



A Fragmented Journey

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As a young woman born and raised in a relatively small city in China, Jieyang, I come from a city that has a particular culture (Chaoshan culture) that influences the family structure and the expectations of men and women. The culture here dictates the lives of many, and involves customs such as women staying at home while the men deal with the external affairs¹. By doing so, these actions conform to the principle of ‘Ying and Yang’²; where getting married young and having children is the most important thing in a woman’s life. I spent my high school and university years outside of Jieyang in another city, so my exposure to these assumptions and expectations were minimal until now. After returning home in 2019, I was now exposed to these customs as a young adult, and it was only a matter of time before my mother began pressuring me to take certain steps in life. With new pressures looming over me in combination with the restrictions of a pandemic, my already turbulent relationship with my mother took a turn for the worst.

The complex relationship between my mother and I is the true subject of my writing. This dissertation is a memoir, a memoir of my relationship with my mother that mostly consists of fragmentary and episodic memories scattered throughout my mind. The memories I have recorded are difficult; they are the experiences that have caused me to wake up screaming in the dark of night, the experiences that have hurt me deeply, and memories that have brought me to my lowest points. By recording them, I hope to understand them better, and by doing so learn to heal and find forgiveness between my mother and I.

David Metzger notes that ‘a fragment appears incomplete, be it a sliver cut off from a larger whole, an unfinished work, or a work that seems insubstantial.’³ This dissertation is but a fragment of my personal experience, a few moments of my life pieced together, and only a part of the whole picture. The stories I tell are drawn from my past which has shaped who I am today, and have helped define my perspective of the world around me. It’s interesting that the etymology of the word ‘fragment’, is also associated with loss, a lack of something and even ‘the wound’⁴.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Chinese text is my own. The original text reads ‘家人，女正位乎内，男正位乎外；男女正，天地之大义也’， I have translated from Chinese and paraphrased from the text 姬昌 Ji Chang, *易经 The Book Of Changes* (Hunan: Hunan Publisher, 2021).

² See footnote 1 for the original text. Chang, *The Book Of Changes*.

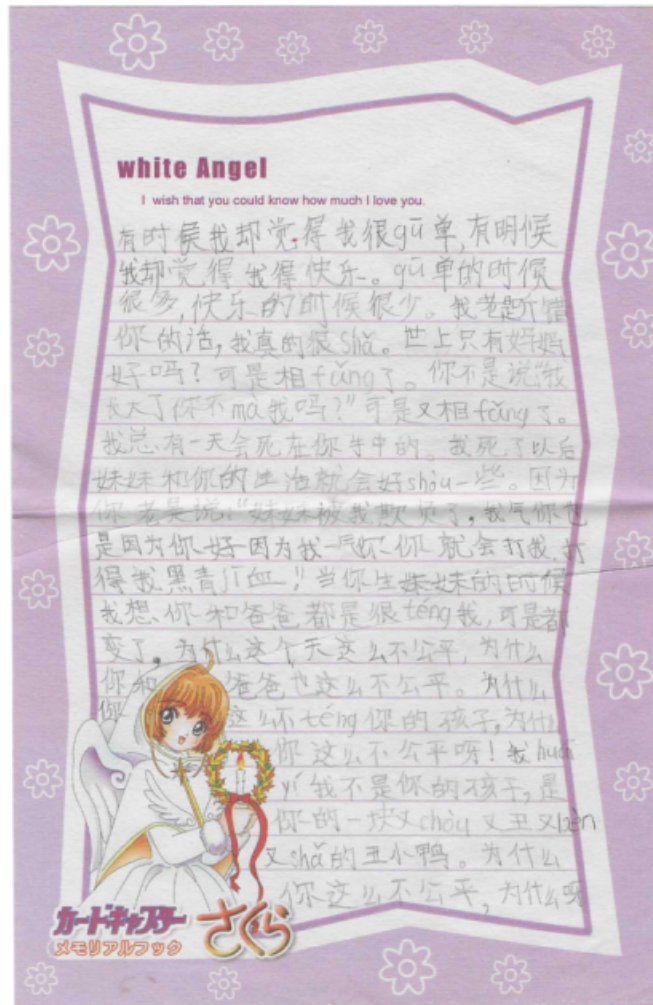
³ David Metzger, *Musical Modernism At The Turn Of The Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 106.

⁴ This quote is from Andre Guyaux, and is quoted and translated in *The Poetics Of Fragmentation In Contemporary British And American Fiction*, ed. by, Vanessa Guinery and Wojciech Drag (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2019), p. xii.

At first, I thought that due to the nature of my memories I would primarily be writing in a more 'fragmented' style. The four stories I chose dictated otherwise, so the more fragmented thoughts, imagery and memories have been spread out between the primary texts. As for my writing, the process of writing has been a very challenging experience for me. Recalling my painful childhood traumas has forced me to relive them, and as I began to write them down more and more memories came back to me. Even as I refined my writing and research, my emotions fluctuated between hatred for my mother, and wanting to forgive her.

The aim of this dissertation is one of healing, making peace with myself, and attempting to understand my mother from her maternal perspective. I have used theoretical texts, novels and poems to explore, analyse and be critical of my ideas to the best of my ability. I hope that my writing will also be a means of education and comfort for those who can relate to my situation, in particular young women who may have ambivalent relationships with their mothers like myself.

Despite all of the difficulty, pain and trauma, I just wanted to say deep down in my heart I know I will always love my mother, and I know she loves me too.



2006

Sometimes I feel so lonely, while sometimes I feel so happy. I feel alone a lot of the time, happy times are rare. I'm a fool to listen to you all the time. 'Mother is the best in the world, a child is like a gem for her'. This is the opposite of what you see me as, I am not a gem for you. Didn't you say you'd stop scolding and hitting me when I grew up? This is the opposite of what you do. I shall die at your hands one of these days, and you and sister can live an easier life without me. I thought you loved me very much, but all this has changed.

Am I not your child? I have doubts that I am your child.

I am ugly, clumsy and stupid in your eyes.

I am the ugly duckling.

Why is your love so unfair? Why?⁵

⁵ The text under each image of my letters is my translation of the above letter.

Story I: The Circle of Life

It was a warm, summers evening, and I was invited along with my mother, to one of her friend's homes to have a meal. The family was rather typical of my city in China, and the eldest daughter, closest to my age who could easily pass as an older sister, ran around the house attempting to control her 2 year old daughter. For the 3 hours I was there, the sound of crying, laughing, screaming and electronic toys filled the space, and it was as if there was no time for rest. Despite this, we managed to have some conversation over the dinner table, but the atmosphere remained negative and pessimistic as my elders all discussed about their babysitting and marriages. The elder sister remarked to me that she had not slept soundly since the birth of her daughter for a plethora of reasons, and I wondered how she continued to handle the energy of her child. Yet my biggest surprise was still to come and that is despite the generally negative, helpless vibes I was being fed all evening, the sister told me she was preparing yet for another pregnancy, due to the advice of her elder friends.

Now is the best time to have another child?

I was in utter shock. A mother who needed a nanny as extra support until 2am everyday, to only wake up again at 8am for work, not to mention the endless housework that also seemed to consume her, wanted to have another child right now? At this point I couldn't hold my own voice back and I asked openly at the table:

“So what really is the purpose or meaning of having children if the only thing it seems to cause you is difficulty?”

My question was immediately replied to by none other than my own mother:

“Of course it is our duty to reproduce and continue the circle of life!”⁶

And continued to give the example of salmon spawning:

“Mature salmon will make an incredible upstream journey to spawn in the same places they were when they hatched even though that migration is extremely difficult. Not only do they have to scale fish ladders within dams but also other man-made obstacles along the way. Despite the difficulty, many salmon will return to their birthplace multiple times throughout their life to spawn again and again. So it is like our own journey as mothers, even though pregnancy and children is difficult work, it is a natural experience for us women to have.”

I decided to hold back my thoughts on how silly I thought the idea of humans being compared to salmons was for the sake of peace, as I would have been scrutinized for not only that, but also for the questioning of my mother's words.

⁶ From here on all bold text in quotation marks are words belonging to my mother, and of course translated into English.

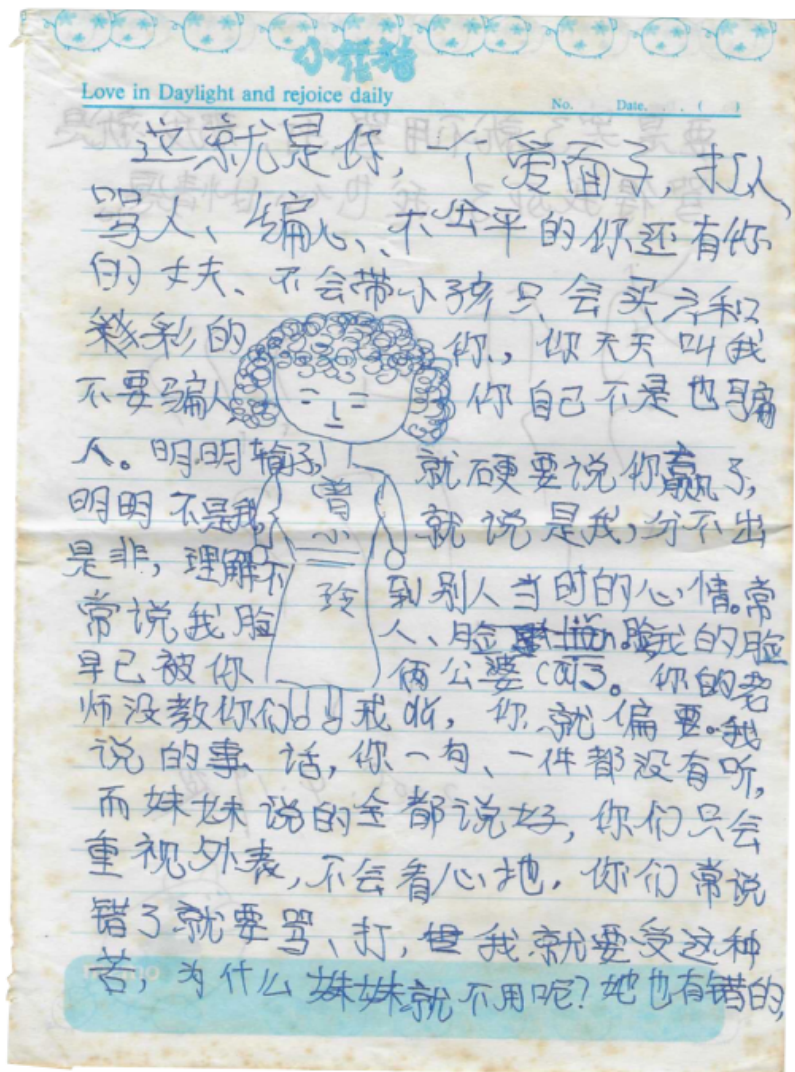
As I recall these memories now with a more critical mind, I have asked myself several questions regarding women: What exactly are the roles and expectations of women in society today? How does the role of motherhood play into those expectations and why is it that we are expected to follow those expectations? In *Discovering the Inner Mother*, Bethany Webster argues that the origins of certain attitudes and expectations towards women stem from patriarchal cultures; where women are required to ‘sacrifice and utterly deplete themselves in order to mother a child.’⁷ Not only are they expected to abandon all personal ambitions, but also be the primary care takers of the household and constantly serve the needs of others⁸. Furthermore, Beverly A. Ogilvie states that ‘women, and in particular mothers, are not viewed as sexual, violent or aggressive, but rather as gentle, passive and nonsexual.’⁹ Therefore, a woman who questions or acts outside of these cultural expectations in attempt to be something different, is a direct challenge to the cultural image of what a mother (or woman) is.

So where do all of these expectations lead to? It seems to me that women who attempt to adhere to them become increasingly pessimistic, tired, frustrated and even aggressive, which of course contradicts what a woman is ‘supposed’ to be in the first place. These cultural expectations are a recipe for disaster, the cause of much pain in women, both mothers and daughters. Not only are they unrealistic and impractical, but are also a barrier against women who need to speak about the struggles and problems of their reality. If a mother behaves outside of the character society has defined for her, it becomes taboo to talk about, problems are then never resolved because they are not addressed and swept under the rug. These issues are then carried into the next generation and a cycle of pain and difficulty continues until someone puts a stop to it.

⁷ Bethany Webster, *Discovering The Inner Mother* (New York: HarperCollins, 2021), pp. 17.

⁸ Webster, p. 17.

⁹ Beverly Ogilvie, *Mother-Daughter Incest A Guide For Helping Professionals*, 1st edn (Haworth Maltreatment and Trauma Press, 2004), pp. 6.



2005

This is you, a vain, violent, eccentric and unfair mother. You don't take care of your children, all you do is play your gambling games. You accuse me of being a liar, but you are the one that always lies. You lose your games, but you say you won.

I'm not the one with a bad mind, even though you say I am. You can't tell right from wrong. You can't understand other people's feelings. Why can't you hear my voice? Why? Even just a word? You listen to sister's but not mine.

You only care about appearances. I am not your pretty girl, you don't know what's inside of me. You always say if we do something wrong we will be scolded and beaten, so why am I the only target in this home? What about sister? Can't she make mistakes? If tears from her can prevent violence, why can't you see my tears? Why?

Story II: The Formula for a Golden Child

“3 + 1”

Sensible, submissive and tactful. These are the three qualities that apparently defined whether I was a ‘good’ child or not. The ‘3’ in this formula represents these qualities whereas ‘1’ is the indication of the others used as a comparison group, mostly my younger sister and cousin, who set the standards for my own behaviour. Through the eyes of my mother, it was this formula, this criteria that defined whether I could be ultimately judged as a ‘good’ daughter or not. This perspective was also shared amongst my family and extended family too so with my mother’s role of reporting, the whole family defined who I was on the basis of my mother’s subjective opinions of me.

“How can I be a ‘good’ daughter?” I used to ask myself.

At the age of 5 or 6, I remember being left home alone as my mother decided that it would be better for her to socialize with her friends than to watch over her own child. I remember the talks we had preceding the moment she walked out:

“Can you stay at home by yourself? If you stay at home and go to sleep by yourself then you are a good, submissive girl and I will love you more.”

“But I am scared, could you stay at home?”

Fragments of these conversations still exist in the shadows of my mind, the strange mix of wanting to please my mother, yearning for her compliments, her love and yet having to cry silently on my bed to do so wondering about what was hiding in the darkness of our home. The desire to please her always resulted in me saying:

“Yes, you can go.”

These are not the only fragments of the past that haunt my memory, the earliest memory I have is at the age of 3 years old when I was living at a local nursery school 6 days a week. The familiar feeling of yearning for my mother’s love still echoes in these few fragments I have left, sometimes intertwined with feelings of restlessness as I recall scary nights feeling alone and listening to the growling of motorbikes on the streets outside. The strong reluctance towards going back on a Monday morning also remains somewhere in me; the fear of wetting the bed and being scolded again by the carers was enough to make my young self never want to go back. Yet I remained there for a year and a half, only to move on to another nursery centre.

I remember a dream that used to occur again and again. In the dream I found myself running around my neighbourhood attempting to find my home with no avail. I recall running up the ramps that were intended for motorbikes, leading up to the seventh floor of the apartment building I used to live. At times a large dog would be chasing me, and at other times an intimidating figure. After running frantically for what felt like ages, I would eventually reach some form of destination only to be engulfed by deep, void of darkness which jolted me awake.

Sigmund Freud argues that the historical origins of reoccurring dreams lie in childhood experiences¹⁰. Rosalind Cartwright also points out that repeated dreams reflect difficulties that have not been adequately processed during wakefulness¹¹. It appears as though my repeating dream could be linked to my childhood experiences at the nursery and my mother often leaving me home alone at a young age. Reflecting on this also brought back more memories of my early secondary school days. During that time, my mother used to sign me up for after school classes that ended very late at night. As class finished, I always yearned to see my mother waiting for me after lesson, but unfortunately it was a rare sight. I called her frequently asking her to come, but most of the time she was too busy playing mahjong¹² with friends. I recall walking back alone in dim lighting, the quiet streets intimidated me and sometimes I would nervously run home. Looking back now, it seems that all of these experiences relate to the need for my mother's company and attention; they then manifested into my repeating nightmares. It's interesting that now, over the last few years, I have not had this particular type of dream and no longer suffer from its effects. I suspect this is because I am now more independent and less in need of my mother's company and attention.

“Dreams are the guiding words of the soul. Why should I henceforth not love my dreams and not make their riddling images into objects of my daily consideration?”¹³

Carl Jung's ideas surrounding dreams are also very fascinating and practical. According to Jung, dreams are not so much a fantasy or deceptive in nature, rather they are a means of guidance for the “ego” from the “self”¹⁴. Whether it be from the past, the present or the possible future the self attempts to communicate things to the ego that it does not know and therefore have an effect on the conscious individual.¹⁵

I can't help but wonder, what is my ‘self’ attempting to communicate to me now? Could my dreams be a means of guidance for the next steps I need to take with my mother?

Reality or not?

There is a distant memory from my childhood that despite being a vivid, very real memory of mine I'm not actually sure if it occurred or not. I recall playing with other children in the Nursery I was staying at on a warm evening and suddenly falling over flat on my face with my arms outstretched. As I did so, a speeding motorbike sped past and ran over my outstretched hands. Miraculously my hands were absolutely fine and I went home that weekend explaining to my mum what had happened to me.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation Of Dreams*, 1st edn (New York: Basic Books, 1955).

¹¹ Rosalind Cartwright and I. Romanek, "Repetitive Dreams Of Normal Subjects", *Sleep Research*, 1978, 7.

¹² This is a tile-based game commonly played in China.

¹³ Carl Jung, *The Red Book: A Readers Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), p. 137.

¹⁴ Zauraiz Lone, "Jung's Dream Theory And Modern Neuroscience: From Fallacies To Facts." *Psych Central*, 2018 <<https://psychcentral.com/lib/jungs-dream-theory-and-modern-neuroscience-from-fallacies-to-facts#1>> [Accessed 29 April 2021].

¹⁵ Lone, “Jung’s Dream Theory And Modern Neuroscience: From Fallacies To Facts”.

Unsurprisingly, she didn't believe me and accused me of making the story up. It was obvious to her that if this had happened, my hands would surely have been broken and I certainly would have been harmed in some way or other.

The strange nature of this memory begged the questions, how exactly do memories form and how do we define their reality? Why are some memories so clear while some events go past without ever being recalled again? William Friedman suggests that we recall certain things due to 'the vividness of events in memory' and it is the vividness of the event that enables us to pin point when that exact event happened.¹⁶ On the other hand, Micaiah Zwarts and Stefanie Sharman suggested that memories are recalled when personal events of the individual are associated with certain landmarks within an individual's lifetime.¹⁷ Steve Janssen and Jaap Murre also presented that an individual's stage in life also affects how a memory is recalled.¹⁸ It is common to remember particularly the younger and adolescent years apparently because the individual is starting to really develop a greater awareness of the self¹⁹. In my own particular case though, my memory appears to relate to a traumatic event. According to Dorthe Berntsen, traumatic events are more easily recalled due to the intense emotions associated with them.²⁰ It is the vividness of this memory in combination with the traumatic experience which really makes me question if a motorbike really did happen to drive over my hands.

I wonder what it was that resulted in my mother's decision to leave me to the care of others. From my understanding, she was not busy with any job or unbearable housework at that time so why abandon me? These are the questions that these fragments have left me with and I have even vocalized these questions several times in the past. Every time I did though I always got one of two possible responses, the first was the apparent reality of me being an 'annoying' child as I was one who often woke up during the night crying and the other was due to this, my mother's health began to deteriorate so she could no longer care for my sister and I. According to my mother, I was sent into care as early as 18 months old and my sister was sent away at 2 months to return only when she was 5. My sister regarded her carer as her own mother for years.

I recall one evening at home when I was around 8 years old. Overhearing my mother on the phone talking with her friend who had been trying to get pregnant for a long time I foolishly asked:

“Why can't Liling have a child?”

¹⁶ William Friedman, "Time In Autobiographical Memory." *Social Cognition*, 22 (2004), 591-605.

¹⁷ Micaiah Zwarts and Stefanie Sharman, "Using Personal Landmark Events Improves Judgements About Time, But Not Contents, In Autobiographical Memory." *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 27 (2013), 286-290.

¹⁸ Steve Janssen and Jaap Murre, "Reminiscence Bump In Autobiographical Memory: Unexplained By Novelty, Emotionality, Valence, Or Importance Of Personal Events." *The Quarterly Journal Of Experimental Psychology*, 61 (2008), 1847-1860.

¹⁹ Janssen and Murre, p. 1847-1860

²⁰ Dorthe Berntsen, "The Unbidden Past: Involuntary Autobiographical Memories As A Basic Mode Of Remembering", *Current Directions In Psychological Science*, 19 (2010), 138-142.

My mother responded to me by slapping me across my face as she finished her phone-call. Once she had finished, she asked:

“Do you know why I slapped you?”

“No ..”

“Liling’s failure to bare a child is the core of her misery. How dare you ask such a question? You can’t mention this from now on ok?”

“Ok ...”

She then went on to comfort the misery she had caused, but this scene still lies firmly etched into my childhood memories. I question why is it that my mother would think that an 8 year old would be asking a spontaneous question with any malicious intent. It almost appears unreal, like a bad dream that contradicts the personal image I have of what an ideal mother is.

My lack of ‘tactfulness’ was very apparent to my mother in comparison with my younger sister or cousin. There was a Chinese saying she always used to tell me that could be translated as **“You cannot even hold your cousin’s feet steady!”** - basically meaning that the distance in quality between my own cousin and I was very great. As a child I didn’t know the origin of this saying, but I came to know that wealthy families of ancient China used to instruct their servants to lift their feet for them whenever they pleased; as lifting your own feet was not deemed necessary if you belonged to a rich household. Regardless of this, I understood that I was deemed inferior to my cousin from my mother’s perspective. These comparisons continued throughout my childhood and adolescence and gradually, as I was always dictated as the worst, I accepted my position as an ‘insensible’, ‘tactless’ and ‘unsubmissive’ daughter. As long as it was my mother setting the standards, I did not have the ability nor the authority to define who I was.

This incident was the first time my mother had slapped me but unfortunately it was not the last. Throughout my adolescence, the slapping continued and I had the most vile language directed towards me. I would run around the house, away from my mother, who used to beat me with a hanger, long stick or slippers and I ended up locking myself inside of my bedroom to protect myself. She would then repeatedly kick the door and threaten me:

“I’m counting up to 3, if you don’t open this door I’m going to beat you even more.”

During the most violent times, my mother would stamp on me, telling me that she hoped I would die and that in her previous life she must have stepped on my coffin. Only by stepping on my coffin would such misfortune fall upon her, that misfortune being me²¹.

²¹ Regarding ‘stepping on ones coffin’, this is a Chaoshan saying and is used when describing something unfortunate has happened. It’s a very malicious saying.

I didn't realise how much the violence and negativity had effected me until I left home for high school and lived in another city. It was the first time I was separated from my mother, and being away from her negative influence made me realise I was not the 'horrible daughter' my mother made me out to be. My teachers and classmates praised my 'well-behaved' character as I did not smoke, drink, go to night clubs or date anyone. It was at that time I also realised that being beaten senseless at home was apparently not a norm for any of my classmates. Despite feeling somewhat enlightened, I remained quiet, timid and insecure throughout my high school years and dared not pursue the things I enjoyed as I felt undeserving of them. The physical distance between my mother and I was clearly not enough to solve my problems, her negative definitions of me continued to influence every aspect of my life.

There are a few memories of mine that are particularly difficult for me to face. Every time I recall them, I experience a surge of negative emotions and even now as I write this, I feel like they are unforgivable experiences. I have labelled one of them as 'the piano story':

It was a warm afternoon and my little sister was required to practice piano for two hours. I grew bored listening to her practice and after a while we decided to play games of make-believe together. At the time, we were both terrified of my mother so we decided not to tell the truth if she asked what we had been doing. As the clock rang six, my mother returned home and immediately suspected my sister was lying to her about her activities. I was called and then asked if my sister had completed her two hours of piano practice:

“Did your sister complete her piano practice?”

“Yes. She did.”

The moment the words left my mouth my mother slapped me hard across my face. I was afraid that my sister would be in deep trouble, so when she asked again I stuck with my answer as I felt responsible for the situation. One slap after another ran across my face as my mother continued to ask me, and my sister stood by and watched as I stood there scared and ashamed.

There have been several times where I have attempted to address these memories with my mother, reminding her of how she used to punish me and the violence I suffered at her hands. Both my sister and father were aware of her behaviour towards me, they silently accepted it, and even now they refuse to take sides. After arguing my case many times and reminding her of the piano incident, she finally confessed to hitting me. She argued that it had only been once though, as she refused to accept the fact that she slapped me multiple times. This is a narrative I have refused to accept, but pushing my case further resulted in her snapping sarcastically:

“Yes okay! I am the worlds most vicious mother! I don't love you at all, I've been torturing you and I almost beat you to death! Are you satisfied with my answer now?”

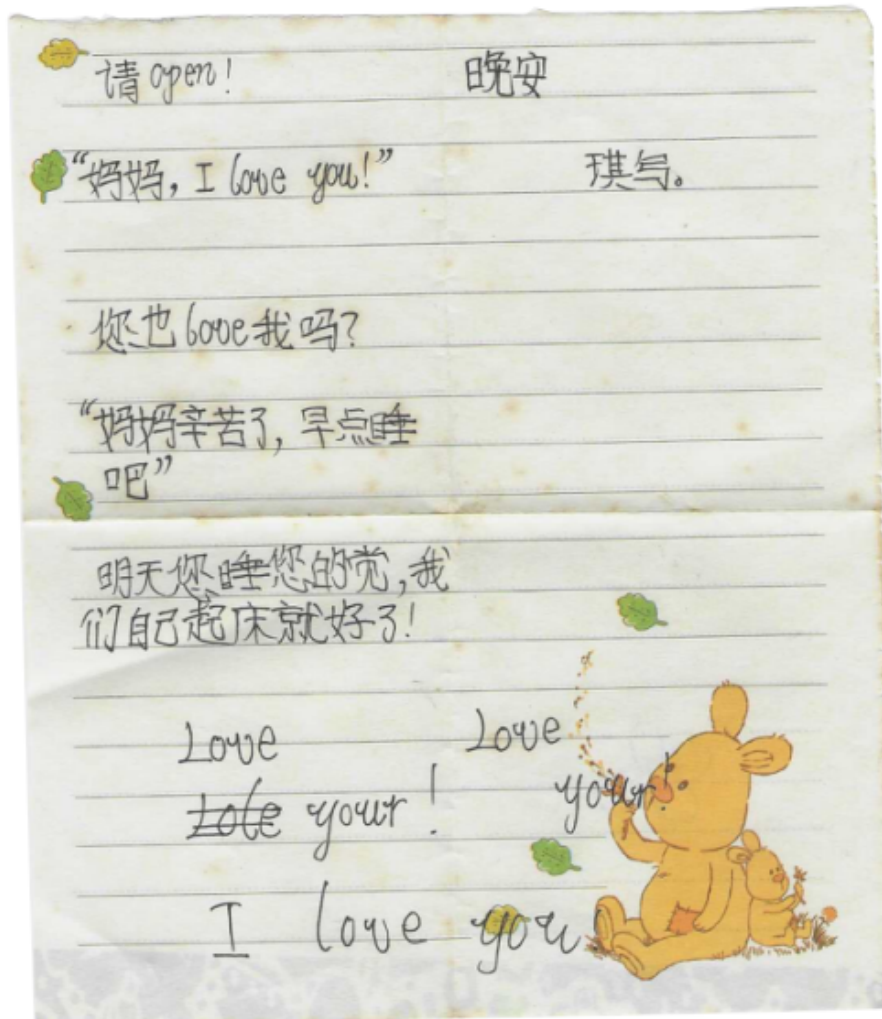
It's at those moments I have realised that speaking of these incidents is taboo in my family. As Bethany Webster points out, in many cases of abuse within families, the family pretends the problems do not exist as if keeping it a secret will make everything OK again²². I understand that my parents generation grew up in a very different environment and culture to what I live in now, but I know that these issues will not simply disappear, even if I confess to myself that it's possible my memory has gone astray.

'Our definition of love must expand to include accountability'²³

My dear mother, you do not want to look back into the trauma of the past do you? I'm sure you also feel guilty for treating me so violently and you snap at me as a means of escape, escaping the truth that you do not have the courage to admit. The reality is, I do not say these things as a means of attacking you, as a matter of fact I say them so I don't hold them against you forever. Protecting you from the accountability you must take is not an act of love, I'm tired of hurting and I want my wounds to heal. No longer will I hold onto this pain, I refuse to carry it into the next generation of our family. I am deeply sorry that you suffered in your own childhood, but I am sure you didn't want the same for me right?

²² Webster, p. 35.

²³ Webster, p. 88.



2004

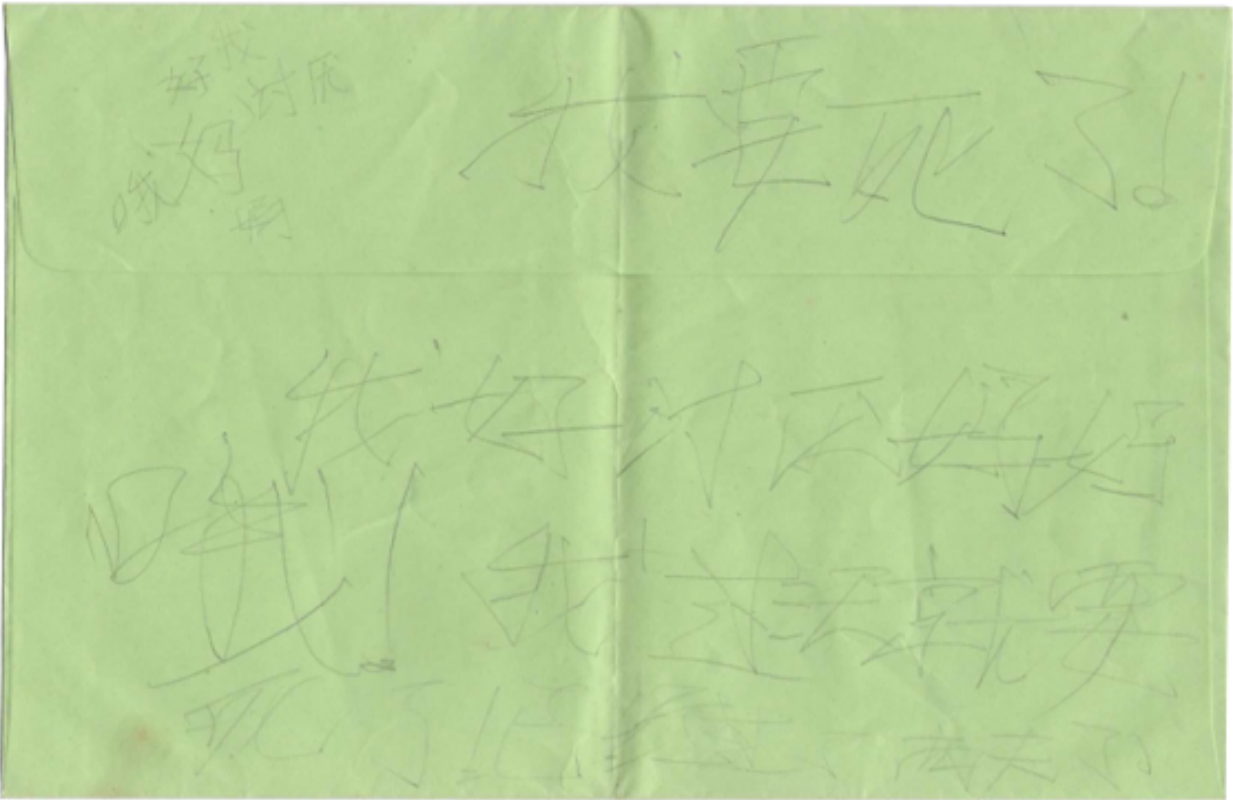
Mama, I love you!

Do you also love me?

Mama, you are tired today, have an early rest.

Tomorrow you don't need to wake up early for us, we can get up and go to school by ourselves.

I love you!



2004

Mama, I hate you so much!

I feel like I am dying!

I really hate you!

I feel like I will die in three days and two days have already gone!

Story III: Love and Hate

A rather recent memory of mine was when my mother became infuriated with me in public when I mentioned that I would like to apply to MA courses in the UK. In the shop of a family friend surrounded by others she yelled:

“You just want to abandon your parents! You have no responsibility towards us! You don’t have a drop of gratitude towards us for bringing you up! You really are an insolent daughter! Why did I give birth to you? Do you think the moon is rounder in a foreign country rather than your home in China?”

I felt like her reaction was so extreme and I try to push back these memories because of the toxic feelings that come alongside them. After her reaction, I simply remember curling up in a nearby chair and quietly replying “no” as tears rolled down my cheeks.

In the end she decided to change her approach and support my decision to study abroad but I had already delayed my Masters degree for two years because of her strong opposition. After two years of anguish, I finally felt some relief and love towards her for respecting my choice and her concern about my safety and health when travelling alone. One thing that stayed with me though was a hatred for the horrible qualities she accused me of. I also hated her selfishness as she did not want me to leave and be far away from home. She wanted me to live within her bounds, wanted power and control over my life and live in the small cultural world of Jieyang; where if you were a woman, marrying young was of the highest priorities. Within the past couple or so years she has started to complain about my climbing age and the fact that I am still not married. I couldn’t help but think why is it that marriage is now more important than my education? Throughout my whole childhood I was constantly insulted and punished for not living up to the academic achievements of my other family members so why the change of stance? It was my education that drove me towards independence and seeking further study in the UK. On the other hand I cannot help but be grateful for my mother’s strictness in regards to my education. If it were not for that strictness it is unlikely that I would be where I am now, rather I would be a young woman at home waiting to be married into the most appropriate family we could find.

My feelings towards my mother fluctuate between love and hate. At times, I lay down in bed and feel like I deeply miss her, despite the fact that we are sleeping under the same roof. Long gone are the days of when I used to tell her these feelings, I am no longer the little girl who can easily be bribed with sweets after being slapped across the face and insulted. At times, the hateful feelings towards her were so strong during intense conflict I couldn’t help but think: what if she died now? Would I feel more liberated or sad? Sometimes these feelings of love and hate would fluctuate in an instant and sometimes one or the other would extend over long periods of time. I often questioned if I was a little crazy when having these feelings go back and forth time and time again. I couldn’t fathom how a daughter could possibly hate her mother and not only hate, but feeling so much hate that the mind would wonder what life would be like if she wasn’t there. These deep, dark thoughts would shock me to my core and make me extremely uncomfortable.

In Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I found the character Tereza also had similar fluctuating emotions towards her mother. Her mother cast off youth and beauty and insisted Tereza remain with her in the world of immodesty, where there was no shame towards the body at home or in public and forbade her to lock the bathroom door²⁴. She hated her mother for lacking shame, loathed her immodesty and the fact that she deprived her of the right of her own identity²⁵. Nevertheless her love for her mother still remained and as Tereza stated herself: 'she would have done anything for her if her mother asked in a loving voice'²⁶.

During my research in my attempt to navigate these fluctuating emotions. I came across the term 'ambivalence' while studying the psychology of colonialism. It describes 'a continuous fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite, it also refers to a simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from a object, person or action.'²⁷ At first, the thought of comparing my own relationship with my mother to the colonizers and the colonized seemed utterly ridiculous.

'The problem for colonial discourse is that it attempts to produce compliant subjects who reproduce its assumptions, habits and values, in other words that 'mimic' the colonizer.'²⁸

I wouldn't go as far as saying a parent could be describe as one who attempts the colonization of their own child, I believe this sounds too dramatic. It is certain aspects of the psychological reality of the situation that draws my attention: 'the colonial relationship is always ambivalent' and because of this 'it generates the seeds of its own destruction'.²⁹ I understand that when a child is born into an environment and culture by default they become a part of it, but once that child begins to think for themselves there is an option to reject that culture. The continuous attempts of my mother to force her standards, assumptions, habits and values upon myself in rather violent, invasive ways does make me question how I can label my position.

As I continued my research I realized that maternal ambivalence appeared to be a common experience amongst mothers. I realized that these conflicts that I had with my mother were not just the result of my own ambivalent feelings towards my mother, but also my mother's towards myself. Over the years I have asked her whether she truly has love for me and these questions always resulted in her becoming extremely angry. I now wonder if that anger came from a fear of admitting the negative feelings she held towards me. Indeed, we live in a society where a mother must absolutely love her children, and we recite ancient poems throughout our childhood to remember the greatness of maternal love:

²⁴ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness Of Being: A Novel* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), pp. 27-44.

²⁵ Kundera, p. 27-44.

²⁶ Kundera, p. 44.

²⁷ Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity In Theory, Culture And Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 161.

²⁸ Vida Rahiminezhad and Soheila Arabian, *Acculturation, Otherness, And Return In Adichie's Americanah* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), p. 85

²⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location Of Culture*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2012), p. 86.

‘Who says the little soul of the waving grass, could ever repay for the warmth of the spring sun.’³⁰

But was it really just the natural experience of ambivalent feelings dictating my mother’s behaviour? Or were there other factors in play too? The psychoanalyst Hendrika C. Freud wrote that ‘A mother who is disappointed in her own mother will be more than likely to have an unusually ambivalent relationship with her daughter.’³¹ It’s interesting that my mother actually told me that the worst insults and profanity towards her came from her own mother. Her father was also a short-tempered man and used to hit her and her siblings for the smallest mistakes. She swore that she never wanted to display this same behaviour to her own children, yet just like her parents she displayed the exact same behaviour towards me; continuously insulting me and physically abusing me as a child.

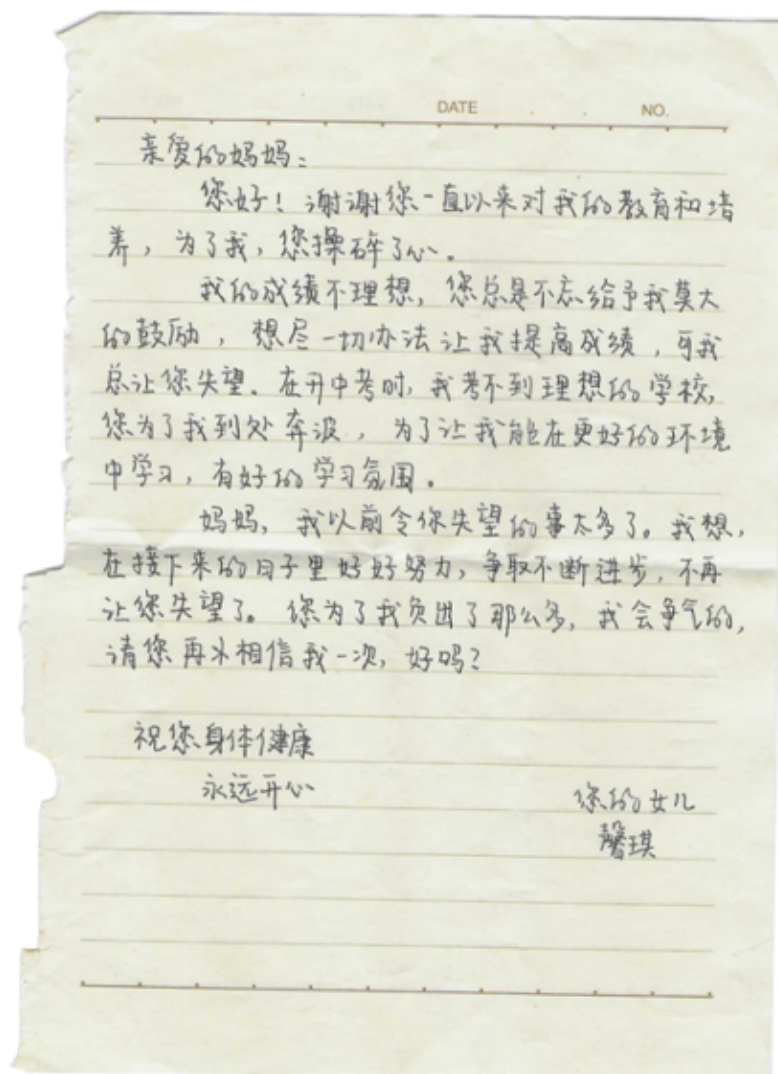
‘The stamp that parents imprint on the child will induce similar patterns in subsequent generations. This is particularly true when a family endured experiences that are traumatic in nature.’³²

Freud here gives a perfect explanation of why I am so resistant to the idea of getting married and having children. I am aware and can acknowledge now what my mother went through as a child, and I am exploring my own past to the best of my ability. Despite this, I can’t help but fear that the damage of the past will subconsciously effect future relationships with my children.

³⁰ This is a translation of part of a poem I have known by heart since my childhood. During primary school we are required to memorise this poem and recite it. The original poem was written by Jiao Meng, *A Traveler's Song*, 806.

³¹ Hendrika Freud, *Electra Vs Oedipus: The Drama Of The Mother-Daughter Relationship* (Routledge, 2010), p. 5.

³² H. Freud, p.5.



2009

Dear Mama,

Thank you for your nurturing and cultivating me all the time. My grades are not as ideal as others, but you encouraged me and tried to help me get better grades. I still didn't manage to get into the best middle school but you paid for me to go to another school with a better learning atmosphere.

Mama, I have disappointed you in so many ways before. I will work hard to progress in the following days, you have done so much for me, I will do my best. Please trust me again.

Hope you stay healthy and happy,

Your daughter,

XinQi

Story IV: Privacy

I sat in the small, confined space of my mother's car peering out of the window in anticipation of the invading, personal questions that were coming my way.

“Did you sleep with that guy?”

“Why do you even ask me a question like that out of nowhere?”

“It's nothing, I just want to know. So have you?”

“I don't want to talk about this with you.”

“Have you slept with anyone yet?”

“No! Don't ask me questions like this any more.”

“So you're still a virgin?”

“So what if I were a virgin or not? What are you going to do about it?”

“I'm going to assume you've had sex then if you're saying this.”

“Just stop! You're so annoying!”

“I thought I told you that you'd better not do this!”

She always had these intrusive questions that seemed to appear out of nowhere. If my sister or I happened to be alone with her, a sudden onset of questions would occur attempting to pry into our emotional and sexual well-being.

“What does it feel like when he hugs you?”

“What about kissing?”

“Does he ask you to touch his private areas?”

“Does he obsess over your body?”

“My sex life is deeply unhappy ... and sometimes I feel like going off the rails, but I am a good woman.”

Whenever I leave my family home, my time out is carefully calculated by my mother and I am aggressively questioned on where I have been once I return home. If my mother believes that what I say doesn't add up with her calculations, I am questioned further. It is also common for her to barge into my room at any given moment, acting as if she is going to the balcony to water the flowers. Her body language and attempts to find out what I am doing say otherwise; I know that she wishes to find me on my phone talking to a man that she can ask about.

I wonder at what point did our relationship begin to change? I recall sharing secrets with her when I was in primary school, in secondary school and even throughout high school. I desired her companionship, her love, I trusted her and truly believed that she was the only one who could love me the most in this world. But now I resist her curiosities and no longer feel the need to share my thoughts, problems or secrets.

In Linda Gray Sexton's memoir *Searching for Mercy Street*, I found myself deeply empathising with Linda's situation relating to her own mother, Anne Sexton. Linda often suffered from the blurred physical and emotional boundaries between her and her mother³³. After realizing the psychological damage it was doing to her, she began to reject her mother's intrusive questions and attempted to distance herself from her³⁴. During this time, Linda also began therapy in an attempt to treat her depression, but her mother was adamant on knowing every last detail about her sessions; an opportunity that she saw as a "reunion", a means of resisting against her daughters distancing³⁵.

"What did you talk about?" she would inquire. "I'm paying for this, so I have a right to ask."³⁶

The text did not only expose me to Linda's perspective, but also Anne's, and I attempted to understand her position in hope of understanding my own mother's actions. Anne's assertive demands demonstrated her distorted understanding of the boundaries between her and Linda. It became such an issue that Linda's psychiatrist had to step in and ask Anne to stop asking Linda such personal questions; a situation that resulted in intense animosity from Anne:

"I'm paying someone to take you away from me."³⁷

Later on, in a letter to Linda, Anne details a series of conflicting and painful emotions as she realizes that Linda has begun to build a defensive wall against her.

"To lose you seems worse than death but that is what I must prepare to do ... The hardest part was our closeness, our deep and lasting relationship, our bonds of confidences ... I feel that is no place for me now. I wonder what my role is. To be mean? I guess so. No longer the friendly sister."³⁸

Reading over Anne's letter triggered many memories of my own. There have been many times where I have attempted to prove my independence in front of my own mother, prove that something I own truly belongs to myself only. My mother would reply with phrases such as:

³³ Linda Gray Sexton, *Searching For Mercy Street: My Journey Back To My Mother* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1994), p. 70.

³⁴ Sexton, p. 70.

³⁵ Sexton, p. 70.

³⁶ Sexton, p. 71.

³⁷ Sexton, p. 71.

³⁸ Sexton, p. 73,74.

“Everything you have is from me, including the person you are, you stayed in my uterus for 10 months and it is my blood that flows in you.”

“I am the closest person to you in this world, and no one can love you more than me.”

My mother glorified her boundless behaviours and argued that they were motivated by her love and concern. She saw me as a part of her, not as an individual.

Ogilvie has pointed out that one of the reasons why a mother might see her daughter as an extension of herself, is because the mother is experiencing ‘a symbiotic relationship’ with her daughter³⁹. Symptoms of this include the mother attempting to re-experience her own infancy through her daughter due to unsolved desires that have been evoked during adulthood; such as disappointment with her own mother⁴⁰. This can result in the mother anchoring herself through her daughter, without anything else to look forward to in life⁴¹. The behaviour of the mother then often leads to ‘boundary violations’, such as a strong desire to control the daughter’s life, and an intense curiosity regarding the daughter’s intimate relationships.⁴²

So what do I know of my mother’s childhood? Indeed, my mother has told me many times that her childhood was deeply unhappy. She was born during the Cultural Revolution in a poor family of seven; consisting of two parents and five older sisters. During the revolution Chairman Mao considered certain categories of people as enemies including ‘landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements and rightists’⁴³. My grandfather’s family fell under the ‘landlord’ category, and as a son of a landlord he became an object of criticism and was expelled from his workplace. My mother once told me that multiple times her father was brought to his knees amongst angry crowds, he was pushed, shoved and had litter thrown at him as the crowds chanted “strike the counter-revolution!”. As his life took a hostile turn, he became short-tempered and abusive. With no longer any work, the burden of providing fell onto my grandmother, who then became extremely tired and foul-mouthed. As for my mother, the final and youngest child, the family had hoped for a son so their newborn daughter was immediately a disappointment. As a rejected child in a complex family during difficult times, my mother was then brought up predominantly by her elder sister. It seems that emotional comfort, education and care were a luxury, as the most important factor back then was to simply survive, to not starve to death and see another day.

Today, materialistically speaking my family lives a very comfortable life. The difficulties of the past have remained in the past so I cannot say that I fully understand the childhood experience of my mother. What I have done is think deeply about her circumstances, and I have realised that as a child all of my materialistic desires were fulfilled, whereas my mother’s family struggled even for basic needs. My mother

³⁹ Ogilvie, p. 12-15.

⁴⁰ Ogilvie, p. 12-15.

⁴¹ Ogilvie, p. 12-15.

⁴² Ogilvie, p. 12-15.

⁴³ Jian Guo, Yongyi Song and Yuan Zhou, *Historical Dictionary Of The Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Scarecrow Press, 2006), p. 14.

dressed in her sister's old clothing, slept under a torn quilt, and would be beaten by her father for stealing eggs around the home. I wish now that I could hug the suffering child my mother once was, and I feel a great deal of empathy towards her for the suffering she went through. But what that suffering does not justify, is abusive behaviour towards myself. I'm at a point in my life now where I am fed up of feeling guilty over her morbid fortune telling, her accusations that I do not love her, her constant attempts to rein control over my life, and the extreme emotional states she goes through to do so. I reject the symbiotic reality she is attempting to live in and it is time for myself to start really defining some boundaries.

Finally, as Webster points out in *Discovering the Inner Mother*, when we feel compassion towards the person hurting us, we tend to soften our boundaries and mistakenly believe that they didn't mean to hurt us⁴⁴. In our minds they are no longer responsible for their actions, and we build walls to protect them. What I have learnt is you can still be compassionate while having strong boundaries with those who might unintentionally hurt you. Putting distance between someone you love about does not always mean you lack care for them, rather it can actually put you in a better position to handle that relationship. My mother's background has made it very difficult for her to understand the importance of establishing boundaries, but I am going to be the one who makes the first move. As Bethany Webster said so well, establishing boundaries is a form of 'mothering ourselves' and 'self-love.'⁴⁵

Conclusion

This piece of writing is the first time I have ever recorded and told the story of the ambivalent reality between my mother and I. In the past, I used to cry, shout and lash out at her as I was eager to reclaim my childhood that I felt had been robbed from me. My memories haunted my day to day life, and made me hate both my apparent weakness and my mother's tyranny. I knew that the constant misery I was putting myself through was not going to solve any problems, so I guess it got to the point where I decided to go on a journey and try and heal myself. This dissertation, the beginning of that journey, has forced me to express dark thoughts that have lingered inside for too long, and writing them down in an honest manner has helped me immensely.

'Only when I was able to acknowledge what had happened to me could I begin to dig a grave for those events.'⁴⁶

Sexton's words were a wake up call for me. I must remind myself that I should bid farewell to these memories, continue to shape my own life and claim an identity for myself. As I look back now at the stories I have wrote, I realise that the anger that used to burn inside of me is not as intense as it once was. Rather than wallowing in my own pain, I attempted to understand my mother from her perspective, and empathise with her situation. By doing so, I have opened up new ways to navigate our relationship and have a positive outlook for the future. As difficult as it was writing this, it has been an emotional outlet for me, a way for me to relieve my negativity.

⁴⁴ Webster, p. 71.

⁴⁵ Webster, p. 71.

⁴⁶ Sexton, p. 131.

‘The end of a melody is not its goal, but nonetheless, if the melody had not reached its end it would not have reached its goal either.’⁴⁷

For Nietzsche, there is no destination or completion in a melody, the purpose of the melody is to simply be expressed. This journey to me is like a melody, an ongoing one that will continue to record the experiences that confuse me, and the experiences that shake me to my core. It is not the end, neither is it the whole story, but these are moments that have shaped who I am today.

I hope that one day my mother and I can both talk to each other about all the difficulties we have been through, come to terms with each other, and experience healing together.

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⁴⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche: Human, All Too Human: A Book For Free Spirits* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 360.

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