A Childhood Spent Inside A Chinese Restaurant

By Susan Cheng

Being one of the few Asians in my school was hard enough. Working at my parents' Chinese restaurant didn't make it any easier.

Snot gushed from my nostrils as I heaved giant sobs and tried to steady my breathing. I felt so ugly propped on a barstool inside my parents' dingy restaurant. My Chinese textbook laid open on the counter before me, mocking me. In between sniffles, I continued to read aloud from it, jumping slightly every time my mom interrupted.

"Cuo le!" she barked. That means "wrong." I was used to being wrong. At 13, I'd sort of accepted that I'd never be right in my mother's eyes. My fastidious, self-sufficient mother, who'd immigrated to the United States at 20 after marrying my dad and leaving behind her family in Hong Kong.

It was a Sunday, the only day of the week I had neither regular school nor Chinese school. I went to Chinese school, an hour away from my house, every Saturday from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. My classmates and I spent most of that time reading through a passage with help from our teacher. I hated waking up early on a weekend, commuting, and spending what felt like every second of the day with my mother, but Sundays weren't all that better. At 11 a.m. that day, I'd gone with my mom to China Inn, the restaurant my parents opened when they first moved to Pennsylvania in 1983. Now, 21 years later, as she made all the necessary provisions for lunch, my mother also used this time to quiz me on what I'd learned in Chinese school the previous day.

"How do you still not know this?" she spat in Mandarin, furiously circling all the words I couldn't read from that week's lesson. Although she hadn't said anything particularly cruel, her tone was scathing so every word felt like the lash of a whip. "If you don't learn these words by the end of today, don't even think about doing anything else!" Resentful but too tired to resist, I wrote and rewrote the characters, while also devising mnemonics for remembering them so that I'd pass inspection at the day's end. This scene was repeated pretty much every week.

But as strict and demanding as she is, my mom is not and has never been a ruthless tiger mother. After marveling over what a sensitive kid I was, she would feel sorry for me and explain that all of this tough love was for my own good. "One day you'll understand and thank me" were how the conversations always ended, as she pushed a bowl of rice porridge and shrimp dipped in soy sauce near me. "Eat!" No matter how frustrated she got, she would never let a child go hungry.

Although it's been over a decade since China Inn closed down, I can still vividly recall every detail about the place, especially that taproom where I'd spent so many years of my childhood. An ornate mirror hung on the wall of the stuffy room, which reeked of cigarettes. The surface of the L-shaped bar was usually sticky and lined with an old red cushioning that I'd pick at for hours while pretending to study.

And when I wasn't studying, I was working. Over the years, more Chinese families moved into town, opening up their own businesses. Due to the increase in competition, my parents were forced to lay off employees and put me to work.

At China Inn, I was terrified of seeing anyone from school, especially those with whom I'd never interacted but was forced to greet. I thought it was unfair that I had to be in a smelly Chinese restaurant serving others while all my friends were out doing whatever typical teenagers do. It only made me feel more alienated from my mostly white peers — some of whom were my friends but no one I could relate to 100 percent. Whereas the other kids in school had grown up familiar with classic pop culture like The Beatles and The Brady Bunch, I knew all the words to popular Chinese folk songs and watched dramas set in Imperial China with my mom. My friends whispered secrets and giggled over jokes that I'd often miss, because conversation was harder for me as a kid who thought first in Mandarin and then in English. And football was their religion. Family was mine.

I'd known that I was different since a friend pointed it out to me in first grade. She'd tapped me on the shoulder, and when I turned to look at her, pulled the corners of her eyelids into slanted slits. From that point on, I dodged anyone's questions and avoided conversations about my ethnicity as not to draw attention to my differences. It wasn't that I wanted to blend in with my peers or erase my culture. I just didn't want my heritage to be the only thing that defined me.

But as I grew up, things only got more confusing. I wanted to be accepted by my peers, and I wanted to appease my parents. But there was a part of me that wanted to be my own person, which meant disappointing my parents. Instead of a disciplined, studious child and dutiful daughter, they got a kid who was content to slack off and scribble absentmindedly on the backs of placemats. The ones at China Inn had the Chinese zodiac on them.

According to those placemats, I am a goat — creative, timid, reserved, "compatible with boars and rabbits, but never the ox." The description was actually quite apt. Carefree and contemplative, I was a dreamer, not a doer. I quit ballet after just one recital, which is a lot longer than my stint in gymnastics and violin lessons. In school, I did what I could to get by with no desire to be the best, much to my mother's frustration. And though I never outright disobeyed my mother, I often fought with her.

Through tears, I would protest: "Why do I have to learn Chinese and study so much? I'm an American. I live in the 'States, and here, people speak English, and they go out." She would remind me that like her, I had yellow skin and slanted eyes. Because of that, nothing would ever come easy for us. "We've got to work twice as hard to get ahead!"

To my mom, there was always something I could be working on, if not refining my Chinese then working on SAT practice questions to raise my score. Her idea of constant improvement terrified me, as I had grown content with being average. More than anything, being average was something I could claim as my own. It was my personal way of quietly countering against a mother who wanted so badly for her kid to be an obedient, refined, and high-achieving daughter.

It was also my way of standing out as the middle child. My brother, who is 8 years older, had already lived through those tumultuous years of fighting with my parents. I doubt he wanted to relive them through consoling me. Then there was my younger sister, who was something of a child prodigy in my parents' eyes, so it's not like I could turn to her for comfort. But even if I had someone to talk about this with, I'm not sure I would have had the words for it back then.

When I was younger and not yet versed in Confucius, I hadn't realized my mom had grown up in a culture that placed the family above all else. Years later, I learned the name for this — filial piety, to show devotion to your parents, to display good conduct outside of the home as to save face. Although my dad never worried too much about my education, he has always been unwavering in his belief that children, especially daughters, ought to

remain devoted to their parents until marriage. I used to think I hated China Inn because of the monotony and because I was constantly subjected to my mother's criticism. But now I realize I loathed going there so much because I felt trapped, confined to my family's culture, always expected to think of the family first, to sacrifice and compromise any sense of self.

At the end of the night, after a long day of work, my mother would soften up, forgetting all about whatever dispute we had earlier that morning — sometimes even sparing me the quiz in Chinese. Instead she'd tried to reason with me.

"You see why you have to study, why you need to work hard?," she said that night, while scrubbing glassware at the sink behind the bar. "Only hard work will bring you a bright future. I don't want to see you working in a Chinese restaurant like me. I want you to be better than me."

Now, at 23, I still struggle to reconcile with my culture's expectations for me. I hated myself the first time I chose a boyfriend over my mom and felt immense guilt when I moved out. But I still did all of those things — because as much as I love my mother, I'd never wanted to be just my mother's daughter. I hated the idea of being just an extension of the woman who gave birth to me.

Having worked side-by-side with my mother, I saw my mother in ways that no one else saw her. I saw the way she spoke to customers, the way she nervously but happily made small talk with the restaurant-goers and the way she would stare blankly into space during the slow hours. I recognized in her a yearning to be her own person too.