

# Chinese School and Me

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I did not start out liking Chinese; in fact, I hated it with a passion. When I started first grade, my parents had already arranged for me to attend Chinese school. At that time I really did not want to go. I was a rebellious and mischievous troublemaker in Chinese school. Sometimes I would hide the chalk in order to delay class. When the teacher asked us to speak Chinese, I would speak English with a passion. And when the teacher was away, I was the kid that all substitute teachers hate and fear. At home, not only did I often whine to my parents about wanting to stop going to Chinese school, I also grumbled saying “All the other kids can go out and play on Sundays, how come I can’t? If you guys don’t want me to play, that’s fine with me, but how come I have to spend three hours at Chinese school?” However, my complaints fell on deaf ears. When my mom wanted to help me revise for an upcoming Chinese test, I would be very difficult, sometimes it seemed as though World War III was taking place in my house. One year, at the annual speech contest I even gave a speech on which my topic was “Why I Dislike Chinese School”. When the judges gave me third place, I was very baffled. In this manner, I wasted six years of going to Chinese school because my heart was not in it. Instead of studiously learning all that I could, I put all my energy into rebelling. Thus, not only did my grades suffer, I was not very happy either.

However, all of this changed when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, my attitude towards learning Chinese took a 180 degree turn. I remember that at the beginning of that year, I was still ready to rebel and to refuse to learn Chinese, however as the year progressed I unconsciously came to like Chinese. The teacher’s name was Madam Lu. No matter how rude or obnoxious I was, she patiently and enthusiastically continued to share her knowledge of the Chinese language and Chinese culture with me. Under her tutelage, I discovered that Chinese culture was very rich and elegant. For example, we can use four character idioms to describe an event or to explain a proverb. Furthermore, every Chinese character is defined by its radicals and has an original meaning. Take the character for house, “jia”, for example. In ancient times, during the winter time, people would bring their pigs into the house, thus the character for pig under a bracket became the word for family or house. Another intriguing element of Chinese culture that drew my attention was Chinese Chess, because it contained many interesting rules. For example, the elephant cannot cross the river. In my mind, this is because the elephant is so heavy that if it tried it would sink. During that year, I also heard a lot of stories about China’s history. I discovered that many of China’s past rulers and leaders were pretty cool. Take for example the first emperor of China, QinShiHuang. Not only did he build the Great Wall, he also united China for the first time in history. However, at the same time, his desire to build the Great Wall also caused many deaths. He also gave the order to burn many early historical documents and Confucian texts, thus much of China’s early history was lost. In addition to all these things, I also came in contact with many other aspects of Chinese culture including: Chinese yo-yo, Wushu, Chinese instruments, Chinese calligraphy, etc. All of these things attracted me and in this way I began to love Chinese and Chinese culture.

When I realized that Chinese was so fun and interesting, I started to be self-motivated in learning Chinese. I started to complete my homework and to study by myself. In class, I listened attentively, took notes and actually tried to behave. I started to learn Chinese for myself instead

of learning it for my parents' sake. This change in my attitude towards learning Chinese not only positively affected my grades; it also led to a change in my own views and beliefs. In the past, I had always thought that learning Chinese was a waste of time. Not only was I born in the U.S., I also lived in the U.S., I didn't need Chinese to survive. However, when I went from being last in the class to being one of the top three students in class, I didn't think like that anymore. Now, I am proud to say that I am a Chinese who is able to read, write and speak Chinese. Although I was born in the U.S., however I am still Chinese. This is an undeniable part of my heritage, my black hair and yellow features are irrefutable evidence.

When I traveled to Singapore and Malaysia to visit my grandmother, when people learned that I was born in the U.S., they immediately looked down on me because they thought I couldn't speak Mandarin. When I started college last year, I met many international students from China and Taiwan, and they displayed a similar reaction. However, when I expressed that I not only able to understand Mandarin, but also speak it fluently, their attitude towards me changed from one of disdain to respect. It is at these times that I am grateful that I attended Chinese school. In college I also met a lot of American-born Chinese who started to take Chinese classes again, they all regretted not having continued with their Chinese education when they were younger. Whenever I meet these people, I feel extremely grateful to my parents who had forced me to attend Chinese school from beginning to end.

To my younger brothers and sisters at Chinese school:

What I would like to share with you are words from my heart, it is not like Chinese school is paying me to tell you these things. I want to encourage you to continue to learn Chinese. I encourage you to struggle diligently and to persist in learning Chinese, don't feel discouraged and don't give up, because in the end, you will not regret it. Don't come to Chinese school for your parents, come to Chinese school for yourself. I challenge you to make a decision to better your Chinese for yourself. If your pronunciation is not very accurate, don't feel embarrassed, speak Chinese bravely, keep practicing until your pronunciation is perfect, and then practice some more. If you have a challenging time with reading, don't give up, read a little everyday, and one day you will find that reading is no longer an obstacle for you. If you always can't remember those Chinese characters for the vocabulary tests, write them a couple more times, pretty soon you won't be able to forget them. At the same time, remember to enjoy the many aspects of Chinese culture as well, I guarantee that you'll find something that you like. It doesn't matter if other people look down on you; the most important thing is not to look down on yourself, do not belittle yourself or your heritage. Don't be ashamed of your own heritage and culture. We are all Chinese with our black hair and yellow features. I am proud of my heritage, and if you don't feel the same way yet, I hope that one day you will be proud of our rich heritage and culture as well.

In the past few years, I understand that many students from other backgrounds and cultures have started attending Chinese school as well. I am happy you have come to learn Chinese with us. I also hope that you will continue to study Chinese diligently, because the effort that you spend now will not go to waste.