

## From To To From: What Freedom Is

### I.

I had a happy childhood. Even so, I still spent all my weekends rushing through double-sided A3 practice tests distributed from every core class — Chinese, Math, and English — ever since first grade. No electronic devices during school. No using the restroom during class. Our lives revolved around Zhongkao which influences Gaokao which determines your life. Nonetheless, I was content and knew I already had it a lot better than the majority of Chinese kids. I didn't know life could be any other way. We laughed and giggled in our childish ignorance through the dark circles under our eyes.

After I finished Zhongkao, I had a summer without thick bundles of holiday homework packets. That's when I picked up the Chinese translations of *1984* and *Brave New World* from my dad's crowded bookshelf. From *1984*, I suddenly understood why newspaper headings always portrayed other countries as nasty enemies of China; why three year plans (we call them exactly that) were always overfulfilled; why "Politics and Thought" class was mandatory for all 12 years of education. Moreover, there was this wide, inescapable gloom, a depressive atmosphere where "there seemed to be no colour in anything" (Orwell 2). The Party sucked out all human capacities of love and hate and directed those energies to serve the Party. In the same manner, our educational system flooded our brains with paper and ink so that there would be no energy left to consider whether the information we received was true, or the reality of humanity outside of "serving the society" — those were the exact words they taught us. Our Chinese textbook, over the years, gradually replaced stories that discuss general human experiences with stories about the red army, the moving comradeship, the

benevolence of party officials... As if the highest, most honorable goal a human being can achieve with their life is becoming a party member.

## II.

After an incident in which my dad buying censored books earned him a threatening trip to the police station, my parents were determined to find any means to leave. As you can probably tell, I was already rebellious and utterly despised my country by the time my family set foot in America. I was 16, certain I would love my new home. Finally, I live in *freedom* — which meant accessing banned sites such as Twitter and Google, hearing or voicing different opinions besides the loud, deafening shriek of a narcissist and extremely insecure totalitarian government, and no detention for refusing to salute to the flag.

America was friendly and pleasant. It couldn't be called unpleasant that I faced several culture shocks about America's normalization of terrible infractions in my culture.

The first few days at an American public school I made the mistake of using the restroom during lunch break. The moment I pushed open the door, white, misty vapor filled the entire space and clouded my vision. What is this? Confused and scared, I walked quickly through the ominous air and, through my peripheral view, made out that there were *people* crowded in that mist, just standing and talking. Couldn't they talk somewhere else? Ugh.

A few weeks later, I overheard some kids complaining about "vaping in the bathroom".

*Vaping!?*

That's what they're doing?

Internally, I nearly dropped my jaw. I knew what the word meant, but I'd never seen a real person doing it or heard that awful word being spoken in such a casual manner. It all seemed like an absurd, surreal soup of contradictions. I had no idea the freedom I opted for consisted of the freedom to *smoke*.

After one year of fulfilling education from my peers on all the different names of street drugs that I never knew existed and how common teenage pregnancies are, I engaged in a ridiculous paradox during summer school called Health Class. In an individualist society where premature sex and drugs run rampant, this class protested feebly, preaching about abstinence "because babies are no fun!" and "say no to drugs because they're harmful to your body!"

In *Brave New World*, Huxley raises an objection against those types of warnings. If drugs without negative effects, like *soma*, can be produced, is the act of consuming drugs for pleasure justified? If the effectiveness of contraceptives and abortions can be guaranteed and no one has to ever raise a baby, does that make "promiscuous" a positive adjective, the way Fanny uses it to Lenina (Huxley 43)?

I couldn't answer. I was aware that *Brave New World* essentially depicts a totalitarian government that uses happiness to control its citizens, and thus is inherently wrong. However, it seemed evident to me that in the absence of totalitarianism — in America, people can nevertheless be enslaved by their own greed and desires when people are "free to have the most wonderful time" (Huxley 91). There was something wrong with the very act of pursuing pleasure without boundaries.

I found the answers in *Fahrenheit 451*. Having lived amidst the blinding affluence of America for a year enabled me to connect the concepts to reality. The next time the boy at my table looked at me in confusion and took off his iPods to hear what I was speaking, I saw. I saw him plugging his ears with 2 tiny seashell radios, muting the reality of the world away, diving back into waves of stimulations. Bradbury argues that when quicker forms of entertainment emerged with technological advancement, “the public itself stopped reading of its own record” to seek instant gratification. Therefore, the censorship of books in Montag's society is “rarely necessary” and only serves to discourage rebels (83). The lack of deep philosophical thought, which can be found primarily in books, produces an inability to deal with “poetry and tears”, and a preoccupation with bland, illusionary happiness (Bradbury 97). In effect, fast-food entertainment fights off boredom and sadness at the expense of veiling the essence of human life — which inevitably consists of negative or intense emotions such as melancholy, passion, anger, and regret. *Brave New World* demonstrates the same concept when Benard remarked “I want to feel something strongly” (Huxley 94).

This is all too awful, I thought. And I began to whine —

“I want to go home!”

### III.

Before the horrendous lockdown, A4 revolution, and ruthless reopening in China happened, my mom always responded — although she feels the same, perhaps even stronger homesickness — that “America has everything China has and everything China doesn't have.” During those events, although she was the one who plunged into a deep depression for her hometown, it was “you want to die? You want to go to torture

camp?” I always resented the way my mom glorifies America (or “dangerous unfair imperialist bully”, roughly translated). In fact, it sounded similar to Winston when he, desperately trying to find a way to destroy the Party, turns to the Party’s (supposedly) enemy — Brotherhood. The desire to overthrow the Party burns so powerfully that Winston swears he is prepared to “do anything which is likely to cause demoralization and weaken the power of the Party” (Orwell 172). This is perhaps the saddest part of *1984*, because it revealed how Winston is *never free*. He believes that the force that can destroy the Party is one that is eviler and more immoral than the Party itself. However, Winston’s definition of “immoral” is derived directly from O’Brien’s definition of immoral! Subconsciously, he is still chained to measure the world with the Party’s metric stick. He thinks removing the Party means embracing the Party’s enemy Goldstein, but even Goldstein and Brotherhood are invented by the Party. My mom’s emotional defense for America, I believe, arose from the same cause — her distaste for totalitarianism was so great that she went out of her way to ally with what our newspaper headings label as an enemy. She has the freedom *to* oppose the government, yet she still isn’t free *from* thought control.

This past semester, I read Qian Julie Wang’s memoir, *Beautiful Country*, an account of her family living as illegal immigrants in America. Motivated by the same pursuit of freedom, I realized how insignificant my discomforts are compared to the price her family had to pay for freedom. I processed my contradictory feelings for my country, a familiarity without freedom, through her words, and became reassured that I could love China without adhering to the government. Wang reaches the conclusion that though her family indeed found America free of control and censorship, the hardships of

living in poverty, malnutrition, and fear induced another form of imprisonment. Both she and her parents are now “apparently free and safe, but really behind bars wrought from trauma” (Wang 296). Wang’s sharp juxtaposition dissected the core of “freedom”, which is also what I have learned from my books and two countries — that while freedom undeniably consists of the ability *to* do something, it is also the deliverance *from* a controlling force, whether it be physical desires or the scars of brainwashing.

## Works Cited

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