



T a
h n
k

*A daughter's
response to her
parents'
sacrifices*

**By Jennifer
Yehkyung See**

**Paintings by
Royd Chung**

Y O
U

I am not going to pretend I am a perfect daughter. If anything, I'm far from it. How I've given my parents trouble! Refusing to sit down and diligently do my Kumon math exercises for which my parents paid a hefty sum of nearly \$100 per month. (In fact, I still have a foot-tall pile of exercises I never did getting dusty in a closet at home.) Falling off of the risers at my third grade chorus concert to the horrible embarrassment of my parents. (Although I swear the girl in front of me backed into me and made me lose my balance.) Always being either sick or injured. (I know, I know, I should gargle and take my vitamins like you tell me to, *Umma*.) Somehow always managing to make mistakes at violin or piano recitals. (Okay, okay, I will concede to the fact that it was most definitely due to lack of practice.) Making loud and obnoxious scenes in public and absolutely making sure that everyone within 50 feet knows that, yes, I am disobeying my parents. Which, I must admit, makes the following favorite saying of my mother undoubtedly correct: "You think parents embarrass their children? I promise you that you embarrass us even more."

My mouth, more than anything else, probably got me in the most trouble. There is no denying that I often saw the infamous wooden spoon during my childhood years for being sassy. And I even had a couple of yardsticks and plastic coat-hangers broken on my behind (Buns of steel, baby! It didn't hurt me one bit!). Of course I deserved every punishment I got and more. But either due to stupidity, an excess of pride, or,

most likely, both, I could never understand why I was being punished. I would threaten to call the police and report child abuse (I understand this is not an uncommon thing for Korean American children to say to their parents), to which my parents would respond that they too would call the police ... to report parent abuse. Once I "ran away," stubbornly refusing to admit my guilt over something I can't remember now, getting as far as ... the carport right outside the kitchen door. I planned on sleeping in the station wagon that was, thankfully, unlocked, and did so for about 30 minutes until I realized I had to go to the bathroom. My mother had, I would like to think playfully locked the door and gone to bed. I rang the doorbell for fifteen minutes, screaming that I had to go to the bathroom, until my ever faithful brother got out of bed and asked my mother to let me in on the grounds that it was unnecessarily cruel to not let me go to the bathroom. In retrospect, I don't know why I didn't just follow the example of our cat, Arong, and do my business in the woods behind my house. But in any case, I always thought that I was right and that I was unjustly being punished without cause. I thought that my parents were overbearing and annoying. I even had the audacity to think at times that I knew more than my parents did. Now I still know less than they do, but I think I understand them better.

I have always been proud of my parents' achievements. I still am and always will be. They are both graduates of Seoul National University. My father is a research scientist who has a Ph.D. in polymer science and received The Fiber Society's award for Best Original Research Paper for his dissertation. My mother is a registered nurse and

holds a master's degree in public health. They are both over-qualified for the positions they hold at work in the States. This is not an opinion. It is a fact.

My parents' situation is intolerable to me; I expect to receive my due credit, in the form of a high income, social status, respect, and whatnot, for the amount of effort I am putting into and the pains I am suffering for my education. I know that I cannot and will not work under someone who is less qualified than I am. It is so disappointing and frustrating knowing that my parents are working under people who are less educated and less qualified than they are and that they do not receive the respect that they deserve and would have received in Korea.

My parents' situation is far from being unique among the Korean American community. In his book, *The Korean Americans*, Won Moo Hurh states that according to the 1990 census, "the educational attainment of Korean Americans was much higher than that of the total U.S. population."ⁱ However, the 1990 census report also found that the "Korean Americans' median family income in 1990...was lower than the median income for all American families" and that "Japanese Americans, who have basically the same educational level, earned substantially more than Korean Americans."ⁱⁱ Although this is undoubtedly due to a number of factors, Hurh states that "nativity (place of birth), immigration history, and English-speaking ability appear to be the predominant ones."ⁱⁱⁱ Because Caucasians and the Japanese are fluent in the English language and they have the advantage of professional networks, thus resulting in their obtaining more professional and economic success more often than Koreans.

But this is all old news. Of course Koreans, being fairly new immigrants, would have a lower English-speaking ability and a lack of connections, and therefore would have a much more difficult time achieving success than the Japanese (the majority of whom, according to the 1990 census, are American-born) and definitely more so than Caucasians. Even my parents, who rarely complain about any hardships they may be experiencing living in the States, at times would tell me, "In Korea it would be different. We would have higher positions than we do here."

I never really bothered to think about why my parents were staying in the States when they could possibly have an easier life in Korea. I always took it for granted that the United States was my home and that my parents were foreigners. For some reason, it never clearly dawned on me that there was a country where my parents were not foreigners and where they knew the language perfectly. Such an obvious fact! But a fact that I never even considered.

And then recently I came across a poem in a book that I was using as a secondary reference for an English term paper. It was written by a Korean high school teacher who could only find a job as a high school janitor in the United States due to his difficulties with the English language:

I do not see, although I have eyes. Then, have I become blind? No, I have not. I do not hear, although I have ears. Then, have I become deaf? No, I have not. I do not speak, although I have a mouth. Then, have I lost my speech? No, I have not. I have become an old stranger who wants to raise a young tree (to educate his child) in this wealthy land.^{iv}

... I asked, "If you had been childless, if you hadn't had Eric and me, would you have stayed?" And my father answered, "No, probably not.



My first reaction was to remember the first week of my homestay in Spain. I cried all week because I was frustrated at my inability to communicate with people. I longed to return to the States where the Cokes were bigger and where my house had central air conditioning. I was lucky. I got to go back home after a month.

Then I remembered how I had screamed and refused to return to Korea when my parents had toyed with the idea when I was in elementary school. I began to wonder why we hadn't gone back then. All of the Korean men with whom my father had studied in North Carolina had returned to Korea with their families. Why had mine stayed?

I called my parents and asked my father why they had chosen to stay in America. He responded, "I had originally planned to return to Korea after I got my Ph.D. and some job experience, but, well, we like it here. In Korea, we would have probably had higher job positions, but that doesn't necessarily mean

our lives would have been better." I felt relieved that my parents weren't living in torture as my over-emotional self had impulsively thought, but still, I wasn't completely satisfied with that answer, so I asked, "If you had been childless, if you hadn't had Eric and me, would you have stayed?" And my father answered, "No, probably not. We knew that you would have many opportunities in America and that you would receive a great education here. That is the number one reason why we are still here."

All I could feel was an incredible sense of guilt. I felt guilty for all of the times I had embarrassed my parents in public. I felt guilty for complaining about having to do my Kumon exercises. I felt guilty for the times when I had been mortified when they misunderstood a cashier at the mall or when a cashier could not understand their accented English. I felt guilty for ever feeling contempt at my parents for not having connections or a better job or more money. I felt guilty for

yelling at them the week before about how I didn't want to be a doctor or a lawyer and how I couldn't understand why they wanted to run my life when it was my life. I felt guilty for telling them in that same argument that they were going to die and I would have my life to live, so they should just back off. I even felt guilty for being born because I knew that if I hadn't come into the world on that fateful cold January day in 1981, my mother would have continued her education to receive her doctoral degree. In short, I felt guilty for ever giving my parents grief, no matter how small, because I realized that my parents had more stress and burdens to think about than your average American parents and that I had

only been adding to it with my moments of disobedience.

But perhaps one of the biggest guilts I felt was for having been lazy and unmotivated spring semester (unfortunately, I was victim to the "sophomore slump"). And I felt incredibly guilty for ever wishing that I could have just gone to a local community college or not gone to college at all. I felt guilty for those moments late at night, a 12-page paper looming over my head, when thought that I would be perfectly happy being mediocre if only my parents would stop pressuring me. Because there are amazing Korean people in America with high levels of education who would have been leaders in their homeland but, as Brian Lehrer points out in *Korean Americans*, instead "find themselves washing vegetables, arranging candy bar displays, and counting change for a living because they lack fluency in English and have no network of professional contacts."^v And despite the fact that Koreans like that exist in America, I had held

the myopic belief I could have as good of a life as my parents had given me with just a high school degree. I had taken for granted the fact that my parents had raised me like a high class American, with my multiple music lessons, ballet classes, prep school and private college education. And now I felt sorry for having forgotten the fact that they had to put in twice as much effort than the average American to make that happen for me.

Why are our parents willing to live in this foreign country when they could find more success or comfort in Korea? Because of us and our children and our children's children. Why do our parents push us to excel? Why do they want us to play the piano or the violin better than anyone else even when they don't want us to become professional musicians? Why do they want us to go to Ivy League schools and become doctors, lawyers, or I-bankers?

For one, if they didn't want us to be the best, they would undoubtedly be negligent parents. But more importantly, they know how hard it has been for them to succeed as a foreign minority in America, even with their high levels of education. Our parents do not have legacies and connections like other Caucasian Americans may have. They want us to be the best to ensure that we can have all of the opportunities that an "American" should have. Simply put, they want us to have good lives.

Now I know our parents would never want us to feel any kind of guilt for what they have been through as immigrants (I can see my mother cringing as she reads the part about how I felt guilty to have been born). But remember the sacrifices our parents are making for us the next time, sitting in your college dorm room, talking to your parents, you get annoyed when they scold you for overspending on their credit card or you wish they would stop nagging you about your grades. I know I certainly will.

Appa, Umma, thank you so much for giving me so many opportunities. Thank you for letting me live in America. Even though you tell me I should never study or work hard for you, I will. I'll do it for all of us. I love you and I promise I will make you proud.

And *Appa*, I know that you're a hundred times smarter than that Boston Market cashier who couldn't understand you when you asked for hot sauce. Stupid girl.

For some reason, it never clearly dawned on me that there was a country where my parents were not foreigners and where they knew the language perfectly.

Jennifer Y. Seo '03 is a Literature Concentrator in Mather House.

i Won Moo Hurh, *The Korean Americans* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 53.

ii Ibid.

iii Ibid.

iv Won Yong quoted in Bong-young Choy, *Koreans in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), p. 248.

v Brian Lehrer, *Korean Americans* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1996), p.76.