

My 18 years of school life in China consisted of two major parts: going to classes and doing problem sets. Going to classes involved sitting in the classroom from 7am to 6pm, listening to lectures and furiously writing down what the teacher said as much as possible. The teachers' voices echoed through the silent hallway, interrupted only by ringing of the bells. Very occasionally, a student would raise a question and pursue it somewhat adamantly. But time for discussion was rarely in the teaching plan, so the Q&A would often end with the teacher's scolding, "No sophistry! Let's not waste other people's time!" or "Just do it the way I told you to, that will get you points on the exam!"

Luckily, I was never the one scolded that way, because I have always been a "good" student. Thinking of it, there are really only two definitions of a "good" student in my country. First, "cheng ji hao de" which means you score high on exams. Second, "ting hua de", which means you heed what an elder or a superior says. I fell into both categories, as did most of my classmates who were grouped together because of their impressive academic performance. Not surprisingly, to do well on exams, you kinda had to always understand, memorize, and follow the teacher's instructions.

The second part of my school life was about numerous pages of problem sets. Every day, I spent almost all my free time after school, from 7pm to midnight, trying to find an answer to each practice problem. What are the amino acids in the human body? What is Newton's Second Law of Motion? What is the significance of Zunyi Conference to the leadership of Chairman Mao? Which of the following are the benefits of the harmonious development of Tibet with Chinese characteristics? etc etc.

Occasionally, my classmates and I got into heated arguments over what the right answer was. When that happened, we would elbow each other's way into the teacher's office, presenting the teacher with what we thought was the truth. "Yours is right. His is wrong." The teacher would say. Done. That was the final judgment, saving all the time and room for argument. Somehow, we all knew, the teacher's words were the sound of authority, and few of us ever thought the teacher could be wrong. It was also unnecessary to have such doubt. When the college entrance exam was the only determinant for our next four years of life, time was better spent making our answers consistent with the correct solutions at the back of the workbook, than coming up with a new solution ourselves. Weirdly, to each of all those thousands of practice problems I've done, there was always a correct answer. The truth we were taught was one and only. It was as black and white as the letters and papers of my workbooks.

Growing up, and leaving the country after 19 years, I belatedly discovered that the real world was not as simple. My Chinese teachers are no longer here to tell me what to think, what to believe, and what the correct solution is. Which side am I supposed to argue, when students debated whether to let Muslim citizens build a multicultural center at Ground Zero? What solution am I supposed to support for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, when I'm friend with an Israeli Zionist plus human rights activist, a descendent of Palestinian refugees, and a liberal

American Jew? Whose story should I believe in, when each tells a convincing one from a unique perspective? For a long while, I was overwhelmed with so many different versions of what ought to be the only truth, the only correct answer. I was frustrated with the inaction of the professors—why are they only asking questions in class? Why did they let the debate go on? Couldn't they just end it with a judgment call, and move on? What was the “correct” answer that would get us points on exams? I hesitated to speak up or even make up my mind, because I was afraid it might not be the same as the solution in the back of an imagined workbook. In my head, I was afraid to hear the voices of my teachers: “Yours is wrong. Let's not waste other people's time”.

Going through these struggles, I slowly walked away from my old world, where the only principle for judging right from wrong was exam scores. I came to see the colors of the lenses that people inevitably wear, and the diversity of ways to look at a situation. I began appreciating the complexity of the place that I live in, and even the dilemma of not knowing what to believe and not having a fixed answer.

It's been almost four years now, I still haven't developed a new principle or a set of principles, to determine what's right and what's wrong, what's authentic and what's not. But I tell myself it's alright, because at least, I'm asking myself questions every day, of why I think the way I do, or why I trust the things I'm told. My mind is no longer fixated on the correct answers in the workbook. Once I realized that they are not the only correct answers, or may even be wrong, I could never look up to them with the same obedience as I did before. Finally, after 22 years, I'm feeling like I have a mind of my own, a voice of my own.

Thank you.