

You're listening to *Shifting Subjects*: stories from Asian Australian life. I'm Lisa Divissi. You won't believe how long this story has been in the works. It was 2020, we were in lockdown, and my friend Alan Weedon and I decided that we would make a podcast about Asian Australian life together. Alan is half Filipino. We were brainstorming, thinking of people we'd like to interview. People whose work prompted interesting conversations. That's when Alan suggested we look at the work of one of his friends, the artist, Angie Pai.

[*Sound of Angie and Shu-Ling kidding around. Angie says, "I'm a joke to you!"*]

**Alan Weedon: So I was doing journalism at RMIT, she was doing advertising at RMIT from memory. And we were in this building, the Comms building, building 9, which is this kind of beautiful art deco pile which stretches the length of a city block.**

Building 9 was an exciting place to be if you were into making things and collaborating with new, like minded people. It's where so many disciplines intersected: there were people studying graphic design, advertising, fashion, music industry... and together they'd organise events, or begin independent publications... stuff like that

**AW: And I was just like, fuck, like, these people are amazing. I want to get to know them.**

And that's how Alan met Angie. Angie Pai may have been studying advertising at the time, but she was also taking her first steps as a multidisciplinary artist. This was around 2014, 2015. I didn't know them at the time, but I remember seeing photos on tumblr of a new clothing label called PAI. It was a collaboration between Angie and her friend Adrian Bressanutti. The most memorable pieces for me were these black, long sleeve t-shirts that had large, white, hand-embroidered cubist-looking designs on them, all bumpy and ridgy. And some of them even looked like coral reef, it was beautiful. Bands on the cusp of widespread popularity started wearing them at gigs, organised of course by music industry students at building 9.

It was a time of new-found independence. Many of the students were living out of home for the first time and venturing out into the world.

**AW: We were all you know, breaking out of our shells, we were fashioning the young adult identities we wanted to sort of step into as a reaction to what we had come from. And I think what was interesting with Angie—my**

impression of her at the time—is that the idea to disavow and break from the context that you grew up in was never ever on the cards for Angie. And you can see that through her work; there is a profound respect for her parents, the context that she sort of has come from but also, you know, youth and celebrating youth doesn't have to be this break with the family unit, if that makes sense.

Angie began an instagram account called Mama Pai. It featured candid videos of her mum, Shu-Ling Huang, going about her everyday life. Sometimes it was her laughing whilst watching TV.

*[Sound of Shu-Ling belly laughing whilst watching TV]*

Or dancing with Angie in the lounge room, or screaming in surprise at Angie's newly dyed green hair.

*[A sustained, open-mouthed, high pitched scream emerges from Shu-Ling in reaction to Angie's new hair]*

For all its facetiousness, it was crystal clear that Shu-Ling was looked upon by Angie with love and inspiration. Shu-Ling, in many ways, is Angie's muse.

*[Theme music]*

This episode began when Alan and I were looking at a particular work of Angie's, a short film she made in 2019 called *Listen to Mama*. It was part of an exhibition by the same name, which Alan was lucky enough to attend. *Listen to Mama* is a kind of diaristic collage, composed of scenes from places in Angie's childhood in Taiwan. They're overlaid with sound recordings of Shu-Ling deep in intimate, private conversation with Angie. We wanted to do a peek-behind-the-curtain at how *Listen to Mama* came about, and the events leading up to it.

So here it is, plus a little more. It's a conversation with Angie, interspersed with moments from the film, *Listen to Mama*. You'll hear a bit more from Alan, as well as some extra recordings that Angie and Shu-Ling were kind enough to record together and share with us.

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**Angie Pai:** My mum has always been this person that gave me permission to be foolish, and to be childish. And to be jovial.

**AP:** Did you always know that you wanted to be a mum?

**Shu-Ling Huang:** No. When I had the first baby is a very strange feeling when you breathing him...

**AP:** breathing?

**SH:** breathing the baby

**AP:** feeding?

**SH:** feeding the baby, yeah

**AP:** [laughing] breathing the baby ... okay, yes.

**SH:** Oh, I'm very struggle and he too. How to put the nipple in the mouth—oh my god! I really struggled.

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**AP:** Growing up, I sought a lot of comfort in that, because whenever I feel external pressures to be more sophisticated, or to be more refined, or to be more, you know, this or that, she's very validating, in the sense that she'll say, you know, "Fuck that you do, you don't give other people too much power in determining how you should be." Something that she tells me is like in Eastern doctrine, and in Confucianism, there are like eight virtues that one should pursue. But the cheat is, if you pursue one completely, you pursue all eight at the same time, because they're so interconnected. And so she's always said, "You don't need to do all eight at once. Just choose one and dedicate your life to it." And for her, that was filial piety.

**Filial piety is a virtue in Taoist philosophy and Chinese Buddhist ethics, as well as a Confucian organising principle. It emphasises the moral duty of children to care for, respect and obey their parents and the elderly. It's about giving back, and wanting to give back. It has to be sincere. It's a gesture, rather than a transaction.**

**AP:** And so, she says in *Listen to Mama*, "If you pursue a saying for life, you will acquire all of its wisdom for life. For example, the most basic one says, of the virtues, filial piety should come first. Just a few words, the most important thing in this life. If you struggle being filial, you'll have a hard time with all the other virtues."

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**Angie's family have practised Taoism for generations. On top of wanting to give Angie and her siblings more opportunities, they also wanted to spread**

**the wisdom of Taoist philosophy. And that became a large part behind the decision to move to Australia.**

**AP:** My dad grew up in more of a metropolitan city, and my mum grew up in more of countryside, Taiwan. And so my grandparents weren't formally educated. And so, when my mum went to my grandma and said, "You know, we're moving overseas to Australia," she just, from a very innocent perspective, thought that someone must have cast a spell on her; that we were being scammed or that she must have taken some dark magic potion.

**Shu-Ling came to the conclusion that her mother would never understand or cope with her decision to move overseas. So she lied, and told Angie's grandma that she had changed her mind, and would remain in Taiwan.**

**SH:** (Untranslated) Knowing how intensely she couldn't accept it, we didn't want to worry her either.

**AP:** And so for the, for the first, maybe five years that we were in Australia, mum would always just pretend that she was still in Taiwan.

**SH:** (untranslated) After we left, my mama would call sometimes. So I would call her back and say, 'Ma, I went to get groceries before, were you looking for me?' Pretending I was still in Taiwan.

**AP:** My aunties would call my mum and be like, "Mum's looking for you, just say you went to the grocer's," and so she never, she never knew that we came to Australia, which is so crazy.

So when her mother eventually passed, it hit Shu-Ling hard.

**AP:** I remember her crying so hard because she had this vision of my grandma finding out, you know, they, they believe that once you pass, you see the truth of everything. And she was like, imagining that her mum's spirit was then with her in Melbourne and she would like apologise to her profusely and be like, "I'm so sorry."

**Shu-Ling resolved to be there for her dad in his old age.**

**AP:** Her objective was to stay in Australia up until my little brother went to university. When that finally happened, she was so excited, because it meant she could go back and be with her dad.

**SH:** (untranslated) in Chinese we have this saying, 'When you finally have time to be with him, he might not have time to wait for you.'

**AP:** And it just so happens that when she finally had time to be with him, he didn't have time to be around for her, because he passed shortly after.

**SLH (untranslated):** This year your papa's papa passed, and my own papa passed, I was so miserable in Australia. When I was severely depressed, your older brother comforted me. From this perspective, I genuinely regret coming to Australia.

**AP:** So this is her recounting when both my grandparents passed, she said, "this year, your papa's papa passed and my own papa passed. I was so miserable. And from this perspective, I genuinely regretted coming to Australia." I remember hearing in a conversation she had with my older brother, my brother said,

**SH:** (untranslated) 'Mama, please look at how your children grew up, look at what they have achieved... If you had to choose between the two sides... your children thriving and flourishing... or caring for your mama papa... of the two sides... which would you choose?'

**AP:** "If you could do things again, would you choose your parents or would you choose your children?" And she said, she thinks about this a lot. And there's been times where she really questioned whether she made the right decision.

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**SH:** After immigrated two or three years I just thinking, Oh, if that mean choice again, killing me! I won't come here! [laughter]

**AP:** No! You'd stay in Taiwan?

**SH:** Yeah! I would prefer to stay in the original place I stay there.

**AP:** Really? You – you said a different thing last year when I asked you the same question. You said you would not change anything.

**SH:** No—that's all after two or three years. So after five years, I think I review it. I won't regret. Yeah, my ... my children have a more bigger, bigger sky to fly. Although for for parents, many things struggle, like language or new environment, but it's really good for all my children, so I won't regret it.

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**AP:** She still stands by her initial decision, which is to choose the children and to give them the world that she never had. And that weighs really hard on me.

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**Here's Alan, again.**

**AW:** As children of migrants, there's this intense battle between agency and the expectations that our parents have for us in our lives. And also, we can't separate ourselves from the promise of migration. That is, you know, I'm going to go to all this expense, all this effort, uproot myself, cut myself away from friends and family, in the promise of a better life, both for myself and my children. And whether we like it or not, we're sort of dragged into that expectation.

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**After graduating from uni, Angie seized on a last-minute opportunity to move to the US.**

**SH:** When you want to go America, I think oh my god, my baby bird [indecipherable] fly away so far away from me. But have I had to control myself to say no. Because maybe that's ... will have another ... [crying] ... another paradise or another place for, good for you. The only things that I can do just say god bless you. Safe and peaceful.

**While in the US, Angie was offered a dream job, working with a creative director she had long admired.**

**AP:** And I called my dad because I really, really wanted to tell him and my mum picked up the phone to my shock because my dad was in Taiwan at the time and my mum should have been in Melbourne. When mum picked up, I was like, "Oh, what the hell? Hi, mum." And she was like, "Hey!" And she was - I could tell that she was being really short. And I couldn't really tell why that was happening. And I was like, "Oh where's dad?" She was just like, "Oh, he's, he's gone to pee." And I was like, "Oh okay, well, I'd like to speak to him. Can you let me know when he gets back?" And she was like, "Yep, I'll get him to call you back." And I was like, "Oh, no, no, I'll just stay on the phone." And she was like, "Oh, he might poo, too." And I was like, "Oh, that's okay, like, I'm sure he can't take *that* long."

She was like, "No, you can't stay on the phone. I'll get him to call you back." And I was like, "Why?" And she just started bawling her eyes out. And that's when I knew something was up. And I was like, "What the heck is going on mum? Like,

tell me right now.” She said, “Your dad's on the operating table. He's getting his kidney removed because he has a massive tumour in his kidney, and I flew back last night, I came straight from the hospital. Yep. I'm sorry that this is how you found out.”

**Instead of taking the job, Angie flew to Taiwan to be with her family.**

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**All of these things, her mum's grief, her dad's health, her parents's sacrifices, Angie's own sense of filial piety and duty, her own ambitions ... all of these things were front of mind as Angie began making her film.**

**AP:** I was in Manila with James. My dear friend James Robinson, who also helped me produce this film. And he said, You should think of a way to document this. James kind of gave me some very preliminary advice on how to go about it. But he was like, “Don't think too much about how you'll capture it, just take a camera, and film, whatever it is you want.” And it was a project that I worked on for maybe like the duration of a year and I ended up going back to re-do certain parts. I think, in that way, it's been my favourite work to date, because I didn't sit down and go, I want to make a film. It just happened. And it happened in a medium that I would have never thought to employ. And the end result is something that I would not want to change even though it is so amateur. But it's like, it's like a diary entry in every sense of, you know, that it's something that I say that I'll cherish in this life, and will [for] others to come because it just articulates so much of what my family is in this concentrated form.

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**Fast forward to the film's opening, which Alan attended.**

**AW:** I remember the night the opening night for listen to mama, and that was at Metro gallery in a in an eastern suburb of Melbourne called Armadale. So Armadale: ritzy, typically white suburb, you know, you get run over by a Porsche four wheel drive if you don't fucken, you know, look properly. And then, you know, here was a whole bunch of people that, we all sort of came through the RMIT graduating generation, we were all, you know, from different parts of Melbourne, different parts of the country, different socio economic statuses that we were raised in. But here was this kind of, you know, patchwork quilt of a whole bunch of diasporic identities coming together into a space that, you know, if I had no context about that gallery, no context about Angie, I would perceive as

quite elite and *not for us*. I go, oh, actually, this is Angie has created this space for us. And this is wonderful.

**100 people filled the narrow gallery. The crowd formed a semi circle around a large screen.**

**AP:** We pulled up a chair, and it was so sweet, the whole audience clapped for them.

**AW:** And then the video plays. I think my memory of the opening scenes were, the colour. It was like this muted, blue grey morning, if that makes sense. So like, an overcast sky, but things almost kind of look like it's bathed in this teal, if that makes sense. And it was like from memory. They were like a car ride or a train ride where you saw sort of the time and he's sort of countryside wooshing past you. And then, you know, in time, there was tape of Mama Pai, almost speaking in - it wasn't necessarily a 'Hey Angie, how are you going?' Angie had clearly like gone into the tape and found almost - what's the word? It was almost like a manifesto.

Three quarters of the way through that film, there's this melancholy. And, you know, by this stage, everyone's like, bawling their eyes out. And everybody, you know, you can hear the [sniff sniff crying sounds] the room as it's echoing through this, like, cavernous gallery space. That sort of melancholy towards the end is, I guess, perhaps a self awareness within Angie's mum; that through the process of migration and the process of Angie growing up as, you know, an Australian kid, there will be sort of a gulf that emerges between the two of them in some way, that she might not even be able to comprehend, that Angie might not be able to comprehend. Nothing, you know, nothing intentional, but there's, there's a void that opens in this, I guess. Yeah, in the process of migration and becoming someone else, if that makes sense.

**AP:** I made this entire film also in secret. Like I had a Super Eight camera that was clicking away. And they just thought I was playing with some gadget. And the first time they heard of this was at the premiere.

Yeah, the last shot. So my parents took me and my brothers to like a spa. And there's this like water area and there was splashing about that mum and dad were just having so much fun. Just splashing each other being kids. But obviously they're like, in their bathing suits, which look like their underwear. And for two people who are very conservative, obviously, they don't like the idea of other

people seeing them so exposed and so vulnerable. And dad was really embarrassed. But he was also, you know, really touched by that sentiment.

Mum, and I joke about being rebel monks, how we, you know, are like on the cusp of - within the goodie-goodies were like the most rebellious, and then within the rebellious group, we're like the goodie-goodies. And I knew on some level that I would have their support. And I knew that they would understand that it came from a sincere place.

And so because of that mutual understanding that we would never have any malicious intent towards each other. Even if you show that in different ways, like I knew that they would be okay. And also, like, I wasn't divulging any deep, dark family secrets, it was just me showing them that I really value their sacrifices, and they look cute in swimwear.

I just wanted to celebrate them for all the, you know, trials and tribulations and the hardships that they don't even think are worth celebrating. And it was also an attempt to get my dad to slow down. Like we'd been trying to get my dad to slow down and stop working so hard. And that's why it was called listen to mama.

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**And as I mentioned, Alan and I were working on this story together.**

**LD:** That couldn't eventuate. I don't know if you wanted to talk about why?

**Alan:** Oh, yeah. I mean, it's very on brand [laughs] for Angie's subject matter, really. Yeah. So we were supposed to work together. And that was all in train. But then, you know, 2021, clicked over into 2022. And 2022 was the year that I lost my mother. And, of course, you know, I've talked about throughout this conversation, you know, being able to read over our own histories in our own autobiography through Angie's work. Obviously, that has a particular resonance with me, because even you know, throughout the different contours of Angie's career, and Angie's art practice, I have been reading over my relationship to my mother and our, I guess our relationship through Angie's work.

And that was always something difficult for me, in the sense that, you know, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was fifteen. And, you know, as I sort of emerged into young adulthood, Mum was always sick, she was always sick up until 2022. And I think maybe in a subconscious way, I was enamoured with the joy that was clearly present in Angie's ability to broadcast her relationship with her mother to the world and also share Mama Pai to the world. Right. It was

a generous act. And in a way, I could never do that, because mum was always sick, she never could meet my friends, she could never meet, you know, the young adulthood that I had carved out for myself up until that point. So yeah, and that's sort of why ultimately, we could I couldn't join you as co host is because I, you know, had to care for my mother and then eventually deal with the wallop of grief that I'm probably still in.

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**AP:** well this was supposed to be five minutes, and it is now 20, so let's leave it there... but, do you want to say hello Alan, hello Lisa?

**SH:** Hello Alan, hello Lisa!

**AP:** Did you enjoy this conversation?

**SH:** It's a very, very, nice conversation. Yeah, you can review it from 20 years ago—

**AP:** OMG you always—you're gonna do that thing every time we talk, you'll be like "This will be so nice for you when I die!" [laughter]

**SH:** Yes! Yes!

**AP:** I hate when you do this!

**SH:** Well that's why I always co-operate with you, I don't have no money to earn?? [laughter]

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### *Outro*

Shifting Subjects is a *Liminal* podcast and a proud member of the Broadwave podcast network. It was written, cut and hosted by me, Lisa Divissi. Our supervising producer is Jon Tjhia, he also mixed the show. It was fact checked by Mell Chun. Our theme music is by Marcus Whale. Additional music by AnSo, including original Tracks compositions. Listen to their music on all streaming platforms. Our publisher is Leah Jing McIntosh, executive producer is Lisa Divissi.

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If you liked this podcast, tell your friends about it! And if you're in Melbourne, head along to Angie's exhibition. It's called Why You Like This and it runs until the 21st of May—I've put the details in the show notes. I'm Lisa Divissi, see you next time.