

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, May 7, 2019.

Why the mum of Stanford admissions scandal student Yusi Zhao is mother of the year in my books

The mother of Yusi Zhao was willing to pay any price – US\$6.5 million in this case – to see her daughter get an education of value. Let's be real: it's a mother's nature to go to great lengths for her children, and universities need extra funding to thrive.



Tom Plate



Illustration: Craig Stephens

All mothers are special, of course, as we are about to be reminded with the coming of Mother's Day this Sunday. Not everyone gets to have their own annual day (not surprisingly, there's none for newspaper opinion writers, for example) and, heaven knows, mothers do deserve this annual ritualistic swelling of our guilt glands.

This year, with my own mother having passed away long ago, I began to think about admirable, living mothers – indeed, to propose whom one might plausibly celebrate as International Mother of the Year (imagining such an honorific).

Obvious nominees abound, but mine will surprise you and while I doubt many will agree, you should respect my view; I've given it some thought.

And no, it's not Meghan Markle – the former American actress who is now, thanks to Prince Harry, the Duchess of Sussex – and who has just given birth to her first child. Another great choice: Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand's prime minister, who last year became but the second national leader in modern times to give birth while in office.

But no, my nominee for Mother of the Year is very controversial: it's former Stanford sophomore Yusi Zhao's mother in China.

Consider that this amazing mum was willing to pay any price to see her daughter at Stanford, the US university of her choice.

In fact, Yusi's mum forked out US\$6.5 million to an American con man, now dealing with charges of racketeering on behalf of mum-clients wanting to realise their daughters' higher-education dreams by all possible means.

But – and I surmise your mounting anger – I cannot bring myself to condemn Mum Zhao or almost any Tiger Money-Mum.

Maternal love is neither proportional nor even entirely rational. It is a constant fact of life on this planet, like hurricanes or gravity. I admit there were times in my youth when I wished my own loving mother had as much money as Mrs. Zhao.

I am also loathe to condemn Stanford or almost any school favoured with large donations from grateful rich Chinese.

And not just from China, as a matter of fact: crazy rich mothers – both Asian and non-Asian – have been writing out big cheques for as long as I can remember. God love them. It's not an Asian thing, it's a mothering thing.

To be sure, institutions of higher education do have to protect their admissions process. They would not merit their phenomenal reputation were admission simply for sale to the highest bidder.

But, at the same time, let's be real: not everyone on the Stanford football team was granted admission because they were absolute shoo-ins for a Rhodes Scholarship.

Mums know higher education is a treasure, and America's universities are among the best that can be had.

In fact, our best undergraduate institutions convert young people who enter as freshman thinking they know everything into young citizens upon graduation who can actually think through complicated things. Such a magical transformation alone is priceless.

These days, alas, trans-Pacific tension is poisoning what had been a stellar staple in the fraught China-US relationship.

Chinese nationals make up the largest group of international students in the US, roughly 30 per cent. Here in California, at the University of California, Los Angeles, where I once taught, many Chinese took my classes.

At my current university, Loyola Marymount University, smaller and more personal, the Chinese students entrusted to my care add powerful value to the education of all my students (and sometimes their professor).

But now, snatching defeat from the jaws of our soft-power victory, Washington is saying stop – “Chinese spying on campus! So let’s be suspicious about all student visas”. After all, they are foreigners, right?

On the contrary, our students from China – and from Indonesia, the Middle East, India, Korea, and so on – make our educational life in America less provincial, more cosmopolitan.

Government officials on both sides of the Pacific Ocean do future generations an unforgivable disservice by flashing “national security” and “spying” red lights to eviscerate university internationalism that has the potential to help youth generations understand each other better and elevate the perspective of our future leaders beyond provincial nationalism.

Mrs. Zhao, in her defence, claimed she had been told that her largesse would help provide more scholarships for students in need and help fund university programmes.

Since universities do need money to survive, much less thrive, we must be careful not to condemn those who have wealth simply because it is so very unevenly spread out.

After all, America, with its many great universities, is the most capitalist of countries.

Sure, on the surface, chequebook parenting can seem vulgar and inarguably unjust, but all good mothers want the best for their children, just as all serious universities want the best for their students.

While we need to push our university administrators to eyeball those gaps in their admissions process that can be exploited by vipers, there is little value in criminalising that relationship.

Surely it’s better for mum’s big cheque to go to a serious university, for a new microbiology lab or a boatload of scholarships for the not-so-wealthy, than to a certifiably crooked “charity” or crackpot evangelist.

So, based on what I know as of this writing, I’m sticking with Mrs. Zhao as my candidate for mother of the year.

As for her daughter, Yusi, having been forced to leave Stanford for all the negative publicity and questions about her application's veracity, this promising young woman will surely better understand her mum – and life itself – when someday she herself becomes a mother. It's a very special and often difficult job.

Tom Plate is the distinguished scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at LMU (Loyola Marymount University) and the author of seven books about Asia