

An Open Letter to Mama,

‘Did you eat yet’, meant ‘I love you’. ‘Are you warm’, meant ‘I am proud of you’, and ‘You must work hard in school’ meant ‘We do not want you to go through the same hardships we have’.

A decade ago, I was incapable of deciphering the cryptic meanings behind these phrases. Now, ten years later, I am barely beginning to understand the significant impact differences in generation, upbringing, and circumstances had on the way we communicated as a family.

Navigating through our conversations was more difficult than completing the challenging Sudoku puzzles you had me complete as a child. At the time, I did not understand that actions meant much more than words, that the sacrifices you and Papa made were for me, and that your constant absence at home was to provide us all the opportunities you and Papa lacked.

Despite attempts to understand, I never succeeded at comprehending the true symbolism behind your words and actions. It was only recently that I am able to feel how you both illustrated love through conduct. Today is my first attempt at communicating transparently with you both, after 24 years of life. I write with apprehension, hope, and aspirations that this letter might serve as a conversation starter between immigrant parents and their Asian American children. My goal is that I can illuminate the complexity of our relationship, the impact of generational differences, and the importance of working to meet in the middle ground in order to establish open dialogue in modern Asian American homes.

At age 15, I felt our relationship paralleled a professional working relationship; I was expected, as a female Asian American, to remain reticent and obedient. You have always said: “You are a girl, and girls must never speak up, especially to their parents.” I responded: “Why”. I immediately regretted the question because the answer was always: “Because we said so”. In retrospect, “professional”, might be a rather generous term to describe our exchanges.

As a junior in high school, I was balancing extracurricular activities, college application, jobs, and classes, including the worst supplementary weekend writing courses you both enrolled me in. Lacking any sense of independence, I felt trapped, and distressed, which led to the several months of my absence and zero communication after leaving for college a year later. My conflicting emotions of stress, frustration, and loneliness were a forbidden topic for our weekly family dinners. Papa always said: “No tears... emotions make you weak, think with your brain, not your heart”. Thus, I kept all of my feelings bottled up, and putting your desires above my own. You both wanted evidence of scholastic achievements, and I made sure to deliver that. Nothing more, nothing less, despite my dream of communicating that your high academic expectations, specific behavioral etiquette, and tight reins on my independence were unhealthy for my emotional and physical well-being. For a while, I failed to believe your intentions were pure.

You and papa always told me that at age 15, you both were escaping the war, violence, and turmoil in China. You both witnessed deaths, experienced the worst human conditions one could imagine such as starvation and disease. Escaping to America was imperative, but it was also to grant me a life of opportunity. After moving to America, your inability to speak English was an obstacle for professional jobs, so you and Papa resorted to working labor intensive jobs seven days a week to provide for the family.

As a child, I was oblivious to the fact that your absences were symbolic of your love for me, at the time, I misunderstood absence for avoidance. I was envious of my peers who had their family around, parents who could speak perfect English, verbal phrases and formal expressions of love. In hindsight, I see that I was a foolish child, and for that I am a thousand times sorry.

You both were raised differently, in a world where ‘actions spoke louder than words’. As a first generation Asian American, words expressing love were more common amongst my peers, and emotions were encouraged in Western culture. Our disparities in upbringing, location, and generational values drastically strained our relationship.

Many of my peers have also experienced strained communication with their parents who immigrated to America. Our values are different. While you and Papa believed the key to a good life were: job security, maintaining Chinese female etiquette, finding a stable husband, and building a family. I believed it was important to pursue my passions, assert myself, and focus on happiness. I was unaware that, happiness was all you and Papa wanted for me, rather the way it was communicated was indirect, which led to misunderstanding.

Immigration to America itself already presents a myriad of challenges for individuals. Furthermore, generational clashes between immigrant parents and American born children address a vital need for both parties to develop empathy for each other, open-mindedness, and willingness to learn about current trends in parenting, communication, and values. It is imperative that emotion is encouraged, in hopes that unforced, genuine, sincere exchanges can happen often. It is also vital Asian parents become aware that mental health is of equal importance to physical health, and dialogue should incorporate emotional wellbeing instead of solely physical symptoms.

To conclude, I write this letter today, knowing fully that the sacrifices you and Papa made were a commitment to my happiness and livelihood. I write this letter as a promise to continue working on our communication differences. But most of all, I write this letter with love, and hope that immigrant parents, like you and Papa, and their second-generation children can learn to adapt, be flexible, understand the breadth of diversity between parents and children, and hear your children out.

I end with a question to you Mom: Have you eaten yet?

Love,

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