

The Unending Sacrifices of a Chinese Immigrant Family:
An Intergenerational Analysis

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My mom often claims that my first language was Cantonese, despite my school-learned Spanish far exceeding my “native tongue.” My immigrant grandmothers and I engage in single-sentence conversations in fragmented English and Cantonese. They smile through the unavoidable awkwardness and ask, “Tou ngo ma?” meaning “Are you hungry?” These language barriers prevented our relationship from strengthening to its fullest potential, as I could not hold private, intimate conversations with them. Their knowledge of my personal life is limited to what other family members will disclose, just as my awareness of their histories is folklore-dependent. Immigrant families tend to experience more intergenerational conflict depending on their level of acculturation, due to causing greater gaps between generations (Guo, et al., 2022). While the acculturation gaps between my grandparents and me never caused altercations, I was acutely unaware of the many sacrifices they made to support my parents instrumentally and how these gaps manifested in the relationships between my parents and me. These sacrifices conveyed their love and shaped the expectation of their child’s reciprocation of devotion and hard work, a Chinese concept known as filial piety (Yang and Zhou, 2008). Conducting turning point interviews with my parents lent insight into these countless sacrifices that my Chinese immigrant family made, gave a deeper understanding of how my parents developed their style of affection communication, and helped me navigate what it means to embrace Chinese culture in a juxtaposing American environment.

My mom was the eldest child of immigrant parents, born in Las Vegas before eventually moving to California for university and settling down with my dad. Initially, she didn’t have a strong relationship with her father, due to his familial duty of being the breadwinner. He’d return home past her bedtime, limiting the opportunity for father-daughter bonding. There were moments when she forgot she had another parent. However, their relationship improved when he

started incentivizing her with jewelry to excel academically and learn English. He never got to graduate high school and wanted her to attain the highest level of education possible. My mom's motivation was fueled by making her preoccupied father proud, although the incentive helped as well. It wasn't until she started working part-time at the restaurant her father operated and started her first job in college that she realized the immense sacrifices he made throughout her life. Not only was he the sole financial provider and completely expensed my mother and her two younger brothers' education, but he also gave her extra spending money for college and jewelry throughout her adolescence. She could better understand her father's motives despite not being able to spend much time with him growing up and thus dedicated more effort to her academics. Research on Chinese-American academic success points to parents' demands and expectations for their children to excel academically. While my grandfather never explicitly stated the sacrifices he made, filial piety creates the expectation that children raised in this high-context culture can recognize the sacrifices and exhibit an internal motivation to fulfill their parent's wishes (Yang and Zhou, 2008). After my mother obtained her degree in dentistry and fulfilled her father's lifelong wish, their relationship had a high degree of closeness till his death.

My mom's early childhood consisted of many memories with her mom, as she was a stay-at-home mother. Their initially strong relationship took a dip in closeness when her younger brother was born, due to competition for resources and parental attention. The strain in their relationship continued when my mom started going through the "rebellious teenager" phase, showing a budding interest in dating (Golish, 2000). Both of her parents had expressed concern that dating would distract my mom from her studies and displayed a negative reaction when one of the boys she was interested in was not Chinese. However, this had a more severe impact on my mom and grandmother's relationship due to being the primary caretaker and the

disciplinarian of the family (Golish, 2000). My mother, growing up in a high power distance household with an emphasis on the traditional, Confucian ethic of respecting superiors through obedience, struggled with maintaining a harmonious relationship with her parents while still exercising individual autonomy (Wang and Chen, 2023). Their relationship improved in college when my mom better understood the sacrifices my grandmother had made in raising her once she moved to college: all of the work she had done to clean the house and tend to her needs became more apparent when those responsibilities shifted to herself. Since then, they had an increasingly strong relationship, particularly after my mom gave birth to my older sister and my grandmother shared caregiving responsibilities. When my grandfather was hospitalized, he told my mom to take care of my grandmother— demonstrating filial piety carrying on into adulthood: it is an adult child's responsibility to care for their aging parent's physical, emotional, and social needs (Xiao, et al., 2024). By this time, she was already completely settled into her life in California but she still calls home daily to check up on my grandmother. While it's difficult to tend to my grandmother due to physical distance, she communicates affection by flying to Las Vegas to serve as a translator at doctor's appointments and ordering groceries for her.

Like my mom, my dad also grew up without much quality time with his father due to work obligations. However, they started with a higher degree of closeness, as he was the nicer, more permissive parent compared to his mom. Immigrating to the United States from Hong Kong at 10 years old strained his relationship with his father. He had the new responsibility of language brokering— doing English translations and interpretations for his immigrant parents, while trying to learn English and adjust to a completely different cultural environment (Wu and Kim 2009). He cited that the early role reversal was frustrating: he was still at an age where he should depend on his parents, yet they constantly relied on him to translate a language he

struggled to understand. Research on Chinese American language brokering indicates that adolescents with lower Chinese orientation are more likely to feel a sense of burden as language brokers due to feeling a lower sense of familial obligation and a sense of alienation from their parents (Wu and Kim, 2009). While my dad never mentioned familial obligations in his interviews, stories from my aunts suggest he may have felt a sense of alienation from his parents while adjusting to his new American school. When my dad was in high school, his parents bought a liquor store which would become a family-operated business. He began working part-time shifts with his parents which increased the quantity of time spent together and fostered a sense of awe in all that his father had accomplished and sacrificed thus far. My grandfather's near-death experience when my dad was 21 triggered an early "times of crisis" turning point, which caused a spike in closeness (Golish, 2008). They had a stable, close relationship until his unexpected death only a year after my older sister had been born.

My paternal grandmother was the authoritarian matriarch of the family: my dad's earliest memories with her were when he received spankings and when she always said "no." He did not recall knowing why he was getting disciplined or her refusal to partake in activities, such as sports. Their already low-scoring relationship further decreased when they immigrated—however, my grandmother realized she depended on my dad to be a language broker and reduced her frequency of spankings. Immigrating to the US increased his time with his mom as she was a housewife. However this increase in time was double-edged: more frequent translation requests intensified his sense of burden from language brokering, but they also started bonding through watching the Oakland Raiders together. Prior research shows that engaging in activities together is common among fathers, as mothers are more likely to openly express closeness with their children (Golish, 2008). However, shared activity is also a crucial way for mothers and fathers in

high-context, collectivistic cultures to express affection, as they rely on nonverbal communication to convey their affection. Their relationship continued to increase when they started working at the liquor store together and as my dad moved out to attend dental school. He noted that his mother started verbally expressing affection and he also started greeting her with affectionate head rubs, something he continues to do in the present day and with both my sister and me. During this period, he developed a greater sense of appreciation for their monetary support, as he recognized the liquor store was short-handed on staff since he could no longer work part-time. Their relationship was consistently close until the death of my paternal grandfather caused a rift in their relationship. While grieving, my grandmother became a more gentle maternal figure and helped co-raise my older sister, while my dad had a much shorter, intense temper. When the Raiders moved back to Oakland the following year, my dad bought season tickets for him and his mom. They attended the Raiders games together for 24 consecutive seasons and he helped her through the grieving process, despite his internalized resentment not subsiding until 15 years later. This reflects the collectivist and filial pious nature of our family—no matter how hurt or angry my dad may be, he will always prioritize the needs of his mother. These games also helped them heal their relationship as they bonded over shared activities from the past and had a recurring time for private conversation. Their relationship now is extremely close: my dad makes daily visits to her house and frequently takes her out to eat, while my grandmother verbally expresses affection and always pays the restaurant bill.

The common methods of communicating love within Chinese families are through instrumental, nonverbal support and parental sacrifices, contrary to American parents who are typically more direct, expressing, and warm with their affection. Growing up, I struggled immensely between feeling too Chinese in America and too American in the Chinese household.

I longed to hear verbal expressions of affection from my parents as my friends received daily, but I hadn't realized that my expectations were completely contradictory to how my parents had learned to communicate love for generations prior. With an older perspective, I now recognize my mom's efforts to verbally express affection, even through discomfort. My dad was an authoritarian parent like his mother was but is making a greater effort to be authoritative— still demanding and directive but attempting to balance responsiveness by explaining his reasoning for criticism more often. My parents learned to communicate their love to me through receiving instrumental support and nonverbal expressions of love from their parents, although these Chinese forms of expressing love went unrecognized during the majority of my adolescence due to yearning for a more expressive, American display of affection.

Pivotal turning points for both of my parents were during their teenage years when they started working part-time with their preoccupied fathers and when they moved out of home for the first time, developing a greater sense of appreciation for the sacrifices in quality time while they were growing up to support their academic endeavors instrumentally. Like my parents, I also started working part-time at their dental practice in my late teens and developed a greater appreciation for how hard they worked to provide for my comfortable childhood. Filial piety— a closeness to parents and ancestors reflected through respect, obedience, and reciprocity— has been passed through my family's lineage and shaped the intergenerational relationships in my family. My mother sacrificed many social events and potential extracurricular interests to excel in her studies in return for her father's sacrifices, whereas I internalized the pressures to give back by achieving high academic honors, participating in elite sports, and excelling in my career immediately after college. After interviewing my dad, I was surprised when he expressed he doesn't have the highest expectations for me— meaning, he expects that I'll move back home,

work part-time at the dental office again, and try to figure things out from there. This revelation was refreshing to hear because I struggle with perfectionism, which functioned as a self-imposed coping mechanism for the high expectations I perceived from my parents. I felt I needed to have everything planned and perfected to make my parents' sacrifices worthwhile. Research suggests Asian American perfectionists reframe perceived parental pressure as a culturally normative expression of hope and support to mitigate depressive and maladaptive perfectionism symptoms (Yoon and Lau, 2008). In my case, this reframing was true, however, I wouldn't have believed it had I heard it from anyone other than my parents. When I started college, I felt that I took their sacrifices for granted, which resulted in a hesitancy to accept my parents' monetary support outside of housing and tuition. These interviews have helped me understand that my parents felt the same mixture of guilt, appreciation, and an urgency to give back while attending university. Moving forward, I hope to accept their gestures of love without feeling like a burden and explore ways to reciprocate the affection without overly pressuring myself to achieve.

My grandparents heavily relied on nonverbal expressions of affection with my parents and typically used food to communicate their love to me across the language barrier. Conducting these family interviews illuminated what their parenting styles were like, how my parents learned to express affection, and how these traditions of affection communication impacted my closeness to my parents and my perceptions of filial piety. Family interviews can be difficult for immigrant families, particularly if there are language barriers, family deaths, or a low degree of open, verbal communication. However, these conversations can greatly help those caught between acculturation gaps struggling to navigate the culture of one's homeland and the culture of one's new home— showing that it's possible to embrace one without rejecting the other.

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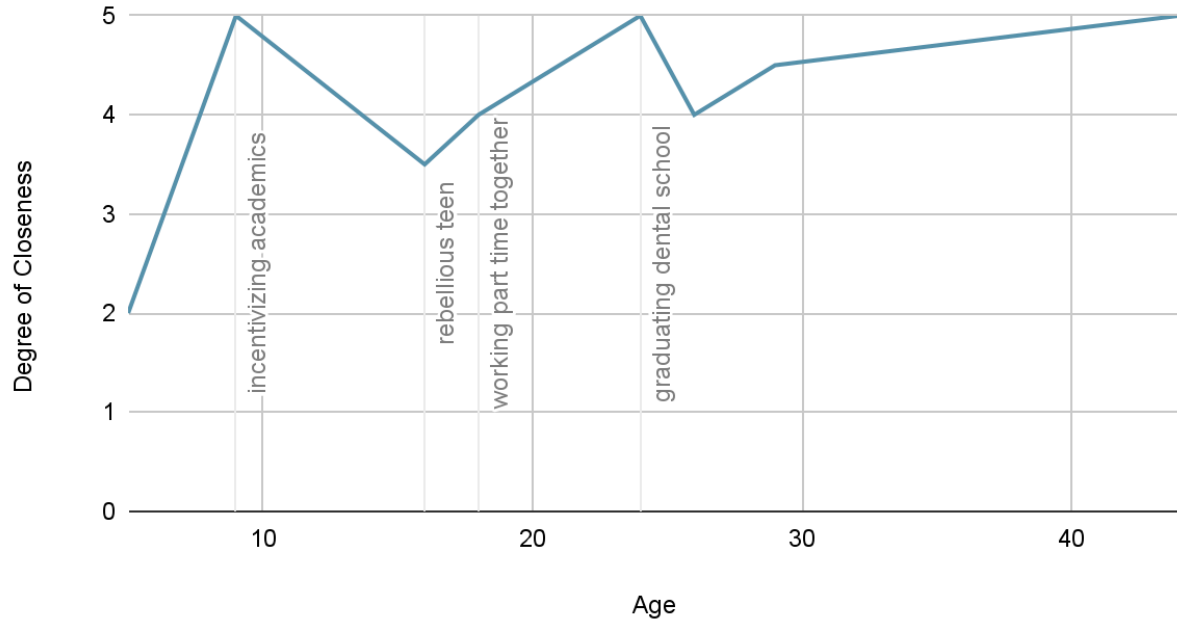
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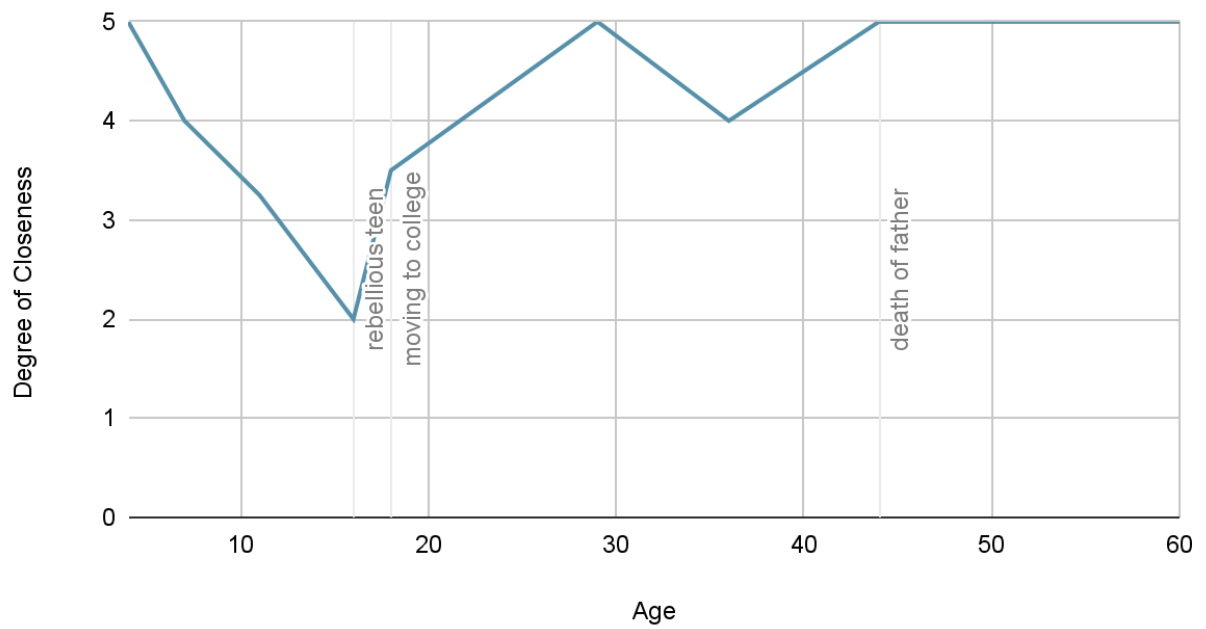
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Appendix

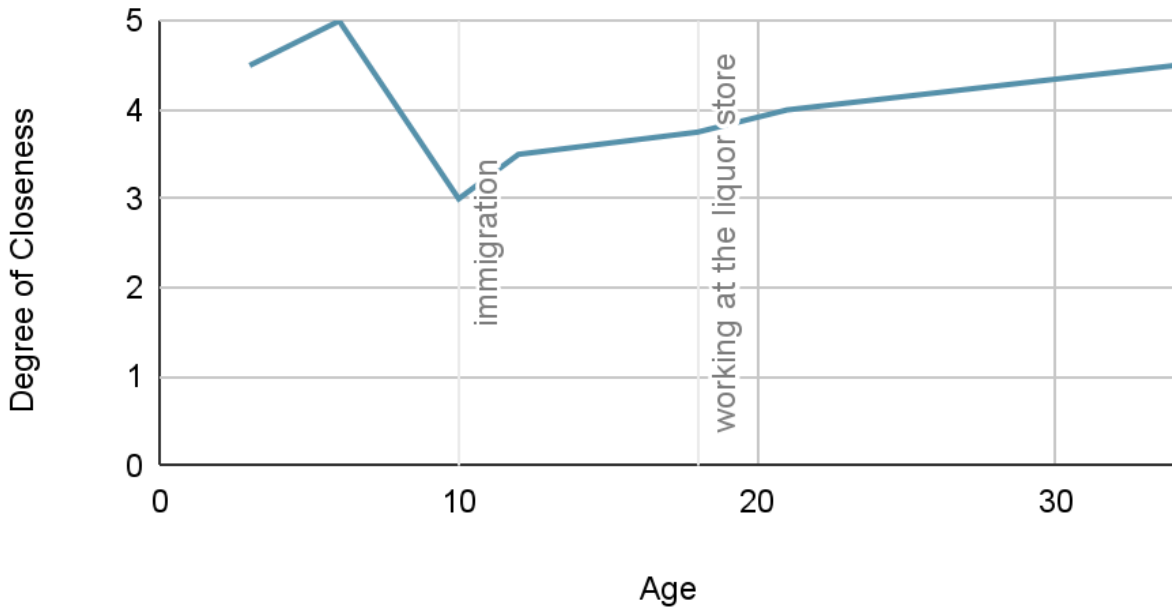
Maternal Grandfather RIT Chart



Maternal Grandmother RIT Graph



Paternal Grandfather RIT Graph



Paternal Grandmother RIT Graph

