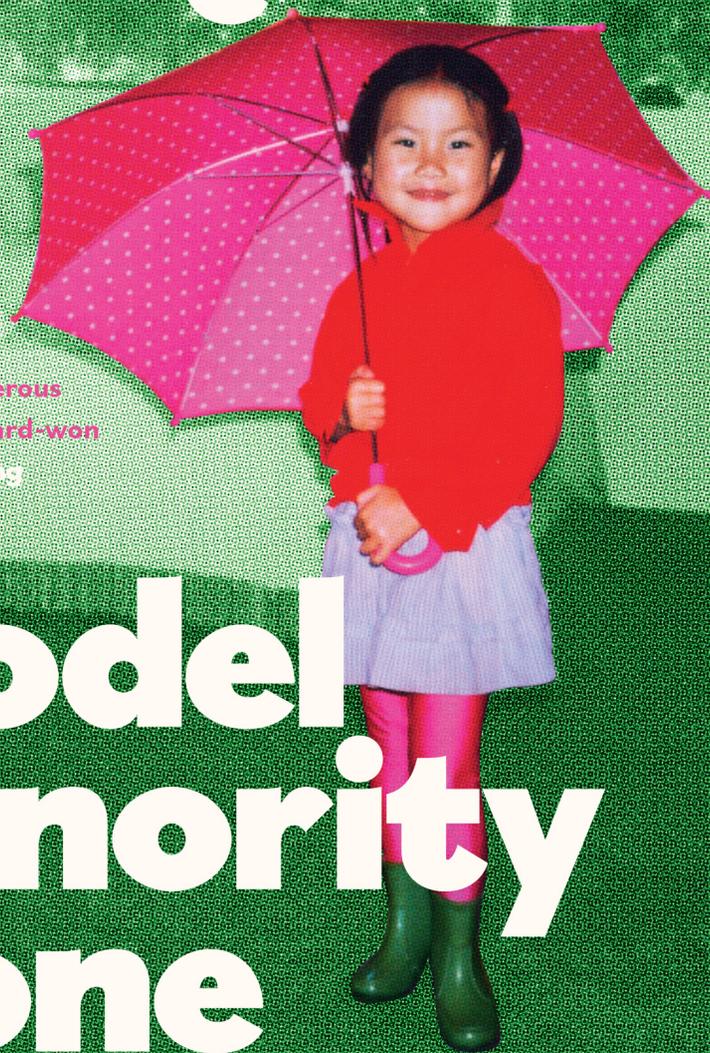


Qin Qin



*'Illuminating, generous
and full of gutsy hard-won
wisdom.'* Alice Pung

Model Minority Gone Rogue

*'A galvanising rebuttal to
stories and expectations
about who we should be.
Read it and feel yourself
unknot.'* Benjamin Law

**How an unfulfilled daughter of a
tiger mother went way off script**

**Model
Minority
Gone
Rogue**

Qin Qin

Author's Note

This memoir is about discovering my truth and moving toward self-love, and inevitably discusses the shadow side of this quest. Although I don't get super explicit, some readers may find the content distressing. If you're an abuse survivor or struggling with addiction, you are not alone. Please see the recommended support services at the back of the book.

I also write from an East Asian Chinese perspective. That's one lens through which I view the world. The model minority myth sees Asian Australians as a monolithic group, so it's important to acknowledge from the outset that there are so many nuances in our experiences. My story is one of many.

Onward, dear reader! Let's go for a book walk, shall we?

Going rogue: ‘. . . indicate[s] that someone is displaying some degree of independence or failing to follow an expected script.’

—Merriam-Webster.com

‘When a woman decides not to play by patriarchal rules anymore, she has no guidelines telling her how to act or how to feel. When she no longer wants to perpetuate archaic forms, life becomes exciting – and terrifying.’

—*The Heroine’s Journey*, Maureen Murdock

‘When did we forget that we are not the stories we tell ourselves?’

—*The Misfit’s Manifesto*, Lidia Yuknavitch

Notes and Numbers

Despite everything happening at home, I was well on my way to achieving the coveted Good Immigrant sticker.* Asian immigrant culture expresses itself through two primary vehicles (apart from Honda and Toyota): education for upward mobility and a strong work ethic. My parents started me on a music and maths study routine from a young age. I was to become the guāi-est, most dǒngshì and tīnghuà kid on the block!†

‘I thought when you were five, you had to play piano. Because the old woman was worried you would touch her piano and make it dirty,’ my mum said, referring to the rich woman who hired my mum as a cleaner. The lady wouldn’t let me into her house. Instead, I sat outside in the garden and watched my dad clip the hedges and mow her lawn. Hiring babysitters was like using the dishwasher: not an option for Chinese immigrants. My parents also took me to the university at night when they worked and I slept on the laboratory bench.

* Why are stickers reserved for young kids? Stickers are the best!

† Obedient, mature, and well-behaved: the holy trinity of Chinese girlhood.

‘I phoned the Yellow Pages and sent you to the piano teacher in Hughes, even though it was far away,’ my mum declared.

Lessons were expensive. Cleaning was one of three menial jobs my mum juggled to support my dad’s studies while raising me and going to English classes. But my mum was undeterred by the financial outlay, or the time it took to drive me to lessons. Her Mother Bear instincts must have kicked in. *No-one will ever treat my daughter like that again*, she vowed. Each time she saw me push down those ivory keys, she probably reclaimed some dignity at being a university lecturer turned house cleaner.

Piano wasn’t enough. I studied violin as well, although I gave up after a few years. At fifteen years old, I passed the Grade 8 classical piano exam. I didn’t play much after that since it wasn’t even my choice to learn the instrument. Later, I read in the entrepreneur Tony Hsieh’s book, *Delivering Happiness*, that he would pre-tape-record himself practising piano and then broadcast his renditions to his parents while he did his own thing. *Damn! If only I had known!* Tony’s resourcefulness and enterprising spirit led him to create a multi-billion-dollar online shoe company, Zappos. Unfortunately, he died in tragic circumstances, addicted to drugs and surrounded by hangers-on. That was the dark underbelly of the pressure to succeed. But I’ll get more into that later.

It took me years before I understood my music education wasn’t about sobbing at sheet music, cursing Mozart and waking up at 6 am to practise for hours each day. That was a serendipitous side effect. It was about dignity, social mobility and cultural belonging. Being versed in the Western classical music canon surely meant I would never again be excluded from a home for fear of tarnishing its precious book-lined shelves, thick carpets and grand piano – a place scrubbed meticulously clean by my mother in the first place.



Then there was the maths. Why the excessive focus on this learning area? For a start, it's probably got a lot to do with the types of Asians who came over here. I'm talking pre-2000s, before the children of the crazy rich Asians came with their designer handbags and pink Maseratis.

The Asians who immigrated in the 70s to 90s escaped brutal dictatorships that would kill you if you wore glasses (Cambodia), fled hardship and political persecution on overloaded boats in shark-infested waters to get to refugee camps (Vietnam), or ran from a regime that denied democratic freedoms (China), to name but a few choice examples.

There were no guarantees you'd make it and the stakes were high. It's why the North Koreans who travel outside their socialist 'utopia' always have minders around them to ensure they don't escape (one enterprising fellow at a Maths Olympiad abroad still managed).

So the newly arrived Asians in Australia at that time were a pretty self-selecting group: they wanted a better life and had an insane amount of endurance and will to survive. It was one of the biggest holes in the model minority myth – there was a selective nature to Asian immigration. Other non-white communities were then pitted against these supposedly upstanding Asians.

No wonder my parents pushed me to be good at maths. Being good at maths meant a chance at stability and a high-paying job, and never having to go hungry or drown or grow up starving, toiling in the fields.*

The only catch: I was the kid that got lost in storybooks and adored going to the library. I sucked at maths.

* If it was somehow English literature and oil painting that would have created the same outcomes, there would have been an explosion of toddlers who quoted Hemingway and Dickens and replicated van Gogh's paintings.

That posed only a minor setback. Asian parents have the belief that anything, especially maths, can be taught with sheer repetition and willpower alone.

At primary school when the bell rang to mark the end of the school day, I watched the (white) kids sprint away to the playground. I longed to join them in squandering away our leisure time on play. But my mother made a deal with the manager of the after-school care program. I could leverage his office to do maths exercises. For free!

So each day after school, I trudged slowly to the after-school care centre, away from the laughter and echoes of *Stuck in the Mud*, my favourite game. I don't remember the manager being at his desk much (although who knows, given the childhood amnesia). I sat alone at the small desk next to his bigger one to tackle my maths homework from a textbook my mother had especially brought over from China. There was another catch: my mum would mark my work and spot many errors. Even if she hid her disappointment, I could probably sense it. I still sucked at maths and that made her unhappy.

That's where Kumon came in.

If you've never heard of Kumon, congratulations on making it this far in your life without being mind-numbingly bored by repetitive maths worksheets. Kumon is the world's largest after-school learning program because it caters for all of the Asian children (diaspora or not) who weren't maths whizzes and are forced to be better at numbers.

In high school, I enrolled in Kumon and forced myself to study extra hard. On trips back to China in the summer, I lugged around stacks of Kumon maths exercises. I still failed maths tests though. To cope, I wrote poems. One was titled 'A hateful (subjective) essay on maths'. (Excerpt: 'Maths encompasses our lives, like a cockroach. How can Maths be so beautiful if it looks like an ugly professor with cornflakes stuck in his beard?')



The focus on academic accomplishments was probably to the detriment of other developmental milestones such as emotional maturity and essential life skills (the tasks that fall under the umbrella of ‘adulting’). It’s why there are so many reddit threads with subjects along the lines of, ‘Did any of you fail to meet expected childhood milestones or learn basic life skills?’ and ‘Why do so many Asian parents raise socially awkward children?’ in the subreddit *r/AsianParentStories*.

During my penultimate year of undergraduate studies, I was flown up to Sydney for a ‘pre-interview’ (the ultimate power move to impress someone like me) at a prestigious management consulting firm. ‘So, what do you do on the weekends?’ the partner asked.

‘Homework,’ I replied earnestly.

‘Kthxbye,’* he said, abruptly ending the short meeting. I didn’t know I needed to be more well-rounded so I could schmooze with clients (nor to structure my answer into three points – the hallmark of good consultant speak). Studying was my default. The irony was that the partner probably didn’t do anything except work on the weekends either.

‘Work is my hobby,’ confessed a friend, a partner at a rival consulting firm, over a decade later.

A.S. Neill, the founder of a school and philosophy that children learned best without coercion, wrote in his book *Summerhill*, ‘By compelling our students’ attention to subjects which hold no interest for them, we, in effect, condition them for jobs they will not enjoy.’ It was a seductive line. But first-generation Asian immigrants, parenting in a neoliberal society founded on white ideals, did not optimise for enjoyment. That was a privilege reserved for others.

* Internet speak for, ‘okay, thank you, goodbye’, used to dismiss a conversation.