

Shijun Li

The Pike School

2023 American Ancestors Young Family Historians Essay Contest

2023 April 1

### A Better Tomorrow: An Examination of the Chinese Way

It is not uncommon for a rising seventh grader to spend three weeks studying AP physics, for a rising sixth grader to learn Pre-Algebra, or for a sixth-grader to win the National Junior Duck Stamp Contest. Instances like this represent the defining characteristic of Chinese culture: the pursuit of academic prestige.

I am no exception. My parents, and the parents of my Chinese friends, all stress the importance of attending a top-school. Because of this comical emphasis, most Chinese parents are often seen as simple-minded people whose only focus in life is their children's education. While valid in some ways, their motive cannot simply be a matter of rank or prestige. The great time, effort, and energy invested in such endeavors must be for something far more meaningful.

My search for answers led me to the story of my great grandfather during the Cultural Revolution, which occurred from 1966 to 1976 and was aimed to scrub China clean of the dirt and grime of their western-affiliated past and cement itself as a fully communist regime shortly after Mao Zedong's failed Great Leap Forward in 1962. Motivated by the promise of equality by any and all means, the communists seized and redistributed two-hundred to two-hundred forty million acres of arable land from the upper echelons of Chinese society to approximately seventy-five million peasant farmers. My great-grandfather's family, being rich landlords, saw the seizing of nearly all of his assets and estates, and when his father passed away, he was left with nothing.

Being in the lower class gave my great-grandfather a taste of the common people's struggles. Poor families could only afford one set of clothes, so that only the person going out could be dressed and the rest had to be naked. Poverty and starvation ran rampant in the streets. People starved to death in their homes. To the regular civilians living in China, it would have seemed like the end of the world.

My great-grandfather's life wasn't much better. Everyday, he would catch a fish in the river and then swim for miles to his aunt's house to trade his catch for a warm meal. With no money for a formal education, he became a blacksmith and built for himself a better life.

Even with a well-paying occupation, life wasn't easy: he molded metal in blistering heat and searing smoke; he worked tirelessly day and night, even as his muscles ached with the strain. But eventually, he lifted himself out of poverty and built a better life for my grandfather and eventually my father.

My great-grandfather, through his experience, understood the deeper motive of the Chinese people. The poor didn't care about equality or top schools. It was never about that. The revolution meant something much more to the people. It represented a hope for a better life—a hope for improvement. The Communist Revolution and its subsequent movements, Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, all shared this hope, and it was really that promise that prompted so many to become loyal to the communists.

Irrespective of the end result, my great-grandfather's story gave me a better understanding of the true motive of everything the Chinese do: the desire to improve. Improvement—not equality or communism—is the reason the revolution happened. Improvement is the reason we attend torturous class after class. Improvement is the reason we

push ourselves to the absolute limit. Improvement, not just for ourselves or just for our descendents, but rather for our beloved nation.

The emphasis on academic achievement was never only about prestige, just as the Cultural Revolution wasn't only about turning China into a communist state. It was all a means to an end: a way to build a more prosperous life and a more prosperous China.