

Max Khamphavong

ENG 211C

Argumentative Essay

## **How Cultural Silence Creates the “Stable Friend”**

### **Introduction**

My name is Max, and I am 23 years old. Have you ever wondered what makes a person unique in their own way? Underneath the surface each person has their form of fears and trauma that shapes the way you act and make decisions. Mine was being the “stable friend.” I proudly was known for being mature, dependable, and natural to my peers. But looking into my inner self, I realized I was never happy, because I realized it was not a choice for me, but something I was forced to be raised upon. How does a childhood built on silence, fear, pressure, and cultural expectations really shape your adult life?

This paper will explore the question: How does being viewed as the “stable friend” impact the identity of adults who were raised in emotionally withdrawn, collectivist, and first-second generation households. This will be from the standpoint of my firsthand experiences and people who are just like me.

My argument is being portrayed as this person who is stable may look and performative on the outside, has a darker side behind the scenes. The goal is for you, the reader, to understand the complexities of the day to day lives of myself and people who are just like me. While blending a mix of both Western and Eastern cultures we need to understand who really pays the price and what does it mean to be stable.

### **Background**

My parents were around my age when they almost died while fleeing Laos in the 1970s. Like many others fleeing for better opportunity, quality of life, and survival there was just no place for vulnerability in the picture. This carries into their parenting style, and remember no one is perfect, it is their first time living too. Expressing needs and showing emotions were seen as ungrateful and a sign of weakness. As the youngest out of four I learned that each of my siblings had their own form of trauma. Mine was having to grow up quickly to aging parents, smoothing tensions, being passive, and doing everything that is

beneficial to family but not myself. Overtime this correlated this cemented me as the “stable friend” in my early adult friendships and relationships.

From the book *Minor Feelings* (2020) by Cathy Park Hong, she explains that the way I feel is not just a unique problem, but a problem that occurs across the board for many first-generation households. “Asian Americans are conditioned not to take up space but to be silent” (p.112). This style of eastern parenting clashing with West and American values creates the perfect storm. We become the perfect leaders and the perfect performers, but constantly battle self-doubt, unrealistic expectations, and overexerting ourselves are the benefit of others.

What can often times have been seen as strength is actually just hiding emotional suppression. Shirely Geok-Lin (1991) states that first and second-generation households in Asian American literature walk a fine line between their inherited values and self-expression. This leads to what she calls “performative indemnity.” It is not that I want to be emotionless, I just was not able to fully grasp it to the level of my peers.

## **Lines of Argument**

### **Cultural Silence Teaches Emotional Suppression**

First, we need to understand this style of parenting has a generational effect and that there are different standards between Western and Eastern ideologies i.e., individualism and Collectivism. These Eastern households often impact the child negatively due to the home being emotionally reserved and emotionally suppressed.

In bell hooks, *All About Love* (2000), She explains that “Love is an action and never simply a feeling” (pg. 5). In many first and second-generation households this means love is shown through the sacrifices our parents made. The stability the built upon financial stability and discipline. However, love is not often shown on the emotional side through affirmation or an emotional bond with the child and student. This causes the child to seek validation from other sources like work, school, and other non-family relationships.

### **The “Stable Friend” is a Role, Not an Identity.**

Being a stable friend often times is associated with someone’s social identity, but the issue is that it is not who they really are. It is a role that we play because we are raised in survival mode and that allows us to believe that its safer and more effective than being vulnerable. In *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013), by Kevin Kwan he appeals to western audiences by showing a romcom like story, but underneath is a story about a woman who knows she is

forever in a grey zone with her identity. She tries to fit into her rich boyfriend's family but almost fails until she realizes accepting who she is and allowing herself to stop performing is what leads her to inner peace. This performance through out the book and movie deeply correlate to emotional labor of being the 'stable friend.'

In another novel and movie, the Joy Luck Club (1989) one of the characters of the book say "I believed my parents silence to be strength (p. 120). That silence also has a subsequent effect on distance. This distance may then be seen as emotional maturity while the reality is that it is just a form of avoidance caused by cultural trauma.

### **Emotional Labor Leads to Burnout**

The society we live in creates a social construct in which people are expected to "keep it together." Showing any form of vulnerability is seen as being weak and unstable. Those who are stable friends are constantly absorbing everyone else's pain but not releasing your own pain. This is a two sided streak too, have you ever considered your own baggage someone in your life is helping you carry? In Daring Greatly (2012), by Brené Brown, she argues that allowing yourself to be vulnerable is key to creating long term true relationships. Never expressing your own self causes an emotional imbalance, and this imbalance leads to long term negative mind and physical health problems.

Bell Hooks states that love must be mutual to be healthy. If it is just one sided, then that is not love but labor. Over time the labor gets overlooked and the stable friend feels as if they are not being seen. This often leads to the common saying "I'm fine" when the reality is they are not. Ask your friend who you view as the most stable, put together, and a constant if they are actually happy and why.

### **The Fractured Identity**

Due to this imbalance, it causes an identity crisis early on, especially for first and second generation people. Hong (2020) says that this is called being in the "grey zone" of identity, never fully seen, but constantly judged. That being said we define ourselves often based on how useful or how we can be together through performances. This is a heavy weight that constantly lingers into adulthood creating a more turbulent time than peers who had a monocultural background.

Lin (1991) explains that children of immigrants are stuck in a cycle of a form of role play between cultural expectations versus how they feel. Being a stable friend means this cycle leads to self-disconnection, because you do not know what you need and only understand what is expected of you. Many of my peers go through this similar experience later regretting it, and wishing they put themselves first. It is not necessarily people pleasing as

one might assuming, but decisions that are felt through generations and the “long term” stability aspects.

### **Personal Experience**

My world has drastically changed from 18 to 23. Albeit being young for my age, I have gone through my fair share of hardships that shape the way I see the world. I thought I was happy because I was the de facto leader of my college friend's group and was in a relationship that I got into when I was nineteen. The truth is I was not happy; it was short term gratification because I was being honest to myself as I took on everyone's baggage and ignoring mine. My childhood was built on survival and never being good enough for my parent's expectations. It took me finally setting boundaries and a breakup as a wakeup call to get to where I am today. Reflecting on my family dynamic, I do not think my family is broken, but in a way my parents and my three other siblings all had survival instincts that they had to overcome. Going to university, I put up this image of stability which catered to people who were not so gradually I lured people in, but I being aware that I was having my own identity crisis because I am stuck in the grey zone. Being too “White” to be Asian but being Asian to be “white.” I am currently learning to heal based off reflections and actually putting myself first. For the first time I can actually say I love myself and mean it. The question is: Do you love yourself?

### **Counterargument & Refutation**

Being the “stable friend” is also be seen as a compliment. Being stable in our society equals reliability, respect, trust, and is often awarded upon. It is important to understand that when these roles begin from childhood where emotions are silenced, then it is not really strength. That is just a form of survival that is masked and seen as strength. This form of survival is a deep sense of trauma and unprocessed pain.

See the issue is not stability, but it is how that stability is being used. When people are raised and crated to mixed backgrounds it comes with a constant pull to fit into a molding. They are expected to hold it in for everyone else's sake and carry the responsibility to the next generation. These carried generational traumas are deep rooted in misunderstanding, miscommunication, and often times fear of self that is projected.

Some may argue that not all first and second-generation households are emotionally repressed. And it is there are many loving and open households that are healthy. The true

the fact remains that there is a strong cultural pattern between emotional restraint and maturity. This pattern has many psychological consequences that go unnoticed or fade into the background as talking about this is something frowned upon. Especially in Asian cultures. Have you heard of the saying “Tiger Parents?”

## **Conclusion**

Being the “stable friend” is blessing and a curse. It lets you be more aware of your surroundings and who you are as you get older. In my case it took some traumatic events for me to finally see the full picture and let those walls come down. Childhood is shaped by survival, and fears of all past generations trickling down. This paper argues that being that being the stable friend especially among those raised in first and second-generation households comes with a foundation that is emotionally resistant, culturally conditioned, and indemnity crisis which leads to pain, burnout, and lack of genuine connections in their young adult phases of adulthood. The next step in this phase of what we call life is not rejecting stability. Having genuine stability includes vulnerability, self-respect, and love. This means the freedom of expression to say “I am not okay, or I need help” while being seen and heard. Creating a space for even the stable ones to decompress and process as well.

From the academic conversation standpoint about emotional labor, mental health, and self-identity this opens Pandoras Box to the inner world of those raised in these households. Questions such as: How can we teach emotional awareness while respecting diverse cultural backgrounds? What are the steps needed to understand language barriers? How do we build fulfilling friendships based on genuine connections? This opens discussions for people like me to find relatability and common ground with others that have similar backgrounds.

Thank you for reading my paper, it is not amazing. I am horrible at staying in tune with my feelings so writing this has been a struggle. I hope this paper helped you as the reader understand the hidden battles people go through in life.

## APA Citations

Brown, B. (2012). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. Gotham Books. <https://brenebrown.com/book/daring-greatly>

Chua, A. (2011). *Battle hymn of the tiger mother*. Penguin Press. <https://penguinrandomhouse.com/books/307746/battle-hymn-of-the-tiger-mother-by-amy-chua>

hooks, b. (2000). *All about love: New visions*. William Morrow. <https://harpercollins.com/products/all-about-love-bell-hooks>

Hong, C. P. (2020). *Minor feelings: An Asian American reckoning*. One World. [https://books.google.com/books/about/Minor\\_Feelings.html?id=fPQmEAAAQBAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/Minor_Feelings.html?id=fPQmEAAAQBAJ)

Kwan, K. (2013). *Crazy rich Asians*. Doubleday. <https://penguinrandomhouse.com/books/227000/crazy-rich-asians-by-kevin-kwan>

Lim, S. G. (1991). Immigration and identity in Asian American literature. *American Literary History*, 3(1), 59–77. <https://jstor.org/stable/489991>

Tan, A. (1989). *The Joy Luck Club*. G.P. Putnam's Sons. <https://penguinrandomhouse.com/books/176674/the-joy-luck-club-by-amy-tan/>