

# Essay on story of an immigrant: an american dream

[Countries](#), [Vietnam](#)



Born in 1983, Edwin grew up in a small town in Vietnam, near the border with China, as part of a Chinese family with a quite complicated history. He referred to himself as a Vietnamese-Chinese immigrant here in the U. S. He recalled that his grandparents were refugees of The Great Cultural Revolution of China. They had moved to Vietnam during the so-called “ dark” years. He explained that he was referring to that awful time in recent Chinese history when an estimated 20 million Chinese were killed and around 100 million persecuted. Edwin further told me that the revolution – instigated by the then Communist party chairman Mao Zedung – was intended to enforce the party’s socialist ideals throughout the nation and to purge China of what were seen as all of the capitalist and cultural elements and influences in Chinese society. He related horrific stories he had heard of people being beaten to death simply for being a schoolteacher and even a lowly cleaner – a widow with seven children – who was strangled to death just for speaking out against Mao and for renouncing her party membership. However, after the Vietnam War ended they decided to return to China, partly as a consequence of the “ purify the border” policy adopted by the Vietnamese authorities. That policy, coming at a time of severely strained relations between Vietnam and China, entailed the Vietnamese regime not only building defensive works along the common border, but forcing the inhabitants of those areas to move away, so as to clear the land of people. He related that as far as he can recall he had a good childhood, with no worries over food or clothes. His parents had some sort of small business and were able to provide him with a relatively comfortable environment and a high quality of life in comparison with many others in China at the time,

especially his relatives living in rural parts where he thinks that many of them lived at a subsistence level, scraping a living from the land.

However, he said that he became tired of living what he perceived as a pampered and weak life, and could see no good future for himself if they had stayed there. In letters received by his parents and others from relatives already living in the U. S., he had heard stories about America being the land of opportunity, which served only to add to his frustrations about his own seemingly dull life in China, where not just Edwin but his parents appeared destined to have no opportunity to significantly better themselves.

Accordingly, he persuaded his parents to apply for immigration to America, although he said that they too were not happy with their lives and were not too hard to convince. Regarding the plan to emigrate to America, Edwin commented in our interview that “ good things are always a long time in coming.” When asked what were the main difficulties faced in actually leaving China and getting to the U. S., Edwin – rather surprisingly – gave little mention of the actual travel from China to America, but instead told me the story of the struggle to gain permission from the authorities to come to America. He did say that their travel from China to California was exciting yet frightening (none of them had been on an aeroplane before), as well as hugely expensive – most costs were met in the form of loans from relatives already here in the States.

Having formally applied for a visa to emigrate as a family, they were finally granted a visa interview after 10 years of waiting, but then failed twice due to being unable to meet the needed sponsorship requirements by relatives already in America.

Commenting on cultural differences he has observed, he recollected that in China people tend to live in the same house or apartment for most of their lives. He has noticed that communities here in America are not as closely knit as those in China, perhaps because people move tend to around more than in China. Seeing the great variety of accommodations (houses and apartment blocks) here in America, Edwin commented how different it was to the scene back in China where dwellings tended to be much more uniform and utilitarian in appearance.

He also recalled that his parents (and even more so his grandparents) were followers of the Bhuddist faith, although that was for a long time suppressed by the authorities during the Cultural Revolution. As a consequence, his family were forced to cease practicing Bhuddism. Edwin himself has no recollection of those religious ideals and leanings, although he freely admitted that in America there are so many religions and the freedom to follow any of them that if he so wished he could become involved once again. However, so far he has not felt the need, having never been actively involved with religion during his childhood.

After the disappointment of that second failed attempt to get a visa, they almost gave up. Edwin recalled that his mother angrily and tearfully threw all the documents into the trash following the second failure. He told me that he was so frightened that this would be the end of his dream that he burst into tears and begged them to try just once more, because he really wanted to go to America, convinced that getting there was the chance for not just himself but the whole family to enjoy a better and more prosperous life. Finally, at the third attempt in 2004, they were granted the long-awaited

immigrant visa. His whole family then moved to join his mother's relatives in the San Gabriel Valley in Southern California, where there is a large Chinese population. Edwin remembers particularly that his cousin (who was already living here) helped him a lot in the early times following their arrival.

Recalling those early days here in the U. S. Edwin commented that the biggest problem for the family was the language barrier. Because they spoke no English, his parents were obliged to get work in Chinese-run factories earning very low salaries. During that time Edwin - now a young man in his early twenties - simply stayed at home once more, playing on his computer, because he was unable to find a job having little knowledge of English.

Everything about the American culture and society was new and strange for him. The food, music, the movies and many of the other normal pleasures of life typically taken for granted by an average young man in the U. S. were all barred to him unless he could adapt to life here, and be able to integrate into American society, which was his goal.

He also said that in those early days and weeks following the family's arrival in California, he felt somewhat of an alien. Although his mother's relatives lived in a community where there were a lot of other Chinese, once he left the family home and ventured into town, he soon felt "lost." All the shop signs and the advertising around him were in English, and most of the conversations he overheard in the street were also English. He said that he couldn't even go to buy a coffee or a snack unless he sought out a Chinese-run business, which made him feel even more of an outsider.

He realized that he couldn't live like that indefinitely, his life was not much better than it had been back in China. Seeing everything going on around

him, Edwin knew almost immediately that life here can be so much richer than it was in China, but that he really had to push himself to integrate as soon as possible - to truly become a part of it.

So, in order to change his situation, Edwin decided his highest priority was to learn English. He would go to adult school during the daytime and meanwhile managed to get a job in a restaurant, working at night to try to pay his way. He told me that the workload in that restaurant was huge, the pay was at minimum wage level, and the manager kept most of the tips. However, he said that he knew that he had to put up with those arduous working conditions for a time, to help his family and that he must also study, so that he could seek a better job and work towards a better future. He therefore began to study at East Los Angeles College, not far from the family's new but temporary home in Monterey Park.

After a few months in work, he was able to buy his first car for \$1500 and found another job in a Chinese supermarket. Meanwhile in school, he had started to make friends and to be able to begin enjoying some entertainment in his free time. " Everything went better after the language problem became less serious," he said. Speaking of his job with Glidewell he said " I am no longer working for Chinese only, I am now working for a U. S. Company and I feel so proud of myself."

Going to school and work in the Los Angeles area, Edwin said he had already observed that there seems to be just as many women as men in those environments, whereas back in China, because traditionally sons are valued more highly than daughters, fewer women than men go to college, and in the workplace, the women tend to be mostly engaged in the more menial

jobs. He admitted that things were improving in that regard (i. e. less inequality of the sexes) in the years before they left China, but that he thinks there is still some way to go.

He also said that he has found there is greater freedom and openness in meeting the opposite sex here. Dating is much more a matter between the parties concerned, with a lot less “interference” from the family than was the case back in China. He has found that he is able to fraternise with girls when out with his friends – and not just girls of Chinese extraction or origin. This he has found is yet another refreshing aspect of the diverse and multicultural society prevailing here in America. Whereas single girls in China are in the main very unlikely to consider sex with a man who they are not intending to marry, Edwin admits he has found to his delight that in America the culture is dramatically different.

Now he has managed to buy his own house, goes to the movies and does sports with his foreign colleagues every week. Buying his own house and thus living apart from his parents is also a refreshing cultural change for Edwin. He told me that in China it is more or less normal for a son to stay with his parents, even after he gets married. He thought that is part of the tradition in China of much stronger family ties than seems to be the case here in the United States.

When asked what he saw as the advantages gained by relocating to the United States and if and how it has lived up to his expectations, Edwin’s answers can be summarized as follows:

Overall, he feels that his life has gained substance and that he feels enriched in many ways. He told me proudly that he pays bills, and taxes “just like a

proper American citizen” and takes good care of his family, too. He confessed that he would not have known how to do any of these things if he and his family had remained in China, nor would have been in a financial position to do so. He said that he now has absolutely no doubt that coming to live in America was the right choice for them.

He also said that he is now conscious of the material things he can buy as a result of earning a reasonable wage and is aware that he looks around when out shopping, having more interest in the goods on display because he knows that if he chooses to he can buy things for himself and his family - something that was not always possible back in China. Whereas in his former life the family was the center of everything, and he had little life outside of it, here in America he finds that he has more friends of his own age group and more opportunities to enjoy time with them, and a greater variety of ways to spend that leisure time. He has also become conscious of being part of what is very much a multicultural society, realizing that his view of life and the world was much narrower back in his home country, where virtually all of his contact was with other Chinese - mostly his immediate family and their neighbors.

When I asked him to sum up how he sees the overall impact of their immigration, he hesitated for a few thoughtful moments, then said that it has changed his life out of all recognition, and that he has gone from being someone who knew virtually nothing and needed to be supported by his family, to a strong independent person who is enjoying a life of cultural freedom in the land he always wanted to reach. Although in some ways he regrets that his formerly very close ties to his family have clearly loosened,



he also sees that his horizons have widened and genuinely feels that the future will be even better.

He sees more freedom in almost every aspect of life here in the United States - freedoms that he was unaware existed while he lived in China. And it was not all to do with the regime and the law in China. Much of the difference was in the culture, attitudes and acceptable behaviours being different between the two countries. Adapting to these greater freedoms has not been for the most part in any way unpleasant, but has taken conscious efforts to accept. Edwin admitted that sometimes he had struggled to avoid feeling uncomfortable when his friends behaved in ways that are perfectly normal in America but would have been frowned upon in China.

For Edwin, his American dream came true.