

Jin's Gift

Not too long ago in a Chinese village outside Shanghai, a group of young women stood in line. Many were carrying fruits, food, and other farm products. At the front of the line was a hunched old man busy writing with his Chinese brush. Attached to his table, a handwritten sign read, "LETTER WRITER AND READER," though none of the women in line understood the words. They could neither read nor write. One of the young women was my great grandmother, Jin Yip. She had long dark hair and dressed in modest farm clothes with rough hands much older than her true age. The chatter of the women in the cramped line filled Jin's ears, but she was too focused on organizing her thoughts to truly hear them. Her turn eventually came, and the man gestured for Jin to sit down. As she took a seat, she unloaded her thoughts to the old man. He transcribed her spoken words as a letter. It was a letter to Jin's husband, who was working in Shanghai. She spoke of how she missed him, how his parents were doing, and reminded him to send money home. The old man finished the letter, then held out his hand, waiting for his payment. Customers who couldn't afford to pay for the writing service with cash needed to pay the letter-writer with a "gift". Cautiously, Jin reached into her pocket and carefully withdrew a single brown egg. For a woman of her status, an egg was a precious thing; while other women would pay with fruits or farm products, this egg was all that Jin could afford. Jin placed the gift in the man's hand. The old man, looking slightly disappointed, put the egg in his basket and called over his next customer. Jin walked away with her letter, satisfied and relieved to have gotten it done. She looked down at the letter, folded in her hand, like it was the most wonderful thing in the world.

This story was a real account of what my maternal great-grandmother, Jin, would do just so she could get letters written or read. In fact, my great-grandmothers on both maternal and paternal sides were illiterate. Most girls in China at the time could neither read nor write while the boys were given higher priority for education. Women were essentially indoctrinated to believe that their only role was to clean the house, watch over children, and run errands.

An egg was indeed a precious gift from young Jin, but she would give away her most important gift later in her life to her daughters. Jin had a total of four daughters but could not have a son. Unfortunately, her husband ended up marrying a mistress just to have a boy. To make sure her daughters could have better lives, Jin aimed to secure their education. Sending girls to school was not popular at that time, and Jin had to send four. This meant that she had to sacrifice much of her own life for her children. She skipped meals to save money, did free housework for educated men so they would tutor her daughters, and stayed up late to prepare the girls for school the next day. One particular thing she did was sharpen all her daughters' pencils every night to ensure that they could write well in school. As a symbol of hope, she chose for all her daughters' middle name to be 書 (Sh ū), or book. Jin's wish ended up coming true. All four daughters reached at least a high school education. My grandmother was thus able to establish her own business in Hong Kong, and she sent my mother to the USA for a college education.

One of my grandaunts immigrated to the US and brought Jin along. She lived to be almost 100 years old. My mother said that Jin had comfortable senior years, but since she was illiterate, she spent most of her days watching Chinese soap operas. Jin passed away when I was very young. Whenever I look at a picture of us together, I feel grateful that I,

the female descendant of generations of illiterate women, am here writing this article. The egg story was passed on from Jin to my grandmother to my mother and to me. Now I don't need to pay an egg for literary services, for I am a lucky recipient of Jin's most precious gift.