

Celebrating the Life of 'ah-Yeh'

Thlick Fung Soo Hoo

April 5, 1904 – August 7, 2006

Thlick Fung Soo Hoo, 'ah-Yeh' or 'Gung Gung' as his 7 grandchildren would call him or 'Bok Bok' as his 5 great-grandchildren would refer to him. Or 'Sahm-Bok' as his nephews and a host of other SooHoo & Szeto relatives would affectionately greet the third of five siblings who arrived from China in search of a better life for his family. And to his children Nelson, Susan, & Tony and his nephew Sal Chin; they simply called him 'ah-Sook'. For this piece I will refer to him as **Grandpa**.



The heartland of the SooHoos, is in Hoiping (Kaiping), which is near Toisan (Taishan) in Guangdong province.

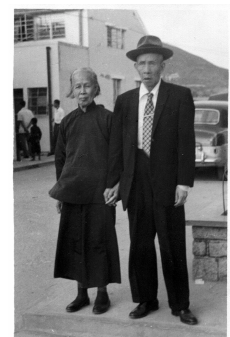


My Grandfather and his younger brother Yin were the 3rd & 4th of five children born to textile merchants; Grandpa was born on April 5, 1904. In my opinion, Grandpa lived out a very full, healthy, and prosperous life. As my mother puts it, '...we should all be so lucky to have a health record like his.' Grandpa was a good provider who looked after his family to give them a better life. He was a modest man who was generous with his ability to help others in various ways, too numerous to mention.

Photographs of Grandpa's Grandparents (my Great Great Grandparents) – photo by Chor Szeto 2004

The 1920's thru 1940's

Grandpa initially came to the United States on a steamship arriving in Boston by way of San Francisco via train (at the time that Grandpa was born, the Wright Brothers had not invented the airplane yet) in **1921** to work in the hand laundry business. Grandpa stayed in a bunk on the lower levels and never got seasick; his brother Yin, then 16 joined him in 1923. Right around the depression of 1929, Grandpa, who was 26 years old by this time, returned to China to marry my grandmother **Yue Sun Chin** (d.1977) against her parents wishes. Her parents said that she should not marry my grandfather as he is expected to only live to the age of 36. They married anyway and had my father Nelson (d.1986) in 1932. Afterwards, Grandpa returned to the US, this time settling in New York City and starting up his own hand laundry at Amsterdam Avenue and 207th Street in Washington Heights during the late 1930's while living in the back room. Grandpa basically ran a one man operation by day and slept on a makeshift bed of textiles at night. He pretty much prepared one meal and consumed it twice throughout the day. Grandpa made the journey back to China one more time in the late 1930's after the war with Japan when soon after Grandma gave birth to a daughter who died as an infant. He then returned to the US, as WWII came about, Grandpa was stuck in the US, apart from his family for the next several



Grandma's Parents

years. He was drafted into joining the military but was relieved of duty due to a hernia condition.



Photos Above: 1) Grandpa & Grandma's Wedding ~1925, 2) Grandpa in the 1920's(?), 3) Grandpa & my father Nelson (1937(?), 4) Grandpa's House in China (1980).

In 1947, after the war ended, Grandpa returned home to China and built a home that cost him *'...over \$10,000 US Dollars'* as my Grandmother gave birth to my Aunt Susan a year or so later. In 1948 Grandpa went back to the Laundry while brother Yin was minding the store. Upon his return, Grandpa would ask his younger brother to return home to marry Chui Woo and stay at the new house he had built. Grandpa was very proud of the all brick structure that housed two kitchens and six bedrooms, it also employed a house staff and was located about 30 minutes from town. Grandpa's plan through all of his efforts going back and forth between China & the US while struggling to amass enough savings so that he could return and retire in his mansion in his homeland with his family. Unfortunately, things didn't work out that way. As the Chinese Civil War tensions built up and Civil War broke out, Great Uncle Yin (aka 4 Sook / 4 Gung) and Great Aunt Chui Woo (aka 4 Sum / 4 Poh) stayed in the house for two weeks before beginning their flight to the U.S. Grandpa thought it would be best to urge my Grandmother to send photos of herself and the two children so that he could start the process of getting them into the US. Grandma refused. Grandpa then turned to his sister in law Chui Woo to ask her to convince Grandma to come to the US due to the unrest at home. Grandma fled with the two children in 1949 by buying their passage aboard a house boat operated by boat people. It is said that Grandma stayed on the boat for almost one month with her children. Grandma, my father and Aunt Susan traveled through Canton to get into Hong Kong, where they stayed for a couple of years, then ultimately obtain entry into the US in 1954.

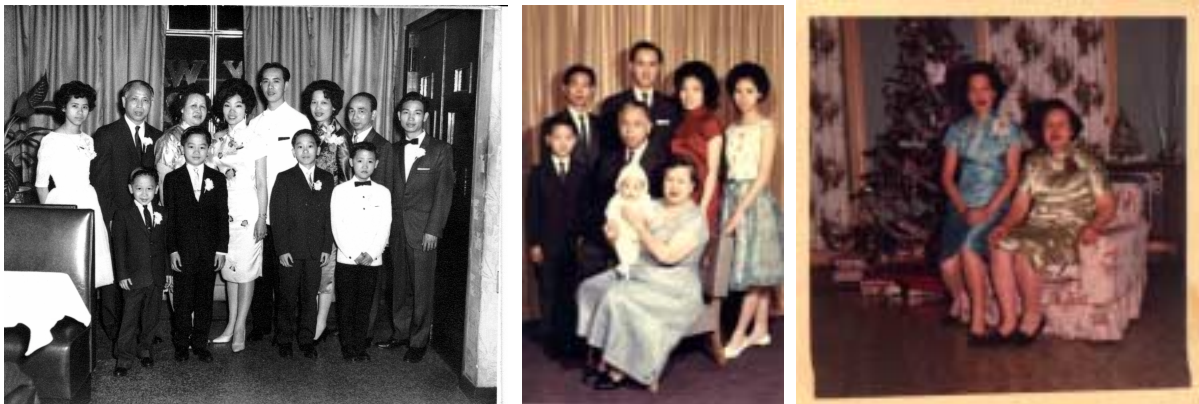
The 1950's & 1960's

The entire family immigrated to the US in February of 1954. In the 1950's Grandpa and an uncle started a profitable venture in the shirt pressing business to support the growing number of hand laundries that had sprouted throughout the city, the company, named after their sons was called **'Yee Wing Shirt Pressing Co.'** The factory that was located at 891 - 893 Bergen Street in Brooklyn was named after my father Nelson (Yee) who managed the day shift while my grandfather's cousin, Chuck (Wing) Szeto managed the night shift. 1954 also marked the year when my uncle Tony was born; an event that would affect Grandpa's well being for the last 20 years of his life. The apartment building next to the factory was the first home for my sisters and I, we lived there with our

extended family; that included my parents & sisters, grandparents, great – grandmother, uncle Tony, Aunt Susan and Uncle Sal before my family moved us out to Kew Gardens, NY in 1969. Grandpa would close the business as the advent of Polyester & Permanent Press pretty much destroyed the demand in the shirt pressing industry and eventually sell the building by the next decade.



Photos Above: 1) Uncle Tony, 2) my father Nelson & Aunt Susan, 3) Grandpa and his family in the 1950's, 4) Grandma & Grandpa at my Parent's wedding in 1963, 5) Family Photo – 1950's.



Photos Above: 1) My Parent's Wedding with Grandpa and Great Uncle Yin's Family 2) My First Family Photo (Uncle Tony, Uncle Sal, My mother & father, Aunt Susan and Grandparents , that's me in the middle with Grandma) 3) Grandma and Great Aunt Chui Woo

The 1970's

In the early 70's, as the Yee Wing business was beginning to wind down, tragedy struck when Great Grandmother Chin passed away in 1972. Life continued however, as Grandpa was enjoying retirement with my grandmother. They traveled a bit to Canada, Niagra Falls, & Pennsylvania. Things were evolving, my father was raising a young family and was starting a business with my mother Betty, Aunt Susan & Uncle Bob got married and moved to Elizabethtown, PA, & Uncle Tony had just finished college at Brooklyn College. One thing that I failed to mention, as I recall in my earlier years as a child, Grandpa was not a very vocal person; he was a man of very few words. From what I've heard, he may have had a temper at times although I never really personally experienced it. My relationship was primarily with my grandmother, who was the voice of the family. It was Saturday, April 10, 1976, shortly after his 70th birthday

celebration, when both of my grandparents came to pick me up from Chinese School in Chinatown, that was the day when the relationship between Grandpa and I would truly begin. After we had our usual lunch at my favorite noodle shop on Pell Street, my grandparents would take me to their house where my parents would pick me up after work at Bergen Street. However, on this particular Saturday, Grandma suffered a stroke on the subway and passed away a year and a half later on 12-02-1977. While Grandma was in the hospital for the year and a half, Grandpa, the devoted man that he was, diligently made the journey from Bergen Street to St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village then to Goldwater Hospital on Roosevelt Island twice a day, everyday; by subway in the daytime and with uncle Tony in the evening. As this was my first experience with the loss of a loved one, it was an experience that would have me worry about my grandfather too. Who would have guessed that I'd be worrying for nearly 30 more years?!

After Grandma's passing, a family friend set Grandpa up with Yuk Lee Chan, whom we refer to as '*ah-Poh*' '*ah-Seem*' or respectfully '*The Lady*'. It wasn't a romantic relationship, but one of companionship. They would bicker about little things like '*who gets to use the shower first when they get home*' or whether the room was too hot or too cold or whether they should have steak or chicken for dinner. The bickering went on for over 25 years; some have said that was the spice of life they had. We are thankful to The Lady today for keeping Grandpa company, helping them find their apartment that they've called home for the past 20+ years, and being a part of our family.



Photos Above: 1) Uncle Tony & Aunt Susan at our home in Kew Gardens 1970 2) Grandparents with Aunt Susan in 1971

The 1980's

By the 1980's, Uncle Tony & Aunt May were married and moved to Merrick, Long Island; closer to our family while Grandpa was transitioning from his home in the Gravesend section of Brooklyn to Corona, Queens where The Lady located government subsidized housing for the elderly for her and Grandpa through her church. It was close to shopping and easily accessible to mass transit. Grandpa and The Lady did some traveling and occasionally went to Atlantic City with my parents and played Mah-Jong with friends. In 1986 my father went to the hospital in March and passed away in June of that year two weeks after my graduation. Once again, as many of us were devastated at our huge loss, I worried about my grandfather again.

He did not say a word, as I saw tears well up in his eyes through his silent expression of grief at the loss of his eldest son.



Photos Above: 1) Uncle Sal's Wedding 2) My High School Graduation in 1982 3) Grandpa in 1985

By the late 1980's Grandpa was still exhibiting great health. He developed a regimen of daily walks to get his newspaper, subway trips to Chinatown, walks to the grocery store, the local KFC. My sisters and I realized that Grandpa was very resilient from the hardships that he had faced in life but continued to live a jovial life with a loving family. We were convinced that all he needed was a bag of peanuts, a cup of tea and a newspaper to keep him occupied.

The 1990's

The 1990's brought 3 more grand daughters to Grandpa's life in addition to Albert Cheung who joined the family in the late 80's. Alyssa & April SooHoo and Amy Cheung were the newest wave of grandchildren since the 1960's. As Uncle Tony and Aunt May are symbolic of the Sandwich generation; caring both for the young and old. Uncle Tony and Aunt May devoted a good portion of their lives raising their two kids and caring for Grandpa & The Lady. He would take them on countless cruises and road trips along with Great Uncle Yin and Great Aunt Chui Woo as well as others in the SooHoo / Szeto clan. Grandpa loved cruises where he was to satisfy his appetite. Uncle Tony like cruises because Grandpa couldn't really wander off and get lost too easily.



Photos Above: 1) Three Generations 2) Taking Grandpa to Dim Sum 3) Grandpa, The Lady, Emily & Shawn

As Grandpa grew older, we started to get concerned about his ways. The walks, his diet, & the trips to the New York City. We'd ask him to curb his activity during heavy snowstorms and heat waves. He'd defiantly ignore us. There was one blizzard where he was long overdue to arrive at home, we'd all call around and no one had heard from him. Hours later he'd be coming through the door and complain about the trains and say something like '...it's really snowing hard out there !'. Another time he had gone out for a walk during a heat wave in the middle of the summer; we'd call him to remind him to not leave the house; but we were too late already. He would tell us that he had to get his newspaper and needed to stretch his legs a bit. As my sister puts it, 'Grandpa would laugh at us for being so worried.'

As for Grandpa's diet, it consisted regularly of KFC, Peanuts, Potato Chips (Pringles), Ice Cream, Watermelon, Soda, Beer, Coffee and Oranges. As much as he avoided green leafy vegetables, he had to have an orange every day; his favorite fruit. We decided that at 90 years of age, we shouldn't criticize his diet, whatever he was doing, it was fine. We continued to foster their diet by serving KFC to him and The Lady.



Photos Above: 1) Having Oranges 2) Dinner At Home With ah Poh 3) Having a Coke at Atlantic City

There were several times where I remember going over and having dinner with Grandpa and The Lady. I'd take them to Alley Park in Queens for walks, visit uncle Tony's house, I'd taken him to Pastrami King on Queens Blvd, Sizzlers in Bayside or out for Dim Sum in Flushing. He and The Lady always had an appetite. I'd asked them one time if they'd like Kenny Roger's Roasters for lunch one time, they said no thanks 'It's too dry'; then how about Soup Noodles; 'no it's too hot for soup'; then I suggested fried chicken, 'Fried Chicken ? Yes, that sounds good, let's have fried chicken' both of them exclaimed. It is my theory that the oranges that Grandpa had everyday are one of the secrets for his longevity.

The New Millenium

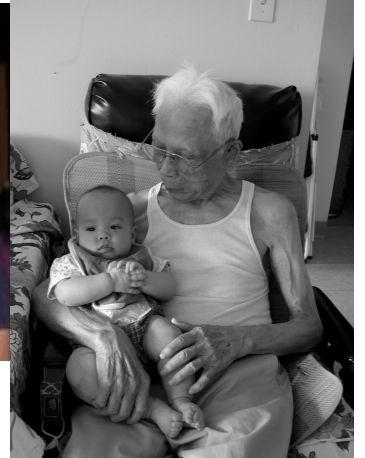
In the New Millenium, Grandpa was still going strong, he had a full head of snowy white hair, shaved himself everyday, took his walks, hearty appetite, and good sense of humor. His hearing had been deteriorating for some time already and even dual hearing aids were of no help; nonetheless Grandpa stayed coherent. In the early years of the Millenium from 2000 through 2005, Grandpa became a Great Grandfather 5 times over with the births of Thomas, Timothy, William, Alexis & Jack. The spread in ages was nearly a hundred years by this time. My son Timothy, who is fortunate enough to have met 3 Great Grandparents; referred to Grandpa as 'Bok Bok with no Teeef (Teeth)'. Having a family and relocating to New Jersey and working on weekends on a pretty regular basis made it difficult for me to visit Grandpa more often. Aunt Susan and her family, my sisters Emily & Loretta and Uncle Sal and his family made frequent visits which helped increase the traffic through their Corona apartment. But it was uncle Tony that would prove to be the primary caretaker of Grandpa. Uncle Tony planned the social events, day trips, doctor's visits, Birthday celebrations, and Father's Day outings for

Grandpa and The Lady. As you see in the following photos, Grandpa and the Lady had excellent quality of life primarily under Uncle Tony's care while Aunt May took care of the household and April & Alyssa.





Photos Above: 1) Grandpa and I - 2001 2) Our Trip to in Toronto – 2001 3) Grandpa & The Lady at our home in NJ - 2001



Photos Above: 1) Aunt Susan & Uncle Tony & Kids with Grandpa - 2002 2) Grandpa with Aunt Susan, Me & Uncle Tony 3) Grandpa in his favorite chair holding my Son Timothy – the first in the next generation of SooHoos. -2002



Photos Above: 1) Grandpa with his kid brother Yin – March 2003 2) Great Uncle Yin and Great Aunt Chui Woo with their sons Joe, Bill, & Lenny and their families.

We all did what we could to make Grandpa and the Lady happy, whether it was treats from Chinatown, a big bag of peanuts, a hot cup of coffee or a bucket of KFC. However, Grandpa and The Lady were getting older each year and would evidently be vulnerable to something, whether it be illness or a mishap. Grandpa had been losing his hearing

for nearly 20 years already, which resulted in many, many, frustrating yet humorous stories.

Most memorable of all was the time when my father was arranging plans to pick up Grandpa the following day from his home in Gravesend; but Grandpa couldn't interpret what day he was hearing. My father in frustration kept on repeating and stressing that it would be *'the next day'* in Chinese; father got so frustrated that he screamed out **'TOMORROW !'** in English.

Another time, on one of our road trips, uncle Tony was telling Grandpa that we were visiting the City of Brotherly Love by its Chinese name (Feui Sing). Uncle Tony repeated himself 3 or 4 times but Grandpa didn't get it, until I told him Philadelphia (in English), then it hit Grandpa as he said *'Oh, Philadelphia, why didn't you say so !?'*

By the late 1990's Grandpa was beginning to lose his balance while walking and refused to carry a walking stick. Although, the times he did carry it; he used it to point at things most of the time. He'd fall quite often, but nothing too serious. But we all knew it would only be a matter of time.

In 2003, shortly after his birthday, Grandpa tried to get up in the early evening to go to the his dresser when he fell and broke his femur/hip. He was taken to the hospital where we were given the choice of whether or not to operate at his age. Grandpa was in good spirits and demanded to get out of bed (he attempted this several times with his I.V. still connected). It got to the point where the hospital would have to restrain him, each time we'd visit him, he'd ask me to release him from the restraints and help him sneak out. We ultimately had to present the dilemma to Grandpa and asked him whether he wanted the procedure or not; Grandpa quickly blurted out *'The choice is obvious, I want the procedure done. I can't be bed ridden, I've got 3 more years to go!'* Grandpa underwent a scaled down version of the procedure and went through rehabilitation at the Parker Institute in Long Island. Uncle Tony made the trip to Lake Success on a regular basis, almost daily to help him with the basics. He would ask when he'd be returning home at each visit. Uncle Tony asked him where he thought he was; and Grandpa said it felt kind of like a cruise ship.



Photos Above: Uncle Tony in Action 1) Adjusting Yeh's Hearing Aid 2) Shaving Grandpa at Parker Inst. 3) Taking Grandpa on his daily walk with Emily

Grandpa eventually returned home to Corona after nearly a year at Parker. The Visiting Nurse Service of New York evaluated Grandpa's condition and determined that he was eligible for around the clock 24/7/365 federal subsidized assistance. For the next 2 plus years, Grandpa was able to live in the comfort of his own home just as he wanted it. During the day, he'd sit in his favorite chair most of the time, the one from Bergen

Street. I recently took him for his second cataract surgery this past February as he was beginning to lose his sight, evidenced by his loss of interest in reading the newspaper over the past year. Grandpa was still strong spirited though and had a relatively healthy appetite, (he misplaced his dentures a couple of years ago and the new set did not suit him well) I knew this as I fed him apple juice and cookies in the recovery room and then followed by Beef Chow Fun, Singapore Mai Fun and Roast Pork. He cleaned his entire plate.

In March 2006, Grandpa celebrated his milestone birthday at Ocean Jewels in Flushing. Grandpa was surrounded by all of his loved ones and was dressed in a suit and even occasionally smiled for pictures. The Centenarian had a feast and cleaned his plate of the Lobster and Steak that uncle Tony ordered for the occasion.

Grandpa's Milestone Birthday Celebration



Throughout the Spring of 2006, Grandpa was losing his appetite and just wanted to sleep all of the time. He was losing weight and his spunk with each passing day, just withering away. Uncle Tony constantly reminded all of us to make sure to see your grandfather as much as possible. On my visit to him during the Father's Day time, he just kept his eyes closed and opened them each time I called him 'ah-Yeh' while holding his hand. I asked him if he recognized me and he said that I was Uncle Sal. I was discouraged as he had always remembered me if not for anyone else.

The last time I saw Grandpa was on July 29th with my wife Wanda and my children. We entered the apartment and the aide woke him up and said 'Look who arrived, your eldest Grandson.' Surprising he sat up in bed, eyes wide opened and held my son Timothy's (Ho Doy) hand. I took pictures as I did with every visit to capture the moment. Our visit lasted about an hour or so before we headed over to Uncle Tony's.



My sister Emily's Son Thomas holding hands with Grandpa - 07-22-06



My Son Timothy seeing Bok Bok for the last time - 07-29-06

We sat and chatted with the aide and The Lady most of the time. Grandpa came out and sat in his favorite chair for the whole time. I tried to make conversation with him in an attempt to see if he'd recognize me. Throughout the whole time he just kept opening and closing his eyes as if he were very tired; the aide tried to justify that he was usually like this at this time. She also claimed that he was very feisty and would resist about taking a bath lately. The aide also told us that Grandpa was so certain that he didn't want a bath that he was resisting forcefully until she told him that Uncle Tony was coming to pick him up to go out; it was only then that he'd cooperate. As we were saying our final goodbyes and as the kids were giving out their hugs to both Bok Boks, I went over to give Grandpa a hug as I usually do and told him that I was leaving and would see him next time. At the same time, I got down on one knee and asked him one more time if he recognized me. It was a very poignant moment that he would open his eyes wide that appeared watery and looked directly at me and said my name 'ah-Awn'. The thought had crossed my mind that this could be the last time I would see him. It turned out to be true. Uncle Tony was the last one of us to see Grandpa alive on Saturday, August 5th.

According to his citizenship papers, my grandfather was 102 years old when he peacefully passed away on Monday morning August 7th, 2006 after his breakfast. He was actually 100; he was given amnesty for 'buying papers'; but the official records were incorrect. His live-in attendant fed him his morning supplement of liquid nourishment and Grandpa passed quietly.

I will miss the way he: sips his tea loudly, his boisterous yawn (one of his signature traits), sits and reads the newspaper for hours with a cup of tea and peanuts, cleaning his dentures in public restrooms at the grimace on the faces of onlookers (myself included) while resting the dentures on the vanity in filthy public restrooms, played cards with me and taking me to the comic book store when I was little, and the sound of his voice calling out my name.

I am very lucky to have had a grandfather for the 42 years that I did. My sisters and I are overjoyed that he was able to witness life events such as graduations from school, obtaining a first job, marriage celebrations to our spouses, the births of our children. These achievements were not solely for ourselves, in Chinese culture, these were symbolic achievements for a long lineage of parents and grandparents and so on; fruits of their labor. The results that are representative of the hardships and labor that each generation has endured to get us where we are today. The single most important event for me was for him to know that he has a great grandson who will hopefully carry out his legacy, the traditions and the family name. Grandpa knew how I felt for him too. For the man that exhibited very little emotion, on one occasion, as I served him tea and noodles at a restaurant, a passerby said 'your Grandson takes very good care of you', Grandpa said 'Yes, my Grandson loves me very much.' That alone gave me reassurance that he knew. I am thankful that he was in good physical and mental health until the very end; as he was my sole connection reaching into the past.

Now that Great Uncle Yin and Grandpa are no longer here, I will miss being able to tell people in disbelief that my Great Uncle Yin was 94 years old; if you don't believe me, ask his older brother.'

I will miss you Grandpa, as you are forever dear to me and you will never be forgotten.

- *Lawrence SooHoo*
August 8, 2006

Here's what Grandpa's surviving grand children have to say...

Grand Daughter Emily – Charlotte, NC

'That which I remember most about Yeh is his hearty laugh. He was never a large man and as I grew older, he seemed to get smaller. But his laugh didn't shrink until the most recent years. He had a deep laugh that was like a , "ho ho ho." Yeh was jolly - like Santa Claus - but a lot skinnier. And when he thought something was really funny, his laugh almost came out of his nose. Seeing him laugh made me laugh.

For a man who has lived though two world wars, lived on two continents, witnessed countless births, deaths and other milestones of life, he seemed to me to be a man of simple wishes. He was so undemanding and contented all the time, but determined, too. He was determined to maintain his independence even when he was well into old age. Yeh would go out in a snowstorm to get his haircut, take the subway to get a newspaper, climb a wobbly chair to change a lightbulb. He succeeded for the most part, except for some bumps and bruises and he laughed at us when we worried about him.

My mental image of Yeh is sitting in a chair, wearing his black leather slippers and reading the newspaper. There was usually a cup of tea on the table next to him. When he was reading the newspaper, he usually had a deep, thoughtful look on his face that indicated he was deeply engrossed in the article that he was reading. My vision of Yeh is a person of uncomplicated peace and he has I am sure transitioned effortlessly to whatever lies beyond this life.'

Grand Daughter Loretta – Brooklyn, NY

'The year before I moved to Seattle, 2-3 times a week I would stop in to visit a yeah and the lady. Sometimes before work, sometimes on my way home. And they'd have breakfast or dinner waiting for me. We'd eat together, he'd ask me about work, if I needed any money, and then they'd swat me away from trying to do the dishes. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to spend this simple time with a yeah. I'll always remember my kind and gentle grandfather.'

Grand Daughters Alyssa & April – Merrick, NY

'Yeh Yeh has had a special role in our lives. Although we could not communicate with him verbally, we always felt that we shared a unique bond. Yeh Yeh's gentle touch while we walked hand in hand created a deeper connection among us. This along with his embracing smile was enough to brighten up our day. We cherish the many memories shared with him and he will forever have a place in our hearts.'

Things we remember about grandpa

- *His smile*
- *The way he said our names*
- *How gentle he was*
- *His laugh*
- *Pringles, fried chicken, peanuts, and coke*
- *Walking with him hand in hand*

Grand Children Albert & Amy – Camp Hill, PA

Gong-Gong was:

- *Generous*
- *Kind-hearted*
- *Strong-willed*
- *Full of life*
- *...and he always cleared his plate.*

'Whenever we visited, he was always very hospitable and glad to see us. Though it was difficult to communicate, he was always interested in what we were up to. You could tell he cared.'