

## **An Interview with Ama during the Lunar New Year**

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“過年加油, 怎麼都是作業嗎?” (“You have come for the New Year, why all this homework”) Ama smiles as I prepare our interview. I blush whilst laughing along, aware of the value she places on education and is tacitly overjoyed to help with this assignment. ‘Ama’ (阿嬤) is the standard Taiwanese reference to the title of Grandmother and is how Xu Yanqie (徐顏秋娥) is referred to by both her children and I. Ama was introduced to me by her granddaughter, a good friend of mine who has invited me to celebrate the lunar new year with her family in Taizhong (台中). We are sat around the circular family dinner table, a standard feature in most Chinese and Taiwanese households. For the past three evenings, the table has held an array of dishes prepared for our lunar new year dinners, all cooked by Ama herself before encouraging me to eat, eat and eat more. Later, I would be shown a picture of Ama’s five children, standing up straight in front of this very dining table. She tells me that between the ages of 23 and 33, she and Agong (阿公, Xu Xiuxiong 徐秀雄) originally had 6 children. However, their last child, a baby boy, would die of a heart defect, just three months after birth.

Today, these five children are once again gathered around the same table drinking tea, eagerly listening to me interview their Ama, whilst their Agong is sat bashful but comfortable in his chair in the corner. His children all claim that he is shy, but I have already witnessed Agong, after a few sips of whiskey, eager to contribute to his grandchildren’s evening conversation and repeat how much he loves and is proud of them.

“I was born in 1944, as old as spring mud!” Ama remarks, proud to admit her age of 78. That’s 78 years right here in the district of Qingshui, Taizhong (清水區). Ama tells me she enjoys her Qingshui lifestyle, although admits she has never had the opportunity to live elsewhere. In this coastal district, Ama was born, attended school, met and married her husband and raised all her children, who attended the same elementary school as both of their parents. I reflect with amazement that this town has seen Ama grow from a starving daughter to such a proud Grandmother.

Born the third oldest into a very poor family of 9 children, Ama’s early life was undoubtedly bitter. Her grandparents came to Taiwan from Huian (惠安), a

coastal county in the Chinese province of Fujian, yet Ama remembers neither the date nor the age of her grandparents at the time of this migration. Her parents earned money by making and repairing damaged clothing, mainly using leather, to sell by the roadside. When asked about the emotional influence Ama received from her parents, she tells me with a wide smile that despite the lack of money and food, “爸爸這麼活潑很像我,” her father was such a lively character, full of energy just like her today.

Yet staring down at the table, Ama states with a low tone that her relationship with her parents was “認為單純，沒有什麼特別” (“Simple I think, there was nothing special”). Life at this time was too busy she said, and her Mother and Father simply had no time to worry about all nine of their children; “爸爸媽媽沒有無暇心，大姐大哥關心。” It was her older Sister and Brother who were most concerned that these youngsters were safe and nourished. Yet with this, they unfortunately struggled. Again, staring at the new year’s snacks set out delicately atop the table, Ama states she grew up starving. Her parents could not even afford to feed their children rice and the only food she recalls as a regular feature of her childhood is “地瓜” (sweet potatoes). But only the mention of sweet potatoes lights Ama’s face right up. Still, this cherished delicacy fuels her warm smile and glistening eyes. Ama voiced how as a child, she loved the simple but fragrant taste of roasted sweet potatoes and promised to prepare some for the evening meal.

Ama has no understanding of English and speaks only in Taiwanese Hokkien, a language that was brought to Taiwan during the Qing dynasty by immigrants from southern Fujian. It has been hard for Ama to admit, and for me to hear, that there was no such opportunity for talk around her family dinner table (“沒有，不用對話，沒有機會”). Ama tells me her family was simply too busy and food was too sparse for such mealtime conversation. At this moment, Agong keenly interjects from his corner chair. So too did his family communicate in Taiwanese Hokkien, but from what I can understand of the *Taiyu* (台語) he speaks, the table conversations of his family contained anti-Chinese sentiments, specifically centred around the topic of “操中國啦” (fuck China).

With her siblings and classmates, Ama enjoyed playing “打牌，彈珠，高挑” (mahjong, marbles and skipping). Of these, her favourite was without a doubt skipping, but only because, Agong interjects again, “她不高” (only because she wasn’t tall). Agong, now 85, was also born in Qingshui. He tells me his favourite game was marbles and he specifically remembers the joy of aiming them to fall directly into holes dug into the ground. Like his wife, Agong’s grandparents came to Taiwan from Huian, but as the oldest of only 3, his family was financially better off compared to Ama’s. He fondly remembers family

trips to the zoo, whilst Ama tells me her parents were poor to take them on such trips and they didn't have many places to go. They could barely survive in Qingsui.

Nonetheless, Ama's parents wanted her five sisters and three brothers to receive an education but could only afford to fully educate her oldest brother, whom I am told was very clever and went to work in Taipei after succeeding in his final high school exams. For 6 years, Ama and her siblings attended 清水小學, Qingshui's local elementary school. Afterwards, they all returned to the family's sewing work. Although lucky to have this brief opportunity, Ama states with certainty these 6 years were not enjoyed, asserting her education was a waste of time. She believes it would have been more efficient for the other eight siblings to work and earn money rather than be stuck in a classroom. I thus pick up on an anger Ama has towards her parents for being sent to school; why put them through books when they could not even afford to eat? However, Ama regularly voices her pride towards her children and grandchildren's education, whom she says are considerably more clever and powerful.

To my surprise, even as children Agong and Ama were not far apart. They attended the same elementary school, and Agong's little sister was Ama's classmate. Despite being married for 55 years, the couple did not date. Rather, 24-year-old Agong and 22-year-old Ama were formally introduced by family members. Apparently, Agong's mother went to Ama's family home to pay her parents a deposit and tell them he wanted to marry her. They then married that same day.



The couple were both raised Buddhists and as a child, Agong remembers his dream profession was to be a baker, making breads and cakes; whilst Ama's dream job was simply to carry on the family business of making clothes. In fact, throughout the couple's life, they have continued such work of selling repaired or bought clothing. Yet momentarily, Agong worked in the Qingsui temple where he would translate the Gods' language to the people. He came to this job after taking the place of the former spokesperson of the Gods, who had become ill. Agong enjoyed this work and it managed to supply the family with a stable income. However, when Agong was 54, he had to stop suddenly after his partner borrowed money to gamble and ran away. After this, the family returned to selling clothes. The couple still buy and sell clothes today.



United, both Ama and Agong repeatedly emphasise how completely different their youth was in comparison to their grandchildren's. Besides the fact that "they eat so much meat," when reflecting upon the emotions of her childhood, Ama recalls feeling "confused, scared and simple". She tells me "We used to live without kindness. Everyone listened to their parents, who were very serious."

I was told by the whole family that food began to increase in 1987 when "the president changed, and the 10 constitutions were introduced". Such change refers to Chiang Ching-kuo, son of Chiang Kai-shek, taking the presidency in 1972. After recognising the flaws in Taiwan's industrial development, Chiang Ching-kuo proposed the 十大建設, 'Ten Major Construction Projects' in 1974. These successfully fulfilled their aim of improving the efficiency of Taiwan's infrastructure and distribution by upgrading roads, railways, ports, etc. As a result, job opportunities were created and Taiwan's economic modernisation was accelerated throughout the 1970s, satisfying the appetites of its politicians and populace.

Chiang Ching-kuo's remaining time in office also saw the ending of the second-longest period of martial law in global history. After its ending in 1987, the couple stated that their life did not change drastically. They tell me, during the period of martial law they did not want to be guilty, so they followed the law. The biggest difference was that they could vote for their president and have freedom of speech. Yet, when I asked whether they agree that these are both important matters, I was surprised to hear that they believe these changes 'did not impact the people, only politicians.'



*Premier Chiang Ching-kuo overseeing the fulfilment of the Ten Major Construction Projects.<sup>1</sup>*

Such suggestion that 'the politicians' are separate from 'the people' implies that Ama saw no connection between the economic activity that aided her poverty and the democratic privileges which were granted after the ending of martial law (elections, rule of law, freedom of association). Her education failed to provide her with the transparency to connect political decisions with the resulting benefits of the general populace, leaving her deprived of political understanding and expectation. The fact that not one member of Ama's family informed her that it was the populations who were accountable for eradicating the people's poverty, implies that perhaps they too are unfamiliar with such concepts.

Despite the apparent bitterness of the couple's life, one must not assume they are unhappy. They tell me that in today's world, "now everyone is safe. Everyone has the ability to help other people. Everyone wants mobile phones. Our children want to help us, they earn money to help us". In Today's safe and helpful Qingsui, Ama tells me that she lives a very simple Taiwanese lifestyle, "there is nothing wild to talk about... At noon, we watch TV and if want to, we will eat a little, but not too much. How come it's so tiring? Life now is casual but well fed. I wonder how you live in the UK".

Ama and Agong do not remember seeing their first foreigner, saying they have seen plenty on the street. However, this is their first time speaking to one. They tell me more and more throughout my stay that they are delighted that their granddaughter has brought a British friend.

My privilege of studying abroad has allowed me to hear Ama's life story and answering her questions about life in the UK. When I asked her what she would tell her 20-year-old self, she tells me there is nothing she would say. So, I rephrased the question. "What would you tell your 20-year-old

Granddaughter?” Looking across the round table at her granddaughter, with the widest smile and glittering eyes, “學好” (Study well) Ama says with certainty.

