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Anthropology 101

*Pressures Experienced by Zhimo Li*

Compared to American students, my informant experiences more pressure. My informant is Zhimo Li, a young woman from Chengdu, China who is a sophomore Dietetics major here at the University of Delaware. I met her recently in my Nutrition and Dietetics Club. We met twice in Trabant in the food court where I asked her questions about her culture and she told me about many different aspects of her life.

Zhimo feels many pressures as a student at the university. She feels academic, social, and financial pressure. To make the most of her education in the U.S., she puts a lot of pressure on herself. She is one of the nearly 30% of Chinese students who study abroad in the U.S. She feels the pressure that she must do well in order to stand out academically in order to get a good job. To maintain her academics, Zhimo studies three to four hours every day and five during midterms. Despite her academics, she told me that she still maintains a vibrant social life. According to Zhimo, she socializes mainly with her Chinese friends because she doesn't understand the social relationships between American students. After meeting an American student once and having an initial conversation, the next time she sees the person, he or she does not initiate conversation. However, when she walks to class, she notices that American students make eye contact with each other and will greet her if they recognize the people they recognize.

Since her parents are paying for her education, she feels the pressure that she must make the most of her parents' money. Her parents are one of the 60% of individuals who pay for their child's foreign education privately. She is a member of the Nutrition and Dietetics Club, the Chinese Association Club, UD voice, which hold singing competitions for Chinese students, and she helps out with the Spring Festival in March. She has the same drive for extra curricular activities as academics. Zhimo must try to

do her best in everything, which is why she works very diligently. She has to live up to her parents' expectations of her.

Family is another pressure Zhimo experiences. From the time she was young, her parents have made many major decisions for her. They chose her middle school, high school, and even college. Attending college is mandatory for Zhimo. Her mother told her that she had to apply to colleges in the United States in order to get the best education. She only applied to schools in U.S., such as New York University, Boston College, and the University of Delaware. She never visited any of the schools during the application process due to the cost of travel. Her first time in the country was when she started her freshman year at U.D. The reason she ended up at U.D. was because her parents had received a suggestion from a family friend that she should apply because it is a very good American school.

The only decision Zhimo was allowed to make was her major. When Zhimo picked her major, she told me that she was free to choose. She is a Dietetics major and her parents are both are Animal Nutritionists; however, given the circumstances and level of control they have in her life, it is safe to say that her parents heavily influenced her decision. By choosing a major similar to her parents, she has to be at as successful as them in the field. Because they both hold Master's degrees, they told Zhimo that she must at least reach their level of education or greater. When she graduates with a Master's degree, she will eventually start a family and marry. Her parents want her to be married by the time she is twenty-five or twenty-six to a Chinese man who has a good job and who has an education equal to hers or greater.

There are broader cultural pressures that impact my informant. Even though she hasn't yet graduated, she told me that she would prefer to work in the U.S. instead of China and worries about being able to get a good job here. She spoke about how finding a Chinese husband is something she thinks about often; she wants to marry for love, because she wants her relationship to be happy and long-lasting. The pressure of her culture to marry young can be seen in her parents' strong desire for her to find a spouse and marry him by the time she is twenty-five or twenty-six. Zhimo told me that she wants to meet

her parents' expectation, but if it means that she has to wait until she is twenty-eight or twenty-nine, then she will, contrary to her culture.

Depending on if she finds a job in the U.S. and where she marries will determine how many children she will have. According to Zhimo, if she settles down in the U.S., then she will have two or three children, but if she settles down in China, then she will have one or two. Despite the One-Child Policy of China, she says that the government has become much more lenient recently. She has many friends back in China who have with multiple siblings because their parents paid a fee to the government for every additional child. Zhimo explained to me that because she is an only child, if she marries a man who is also an only child, it will be acceptable to have more children. At the same time, there is a pressure imposed by the government to still refrain from having multiple offspring. Because Chinese law prohibits citizenship of any country other than China, even if she resides in the country, she will never become a U.S. citizen. If she does, then she will lose her citizenship of China, which will cut her ties from her family. If she has children here, she told me that she would love for them to become U.S. citizens, because of the vast amount of opportunities available for them here. The pressure of having her entire future planned out for her six to seven years ahead of time is an enormous weight for a teenager to bear. As an American, I was raised to be a self-sufficient and independent young woman, to pick a job that I wanted not based on my parent's occupations, but based on what I truly desired. Since I was a child, my parents have supported me in all the decisions I have made for myself, and pushed me toward all of my interests. They have never forced me down any path other than the one I have been continually developing for myself. I have always been encouraged to voice my desires to parents and they have always taken my opinion into consideration. My mother constantly tells me, "Do whatever you want to do and follow who you are." Compared to me, Zhimo's path of life appears to be relatively set in stone, regardless of what she may personally want. Her parents have determined her education, told her when

she should be married and with what type of man. Whereas I have been allowed free rein over my future, Zhimo has been kept on a close leash.

Through my fieldwork, I gained an understanding of the multiple pressures experienced through the eyes of Zhimo Li. She is aware of her parents' desires and does her best to fulfill them. My parents have always been proud of me in all my successes, and encourage me to make my own decisions. I can't imagine having my parents choose colleges for me to apply to, then picking from institutions that accepted me. Zhimo is a very strong young woman, and thanks to her I have a better understanding of the Chinese culture and pressures that she experiences.