

Drying My Eyes and Smile

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Abstract: Yuanya Zhang was born in a rural village in Mainland China. As a girl, non-local, and first-gen college student, she has been through lots of moments of "crying" throughout her education, from schools in a small town to universities in Hong Kong and the UK. In this narrative, Yuanya deliberately selects moments in her life that have led to her growth and helped her to develop perseverance and resilience as she managed to overcome challenges by drying her eyes and smiling.

“Would you cry when you cannot finish your homework?”

“No.”

“Would you cry when you get told off in school?”

“No.”

“Would you cry when you miss your family?”

“Yes!!”

These are excerpts from the conversation between me and my students in one of the English classes when we talked about emotions and feelings. I joined a volunteer program this year and delivered online English classes to students who were Orang Asli inhabiting jungles in Malaysia. Now they lived in an urban charity school and only went back home once a year. The conversation reminds me of my family. I do miss them very much. In fact, I’ve been far away from home since I was 18. In the past ten years, I sometimes wept in the airport, sometimes in my room, sometimes when walking alone back to my place at night. I can’t remember all of them, but some key moments come to mind. As a first-gen college student, a non-local student, and a girl, each of the identities seemed to be a “barrier” in my life journey. Now looking back, I see all the past crying moments are precious moments that have inspired me and helped me to move forward.

“Girls can learn science well.”

“Better to marry well than to study well.” Growing up, I’ve heard of this many times from relatives and people from my hometown. They couldn’t understand why my parents spent lots of money sending me to a top school in town instead of the village school just next door. I was very grateful that my parents were open-minded and believed that girls deserved good education just like boys. My academic performance was good in primary school but when I went to junior high school, we had a new subject, “science,” and I found it very difficult at first. “I cannot do science. Girls are usually bad at science.” Every time I received my science grade, I felt like it was the end of the world. My mum only received five to six years of school education. My dad graduated from high school. He said he was good at math and science back then, but he was too busy to help me. Then he found me a tutor and told me that girls could also learn science well. I didn’t expect that he would pay extra money for my studies. I was aware that my parents worked very hard to support me and my sister and I felt

so guilty that I had let them down. I was crying in bed before sleeping that night, telling myself not to give up, and it turned out that I did just great.

“I’m leaving now. You take care of yourself.”

I was both excited and anxious when I received an offer from a university in Hong Kong. I grew up in a small town in Mainland China. Hong Kong, to me at that time, was a brand new concept far away from “my world.” The only thing I knew was that it was an international city where people spoke Cantonese and English. I was excited to have the opportunity to see a bigger world, while at the same time I was worried that that world might not welcome me, or I just could not fit in. I travelled to Hong Kong with my father. I still remember when we got off the train and accidentally went into a shopping mall, we then had no idea where the entrance to my university was. It was late summer. It was very hot outside. My father carried two big luggage cases while walking in the sun with beads of sweat on his forehead. It was uphill all the way to the residence hall.

My father stayed for two days, during which time he went to a big mall and bought me my first laptop. He shared with me everything he had learnt such as the tube lines, how to transfer between lines, how to top up my card, where the canteen was etc. I could figure them out all by myself, but I really appreciated that.

“I’m leaving now. You take care of yourself.” That’s the last words my father said to me before he left.

I was gazing at my father’s receding figure on the second day in Hong Kong when he was on his way to the train station back home, leaving me alone in a big city. I looked around. I was alone in my room. I didn’t know what kind of life was ahead of me. I cried out so loud, as I knew nobody would hear me.

“You’ll be fine, just hang in there.”

The first semester in university was the hardest. I didn’t know very well about the university curriculum and I could not follow everything in lectures as it’s all in English. I didn’t know how to write essays; I didn’t know how to do presentations; I didn’t know how to do group projects. But I could learn. I was a quick learner, and I was so driven and ambitious. I tried to seize every opportunity to learn and ask. Luckily, I met some very nice professors who were willing to help and support me. I remember the first time when I did an English presentation in class; I wrote my script and rehearsed many times before the formal presentation even though my part was only five-minutes long. I received quite good results in most courses, except this module, called “University English,” which nearly killed me. The lecturer asked us to write a proposal discussing a problem and three potential solutions. In my consultation meeting, the lecturer commented on my draft, “No, this is not gonna work. I would suggest you change the topic.” My brain went blank when I heard the feedback. It was only one week left before the final submission and a 2,000-word essay was a lot of work for me at that time. What’s worse, how could I even know whether my new topic would work. “What if I fail? What if I get a C or D?” I walked out of the office with the draft paper in my hand, found a corner in that building, and crouched down and wrapped my arms tightly around my body. With tears running down my face, I told myself, “You’ll be fine, just hang in there.” Now looking back, it seems not to be a huge thing but that was a big challenge for the 18-year-old me. I received a B- for that module, quite bad, actually the worst grade I’ve ever got. It pulled down my average GPA, but I accepted it as I learnt a more important lesson, which is to pull yourself together whatever twists and turns your life offers you.

“Just follow your heart and do what you like.”

After graduation from undergrads, I found a job in Hong Kong. My parents were very happy that I got a nice job, but later I realised that was not the right job for me. I didn't enjoy doing most of the tasks assigned to me and I found it quite boring. Plus, I never felt I had fit in. I was always an “outsider” without a sense of belonging. The crowded streets, the busy shopping malls, the neon light billboards, men wearing suits and ties, noises from pubs, all these things had nothing to do with me. After all these years feeling like a drifter, I just wanted to run away.

“I want to quit my job. I want to be a volunteer teacher.”

“No problem. We always support you in whatever decision you've made. Just follow your heart and do what you like.”

There was a store next to the place I lived. I sat on the front steps, looking at the people and cars passing by. It was a late night, nearly 10 pm. I had just got back from work, exhausted. After days of indecision, I finally picked up my courage and called my parents. I remember I cried for a long time after hanging up the phone.

I was surprised that my parents would reply the way they did. To be a volunteer teacher sounded cool, but I knew many Chinese parents would not allow it. The work was in a rural area and the opportunity cost was high. I could have chosen a more “promising” job (like working in big companies in big cities) for my future career development. But being a volunteer teacher has always been my dream since childhood. Thanks to the support from my family, I made up my mind and joined a volunteer teaching program.

I spent two years in a rural middle school in southwest China. I had great time there with my students. I enjoyed teaching, talking to them, playing with them, singing with them, and running with them. Every moment we spent together was precious. I wanted them to know the power of education and how unique and valuable each of them was; I wanted them to know that their life was full of hope and opportunities; I wanted them to know that we could change our lives and write our own stories. I was extremely happy when students told me that I had inspired them and encouraged them to be better selves. Deep down, I know my decision to be a volunteer teacher is closely related to my own background and experiences. I want people who are “disadvantaged: to feel empowered and powerful. That's why I'm still doing volunteer teaching now.

Knowledge has always been my weapon. I've never stopped pursuing knowledge, in fact, I love thinking about what I've read, seen, and heard; I love trying and learning new things; I love developing and sharing thoughts and ideas. After finishing the volunteer program, I did my master's in Education and now I'm a first-year PhD student at one of the most prestigious universities in the UK. Although those horrible monsters such as “self-doubt” and “imposter syndrome” would come to me from time to time, I am no longer the 18-year-old girl who cried at the corner. I may have met even more problems compared to my undergrads, but I believe that I'll be doing fine as always. I just believe that.

I cannot remember the last time I cried. But those key moments will stay in my memory forever. They have led to my growth, and I believe that crying is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign of getting stronger and becoming a better self. I'm now not shameful of being a first-gen college student, rather I'm very proud. I appreciate everything that I've had now and every person that has ever helped me, guided me, inspired me, encouraged me, and supported me. I hope I continue my life journey with all the tears and laughter I've had in my backpack and move on to write the next chapter of my life. And I hope you do too.