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Messages from Beijing

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Paul Gurzell

Beijing, China

February 9, 2019

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I interviewed a local barista at a nearby Gongcha (貢茶)—a popular Taiwanese milk tea chain—who is so familiar with my order I simply walk in, scan the code and pay with Wechat as he prepares my favorite drink. Being as familiar as he is with me, it was easy to ask a few culturally-related questions of him. I first asked (interpreted from Chinese) “What kind of style did your parents use when they raised you?” He explained that his parents insisted he used nearly all of his time as a young boy to study in preparation for the Gaokao (高考), an extremely difficult end-of-high school exam that all Chinese students must take. He said they took care of all the chores; they cleaned, cooked, swept, etc. in order to give him the time he needed to focus on his studies. When I asked how they showed affection, he said they would not directly tell him or use physical touch—such as hugs or kisses—to show affection, rather he knew they loved him through the things they did for him. If he was sick, they would spend all their time doing what they could to make him feel better, if he was hurt, they would spend every second ensuring his healthy recovery; in this way, he knew they cared very much for him.

After living here in China for nearly 9 months, his answers to my questions do not come as a big surprise. Through my teachers as well as a homestay experience, I have come to understand the Chinese parenting style as one of actions, rather than words. The Chinese perspective is that words are just that—

words. While you may say as you please, only actions can truly represent your intentions. An old Chinese saying goes as follows : 話多不如話少, 話少不如話好 (*huà duō bù rú huà shào , huà shào bù rú huà hǎo*; Many words are inferior to few, few words are inferior to well-spoken ones). In essence, it is actions that can determine one's true feelings, not empty words. As for his parents' focus on education, this, too, is very indicative of the Chinese parenting style. Most Chinese parents believe their kids should focus all their available time on preparing for the Gaokao, an age-old test that students must take at the end of high school to determine which colleges they will be able to attend in the future; the Gaokao may be taken a maximum of three times in one's life, so scoring well is vital to one's success. It really is no wonder his parents put such a focus on him to study hard during his high school years.

I have conversed much with him before, and I noted some similarities between us due to our age, mostly in the form of our smartphone usage and other things of the sort. To be honest, the interview did not change much about my perspectives, and not because what he said did not display differences between US and Chinese cultures and what-not, but because in my program we have been required to do dozens of the kinds of interviews all in Mandarin, and the answers he gave me I have mostly heard before.