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Lowell Speech

How I Came to Unlearn

At five in the morning, the house was still dark when I pulled back my bed covers. I tiptoed silently into the study and powered up the family computer. I was a nine-year-old on a mission. As the beeping sounds of the dial-up Internet pierced the silence, I looked back to check the door. Will my mother catch me?

On the days that she didn't, the few hours before my family woke up were spent blissfully designing my own webpage on hellokitty.com or, if I felt up to it, reading up on astrophysics online. But I always felt guilty. I had strayed from my mother's imposition of strict and controlled learning.

One might explain this tension in my childhood as an ancient philosophy, Confucianism, emerging from my Chinese heritage. Confucius believed that the reverent performance of ritual would gradually create a virtuous person, and so my mother concluded that the discipline of practice and rote learning would produce the steadfast work ethic one required to succeed.

Even while my mother was away at work she would enforce my piano practice by listening to me play over the phone for hours. These measures were part of a Confucian belief in the power of ritual.

I flourished and probably overachieved within this system until the end of high school, when I sensed I could no longer suppress the exploratory nature from my early days. I came to unlearn all the rigid routine that I was trained in, preferring instead to go along with the experiences unfolding around me.

But at the same time, I struggled with my failure: I had not attained Confucian ritual perfection.

But actually, this is not the full truth behind my story at all.

Instead, my story begins in China 50 years ago, at the start of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

In 1966, during the last years of Mao Zedong's life, the Cultural Revolution began. Its goal was to purge Chinese society of all traditionalism and to solidify the reign of Communist ideology. It was a terribly violent era, responsible for the most severe setback suffered by China in the modern era. Thirty million innocent lives were lost; even more were displaced.

One particularly painful Maoist policy stripped academics of their posts and sent them to the countryside to become peasants, far away from where they could threaten Mao.

My mother's father was an academic.

Seven years into the Cultural Revolution, he passed away from the terrible conditions of poverty in rural China, where he had been sent to live. He left behind his wife and three children under the age of ten, one of whom was my mother.

In the aftermath of the revolution, my mother's family was given a tiny place in Shanghai to live in. The bathroom of this new home was where my mother would spend late nights studying, because the rest of her family slept in the only other room. My grandmother, who was also once an academic, cycled miles through the city each day and labored intensely in three jobs in order to feed her children.

In these circumstances, my grandmother became distant and emotionally unable to nurture her children. Although she is still alive today, my mother constantly recounts how she never really felt like she had parents.

My mother did not realize that years later, she would carry this yearning for parental love, care and guidance with her when she migrated to Australia and started her own family. Another lifelong hardship--the immigrant experience shared by some of you in this room--was added on top of the suffering from her early life.

Knowing all this, the forces behind the unusual anecdotes of my childhood are now less of a mystery – the events of recent Chinese history fully explain what I could only speculate about with Chinese philosophy. The truth is that my mother brought me up this way because she was fiercely committed to providing the love that she never received from her parents. She loved me in the only way she knew how.

Today, like that nine-year old many years ago, I am still that girl who cannot stop stealing time to satisfy her exploratory nature. For example, I will wake up tomorrow and spend my free hours building a set for the show *Ghungroo*. It is an activity that does little to further my academic pursuits, but it is part of my unlearning.

But unlearning the rigid discipline of my childhood like this does not come without tension. I have brought that unresolved tension with me here, to Harvard.

Perhaps one day, I will return to my mother's ways, or perhaps I will find my peace without them. But one thing is certain. The effect of the Cultural Revolution does not go away, and I live to embrace this part of my history.