

Deceiving Patients to Dampen Pain: A Chinese Family's "Good Lie"

Category: Across Borders and Cultures
written by Sophia Zhao | March 4, 2024

It had been a long time since I'd seen my grandmother. I was seventeen and traveling to Shanghai, where she resided. My grandmother had helped raise me. All throughout my childhood, she and I would share a feast of foodstuffs, their scalding scents curling through the house. In the afternoons, we would scamper down winding forest trails. This was how I remembered her: vigorous, strong. Now, years later, entering her Shanghai apartment, I noticed the unfamiliar way she hunched into herself. Her sunken cheeks. Her body stiff and frail, almost shaking.

When I was even younger, my mother had taken my grandmother—*Wai po*—to a cardiologist in the States. Only knowing English, the doctor spoke to my mother, revealing that *Wai po* had an issue with her heart: "I'm not sure how many more years she will survive." The cardiologist and my mother discussed the possibilities and, given the complications, settled on doing nothing. My mother saw fit not to translate the diagnosis for *Wai po*, telling her the findings were benign; she was old and did not need "unnecessary pressure."

When I recall seeing *Wai po* so feeble in Shanghai, I empathize with my mother. Many Chinese families are ravaged by a dizzying fear and act out of worry and affection. My mother earnestly bore in mind *Wai po*'s health. Not long ago, she told me that *Wai po*'s "threshold to bad news is low...the decision not to share the news with her was a thoughtful one." She felt not informing *Wai po* of her illness allowed her to survive longer than expected. Indeed, *Wai po* is still alive, traveling from Shanghai to Beijing, learning English and the piano.

Possibly *Wai po*'s well-being is attributable to my mother's secret-keeping. However, I believe in *Wai po*'s right to be aware of her own health status. I would hope to be informed, and my mother feels the same.

For individuals like my mother, acclimated to both Western and Eastern cultures, there seems to be a tension between individualism and collectivism, between freedom and security. Concealing diagnoses from older patients is seen as a "good lie," but what of personal agency? My mother struggles with this balance, entangled in the calculus of deceit and honesty to prolong *Wai po*'s life.

Author and neurosurgeon Henry Marsh wrote of his own mother's passing, "What makes for a good death? Absence of pain, of course, but there are many aspects to dying and pain is only one part of it." My mother has arguably facilitated an "absence of pain" for *Wai po*. Yet I wonder about Marsh's "many [other] aspects to dying." Should not an incontrovertible one, in a life of autonomy and dignity, be the mere knowledge of illness? Must we always perceive such news as a burden?

Sophia Zhao
Newark, Delaware