

During the 1,988<sup>th</sup> year of the Common Era, my mother and father embarked on “the road to opportunity” aboard a magical flying machine. One would like to imagine that they were clad in white space suits, teleporting into the future on a high-tech apparatus, but reality paints quite a contrasting picture: my parents were actually traveling aboard a Boeing 757 airplane from Shanghai, China to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Arriving with only fifty dollars each in their pockets and two ragged suitcases, my parents had no roadmap of any sort for guidance, relying only on their instinct, reviving traditional recipes and scrimping change as they once did as kids during the Cultural Revolution. For the first few months, they lived together in a cramped walk-in closet of an apartment. Yet surprisingly, my parents were also quite content; my dad marveled at the \$1 gallons of milk, and my mom relished yard sales where she could purchase “European high-fashion” for a quarter.

Four years later, I came into the picture as a first-generation American-born Chinese, or ABC as I have dubbed myself. Though at school I was quickly mastering English, chowing down on pizza and hot dogs, and celebrating Halloween, at home, I was constantly listening to Beijing Opera, playing badminton and ping pong, eating tofu and stir-fries, or attending the local Great Wall Chinese School to improve my Mandarin and learn ancient Chinese poetry and history. Not surprisingly, Chinese was my first language, and I became fluent in Mandarin as well as the dialect of Shanghai. I was even deemed the “language prophet” by my peers, whom, if lucky, were bestowed with a Chinese nick-name handwritten by myself.

Yet too quickly, I developed into the archetypal naïve, ungrateful, and recalcitrant pre-teen. As a Chinese American, I could not help but feel like the odd-ball in my elementary school, which seemed to be dominated by perfect little Caucasian, fair-skinned, and blue-eyed

boys and girls. I began to despise my parents' thick accents and to snap at them whenever they fumbled to pronounce the tongue-rolling "r" sound, jumbling words like "work" and "walk." I yearned for the flowing, golden blonde locks of my Barbie dolls and instead scowled constantly at my thick, pin-straight ebon hair. As I struggled to conform to the habits of my American peers, I began to resent my Chinese heritage more fiercely than ever.

Thus, when I traveled to China the summer before 7<sup>th</sup> grade with my dad, though he enthusiastically endorsed the idea of visiting Beijing, the historical capital, I dreaded the trip—how could I possibly survive spending two weeks surrounded by the very culture from which I so desperately tried to detach myself? In the sweltering August humidity, I could pay little attention to our tour guide as I busily swatted away mosquitoes and gazed at the pretty souvenir boutiques, and to be honest, I probably enjoyed giggling with my cousin during the train ride more than visiting the historical attractions. However, in my dad's viewpoint, the tour was quite successful; we had visited the Forbidden City, Tian Tan, and the Summer Palace, and we even trekked to the top of the Great Wall. I, however, came home with little recollection of our trip to Beijing, besides a few postcards, key chains, and photos as reminder.

Now over five years later as a high school junior, I am proud to say that I have matured into a more grateful daughter since my rough pre-teen stage. Though as a child, my exotic culture seemed to be a barrier that prevented me to conform to my peers, I have realized that there is no need for that conformity at all, and over the years, I have gained a strong appreciation for my diverse background. Today, I am grateful for both China and its rich heritage and customs. I revisit my Beijing trip with a renewed sense of pride in my heritage, and I am thankful for my father's meticulous documentation of our entire trip. Retracing our footsteps through pictures, videos, maps, and tourist brochures, I am in awe of the grandeur of the Great Wall of China, the

regality of Tian'anmen Square and the Forbidden City, the extravagance of the Summer Palace, and the ethereality of Tian Tan. On the other hand, I am also grateful for the United States—the land of opportunity that did not fail us, helping my parents embody the American dream as they purchased their first house and car and opened my mom's now flourishing Chinese acupuncture clinic. Most importantly, finding this balance between the two cultures has helped me discover a confidence in *myself* and my abilities. As I will enter my senior next fall, I am no longer that shy 5<sup>th</sup> grader I once was—I have learned to embrace my unique background and strive everyday to spread cultural awareness and diversity, whether it be through giving presentations to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade about my Chinese culture, participating in the Multicultural Club, or choosing to write a passionate speech about Chinese New Year which helped me place 4<sup>th</sup> at a state finals speech tournament. Thus today, in every photo of my dad and me from that trip to Beijing years ago, I no longer see a shy, playful little girl, but a proud, Chinese-American.

As Earth nears the end of the 2,008<sup>th</sup> year of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Common Era, I hope I do not disappoint anyone when I announce that my parents, upon their voyage halfway across the world, have not discovered a new extraterrestrial creature or a new planet in the galaxy. However, what my parents did do, in my opinion, qualifies their journey as more exhilarating and fruitful than any spacecraft mission would have been—they have found a home halfway across the world from their mother country, and most importantly, they have planted a seed for an ambitious daughter, eager to impact and influence the world.