

2024 HIGH SCHOOL ESSAY CONTEST – HONORABLE MENTION

Be Water, My Friend; But Also, Be Granite

By Winnie Chen

“Please remember what Bruce Lee said: ‘Be water, my friend!’”

At weekly flute lessons, my teacher often disapproved of my attempt to perform perfectly. Her philosophy was that to be a superb flautist, it’s essential to “flow” with elastic and ongoing motion. Yet the flute is also a highly responsive instrument that demands the opposite: control as intense as granite.

That paradoxical blend of water-like fluidity and granite-like solidity also applies to the creative realm. I’m both a classical and a jazz musician, and everything from cadenzas to improvisation requires a sophisticated mixture: of *fluid* spontaneity and interpretation combined with a *solid* base of knowledge and practice.

Playing a jazz riff, for example, demands solid knowledge of music theory so that I can invent magical sound creations that can develop in unexpected directions. Balancing those contradictory approaches of fluidity and solidity has been a challenge throughout my life.

In illustration, while growing up in Shanghai, I was a popular student who ate with different friend groups each lunchtime and always felt a relaxed sense of belonging: if my life then were a flute choir, it would be exceptionally harmonious.

However, when I moved to America just before high school, I slammed into a cultural granite wall. Indeed, while adjusting to my new school, I was so ashamed about my lack of belonging that I hid in the restroom for the entire lunch period, anguished day after day.

Therefore, my life felt like a staccato flute composition with lengthy and bewildering pauses. I was struggling to process no longer being the girl whom everyone knew and liked, but instead, a “Who is *that*?” Over time, though, I made many friends and attained a waterfall-like social life, but I still am processing differences between adolescence in America and in China.

Experiencing an intercontinental move had benefits, though. In the process of adjusting to a radically novel culture, I discovered my delight in making the most of any opportunity that flowed my way: eagerly navigating the challenging rapids of my new circumstances, rather than resisting them.

That’s why I began participating in parliamentary debate, where the topic is provided topic only on the day of tournaments. My impromptu speech skills transformed rapidly, and I’m proud that in just three years, I’ve morphed to someone who masters torrents of words: clearly articulating arguments, effectively refuting opponents’ points, and robustly affirming stances.

Lee's advice about fluidity continues to serve me well in all aspects of life, yet he developed his thoughts further. He also claimed that water embodied the "very essence of *gung fu*" because no matter how fiercely he hit water, he couldn't damage it. I'm determined to embody that contradictory position: fluid and open, yet concurrently so solid in my values that I cannot be harmed.

Consequently, my unique personal philosophy—after adjusting to life in a new country and thriving—is a twist on his guidance: "Be water, my friend; *but also, be granite!*"