What does it mean to be Asian American?

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Being Asian American to me means that you're constantly straddling two worlds. Being Asian American means that you'll forever be caught in the middle, never being completely part of either world.

I was born in a medium-sized city in northeastern China and grew up under the wing of my maternal grandmother, who raised me while my parents were out working. She and I were inseparable. According to her, I was kind of a lazy kid, liked to eat, and a fanatic reader. I remember once my mom was able to bribe me into going to the dentist (I hated the dentist; still do) by promising me she'd buy me some books after we were done.

When I was seven years old, my father, who had been living abroad for several years, brought my mom and me to live in a suburb of Philadelphia with him. At that age, I really didn't know much about America, but I knew that it was an exciting place that all my friends in the same daycare wanted to go to.

When we first got to America, I was bullied a lot. I didn't speak English and was constantly taken advantage of by other students in school. I don't remember this now, but my grandmother says I called her a lot in the first two years, crying, saying I missed China.

And then after two years, I stopped calling my grandmother. I also moved to a new school district at that time (third grade). Because most kids at my previous school couldn't pronounce my first name, I switched my name to a popular American name. At that point, I was reading a lot of teen books. I no longer needed help with my English, so I was finally allowed to leave ESL (English as a Second Language) class. From that point on, I began to feel pretty American.

In hindsight, I was given two choices: sink or swim. I could either try to fit myself into the American lifestyle and culture, or cling tightly to my heritage and be excluded from my new life in the States. I chose the former because it was the easier of the two.

My parents are not very festive people. Growing up, we didn't celebrate any holidays. We didn't really celebrate the Chinese ones or the American ones. There was the occasional moon cake for Mid-Autumn festival but that was it. When my friends would go visit their extended families for Thanksgiving or Christmas, I had a weeklong vacation consisting of sitting, staring at my computer screen. I had no relatives to visit, no family to share important holidays growing up with. This was always something I resented my parents for, but my parents worked hard to get to where we are today, and I knew there was no point in trying to get them excited about holidays that didn't mean anything to them.

I went to Chinese school for many years through elementary, middle and high school. It's held once a week (Saturday or Sunday) and it's overseas Chinese' parents attempt to get their children to retain some of their ancestral language. Because I was born in China, I felt like I was ahead of some of the other students, most of whom were born in America, but the biggest problem with these schools is that the kids who attend don't speak Chinese to each other. I spent every Sunday going to Chinese school and speaking English to all my classmates, listening to our teacher talk about some ancient poems that had no interest or relevance to me. I remember crying to my parents, begging them to take me out of Chinese school. They resisted at first and eventually withdrew me after my repeated protests.

I spent my high school years trying to distinguish myself from other Asian Americans. I was a self-claimed "banana" (yellow on the outside, white on the inside) and I was proud of it.

Additionally, I was always more inclined towards literature and the arts, and I was almost always the only Asian in any theater group, which what I spent the majority of my high school years doing. I was proud that I wasn't like the other Asians who had their minds focused on going pre-med or becoming engineers or working for Wall Street. I was an artist and there was no way I'd let myself be bunched in the same category as what I considered to be "mindless" Asians.

The year before I entered college, I visited China as a high school graduation present. I remembered going to a bookstore (one of my favorite places) and not being able to read a single book. I couldn't even read most of the book titles. It was at that moment that I felt a stab of regret and guilt; I remember a time when I gobbled down Chinese books like I gobbled down baozi, enough for my kindergarten teacher to call me a "bookworm," a kid never seen without her books. I was still a bookworm; I'd just switched out Chinese language books with English books. I couldn't shake this feeling that I was missing something important, and I started studying Chinese on my own. But once college started, I got busy and stopped studying it altogether.

Fast toward to college graduation. At that point, I was pretty set on trying to make it professionally as an actress. I'd gotten an agent in New York, and I was on my way. But what shocked me was how often I was called in for roles that required me to speak Mandarin or roles that called for Asians. On casting sites, the casting breakdowns are usually pretty straightforward about what they want - white or minority (and then they specify what kind of minority they want).

All these years, I tried my best to fit into this society. I'm just as American as anyone else; I speak perfectly in unaccented English and I can write long, sophisticated essays in English. I can perform Shakespearean monologues as well as the next auditionee. They say America is for the land of the free. If it is, then why is that my ethnicity is the lead determinant in whether I can get a job in the field I want to work in? I look at my Asian American friends in medicine, business, any other field - and I feel robbed. My parents worked just as hard to get me a good education here in the States, and yet, there are almost no role models that look like me in the profession I want to pursue. (There are starting to be more and more Asians in film and TV, but this is still a new development and most lead roles are not given to Asians). This was the start of my identity crisis.

This was when I started plotting my return to China. In my mind, I created all these fantasies of being a "majority" in China. No one will ask me where I'm "really" from, because I look like everyone else. I will no longer be a minority, chasing acting roles that I have no chance of landing due to my race. In my mind, I had totally switched my identity. The past fifteen years of being in America could totally be erased; I would be Chinese again and I would fit into the society as easily as I did when I was seven years old.

How wrong I was. Now that I'm back in China, almost everyday I encounter something that reminds me of how American I am. Chinese people don't use driers to dry their clothes; I have to hang them on the balcony on lines. Chinese people don't tip, but there is almost no customer service. If this was America, the Yelp scores of every restaurant here would be 1 due to the brisk attitude and often rudeness of many waiters. Want to go to the bathroom when you're out in public? Well, you better bring your own toilet paper or you're out of luck.

Then there's the language. Having been in America for so many years, I'd grown up completely unexposed to Chinese slang and modern words. Here I am, convinced that I'm fluent in Chinese, and unable to explain to my uncle how to connect to the Internet because I don't know how to say words like "modem," "server," and "web browser" because those words didn't exist when I left China. And then there's the occasional stutter where I can't find the proper word I want to use, because I'm translating the English sentence in my head into Chinese. I remember a time when I didn't know any language other than Chinese. It is an incredibly conflicting emotion.

In America, I didn't feel like it was an incredibly privileged place. I didn't feel that having a drier to dry my clothes with was so special. I didn't feel that having a microwave was a luxury (a lot of poorer Chinese still don't have microwaves). I didn't feel that being able to cross the street without being worried about being run over was a big deal. I didn't think that picking a major in college based on my passion for it and not its financial value was something that was totally outrageous. Now that I'm in Asia, I feel more American than I ever felt before. And yet, in America, there's always something that reminds me that I'm not completely American (at least not the stereotypical American).

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