

ESSAY

For Your Own Good

by Huina Zheng



"Authority" by Nathan Cho

Normally, in my country of China, the news reports you saw were positive and people did not post negative comments on social media about society and the government. I believed my country was different and it was getting better because of all the positive news reports. But since the outbreak of the Coronavirus epidemic in early 2020, lots of ridiculous and surreal posts had leaked out — they would be gone within a day — and then the world remained safe and stable again.

The health workers clubbed a woman's three dogs to death after she tested positive and was put into quarantine.

The neighborhood committee forced a 98-year-old man to vaccinate, leading to his death after a vaccine reaction.

A high school expelled a student because he failed to notify them that his parents returned home from another city, violating epidemic prevention regulations. Posts and videos abounded, some more “absurd” than others.

No one could explain these phenomena, so more and more people on social media post that there must be foreign forces behind all of these incidents — “...they tried to overthrow our government and take advantage. We must always be on guard against falling into the trap of the evil capitalist countries.”

I knew that the real world I lived in differed from the official narrative. Still, under the long-term guidance of ideology, public opinion, and news immersion, the boundary between these two worlds had blurred. All these posts were slaps in the face. The bubble exploded.

I asked a friend I trusted, “Why are we like this?”

She replied, “Because we don't know anything else.”

We were both silent — we had to stop the conversation before it led us too far away.

The silence brought back memories of my younger years when I struggled to make sense of the world.

#

I grew up in a traditional family in southern China — my father was the master of the house and my mother was a housewife. My father was hot-tempered. If my siblings and I disturbed him, he would shout, “Stop it! Or I will beat you to death, dig a hole in the hill and bury you.” I never thought it was a threat; I believed it was a fact.

My parents thought children were too young to understand things, so they never minded that we were around when they talked. From my mother's chitchat with relatives, I learned that

an uncle had accidentally beat his son to death. I had always known that sons and daughters were different—sons were the hope of the family while daughters were just another family's daughter-in-law. What chance did a daughter have if a parent could beat his exalted son to death? My father had a factory on the outskirts — we were a minute's walk from the mountains — I feared he would beat me to death in a rage, and when my family moved, I would be left alone and forgotten. Consequently, I developed the instinct to read my father's expression to detect any hints of rage.

My family went to live in a small town when I was ten and my father moved his factory to our hometown, so he was thankfully seldom home. My siblings and I never missed him or asked about him. My mother liked to joke that we were like little mice around a cat when my father was home. She was right. How could a mouse not hold its breath around a cat that might devour it?

This fear did me some good when I went to school. Beating children was not considered violence but a way for parents and teachers to administer discipline. My teachers would hit our palms with a ruler or pinched us if we didn't behave.

On the first day of school in fifth grade, my classmates were chatting and laughing. A man in his early thirties entered the classroom. He had fair skin, a crew cut, and a mustache on his lips. Some classmates were still making noise. He pursed his lips, and his face twitched. He said in an almost calm voice, "I am your Chinese and homeroom teacher, and my last name is Yang. Today is the first class, and not everyone is disciplined. Doesn't matter. There is time for me to make all of you disciplined." Teacher Yang did not yell to warn us, but beneath his calm appearance I felt unease. I was right — this was the calm before the storm.

He began to beat us on the second day and every day for the rest of our school year.

If he spotted you not concentrating or chatting, he either walked towards you and struck your face with his hand or demanded that you step to the platform so he could slap you. If he asked a question and you failed to know the answer, he tweaked your ear. He hit you if he saw you playing when you were supposed to study. That was what he did to a boy in the class. On a Saturday afternoon, when he saw the boy skateboarding in the square near the school, he punched him. "You will have a unit test next week. Have you finished your homework? Have you studied for the exam? How dare you not study! Keep this in mind. Whenever I catch you playing, I will beat you." He warned the whole class.

You couldn't do anything to avoid being beaten. We had row-and-column seating in the classrooms. If students in your column did not behave, Teacher Yang would punish all students in the same column. He would order us to study the textbook while he took his time

beating each of us. He would start with the students sitting in the front row. If your face was not toward him, he would yank your hair or your ear if your hair was too short, turn your face toward him and hit you in the cheek. Sometimes a slap was not enough to ease his anger — he would pull you and your deskmate’s hair and bump your heads toward each other. “Thump,” “thump,” and “thump.” You would see stars for several seconds.

The worst part was not when he hit you but moments before he did. I would open my Chinese textbook and pretend to study the text. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him approaching. I held my breath and got prepared. Before I knew it, it was over. You felt pain and a burning sensation, but it would fade. It was not that bad. But the class was not over yet. Even if the class ended, as the homeroom teacher, Teacher Yang would still return before school was over and punish you when he believed you did something wrong. Even though the day was over, on the next school day, it started all over again.

Each time he graded tests, he would sit in front of the platform, holding a ferrule, and the whole class waited for their turn to walk towards him with the graded examination paper. He would look at our papers and hit our palms according to our grades. The lower scores you got, the more beating you had. Once Teacher Yang used a broomstick to beat us. The broomstick must have cracked from the numerous hits, so when he struck a girl’s palm, the crack in the broomstick cut her palm and drew blood. That day, he walked home with the girl to explain to her parents what had happened.

The following morning, he told us that the girl’s parents said to him that a strict teacher produced outstanding students. They were grateful that their daughter had such a strict teacher. Teacher Yang should not worry. They would understand even if he broke their daughter’s hand to discipline her. When Teacher Yang recounted it, his face lit up with pride.

#

He implemented corporal punishment while our math teacher (I don’t remember her name), a middle-aged woman, applied a mental penalty. She disliked girls in general and especially hated girls that performed poorly at math. She liked to compare them to pigs.

In class, she would point at the girl and say in a loud voice that the whole class could hear, “You are so stupid. A pig is smarter than you. Why don’t you quit school and find yourself a husband?” And then she would continue to bully another girl. “Do you have a brain? Did a pig eat your brain?”

Boys laughed and clapped and those girls lowered their heads. I feared Teacher Yang, but I resented the math teacher.

Once Teacher Yang took us on a one-day autumn trip to the Martyrs' Cemetery and said we should write a composition. It was not far away from the school. We lined up to walk back to school in the evening. One car had to stop when we crossed the street, and the horn blared several times. Teacher Yang went over, and the car window lowered. Teacher Yang said something to the car owner with a smile, but the car owner wagged his hand, and the window rose. Teacher Yang's face twitched — the sign of his suppressed rage. When we returned to school, the day had ended, but he asked us to stay. He pointed out things we did wrong during the day, and each student took turns getting beaten up.

I usually did well in my studies, but once, I failed a Chinese unit test. Teacher Yang hit me harder than usual because, as a good student, I had let him down, and he wanted me to learn my lesson. My palms were swollen all afternoon.

Students who failed the test would have to ask their parents to meet the teacher the next day. I was not worried that my mother would punish me for failing a test because she believed an elementary school education was sufficient for girls. Instead I feared she would not go to school. In that case, Teacher Yang would surely punish me. It was Friday, so I had a weekend to work out a solution.

There was a multiple-choice question that I got right, but Teacher Yang put an X on it, deducting two points. If I told Teacher Yang about it to get back the two points I deserved, my grade would be 61, not 59. Then I would have passed the test, and my mother did not need to go to school. But how could I tell Teacher Yang? In those days, we did not have mobile phones, and I did not know his landline number. I told two friends about it. One of them told me that she knew where he lived and she could take me to meet him. To boost my courage, the other friend would also go with me.

We set off the next day, but I hesitated before his house. I dared not ring the bell. What would he think about it? Would he be offended and beat all of us? "Come on. I know his history," my friend said. She told us that Teacher Yang borrowed money from her father to buy this house, and he was still in debt. He beat his wife so severely that she ran away, leaving behind their son. Now Teacher Yang beat his son every day until the boy was black and blue.

I recalled my father's rage and felt a sharp pang of pain. If a father would badly beat his son, what chance would I, his student, have? How could I expect compassion?

I decided to go home. Being beaten by Teacher Yang was not that bad. I could grit my teeth and endure it. At least he would never accidentally beat me to death. Teacher Yang did not scar me; my continued dread for my father overshadowed my fear for Teacher Yang.

No one ever told us that it was wrong for teachers to beat students. If you told your parents about it, they would ask you to reflect on what you had done wrong to deserve it. Naturally, I never told my parents.

It has been our fine tradition to esteem teachers and education for thousands of years. As students, you should always respect and obey teachers; you should never question or challenge them. If your teacher told you the sun rose in the west, you nodded as if you agreed. Punishment was necessary to make students good, just as teachers assigned homework so students could learn.

Teacher Yang dedicated himself to teaching and imparting knowledge. Although he seldom smiled, when we did well, he would nod with a proud smile and urge us to continue to work hard. He was like a strict father — when you played the piano, he would stand beside you and hit your arm with a ruler whenever you played a wrong note — all to make you improve your skills. It was for your own good. You should be grateful. We should respect Teacher Yang and thank him for his selfless dedication. In some way I think my classmates and I learned to blame ourselves. We believed corporal punishment and abuse were common in school learning, so we never discussed it.

There were three worlds I lived in — the real world, the official world we were taught to believe, and the third world that I created for myself. The third world contained all the alternatives. Every night before I fell asleep, I imagined different versions of the day's events — the girl's parents asked Teacher Yang to apologize for beating their daughter, and the boy who got slapped for skateboarding fought back.

In the official world, everything was sanitized to seem pleasant. The textbooks and news revolved around this world. You only saw positive things — all parents loved their children, and all teachers were responsible and caring. We were trained to believe in this world and obey.

Some of my middle and high school teachers continued to abuse students, but my impeccable grades formed a shield around me, dispelling their humiliation. Your grades determined whether you deserved respect or not.

When I entered puberty, I became silent. I put myself into a jar so that it blocked out all my emotions. The real world would not affect me. However, the negative feelings I had suppressed still found a way to sneak into the jar and haunted me. I wondered: were there legitimate pains and rage others felt? What did they look like?

I read books. Teachers and parents believed that students should focus on study in those years. Students were not allowed to read non-textbooks. Still, I devoured books, especially foreign literature. Strangely, the suffering in the corrupt, evil capitalist countries did not appall me. Instead, I felt understood, connected, and empowered — I saw another way of being — I felt *normal*. In the worlds created by foreign literature I felt I knew how to feel and think, but once I closed the book, I was not so sure.

#

I thought corporal punishment and emotional abuse only existed in rural areas or small towns, and that only happened in the past or to students living in poverty. I was wrong.

A few years ago, when my sister's daughter went to kindergarten, my mother told me that because my niece was so active, her teacher tied her hands with a rope. "Don't you think it is wrong for the teacher to do so?" I asked my mother. But she laughed and said, "Your niece is so naughty, and the teacher is just bad-tempered."

A friend who sent her son to an expensive private elementary school told me that her son's classmate's parents had conflicts with the homeroom teacher. They suspected the teacher abused their daughter and asked the daughter to take a recording pen to the school.

According to the recording, the teacher indeed abused her. However, when the parents demanded the school fire the teacher, no one supported them. In the end, they had to transfer their daughter to another school. "Aren't you worried the teacher might abuse your son too?" I asked my friend. She rolled her eyes.

I've worked in an educational agency that helps Chinese students apply for overseas schools. Students all come from middle and upper-class families. When I brainstormed with students about their personal statement, they shared their traumatic experiences, many of which happened in the classroom. A student told me he went to an elite elementary school, but because he always raised questions that disrupted the homeroom teacher's sense of discipline, he became the teacher's most disliked student. His mother only realized that he had been bullied when one day in 3rd grade his teacher told the class to line up to give him a slap. Another student told me that when he was in 9th grade, his teacher asked the class to vote for the student they would most like to kick out, and he got the highest votes. Their parents were educated and wealthy, but when the teachers bullied them, they did not help.

We now know it is wrong for teachers to abuse students, but why did these resourceful and educated parents remain silent? I realized I was so naïve. How could an individual fight against a system?

One day I read a news report that when a man met his former middle school teacher, a retired old man, in the street, he asked his teacher if he remembered how he used to humiliate and beat him. He slapped his teacher again and again. So many people carried the scars years into adulthood, but the teachers never thought much about it and continued abusing the next generation. The court sentenced the man to one year and a half in prison. My colleague commented, “How can you beat an old man, let alone a former teacher? Nuts!”

I said, “I had an elementary teacher who beat us every school day.”

“That can’t be true.”

Of course, such things never happened in the official world. What point did I want to make; that I resented all teachers, or I’d developed an anti-social tendency? I shrugged and ended the conversation.

So often, I wanted to scream, and people would stare as if something was fundamentally wrong with me. I did not know how to feel and think in a *normal* way.

#

I’m a grown woman now, but I still try not to think of those years I spent in school. Before I graduated from college, my parents suggested I become a teacher — a safe and wise choice for girls, but I refused. I thought I would have to agree with the system and become an abuser if I wanted to be a teacher.

There is a kindergarten right next to my apartment. Perhaps the kids were too noisy or the teacher tried to avoid getting a sore throat from speaking out loud, she often used a loudspeaker to lecture students. When I worked in the room that was close to the kindergarten, I heard the teacher abuse and yell.

I was restless and anxious the first day I sent my daughter to kindergarten. I immediately remembered how it felt — deep inside me, everything tightened up as if preparing my body for another blow. I had met the teachers and they seemed nice, but I did not know who they were when alone with the kids. I still felt that tight, expectant tension all over my body.

When I picked my daughter up from school, I noticed that she wore different pants. She told me that she wet the bed during the nap. “What did your teacher say to you?” I asked.

“She said it didn’t matter, and she would help me change the pants. She said so in a very nice and gentle way.”

My tense nerves relaxed, and I could breathe again.

It struck me that I had prepared myself and my daughter for her to enter this system when she was still a baby. I read articles about how to use roleplaying games and how to read the

warning signs of kids being abused. I taught her how to be polite at school and made sure that she was a role model student so teachers would all like her.

The Ministry of Education had long issued a code of professional ethics for teachers, one of the most important of which was that corporal punishment, including kicking and slapping, was forbidden. But varying degrees of punishment still existed. Posts about abuse spread throughout the Internet.

I tried to understand why we couldn't stop it. I speculated on many reasons — historical, cultural, systematic factors — but they were ungrounded. I could only find limited information, and the few articles I have found just pecked at it. Whenever I brought up the subject, my friends and family remained silent or changed the topic; if I pushed, they became uncomfortable and told me it was only abnormal if I made a fuss about it.

My people were raised to believe in the merit of denial. The only way to overcome difficulties was to pretend they didn't exist so that we could have a future untainted by an unhappy past. For years I had to tell myself what happened at school was no big deal. The pain was just my imagination.

Self-denial did not liberate me but exacerbated my pain. I recalled how I felt when I read the 19-year-long struggle of Jean Valjean, the protagonist in *Les Misérables*. Valjean does nothing wrong and he doesn't deserve to be oppressed, just as my classmates and I did not deserve to be abused. And it dawned on me, finally, that it had not been our fault. I felt relieved, a warm feeling flooding over me, as if someone held my hand and told me it was okay to think Teacher Yang should not beat us.

What if you were allowed to talk about it?

Would students who endured abuse learn that they were valued, we understood them, and it was not their fault?

Would the public understand that even though a teacher's slap did not leave a scar on the face, it did leave cracks in students' hearts?

Would we start to brainstorm solutions to prevent corporal punishment? Schools reflected society. Perhaps many educated parents did not intervene because they knew that if this was the world we lived in, their children should learn to navigate the real world. The sooner, the better.

We all knew we could do nothing about it. Why torture yourself with things you could not stop? Better get numb and live your life.

#

A few days ago, I chatted over WeChat with a childhood friend in the same class as me in 5th and 6th grade. I asked if she still remembered Teacher Yang. “Sure. My son will attend that school this September, and I just told him about Teacher Yang.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Teacher Yang is a very strict teacher.”

She was right. For a long time, when I thought of Teacher Yang, he was a responsible teacher. My friend had repositioned me in the right way to view Teacher Yang — a strict but well-intentioned teacher.

When the dogs’ owner tested positive for Covid-19, officials thought the dogs might be positive too. The health workers clubbed the dogs to death so that the dogs would not spread the virus to people. They saved lives.

Likewise, the 98-year-old man could’ve died of Covid-19 if the resident committee did not force him to vaccinate. They were doing their job, and took the trouble to care for the old man.

Similarly, the public should trust the government and follow the prevention and control measures. After all, we share the same goal — dynamic Covid-zero strategy. The student’s parents should never violate the regulations.

When the sun rose to its highest, everything was clear and nice. See? There were indeed no shadows.