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## My Awkward Relationship With Asian Excellence

I am very much Asian. My excellence, however, is not.



My dad's "accidental" scales bookend, via [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

Before I was born and when my sister was very, very young, my dad bought some bookends. Being an allergist married to a pharmacist, he wanted to find two with caduceuses on them — one for each daughter who would follow his and his wife's medicinal career path. My dad did indeed find two gnarly marble slabs to bring home; however, he later realized that only one had a caduceus. The other bookend had on it the scales of justice, blazing in its gilded golden glory.

It was "an accident", we all say.

Today, as my sister runs off to UC Irvine's Hughes Lab every day to run her own experiment, I'm prepping for my upcoming debate tournament. She reads *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, I read

*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. It's not like we can't swap places and live happily, it's just that we'd rather not. Every day we live is a metaphorical bookend in our dichotomic pre-med/pre-law lives, and we tell our stories through what we choose to do.

Whenever I pass my bookshelf, I give the scales bookend a long look.

*An accident.*

### **Growing Up Under Asian Expectations**

As a kid, I grew up under stereotypically “gung-ho” expectations. I did workbooks every break and weekend, and if I didn't finish them in a short time frame, hell would break loose. I took banal summer classes, learned material two years ahead of time, started academic competitions in middle school, and read books like I was going to die the next day.

However, I'm glad my parents pushed me. The pursuit of academic greatness defined my path early on, and my hungry, self-driven search for success is a product of it.

Alas, even knowing this: the expectation to be good, successful, *excellent*, is both philosophically and emotionally problematic.

I raise a glass to my fellow Asian sons and daughters, the “fallen soldiers” of many academic generations.

### **The Uphill Battle Versus Myself**

The moral and philosophical question of what the “goodness” in “good child” truly means was a prevalent one in my childhood. Does “good” in this sense mean successful, kind, morally superior? At ten years old, I couldn't decide.

My desire for success was untamed, and at the time, I wasn't sure if it was my parents' or my own. I've grown old enough for it to be solely mine, but my drive at that young...I really cannot tell you who it truly belonged to.

An example of my ten year-old moral struggles was in fifth grade. I was in the most advanced math class offered at my school. However, during one particularly confusing unit, I received an 11/15 on my homework assignment. I remember how depressed I was when I got my grade back, but everyone gets somewhat disappointing grades once in a while. This memory, however, haunts me because of what I did next.

In a feverish craze, I snuck off to the bathroom with my graded assignment. Crouching in a stall, I changed my incorrect answers to the correct ones, maniacally jeering “that's one more point back” every time I did. I returned to class and showed my paper to my teacher, claiming that it was ‘graded wrong’ and I had gotten a perfect score.

Long story short, this was blatant academic dishonesty, and I obviously got caught. I was given a zero on the assignment and lost my spot on the competitive math team. To this day, though, I count my blessings: I wasn't suspended and didn't have to suffer massively because of my choices.

On the other side of the coin, my parents — rightfully so — lost their minds. They emphasized that they would have been much less angry if I had simply brought home the score as it was, and that they were questioning everything else I had achieved. No one could be sure what good grades I had earned honestly anymore. It was probably one of the worst days of my life.

It's safe to say that the experience scarred me so much, I never tried anything like that again. I'm truly proud of the accomplishments I've attained since then, especially because none of them were generated under morally questionable premises.

And yet, even now, I know for a fact that it wouldn't have been much better for me if my parents had seen my original score. I don't think they realized that, sometimes, a ten year old child isn't in the mood for getting smacked on the head. A child wants to be sufficient enough, partially for themselves and mostly for their parents. I hate what I did, but I understand the action: I had just wanted to be a perfect student one more time.

My parents are good people, though. They taught me that a good student must be proud of everything she puts her name on and spares nothing if it means perfection.

Nothing in that blatantly encourages cheating. My mother, in fact, prides herself in raising me to be a good-hearted person. She won't be proud of me unless I am so, she says.

Nonetheless, to all parents: you simply cannot raise children to unrealistically attain perfection ninety-nine out of a hundred times and *not* intrinsically encourage cheating. You cannot instill a "fight or flight" mentality in them by lashing out every time they are even a little bit subpar. You cannot suffocate them with high expectations, all the while banking on them having a desire for success within themselves. I do, but many others aren't so lucky. Most of my high-achieving friends are swimming in resentment, as everything they've achieved was to please their parents instead of themselves.

### **Social life?**

Another lesson that might be more specific to my parents was this: a good student must know sacrifice, even at the expense of a social life. That friends in general are a folly prospect and will backstab you later on, while family will remain loyal to you.

The dark side of this lesson was a thousand times more impactful on my childhood than the cheating incident. That was because it was the first and only reason why I decided to socially isolate myself in early middle school.

I had one best friend. She still is my best friend, and we met in preschool. New friends, though, were out of the question in my mind.

I scoffed at "normal people" things: hanging out after class, going to birthday parties, and the like. I didn't get close to anyone. I got used to working alone or with "the nerds" for a partner activity. I have no

qualms about the latter, as the studying-obsessed at any school are probably the nicest people you'll meet. I'm friends with way too many of them now.

Nonetheless, back then, I was too blinded by my parents' teachings to realize that. The nerds were too nerdy, the socialites too social, the people just too people-y. They were not my family, so they must be ever so *nefarious*. These beliefs that weren't mine were superimposed onto my outlook on life, and it took a while to truly grow out of it.

The best bit of irony is, high school, the point where all teens turn to the dark side and use drugs as a coping mechanism...it made me fully, truly excellent.

Or, well, excellent on my own terms.

### **The Enlightenment**

Although I steer clear of the potheads at my school, I soon discovered upon entering ninth grade that my entrenched life philosophies were completely wrong. I stopped telling my parents whenever I got Bs on tests and found a group of lunatic, studious friends. High school was also the time where I decided against going into a career in healthcare and picked what I've always wanted: the intensely pre-law lifestyle. My career choice was still "honorable", but it was wildly anomalous in my UCI-alumni, rigidly pre-med family (and extended family).

Maybe I'm not a disappointment, after all. I'll be honest, I'm still busy: Chemistry Olympiad is coming up soon, my debate tournament is next Saturday, my Academic WorldQuest competition March 3rd. I have AP tests to study for, clubs to run, volunteer hours to complete, summer programs to attend. However, I still gain massive satisfaction from the fact that nothing I am currently doing was even remotely inspired by my parents.

For example, my dad forced me to play tennis since I could walk. I vehemently hated it. I made varsity, but the coach was terrible to me and every minute of a match took years off my life. I quit tennis and elected to mentally count debate as my athletic activity instead. Because, in all honesty, debate is an extreme sport.

Both of my parents also made me play piano for years. I abhorred piano with a burning passion, and soon enough, I ended that as well. I turned to writing and journalism as "my thing".

They envisioned me becoming a doctor, my white coat ceremony, my first surgery. They told me how they could just *\*see\** it now. Well, it's safe to say that visions are visions for a reason: *they aren't real*. It took a while, but my parents learned to live with it. They are proud of me now; they came around. I think it's because I'm still a fervent workaholic, but I won't complain.

Alas, that's just my story. There are a good amount of Asian children suffering from similar expectations. As a whole, plenty of students in general are burdened with the task of making their parents proud at whatever personal cost.

That is why it's so important to know this: you aren't graded on a parent-generated rubric, although you'll think you are for a large portion of your life. You are not alive for a purpose predetermined, you are not a bookend on a shelf of outdated, poorly-written life approaches.

And, to every philosopher who has tried to answer the question of good: goodness is not a rare commodity. Everyone has it. To be a good person or to be excellently Asian are two different things, and it is possible to be the former without the latter. If you're not applying to medical school, you still have the capacity to have intelligence and compassion. To be kind, to learn, to understand.

Lastly, to all of us: You are the scales of justice in a store of cadecuses. A coincidental accident; a plan gone awry. Yet, still made of weighty marble and, if thrown, could break a window.

You are the beginning of an end, and you tell your story.

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