“A Duty to Family, Heritage, and Country,” by Ying Ying Yu

I am a good child, obedient. I grew up in China, a country where education is the center of every child's life and a grade less than 85 percent is considered a failure. Grades mean more to us than a mother's smile, more than the murmur of a wish lingering on birthday candles. I had homework during lunch, math and language classes two times a day. There were punishments for not paying attention. I was beaten with a ruler. I learned to do anything to get a good grade.

I believe in duty, but that belief comes with sacrifice. The achievements I make come with a cost.

I remember first grade, the red scarf flapping in the wind, wanting more than anything to be the first one to wear it, that, the symbol of responsibility, excellence and loyalty. The first thing that flashed to mind when I put it on was how glad my family would be, how proud the motherland would be of the child it had borne and how my accomplishments would look on a college application.

All my pride, love, self-esteem — they merge into duty. There have been times I wanted to throw away everything, but duty and obligation were always there to haunt me and to keep me strong. I would think: My parents and grandparents brought me up, my country gave me shelter, my teachers spent so much time building my foundations just to have me throw it all away? No, I can't do that! I must repay all that they have done. "I must," "I should," "I have to," all those little phrases govern my life and the lives of many of my classmates. We struggle on because duty reminds us that the awaiting success is not just for us. It's for our families, our heritage and our country.

I used to want to be a gardener. I liked working outdoors and the gritty feel of dirt was much more tangible than a bunch of flimsy words strung together. But I can never grow up to be a gardener. Everything I have done so far points to the direction of becoming a lawyer. That's a job my family wholeheartedly supports.

There is no other choice for someone who's been brought up by such a strict system, someone who has ambition. Here in America, there is almost a pressure to follow your dreams. I don't want any more dreams — dreams are illusions. And it's too late for me to work toward another future, to let the foundations I have built go to ruins.

I believe in the power of duty to impel. Only duty will offer me something true, something worthy of my effort and the support of my family and country. Duty can bring me to an achievement that is greater than I am.