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Writing 101: Asian American Narratives

24 April 2022

The Real Value of Education

On January 8, 2011, Chinese-American author and legal scholar Amy Chua published an article titled “Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior,” an excerpt from her book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. In the article, she tells the story of how she raised her two children to excellence through a supposedly traditional, strict “Chinese” upbringing. Her children were never allowed to “not be the No. 1 student in every subject except gym and drama” or “get any grade less than an A,” or even “have a playdate.” She further claims that “...the solution to substandard performance is always to excoriate, punish and shame the child” (Chua 2011). Chua pits this rigorous strategy of childrearing against more relaxed Western ones, and she cites it as the reason Asian Americans outperform white Americans. According to her, this is the way to success: the way of the, now infamous, “Tiger Mother.”

Unsurprisingly, the article was immediately swept up in controversy. Western audiences praised her for disciplining her children into reaching their fullest potential, and Eastern audiences heavily rebuked her for pawning off her own authoritarian methods as authentically Chinese (Lee 2015). As a first-generation Chinese-American, I was deeply rattled by Chua’s article the first time I read it. Not only was she reinforcing the model minority myth, but it also seemed to me that she was shamelessly buying into the longstanding Orientalist narratives of Asians being incapable of assimilating into Western society in order to appeal to the white

masses. In a way, I felt betrayed; Chua was tarnishing the reputation of our culture and people just for the sake of more clicks and purchases.

Sure, contrasts in culture and tradition may factor into differences in parenting styles, but there is so much else to account for. It was only upon further introspection that I realized even I couldn't name more specific factors. Straight A's, extracurriculars galore, a future defined by the ivy league—these had always been fundamental parts of my and my brother's lives. I had never thought to ask why. Why *was* our academic achievement so important to my parents? To understand why my parents put such great emphasis on education, I delved deeper into my mother's story.

On January 8, 1964, my mother was born Qingyou Yan in Luzhou, a city in the Sichuan province of China, to my Wai Po and Wai Gong. She was the beloved youngest *qi mei*, seventh sister, of a working-class family. She was born a few years following the Great Chinese Famine (1960-1962), a tragic period of time in which an estimated 30 million people died of starvation. It suffered more losses than any other famine recorded in human history. The famine was the result of the failures of Chairman Mao's Great Leap Forward, a fanatical plan to reach record-breaking production and build a Communist paradise. People scrambled to eat anything they could: grass, leaves, boiled leather. Sichuan was among the most affected provinces (Brown 2020), and only my mother's oldest brother and two of her sisters were able to withstand such destitute conditions. She was fortunate just to be born.

My mother was lucky to escape a stomach full of soil and tree bark but not quite lucky enough to escape the Mao regime's ensuing plans. The first 12 years of her childhood would be marked by scarcity, paranoia, and Little Red Books (a book of quotations from Mao that was virtually mandatory to carry). On May 16, 1966, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officially

launched the Cultural Revolution, a sociopolitical movement aimed at cleansing the remains of capitalism and Chinese tradition from Chinese society. Its goal was to attack the Four Olds—“old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits”—in order to reeducate the populace using Maoism (Jian 2009). Intellectuals and the bourgeoisie were labeled enemies of the people, and independent thought was strictly forbidden.

The May 7th Cadre Schools were established in late 1968 to reform scholars, dissenting government officials, and property owners through manual labor. Middle school through college students were not spared the repressive hand of the CCP either. My mother was only 3 years old when her brother was taken away from her. He was one of 17 million urban youths who were sent to the countryside to be “reeducated” (Jian 2009) with no way to return except to replace one of their parents as a cog in Mao’s Great Proletarian machine.

As such, my Wai Gong took early retirement from factory work in order to rescue my uncle from grueling labor and isolation. Thereafter, he was deathly afraid of allowing his children to continue their education past the elementary level, for that was the only position their family had to spare. My mother, 9 and 10 years younger than her sisters, was the exception. When it came time for her turn, her father wanted to do the same, but she was a remarkable student. Her school’s principal along with other administrators visited her home and convinced my Wai Gong to support her further academic endeavors.

Even so, my mother continued to face significant barriers in her education during her first year of middle school. School days consisted of mainly two categories of classes: one that taught who the enemies of the republic were and another that reinforced Maoist thought and collectivism. English classes studied translations of Mao’s works. Art activities involved sketching scenes from the Peking Revolutionary Opera, and songs of the People’s Liberation

Army echoed through every hallway (Sigmund 1973). Any deviation from the schooling of the cult of Mao was prohibited and brutally punished. Fortunately for my mother, one of her teachers was daring enough to rebel.

At sunrise, my mother sang songs of Mao's greatness and learned to "Serve the People," but, at nightfall, she secretly joined a small group of students at their teacher's apartment for extra math lessons. Any fear of the repercussions of her actions was eclipsed by her longing for a real education. She was eager to grasp every available bit and piece of information that wasn't purely propaganda. Math, science, literature—there was no subject she wasn't ardent to learn.

On September 9, 1976, Chairman Mao died, and the long-awaited end of the Cultural Revolution soon followed. After four of Mao's closest confidants and supporters, commonly known as the Gang of Four, were arrested on October 6, the era had officially come to a close (Jian 2009). The end of the revolution and return to a customary education signified hope for my mother's academic future. Her appetite for knowledge propelled her to scholastic success throughout middle and high school. The first in her family to attend college, she began studying at the West China University of Medical Sciences in Chengdu in 1981.

There, she met my father while enjoying unprecedented academic freedom studying for both her bachelor's and master's degrees in dentistry. Her professors had previously been persecuted for refusing to surrender to Maoist thought and abandon their pedagogic principles. They understood the cost of pursuing an honest education, and they instilled such gratitude in my mother. Although substantially more liberty existed in the academic sphere, college students were still frustrated at political corruption and the utter lack of democracy in the republic. These grievances culminated most notably in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, but similar protests stretched throughout the country.

My mother was one of the thousands of college students who marched in the Chengdu protests of 1989. These protests originated on April 17 in Tianfu Square as a memorial gathering to mourn the death of Hu Yaobang, a former reformist general secretary of the Communist Party. It took only a few days for a large-scale demonstration to transpire. By April 21 and 22, these demonstrations escalated into huge marches, and, by May 15, students, faculty, and local residents began participating in a class boycott and hunger strikes.

Unfortunately, the imposition of martial law on Beijing caused morale to dwindle in Chengdu. The hunger strike was abandoned, and a handful of people, at best, continued to protest. Even so, on June 4, after Tiananmen Square had been forcefully evacuated, the government ordered another crackdown on Tianfu Square. Most of the 300 students that remained left voluntarily, and the rest were evacuated peacefully. However, once news broke of the massacre in Beijing, thousands immediately surged onto People's Road, the main road in Chengdu.

Some carried mourning wreaths. Others bore signs that said, "'We Are Not Afraid of Death,' 'June 4th massacre, 7,000 dead and injured!'" and 'Down with the Government of Dictators!'" (Lim 2014). My mother valiantly raised the words "改革, 反贪官, 言论自由," "Reform, Anti-Corruption Officials, Free Speech." It didn't take long before the police turned hostile, and, when the first baton struck, chaos erupted.

Protestors retaliated with shoes, bricks, chunks of concrete, anything they could grab. Tear gas billowed through the sultry summer air, and the booms of concussive grenades echoed from street to street. Students staggered along with "heads bound with crimson-stained towels" (Lim 2014). Blood dripping down their faces, they chanted over ear-splitting gunshots, "民主自由, 抗争到底," "Democracy and freedom, fight to the end."

The following few days continued to be marked by pandemonium. Classes were canceled. Factories were closed, and navigating through traffic was a Sisyphean task. The most devastating of several fires that roared across the city was set in the People's Mall in southwest Chengdu. The shopping center, a hallmark of Chengdu's bustling city life, burned to the ground within a day. Although the source of the fire remains unknown, the government was swift to assign liability to rioters. They labeled them as unruly "hooligans" and "gangsters," but, to this day, my mother and the bulk of protestors still believe that the government deliberately set this fire to discredit the student movement and justify a more intense crackdown (Lim 2014).

From then on, paranoia and mistrust pervaded the halls of my mother's university. School officials began asking students to report who was in the movement, who was an insurgent, who was responsible for "leading the rest astray." They were prepared to cleanse the student body of anyone who dared to defy the CCP. After these events, it was clear to my mother that there was no hope left in China. She needed to leave behind her friends and family for a brighter future, one that wasn't cloaked by the darkness of political repression.

On April 11, 1990, President George H. W. Bush issued Executive Order 12711 as part of the international response to the Tiananmen Square massacre. It allowed Chinese nationals to remain in the United States until January 1, 1994, regardless of visa status. This executive order was later bolstered by the Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992, a policy that provided sanctuary for Chinese students who fled to the United States between June 4, 1989, and April 11, 1990 (Himler 1993). While this promise of refuge attracted many, my mother chose to pursue a master's in oral biology at the University of Toronto instead in June of 1991. This meant leaving behind her husband, but it was the only school that offered her a scholarship. It was the only one she could afford.

The opportunity to emigrate to the United States didn't present itself until four years later in the form of an EB-1B visa, a green card issued to outstanding scholars who wish to contribute their expertise to the United States. In 1995, she reunited with my father in New York, New York, where she would conduct breast cancer research at the Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons. She worked there for two years before beginning her study at the university's College of Dental Medicine in 1997, and, that same year, she gave birth to my brother Jeffrey. Three years later, she graduated with one hand holding my brother on her hip and the other clutching her diploma.

On September 6, 2003, I was born, and, between juggling a family and her own dental practice, my mother didn't have a second to spare. Even so, she always found a way to support my brother and me in our education. Every week, she sacrificed her own leisure time to drive us to afterschool enrichment classes, violin lessons, and whatever extracurricular activities we found ourselves entangled in. While A's were standard, she never punished us for receiving bad grades; instead, she encouraged us to study harder and tried to tutor us on what she could. There was nothing my mother valued more than a good education, and now I understand why.

What I misinterpreted as stereotypical "Tiger Mother" behavior had simply been her efforts to teach my brother and me to appreciate a luxury that she had fought her entire life to obtain. Her education was the sole reason she was able to escape poverty and repression, and it is the reason the "Tiger Mother" argument falls apart. Chua's narrative disregards the context of the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen Square massacre. It egregiously neglects the experiences of an entire generation that was lost to ruthless political command and propaganda.

To trivialize my mother's commitment to pushing my brother and me in school as merely rooted in "authentically Chinese" customs is to minimize a generation of children whose education was stripped from them. It is to discount the nights my mother risked her life for a few extra math lessons, the professors who would rather face merciless persecution than betray her learning, the EB-1B visa that allowed her to finally start a family. School is of the utmost importance to my mother because it was her way out. As I toil along in my academic career, I can only hope to honor her legacy through similar diligence and determination. Writing this essay was just the first step.

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