

I was raised in a traditional Chinese culture by a traditional "Chinese Tiger Mom." Still, merely attaching such stereotypical labels onto these twin cultural phenomena provides little insight into the actual, everyday experiences of a young vulnerable child attempting to navigate his way through the shoals of his difficult upbringing.

During this time, I existed in a type of shadow world: a world which brooked no dissent: deified personal responsibility; and, elevated perfection to stratospheric heights. This was a severe environment, from age six through sixteen, where any infraction of the rules—from accidentally dropping a dinner plate at age five to failing to meet unrealistically high academic standards—would incur swift, harsh physical punishment.

In response to this intolerable situation, I often retreated to the safe confines of my bedroom, where I would play video games. For, inside my bedroom, my self-worth was not dependent upon my latest test score. This was the place where I gave myself what I desperately craved: both the permission to heal and the freedom to fail. In time, I was able to craft a stronger version of myself as a mythical figure battling powerful adversaries near and far. And, unlike in my real life, in my virtual life, sometimes I even won these battles. Not only that, but these virtual victories provided me with the self-confidence and strength to fight the true battle that was yet to come in my life.

Meanwhile, outside my bedroom walls, I somehow found a way to muddle through my difficult life, never realizing, paradoxically, the more my mother externally repressed me, the stronger I became internally.

Until, one day, when I suddenly instinctively knew it was time for me to bridge the divide between my virtual and my real worlds—between the strong me, inside my bedroom walls versus the weak me, outside my bedroom walls. In other words, it was time for me to break free from both the constraints of my traditional Chinese culture and the constraints of my traditional "Chinese TigerMom."

The first issue I needed to confront involved my mother's plans for my future. My mother had decided—probably even before I was born—that, when I grew up, would become a physician. The only problem with her plan was that she had never asked me. Had she bothered to consult me, I would have told my mother that I had a very different life plan in mind for me.

As my senior year of high school was approaching, I knew I needed to confront my mother. I also knew how difficult that would be: All my life, my mother had successfully squelched out the barest nascent seeds of autonomy out of me, replacing those seeds of freedom with suffocating weeds of conformity.

But, not this time.

I then searched deep within myself and realized my true battle never had lain against my mother; my true battle had always lain against myself. I then realized, before I could find the

strength to confront my mother, I first had to find the strength to confront myself. Specifically, I needed to stop living in - and winning battles in -the virtual world, in order to begin living in-and winning battles in- the real world. At that moment, it then dawned on me, in the past, because my real world had been so painful, I simply had opted to reside in the safe virtual world I had crafted for myself. As a result, I had, unintentionally, ceded all my power in my real world over to my mother.

Only after I found the courage to eviscerate this protective virtual-world cover, would I find my true voice: would I find the inner fortitude to confront my mother.

In the process of finding my true voice, of finding my inner strength, I discovered the most important person of all: I discovered the real me.