FILM 485 AI + Film

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A Song for Grandma (ft. suno, chatgpt, and mom)

My final project is a music video. Composed of Chinese lyrics, it is a song memorizing my grandmother, who passed away in August 2020 due to cancer. The song was generated by Suno AI with lyrics written by ChatGPT, prompted by my mother’s writings about grandma[[1]](#footnote-2). The footages within the video were old pictures and video clips I pulled from my hard drive that could date as early as January 2012, as well as more ancient photos my mom provided when grandma was in her 30s. So, the music video indeed was a collective creation of me, my mom, and Generative AI tools - each of which played some role in making it what it is. It has obvious flaws, but it is meanwhile very private, sentimental, lingering, and beautiful.

I had this idea of having grandma as the protagonist of my final project because as I read about the AIGC application in the Film and TV industry comes in the form of “reviving” the deceased, constructing a reunion, or even interaction in the virtual space[[2]](#footnote-3). The book referenced how *Furious 7* (2015) brought the late Paul Walker back to life with the help of VFX artists and Paul’s brothers[[3]](#footnote-4). An argument was made in the book that outside of the Film industry, such technology could walk into common people’s lives by helping people retrieve memories of people they love, place emotional sustenance, and realize another form of get-together. In my past twenty-one years, there is only one relative depart that has left a mark on me and that person is my grandmother. I was brought up by my grandparents – my grandpa usually cooked for me and my cousins, and my grandma, who used to be an elementary school teacher, was my first teacher. Unfortunately, she was diagnosed with cancer in 2012, in her 70s, and then set on this tough journey of fighting the disease for eight years. She was the strongest and the most optimistic. She had outlived numerous longest lifespans that her physician-in-charge had predicted and frankly surprised everybody’s expectation, so truly a heroine in my life. Despite grief, it is human nature to say a proper goodbye to the persons we love. The way to get through pain is not to forget, but to remember them forever in a way that retains their spirits and wills. Not “reviving” the corporeal body or finding a substitute like what we’ve seen in *A.I. Artificial* Intelligence (2001), I opt to use generative AI tools to facilitate me to envision the ways to maintain and rejuvenate grandma’s countenance.

I also thought about my mother. At my grandma’s funeral, she gave a powerful memorial speech on her mom. My mom asked me to create some sort of video for grandma and play during the ceremony. I did not take it seriously with an excuse of not knowing how to approach this form of video. So here I am, making up for the work that I was supposed to do four years ago for two of my beloved ladies.

The making of this final project was a bumpy ride. I got the ingredients (my mom’s writing and my grandma’s footages) and the rough idea of memorizing grandma but was not sure of the format of the presentation. Initially, I tried to ask ChatGPT to write a response letter to my mother’s memorial speech in my grandma’s tone. This is because in her last few years, due to heavy treatment, grandma lost almost all of her consciousness and ability to speak, and we never know what she would have expressed to us. ChatGPT’s response was okay. It touched upon a few points mentioned in the writing (after several revisions); it was in a legit reply format; it narrated from my grandma’s perspective. But it just did not feel right. It gave the sense of structured, coded, and feed-in plain text, like replying to an email instead of a mother writing back her daughter. It is consistent with what we discussed in class that ChatGPT performed the best for those fixed-answer math or computer science problems, while somehow ordinary in relatively more open-ended, explorative, humanities-related questions.

Seeing the rather disappointing outcome, I decided to change direction. As I need to create a video in the end, why don’t I make it into a music video? Having zero music background, I am counting on Suno AI and ChatGPT to generate this music piece. To achieve that, I need to provide two things to Suno. One is the lyrics because I want the music to be textual, specifically Chinese so that my mom could understand. Another is the style of music. To compose the lyrics, I referenced back to my mom’s writing on Qingming Festival[[4]](#footnote-5) amid 2021 Chinese Covid lockdown, and it gave the second line “pining for you in the Qingming Festival”. In that piece, I found that she wrote an acrostic poem for grandma. It was a seven-character rhymed poetry[[5]](#footnote-6) with the last character of each line forming together to “Yi Li Jin-hua”, meaning “memorizing + grandma’s Chinese name”. Immediately realizing this could be one of the verses in my music, I filled the rest of the bars with the help of ChatGPT, asking it to provide the complete lyrics for a three-minute song in the style of Teresa Teng, Diva of Asia, grandma’s favorite. Since my mom’s writing was very long, synthesizing it into a three-minute music piece could be challenging. ChatGPT can’t touch on all the details. It is not how people write songs, either. My approach was to ask ChatGPT to summarize twenty key points that it identified from my mom’s writing, and then generate the lyrics based on the key points. After multiple times of revisions and editing, I got the rough layout of the lyrics that I envisioned. Having that draft in hand, I made more manual adjustments to the language and rhyme, removing some awkward punctuations and phrasing.

Moving to Suno. I got to choose the style. I put “pop, lyric, classic oldie, memorial.” They are legitimate songs, which amazed me on my initial tries. The pronunciation was clear and correct except for one polyphonic Chinese character. Each time you hit “create” with the same prompt, interestingly, Suno will generate two songs at a time – each of which is two minutes. I did not find online specifying why Suno opted to do that, but I would imagine this could give users a binary choice and if they selected one over the other, Suno studies their preferences and builds algorithms upon them. If the song does not finish in two minutes, users can choose to “extend”, and then Suno will generate a new piece that picks up where the original song ended. Additionally, Suno is good at the imagination and filling in the blanks. In one of my extended songs, the lyrics provided had already wrapped, but the melody was not resolved, so Suno kept repeating some of the lines in the end to make a proper stop.

In the end, it took me almost thirty trials to reach the song that I was 80% satisfied with. Unlike ChatGPT you can “communicate” with the chatbot to optimize the output, Suno gives you no room for negotiation. It is like opening “blind boxes”. The randomness of the output creates some extent of uniqueness within each trial while making revision and reproduction almost impossible. In my case, since I have a rough vision of how a “natural song” should sound, I primarily modify the lyrics and leave the style of music unchanged.

Like I said, I gave the final song 8/10. Suno, as a AI song generator, definitely has technical limitations, awkward behaviors, and suboptimal results, like all these AI tools we’ve seen in this class. However, the process of testing and playing around with the technology was fun, and to some extent, very intellectually stimulating. All the thinking involved in music creation was a completely New World to me as I learned some lessons about composing lyrics, arranging verses, twisting music styles, and more. The project was also very meaningful for fulfilling a late duty of mine. I would leave a rather positive note on AI-powered art creation. When I presented the video to my mom, she told me she cried, which was when I realized it was my first video/short film dedicated to my mom given that she has always been my inspiration. I would argue that Suno works best in such an unformal, uncommercial, and amateur scenario when we put its legal, professional, and copyright-related issues aside. In my case, AI is simply playing as a team member in preparing a family gift. On the website, Suno stated that it is “building a future where anyone can make great music” and “breaking barriers between you and the song you dream of making”[[6]](#footnote-7), so I definitely look forward to seeing how it achieves the sentient, humanitarian goals it envisions.

1. The original text can be found in the file *mom’s writing*s. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Du, Yu, Zhang, Ziming, *AIGC: Age of Intelligent Creation* (AIGC: 智能创作时代), Zhong Yi Publisher (中译出版社), 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Giardina, Carolyn. *How ‘Furious 7’ Brought the Late Paul Walker Back to Life*, 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. also known as Ching Ming Festival or Tomb-Sweeping Day. It is a traditional Chinese festival that honors the deceased and marks the return of spring [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. a genre within classical Chinese poetry, referred to as “Qilu”, and belongs to the category of regulated verse (Jintishi) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. https://suno.com/about [↑](#footnote-ref-7)