

Christine Wan

Grade Level: 10

School Name: American High School

Dark Blue

“By three methods we may learn wisdom:

First, by reflection, which is noblest” - Confucius

I'd climbed all the way to the top of the red and blue playground with my best friend Amy close behind me. When we reached the top of the rope ladder and stood on the dark grey plastic bridge that marked the highest point of the whole school, we planted a makeshift flag of sticks tied together with my teal GAP jacket.

Amy turned to me, asking, “What should we call our land? China? Or America?”

I looked at her, puzzled. “Hm?”

“Well, are you Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, American—? You know, what are you?” she said with wide eyes that asked for a quick answer so we could conquer new territories. But my answer couldn't come so easy. My dark blue passport screamed “American.” My face, on the other hand, with its tanned yellow skin and small dark eyes, screamed a different answer.

Afterwards, I remember Amy going around asking my other classmates questions like,

“Are you Chinese? Or are you American?”

I watched my peers answer with lightning speed.

“Of course, I'm American.”

“Is that even a question? Chinese.”

“Can’t you see?” someone would say, pointing at their tanned yellow skin with a chuckle. “I’m Chinese.”

How could they know with such certainty? Our birth certificates make us, technically, American, but our parents incorporate their cultural identities into our lives, teaching us about Chinese New Year or being born in the year of the snake. What bothered me most about their certainty was the ease with which they so readily neglected one of their heritages, whether it be their family’s traditions or the country where they were born and raised.

“Second, by imitation, which is easiest” -Confucius

Sitting at a lunch table with my friends, a chicken salad sandwich in my hand, I glanced around at my fellow seventh graders. Groups of Hispanic children sat together on a blue bench near the science classroom, groups of Indian children sat together at a black lunch table, and groups of Chinese children sat at tables or on stone benches. They were all clusters of nations on a map, separated by seas and mountains.

I had just finished fourth period science class and was holding my first “C” test in my free hand. The morning had been cold, but by noon, the warmth was like Death Valley. I wore a sweater that was too thick and itchy, the wool and polyester blend poking into my skin.

Staring at my test, which was covered with red ink, a huge “70%” scribbled into the right-hand corner, I felt confused and panicked. The writing was so messy, as if the teacher’s penmanship revealed her anger and disappointment, as if she were standing in front of me, yelling at me through the page, her irritation rising through the paper.

New questions formed in my head at an overwhelming rate: Was I losing my Asian-ness? I nibbled at my chicken salad sandwich. Weren't Asians supposed to get A's on every single exam and quiz? Had I ever gotten anything lower than an eighty-eight percent? I reached back into my memory. Didn't "A" stand for Asian? Was I becoming too American?

While I watched a seagull scramble near a trashcan for a french fry, I wondered if I was adopting the side of American culture, which if I listened to my parents, was the epitome of apathy and indulgence. And if so, what next? Giving up Peking duck and rice with chopsticks for juicy Texas barbeque and steak?

"Hey, how'd you do on the test?" one of my friends asked me as she sat down at the table. I floated from a sweltering town in Texas back to the lunch table in Fremont.

"Uh, which test?" I asked, stuffing the evidence of my crime into my grey backpack.

"That science test. You know, the one we just got back, like, a few minutes ago?" she replied, raising her eyebrows.

"Oh, that one," I said. "It was so easy. Of course, I got an A," I fibbed.

"Yeah, I got an A minus," she said, smiling as she opened her backpack to take out a salad. "It was *that* easy."

I nodded in agreement. Yeah. That easy.

By the time I got home, I had a dull headache that was turning into a throbbing. My parents, who opened School Loop at least five hundred times per day to check my grades, looked at me as if I were a different person, as if I wasn't their A-for-Asian daughter

anymore, as if I strode straight out of American suburbia with body piercings and a backpack full of drugs.

My mother rushed up to me and put her palm against my forehead. “That’s strange. You’re not feverish,” she said, frowning her brows. “Are you okay? Are you distracted by weird school drama? Or boys? Maybe you just need to wear more red for the next test. And study more.”

“I’m fine, Mom, really. I will,” I said, before trudging upstairs to take a shower. It was as if my life flipped upside down.

“and third by experience, which is the bitterest.” -Confucius

Ever since I was little, but still old enough to realize and remember, I could feel the eyes of strangers focused on the back of my shirt.

If the world were a quilt with an array of black, gray, white, and multiple shades of brown, I was the yellow-orange square that popped out.

In the beginning of elementary school, people just stared. But later, their twisted pronunciations of “ni hao” reached my ears, first as whispers, then as screams. They’d yell “konichiwa,” too, but not as often, which was strange because I’d never even stepped foot in Japan.

On a hot June day towards the end of the school year, I was heading home from Forest Park Elementary. I couldn’t wait to get home and open the fridge, take out a Häagen-Dazs vanilla ice cream popsicle, and devour it.

As I stopped to wait for the cue from the crossing guard, an Indian man walked over to wait as well. After a few minutes, he said, “Ni hao,” the words tinted with a thick accent. I just stared straight ahead, then walked away, without a word. Maybe he had just

taken a Chinese class and wanted to try out the simple greeting. Maybe he was just trying to be polite. Maybe he was just an ass.

Still, I felt as if I were being called out for having a culture or ethnicity that was different from his.

If I were Hispanic, would he have said “Hola”? If I were Hawaiian, would he have felt the need to say “Aloha”? If I were Caucasian, what would he have said? Would he have said anything at all?

The moment felt like an acknowledgement of difference.

It felt as though I was being singled out.

The more frequent these moments became, the more I questioned. When people looked at me, did they see only yellow skin and dark hair? Did they not see an artist, a writer, a swimmer, an avid reader, a good friend, an American?

Other times, those few other times, I wanted to scream something back. I wanted to yell for them to leave me alone, to shut up, to stop forcing me into stereotypical boxes. I craved to make them feel different, to strip them of their sense of belonging. I wanted to make them feel as bad as I felt, and I needed them to understand how deeply they had cut me. I had enough ethnic drama at school, and now these strangers somehow wielded a sort of power to make me feel low and confused again. I wanted to make them feel the same way. But I kept my mouth shut. This is America, land of the free and the silent.

“Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it.” -Confucius

A few years later, I was starting eighth grade.

I guess it was what some people call a golden year: it was my last year of middle school. It was supposed to be one of the best.

It was a year that would mark the beginning of high school and the saga of who-said-what-about-whom. At the same time, I was under the misapprehension that it was supposed to signify the departure from the immature ways of childhood. Instead, we seemed to be regressing.

That was the year a group of three boys in my grade started running up to their classmates. They'd place their fingers near the outer tips of their eyes, pushing their eyes up and down while singing, "Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these!" They would laugh and then run away. One kid was white, but the other two were Chinese, so the whole spectacle confused me. Weren't the Chinese kids just being racist against themselves? Once I came home and looked up the lyrics on the internet, hoping to find some clarification. When I learned that the song was a nursery rhyme, I was even more confounded. What sane person would sing this song to children?

The next day, we watched a video about recycling. There was a young boy on the screen who was blond and perky. He was in a park picking up water bottles and soda cans with those long metal pinchers. He smiled at the camera and said, "We all have to come together to make the world a better place."

That same day, one of those three boys—the white boy who seemed almost like a mirror image of the boy in the video, with his blond hair—ran up to me, yelling "Japanese!" with his fingertips pushing his eyes up.

I just stood there, shocked as my Chinese friends giggled. I couldn't help wondering why these boys still found fun in guessing people's ethnicities. Why did it matter? Hadn't he paid attention to the video?

That night I stared in the mirror, determined to find out what part of my face looked Japanese. I gazed at my long red-brown hair. I focused on my eyes, which seemed to slant neither up nor down. I observed my sun-tanned skin from swimming outdoors. I looked like any other kid on the playground. I didn't necessarily fit the stereotype of the East Asian, with black hair and pale skin.

I thought I looked ... distinctly *American*. I didn't know whether to feel happy or sad.

"A child's life is like a piece of paper on which every person leaves a mark." -Confucius

One day, I think I cracked. I broke under the pressure. Getting straight A's while participating in all my other extracurriculars, including swimming and art, was like carrying the weight of my questions and fears on my back. It didn't help that I surrounded myself with friends who lost themselves in their attempts to "lose their Asianness," trying so hard to fit in that they looked like twins with the same hairstyle, glasses, and jeans. And I was struggling so hard to stay within a constricting box of standards everyone had been forcing me into. I started worrying myself, wondering if I would ever be smart enough or Asian enough to do well in AP classes or go to schools like Stanford or UC Berkeley like other Asian kids? Would I ever speak Chinese as well as my parents could, or speak English as well as my English teachers could? Maybe the acne I sometimes got when I ate greasy American food was a reminder that my body couldn't become accustomed to America, and maybe it never would. I would always be judged based on my appearance and would never be able to assimilate.

When I got home from swim practice one night, I showered and sat on the ground, as I did everyday, to unzip my backpack and take out my schoolwork. But as soon as I

put my hands on the zipper, they felt weak. I could feel them tremble as I pulled the tab, and the tremor traveled throughout my body, making me weaker and unstable. I stiffened in place, pushing myself to stop swaying, and felt my eyes grow sore as water overflowed and rushed past my eyelids. An elephant had managed to crawl its way into my throat but couldn't crawl back out; it was stuck.

Later, I wasn't too sure if I had cried. I was embarrassed, even though I was alone in my room without the prying eyes of my peers and friends and family watching me.

"I hear, I know. I see, I remember. I do, I understand." -Confucius

Exiting the car, I dashed towards H&M, which sits in the middle of Great Mall. Behind me, I heard my mom groan as she took out her purse and locked the car. Under the midday California sunshine, we made our way through the full parking lot. All my friends were showing up at school in blue, black, or white shorts. Everyone, but me. And if I was honest with myself, I had to admit—I wanted to fit in as much as everybody else.

When I got to the store, I found a rack lined with shorts: velvet, chinos, leather, and denim. When my mom noticed the shorts draped over my arm, she suggested, "Why don't you buy something else? You can wear something unique. Besides, you and all your Asian friends dress the same."

I frowned at my mom before taking another pair of denim shorts from the rack.

"Look," my mom said. "You can't wear short shorts to school."

"Why not? Everyone does."

She pointed to a knee-length gray skort.

"No one wears those to school," I replied, before glancing back at the shorts on my arm.

“But you could set a new trend,” my mom argued. Was she serious?

“Why can’t I wear shorts?” I didn’t understand. How come all of my friends’ parents, even the Chinese ones, gave them the “okay,” but my mom was so adamant about forbidding me from even trying them on.

“It’s too scandalous. Why do you want to show much skin? Do you want to attract the attention of dumb school boys? Besides, you’ll easily get scrapes on your knees,” my mom replied.

“I can walk without falling down,” I said.

“Besides,” my mom continued, “it’s so improper. When I was your age, girls would cover up better. They’d wear long *qipao* that went past their knees, and they’d button their dresses up to their necks.”

“So girls wore that to fit in. Why can’t I wear this to fit in?” I asked, holding up the denim shorts on my arm.

“Times are changing.”

My mom stared at me, then at my shorts.

As I strolled through the racks of shorts and miniskirts, I thought about the boys at school who sometimes called my friends “yellow sluts.” It was a strange moniker since they were girls who’d never been on dates. Maybe my mom just wanted to protect me from that stigma, and she was right—I had just been thinking about how annoying it was that all my friends dressed so alike. But here I was, becoming just another copycat.

“Hey, *ma ma*? Why don’t we go eat something instead? How about that new boba place that just opened at the food court?” I suggested.

We sat in the food court, drinking our boba and talking about old family stories we'd retell, just to laugh again about the same details.

“Remember the time I ate leek dumplings and ice cream together? I threw up so much!” I recalled.

“And how about the time when...”

We filled the food court with our laughter.

As we walked through the parking lot, palm trees leaned in the wind, shielding us from the heat. They were all the same height and similar width—maybe they were planted together, or from the same seeds? But, at the same time, every single tree was a separate body, a complete system of roots, veins, insects, and microorganisms. Each tree was its own world. Yet, one day, someone might dig up the trees to find the roots all tangled into each other, as if they made up a barricade to unite against some common force, like wind or erosion.

After my mom pulled out of the parking space, she asked, “Why do teenagers always try so hard to fit in?”

“Because we don't want to be bullied. We want to make friends. We don't want to lose them because we don't fit in,” I replied, frustrated at my own answer.

“I want you to be happy being yourself,” my mom said.

But that's the problem—it was not easy just being myself. If being myself meant being laughed at or singled out, why should I be me? This was a question I always asked myself.

And yet I was growing up and could feel myself changing. Being labeled American or not wasn't the issue; I had to accept the fact that I might be a nerd or a freak

or an outsider, no matter what I did to fit in. I had to accept the fact that I would never be perfectly American or perfectly Asian.

Only then could I laugh about it all.