

IMPEDIMENTS TO SPEAKING

by Lowry Pei

I have never known if my father stutters in Chinese.

When my father came to the U.S. from China at age 21 to go to graduate school in engineering, he came knowing English. I think he learned it in some sort of missionary school. And of course he's been here speaking English for the past 77 years. But he has always had, and still has, an accent so difficult that most Americans can't entirely understand what he says when they first meet him. It doesn't help that he stutters, sometimes badly. His spoken English has been difficult to say – and to hear – for 77 years.

He has seldom been around people who spoke Chinese, and at some point he started claiming he couldn't speak Chinese anymore; but I do know that once my friend Jean Wu came over and kept speaking to him in Chinese until he switched over. She says he's much more eloquent in that language, which is something I'll never know firsthand. He never spoke Chinese to me, but he encouraged me to study it when I was eighteen, which always makes me wonder why he didn't try to teach it to me as a little kid. I think perhaps he didn't want me to have to be different. Perhaps speaking English was so difficult for him that he just wanted to be sure I'd grow up a regular American.

My father has always been very good at getting mad. It was awful to take him shopping; he would end up yelling at some unfortunate clerk who was trying to wait on him. I used to think he was just an impossible person with a horrible temper – which may be also true – but now I think it's probably the upshot of a whole lifetime of encounters in which people didn't understand what he said. Going into each one anticipating their uncomprehending looks, their impatience,

their poorly disguised reluctance to listen as hard as you have to to catch what he's saying. Anticipating frustration, he becomes frustrated before anything has happened, angry before there's anything to be angry about. Certain kinds of people release his bottled-up rage on contact – most dependably, people who come to the door carrying Bibles with some evangelical goal in mind. As a kid I could always tell when one of those Bible people had had the misfortune to ring our doorbell by the particular roar of his voice and the violence with which he would slam the front door. Those missionaries left a powerful impression on my father.

I have inherited some of these qualities and tried to compensate for others. I, too, anticipate frustration in social encounters and borrow trouble before it starts, can't bear contradiction and irrationally expect people to say no to me, have a horrible temper, pitch fits. Not quite in the same situations or for the same reasons, but similar fits nonetheless. Mine make less sense than his. I don't have such a good excuse.

Because although I am in some ways my father, I am also this other person he could never be, full of American words, possessing this persona of American entitlement I can put on, sometimes, like a jacket and tie. At those times I remind myself of what it was like as a kid to go to Harvard and sometimes end up hanging around or socializing with enormously privileged people. I remember realizing that, even though they always knew I wasn't one of them if they knew me at all, I could avoid making them uncomfortable, so they wouldn't have to think about whether I belonged there, so for the moment I could invisibly play the game. I could pass. I don't mean pass as a rich person with three generations of Harvard ancestors. I mean pass as a regular American. This my father could never do, and to his credit, I think he never wanted to. He had his own entitlement, Chinese style.

In one way I may have inherited my father's speech: I stop inexplicably in the middle of sentences – at least inexplicably to others. In my mind, I am clearly in the middle of a sentence and am weighing my words; in the mind of the listener, I've come to a period and am not going on. So it must be their turn to talk. Thus I am pretty regularly interrupted, without anyone's knowing it except me, unless I make a special effort to talk continuously.

A couple of years ago I went to a party and ended up talking to a friend of my wife's who stutters. Of course I have a lifetime of training at this and so it wasn't difficult for me to wait for him to get the words out. When I would answer him and stop in the middle of a sentence, he

would wait for me to go on. Then after we had been conversing for a while, he started helpfully supplying the word he was pretty sure I was looking for – one stutterer helping out another.

(1998)