

Zhijiao Yang
Durham University

Always Wondering, Always Trying

Abstract

Zhijiao Yang, a postgraduate accounting student at Durham University, diligently seeks her life's direction as a first-generation college student. In this essay, Zhijiao narrates her journey, reflecting on her childhood as a left-behind child and the profound impact of her parents' support on her education. The narrative highlights the resilience, open-mindedness, and self-reliance she has developed, and offers advice to fellow first-gen students on embracing challenges and navigating uncertainties.

Recommended Citation

Zhijiao, Yang. "Always Wondering, Always Trying." *Text & Type*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2024. CSU Open Journals. Available at: <https://journals.calstate.edu/textandtype/issue/view/451>

Articles printed in *Text & Type* are published by CSU Open Journals under a Creative Commons (CC) copyright license. Authors retain ownership of all rights under copyright in all versions of the article. Specifically, the journal uses a CC BY-NC-SA license. This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator. If you remix, adapt, or build upon the material, you must license the modified material under identical terms.

ZHIJIAO YANG

Always Wondering, Always Trying

As the first in my family to attend college, I navigate a sea of uncertainties and novel experiences. Questions like “How can I do this correctly?” and “What should I do next?” frequently cross my mind. Despite exploring various paths and eliminating some options, I often find myself at life’s crossroads, with little guidance from my parents.

When I was around 4 years old, I became a left-behind child. My parents know very little about me due to the significant distance and limited time we share. They run a vegetable shop in a remote county, 955 kilometers away from me, so distant that our reunions are confined to the Chinese New Year. They endure a harsh environment, working tirelessly to provide for my older brother and I. Meanwhile, I reside in the capital city with my grandparents and brother because my parents want us to have access to the best education in our province, despite the hardship of being apart. For as long as I can remember, my feelings during the month I spend with my parents are split between the excitement of Chinese New Year and the sadness of knowing they are about to leave me again. We stay connected by phone for the rest of the year.

My parents do support me a lot, even though there were times when I wondered if I really knew them. They are the stingiest people I know towards themselves. Once, my father chose to walk two hours rather than spend one yuan on a bus fare from the train station to our home. My mother rarely buys new clothes for herself except for big festivals. Yet, when it comes to my education, their generosity knows no bounds. Once, I asked my father about his vision of my ideal adult life; he expressed, “My greatest wish isn’t that you land a job with an impressive salary, but rather that you secure a position that is both decent and commands respect in the future.” This desire for respectability is the driving force behind their painstaking support for my higher education. They want me to experience a world they never had the opportunity to see—a world far removed from the hardship, helplessness, and disrespect they endure. I appreciate them immensely and try my best not to let them down. Since all the choices I have encountered while growing up are entirely new to them, I have strived to be the master of my own life, taking responsibility for my decisions and accepting all the consequences.

Under these circumstances, I don’t agree that the identity of being first-generation purely brings setbacks. Firstly, I see myself as more of an open-minded person who loves to try new and challenging things. Even though there isn’t any formal path my parents walked for me to follow, it means I will never live my life under their shadow. It is an unsubstantiated statement that a calf led across the river by an old ox is happier than a calf that crosses the river alone. Secondly, I make an effort to become more resilient. I failed the postgraduate entrance examination in December 2022 after spending more than 12 months, 10 hours a day, preparing for it. I also had a failed first career experience, taking eight months to realize the position was not suitable for me. These failures do not define me as a loser; they simply show that some of my efforts did not succeed. If I can learn something useful from these failed

experiences, I believe they will be more valuable than my successes. Lastly, my strong ability to connect with friends and peers partly stems from my identity as a first-gen student. I enjoy hearing about others' life paths and experiences, which often enlighten and inspire me.

I also have several suggestions for my first-gen peers and myself. First, even though our parents might not know us well, it's vital to leave a door, or at least a window open for them to glimpse our lives. Be patient and prepare to explain new things to them repeatedly. Moreover, never complain about being first-gen or envy those who aren't. We must be grateful for what we have and find ways to improve our situations. Finally, don't be afraid of uncertainty and failure. We are drawing on a blank canvas, and it's understandable that we may need to use an eraser to correct our mistakes now and then.