

# BEST *Essay Award*



## *How My Chinese Ancestry/Heritage Affects My Goals and Interactions With This Society*

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Ding. Blinking, I step out of the elevator. My nose is immediately ambushed by a horde of smells: sharp scents of rubbing alcohol, bleach, and cleaning solution poke through stuffy whiffs of perfume and rubber. I press my face mask tighter around my nose and mouth. My mother ushers me down a hallway to our right, where we arrive at a set of sliding glass doors with bold red Chinese characters plastered across them. Kidney Dialysis Center. Entering, we stop at the closest hospital bed. Its patient tosses and turns under his flannel blanket. Long, angular bones protrude under his thin, infinitely-wrinkled skin, hinting at the large, bulky man they once held up. This frail old man, barely recognizable, is my grandpa.

For three years now, my grandpa, or Ah-Gong, has been hospitalized in Taiwan for organ failure and behavioral problems. A week before Thanksgiving last year, his condition suddenly worsened, and my uncle urged us to visit Ah-Gong during my Thanksgiving break. Unfinished college applications flashed through my mind. How would I complete them if I went to Taiwan? My mother wouldn't hear of it. "Ah-Gong is family, and family always comes first," she said, repeating a lesson she'd taught me since I was little. Thus, three days later, we boarded our flight to Taiwan. My thoughts are interrupted as my uncle joins us. Pulling me closer to the bed, he kindly asks Ah-Gong, "Michelle's here! Do you remember her?" I hurriedly pull down my face mask and smile hopefully at Ah-Gong. His glazed eyes drift to my face. He decisively shakes his head. My uncle pats Ah-Gong's hand reassuringly, while my

mother gives me a sad smile. I know Ah-Gong has lost most of his memories, but I still feel a pang of disappointment.

An hour later, we wheel him downstairs into the courtyard to meet up with my two older cousins. As they push Ah-Gong along in his wheelchair, my mother and I stroll behind them. I watch my cousins cheerfully chatter to Ah-Gong, pointing out birds in the surrounding trees and laughing at jokes. Though he can barely utter a word, I can tell Ah-Gong enjoys their company. My mother beams. "Your cousins are extremely busy right now. One's preparing to get her orthodontist's license, while the other is transferring into a new doctor's clinic. Yet they still make time to come nurse Ah-Gong. This is family." I recall my hesitation to visit Ah-Gong and feel ashamed. I had been so worried about my college applications that I hadn't fully understood how Ah-Gong needed me here. My family needed me here. I think back to how I was always taught to respect and care for our elders. Western cultures place the family name after the given name, but Chinese culture places it first. We put family before ourselves. My college applications could wait. Right now, I needed to focus on supporting Ah-Gong through his illnesses. My visit to Ah-Gong instilled in me a sense of unity that continues to shape my life. Apart from being a pillar my family can lean on, I can also fall back on my family. We aren't just people who live together — our shared blood links us all through unbreakable bonds. Supporting Ah-Gong has also taught me how much my parents sacrificed to raise me so wholeheartedly. As I become an adult, I know I'll always return to my parents and care for them as they did for me.

The last day I spent with Ah-Gong still echoes. I'm sitting with Ah-Gong in the courtyard, waiting with him while my mother completes paperwork in the lobby. Sweat gathers on my forehead and neck. It's mid-November, yet southern Taiwan is still hot and humid. I notice Ah-Gong hunch over, shying from the relentless sun. Scrambling to my feet, I take a few steps closer so that my shadow falls on him. Slowly, he straightens up. He opens his eyes wide, staring straight ahead. He nods. Even though I know I'm little more than a stranger to him, I still feel happy. Happy that I can stand here with him. Happy that I can protect him. Happy that we are family.