

Jincheng Zhao

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Holton-Arms School

Dear Mom, Dear Dad,

It was just Chinese New Year, and Dad left to go back to China on Wednesday to visit his parents. We pretended everything was normal. We didn't talk about the Monterey Park shooting. My school offered me more support than I got at home. We like to pretend that everything is normal. That Dad traveling between two countries every six months is normal. That growing up as a third-culture kid is normal. I know you guys don't mean to pressure me, but every time you bring up another child who has better grades or test scores than me, I feel so much stress and pressure. I feel like you never see my strengths, that instead this isn't enough or that isn't enough. I'm not good enough at violin, I don't get perfect grades. I don't do math competitions, I prefer the humanities. I'm not athletic enough, I'm not academic enough. I go out too much, I go outside too little. We're disconnected from the Chinese American community, and we're disconnected from your family in China. We float. Between countries, between cultures, we float, except you have an anchor I don't, because at least you grew up somewhere. I float. I float between multiple houses, countries, cultures, identities. I grew up in the U.S., but I've left memories in the U.K., playthings stacked away in China, color pencils forgotten in Brazil. I'm like a shadow, pieces of me everywhere and nowhere.

In “Slaughterhouse Five,” Vonnegut describes aliens who can see in the 4th dimension: time. They say that everything happens all the time, they perceive time as constant, instead of the way we do with a present, past, and future. To them, you could be five years old and seventy-five at the same time. I feel like that. I’m 3 in China, 5 in Brazil, but I’m also 8 in the U.K. and 12 in America. I feel everything all at once.

We’ve talked so much about parenting and parent-child relations over the past few years, and to be fair, there was a great deal of change and compromise. I think we have found a happy balance between Chinese and American parenting. You also suggested speaking English at home, as practice for you and to allow me to fit in more at school. But time after time I’ve said no. I know we’d lose some of our heritage and culture, as I tried to be like the white girls at my school. Your insistence on me learning Chinese my entire life has deeply ingrained a sense of some sort of belonging to a Chinese culture or community. But my American-ness keeps me from fully belonging to China, attending private school keeps me from belonging to our local Chinese communities, most of whose children go to public school. Even writing this letter feels like it doesn’t belong in our lives, since I don’t speak English to you two. It feels like I’m talking to a piece of paper.

We’ve talked often about what I would do when I grew up, from adults asking a little girl about dreams and aspirations to college counselors and parents asking seriously about college majors and actual career choices. When I was younger, I often responded “I want to be a ballerina” or “I want to be a solo violinist and perform around the world!” At one point, I even came up with an elaborate plan to become the founder of a music school in China, teaching students to love playing their instruments, unlike many music schools in China that only look for results or push students to enter competitions. I didn’t want students to hate playing or listening to classical music. As a seven year old, I thought that was enough to fix the problem. But now, as a junior in high

school, all the questions are serious, and people actually expect serious answers from me - answers I don't have. Dad, you want me to go into politics or law. And Mom, you want me to become a doctor, pre-med. I doubt I'd have any other ideas if I did stop and think for myself - I haven't really changed from the young girl who wanted to teach people to love music. I'm not sure what "realistic" choices I have or what else I'm passionate about. For now, I'm telling people I want to major in Psychology, partly because of my interest in mental health and how people think, especially after the pandemic. But the other reason is so I could buy myself more time to satisfy everyone. With a psychology degree, it wouldn't seem strange to apply to med school, or law school, or perhaps even a masters degree in marketing and communication. It leaves me options to decide what I want and how to make everyone happy. But part of me wonders if I'm not still chasing someone else - trying to be as "successful" as those smarter, more athletic, more accomplished kids you tell me about.

I know this is your first time being parents for a child going through the intimidating American college application process, just like it's my first time being a kid. Neither of you know the system or have been through it yourselves, so the three of us are finally seeing something together in the same way, all of us new to this process. I hope that in the next year and a half we remain close as I begin my college search and applications. Please don't become those parents driven crazy by their child applying to colleges. I look forward to starting this journey with you guys, because if it goes well, I imagine we'll be closer bonded than before, you know, like surviving soldiers after a war. I have so much more to say and to do and to become. Thank you for the opportunities you've given me, and I love you very very much.

Your Chinese, American, confused, loving daughter,

Jincheng Zhao