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Reflections of a Chinese Academic Mom Struggling to Survive a Pandemic

Each of us has been negatively affected by this pandemic, but mothers have had to shoulder the brunt of it, as they have been forced to work from home, provide child/elder care, and ensure that their family survives. Sadly, academic mothers have been burdened not only with an increased workload at home but also with trying to juggle their academic careers, which have been gravely affected by this pandemic. As a Chinese academic mother, I have struggled with managing my publishing requirements, my service to my department, and my online teaching responsibilities. I have had to care for elderly family members, who are more susceptible to COVID-19, and for my children, who have been exposed to COVID-19. I have also had to work through filial piety failures as a daughter and daughter-in-law. Sharing the struggles of academic mothers aims to expose how the exorbitant workload that falls upon academic mothers is not sustainable and to address systemic problems that have been long plagued both the academic and home environment. All mothers cannot continue to support a system or a government that lacks leadership during global crises that do not value the visible and invisible labor of mothers because women have far too long been viewed as disposable. In sharing my experiences during this pandemic as a Chinese mother and academic navigating through this uncharted territory of pandemic survival, I hope my journey can provide support to other academic mothers as we advocate for structural change in how mothers should be supported as essential workers.

I am fortunate that my tenure began on September 1, 2020; it gave me some sense of security in an extremely tenuous 2020. Sadly, my untenured and adjunct colleagues fear for their jobs, as college enrollments have significantly fallen due to COVID-19 and an increasing number of colleges are furloughing faculty or not renewing their contracts (Kelderman). We have already seen how the pandemic has dramatically decreased the publication rates of female

faculty (Gabster et al 1969). Other colleges are cutting majors and persuading senior faculty to retire early in an attempt to balance their budget deficits (Smola). In the worst-case scenario, in which a college may close, even tenured faculty may find themselves jobless. An online colleague said it best when confronted with all this turmoil: “We are totally on the Titanic, but we’re the orchestra on the deck” (Adeoju). I am in my second year as an associate professor at a community college, which caters primarily to students of color, many of whom are immigrants and/or first-generation college students, just like me. Our campus is located in Brooklyn, New York, which was one of the pandemic hot spots. My primary duties are teaching a 4/4 load, which is quite heavy, as our classes prior to the pandemic were capped at forty-three and now at twenty-nine. I am also a researcher and had been working on a number of publications before the pandemic, but my thinking has become so fragmented making writing and revising extremely challenging. My publications are moving at a snail’s pace, but I’m grateful that I have been productive because my colleagues with young children are even more overwhelmed. After this round of publications has gone to print, I will have more than enough to apply for a promotion to full professor for 2022.

Other hats I wear include being a board member for the Asian American/Asian Research Institute of the City University of New York, a member of an advisory board to create a graduate level Asian American/Asian studies program, a mentor for our students through our college’s women’s center, a mentor for historically underrepresented junior faculty, and a rising scholar in diversity and antiracism work within the classroom. Doing this kind of work has its own issues, especially when the president of the United States (#45) has waged his war on diversity, equity, and inclusion (Flaherty). I know too many faculty of colour, myself included, who have been harassed and sent death threats because of the valuable work we do in this area, and these threats have only increased exponentially under #45’s administration.

I am also a mother of three, my daughter is a junior in college, and my sons are a freshman and junior in high school. They have all gone back to school this fall, and I worry about their exposure to COVID-19. My daughter chose to fly back to Minnesota for her classes, as she did not want to endure another online semester. I asked her many times to reconsider, but I know she’s an adult who makes good decisions. Both of their schools had an extensive COVID-19 testing policy before classes began, and they enforce social distancing and mask-wearing during classes. My sons’ high school will require all students to get the vaccine when it becomes available. These restrictions seem good on paper, but it’s difficult, if not impossible, to keep COVID-19 completely out of schools. My sons’ high school had a student who tested positive, and my younger son was a direct contact, so both he and my older son had to quarantine and get tested. My daughter’s college has weekly testing and

has had six cases since they opened in September. This concerns me greatly, but my husband says keeping COVID-19 rates less than 1 per cent is actually excellent. I prefer zero cases, but he tells me my view is unrealistic. I am grateful that my college opted for online teaching because I know other colleagues at different universities were incredibly stressed not knowing if they had to be back in the classroom during this global pandemic. Even as my college went online shortly after our spring semester had begun, there has never been any discussion should faculty or students become sick. It seems incredulous that our college does not have any contingency plans if faculty were to get sick or die while teaching during this pandemic. Maybe we are too afraid to address this potential outcome as if bringing up a contingency plan would make the terrifying outcome of faculty dying of COVID-19 all too real but deaths are already occurring. Within the biggest public university system in New York City, numerous faculty, administrators, and students have lost their lives to COVID-19 (Valbrun). I surely do not want my name listed on our college's memorial website.

As of October 2020, there have been over thirty-nine million global cases of COVID-19, 1.1 million global deaths, and those numbers increase each day (John Hopkins University and Medicine). It's not surprising that the United States leads the world in COVID-19 cases and deaths with over eight million cases and over 220,000 deaths; even still, #45 tweets, "Don't be afraid of COVID" (qtd. in Cooper). His cavalier attitude towards those who lost loved ones during this pandemic is callous and heartless. All these current issues leave me so fearful, as they underscore the lack of support for academic mothers during this pandemic. One week, the high school notified parents that a staffer tested positive, but my sons were not in direct contact and my daughter's college informed us that they had two positive cases on campus. My daughter told me that one of the cases is a volleyball player and now the volleyball pod must quarantine. She's on the softball team, and two of her friends were randomly selected to be tested. We both hope that they are negative, or their pod will have the same fate as the volleyball team. This is our new normal, and we'd be fooling ourselves to think that any school can stay negative for the academic year. I worry about my children and students for different reasons, and some days, I am overwhelmed with sadness because this is not normal. I'm not sure how long I can continue feeling this way but I do reach out to my friends who are both mothers and clinicians to help me sort things out. It's comforting in a year that started off well but quickly became a dumpster fire.

COVID-19 Arrives in New York City

This year began rather uneventful as my husband and I, jetted off to the 2020 Hawaii International Conference on Education during the first week of January. It was a dream come true that my paper was accepted, and I received funding to present my research on teaching about race and discrimination in my favourite state at my favourite hotel. I barely noticed the passenger next to me who coughed and sneezed throughout the twelve-hour flight. Once we landed, we drove to our favourite poke place for lunch, and I prepared for my presentation while admiring the beautiful scenery from our ocean-front balcony. The day after my presentation, my husband caught a bad cold and was quite sick. I took him to see the hotel doctor who noticed that his oxygen levels were rather low and suggested giving him a steroid shot to help him feel better quicker. Luckily, he was well enough though still weak to fly back home. We didn't think much of it. Shortly after arriving home, we celebrated the year of the rat with a family dinner at our favourite restaurant in Brooklyn's Chinatown, which was packed with Chinese families also celebrating the Lunar New Year. Around this time, my cousin from Hong Kong sent me a message asking me to send her three hundred N95 masks. It seemed so odd that I thought someone had hacked into her social media account, but it turned out to be her, and she couldn't find these masks anywhere. I bought twenty-five boxes for her off eBay and an extra box for my family. Little did I realize how precious those N95 masks would become.

This was the start of COVID-19 for our family, as news trickled in about a novel virus making people extremely ill and unable to breathe. I ordered disinfectant wipes but received an email that the orders were cancelled, which had never happened before. The same happened for orders of bathroom tissue. I decided to return something at our local price club and pick up some wipes and bathroom tissue, but there were dozens of cars, and so much chaos in the parking lot that I just drove home. This was the beginning of the growing panic in New York City. My semester had just started in March, and my students kept asking me if we were going to cancel classes. I always replied, "No. Why would we do that?" but fewer and fewer students showed up to class. Then the faculty received an email stating that classes were moving online for the remainder of the semester, and we had five days to complete this transition. I wasn't too concerned, as I was quite savvy with navigating our online platform. What I did not anticipate was the increase in work while teaching online and that this would be a COVID-19 semester in which faculty and students would teach and learn under incredible stress and fears of death. Many of my students were afraid, stressed out, furloughed, and unable to afford their rent or food. They tried to get their schoolwork done while homeschooling their children, providing eldercare, or quarantining in unsafe

homes. My greatest concern that spring and this fall semester was their wellbeing.

In addition to dealing with my students, I had to figure out my home situation with the five of us needing to use the WiFi for work and classes. My sons were learning online, and my daughter was flying home from college. I deliberately told her to just pack her carry-on and laptop, and we would buy whatever she was missing from school once she came home. I wanted to avoid having her wait for her checked luggage in an international airport and told her to come directly to the pick-up area once she deplaned. I had seen on the news the massive crowds at some airports and wanted to minimize her exposure to other travelers. My youngest son was to graduate from eighth grade and upset to miss out on all the graduation festivities he had seen his older two siblings partake in. There would be no senior trip, senior night, senior BBQ, or postgraduation party. Being Chinese, I also have extended family responsibilities with my elderly parents and in-laws, who all share major health issues.

A New Normal

At the chaotic start of quarantining with my husband, mother-in-law, and three children, I was solely responsible for securing food, which left me resentful. How did I get stuck with all the cooking and dishwashing? I knew my husband was working many more hours while working from home, as the boundaries between work and home life became blurred. His job is in finance, and trying to keep the billion-dollar company he works for afloat increased his workload twofold. If he and his team failed at this task, the entire company would go bankrupt and everyone would lose their job. He is also the primary breadwinner in our family, so his income pays for our daughter's private college tuition, our sons' private high school education, and the majority of our expenses. Being that he and I are both immigrants and first-generation college graduates, the ability to give our children the educational opportunities we never had access to is every immigrant's dream, especially with the emphasis on education in many Asian families. I still feel a twinge of guilt for the many years he supported me as I worked towards my doctoral degree and only brought in a pitiful adjunct's salary. Although there was a short time when I was the primary breadwinner, I still believe that the job which generates more income is more valuable. When I first became a mother, the biggest demon I had to battle was feeling that all the work I was doing as a mother was less valuable because it did not bring home a paycheck. As I've become wiser, I know to value the visible and invisible work of mothers, but pandemic survival has resurfaced some of those old feelings again. I did have a long talk with my husband about feeling overwhelmed, and he has really stepped up in doing an

equitable amount of the domestic labour now, which has made a big difference in managing my stress levels. In many ways, this pandemic has helped us work better as a team and taught me that I don't have to carry everything on my shoulders alone.

Failing at Filial Piety

In some ways, I am learning ways to adapt, but in others, I feel as though I'm failing. Prior to the pandemic, when my husband and I were both working late, it was easy to order dinner, but now with safety concerns of restaurants and delivery staff, we can't take any chances of being infected with COVID-19. One area where I feel I am failing at is filial piety because I get annoyed when my elderly mother-in-law tries to help out but actually creates more work for me. One time, I left a bag of raw carrots to prepare for dinner, and while I went upstairs to get some work done, she chopped them all up into small pieces. Upon closer inspection, she haphazardly scraped them but didn't peel them completely, so I had to finish peeling them one tiny piece at a time. It took twice as long to redo all the carrots than if I had just prepared them myself. I know she has good intentions because she knows my husband and I are busy, but even though I tell her to stop, she still insists on helping. Sometimes, she will attempt to carry a huge stack of folded laundry upstairs, and I tell her to stop because I don't want her to fall down the stairs, which happened a few years back. She has shrunk my work clothes numerous times, which I find maddening because I tell her repeatedly to let me take care of my wash loads. But then I feel guilty for feeling angry and not living up to the idea of being a dutiful daughter-in-law and showing respect to my elders. In traditional Chinese families, the daughter-in-law has the least amount of power in the family and is often subjected to abuse by her mother-in-law, but mine treats me better than my own mother. Unfortunately, her helping drives me insane, and I hate feeling this way. I did redeem myself when my mother-in-law needed joss paper to celebrate the mid-autumn festival, and I was able to order online not only the joss paper but also mooncakes. We haven't ventured into any supermarket since March, and I have had all our groceries delivered, but most Asian grocery stores haven't embraced online shopping, making it difficult to purchase what we need as a Chinese family.

My parents have also contributed a great deal of stress in me because they are Trump supporters. After the increase in racially charged attacks against Asians and the unending racist rhetoric against all communities of colour, the dutiful daughter in me cannot understand why my parents continue supporting this tyrant. The researcher in me understands that their decision is based on their blind acceptance of the model minority myth, in which they believe that shedding their immigrant and Chinese status will secure them a prestigious

place in white American society. What they don't realize is that such acceptance is a fallacy, and they will always fall short in the eyes of white America. The traditional Chinese girl inside of me who seeks her parents' approval is often at war with the established academic, who is an invited lecturer and growing expert in diversity and equity. At times, I feel as though I've failed as an academic if I can't even convince my own parents of the evils of this racist president. My parents probably can't understand why I am showing such blatant disrespect to them after all the sacrifices they endured to bring us to America. Some may criticize me for failing to be a dutiful daughter, but I can no longer spend my time with people who support racism. The pandemic made me realize that this is my deal breaker, and for now, I don't see any recourse with my parents. I hope things will change in the future, but for now, I need to distance myself from them, and it greatly saddens me.

Offers I Couldn't Refuse

Even with everything on my plate, I still wanted to continue with my prepandemic career goals because it offered me a positive distraction. This semester, our new chair asked me to be the psychology area coordinator. I felt I couldn't refuse because I had planned on going up for full professorship in 2022, and this would count as major service to the department. It entailed a heavy workload, but I wanted to impress our new chair who hopefully would advocate for me when I apply for promotion. In this new role, I often deal with male adjuncts emailing me to call them, and I have politely responded that I don't have time to chat on the phone but I can readily answer their questions via email when I have a few moments of downtime. I also prefer a paper trail to document our discussions. In speaking with the other academic area coordinator, who is also a mother, she mentioned how these male adjuncts demand an absurd amount of our time. I emailed this adjunct and explained to him that right now, my sons are quarantining, which means that there is an exorbitant amount of domestic work and that we all have to get tested for COVID-19. I also had pressing writing deadlines, grading to do for almost one hundred students, as well as my own homework for a workshop I was attending. I didn't have time to have a conversation with him. He still didn't get what I was saying and asked if later this week would be better for calling him. I bluntly emailed him to just email me his questions. The answer he was seeking could have been answered by our secretary. So far my work as area coordinator has shown our new chair how efficiently I get things done, which might have prompted him to ask me if he could put my name on the shortlist for the college-wide tenure and promotion committees. Again, I felt I could not decline, but I asked for some time to think it over because I knew it would be another huge commitment. Unfortunately, my single colleague had already

agreed to his request, which made me feel that I would not be viewed as a team player if I refused. Eventually, I agreed to his request because I did not want to derail my promotion. Luckily, I did not get chosen, which says a lot about the lack of diversity of these committees, but that is a fight for another non-pandemic day.

Instilling Change

This pandemic has shown me how society needs to change their definition of mother to that of a valued and extremely essential worker. Mothers need to be compensated for their work in not only providing child or elder care but also upholding a critical part of the world's economic infrastructure. There is no other way to view mothers after this pandemic. They are among the first line of essential workers. Being that this is an election year in the United States, voters need to choose a president who values the work of mothers and will put more mothers in decision-making positions because a lot of this disregard for mothers is based on the lack of mothers involved in governance. I know that this is certainly the case for the United States, as evidenced by the disproportionate number of women in Congress (23.7 per cent), the Senate (26 per cent), and the House of Representative (23.2 per cent) (Center for American Women and Politics). In 2019, only twenty-six mothers were sworn in out of the four hundred and thirty-five representatives and one hundred senators, making them a measly 4 per cent. The saddest part was that this was lauded as historic with a record number of women in the 116th United States Congress (Zoll). Without more mothers in positions of power, it is impossible to institute real change in policies that affect mothers and children.

As an academic mother, I work to instill change in the classroom because what makes me a stellar professor stems from my maternal side. The care I show my children translates into the care I give to my students, who have struggled during this pandemic. Students know that my concern for them is genuine, as I give them flexible due dates, address their fears during another COVID-19 semester, and provide a safe space for them to disclose personal issues they may be facing during this scary time. A student emailed me in a panic that her biology professor required them to log into their online platform daily as attendance and asked if I followed that policy. She explained that being on the computer for hours makes her eyes tired and gives her migraines. My response was "I understand that this is a pandemic, and I feel that professors should be extra understanding and flexible because of all the added stress." She agreed and was grateful for my understanding of students' needs and situations. I've seen syllabi stating that no late work will be accepted, and this was after I sent an email to faculty to remind them that this is a pandemic semester and we should be flexible in deadlines. I've had students emailing me

about extensions because they have been feeling sick, caring for sick loved ones, homeschooling siblings, working extra hours, etc. I make sure I thank them for shouldering all these additional responsibilities and offer every extension they need to survive another pandemic semester.

These safety nets I've put into place show them that I care about not only their academics but also their psychological health. These abilities come from my power of being a mother. Since many of our students are mothers, I assigned the article "Trying to Function in the Unfunctionable: Mothers and COVID-19" (O'Reilly) to help them recognize motherwork as essential to not only our families but also our economy. I asked students to devise ways to help mothers during the pandemic but had to remind many to think bigger and consider government programs to create high-quality and affordable childcare as well as other programs that help mothers in their day-to-day lives. I also teach my students about satellite babies, whereby Chinese immigrant parents often send their infants back to China to be cared for by grandparents, since the cost of childcare in the United States is astronomical (Schweitzer). I want my students to understand the impact of childcare and how this pandemic with the ensuing closure of schools has devastated working mothers in numerous ways. The combination of school closures and working from home has highlighted the lack of a safety net for many working mothers and sheds light on the need to have mothers be an integral part of decision-making strategies in policy making for both short-term COVID-19 survival plans and long-term postpandemic policies. Hopefully, these discussions will lead to structural changes in how mothers are viewed in our society.

I have always tried to teach about topics I am passionate about. Ever since the 2016 United States election, I knew I had to channel my rage from hearing the increasingly hateful rhetoric directed at immigrants, so I decided to create a course focusing on the psychology of immigration. This gave me a much-needed outlet, as I taught students about institutional and structural racism, cultural genocide in residential schools, and the lived experiences of immigrants trying to survive in America while dispelling common misconceptions about immigrants and immigration. Guest speakers who are immigrants came to give my classes a firsthand experience of their struggles and resilience. As a researcher, I've taken what I learned from teaching this course and presented and published on ways to create a curriculum that centres on diversity and inclusion. This work is critical in challenging the constant hateful rhetoric of #45, but the pandemic brought it to a halt. I realized that teaching such heavy topics while trying to ensure my own family's safety was too much work for me. I chose to preserve my own sanity and temporarily put on hold a class that I love to teach. Since our students often do not have access to their own WiFi or laptops, our college recommended that faculty teach asynchronously to accommodate their needs, which made teaching topics such

as xenophobia, discrimination, and racism all the more challenging because I could not gauge their facial expressions and body language as I did while in the classroom. Without a face-to-face setting, it was difficult to help students unpack these topics asynchronously, and when we had to move abruptly online, the students in my immigration class didn't have me to address their misunderstandings in real time. The class discussions were often the most essential part of helping students dissect these heavy topics. I could have revamped this class to be more compatible with an online setting, but I was just too mentally exhausted with dealing with surviving this pandemic while trying to make sense out of a world that seemed to be spiraling out of control.

Each day, I grow angrier at the toxic leadership in the United States that has led to so many preventable deaths and a steep rise in hate crimes against Asian communities (Tessler, Choi, and Kao 638). I am irate that academic mothers publish less than male academics because we carry the added responsibilities of helping our families and students survive this pandemic (Collins 9). Many colleges propose pausing the tenure clock, but this suggestion ignores the systemic gender divide, in which male colleagues publish at a higher rate than their female counterparts during this pandemic (Scheiber). I feel for all those mothers who lost loved ones from COVID-19, missed out on their children's milestones, homeschooled their children, are undocumented and endured the bulk of pandemic fatalities, put themselves and their families at risk every day as essential workers, had to choose between work and their children, and suffered sleepless nights riddled with worry and dread (O'Reilly 13-17; Correal and Jacobs). I worry for all the children who returned to school this fall because no school has successfully reopened without an uptick in COVID-19 cases (Hubler and Hartocollis). As a mother, it would destroy me if my children were to get sick, and I would die second guessing myself if letting them assert their independence to return to school was the right decision. I have never witnessed so many people who are science deniers and continually disregard the recommendations of national health experts. I have lost many hours of writing while researching ways to keep my family safe. I am also mentally drained providing support to students who have lost family members to COVID-19 and trying to alleviate their fears. Every semester while we wait for a vaccine will be another COVID-19 semester with the same fears and anxieties. My students have lost out on having a caring professor teach them face-to-face, and I have missed out on mentoring my students who are primarily immigrant and first-generation college students. Many of them may not be able to financially recover from this pandemic and will have to drop out of college. How does one put a price on that loss? This pandemic has brought to light so many issues that do not have any readily available solutions other than the fact that mothers and academic mothers need more support.

Conclusion

Some days I worry that it will take time before I am able to teach face-to-face in the way I did prior to this pandemic and that frightens me. Have my abilities to interact with people in a face-to-face manner atrophied with a year of asynchronous teaching and Zoom meetings? I may need some time to reestablish myself once we are allowed back in the classroom. This pandemic has devastated so many lives and forced us to open our eyes to numerous injustices that have plagued academia regarding the disproportionate challenges academic mothers continue to shoulder. We need college-wide contingency plans to address the impact of the lack of childcare on our careers as well as how to continue teaching should we contract COVID-19, instead of sheepishly sending my login and password to a trusted colleague to grade my classes. I often think of Professor Paola De Simone, who passed out during her Zoom class meeting and later died of COVID-19, leaving behind a young daughter (Firozi and Farzan). This pandemic has shown us that we cannot continue sacrificing our mental and physical health anymore. Faculty also need guidelines on how to support students who get sick or have lost loved ones. These are much needed short-term discussions, but we also need to have institutional conversations pertaining to tenure guidelines. The standards of tenure have remained the same for decades and that should be a cause for alarm because the world has drastically changed since only white men were allowed in academia. It would be utterly irresponsible to ignore these issues in a postpandemic society. I hope college administrators will apply the existing research on academic mothers during this pandemic to create supportive institutional policies to address these inequities and provide a safety net for their faculty who are mothers. Perhaps this revelation will spark global changes for all universities moving forward. As we struggle to survive this pandemic, many unfortunate truths have been revealed, and now it is our duty to hold the people we vote into power accountable as we work together to find solutions in addressing these truths. We surely need more women and mothers in positions of power so they can create laws to address the inequities that continue to plague our society, but allies who are not mothers also need to step up and provide their support because the responsibility for change cannot fall only on our shoulders. Lastly, I hope that Chinese academics mothers who deal with contentious and complicated family dynamics can learn ways to appease their filial piety responsibilities while staying true to themselves. Maybe there is a way to create a bridge between the myriad of hats I must wear—those of an academic, a mother, and a dutiful daughter.

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