

Viewpoint

Grandma, you were there for us, now we're here for you



Shawn Hoo

Unlike many of my peers from the 20-something generation, I was raised by a gaggle of mothers and grandmothers.

Raised by my paternal grandmother from the day after I was born, I was swaddled in her tangy Hokkien speech. Every night, until I was a teenager, my younger brother and I would lay mattresses on both sides of her bed and go to sleep.

She took us everywhere – including to hang out with her mother, our Teochew-speaking great-grandmother whom we had no common tongue with, but listened and nodded along to. Whenever we visited, which was often, our great-grandmother waited with my brother's favourite curry bun in hand as an after-school treat.

On Sundays, my mother would take us to her mother's house in Yishun. We would spend the whole day lying on tiled floors or my late maternal grandmother's wooden, cushionless sofa. She made a

mean peppery bowl of pig's stomach soup that we, over the years, craved.

It felt – and still feels – natural to me that everyone shares this experience of being lavished by grandmotherly love. But not everyone does and, in fact, fewer people do, as multi-generational households become less common in Singapore. Not to mention the stark linguistic, cultural and educational divide that often seems insurmountable between generations.

Now that I am almost 30, my relationship with my 78-year-old paternal grandmother has inevitably changed. We still live under the same roof, and while she is self-reliant and probably still thinks she is the one caring for me, I think of it as the other way around.

It was only after a fall in 2019 – that she has recovered from – that I reckoned with her frailty and age. One never thinks of the people who cared for us as needing care – until, of course, they do. Way into adulthood, one continues to hold the assumption that they are immortal and omnipotent until that impression is challenged.

Although we have never broached the topic of loneliness, she admits that she would be lonelier without her two grandchildren. She would be, I suspect, much more disengaged from the world had I not set up a



The writer (second from right) and his younger brother with their paternal grandmother and great-grandmother. PHOTO: COURTESY OF SHAWN HOO

YouTube account for her, which sends her surprisingly relevant videos through the algorithm.

Caregiving is often talked about in heroic terms – the grand sacrifice of personal goals, the selflessness of the carer and the guilt of the cared for. But there is also the everyday caring that is less dramatic, that perhaps everyone is capable of without

being called a hero.

Often, these are emotional forms of caregiving, which are invisible and go unmentioned, or they are discounted as trivial forms of care.

Every Saturday for the past two years, my brother – sometimes taking turns with my parents – has set aside an entire afternoon to play several rounds of mahjong

with my paternal grandmother and two of her sisters.

My grandmother has often remarked to me that, without this weekly session, she would probably not be in touch with her sisters as much. When I ask my brother, he remarks on this longstanding arrangement in a matter-of-fact way: He plays with them, otherwise they might not have a chance to play.

His act of doing so – and never making a big deal out of it – has always moved me.

I find that the greatest dividend of hanging out with my grandmother is that I get to learn from her. Being more educated, I often mistakenly feel like I have nothing to learn – but that was patently untrue when I went through a phase trying to pick up Cantonese and brush up on my Hokkien.

Born to a Teochew mother and Hokkien father, my grandmother worked in a Cantonese workplace and married a Hakka man. Out of necessity and to keep in step with the times, she picked up Mandarin and English.

She is my multilingual idol and I like to think I get my love for languages from her.

It was only after picking up Hokkien and Cantonese from my grandmother that I felt much closer to her.

To riff off the title of the popular Thai movie *How To Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* (2024), there are ways to continue making a million memories with Grandma and Grandpa while they are alive.

To do that, one need not resort to grand, heroic gestures.

The investments are everyday and the dividends are daily, almost imperceptible. But when the book has to be balanced, the emotional riches are not divided up but shared and can last a lifetime.