Brown Common Application Essay

As immigrants, there was very little that my parents could do for me. While they worked, I babbled Cantonese with my grandparents, picked up English from my preschool, and studied in daycare. I found it difficult to talk about what I learned in school, much less ask for help.

But math was a blessedly language-neutral subject. One summer, they excitedly brought back a set of competitive math textbooks—in Chinese. That was a mistake. Days later, my dad sat at the kitchen table rubbing his temples as I gleefully waved my ruler around. He lamented about my inability to apply the angle-bisector theorem; I pointed out that I had sucessfully 'measured' the answer. My numbers are distinctly Chinese, from the way I connect the tips of my 4s to the way I curve my 6s. When I need to memorize phone numbers, I first encode it in a fluid string of Cantonese. My classmates would often hear my murmur the nine-nine chant under my breath as I do multuplication. "... 8-8 72, 9-9 81!"

Middle school hit. My friends and I treked to another school to join their math meetings. We were a small, giggly group. Once, when we asked why the quadratic formula worked, the high-school volunteer replied unabashedly, "Hey, I only learned this a week ago, you know." These were the days of loving math.

I entered high school, and things shifted. My upperclassmen easily wielded terms like "discriminant," "determinant," and "difference." Eager to catch up to them, I practiced with Khan Academy. I put in my 100 hours. But when I looked back at my friends, it seemed that a canyon had grown between us. They could no longer understand my delight in solving problems, and I only saw them when they were desparate to finish their homework. My middle-school friends turned into math-hating fiends. As a Mathcounts lecturer, I saw this disease spread to my students too. Many of them stared at the paper, pencils set to the side, eyes drooped. I became obsessed with a very quiet question: how do I stop this epidemic of math-hate.

My theories, experiments, and research jumbled together into non-answers. Maybe our materials had to be more accessible. I bought a large whiteboard, set up a tripod, and began recording lectures in my living room. (It turned into a 36-video series, complete with notes.) After reading Malcolm Gladwell's Outliers in the dead of the night, I looked at my ceiling and wondered, inanely, if my math skills should be attributed to Cantonese, which purportedly helped me hold more numbers in my head? Or should I look back at my rice-paddy-farming ancestors, who prized difficult, autonomous work? As it turns out, this was answering the wrong question: I learned to love math long before I was ever good at it.

I challenged the idea that that math was a competitive sport, and that you had to dedicate hours of study and practice to enjoy it. I am here, not just to love math, but to share it. Every time I'm in the math club, there is excitement brewing in my chest and numbers hiding under my tongue. My best friend laughed as we furiously scribble numbers on the whiteboard, racing against the clock. We design competition problems centered around silly cow puns for the annual competition organized by Moo Alpha Theta. And as for Mathcounts—well, many of my math-fearing students graduated, but I get to see them return as my colleagues.