

COMMENTARY

What Does It Mean To Be Chinese or Asian American?

By Victoria Hu

A little girl was standing in a swarm of elementary school kids trying desperately not to draw attention to herself and trying to fit in.



Fitting in is a state of mind that every single person goes through, because fitting in means that you are normal and that you are accepted. However, as I grew older, I threw the goal of fitting in out the window. To me, it became no longer important to fit my Asian face into the sea of Caucasian faces I see everyday. It became a thrill to be different and unique, and I flaunted my Chinese culture rather than hid it. To me, being Chinese American means embracing both sides of my culture and being confident about maybe not fitting in with either side.

Fitting in becomes an almost impossible task for a Chinese American among either Chinese or American people. We're too Chinese to be a typical American, but too Americanized to be typically Chinese. In America, Chinese Americans are different based on physical looks alone with our black hair and dark eyes. Stereotypes do not help the situation either. In elementary school, I was the quiet, smart, Asian girl. In high school, I am an enthusiastic member of my school's Forensics team, which is a mixture of competitive public speaking and acting. I placed 1st in the Hampton Roads region and 6th in the state, which surprised some people at school who thought Chinese people were supposed to be shy and quiet. Just because of the stereotypes, Chinese Americans are barred from fitting in entirely with Americans. In addition to stereotypes, lifestyle differences, moral differences, and language differences all contribute to create a clear distinction between

Chinese Americans and Americans. My mom cooks rice and Chinese dishes at home, while my friends' moms cook hamburgers. My parents are strict about my academic standings while my friends' parents celebrate when they get "B's". I speak Mandarin with my parents and relatives while my friends only know English. Often, just from everyday conversations, I can feel the acute differences between my friends and me.

Having occasionally felt somewhat separated from American society, I looked forward to vacationing in China for the summer with my family. I dreamed of being in a community where, for once, I was not the minority. But I was in for a big surprise. I discovered that I was an outsider in China as well. Although physically, I looked similar to other Chinese people, but the way we dressed and carried ourselves were different. I had thought that the numerous differences between my American friends and me were too large to bridge, but now I discovered that the differences between Chinese kids and me were even larger. I realized that the Chinese American me cannot fully blend into either American or Chinese society. However, my refusal to fit in, although it may sound disheartening, may be more of an advantage than a disadvantage to me.

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a curse. Few people have this kind of a chance to become fluent in two radically different cultures. When I was nine years old, I enrolled in the Tidewater Chinese School. For eight years, I have been actively involved in Chinese School, first as a student and now as a student teacher. Along the way, I have witnessed numerous kids drop out of Chinese School because to them it is an embarrassment to be Chinese. Many Chinese American kids claim that they are solely American and try to create as big of a gap as they can between themselves and anything pertaining to being Chinese. They feel that they have to

make a choice between Chinese and American, but that is not so. It is perfectly attainable to have both. I can proudly say to anyone who asks me that I am Chinese American. I do not think I have to make a choice between Chinese or American, because they are both a part of me. It is something special because I get the best of both worlds. To have to pick one over the other is equivalent to cutting out a part of myself.

Being a Chinese American means proudly displaying my unique mix of cultures for all to see. The mix of cultures easily creates an identity crisis for Chinese Americans, which is a large obstacle to cross. Many people may try to erase their Chinese heritage to assimilate into American society, while others may seclude themselves from the American world. I struggle everyday with establishing my identity, but I know that my ultimate goal is to mesh the two worlds together because they have both influenced who I am. I am a Chinese American.

Reprint from the March 2007 Newsletter of The Organization of Chinese Americans - Eastern Virginia Chapter with permission from Victoria Hu, the author.