

记得回来 (Remember to Come Back)

离开又不是分开 *Leaving isn't the same as separating;*

为什么眼泪还是掉下来? *then why do tears still fall?*

– “记得回来”, WeiBird¹

2025 年

Last summer, I spent a month at a software internship at Qianjue Technology: a small, early-stage robotics startup, spun out of a Tsinghua University lab and based just a few minutes away from the university, in the heart of Beijing, China.

What stood out to me most at the time was the language barrier between me and the rest of the company's employees. I can technically speak Chinese, and took many years of Chinese classes when I was young. But it had been years since those classes, and at home I never spoke Chinese (my mom typically speaks to me and my sister in English—and when she does use Chinese, I respond in English).

Picture me, then, with my rusty Chinese, in a company where everyone spoke it not just conversationally, but also professionally, weaving in technical concepts and jargon as second nature. On my first day at work, the person supervising me—Lu—spoke to me for a while about the company, the challenges they were trying to solve, the ongoing projects and my work assignments for the summer. I nodded along, trying my best to glean information from his rapid and very technical speech, and trying not to show that I understood probably less than half of the words he said.

¹ “记得回来” (Remember to Come Back) is a Chinese song by WeiBird which my family has listened to together many times.

This language barrier followed me throughout the internship. Every afternoon, one of my coworkers would take me to lunch at one of the Tsinghua University dining halls. I would sit on the back of his moped, feeling the wind whip through my hair, watching the streets of Beijing pass me by: the Weeping Willows and pagoda trees², the crazy, chaotic traffic, the bustling people. I felt such a sense of awe and appreciation to be there—the world my dad lived in, a world so different from the one I was used to—yet I felt I never had the words, the language, to convey to them how much it meant to me.



Moped ride on the way to lunch (Kate Xu, June 2025)

During one of these lunches, I had a rare conversation where I felt fluent enough to express my real thoughts; that is, I could speak without my tongue tripping over Chinese enunciations and my brain grasping for words I didn't know how to translate. The coworker who always ate lunch with me was shocked when I said I grew up in America: "I thought you went to elementary school in China, or were born here, at least; your Chinese is so good!"

² Also known as Chinese scholar trees

Despite the fact that these moments were rare, and most of the time I was far from reaching the kind of fluency and ease of that conversation, I was still grateful for those afternoons at the cafeteria table, where I wasn't expected to fill the silence or speak fluently but I would always have a seat.

2023 年

Two summers before that, I visited 武汉 (Wuhan), where my dad grew up and my paternal grandparents live.

Visiting 武汉 again felt surreal; it was our first time back in 6 years, and my sister and I had grown in myriad ways. But we were welcomed back into our grandparents' home as if no time had passed—the same beds we had sang and danced on as kids were neatly made for us, with newly-bought pajama sets and printed photo albums laid out on top; we walked to the same hole-in-the-wall hot oil noodle restaurant; my grandparents made the same jokes and their eyes shined with humor and love. Outside it was warm and humid, and I remember thinking the whole of Wuhan felt like a warm hug.



Photo album photos with my grandparents (Kate Xu, July 2023)

This time, I was introduced to a corner of my dad’s family I had never met before. My 奶奶 (*nainai*, or paternal grandmother) introduced us to one of her brothers, who I describe in my journal as “really funny and chill and smokes and a very cool grandpa”. Despite being five times my age, he was more fit than I, from daily practicing of 太极鞭杆 (*Taiji Bian Gan*, a type of martial arts) and calisthenics (which somehow many Chinese grandpas take up as a casual pastime). It was thundering outside when we met him, and the air was hot and sticky. We found our way to an alley hidden from the rain and watched as he completed his routine, fluid and powerful from years of practice. Despite being an amateur, he was second in the world for this type of taichi, and I watched in awe at this warrior in front of me, my grandpa I had never met before.



My grandmother’s brother doing his Taiji Bian Gan routine (Kate Xu, July 2023)

When we finished it was evening, and we went to dinner with some relatives. And by “some” I mean around thirty; *nainai* is one of eight children! The table was crowded with people whose faces I didn’t recognize, and my ears were bombarded with clamoring voices and Wuhan accents. Being from America, my sister and I were the center of attention, and I felt terrible not being able to entirely understand the lively conversations around us (especially with the thick Wuhan accents).

Language barrier and introvertedness aside, the dinner was filled with vibrance and warmth, and there was the sense of camaraderie found only in family. Soup was poured into my bowls even when I didn't ask, stories of my childhood I didn't remember were shared and laughed over, and I could feel their love even when I wasn't able to fully reciprocate in words.

At the end of the day, I remember feeling a deep sense of gratitude for family. I missed my *yeye* (paternal grandfather) and *nainai*, their humor and care. I was touched by the carefully made bed, the new toothbrushes and cups, and the thoughtfully prepared photo albums. Years of little to no interaction later, separated by an ocean and the distance of different cultures and languages, I come back, and am met with all of these tiny things holding depths of care and love.

—

The next day we drove out from Wuhan to visit the village *yeye* grew up in. On the car ride we learned of his life. His father (my great-grandfather) had been a real martial artist, and one day when defending the village from intruders he got badly hurt and asked *yeye* to buy some salt for the wound. By the time *yeye* got back he had already passed away. *Yeye* was only 10. He looked for a place for his dad's tomb, and chose the top of a little hill.

From that point on, *yeye* became the man of the house, studied hard, and became the only person from his village to ever leave for college. When he went to college, he didn't have anything, not even a blanket. He was short and small for his age, and one time someone bullied him and they got into a fight. *Yeye* used a single move from martial arts and broke their leg, and he was never bothered again.

My dad was telling this story, about *yeye*'s dad and the tomb and everything that followed, and he started crying as he told it. I started crying too. I couldn't believe I was just learning this now, the story of my *yeye* and how he made it out of his village.

Later that day, we climbed up steep stairs through overgrown weeds to the top of a little hill, where we lit sticks of incense and paid respects to *yeye's* father as the smoke wound its way around us. Then we went down to the village. Since *yeye* was the only person from the village to leave, all of his old friends were still there, even after almost a lifetime. *Yeye* had grown up with these people, had played together with them, had shared a life of martial arts and sun and sweat and fieldwork, for the 18 years until he left. When we drove away from the village I looked back and saw all of *yeye's* friends standing there crying, and thought to myself: *Their bond is like family.*³



Yeye's friends in the village running out to greet us (Kate Xu, July 2023)

³ Turns out, those who live in the village are quite literally our family. The village was started by people in the Xu family line who settled there, and everyone in the village now is a part of that family line. There was a placard there with my last name, 徐 (Xu), written in traditional Chinese.

2026 年

Nowadays when I visit China, it's to visit my dad, who has lived in Beijing for the past 8 years. He has his own family there: it's him, my step-mom 天一 (*Tianyi*, or "Day One"), and my half-sister 小花 (*Xiaohua*, or "Little Flower"). When I go I am often conscious of my foreignness, of my stumbling Chinese and my American mannerisms, and sometimes I feel I am just a visitor to this life.

But regardless of how little my dad and I talk now or how little we know of each other's lives, whenever I visit I treasure the things that haven't changed. The first night after arriving, sitting at a dining table crowded with home-cooked dishes and steaming bowls of 西红柿炒鸡蛋 (eggs with tomatoes) or 皮蛋瘦肉粥 (century egg porridge), I'm always filled with a sense of warmth and nostalgia. To be family is to know that no matter how long it's been, even after a lifetime away from a village, there will still be these people waiting, there will still be tears in your eyes when you part.