

Musings Stemming From an Espresso Machine

Boyuan Zhang, College of Arts and Science

About halfway through the summer, my boss declared that the employees at his startup company would no longer suffer the indignity of going out for coffee. We were going to get our very own espresso machine, a fancy little thing that took pre-packaged cups of coffee with flashy names and made coffee “in the Italian or American style.” I thought this was a big deal only because it was free coffee. According to my mother, our relatives back in China would absolutely love this because the coffee has a sophisticated-sounding name. Apparently, the Chinese *nouveau-riche* have taken to waking up extra early to wait in line at newly imported Starbucks stores so they can walk around all morning sipping and smelling the aroma of sophistication emanating from each cup of Western high culture.

Discussing this with my parents brought up much lamentation and regret; mom wished we hadn’t moved so early, wished that instead of emigrating, we had stayed in China and I had gone to college abroad with a share of the deluge of morally gray wealth pouring over all our relatives. We could have had five or six houses, she kept saying, we could have sent me abroad, paying out of pocket after selling maybe just one or two of them.

As much as some of the regret might be justified, the repetition over the years wore on me, and eventually I began exploding whenever the topic came up. We could not have predicted that things would turn out the way they did, I would tell her as many times as she became wistful. What’s done is done, what’s to come will come. If we stop worrying about our relatives’ new cars, new homes and designer handbags, we’d all be happier.

The more times I explained this line of thinking, the more I began to realize how idiotic the whole business was. We missed out on some hefty income, for sure. We made our lives harder than they ever needed to be. I can see that much in my dad’s face as he mulls over piles of English proficiency practice tests, clawing back to a career he should have been comfortably settled in a decade ago. We miscalculated a little, but that never changed the kind of people we were. There’s always a silver lining, so they say. Well, at least we aren’t walking around pretending that the dirt water Starbucks sells is some sort of upper-class luxury. We understand sophistication, because wealth doesn’t define how cultured we are. I tell my parents we’re more cultured, we “get it,” we know what’s actually upper class, and we are just better than our relatives in China.

Damn them all, in fact. Damn their money, damn the condos looming over streets hazy with smog, damn the new foreign cars crammed haphazardly into side streets and alleyways. Damn the imported American lower-middle-class everyday commodities masquerading as sophisticated cultural adaptations. We are better here. We live right in the middle of the web of corporate manipulation and advertising, and we can fully flaunt our cynical dismissal of modern consumerism and its materialistic naiveté. I can drink my coffee telling myself that the muddy-brown mixture in my mug is nothing more than a stimulant I need to get through my day on the job. I don’t have to pretend that it’s some status symbol, because status symbols are lies cooked up by expert marketers to get fools to pay a premium when they could be buying bulk wholesale. When I make my morning espresso I run the same container of coffee through the machine over

and over until the liquid coming out is close to clear, because I will squeeze out every drop of caffeine, because that is why I drink it—not as a cultural pose.

I don't know how much my parents understood of what I said. Despite all my efforts, the pall of regret has never fully left my mother, who still dreams of a life of ease and leisure, a life that could have been. My father grows more and more on edge as age and money and my mother's dissatisfaction weigh increasingly on his shoulders—alone, because for most of the year, I am not even home to share it.

I imagine the problem is only compounded because it was his idea to suddenly forgo life in China and emigrate. He was always enamored with the West, and he always dreamed of it as the promised land. So he packed his bags and went to experience the genuine Western world, instead of sipping on the imported, packaged sophistication marketed to our relatives. Unfortunately, this decision entailed a significant amount of time and effort and has not been an easy path.

For all its difficulty, though, the path is not all doom and gloom. There were definitely silver linings, such as the time when he subscribed to a wine magazine and began teaching himself proper drinking etiquette—in the European style, of course! Or when he got it in his head to try Western cooking by throwing random cheeses onto everything.

In those moments, I could see the passion that drove him to emigrate emerging from the stress. I assure myself that the dream lives so long as motivation does, and as long as the dream is alive, things will eventually work themselves out. No need to fret over frivolous, short-term pretensions to sophistication, I told my mother and, to a degree, myself. We might live frugally, drinking watered-down coffee, but we are living a genuine life, free of frivolous pretensions to ideas of sophistication we can barely understand, and that is such a blessing that we should feel no shame about the past.