

Surviving in America

by Mei Xiao

I grew up during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (see box). When I was young, I wanted to be a factory worker because that was the only job available at that time. I went to school from 1969 to 1979, but I learned nothing because we didn't have anything to do in school. We didn't even have a teacher most of the time. So we just read Mao's philosophy on communism.

China reopened its universities in 1977. However, because there were very few universities, only 0.2 percent of the people who wanted to go could go. People had to pass an entrance exam to get in. The cut-off score was set very high to ensure that not many people passed. This guaranteed that there were enough spaces for the few people who made it. When I took the test after my high school graduation, I missed the cut-off score by 5 points. I didn't get in. At that time, the provincial government gave out jobs, most of them in factories. But since there were so

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few jobs and so many people without one, there were no jobs for anyone who finished only high school. I had nothing to do. The only thing I could do

was to wait at home for a job. I didn't know what to expect from my future. As far as I could see, I didn't have one. I was lost.

Five years after graduation, I finally got a job at a medicine factory but the experience of not being prepared for a good job has had an enormous impact on me. I didn't even get a chance to get an education that would help me in my life. Years I should have been learning were wasted in schools with no teachers and at home



Photo of the author courtesy of the Asian American Civic Association.

waiting around for a job. I will never forget that era.

In 1998, I came to America. I felt like a newborn baby. When I arrived in Boston, I had nothing. I had no money, no friends and, most importantly, no English skills. I did have my 13-year-old daughter, who also didn't speak any English.

I started taking English lessons one month after my arrival. It was very difficult to learn a new language at my age. I attended a Basic English class at Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center for two years. During those years, I met many obstacles and I had to take care of my daughter and nurture and teach her. She had started playing the piano at the age of four in China. Through playing she developed the determination and the strength she would need to succeed. She became the youngest ever to earn a ninth level certificate in piano, the highest certification by the national conservatory of music in China. The first year we came to America, she faced many challenges, but she learned English in six months and graduated from eighth grade first in her class. We continue to be satisfied with the outcome of her efforts. She enrolled at Harvard University in the fall of 2004.

In June 2001, I started a small business, a

laundromat. The business did well during the first three months. However, after September 11, 2001, the economy fell and business at my laundromat slowed down. I could not afford to pay my bills. I had to think of something fast in order to survive. I expanded my small business by selling groceries in the laundromat. I tried to use my basic English skills to make my business successful.

I knew, however, that I was not ready to handle the grocery business because my English was not good enough and I couldn't understand what people said. I am a person hungry for learning so I made another decision. I would go back to school to learn more English and to gain additional skills to help support my business. I joined the Asian American Civic Association ABE English Transitional program. After one year in the program, I have confidence in my future. I plan to attend a local community college in January 2005 to take additional English classes and business courses. When I finish at the community college, I may go to a four-year college. I still want a college education. I am also exploring other opportunities.

Doing business in a new country with poor English skills was very difficult, especially for a 40-year-old woman. I changed my life through education and hard work. The attainment of my ambitions is now within sight.

Mei Xiao came to the United States from China in 1998 and now lives with her husband and daughter in Boston. Mei is a successful small business owner, a student in the Asian American Civic Association ABE English Transitional program, and is preparing to enter a local college to study business administration in 2005.

Mao and the Cultural Revolution

Mao Zedong was the leader of the Chinese Communist Revolution and the first Chinese Communist Party chairman. During his last decade in power, 1966-76, Mao feared China was becoming capitalistic, and he launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to renew the spirit of the Chinese revolution. He shut down China's schools and organized young people into Red Guards, who attacked all traditional values and intellectuals, including their parents and teachers. Many people were exiled to remote villages to do manual labor and many were physically abused and died. One of the Cultural Revolution's serious problems was that people who were in their teens and early twenties during the Cultural Revolution were denied an education as the schools were shut down. Post-Cultural Revolution policies stressed education and initiative for the next generation but could not create jobs or educational opportunities for the millions of people who had been disadvantaged by the policies of the previous regime. The damage to all aspects of the Chinese educational system was so great that it took several decades to repair.