

From poverty to Princeton PhD: The accidental academic

A Princeton PhD, via the ivy-covered campus of Trinity College in the University of Toronto, is not the outcome that I, or any of my family, would have ever imagined when we arrived in Toronto in 1979 as low-skilled immigrants. Higher education was the furthest thing from my mind when I was sixteen years old, sleeping in Toronto's West Detention Centre with blood plastered in my hair, awaiting bail at juvenile court in Old City Hall. Yet in the spring of 2008, when Princeton University conferred upon me a doctorate in economics, I was able to overcome odds that should have left me as another grim statistic on immigration and poverty. My journey from poverty to a Princeton PhD is an unusual tale that wound its way through a working-class neighbourhood in east Toronto, and the University of Toronto, in a most remarkable story.

My parents were peasants from a rural village in southern China. Though geographically close to Guangzhou, the village is isolated enough from the city that it has its own dialect of Cantonese – to urbanites we were country folks who spoke village-twang Chinese. Chickens and pigs roamed our ancestral village, while people walked around barefoot.

Both parents farmed and tended the rice fields. In their spare time, my mother laboured as a seamstress and my father as a carpenter. As was typical of peasant families, neither of them studied beyond primary school. I was a loquacious, energetic child, the youngest of three.

My family moved to Toronto when I was four. We were allowed to enter by grace of Canada's immigration laws that permitted an uncle – who had found success running a bakery in Toronto's Spadina Chinatown in the 1970s – to sponsor us to come over. We arrived with little more than the clothes on our back and an electric rice cooker, which was a status symbol for Chinese peasants in the 1970s.

I was tasked with carrying the rice cooker through the airport when we arrived in Canada – my family's hands were occupied with suitcases. So with my tiny arms wrapped around the cooker – unable to see my own feet – I strolled through the airport towards a descending escalator where relatives awaited at the bottom. But the escalator might as well have been made of banana peels: I slipped the instant that I set foot upon the steps and tumbled all the way to the bottom like a cheap Slinky. My fall resulted in cuts and bruises all over my body, as well as a phobia of escalators through age twelve. Welcome to Canada!

(I don't recall how the rice cooker fared in the descent, but I do remember eating many meals of rice made with that tiny pot, so I must have done a decent job protecting it.)

The next twenty years in Canada were daunting. My family was poor and we lacked social/human capital to help us navigate our new country. As a child, I had few, if any, toys, and many days I went to school hungry. Birthdays were lonely; holidays were non-existent. I was a "latch-key kid" before the term was popularised – like many of the children in my area, I wore house keys around my neck tied to a red string. By age nine I was routinely making my own meals. Parents were mostly absent from my

upbringing, separated by their work schedules and a growing cultural gap between us. Yet I was highly successful at school, blessed with an uncanny gift for academics.

I grew up in Leslieville before it became trendy. The neighbourhood was (back then) a working class immigrant enclave. Greektown was to the north; Chinatown to the west; Little India to the east; while the south was industrial land. Like most children growing up in Toronto, I had a passion for hockey, though mine was picked up later than most. I learned to skate at age thirteen, shortly after I was first introduced to hockey by an erstwhile Sunday School teacher.

The teenage years were formidable. I was an animated youth who lacked adult influence/supervision and had no positive outlets to direct my energy. I funnelled some of my vibrancy to a local church, but organised religion was not a good fit for me and I drifted away from the church by the time I was fifteen. In the 1990s, youth gangs were prevalent in my area and I found refuge hanging out with local high-risk youths. Those years saw my life tumble down the proverbial escalator, which culminated in me being arrested twice as a young offender and expelled from high school.

My first incarceration, at age sixteen, was for a shoplifting incident at a downtown mall that morphed into a bloody ordeal. I was confronted by security for theft and was chased when I panicked and ran. Three security guards eventually tackled me and beat me with their heavy duty flashlights in the middle of Bloor Street, though not before I managed to put up a wild battle, which resulted in me being charged with assault causing bodily harm. I later spent that night on a cold steel bench in prison with blood caked on my hair. The brief time in jail – a badge of honour amongst delinquents – only served to ensconce me more into the criminal culture.

My second arrest resulted from a fight in which I sent my opponent to the hospital with a footprint on his face. This resulted in my expulsion from high school. I was reminded of the incident when I tried to re-enrol, at which time the vice principal in charge of my file, who was familiar with that, and other matters, told me bluntly, “The day you get back inside this school is the day I quit.” He then threw my transcripts on the floor, leaving me to pick them up off the ground, humiliated. Ironically, I did manage to get back into that school, a few years later, in my final year of high school, because the VP was on sick leave in 1994-95.

As a young adult, I supplemented my diet with rotten vegetables that were discarded by produce wholesalers near my parents’ house, as well as with chicken bones collected from a fried chicken shop adjacent to my sister’s workplace. The items were fine to consume. The key was to remove the spoiled parts of the vegetables, and the chicken was actually fresh cut. I worked throughout high school and assumed responsibility of the household bills and even the mortgage at one point.

In the final year of high school, I finally began using my intrinsic talents, and achieved considerable success. Amongst other accomplishments, I ran in the Ontario cross-country championship. Running was something I picked up after unsuccessfully chasing a criminal – whom I believed wanted to do harm to my family – the summer before I started my final year of high school. Running kept me out of trouble and was an effective conduit for my energy. Because of my strong performance in OAC (pre-university

year), I gained admission to the University of Toronto and had chosen Trinity on the advice of a high school track coach.

I entered the University of Toronto in 1995, at age twenty, under the commerce program and with an intention to minor in English. I wore my hair in a pony tail back then, which stood me out from the Trinity crowd (amongst other reasons). My transition to university life would not be easy. I was rendered homeless within the first few weeks of starting post-secondary life when the bank foreclosed my parents' house. Eventually I found a tiny apartment a block away from the University of Toronto Bookstore and eked out a meagre existence.

I worked two jobs in first year. On Thursday and Sunday nights I worked the graveyard shift at a supermarket stocking the shelves. Friday and Saturday nights, as well as Sunday afternoons, were spent waiting on tables at the Organ Grinder, a now defunct musical pizza eatery that middle-class Torontonians of a certain age may recall as a place where they had their childhood birthday parties. Luckily, I was surrounded by food at my jobs, as it was otherwise scarce and dear.

As a non-resident member of Trinity I was entitled to ten complementary meals on campus (using meal tickets). Given my circumstances, I took advantage of my allotted freebies. The last meal ticket of 1995 was magical. The tallywhacker at Strachan Hall stopped checking my identification when I had reached my final meal ticket; he must have grown accustomed to seeing me there often enough to have assumed I was a College resident. Nevertheless, the tallywhacker did eventually catch on, but not before that ticket generated dozens of unmerited free meals. But alas, when that ticket was laid to rest my diet henceforth consisted of bean curd, canned mackerel and rice. I took multivitamins to ward off malnutrition – the indignity of poverty!

Although my academic performance in first year was not stellar, in subsequent years I excelled after gaining more confidence in my new surroundings. Along the way, I switched to a double specialist degree in economics and mathematics, in spite of math being the bane of my life in high school.

My academics in the final year were solid enough that I was accepted into Princeton University's PhD programme for economics on a full scholarship straight from undergraduate. Because of that scholarship, I was able to enjoy, for the first time, a little financial breathing room. Nevertheless, the years in New Jersey would not be easy in spite of the idyllic settings. The transition was especially difficult because it was cloaked by prejudice – everyone assumed and treated me like I was a high-achieving Asian from a "tiger family" when, in fact, my background was the opposite.

My focus when I arrived at Princeton was not academics, however. Rather, I wanted to partake in the university experience that was largely absent from my University of Toronto days on account of my hardships. However, the metamorphosis at Princeton was even more onerous than at Trinity. I was at the Saint George (downtown) campus while studying in Toronto, so I could excuse myself from the ivory tower by simply walking a few minutes, where I was able to meld into the anonymity of Canada's largest city. Princeton, however, was the opposite. A small town of thirty thousand, Princeton Township is a rich, isolated suburb disengaged from the University that bears its name. An even wider chasm exists

between graduate students and undergraduates; even wider was the gap between the privileged Ivy League crowd and me.

At Princeton I rubbed shoulders with luminaries; among them was Ben Bernanke (who later went on to become the chair of the US Federal Reserve), who was the chair of the economics department when I entered in 1999. In the summer of 2002, Bernanke left Princeton to work at the Federal Reserve and I was in his office the day he was clearing his belongings. Because of this fortuitous timing, Bernanke gave me his fish tank. I used the tank to raise food fish (catfish, trout, etc.) that I bought at the local supermarket, which gained me notoriety at school as the “guy who eats his own fish”.

I chose Paul Krugman as my advisor in 2002. It was an odd choice as he is well known as someone who is terribly busy, and not particularly active in research given his commitments as a public intellectual. At times it was an awkward relationship given his schedule and celebrity status.

Finishing up my dissertation was the furthest thing from my mind in 2003. Many nights around then were spent enjoying New York City’s infamous night life, atoning for lost party nights from earlier years. I was on the verge of quitting the PhD program and left in 2004 for Montreal – with my thesis incomplete – tired of the tedious graduate student life.

In the summer of 2004, my life took another turn when I went to Germany for an internship – my first time living overseas. My time in Cologne rejuvenated my spirits and filled me with determination to go back to Princeton in the fall of 2004 to finish my dissertation and leave the memory of grad school behind. I moved to Singapore in December 2005 to start a career as a management consultant with only the public oral defence (a rubber stamp towards the degree) standing between myself and the sheepskin – or so I thought! My plan was to return in early 2006 to defend the thesis and collect the diploma. However, I was thrown a curveball when the tertiary advisor on my PhD committee asked me to make significant changes to the thesis after I had already moved to Asia. The ensuing years were frustrating, being so close yet so far from conquering the ultimate academic pinnacle.

I moved to New York City in mid-2007 with a desire to wrap up my PhD. However, by this time the tertiary committee member had left Princeton, so I needed to find a replacement. I was able to get Hyun Song Shin, a preeminent financial economics scholar, on board as the final person on the committee. My committee was a who’s who of economics and public policy: Paul Krugman, Alan Blinder, Hyun Song Shin and Gene Grossman. Paul Krugman is a New York Times columnist and would go on to win the Nobel Prize in economics in 2008. Alan Blinder served as the vice-chair of the Federal Reserve in 1994-95.

Although I had surely forgotten much of my thesis topic (monetary policy in small open economies) by the time I defended it – almost three years after crafting it – I was greeted with a “Congratulations, Dr Chan” by Krugman and company after they had left the presentation room and “debated” amongst themselves the merit of my defence.

On June 3, 2008, I attended commencement with a smile from ear to ear and “walked” to pick up my diploma. The “ABD (all but dissertation)” monkey that had weighed me down for several years was finally lifted when I shook the hand of the dean of the graduate school at the ceremony.

The diploma now hangs in my apartment in Manhattan, along with my degree from the University of Toronto (Hon BSc), as a testament to an unusual life that shattered stereotypes about class, education and immigration.

I am often asked what turned my life around from a juvenile delinquent to a Princeton PhD. Invariably, I cite running as the catalyst. A key lesson that long-distance running has taught me is that it is not about winning the blue ribbon, but rather finishing the race. In turn, the pursuit of the PhD has given me a profound insight into life: When you think you have crossed the finish line, that is when you realize that the race has just begun. □

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