

Lotus Blossom

Ting and I both arrived at the College of Engineering in fall of 2002. We were each uneasy in a new environment and nervous about the expectations others' had for us, but our differences far outweighed our similarities. I had moved a half of a mile across a campus I had been associated with for 26 years; I had a network of colleagues, allies, associates and friends. I was a member of the predominate culture, an administrator, not a student. My new job was an expression of my individualism and independence, motivated by a new wave of self-exploration, all manifestations of my comfort with contemporary social norms. She had moved half way around the world to an unknown future; a place where the language and cultural landscape were dramatically different from her own. She was delicate and shy, yearning for a sense of belonging and I was tough and exuberant, seeking something new. She was acutely aware of being different than the students around her, she was like a lotus seed searching for sustenance in foreign soil. Because of my role as an academic advisor and her role as a student, we were less than friends, but our simultaneous arrival at Rinker Hall, made us more than just acquaintances.

It has been a pleasure to share in some of the joys, and sorrows, that Ting has experienced. Ting used my advising services more often than the average student, particularly in making choices about general elective selections. She never complained about an eight a.m. chemistry lab or an eight p.m. linear algebra discussion and she was grateful for, appreciative of, and attentive to, my advice. Despite my new exposure to adult development theory I do not think I would have interacted differently with Ting, but I certainly would have better understood what she was experiencing.

Ting's aunt lived in San Francisco and was her only relative in the United States, but her family's influence was omni-present. Ting's father was Chinese American and their family had

lived in California when Ting was a baby, but after his death, Ting and her mother had returned to China. Ting's identity was molded by the values and customs of the village where her mother's family had lived for generations. Centuries of ingrained values, subconscious and acknowledged, of collectivism, interdependence, respect, selflessness, inter-personal harmony and deference to authority, served as both internal and external monitors of her every move (Kodama et al. 2002). Ting was bilingual in Mandarin and English as a 3 year-old, but had forgotten much of her second language after her return to China. She was devastated when she learned that she was placed in Linguistics 3 (ESL) rather than Writing 1. She hoped that her aunt would not ask too many questions about her courses as she felt great shame that her English skills were lacking. She repeatedly berated herself for not mastering English fast enough and labeled herself 'bad'. This self-blame might have been a way to individualize her perceived failure, protecting the status and regard for her family, as protection of one's family status supersedes the immediate needs of the individual (Tang 2002).

Despite her initial insecurities, Ting excelled academically during her first year in the college, but remained very shy and exhibited many of the stereotypical traits historically attributed to people of Asian decent: introversion, studiousness, intelligence, submissiveness and being an over-achiever (Kawaguchi 2003). Although these labels may seem to be positive, over-generalizing always negates the individual (Tang 2002). These Asian American stereotypes can create a double bind: not only the expectation that every Asian American is 'mathematically inclined' or the 'model minority' but policy makers have also claimed that since Asian Americans can succeed in college without special programs, that other ethnic minorities should also be able to succeed without special programming as well (Kawaguchi 2003). These misconceptions, and failure to address and acknowledge each person as an individual, create a

negative situation for all students. Rothenberg (2003) discusses the additional dichotomy for Asian Americans when addressing the conflict between maintaining one's native heritage and becoming American, a dualism that is not readily accepted by either one's host, nor home, country. One's family expects continued deference to tradition and culture, but much of contemporary American society expects rapid aculturalization to the white middle class norm and immediate mainstreaming of new-comers (Gloria 2003).

Perhaps Ting's initial behavior was explained by both the encompassing cloak of her culture and by her level of cognitive and psychosocial development. Her lack of self-confidence and desire for direction from others are traits manifested in the received knowledge stage as described by Belenky et al. (1997). Because I represented authority, she perceived me as a source of truth and most likely did not even know why she believed in me, or my power to guide her correctly. Imagine the angst I might have caused had I advised her to do something radically divergent from her innate cultural norm. I understand, now, the magnitude of conflict that two such powerful and prevailing pressures might exert on a young adult abruptly relocated into a culture so distinct and in many ways so diametrically opposed to her mother's culture. Had Ting been experiencing college in her native environment, would her psychosocial and cognitive development been accelerated? Does the overwhelming experience of complete culture shock send one into such a total survival mode that the pace of personal development recedes? Are aculturalization and psychosocial and cognitive development partners or competitors in the process of maturation? More qualitative and quantitative research is required to answer these questions. As the year progressed, Ting's interaction with her peers increased, as did her self-confidence.

When Ting returned to school for her junior year, I suspected that the lock of purple hair and eyebrow ring heralded internal changes as well. She peppered our conversations with slang and spoke openly about her amazing summer adventures as a cultural exchange student, living with a family in New York City. The mother of the house, Kim, was an author and freelance writer and included Ting in visits to publishing houses and publicity events. Kim provided a brand new role model for Ting. She had never imagined a Chinese woman, who freely wrote and spoke exactly what was on her mind. I can still hear Ting's giggle when she whispered to me 'and she earns more money than her husband, the doctor'. At the age of 20, Ting experienced new rules and expanded boundaries (Belenky et al. 1997) within a Chinese household vastly different than her own. I think that may have been an ideal environment for Ting's continued journey into subjective knowing and may have fueled her psychosocial and cognitive growth as well. Ting's own words best describe her maturation that summer, 'a girl went to New York, a woman came back' *giggle* 'my mother would not recognized me'. I believe that she was referring to more than just the hair dye and face jewelry, if perhaps only subconsciously. Belenky et al. (1986) refer to women feeling liberated by their arrival into subjective knowing. Ting seemed to be on an accelerated mission to figure out who she was and where she was going. Egan (1996) refers to women's struggle between valuing the one's own choices over the choices made by others during the process of accepting authority of one's self.

In shedding her Chinese cloak, Ting removed and rearranged successive layers of her younger self - rejecting and accepting the parts she wished to discard or to keep and carry into the future. Simultaneously, she was absorbing the thoughts, ideas and mannerisms of the western culture surrounding her. She knew she was alienating herself from her family with this 'Americanization' as they called it, but she also 'knew' that she was growing into herself. Her

mom did not understand that her daughter was not deliberately rejecting her family, but learning to accept herself. Ting may, like many women, go full circle in finding herself and then re-embracing many of the familial customs and traits she once eschewed. Her subjective knowledge is exhibited here by her emergence from a passive to an active state in pursuing her own voice, finding her own words, and expressing her own feelings (Belenky et al. 1997). Ting was finally looking inside for strength and validation, unsure who she would become, but becoming certain of who she was not.

As Ting's social integration increased, her devotion to her studies decreased, resulting in a quarter-end GPA of 3.0. Although that is above average for an Engineering student, Ting was shocked. She had never earned a 'C' before and vowed never to earn one again. I did not see much of her during the following quarter, but I was not alarmed. We both knew she needed me less, a realization that is always a bittersweet moment for College Student Affairs practitioners. My next official meeting with Ting was during the following quarter when we met to discuss her pursuing a double major. She wanted to write. She told me 'so often, I have words rushing out of my pen, drawing verbal pictures in the margins of my lab reports'. She then pondered 'can I do both'? Belenky et al. (1997) discusses the rejection of science by some women immersed in their 'intuitive knowing' phase, the 'I know from inside me' sense of truth. They report that many women change majors from the sciences to the arts or humanities during their move into subjectivism. I am curious if Ting's desire to pursue both Engineering and Creative Writing was influenced by her cultural and developmental dualism, as well as her multiple talents. She could continue to please her family by completing her Engineering degree and please herself by writing. She combined conformity and risk taking, both elements in cultural identity formation

and the transition between received and subjective knowing (McEwen et al. 2002, Belenky et al. 1997).

Many interrelated factors coalesced during the years that I observed Ting's development. I watched her grow from a shy girl, acting solely on autopilot to being a bolder self-thinker, from wallflower to centerpiece. Her transition was a difficult and liberating metamorphosis, validating her own sense of self, selecting her own path, and unmasking a dormant talent that had been unknowingly stifled. Review of current literature confirms that misconceptions, stereotypes and myths that perpetuate Asian Americans as a homogeneous 'model minority' misrepresent the awesome spectrum of individuals and unique ethnic identities that this label so poorly represents. Kawaguchi (2003) reiterates that more research needs to be done to supplement our limited understanding of Asian Pacific Americans students' ethnic identity development. It seems that, solely for the convenience of 'westerners' that people from the Pacific rim, Asia and Indonesia are grouped together as Asians and in the United States, and then further generalized as Asian Americans. These individuals and the ethnic diversity and richness they represent are minimized and degraded by such a designation (McEwen 2002, Tang 2002). Ting seems proud of the balance she has achieved between her Chinese heritage and her new sense of self.

As student affairs professionals we need to promote the belief that the differences between people are valuable and that learning about, and accepting, others who are culturally different than one's self is both necessary and rewarding. Furthermore, we need to understand our own cultural trappings and our own worldview before we can comprehend others different from ourselves. We need to examine, and change, our own values and assumptions as our knowledge of others increases. We need to facilitate each individual student's understanding and

acceptance of who they believe themselves to be. Cultural identity, psychosocial, and cognitive theories are just some of the tools available to help us guide our students through the maze of adult maturation.

The lotus pod sprouts in the dark, from rich soil, stretching upward through cloudy pond waters, seeking nourishment, simultaneously establishing roots and reaching for the sun. As the lotus matures, the delicate foliage slowly unfurls, revealing a flower of unique and genuine beauty. In time, the petals are leisurely shed to reveal the lotus fruit and to scatter seeds for the future. Ting also grew from rich beginnings, a foundation that ultimately supported her stretch toward that which would nourish her, and she made a place for herself in disciplines that value her contributions to both science and literature. Quarter after quarter, she peeled away the obstacles to her success, discovering her own hidden treasures, living her dreams. It was my pleasure to watch Ting blossom like a lotus flower, finding her own unique and genuine beauty, within.

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