

My parents are first-generation immigrants, and, in a way, I am too, except I was a teenager when I came, and they were in their very early 40s. They were descendants of an ancient society where the emperor was the law in the land, and the surest path to success was to become a government official by beating out millions of others in the very difficult placement exam. How did I know this? Because I learned about it in history, geography, and literature classes, through watching historical drama series on TV, and reading many books as a child growing up in Chinese culture. My parents were white-collar workers at a major national company in a major city at the time. It was not something to boast about, but it was certainly a better and more stable job than most, and we, as kids, enjoyed various perks as benefits for the families of company employees. In my eyes, that seemed to be a much better life compared to the life we were living in the US when we first arrived. Every day, life was a struggle for each of us. My dad was busy trying to earn an advanced degree in a university so that he could get better jobs. My mom was trying to stretch my dad's meager graduate student stipend to support a family of five, not knowing much English. I was trying to fit in in high school without understanding a word of English people said to me, and trying to make passable grades and friends at the same time. My younger siblings were in elementary school and middle school respectively, and I suspect they were adapting to the western culture much quicker than I was. If I thought adjusting to the western culture was hard, imagine how much more difficult it must have been for my parents. I didn't know if this was what they had expected before deciding to immigrate. But then again, those were the times when oversea mail took more than a week to arrive. Besides, there was the deep-rooted Chinese notion to never reveal anything less than glamorous to the folks back home, lest you lose face, or give them cause for unconstructive worrying. I remember asking my parents, "why did we come to America?" because I secretly wished we could go back to where we came, so I could have friends again, and be at the top of

my class again. I had imagined their replies could only be how the political situation was so unstable in the wake of US officially recognizing Beijing in 1979, or how they had heard that life is better in the land of infinite opportunities, or they wanted to spare me the stress of studying for and taking the high-school entrance exam. Then, I would be ready to prove them wrong, hoping to convince them that it was a mistake to move to America. But to my great dismay, they replied in Chinese with a stern face, as if all the hardship and sacrifice they endured were for a cause so noble, “why, it is to give you kids a better education, and a better future!”

Better education??!! True, the goal for learning is noticeably very different. In Chinese society, the teachers’ immediate goal is to help students score higher in the national annual comprehensive entrance exams (once for high school and once for college), because the exams are designed to be very difficult in order to sift out the worthy few among millions of applicants to fill limited spots at a handful of prestigious universities. That drives what and how the students are taught in the schools, and it also serves as the measurable indicator of how effective a teacher is. Teachers not only impart as much academic knowledge as possible, but also discipline students to retain them by rote memory, so they can recall quickly during the exam. Math problems are to be solved mechanically, by memorizing all formula and order of steps to apply them, so students can finish as many problems as possible in the time allowed. The school year right before the exam is especially arduous, that classes for subjects not on the written exam (such as PE, music, or arts) are often replaced by additional review sessions, teaching sessions, or practice exams, not to mention spending all night at cram schools afterwards daily. “Don’t question, just follow” would probably be the common school motto or society motto if there is one.

On the contrary, “must question, don’t just follow” is the motto in the US. Teachers in the US schools want students to understand how the math formulas came about, what led to

the Civil War, why the government was set up the way it is, how Mendel discovered genes, why Einstein's theory of relativity was important. They encourage students to be creative, to express individuality, to learn to think critically and independently, to ask questions if they don't agree with or understand the teacher, which are actions unheard of in Chinese society. Ironically, it is precisely this "better" education that taught me to think critically, to ask why, to not blindly accept what adults say if they don't make sense to me, to freely express my thoughts and ideas, to be myself. The unspoken rule about respect in western culture is that respect is earned, it's never bestowed unconditionally.

As I grew older, I began to realize this Western value in me is the exact root cause of endless conflicts with my parents. Even though they have lived in America for over 30 years, mentally they are still Chinese to the core. They cook Chinese food, watch Chinese TV shows, read Chinese news, have Chinese friends, converse in Chinese, and deadliest of all, retain Chinese ideology. Not only that, they expect me to treat them as a good Chinese child should, with unconditional filial piety and total submission to their preferences, especially my mom. To her, there is only her way of doing things. Any other way is seen as great insult or disrespect to her. Initially I would try to reason with my mom, to present my views, but that would often make her angry and lead to total hysterical outburst of yelling and scolding, trying to hammer me into seeing things her way, otherwise I was unworthy of her love and sacrifice. Eventually, I realized she had no capacity to accept me or understand me or willing to give up her ego, so I learned to hold my tongue to keep peace, even when I think she is wrong. Only when I appear to do as she says, would she be happy and reward me with gifts or money. How sad!!! Lecturing adult children and grandkids about respecting her, or giving them money and gifts when they do as she says, is her way of showing love. But instead of money and criticism, what

we really starve for from our parents is a listening and understanding heart, accepting us and appreciating the way we are, products of this society they chose to raise us in.

After all these years of making mistakes and learning the hard way with my OBC parents and my ABC children, my truly sincere, honest, and maybe ugly advice to Chinese immigrant parents would be, please let your American-born children be American, because foremost that's what they are, a guaranteed consequence of growing up in this country. They are too young and too American to understand your deep-rooted Chinese values that cannot be seen nor felt outside of your house in this society they call home. However, you still can have a good relationship with your children if you are willing to cast aside your own ego as parents. They might not comprehend the purpose behind your words, but they will always remember how you made them feel (your kindness or anger, soft tone or shouting at them). Let go of the Chinese ideal that a child must obey the elders. Accept your American children. Set them free to pursue their own dreams, not yours. After all, you do want them to have all the opportunities here that you never had, right? If you insist they must obey you first, and you refuse to listen and observe and understand them first, you are actually building a great wall between you, not a bridge. The wall will shut down any communication between you, then all will be lost. You had forced them to seek acceptance elsewhere. But if you are willing to come down to their level (because they are not as wise or mature as you to rise to your level), to patiently keep listening, to patiently give your children time (may be decades) to learn and mature into adults, they will eventually realize your great love for them, and come to respect you and love you in return. Who knows? They may even come to embrace their/your Chinese heritage sooner than later!