



A Better Life? How to Wash Your Brain

Writer and producer Boen Wang and his Chinese-born mom disagree on almost every political issue. Each suspects that the other has been “brainwashed”, because how else could they have such extreme views? In this personal piece, Boen unpacks the epistemology and history of the term brainwashing, and goes on an intimate exploration of his mom’s childhood and experiences in the U.S. to figure out what has actually shaped her political beliefs—and his own.

Virginia Lora: Across the political, cultural, and generational divisions in the US, there’s one thing that all sides seem to agree on: the *other* side—whoever that is— has been brainwashed.

Teaser Clip: So we try to persuade you with what we were thinking about is objective ... However, you think we are brainwashed. So we end up thinking both of us being brainwashed. We need to probably wash again, so we have a normal brain.

Virginia: From Feet in 2 Worlds this is *A Better Life?*. I’m Virginia Lora. Almost every headline in the news these days is a glaring reminder of the nation’s deep political divisions—gun control, voting rights, abortion, police violence, climate change, economic policy, immigration—these are all issues where there seems to be little consensus.

Through a new multimedia series, *Immigrants in a Divided Country*, Feet in 2 Worlds is exploring how specific issues and events--as well as the national mood--are changing how immigrants view themselves, their communities, the nation, and the world.

On this special edition of *A Better Life?* we bring you one of these stories.

When we call someone brainwashed, what exactly are we saying?? What does the term actually mean? And how accurate—or helpful—is it?

Writer and audio producer Boen Wang went looking for answers. He talked to his mom—an immigrant from Mainland China—about her views on the term and her political beliefs.

The conversation prompted Boen to reflect on his own political transformation. And on whether it's possible for two people on opposite sides of nearly every divide to move beyond their mutual accusations of brainwashing. And find something resembling common ground.

Here's Boen.

Boen: My mom thinks I'm brainwashed by *The New York Times*. I think she's brainwashed by the Chinese Communist Party.

Mom: What you read, what you hear from medium, it's, uh... this place. It's from this place. And once you hear many times, then you believe what they said is right. Like New York Times, and like CNN, you know, whatever they say—

Boen: I don't really watch CNN, though.

Mom: I know. But people have—

Boen: I do read *The New York Times*.

Mom: Yeah, *New York Times* is fake news. That's for sure. Yeah.

Boen: We disagree on pretty much everything when it comes to politics, both in China and the US. I think Taiwan should be an independent nation. And she thinks it's a province of China.

Mom: I do feel that Taiwan ... I will say China is part of China and I stand on that point.

Boen: I supported the Hong Kong protests. And she thinks they were orchestrated by outsiders.

Mom: And what happened in Hong Kong, you will find out it's not just local people are not happy with the situation. There are a lot of things behind the scenes.

Boen: I voted one way in the 2016 election, and she voted the other way...

Mom: He's not good person, and Hillary is even worse. So between these two people I pick up the "better worse." Let me put it that way.

Boen: You get the point. I'm sure you're familiar with this story, parents and their kids on opposite sides of the political spectrum. Like a lot of us, my mom and I avoid topics that'll just cause an argument and leave both of us upset. If there's one thing we *can* agree on, it's that the other person has been brainwashed.

Mom: So we try to persuade you with what we were thinking about is objective... However, you think we are brainwashed. So we end up thinking

both of us being brainwashed. We need to probably wash again, so we have a normal brain.

Boen: To figure out who's really brainwashed, I decided to finally sit down and just ask my mom about her life, and how her political beliefs evolved. Maybe I can figure out if there's anything we actually agree on—or at least try to make sense of what we believe and why. Maybe it's possible, as my mom puts it, to go back to having a normal brain. If that even exists. And come to think of it, maybe it'd help to understand where “brainwashing” even comes from.

Clip: (Edward Hunter radio interview) Interviewer: I would like to have you give me very simply, if it is possible, the techniques—

Boen: This is an undated interview from a radio station in Cleveland. The Bay of Pigs is mentioned, so it's probably sometime in the mid-60s. And this...

Clip: (Edward Hunter radio interview)

Edward Hunter: Of brainwashing?

Interviewer: —of what we call brainwashing.

Hunter: Brainwashing consists of two processes.

Boen: Is Edward Hunter.

Clip: (Edward Hunter radio interview) Hunter: One process is softening up. The other process is indoctrination. Softening up is what mainly took place in the prisoner of war camps in Korea. And softening up is what is taking place in the United States today.

Boen: Hunter wrote for publications like the New York Post and the Newark Ledger. He was a journalist—and also a CIA agent. The story goes that after the Communist Party takes over China in 1949, Hunter is there interviewing refugees trying to flee the country. And he learns about this term he's never heard before:

Clip: (Edward Hunter radio interview) Hunter: “Xinao.” Xinao, Chinese for “wash brain.”

Boen: Xinao. “Xi” as in to clean, to wash, to bathe, and “nao” as in mind, head, brain. And according to Hunter, this process is a mass conspiracy...

Ryan Mitchell: Of remolding people into communist slaves, basically.

Boen: That's Ryan Mitchell, a law professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He studied the etymology of “brainwash,” and discovered that the term didn't originate in 1949. It's actually from decades earlier.

Mitchell: It's introduced during this brief phase in the 1890s where the traditional political system is still going very strong.

Boen: The last empire, the Qing Dynasty, was slowly dying. As the empire buckled under the weight of political and cultural inertia, Chinese intellectuals and reformers looked outward to the West and Japan. They argued that the only way to save China was to embrace modern, Western politics and philosophy and science. So these intellectuals came up with a new term: xinao, brainwash. And to them, brainwashing was actually a good thing.

Mitchell: The idea of ... starting afresh and cleaning out from one's own mind... all of the kind of outmoded ways of thinking or obsolete cultural beliefs and practices that don't accord with a modern scientific outlook.

Boen: Creating a new, modern China began at the level of the individual, by personally washing away all of your tired old ways of thinking, and replacing them with new Western ideas of rationality and enlightenment. Brainwashing was an act of self-improvement.

And as China underwent dramatic transformations—the collapse of thousands of years of imperial rule, civil war, world war—the term's definition pretty much stayed the same.

But of course, everything changed...with communism.

Clip: (Edward Hunter radio interview) Hunter: The tactics that I saw there ... I now see being used against the American public here in our country.

Boen: Edward Hunter claims to hear this term, xinao, and starting in 1950 he writes all these articles and books about it—how the evil Chinese communists are brainwashing people, turning them into mindless zombies who carry out the Party's bidding. And according to Hunter, Americans are in danger of becoming brainwashed as well.

It might sound ridiculous, but remember, this is the Cold War. The idea took root. You can see this in movies like *The Manchurian Candidate*, released in 1962, where an American POW is turned into a secret assassin and ordered to kill a presidential candidate.

Clip: (The Manchurian Candidate) I have conditioned them, or brainwashed them, which I understand is the new American term...

Boen: By the way, that movie is super racist, there're actors in yellowface who do all sorts of gross Asian stereotypes. But when I Googled "Manchurian Candidate racist" nothing came up, I felt like a crazy person!

This is how we ended up with the definition we use today. An obscure, 19th century Chinese term with positive connotations, was translated into English by an American journalist-slash-spy, and turned into something sinister. And fake, by the way.

There's no evidence of any actual "brainwashing" in China, not the way Hunter described it.

The kicker is that as Americans started hyperventilating about the specter of brainwashing, no one in China really used the term, or had even heard of it.

Boen: Can you tell me when you first heard the term xinao ?

Mom: I think I didn't really know about this term.

Boen: Soooo, if my mom wasn't *brainwashed*, if she hadn't even *heard* of this term that isn't even real—then what was she?

My mom was born in 1963 in Inner Mongolia, an autonomous region in China that borders Mongolia the country. When I mention this, people are sometimes like whoa, is your mom Mongolian? Did she grow up in a yurt and ride horses and milk goats?

And I'm like no, she's ethnically Chinese, and grew up in a typical Chinese city with a typical Chinese education.

Although the term "typical" is a bit fraught—like Tibet and Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia has essentially been colonized by ethnic Chinese, with Mongols now making up only 18% of the population.

In school, my mom took the usual classes in math and history, as well as a class in politics that's mandatory for every student in China. She listened to the politics teacher describe a global, ideological conflict between two mortal enemies.

Mom: We are the Third World, and America, they are, impurity ...?

Boen: Imperial? Imperialist?

Mom: Yeah. And they, American people live a horrible life. They are living ... in the fire, and hell, those kinds of things, and poor ...

Boen: I can't help but think of American children sitting in their classrooms at the same time, learning about the suffering of poor, starving Chinese people.

Mom: And also we learned history about how Chinese people have been treated ... like ... opium war...

Boen: 1839 to 42: Britain defeats China and takes Hong Kong.

Mom:...and burn down the Summer Palace...

Boen: 1860: French and British troops invade Beijing, with the British looting and then burning down the Emperor's residence.

Mom: Zujie, you know?

Boen: Zujie?

Mom: Zujie means, a place — like in Shanghai, there are a lot of zujie, and you are a foreigner, but you say, oh, this place is mine...

Boen: Foreign concessions, territories that China ceded to the West.

Mom: So we have kind of a sense that we have been really humiliated by the West ... So Chinese people feel that we want to regain our glory. So we had to work really hard, so we can have an equal footing on the world stage.

Boen: What struck me talking to my mom was how personal this all was. China's enemies were her enemies, and China's future was her responsibility.

Boen: How did you feel when you were learning about all of this?

Mom: I feel that I'm part of this whole process. So I want to do my best, I want to gain glory for my country.

Boen: This reminds me of the original, positive definition of brainwashing, of renewing your mind with modern, Western ideas for the betterment of China. But what my mom learned from her politics class was that instead of emulating the West, she should hate it. She didn't look forward to a better future, but instead felt anger at the past, and all the things Europe and America did to humiliate her homeland.

Boen: So when you were growing up, what did you think of Americans?

Mom: I think America is a bad guy. [laughs]

Boen: I grew up in a very white, very bougie suburb of Philadelphia. My family did the classic immigrant move of buying the cheapest house in the richest neighborhood we could afford, the sort of place with three Whole Foods within a five mile radius of my home, and parents who drove their Porsche SUVs to drop their kids off at my elementary school.

At the front of the classroom was an American flag I pledged allegiance to every day. This being Philly, we learned all about the Revolutionary War, and went on field trips to Valley Forge and Independence Hall. But despite growing up in the birthplace of America, surrounded by monuments to the city's rich history, the only thing I actually remember from history class was this song that went like...[singing along]:

Clip: *(Sacagawea song) Sacagawea, Indian girl. Young, smart and brave!*

Boen: The lyrics are about how Sacagawea assisted Lewis and Clark on their expedition—although I don't remember learning about how at age 12, she was captured and forced into marriage with a white fur trader. And that when she joined the expedition at about 16, she was pregnant with her first child.

Some other things I don't remember learning about: the Trail of Tears.

Or the Tulsa Massacre.

Or the Chinese Exclusion Act.

All I remember is the chorus to that song, which you have to admit is extremely catchy. Sure, there were glancing references to slavery and Jim Crow in history class, but the overriding message was: all this stuff happened a long, long time ago, and is now safely confined to kid's songs and picture books. So don't worry about it.

And most importantly, don't feel bad about it.

My mom had history pounded into her. She learned that the country she lived in today was the direct result of the stories from the past that she learned about. So in that sense, my mom had a better understanding of the way history works—and why it matters—than I did.

Boen: Like me, though, she doesn't remember learning about the atrocities committed by her own country. But during her own childhood, she got to witness an atrocity herself.

This is a song called "The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is Just Good." It also has an extremely catchy chorus, that goes [singing along]:

*Clip: (The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is Just Good. song) The Cultural Revolution is just good!
The Cultural Revolution is just good!
The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is just good!
It's just good!
It's just good!
It's just good!*

Boen: My mom was three years old when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966. Throughout her childhood, she sat in politics class stewing in anger against China's enemies, with the portraits of five men at the front of the classroom: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin—and Mao.

Here he is announcing the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

Clip: [Archival tape of Mao Zedong announcing the founding of the PRC in Beijing, 1949]

Mom: You really love him. Yeah. You, you love him, right?

Boen: It might sound a bit unbelievable—how can a child love a political figure, or even understand what politics is? But for the generation who grew up during the Cultural Revolution, Mao was inescapable. My mom memorized quotations from Mao, she saw posters pasted everywhere with his smiling, benevolent face, she sang songs about all the deeds the Great Helmsman did for the Chinese people.

In fact, it was more than love. It was devotion.

Mom: You always say long, long live Chairman Mao and you have such, you think he is like a God, he never, he would never die.

Boen: You felt like he was God?

Mom: He is God, yeah. I feel he's God. Yes.

Boen: And it wasn't just my mom. During the Cultural Revolution, Maoist extremists and military officials imprisoned, publicly shamed, and killed millions of people who were accused of being, "counter-revolutionaries." Some of these accusations were completely arbitrary, like if you wore "fancy clothes" or had an "outlandish haircut." But some people were targeted for being too rich, or too educated, or even for not being ethnically Chinese. In Inner Mongolia, the Party and People's Liberation Army killed thousands of Mongols for supposedly being unloyal to China.

My mom didn't witness these mass killings, but she saw plenty of "struggle sessions," one of the defining features of the Cultural Revolution. They were usually held in big open spaces like a college campus or stadium, and pretty much everyone in the neighborhood would come and watch, adults and kids alike.

Then, the supposed counter-revolutionaries were paraded onto the stage, a name placard hanging around their necks. The crowd would scream at them and pelt them with rocks, and someone on stage would beat them.

When my mom was 6, she witnessed a struggle session held in the dining hall of the factory her parents worked at.

Mom: And we were kids, we were in the back of the dining hall, and standing on the dining table

Boen: And looking over the heads of all the adults, she could see people being brought on stage.

Mom: We were, ahhhhh! I would just feel like, oh it's kind of like a party. And one person gets on, then one person gets on, there's name tag in front and people are shouting down-down-down. You know, down-down-down such and such, down-down-down such and such, down-down-down such and such.

Boen: Suddenly, in the middle of this big party...

Mom: I saw my neighbor, the kid jump off the table, she just run away. And I saw, oh, it's her dad taken to the stage, people down-down-down.

Mom: So that was kind of a shocking moment. So I still remember, that was like 50 years later I would still remember, I just ... Oh, what horrible, what

horrible moment for this child ... If I were that child and it was my father and I just, I will bury that deep in my heart and never forget.

Boen: To this day, my mom still thinks highly of Mao, and how he unified China and ended the century of humiliation she learned about in school. But she also understands why people who were directly victimized by his policies—people like that little girl and her dad—would hate Mao for the suffering he caused them.

She empathizes with that little girl. So why does she still love him?

Boen: Shouldn't seeing her personal experience make you think differently?

Mom: I do feel that Mao has made a lot of mistakes. He made people suffering. He made people ... the life horrible, miserable, difficult. But you know, I feel ... History will judge a person, right? So I still feel, um, he should judge favorably, in terms of what he has done as a whole to Chinese people and as a nation.

Boen: If you google “Cultural Revolution,” you’ll see images that confirm the stereotype of Chinese communist brainwashing: Mao waving to adoring crowds, all of them identically dressed and holding up the Little Red Book.

But it’s not that simple. There’s what you’re taught, and what you see with your own eyes. There’s the love my mom had for a man her teachers told her was next to god. And then, there’s the horror my mom felt at witnessing what god could inflict upon a girl just a few years older than her.

In the end, she chose love.

Clip: *(PBS NewsHour) A New York judge rejected a bid by Occupy Wall Street protesters to bring their tents and sleeping bags back to a city park...*

Boen: I never loved America, or any of its leaders. My mom was immersed in politics basically since birth, but for me it was all an abstraction, something I learned from school and read about in *The New York Times*.

I picked up the habit in high school. My sophomore year history teacher assigned us to read *The Times* every night, and then quizzed us on the headlines the next day. It was 2011, an eventful year.

Clip: *(PBS NewsHour) Central Cairo dissolved into open street warfare today....*

Boen: The Arab Spring broke out in the Middle East, the US bombed Libya, protesters occupied Wall Street and cities across the country. And the president carefully considering and managing all these issues acknowledged that, yes, America had made its share of mistakes in the past—like the genocide of indigenous people and the enslavement of Black people—but that its founding ideals were pure, and good, and still worth fighting for.

Clip: (Barack Obama speech): Thank you so much, thank you. We the people, in order to form a more perfect union ...

Boen: In retrospect, it was a more sophisticated version of what I learned in elementary school: don't worry about it. And don't feel bad about it. Or, maybe feel a *little* bit bad, but rest assured that all these historical wrongs have been corrected.

Clip: (Barack Obama speech): What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who are willing to do their part, to narrow that gap, between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time...

Boen: Or, in the words of the following Democratic presidential nominee,

Clip: (Hillary Clinton speech) America is great, because America is good...

Boen: I was a senior in college in 2016, and I was excited. It was the first presidential election I could vote in, where the first woman president would succeed the first Black president. Although I did vote for Bernie in the primary, but I guess I had to choose the "better worse," as my mom put it.

Boen: *The New York Times* website had that needle thing, do you remember that? The speedometer looking thing where for months the needle pointed to the left, saying Hillary Clinton had like a 80% chance of winning the election.

So on November 8th, 2016, I couldn't wait to,

Clip: (Hillary Clinton speech) Pokemon Go to the polls!

Boen: And after voting, I sat at my computer and watched that needle thing swing alllllllll the way to the right.

Clip: (Donald Trump's presidential inauguration) Please raise your right hand and repeat after me: I, Donald John Trump do solemnly swear....

Boen: A few months later, I watched the inauguration in 19th century American lit class.

There's what you're taught, and what you see with your own eyes. There's America the imperfect union, struggling and striving and ultimately succeeding in making itself more perfect.

And then there's border patrol agents ripping infants from their mothers' arms. There's white supremacists marching on Charlottesville. And there's the man who proudly called Mexicans rapists and criminals, presiding over all of it.

Clip: (Donald Trump's presidential inauguration) Congratulations, Mr. President...

Boen: Did this all just start in 2016? Or was I not paying attention—to the fact that Obama deported more people than any previous president? And carried out secret drone assassinations in countries we weren't at war with? And that despite his symbolic victory, the police continued to murder Black people with impunity?

I wish I'd talked to my mom about all of this, about her views on America before and after she came here, instead of calling her brainwashed and arguing with her about Taiwan, Hong Kong, the election. I would've realized that while our paths couldn't be more different, the conclusions we each came to were equally surprising.

Boen: My mom moved to Beijing for college at the beginning of the 80s, and stayed there for the duration of the decade. The 80s are to China what the 60s were to the West: an explosion of political and cultural activity, a flowering of youthful energy, a sense that the world was for the taking, and could be reshaped into whatever we wanted it to be.

Mom: Disco become very popular. So they kind of dance disco.

Boen: Wait, mom, you danced to disco?

Mom: Oh, everyone. Young people, yeah.

Boen: Were there like clubs that you would, like disco clubs?

Mom: No no no, people just danced, you know?

Boen: The West and America weren't China's mortal enemies anymore—they were the land of exciting new foreign books and music and movies and TV. They were *cool*.

Mom: There was movie, it's from America, I think it's called, *A Man From Atlantic Ocean*.

Boen: *Man From Atlantis*?

Mom: Yeah, Atlantic Ocean, I think.

Clip: (*Man From Atlantis*) *The Man from Atlantis, Mark Harris is an alien in the world we know. His own world is miles under the surface of the ocean...*

Boen: I looked it up, *Man From Atlantis* is a sci-fi show that aired for a single season on NBC in the late 70s, and was then promptly canceled. It's basically Aquaman: the last citizen of Atlantis washes up on a beach and has incredible swimming and underwater breathing abilities.

And due to a bizarre stroke of luck or whatever you wanna call it, it was the first American TV show to be broadcast in China, in 1979. And all apologies to my mom, but it looks absolutely terrible.

Between disco dancing and TV watching, my mom still had college classes to attend, including her mandatory politics class. It was the same content as before—according to her teachers, the Party was the savior of the Chinese people, America was an evil capitalist empire that oppressed China—but to my mom in her early 20s, the message just wasn't as convincing.

Mom: Because you have witnessed the changes of the world ... And you are older too, then you can think individually, then you can think independently. So you have your own opinions.

Boen: In China, you were rich if you owned four objects: a sewing machine, a watch, a bicycle, and a radio. But her classmates described a country where there weren't just sewing machines, but department stores filled with dozens of brands of every type of clothing. There weren't just analog watches, but digital ones that could light up and act as stopwatches and alarms. There weren't just bicycles, but streets crowded with cars. And there weren't just radios, but color TVs—in every home.

Mom: And that's why so many people, now they just feel, "Oh, China actually is not that strong, and China is poor, and all of our enemies, we thought they live in Hell and they live in the fire, live in poverty, actually they live a much better life."

Boen: After my parents got married, they moved into what my mom describes as a one-room shack on the outskirts of Beijing. They bundled up and burned coal to stay warm during the winter, cooked on a shared kerosene grill, and showered only once a week at their workplace, if that.

My mom worked at a government agency, and my dad was an engineer at a car factory, where apparently he'd just sit in the break room and smoke cigarettes all day. When they imagined their futures, they saw an endless procession of the same exact day—again, and again, and again.

But off to the side was an escape route. A dream.

Mom: You feel that, "oh, America is such a good place..." You have such, admire about this place and these people, you just want to go there ... It's your dream ... Just like a lot of immigrants, they just do everything they could to get to the place they want to.

Boen: In the spring of 1989, my parents got accepted to a PhD program—at the University of Oklahoma. They rented an apartment with running water, bought their own car, and ate as much as they wanted at Old Country Buffet. Their dream had come true.

But there was what she heard about America from her classmates—the America of excitement and abundance she'd built up in her imagination from the other side of the Pacific—and what she saw with her own eyes.

Mom: You might have a honeymoon for a month or so, however you still have to get into reality. The reality is that ... you need to survive ... Because you are

poor. In China I didn't feel that I'm poor, even though my money is, my salary is very low, I didn't feel I'm poor.

Boen: It's like the old joke: everyone is equal under communism because everyone is equally poor. Despite their relative material abundance, my mom felt poor for the first time in America.

Mom: This country is very cruel in the way that ... you don't have protection, you don't have safety nest. If you don't have work, then you lose everything, because everything tied to your work. If you don't have work, then you lose your medical benefits. Then if you don't have your paycheck, then you are not able to pay a mortgage. If you are not able to pay your mortgage, then you have no place to live! That's it.

Boen: I love the way my mom puts it: America is a cruel country. She didn't learn this from reading about spectacular acts of racist cruelty in the New York Times. She just went to the DMV.

Mom: We went to the vehicle registration, and the lady who was there couldn't spell daddy's name right.

Boen: My dad's name is Zhili: Z-H-I-L-I. But even with my name, Boen, B as in boy-O-E-N, I get the same thing. One time at a Starbucks in the South Side of Pittsburgh, the barista spelled my name as, I swear to god, "Beller."

Clip: *(Old Yeller's theme song) Old Yeller...Old Yeller...*

Mom: Daddy asked her to correct it.

Boen: And the DMV lady said sure, just gimme five bucks.

My mom raised a ruckus, telling the DMV lady that it was her fault for misspelling my dad's name. In the end they didn't have to pay the five dollars. My mom would stick up for herself and fight whatever indignities came her way, but still, it was impossible to avoid.

Mom: They don't have patience talk to you ... They don't really have to say that in front of your face, however, their expression. You can tell, you can, you can feel it. You can tell.

Boen: These thousand paper cuts of casual racism added up. I saw it with my own eyes, people talking to my parents as if they were children just because of the way they looked and talked.

So after I witnessed the 2016 election, and after the years of discrimination my mom faced, we both came to the same crossroads. We could hold onto the America of abundance and ideals, or see America for what it really was, a nation of precarity and racism and cruelty. And ultimately, we made the same choice.

But we still don't see eye-to-eye on China. When my mom came to a similar crossroads about her own homeland, she chose to believe in the Party. She still thinks Mao is a good leader, and she admires Xi Jinping today.

Ten years ago, I'd've told you that my mom is just brainwashed by the Communist Party, and that she continues to live under its spell, even on the opposite side of the Earth. Today, I realize that there's no such thing as brainwashing, that our beliefs aren't implanted in us by sinister forces in an instant.

We just live our lives.

Boen: So were there ever moments where you felt like, oh, maybe I've been brainwashed?

Mom: I never feel I'm brainwashed.

Boen: Yeah.

Mom: I think it's just kind of uh, illusion, delusion, then reflection, realization...that kind of a process.

Boen: By calling her brainwashed, I told my mom I didn't care that she witnessed the insanity of the Cultural Revolution. That she danced to disco in Beijing. That she felt the abject terror of being an immigrant in America. I essentially told her that her beliefs weren't hers, weren't real, and weren't the result of her own experiences.

By calling her brainwashed, I told my mom that I was better than her, which I'm ashamed to admit today.

Boen: Did you feel like I was brainwashed, or that I am brainwashed?

Mom: I wouldn't say you are brainwashed, but I think your mind has been shaped by what you heard, what you have observed ... because you only heard one-sided story. That's what you heard in here. That's different from what you hear in China or other parts of world.

Boen: So as for me, I refuse to use the term "brainwash." And I've given up on arguing about politics with my mom, or anyone. It's a pointless term, and a pointless exercise. Instead of asking myself, "How can I convince my mom she's wrong," I've been asking, "What can I learn from her?" I recommend it.

And then after we finished the interview, my mom showed me a bunch of clothes she bought for me.

Virginia: This story was written and produced for *A Better Life?* by Boen Wang. It was mixed and mastered by our technical director Jocelyn Gonzales. Quincy Surasmith is our managing editor. Alejandro Salazar Dyer is our director of marketing, and Isabela Rocha is our intern. The executive producer of *Feet in 2 Worlds* is John Rudolph. Our theme music and original score are by Fareed Sajan.

Additional music by Evgeny Bardyuzha and Yehezkel Raz. You can find information about our music in our episode notes.

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Immigrants in a Divided Country is a multimedia online magazine series by Feet in 2 Worlds that explores the current political landscape from the perspective of immigrants. You can find links to additional stories in the series in our episode notes.

To listen to earlier episodes of A Better Life?, visit abetterlifepodcast.com. That's [a betterlifepodcast.com](http://abetterlifepodcast.com).

I'm Virginia Lora, Editorial Fellow with Feet in 2 Worlds. Thank you for listening.

John Rudolph:

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CITATION

Lora, Virginia, host. "How to Wash Your Brain." *A Better Life?*, Feet in 2 Worlds. March 22, 2023. www.abetterlifepodcast.com.

