

"How many times do I have to remind you to wear something that doesn't show your body curves? You are a girl for God's sake", my mother's voice penetrates deep within me. "You are a disgrace".

Growing up, I was constantly surrounded by this paternalism, and I could not blame her because traditional Chinese values expecting girls to behave in certain ways were embedded in her since her birth. Socializing with friends of the opposite sex after school was not permitted. Clothing choices were also severely controlled, as my mother believed that girls should dress modestly.

Despite these restrictions, my mother chose to enroll me in an international school. It was not until I started to attend the international school that I attained a sense of freedom, interacted with peers from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, and formed meaningful relationships in which I did not have to prioritize conformity and groupthink over individuality and defiance. Attending an international school had a profound impact on my life and helped shape me into the person I am today. Being exposed to different cultures and people from around the world, I was able to look at the world through a much wider lens.

As I immersed myself in a pro-Western environment, I realized that I needed to assert myself and stand up to my mother's expectations. It was a daunting task, as I had grown up accustomed to always obeying her. I feared that my defiance would disappoint her and strain our relationship, and this chain of fear was eating me up inside. For a long time, I thought this was going to be what the rest of my adolescence would be like: striving to swim to the shore of liberty, only to be held back by tides of trepidation.

However, growing out of blind obedience was bound to happen when I was sent to the international school. There, my determination to change the status quo strengthened as I learned more about feminism and democracy. Without being overly radical, I

found ways to negotiate with my mother and insofar change her values, particularly the ones that were suffocating to me.

Furthermore, through the rapport built between me and my peers in the international school, I began to ponder over the weaknesses of various cultures in the sense that all cultures seem to keep their members preoccupied with a set of confined values and norms, hindering them from developing cultural competence and embracing the idea of global citizenship, which could render the eradication of prejudice, discrimination, and conflict less far-fetched.

Cultural difference exists, but similarity remains. While some of my peers' families encourage individualism and self-expression as opposed to collectivism and conformity, they also value taking pride in embracing their cultural heritage. I remember how my family celebrated traditional holidays and cherished traditional Chinese culture. Even though I sometimes felt stifled by the strict gender roles and expectations placed on me as a girl, I knew that my culture is a vital part of who I am. To break free from the reins of my mother's stifling values and expectations without disavowing my heritage is essentially what I have been trying to achieve, and I am proud to say that I have made progressions over time.

"Hey, are you gonna do the dishes?" my mom asked me one night after dinner. "Of course I am! I'm a girl! And I have already thrown out all my skirts, by the way." I tried to sound as serious as I could. She burst out laughing: "You know what? Just go on and do your homework." That spur-of-the-moment reconciliation marked the first major milestone on our way to 'cultural utopia'.

As I enter college, I believe that my adaptability and cross-cultural competency acquired through attending an international school and coming to terms with my heritage will enable me to surmount the barriers presented by race, culture, and human nature.