

# EDUCATION AS WOUND AND WITNESS: A NARRATIVE ACROSS FOUR GENERATIONS OF CHINESE WOMEN

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## Abstract

*This narrative offers a gentle yet profound meditation on a family history that spans over a century, beginning with a long farewell to the author's maternal grandmother, Laolao. Through the experiences of four generations of women in a Chinese family, this story offers a historically textured, deeply personal lens on the meaning of education within a broader sociocultural context. My mother, who received what was considered a modern education, emerges as the most disconnected and, assumably, the most broken among the four women. This story gently unravels the unintended consequences of education when wielded as a tool of dominance—showing how it can dehumanize and wound, rather than liberate. Yet, amidst the rupture, I find a path toward reconciliation through the quiet power of seeing. By bearing witness to the past of an individual, a family, and even a society, one may awaken the capacity to forgive, heal, and reclaim agency. Departing from traditional academic structure, this piece unfolds through narrative. It begins with a deeply personal story and gradually zooms out, unrolling a scroll from the past that invites readers to embark on a shared journey of reflection and rediscovery.*

*Keywords:* institutionalized brokenness, power of seeing, healing, reconciliation, education, historical lens.

### Positionality Statement

This writing is grounded in narrative and autoethnographic inquiry, drawing from my lived experiences as a great-granddaughter, granddaughter, and daughter, situated within a lineage of Chinese women whose lives have been profoundly shaped by socio-historical forces. Starting from this intergenerational journey, I reflect on the multifaceted meanings of education, not merely as an abstract ideal, but as something embodied, internalized, and contested in everyday life. As both a researcher and participant in this family story, I weave together personal memory and philosophical reflections. The value of these reflections lies not in objective distance but in the immediacy of memory as lived and felt—subjective, relational, and emotionally informed. This approach aligns with a body of work in narrative inquiry and arts-based research that honors personal voice as a mode of knowledge production (Leggo, 2000; Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2005). This approach seeks a slower, more contemplative manner of knowing in contrast to what conventional academic work allows. In addition to witnessing the family history, I invite readers to contemplate how the act of storytelling can lead to reconciliation, healing, and a quiet kind of wisdom that helps us carry forward through the complexities of life and inherited pain.

### Opening: The Long Goodbye

I dreamed of my *Laolao* (my maternal grandmother) in late March 2023. She hugged me in her warm arms for a long time, as if I were still the little girl by her side. Then she whispered, “Goodbye.” Was it her farewell to me? I woke up smiling like a baby and the warmth stayed with me for a while, until I realized it was the first time she had come to my dreams since 2005, the year she passed away.

My *Laoye* (my grandfather, *Laolao*’s husband) passed away in the winter of 2003, two decades earlier, during my second year at university, when I was living away from my family in a different city. My mom told me the news over the phone and directed me to stay on campus because, “Schoolwork is the most important thing in your life now. Don’t come back for the trivia.” I begged bitterly but was silenced with a threatening tone, “If you don’t obey me, you know the consequences!”—the typical response Chinese parents use to stop their children from doing anything unwanted. Unable to calm down from the loss of a loved one, I went to the sports field at night to mourn in complete loneliness. The silent pain, intensified by the darkness, nearly devoured me. Why is saying a proper farewell to a beloved family member considered *trivia*?

A little over a year later, at the beginning of 2005, I received a text message from my mother, declaring the dreaded news: “Your mom doesn’t have a mom anymore.” The whole world collapsed in front of me. *Laolao* was a mom to me emotionally. She offered me the purest love I could ever have. Yet again, I was rejected by my biological mom and extended family from attending the funeral. It was once more deemed “trivia” compared to my schoolwork.

I often savored what *Laolao* (grandmother) said after *Laoye* (grandfather)’s death: “If the surviving spouse dies within a year of their partner’s death, their bond was one of true love indeed.” Was *Laolao*’s passing proof of their bond?

I now decide to write something for my *Laolao*, to bid the formal farewell that I never got a proper chance to offer. Maybe that is why after all these years, some part of me still pretends to

believe that they are alive. Each time Laolao and Laoye saw me off at the bus stop after my weekend visits, the moment imprinted itself on my heart and mind. As the bus pulled away, the two of them grew smaller and smaller, until a final turn erased them from view. With them, time slipped away, and so did a part of me. I owe them a farewell.

### Four Generations of Women in a Chinese Family

My *Taitai* (Laolao's mom, my great grandmother) was born at the beginning of the 1900s, when the two-thousand-year-old imperial regime was clinging to its last breath. She came from an affluent landowning family in a province in central China. At the age of six, she lost her voice and hearing due to illness, which drastically devalued her in the future marriage market. In her teenage years, her father wedded her—accompanied by a huge dowry and land—to an impoverished peasant in the hope that she would be treated well by the lower-class husband and live a wealthy life. However, this prosperous overnight “landlord” was stunned by the easy fortune and soon lost himself to the “career” of gambling.

*Taitai*'s only worth in that house was to produce sons to carry on a family name that was not hers. Unfortunately, the first births were all girls. Every time, her husband, this “father,” grabbed the feet of the newly born baby girl—who hadn't yet opened her eyes—and drowned her in the chamber pot without any hesitation. Then came my Laolao. As usual, this father—no, this murderer—pulled the baby from her desperate mother the moment he learned she was another girl. He held Laolao upside-down over the chamber pot, which gave off an overwhelming stench, but paused at the last second. Withdrawing his hand, he said, “Maybe I do need a girl to do the house chores, so that I can save money from hiring servants. What's even better, she can take care of my future sons.” Nobody knows what changed in that heartless man at the last moment. Laolao's life was spared, but her destiny was sealed.

Strangely enough, after Laolao's birth, her mother never gave birth to any girls thereafter. Instead, she gave birth to four boys. The youngest was the same age as Laolao's first child. Laolao, as expected, grew up doing all the house chores and caring for her brothers. “I was very *useful*. I could do the work of several people,” Laolao once recalled. It seemed that, being *useful*, was the highest compliment for a woman—sentiment and flesh—could hope to earn.

Laolao was very close to her mother. They visited each other frequently to provide emotional support. Laolao never got over the regret of not seeing *Taitai* one last time before she passed away, a regret that I inherited when Laolao's earthly life came to an end many years later. *Taitai*'s health deteriorated rapidly before a Chinese New Year, but my Laoye asked the entire family to hide this news from Laolao until the New Year holiday was over. “Let's not ruin her mood for the New Year,” Laoye claimed “thoughtfully” for Laolao, as my mother recalled. Laolao was devastated to learn that her beloved mom had passed away while the rest of her family was celebrating the commencement of a new year. She could not even hold back her tears when she was telling me this piece of history decades after *Taitai*'s death. She almost never mentioned her father, not even to her children.

Nobody now alive remembers *Taitai*'s name, as though her identity was never meant to be known or remembered. What I do know is a piece of information passed down from Laolao: *Taitai*'s brother received an elite education and eventually became the president of one of the

earliest universities established in the 20th century in China. A girl and her brother were born into the same household, yet their life trajectories diverged entirely: one silenced because of her gender, the other uplifted and honored. Fate was not shaped by merit or character, but by the simple fact of being born a girl or a boy.

Laolao was born in 1932, seventeen years before the founding of the New China in 1949. One day at age sixteen, while Laolao was helping out with some work in a relative's house, Laoye's mother happened to pass by and was impressed by Laolao's hard work and good looks. She found a matchmaker to make a proposal for her youngest son, who was nineteen years old. Laolao's father agreed. Following an arranged marriage, Laolao and Laoye moved to the capital of the province. They both worked in the local steel plant. Laolao gave birth to six children, two daughters and four sons, the second oldest and the youngest of whom died of pneumonia in their infancy. Laolao and Laoye never showed preference for sons or daughters. Perhaps out of compassion, or habit, or both, Laolao never asked her children to share the responsibility of the house chores. When her youngest daughter, my mother, cried miserably and refused to go to kindergarten, Laolao gave up her cherished job, the first thing in her life that had granted her anything close to equal social standing with her male counterparts.

Laolao continued taking care of her children's children in the 1980s and 1990s. I was born in the 1980s, shortly after the Maoist Era, when China moved into a new historic age of rapid industrialization and urbanization. It was a turning point in modern Chinese history when the one-child policy was implemented in 1980. Like most urban families, both my parents were encouraged to work for the development of the vibrant new country, and I was among the millions of my peers who grew up in their grandparents' homes. Though my mom's office was nearby, she could only visit occasionally for a couple of hours. She once showed up with a bag full of pricey snacks, insisting I eat those rather than what she dismissively called the "cheap" food Laolao had prepared.

Whenever I desperately asked my mother if I could go home with her, she pointed to a picture on the wall, saying: "Look at the pretty and adorable girl. She's your older sister. She's the top student in a school in Beijing (the capital city of China). She's very hardworking and good at everything. Your dad and I have to take care of her. I'm not your real mother. I found you in a trash can." At first, Laolao did not debunk her prank remarks. When time passed by and my mom added more and more details about that girl's life, Laolao told me it was a joke and suggested to my mom that she should stop. It turned out that the picture was just a poster for decoration. But by then, I was already deeply confused. For years I believed I had a sister who was much better than me in every possible aspect. I still cannot understand my mother's "humor" today. Why did she find it funny to crush a child's sense of belonging and self-confidence?

Laolao, on the contrary, was very warm, patient, and encouraging. "I know you were trying to help. I see your good heart," she would say—even when I caused trouble. She was never reluctant to express her love for me. She cuddled me in her arms and told me bedtime stories. She was like a real mom to me. Laolao was the only person who made me feel safe and whose love I did not have to earn. I believe Taitai played a similar role in Laolao's life.

I loved her back wholeheartedly. Once I saved one week's breakfast money, given to me by my parents (my only source of income then) and bought Laolao a towel as her birthday gift. Laolao hugged me warmly and kissed my cheeks. She held the simple gift so dearly that she

couldn't stop weeping. During traditional Chinese festivals, she made exquisite handcrafts for all her grandchildren and taught us customs and folktales, which were considered outdated by my mother who received a "modern and scientific education," as it was called. I still remember my mother's resistance to almost every piece of Laolao's advice. "What do you know? You did not have any education!" She would bluntly interrupt Laolao and exit the room, leaving Laolao in silence.

It is true that like Taitai, Laolao never received formal schooling, but she influenced me so much more positively than my mother, who excelled in her school years and went through higher education after the Cultural Revolution, a decade-long sociopolitical upheaval in China that disrupted education. Laolao taught me love, care, dignity, and resilience through her practice, which has been the brightest light of my life, while my mom's arrogance and capriciousness make me wonder constantly what it truly means to be educated.

### **Education that Wounds**

My parents' generation (born in the 1950s and 60s) received an education that was vividly shaped by the ideological and political climate of the time. After the founding of the New China (an expression commonly used in China to refer to the People's Republic of China) in 1949, the Communist Party implemented a series of new educational reforms aimed at consolidating its authority. These policies emphasized the dissemination of Marxist-Leninist ideology and the training of scientific and technical personnel to support national modernization, mainly following the Soviet model (Saywell, 1980). This approach reflected a distinctly instrumentalist model of education, in which schooling was viewed primarily as a means to serve national political and economic ends.

Although the educational model shifted several times in response to changing relations between China and the Soviet Union, its underlying instrumentalist nature remained intact. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), this instrumentalism took on a radical form. Students were sent to mountainous and rural areas to learn from peasants and workers before being permitted to attend universities. In this period, countless professors and intellectuals were persecuted, and many students were permanently deprived of access to higher education. University infrastructures were dismantled or repurposed, and students were encouraged to sever familial ties in favor of complete devotion to the revolutionary cause.

This period produced profound psychological and social consequences. Many young people became emotionally detached and ideologically radicalized. The relationships between the post-1950s-and-60s generation and their parents' generation grew strained, as the older generation were viewed as "relics" of a backward, unenlightened past that needed transformation. In place of traditional familial reverence, Chairman Mao was elevated as the "dearest person and greatest leader" by many youths, an embodiment of ideological purity instilled through systematic indoctrination. It was, in many ways, a quasi-religious period, in which Mao's image functioned as that of a god-like figure, and his followers saw themselves as righteous defenders of an absolute truth.

At the same time, as feminism had been introduced to China by the end of the 19th century and thrived in the first half of the 20th century (Ma, 2010), it perfectly catered to New China's

need for more labor for industrialization. Hence, to eliminate the differences between men and women in the labor market, new slogans to further encourage the human capital of women were produced: “Women and men are equal!” “Women hold up half the sky!” (Bai, 2010). The bright side of this trend was that, with the endorsement of absolute authority, the social status of *working* women improved significantly, along with their family status and self-confidence. For the first time a huge number of women (mostly urban working females) gained their voices in the public sphere. That was a glimpse of my parents’ educational background.

The successfully instrumentalized generation later inherited privileged access to social resources from their creators/predecessors and, today, continues to lead the country and educate the next generation in its most familiar way: authoritative, reductionistic, mechanical, and instrumentalized, to secure its power, while in reality, continuing to cause pain and struggle. The formerly oppressed were transformed into oppressors, as:

The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be man; but for them, to be man is to be oppressors ... the oppressed find in their oppressor the model of “manhood.” (Freire, 1970/2000, pp. 45–46)

From a holistic point of view, the 1950s-and-60s generation in China was intentionally framed to become the very first generation of *empty vessels*: incomplete human beings mass-produced to fulfill the regime’s goal of collective development. Their formation took place within a system that treated education not as a space for nurturing the mind and soul, but as a mechanism of ideological imprinting. They adopted a simplified and politicized language, marked by rigid dichotomies—black-and-white thinking and empty rhetoric. Common phrases such as *class enemy* and *fight to the last minute* permeated everyday speech and thought (Schoenhals, 2010; Xizhe, 2015), further amplifying the generation-wide emotional numbness and psychological fragmentation of their generation.

I propose the term *institutional brokenness* to name this entrenched pattern within top-down, authority-driven educational systems, where personal feelings and thoughts are often subordinated to externally imposed ideological goals. This structural condition creates a profound disconnection between a person’s internal sense of being and the educational journey enforced upon them. Its symptoms are wide-ranging, including the fragmentation of identity, erosion of agency, loss of existential purpose, and the internalization of a sense of inadequacy or alienation.

It is no wonder that my mother, an obedient and stellar student among her peers, was shaped into someone who appears emotionally numb to me. She rarely shows her love or compassion to her family—not to her parents, her siblings, or her only child. I have long wondered if she has/feels *any* human emotions at all. In my experience, she follows mechanical doctrines without reflection; anything falling outside the narrow boundaries of her belief framework must be criticized and crushed without mercy. In this sense, it may not be entirely her fault. Rather, it may be the deep imprint of her own institutional brokenness that, unknowingly, caused her to pass on the trauma and rupture that ultimately fractured my childhood.

Also, as the first woman in this family lineage to gain access to formal schooling, my mom, though seen by many other women as a fortunate person, spoiled and protected by everyone around

her, may in fact be the most broken one, at least from my perspective. Her world was constructed within a siloed mental space, where her fragmented personal feelings are the only valid reference. In my continued experience, she remains unaware of her emotional numbness to others and seems incapable of forming genuine emotional connections. Her way of coping with family tensions is to silence us with the coldest language and exit the room by slamming the door as if we were her “class enemy.” She tightly holds her ground and “fights to the last minute,” until we humbly surrender to her with apologies, apologies that validate her “honorable” pride.

My mother has *never* lost one battle on her family battlefield. Yet through her repeated triumphs, she may have lost something far more essential: the capacity to love and care, and along with it, the tangible experience of being loved and cared for. Her brokenness, as I see it, was not simply personal but systemic, largely shaped by the highly centralized, ideological education of her time. It gave her an incredible confidence, while simultaneously severing her emotional bonds with her family and blinding her with the illusion of scientific rationality. Education, in her case, did not liberate—it wounded, acting as what Audre Lorde (2004) would call the “master’s tool” (p. 1672).

Healing from the immense institutionalized brokenness has become a primary focus in my exploration of the field of education. This exploration, however, is not only theoretical—it grows out of the lived experiences of the women in my family.

### Searching for the Light of Humanity

The four generations of women in my family—Taitai, Laolao, Mama (my mom) and I—were all born at the intersections of two historical eras. Taitai lived through the decline of the old centralized imperial regime, the revolution that sought to overthrow it, and her subsequent social outcast status. Laolao’s life spanned from the Republican era of Min Guo (民国:1912–1949) to the founding of the People’s Republic of China under the Chinese Communist Party in 1949. Mama was shaped by the Cultural Revolution and witnessed the later flourishing era marked by feminist movements and rapid industrialization. I was born at the shift from a period encouraging higher birth rates to the one-child policy (Gao, 2015; Kane & Choi, 1999). We have witnessed the tremendous transformations our ancient Chinese civilization has undergone in the past century, each through the lens of our lived experiences. Although our existential realities—that is, the conditions of our lived experience and personal meaning-making—differ, each of us traverses our own route of suffering and struggles. I am curious about what has sustained us respectively in our lives and across generations. I find traces of love and compassion in Taitai, Laolao, and myself, but I sense only numbness in Mama. Education plays a critical role in shaping these differences, though it is not the only force at work.

Taitai’s life was restricted to a geographically limited space. As a woman born into a world where she was seen as inferior and subordinate to her father and later her husband, she had little autonomy. Yet her capacity for kindness and love was preserved. She could not talk or hear, but she was able to build deep emotional bonds with her children. She liked to laugh and make snacks for her grandchildren. Nobody could imagine how much pain was hidden behind her quiet optimism. Within her incredibly limited choices, she chose to become the light for herself and her children. That, to me, was the most courageous heroism.

Her only daughter, my Laolao, carried on with her light and handed it over to me. Despite all the knowledge I have learned, the books I have read, and the years of formal schooling I have been through, it is Laolao's embodiment of love and care, dignity and resilience, humility and compassion, and respect for traditional culture and customs that shines most brightly in my memory. Her presence has been a guiding imprint on my soul.

The so-called "education" that began from my parents' generation penetratingly intervened in the psyche, shaping minds in ways that often suppressed emotion and human connection. My mom and her countless peers who emerged from this system seemed to believe they belonged to something greater and nobler, a collective mission that promised to usher in a brighter future for their nation. I wonder if their success in gaining privilege over social mobility and resources has deluded them into believing their way is the only valid way of being. But such success can mask unseen wounds. While it may seem that Taitai, Laolao, and I are more able to recognize these fractures, I now understand that even this perception should be held with humility. After all, we are all conditioned by our upbringing and education, and none of us can fully escape the blind spots that come with such conditioning. Perhaps what differentiates our experiences is not the presence of suffering itself but the way we relate to it—one that invites reflection rather than defence.

So I propose that the first step toward healing, whether ourselves or others, is *seeing* the brokenness: an impaired ability to experience emotions and to connect, both inwardly with ourselves and outwardly with others. How can we repair a vase without seeing its cracks? How can we heal a heart without seeing the brokenness in it?

But how do we see our own brokenness? How do we obtain this wide awaken-ness (Greene, 2017)—a deepened state of consciousness and critical engagement with the world? These are not easy questions to answer. Yet the beginning of an answer, for me, lies in the act of *seeing*. The willingness to see is a gesture of care, care for ourselves, for others, and for our shared histories, through which we may begin to awaken from conditioned blindness and the deep imprint of institutional brokenness.

### **The Power of Seeing**

Etymologically, the English word *see* originated from the old English word *seon*, meaning "be or become aware of by means of the eye," also, "perceive mentally, understand, experience" (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). To see, then, is to be/come aware of, to connect, to care. By seeing another being's existential reality, an emotional tie is formed, a possibility for compassion is created, and a space for interconnectedness is opened.

"If you saw me in the past, you would forgive me in the present," wrote Zhang Ailing, one of the most renowned female writers in the first half of the 20th century China, in her medium-length novel, *Love in a Fallen City* (2009, p.15). Ailing, herself, endured a deeply traumatic upbringing marked by familial neglect and emotional abandonment and never recovered in her life. Her words are not only a poetic expression of longing but also a call to see a person not as a static figure frozen in the present moment, but as a living assembly of all their relations, geographically and chronologically. The act of seeing creates a bridge across generations and within fractured selves.

In the case of my family, I wonder: What might I have become if raised in my mother's circumstances? Would I have been able to carry on the light of humanity passed down from my ancestors, or would I, too, have been reshaped by the powerful bureaucratic power through education? If I had walked through Laolao's growing path, could I have found her strength to be as resilient and willing to care for my next generation? If I had been born as Taitai, would I have survived the unimaginable pain of watching my babies drowned, yet still held onto hope and compassion for my descendants?

I have no answer to any of those questions. I cannot fully know, as I grew up in a seemingly different social environment. But what I do know is that by learning their respective histories, something deeper than blood has begun to emerge: a broader sense of kinship that transcends time and context. I *see* the three women in the fullness of their existential realities. I *see* their brokenness. I *see* the past and present of the four of us. By seeing them, I see parts of myself that were once hidden. By seeing, I recognize the possibility of carrying forward the light of my ancestors into the realm of healing. By seeing, I learn to respect, and begin to forgive.

To truly see is not only to witness the visible wounds but to become attuned to those buried beneath the surface—traces of pain that live in silence. The act of seeing is intimately bound to the process of surrendering. In the quiet courage to see, the seeds of surrender begin to stir.

### **The Courage to be Broken: Surrender to Imperfection**

Surrender is not a passive letting go, but an active, compassionate response to what has been seen and felt. It is an emotional and ethical gesture—an intentional holding of both the visible and the invisible, the broken and the enduring. In this light, surrender is not about relinquishing control, but about loosening our grip on perfection, making room for tenderness, humility, and healing. While the full unfolding of how surrender emerges from the clarity of seeing lies beyond the scope of this piece of writing, it remains a vital inquiry I hope to pursue in future work—especially as it relates to healing through imperfection and brokenness.

There is only one form of heroism in the world,  
and it consists in seeing the world as it is—  
and in loving it. (Rolland, 1912, p. 2)

Nothing created by humans is perfect. Human history has only proved that so-called “progress” often means replacing old problems with new ones. The history of my family's women over the past century illustrates that brokenness is not an anomaly but a constitutive part of human reality. In this light, the obsession for perfection becomes a source of further suffering, adding to the pain of our inherent imperfections.

A famous teaching from Buddhist tradition helps illuminate this point. The story goes: Once, the Buddha and his disciple Ananda came across a princess who needed help to cross a river. While Ananda passed the young lady to keep distance, Buddha carried her across. The princess left without a word of thanks. A while after they parted ways, Ananda was still upset about her rudeness. He complained to his master: “The Princess should learn some proper manners.” The Buddha replied: “Our disappointment is a result of our over-expectations.” But Ananda wasn't

convinced: “We carried her for such a long distance.” “Dear Ananda,” Buddha replied, “I put her down hours ago, why are you still carrying the burden?”

This story has often been read as a lesson in letting go of ego and resentment. But in the context of my own inquiry, it resonates more deeply as a metaphor for intergenerational trauma. The princess is not just a symbol of disappointment; she becomes the embodiment of unacknowledged brokenness, carried long after the event has passed. If trauma remains unseen and unhealed, it lingers like the burden in Ananda’s mind, silently passed down across generations.

Our obsession with perfection, whether as individuals, families, or societies, mirrors the unseen weight. The longer we cling to it, the less space we allow for healing. But if we can surrender to the imperfect reality of our human condition, we may begin to open the cracks for light to enter. The cracks in brokenness open space for new connections, which has the potential to expand our circle of awaken-ness. As theologian Luis Gómez writes:

The world is not waiting to be transcended or transformed; it is not in need of redemption or reform by the holy or the divine; it is waiting to be recognized for what it is. The recognition, with the implied change in attitude and behavior, is what we call “liberation.” (1993, p.189)

I wonder if this recognition of the broken reality and the quiet surrender to imperfection was the secret that enabled my Taitai and Laolao to preserve their resilience and humanity through immense suffering. Maybe their courage lay in their refusal to close their hearts.

### **Closing: Farewell and ...**

I bid my formal farewell to my Laolao’s earthly life. With deepest gratitude, I carry forward the light of humanity as part of her spiritual life, a light that continues to guide me as I keep searching for meaning in this broken reality.

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