thoughts, Jack said. I don't think Jack understood; I felt somewhat relieved but also uneasy, so I would always find opportunities to "warn" K.

After watching the movie *Confessions*, I looked into Jack's eyes and told him: You know, I would do it. If someone treated my child like that, I would kill them.

After watching the movie *Gone Girl*, I looked into K's eyes and told him: Amy didn't hesitate when she slit Desi's throat—I could do it. If someone threatened me, I could do it.

K always laughed and said, “So scary.”

So he still didn’t understand. No wonder—no one can see the images in my mind. I look “normal,” clean, just like Lucifer seems human. Even if I tell others that I smash people with chairs in my dreams, they probably think of a *South Park* comedic scene, just like when Lucifer tells people his job is to torment sinners in hell, and others believe he’s speaking metaphorically.

People like me because they don’t see the broken side of me or hear my honest thoughts. You know, I couldn’t hide it this time, could I? I was caught; I was heard. My emotions are so destructive that once they get out of control, the sky falls and the earth cracks. I remember small grudges, harbouring them for years until they rot and stink. Once uncovered, I become enraged, wanting to tear the child apart. Are you scared? Of course, you are, right? You’d be petrified like Linda, wouldn’t you? Maybe tomorrow morning, I’ll find a note saying they can’t stand someone like me anymore. A child staying with me will die sooner or later.

It’s okay; it’s nobody’s fault. I’m just too terrifying.

Ah, I’m so tired. I thought what I remembered was painful, but what I don’t remember is even more painful. What’s the point of trying so hard? What did I think I could change or achieve?

I am the devil himself, Lucifer says.

My heart is dark, I say.

Everything I touch, I ruin, Lucifer says.

Yes, even the child, I say.

…

I have failed. Completely.

There is no way for me to cast away this generational curse. I deserve to stay here with everyone.

I see that now. I'll be obedient and follow. I will not betray anyone anymore.

I let go of the strength in my body, and I can feel hands dragging my clothes, pulling me down…

Fighting For The Way Back

I suddenly feel my collar yank back—and the next second—*whoosh*—I'm dragged out of the water.

I'm too stunned to react. I just stare at ///, wide-eyed, speechless.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" /// screams right into my face.

"…Huh?"

"You wanna go down there? Stay with *them* forever?" /// points at the shifting mass of heads and limbs, inching closer, groaning with that sick, hollow sound.

“Because I’m a failure,” I whisper. “I tried for years, and still—nothing’s changed. I’m no different from them.”

“Pull yourself together, you fucking idiot!”

Her fury explodes so suddenly that I stare at her in disbelief. Behind ///, the ghosts flail and shriek like special effects made to echo her rage.

“We’re not here to *join* the curse, you fool! Have you ever laid a finger on your child? No. Have you used those ‘skills’ you learned to hurt anyone? Not once since Ma died. Have you reflected? Apologised? Yes. Have you loved—*truly* loved—your child? Yes. If you can’t see the difference, then yes, you *will* be stuck here forever!”

/// turns to face the creeping ghosts.

“This is the girl I’ve been protecting my entire life. You don’t get to take her. I won’t let you.”

“I’m sorry,” I sob. “I’m sorry, I always need you.”

“If you’re gonna talk nonsense, save it till we’re safe,” /// snaps. Then, scanning the scene,“We’re here to end this curse, not be swallowed by it. I didn’t let them take you before. They won’t take you now!”

“There,” she yells, pointing, “if you want someone, take *her*!”

/// grabs … by the arm and hurls her into the lake.

The lake screams loudly and suddenly, and the surface erupts, swelling into a monstrous wave, like a sea of ten thousand souls crashing forward.

“Hold tight. They’re coming.”

/// pulls my arms around her waist and clasps my hands in hers.

“I’m so sorry….I—”

Before I can finish the sentence, a powerful current slams into us, rushing up my nose, into my ears. My balance vanishes. My whole body yanks backwards.

But my hand still cling to ///.

Then, everything fades.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

I woke up. I was still sitting under the shade. Some other climbers walk past me, wiping their necks with a white towel. I nod at them. The nod back.

I feel empty. Empty and detached. I am a bit scared to move. I don’t know if I am still me. I am not sure if I have really just visited all those places and experienced everything with different parts of myself.

I sit there for a long time. Everything was very quiet except for the cicadas singing.

Cicadas. My ears are ringing.

The warm and wet afternoon air rises from the soil as it begins to heat. The cold, sandy touch of the rock under my hands draws my attention.

Thoughts begin to creep into my mind.

Daughter Aversion Is Child Abuse

I've been wanting to say that daughter aversion is a form of child abuse that's been normalised as "culture" and "tradition" for centuries, under the name of "parental discipline" and social expectation of a "filial child/girl." Now I feel I have built enough foundation to say it out loud.

I'll state it again. Daughter aversion is a form of normalised child abuse.

Miller (2008) reminds us that all children are born to grow, to develop, to live, to love, and, out of self-preservation, to be able to clearly express their needs and emotions. However, the ways daughters are treated under daughter aversion actively undermine every one of these capacities. Girls are not encouraged to grow freely, to express their needs, or to trust their emotions; instead, they are trained to suppress themselves in order to become the second mother of the family.

Bell hooks (1999) makes the ethical implications of this impossible to ignore. If, as she writes, "love is the will to nurture our own and another's spiritual growth," then "we cannot claim to love if we are hurtful and abusive. Love and abuse cannot coexist." Abuse and neglect are not unfortunate side effects of love. They are its opposite. But in cultures shaped by daughter aversion, harm toward girls is routinely framed as care, discipline, or sacrifice. Because it is called love, it is rarely recognised as abuse.

This is precisely what makes daughter aversion such a dangerous form of child abuse: it is not only harmful, but morally disguised. It is not simply a passive preference or cultural bias. It is an active system of harm that denies daughters recognition, safety, and unconditional love. Because it is embedded within moral frameworks — filial piety, family honour, tradition — it becomes nearly invisible to those inside it. What would be called abuse in one context is reframed as "teaching," "discipline," or even "love" in another.

As Ahmed writes, "because you are a girl, we can do this to you." I want to rephrase that slightly to better capture the system I grew up within: **because we are girls, we can do this to us.** This is how gendered generational abuse is sustained, through women who have themselves been denied love, autonomy, and recognition, and who, in turn, struggle to allow their daughters what they were never given. As Chesler (2010) observes, "A woman who is not permitted to love herself will, in turn, refuse to allow her daughters to have what she herself has been denied."

For this reason, I agree with Chesler's insistence that "it is dangerous to deny or minimize the harm that some mothers do, for fear of playing into misogynist hands." To name daughter aversion as child abuse is not to attack women, but to take seriously the relational systems that shape how harm is passed on — often in the name of love itself.

I do want to end the cycle of daughter aversion, but I think there is something we need to look at before we think about it.

Ahmed (2010, 2017) talks about willfulness, about being willing to make it a lifetime commitment to fight against discrimination or oppression.

I think I am willful. Otherwise, I won't be carrying all these memories throughout my entire life, moving through several different countries, and finally begin to explore everything in Scotland.

But what I truly learn from this research journey is the challenge to be willful.

I feel that in this particular culture I've been examining, or perhaps in any culture at all, being willful requires a certain level of privilege. And that privilege can come from many places. I'm not sure I can name them all. Still, it might include a person's natural temperament, the degree of control or suppression they've experienced in life, the number of relationships that offer different kinds of connection, access to alternative worldviews, and the timing and duration of the control they've lived under. There are likely more. But as you can see, it's deeply tied to internal conditions and to how much support a person has to help them find the inner strength to break free. Or to even believe in the possibility of being free.

Vague silhouette of a system

That's when I realise, we need to name this. Not just as individual pain, but as a cultural structure shaping how people think, feel, and relate. Only then can we begin to see more clearly just how much daughters, who will become future mothers, have to navigate if they want to resist this shaping. Just as Ahmed has said, "Having names for problems can make a difference. Before, you could not quite put your finger on it. With these words as tools, we revisit our histories; we hammer away at the past."

I began to call it the ***Gen (d)erational loyalty system***. This naming is inspired by both Yue Du (2022), who explores Qing's gendered-generational power, and Alice Miller (2008), who voices out children's mental loyalty to their parents' abuse under the idea of discipline.

It's not just gendered. And it's not just generational. It's the intersection of both—and the silence that grows between them due to children's loyalty to their parents.

The generational aspect is filial piety, in other words, the expectation that children surrender their own judgment to obey their parents.

The gendered part is the traditional view that women cannot bear the responsibility to carry out the family name.

Together, they create the ground for daughter aversion to thrive.

In naming this system, I hope to make visible what so many of us have quietly endured—and, maybe, to loosen its hold. As Ahmed (2017) reminds us, “the personal is theoretical.” What we live, what we struggle with, and what we try to make sense of are not outside of knowledge; they are part of how knowledge is formed.

I do not claim I’ve already figured out the complete picture of this system. I’ve had enough to be sure there is definitely something immense, something solid, and it’s taking shape, but it still needs further work to reveal its full aspects.

I am going to make some claims, but I will keep them loose. This is because I feel eager to present the shape I believe is emerging, but at the same time want to leave room for others to join and reshape or complete it.

Anyway, allow me to share with you here some thoughts I’ve collected and assembled about the shape of this system I begin to recognise.

...

Over the course of this research, I began by focusing on daughter aversion. But as I wrote, spoke with others, and reflected on both personal and shared experiences, I realised I was brushing up against something far larger—something more profound than patriarchy alone could explain. The harm I was tracing didn’t always come from male authority figures. In fact, it often didn’t. It came from mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters-in-law, and female bosses—women who did what they believed was morally right. Women who enforced the rules not out of cruelty, but out of loyalty, duty, and love.

That's when a new understanding started to form. I began calling it the Gen (d)erational Loyalty System.

This is not just a family structure. It's not just patriarchy wearing a new mask. It is a moral system built around loyalty and survival—where obedience to generational power is naturalised, even moralised, and where gendered expectations are carried forward through emotional bonds rather than brute force.

In this system, daughter aversion is not just a bias. It functions as a moral belief. To treat daughters equally is not just unconventional—it is seen as wrong. And that wrongness extends beyond one's own daughter. Because every woman is a daughter, this belief system turns women into the enforcers of each other's suffering. It's why women end up policing women. Why so many of us ask: "Why are women so hard on each other?"

I used to hear this growing up: "女人何苦為難女人？" ("Why do women make things harder for other women?") But this was never an honest question. It was a shrug. A sigh. A way of saying: that's just how things are. As if this pain was inevitable, or worse, deserved. But it is not inevitable. It is not natural. It is a system.

In the Facebook group *Daughters Raised in Jun-nan-ching-niu Families: Be Brave and Refuse Your Parents' Exploitation*, daughter aversion is not a subtle bias—it is an open wound. Mothers are often described not just as complicit but as primary enforcers. They don't merely obey the rules—they carry them out with a sense of conviction. They genuinely believe that prioritising sons is morally right. That daughters exist to give, to serve, to step aside.

Again and again, daughters write in the group: "Why did my mother do this to me?" I've asked this question my entire life, too. And I've come to realise that it isn't just an expression of confusion—it's a question that reveals a gap in our frameworks. Because if we only name patriarchy, we miss something. We miss the mothers who work two jobs to fund their sons' gambling habits. We miss the grandmothers who call their daughters

selfish for refusing. We miss the daughters who still want to be good, still want to believe, still long to give more.

This is what makes the Gen(d)erational Loyalty System so hard to dismantle: it is not enforced solely through violence. It is implemented through care. Through guilt. Through love. Through the unbearable fear of being seen as ungrateful. Of being selfish. Of being a bad daughter.

In *Haunted Modernities*, Lee (2023) shares stories of parents who refuse to bury their daughters in the family grave because they are too filial to challenge tradition. So filial that they would rather kneel and beg the gods to take their daughters in than break a cultural rule. This, too, is daughter aversion, not out of hatred, but out of moralised obedience.

Lu (2010) describes how ancestor worship rituals—reserved only for sons—are believed to directly affect the family's fortune. Daughters don't just matter less; they become morally irrelevant. They don't count in the afterlife. They don't exist in the family line. And no one questions this, because asking it would mean questioning the system that holds everything together.

This is what I mean by epistemic fog. The Gen (d)erational Loyalty System survives by obscuring harm, fragmenting meaning, and blurring accountability. It convinces us we are the ones who are wrong. That our anger is selfish. That our desire for fairness is disloyal. That our resistance is betrayal.

And resistance does feel like betrayal. Because this system is not built around institutions. It's built around relationships. When we say no to a parent, it's not just disobedience. It feels like we're tearing the fabric of the family itself. This is especially true in societies where parents are positioned as unquestionable, where speaking up is seen as cruel, and where critique of parental behaviour is challenging human nature. We're trained to see silence as virtue. We're taught that being a "good daughter" means enduring quietly.

I think of all the daughters in the group who are told not to send their mothers more money, because the mother will just give it to the son. The advice is practical, but the real battle is internal. Can I live with myself if I say no to her? Can I still believe I'm a good person?

This is where I return to Alice Miller (2008), who speaks of the unbearable weight of loyalty. Or to bell hooks (1999), who reminds us that love should be an action, not only a good feeling. Or to Sara Ahmed (2010, 2017), who shows us that resistance will always be read as complaint—as ugliness—as killjoy. These thinkers helped me understand that what I'm exploring is not just structural or behavioural. It's emotional. It's spiritual. It's survival.

And it is held up—most powerfully—by women. As Chesler (2009) said, "I want women to understand that we have real power over each other. I want women to use this power consciously and ethically."

In the same Facebook group, someone once asked: "Who in your family actually carries out daughter aversion?" Over 50% said only the mother. Another 40% said both parents. Only 10% said only the father.

These aren't academic statistics. But they say something that so many of us feel and recognise, that daughter aversion is not only passed down by men.

In fact, it continues even in the absence of men.

I've read stories of mother-in-laws who demand more grandchildren, of sisters-in-law who gossip and shame, of female managers who make life more complicated for new mothers. My own students have told me about it. My own life reflects it. We even have a term in Mandarin—*三姑六婆* ("three aunties and six elderly women")—to describe the women who exert moral pressure and reinforce gender roles in the name of social order.

This is why I believe we need a new name. Because patriarchy doesn't fully explain a system where the harm often comes from the very people who are supposed to protect us.

Where love is used as leverage. Where being treated well feels *wrong* because we've never seen it before.

The Gen (d)erational Loyalty System is my attempt to name what lives between mother and daughter. Between sister and sister-in-law. Between tradition and guilt. Between trauma and obedience.

It's a system where being born female means being born into sacrifice.

And yet we still ask—every week, every day—"Why did she do this to me?"

Maybe now, we have a name.

Further Research Directions

Throughout this project, I've tried to stay close to what is visible and felt—what has emerged not from certainty, but from recognition. And yet, there are areas I have only just begun to touch. Areas that feel unfinished, not because they are unclear, but because they are still unfolding—personally, politically, and relationally.

Politics and Cultural Influence

One potential direction is to explore how different political systems may shape the formation and persistence of the Gen (d)erational Loyalty System. I was raised in a society transitioning from authoritarianism to democracy, and that shift did not happen only in laws or institutions. It happened in families, in schools, in language, in the kind of obedience we were expected to perform. My mother's generation grew up under a dictatorship, where not only parents but governments were not to be questioned. I grew up as society transitioned to democracy, yet my sense of moral obligation toward parental figures remained largely intact. I followed the rules not out of law, but out of loyalty. That alone makes me wonder: how much power does a political system have over emotional

survival? How do dictatorship and democracy differently shape our sense of what is right, what is disobedient, and what is unforgivable?

Cultural influence is another layer that demands further attention. Both Japanese and Western influences have shaped Taiwan in distinct, sometimes contradictory ways. I grew up consuming Japanese manga and reading American teenage novels. I learned politeness and endurance from one, and questioning and individual rights from the other. But both carried their own biases. I often wonder: How have these cultural frameworks helped or hindered our capacity to see daughter aversion clearly? These are not questions I can fully answer here, but I believe they are worth asking.

Impact on Sons and husbands

Another direction that emerged is the impact of daughter aversion on how daughters later raise their sons, and how they relate to their husbands. In the early stages of this research, I had the vague impression that in this system, girls were tools and boys were human. Those daughters were made to serve, and sons were made to live. But the longer I sat with this thought, the more it began to crack.

Yes, sons were put higher, but were they really allowed to be free? Were they raised to develop an independent self, or just to carry the weight of the family's future? I can see the pain etched across the men in my own family, too. My brother once told my ma he needed to escape her. My uncle ran away from my WanHwa A-ma because he couldn't breathe in her presence. These are not signs of privilege, but of suffocation.

I now suspect that the Gen (d)erational Loyalty System doesn't simply hurt daughters while benefiting sons—it *reconfigures* everyone, shaping them into roles that make genuine relational connection almost impossible. Sons may be placed higher, but their sense of self is often stunted, their emotional needs are frequently ignored, and their agency is overridden by duty. That's not empowerment. That's entrapment.

And what about fatherhood? What happened to our understanding of what a father is? In my own experience and in many of the stories I've gathered, fathers tend to exist at the extremes. They are either absent, feared, or functionally silent. Or they are violent,

aggressive, and openly sexist. I keep wondering: are these simply two sides of the same coin? I want to understand more about this distinction, about what it means, what it hides, and what it might reveal.

Narcissistic patterns and family roles

Another recurring theme in my own experience, in client work, and in the stories shared within online communities is the dynamic of narcissistic family systems. Many of us found resonance in books that describe narcissistic abuse: the golden child, the scapegoat, the cycle of idealisation and devaluation. (Morrigan 2021, Reid 2023) These patterns are hauntingly familiar. Even though I do not want to reduce cultural harm to a Western psychiatric diagnosis, I believe there is something here worth exploring. Perhaps not as a medical label, but as a relational pattern—one that overlaps with daughter aversion and the Gen (d)erational logic I've been trying to describe.

Why do so many daughters feel like their needs are threatening? Why do some sons get idealised while daughters are burdened with blame? How do these roles persist even when we grow up, even when we try to create new families of our own?

If these are patterns rooted in a system that survives on loyalty and silence, then understanding narcissistic dynamics might offer another way to name what we couldn't see before. Also, as a therapist, I am curious about how human minds and perspectives may be shaped when growing up in an environment that extremely suppresses generational autonomy at a cultural level (Du, 2015). After finishing my exploration of the general texture and tone of daughter aversion, I would like to further examine its specific psychological impacts within this relational dynamic—whether it makes certain relational patterns and forms of self-identity more common, and how we might free ourselves from being conditioned by these impacts.

The above are not tidy research questions. They are the parts I cannot yet pull into neat conclusions, but they keep coming back to me in this journey. I believe they are where the next inquiries begin.

On Resisting Normalised Gendered Child Abuse

I believe daughter aversion is a form of intimate abuse. And the difficulty with intimate abuse is that relationships are never simple. They're tangled, woven through with emotions, intentions, patterns of interaction, and often unresolved trauma that can hijack a person's thinking. Even when the roles seem clear to have a persecutor and a victim from the surface, what's really happening is often far more complex, especially when children are involved.

I share Mills' (2009) view that arresting or removing someone from an abusive situation rarely solves the core problem. Because abuse, when it's intimate, is relational. This is even more true in parent-child dynamics. Taking a child away from a parent doesn't guarantee better care. It doesn't necessarily mean the child will feel safer. In fact, the child may not even perceive it as a rescue at all.

When harm is relational and psychological, I believe it must be met with relational and psychological responses. Not just intervention, but attunement

And I also believe that even small individuals with little access to theory, training, or institutional power can make an enormous difference.

I've seen this firsthand in the small Facebook group *Daughters Raised in Son-Preferred Families* (2024), where I've been an active participant. In this space, daughters share their stories without fear of attack. They ask questions, and others answer with compassion. And when someone says, "Please stop me. I feel too guilty, I think I'm going back," others gently remind her of why she left, and what she's trying to protect.

This kind of support is quiet but powerful. It doesn't try to control or fix. It simply stays close, helping someone remember their truth when the guilt begins to cloud it.

Resistance and accountability

I've been thinking about the differences between resisting and accountability. These two words keep coming up when I am reading feminist discussions. According to the Cambridge dictionary, resistance means the act of fighting against something that is attacking you, or refusing to accept something; accountability means the fact of being responsible for what you do and able to give a satisfactory reason for it, or the degree to which this happens. And, to hold someone accountable for something means to make someone responsible for what they do and demand a satisfactory reason for it.

Sara Ahmed's (2010) concepts of *happiness scripts* and *gender scripts* offer a lens into how cultural expectations shape not just what we desire but also how we orient ourselves in the world. Happiness, as Ahmed (2010) frames it in *Happy Objects*, is not an internal state but a social directive—certain relationships, lifestyles, and achievements are positioned as sources of fulfilment, reinforcing dominant power structures. Similarly, in *Feminist Killjoys*, she (Ahmed, 2010) examines how gendered expectations are embedded in these scripts, defining women's happiness in ways that serve broader societal norms. The "happy housewife," (Ahmed 2010) for example, is not just a personal ideal but a relational one, upheld through collective reinforcement. These scripts function as quiet but powerful forces, steering people toward conformity by linking social belonging with personal joy. But what happens when stepping outside these scripts doesn't just invite discomfort but threatens one's relationships and place within a community?

This is where Ahmed's (2017) focus on *resistance* feels, to me, incomplete. The *feminist killjoy* disrupts these scripts by refusing to conform, refusing to smooth over discomfort, refusing to pretend. It's a necessary act, but it assumes a context in which individual resistance is a viable strategy. In cultures that prioritise autonomy, pushing back against expectations may cause friction but does not necessarily sever one's place within the group. In contrast, in collective cultures like Taiwan's, deviation is not just personal—it ripples outward, implicating family, affecting reputations, and reinforcing compliance through social and relational pressure.

For instance, parenting in Taiwan is never only the parents' own business. When I take my son to the park, there will be other females coming, blaming me for not forcing my son to wear a jacket. My friend was preparing a formula for her baby at the nursery room in the train station, and the cleaning lady came to accuse her of being an irresponsible mother because she didn't breastfeed. When we tell our parents or parents-in-law not to

feed our babies, honey before one year old, not only would they call it nonsense, but many of them will secretly feel the need to prove themselves right. Every year, we have news about babies being sent to the emergency room because the elderly in their family secretly gave them honey. And no one could hold these elderly accountable because they can never be wrong.

Resistance alone is rarely enough back home. When the cost of nonconformity is not just personal alienation but collective blame, accountability—not just resistance but responsibility for how one's actions impact relational structures—becomes a necessary extension of change.

This distinction between resistance and accountability shifts the conversation. To resist is to reject an oppressive norm; to be accountable is to recognise the ways one's choices model alternatives and shape the possibilities available to others. Questioning why girls must be gentle and play with dolls is an act of resistance, but living in ways that demonstrate other ways of being—a different kind of femininity, a broader definition of self—create pathways for change. In cultures where identity is relational and requires permission from older generations, resistance will only be viewed as childish, irresponsible, and ungrateful. The amount of criticism and judgment will come from so many different places, to the point that we start to question our own decisions and sometimes our sanity. What this does to me is that I realise I cannot simply resist. To make resistance sustainable, I need to take on complete accountability. Only when I can reason out the actions I take and be fully aware of how these actions will impact relationships in my life, can I stop being threatened and emotionally blackmailed by people around me. We cannot just deviate. To resist, we need to be prepared for the worst. There is no way we can start over, because wherever we go, people judge us based on our relationship with our family.

Relational Accountability and Children

But all of this takes place among adults—among those who, at least in some areas of life, have choices. For children, whose entire worlds are still shaped by the parents they depend on, what we can do may look very different.

And yet, I still believe we can do something. We may not be able to change the system overnight, but we can be that one adult who sees the child. Who names what's happening. Who quietly says, "You're not wrong to feel this way." In relational harm, it's often the smallest gestures that become lifelines. We can support children's mental resilience in resisting by being the ones who offer them space. The kind of space bell hooks (1999) describes, where "a child who feels a parent is being unjust can appeal to another adult for mediation, understanding, or support," and, as Miller (2008) would say, by being their witness.

I'd like to share a small story I was told when I returned to Taiwan in July 2025.

My friend had known about my dissertation topic for some time, and we've had several long conversations about it. During this visit, she told me that her brother's family had also come to stay. Watching how her brother and sister-in-law treated their daughters, she was immediately reminded of daughter aversion.

She tried to gently hint at it to her brother, but he didn't seem to understand. She waited a few days and then finally called the little girl over to her side.

"Charlotte, honey," she said, "Auntie thinks you're the best child in the world. I can see that both your parents are busy with your little brother, so you're often left on your own. And you're doing so well. I'm so proud of you. I don't know what the future will bring, but I want you to remember—no matter what happens—Auntie sees you as the best child in the world."

The 8-year-old burst into tears, sobbing uncontrollably.

When my friend told me this, all three of us had tears in our eyes. For a long moment, none of us could speak.

No one needed to explain anything. We all knew, immediately, that this child would be okay. Because now she had been seen. Her pain has been recognised and witnessed

because an adult dares to have a conversation with her about her pain, even if it's not directly confronted. That unnamed suffering no longer had to live silently in her body.

Those were the words we'd all been waiting to hear our whole lives. And in that moment, it wasn't just the little girl who felt seen. We did, too.

There is no guarantee that all parents will be good enough. But we can let the child know she's not alone. That others see things differently. That, in someone's eyes, she is already enough. She is already a good child.

And that alone can save souls. Sometimes, even lives.

For girls growing up impacted by daughter aversion, their lives are not usually in danger. She will probably grow up looking fine. But what will haunt her, what will hurt again and again, is self-doubt. The feeling that she is not worthy of love. Therefore, I believe the most suitable support for them would be psychological.

And as Martin Miller (2018) reminds us, the person who helps doesn't have to be a therapist. It can be anyone with a relationship to the child.

It means you. It means me. It means all of us who have a personal connection with them.

Miller (2008) believes that, once childhood trauma no longer has to hide in darkness, even the most seemingly irrational behaviour reveals the logic of its early hidden motives. And if we become sensitive to the cruelty children suffer, and to its long-denied consequences, the cycles of violence that pass from generation to generation will necessarily come to an end. I agree with Miller strongly on this perspective.

Simply by raising our awareness and being more sensitive about how children are treated, we all have the power to save little girls.

Sexist work isn't always grand or dramatic. It can be everyday work. Quiet, ordinary, relational. I agree with Ahmed (2017), bell hooks (2000), and Chesler (2009)—that is where change begins.

Hope for contributions

This is the hope I carry into the world after writing this dissertation: that we learn to witness what has long been hidden. That we learn to say, as my friend said to her niece, "you are a good child. I see what's happening. I believe you. And you are not wrong to feel what you feel."

That someone will step into the negative space. Not to fix it, not to explain it away, but simply to name it. And in naming it, begin to shift its shape.

I hope this dissertation can offer what Mills (2019) so powerfully pointed toward: that "only by looking directly at the violence—its complexity, its history, its quiet entanglement in everyday culture—can we begin to understand it, address it, and change our relationship to it."

I hope no more little girls will grow up in families that look perfect from the outside but feel as if they were never truly wanted and are still expected to be grateful for it. That a child's silence will no longer be mistaken for peace. That her obedience will no longer be praised when it is, in fact, a loss of self.

In terms of academic contribution, I am thinking of Foo (2022) and her reflection on how none of her high school teachers seemed to know that she and other Asian students were being beaten at home. That part stays with me. It speaks to the painful dissonance between visibility and what's really happening.

I hope this dissertation can help bridge that gap. I hope it can offer a cultural lens for professionals engaged in cross-cultural work. Whether in childcare, counselling, education, or community support. Not as a definitive guide, but as an entry point. A way into environments where the people we care for might not yet have the words to explain what they're carrying.

I hope it opens a door for cross-cultural families to understand the possible roots of their differing perspectives. For second-generation children to find language, context, and the courage to speak with their parents, and to find a way to resolve what may be preventing them from getting closer to each other.

If even one person sees something more clearly because of what I've written, then this work will have done what it came to do.

Epilogue:

The Grown-up Daughter

Today, I went to the park near my home to look at the trees.

My eyes were immediately drawn to the tallest, most upright, lush and vibrant tree in the entire park. It was truly beautiful, so striking. Its trunk was thick and steady, and its branches reached high and far, playfully stirring the blue sky. It radiated such vitality that it was impossible not to notice it. I sat on the grass, quietly watching, feeling a mix of admiration, envy, and distance.

Children who grow up nourished and undisturbed, able to absorb what they need and grow strong, perhaps they shine just like that tree. It's a height I can't reach. And maybe, in the end, what I have to learn is this: every person receives different nourishment.

With my eyes, I gently traced every part of the tree, letting its strength sink into me. Somehow, just by watching it, I felt supported. I was satisfied and ready to head home, until I realised my body wasn't moving.

My gaze shifted to another part of the park, where several mid-sized trees stood, each of a different kind. My eyes eventually rested on one tree, a little off the path and slightly separated from the others. It had a peculiar shape, with its branches curved in strange ways yet somehow still balanced. There was an unexplainable sense of stability about it. It looked like the perfect tree for small children to climb. Its branches didn't stretch upward as much as they spread outward, somewhat messy, but in a way that felt joyful and easy.

That tree... is it me?

A sudden wave of emotion surged in me.

It *is* me. That tree is me.

This feeling of unexpected recognition filled me with excitement, like this tree had somehow made visible my exact shape. Ah, have I really grown this much over the years? Yes, yes, that part was especially hard, but now that I look at it, it doesn't seem like such a big problem anymore. Wow, I didn't expect that part to have developed so well. I really grounded myself there. Your hair... well, styling has never been your strength, but hey, it's fine, I think it suits you.

This unexpected mirror made me so happy.

I've grown. I've truly grown. I may not be as dazzling as that other tall tree, but I've become a strong tree.

A tree with clear twists and bends, yet a tree that makes you want to come closer, the moment you see it.

Through this tree, I could finally see clearly how every crooked, odd angle was connected to the whole, how each twist held the tree's weight in its own way. And once it passed a certain height, it suddenly spread its branches without hesitation, as if nothing had ever been wrong.

Yes, this is my life. Not a single part can be cut away. And I don't want to cut any of it off. Every piece is proof of my effort, the path I've walked, the life I've lived.

I don't need to be that other magnificent tree. He's beautiful, but I like myself.

I've grown up. I've grown up. I've become a grounded, steady tree. What's next, I wonder? Can I still grow taller? Might I bloom someday? Bear fruit?

Turns out, all I needed was a moment, a chance to really see the path I've taken. I am not any of the labels others have tried to pin on me. I am myself. And I've seen the effort, the beauty, the brilliance I carry.

That's enough.

Thank you, tree, for letting me see a beautiful, complete version of myself.

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