

EULOGY BY PRIME MINISTER AT THE FUNERAL SERVICE OF MRS LEE
KUAN YEW, MANDAI CREMATORIUM, 6 OCTOBER 2010

Eulogy for Mama

Mama has always been part of our lives. Papa was busy with political work, so she did most of the bringing up of the children – me, Ling and Yang. She nurtured us, taught us, disciplined us, took care of us, and fussed over us. She would be home for lunch every day when we came home from school, spending some time with us before going back to work in the afternoon.

Loving but strict, she enforced clear rules, encouraged us to do well, and took pride in our successes. She kept the first school prize that I ever won, for doing well in kindergarten – a pencil sharpener in the shape of tiny trophy, in the display cabinet at home. It is still there today.

Mama did not believe in spoiling her children. When we were small, she would walk with us down Oxley Road to a little stationery and book shop along Orchard Road, now long gone. I think it was called Naina Mohamad and Sons. I was interested in trains, and remember in particular one book all about trains displayed in the shop. It was a hardcover book, old and slightly shop-worn, really meant for adults rather than children. I found the book fascinating, but I was not to get it easily. Each time we visited the shop, I would look at it and reluctantly put it back. Only after many visits did she finally agree to buy the book, which I kept and treasured for years.

Not surprisingly, Mama did not shower us with expensive toys, and rather disapproved when the grandparents sometimes did. But she would visit the textile shops that used to be in High Street, and bring us home the long cardboard tubes which were at the centre of the rolls of fabric, and had been discarded after all the fabric had been sold. They cost nothing, but were great fun used as telescopes, for sword fights, and endless children's games. When I had my own children, my wife and I did the same.

When we were a little older, Mama got us to join the National Library, the old building at Stamford Road. Every fortnight she would take the three of us to the children's section of the library, to borrow another armful of books each,

until we were old enough to go on our own. Sometimes when we found the books had been defaced, she would try to erase the graffiti, or if she could not would make a point of reporting it to the librarian when we returned the books. By the time we graduated to the adults' section, we must have read hundreds of books, and had picked up a lifelong love for books and reading.

We would visit our maternal grandparents at Pasir Panjang regularly. Their house was on the seafront, and at high tide the water would come right in to the seawall. We would swim in the sea, and Mama would sit on the steps watching over us. Once when I had almost learnt to swim but not quite, I got into difficulty using goggles and a snorkel, and nearly drowned. Mama had to plunge in fully dressed to rescue me. She was not amused.

When the boys went away to university, she fussed over us at long distance. She was a skilful knitter, and knitted us sweaters to stay warm, one after another. I still have one of them, a favourite rust-coloured one, patched many times at the elbows but still warm.

We stayed in close touch during my years abroad. Once a week I would sit down to write a long letter home, and Mama and Papa would each write me a long letter too. In those days, Cambridge was very far away from home. Email and Skype did not yet exist. International phone calls were expensive and hard to make. The weekly letter was eagerly awaited for news of home, and for news of the son fending for himself in a foreign land. I would read and reread the letters from home, then file them away carefully. Nowadays the casual convenience of instant, free internet access has made letter writing an endangered art, but I am not sure if it has improved the quality of human communication.

When Hsien Yang and I got married, she embraced her daughters-in-law as her own children. When grandchildren arrived, she helped to look after them, especially my two elder children – Xiuqi and Yipeng – after their mother Ming Yang died. She and the Popo supervised the maids, took the very little ones for walks every evening, and more than made up for what I could not do as a single father.

The years passed. Even in old age, Mama kept a motherly eye on her children. She would follow my public appearances on TV and in the press, and comment on my dress or demeanour. After one particularly long evening function which both my parents and I attended, she reproached me: "You were bored stiff, and looked it". When I fell ill with lymphoma, she worried about my children again, and also about me, fretting over whether I was eating enough nutritious food to stay strong and fight the cancer.

On Sundays the family would gather for lunch at Oxley Road. For a time it was with all the grandchildren, who would make a fine hullabaloo. But as the kids grew up and went off to national service, or went away to study, often it would be back to just Papa, Mama and the three children and our wives, plus Shaowu, the youngest grandchild.

One Sunday in May two years ago, we had the usual family lunch. I had spent the morning on a constituency visit to Tampines, and told her they were debating whether to allow bicycles on pedestrian footpaths. She reminded me that when I was in Cambridge and was mostly a pedestrian, I had written home to complain about the bicycles being a menace, because they crept up quietly on one from behind, giving no warning except for sinister whirring noises. I had completely forgotten, but she was right. She said: "The older I get, the longer ago the things I remember". But she tracked current events too, and knew what the hot topics of the day were.

The next day I was in my office when my security officer told me that Mama had fallen down at home, and Wei Ling was rushing her to NNI. She had had her second stroke. The last two and a half years have been difficult on her and on the family. Now she is at peace.

Over these last few days, I and my family have been deeply touched by the outpouring of condolences and fond recollections from people of all walks of life. She touched the lives of all those who met her, and many more who knew of her only through television images, media reports, or word of mouth. They sensed what a special person she was, and how much she had quietly contributed to Singapore.

Thousands turned up at Sri Temasek to pay their respects. Some bowed or stood in silent prayer, while others crossed themselves or did a namaste. Still others fingered rosaries, and one lady spun a prayer wheel. Many were visibly moved. Mama's children and our spouses stood beside her to acknowledge and thank them all, just as Mama had stood beside us so many times before.

All of our lives, Mama has been there for us. We have rejoiced together, grieved together, and shared critical moments together. Now we will all have to learn to live without her. But she lives on in her children and grandchildren, in our cherished memories of her, and in the persons she has nurtured us into.