

## **Preface:**

Although second-generation Asian Americans have struggled between assimilation and retaining our Chinese culture, recently this demographic seems to have increased in visibility in pop culture. In 2018, 9 Australian Chinese high school students created a Facebook group named “Subtle Asian Traits” to trade jokes and discussions about the common experiences Asians face growing up in the West. Since its creation, the group has amassed over 1.7 million members from over 99 countries, many of whom live in the US. The release of movies "Crazy Rich Asians", and live action "Mulan" propelled topics like Chinese representation in media to mainstream discourse. This prompted me to answer the question: how do second-generation Chinese Americans uniquely define their cultural identity?

Through various interviews and research, I have synthesized a few themes of the Chinese American experience, which I will share with you through the form of three short stories.

I tell the stories of three radically different Chinese Americans: Amy, a Chinese American who has lived abroad her whole life, is starting college in America; Olivia, a Chinese American raised in 90s embarrassed that her parents can't speak English; and 15-year old William, a Chinese American growing up in Chinatown in the 1960s. These three stories have a common theme: the struggle in balancing between cultural assimilation and Chinese American guilt. They show that no matter what decade of America you grow up in, what countries you have lived in, or what age you are, as a Chinese American there is always present a pressure of assimilation into

mainstream white American culture. Littered across these stories are very real examples of how internalized racism manifests in childhood, even lasting into adulthood. At the same time, these stories also shows how Chinese Americans embrace their Chinese culture in very different ways.

It is important to note that these stories represent an amalgamation of real events, people, and places. However, to protect my interviewees' privacy, (as these stories cover personal topics), these stories are not based off of a single person, nor do any names in the story correspond real people.

## **William and the Mystery of the Kennedy Assassination**

William's father was short-tempered. He would get angry at William for not coming down the stairs fast enough when he called, or if he was picky about his food, or if he didn't make his bed. When his father deemed that William had not been studying enough, he would complain that he did not sacrifice everything to immigrate to the United States, the land of opportunities, just for William to disgrace the family and become a lazy bum. William thought it was hypocritical when his father said things like this because their family ran a noodle shop in Chinatown where they spoke Chinese all the time to their Chinese customers and Chinese neighbors and read the Chinese newspaper and listened to the Chinese radio; it was almost like they had never left China. William used to talk back to his father, but that would always lead to a good beating, so now he had learned to just bite his tongue until his father stopped yelling.

The biggest thing William and his dad would fight about before William learned his lesson was Chinese school on Sundays. William did not understand why he needed to learn Chinese: he was living in America, where everyone spoke English. Why would he need to learn about Confucius and filial piety and poems in Ancient Chinese? He thought it was especially insipid having to spend half the day in school while his friends were outside playing, so he often skipped those lessons to go play baseball with his friends.

But one thing that he did like about Chinese school was martial arts class. Because of the martial arts he had learned, he could take on any of the white boys that made fun of his eyes.

William lived in San Francisco's North Beach Chinatown. Specifically, he lived on the edge of Chinatown, directly adjacent to Little Italy. He liked playing all kinds of sports with the kids from Little Italy, especially baseball. And he wasn't half-bad either. When he would first go play with them, the kids would tease him and call him "chink" when he struck out. But after a few fistfights, these kids learned very quickly that William was not to be trifled with. At school, William was a part of both the football and wrestling team. He liked to play sports because at the end of the day, it didn't matter if kids talked smack about him or his race: as long as he scored a touchdown or hit a homerun, he had proved himself superior, and everyone had to respect him.

Of course, his father disapproved of him playing baseball with his friends as well. He would often warn William not to mix with the wrong crowd and berate him about studying instead of "wasting his time playing games".

William did not like studying much. However, one day at school, his history teacher Mr. Davis assigned an essay: a short biography about John F. Kennedy. After doing some research, William became fascinated by Kennedy's assassination. William decided to write his essay on the question of what happened 30 minutes before Kennedy's assassination. According to William's research, the British newspaper received an anonymous call 25 minutes before the assassination about "some big news" in America. William investigated multiple sources and spent the longest time he had ever worked on this history assignment.

One week later, Mr. Davis called William to talk to him privately.

“William, why did you decide to write specifically about 30 minutes before President Kennedy’s assassination, when the assignment was to write a factual biography about his life?

William shrugged. “I just thought that it was interesting. I did a lot of research on his life, but the thing that stood out most to me was the mystery of call that the British embassy received.”

Mr. Davis paused, then smiled. “I have to say, although your essay was not what the prompt asked for, I was very impressed with the thought that you put into it and your critical thinking. I think you have a lot of potential. Have you ever thought about being a lawyer?”

Mr. Davis then went on to explain that he graduated from Stanford Law school and had a long career in law before retiring and becoming a teacher. William was stunned yet pleased. He never thought he was much good at school, and he was delighted that Mr. Davis was speaking so highly of his potential.

That evening at dinnertime, William excitedly brought this topic up to his parents.

“Mama! Baba! Guess what my history teacher said to me today!”

His father smiled. “What did he say?”

William grinned, “He really liked the essay I wrote, and said that I have the qualities to become a lawyer. He talked to me a lot about what being a lawyer is like and—”

Before William finished, his father cut him off. “I’m glad that you did well on your paper, William. It’s good to hear that you are making an effort in school. However, being a lawyer is not a respectable job. You should become an engineer, like Yi Fan’s son.”<sup>1</sup>

“But—”

“Son, do not make me repeat myself. You see all these lawyers roaming around in Chinatown with nothing to do all day. They are lazy and good-for-nothing. I did not come to America for you to become like them. Now finish your food and we will no longer speak of this subject.”

After multiple major fights about what William would do after he graduated, much to the chagrin of his father, he joined the marines. William partially chose to join the marines because he knew that it would anger his father the most, but he didn’t care. In the corps, he found that the same rule applied from sports: as long as he did your part, and did it well, everyone respected him.

Even while he was in the marines, he could not stop thinking about what Mr. Davis said to him. It was the first time he had been praised for his academic work; none of his other teachers praised him, and certainly his father didn’t. After he left the marines, he decided to follow Mr. Davis’s advice, and he went to law school. Immediately after he graduated, his fellow ex-marines connected him to a law firm he could work at.

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<sup>1</sup> In the 60s, the profession of law was looked down upon in the Chinese community because Chinese lawyers had the reputation of being scammers.

His father also eventually came to accept William's success. When he got hired at the law firm, it was the first time his father uttered the words "I'm proud of you, son."

## **Amy: The Great Pretender**

Amy sat cross-legged, picking at the grass near her feet. The summer heat beat down on her face, so she had to squint to be able to see everyone in the circle.

“Okay everyone! We are so excited to welcome you to college! Now let’s start with a little icebreaker. Everyone go around in a circle and say your name, where you’re from, and your spirit animal.”

Amy let out a little sigh. She knew that this question was coming, but after 18 years, she still didn’t know how to answer this daunting inquiry.

Amy was born in the United States, but she left the country when she was only six years old. Because of her dad’s job, she had never stayed in a country for more than four years of her life. Before she started college in America, she had lived in Kuala Lumpur, Chengdu, and Hong Kong. Her most recent “home” was in Seoul.

“My name is Amy Chan, I lived in Seoul, and my spirit animal is...I guess an otter?” Amy knew that it would take too long to explain all the places where she had lived, as well as answering the questions that followed: What is her citizenship? Why don’t you have an accent? What’s your ethnicity? It was a small compromise in the truth for the greater good of a more efficient icebreaker in order to get out of the sun. She also took care to say “lived in” instead of “from”; although she doubted anyone else would notice the difference, it was a way she retained authenticity to herself.

After a couple weeks at college, Amy noticed that she didn't fully resonate with the majority of the other students here and could not find a community that she really belonged to. The international Chinese students talked in too much Chinese slang that she didn't understand. She could banter in American slang, but she was lost when her fellow American classmates talked about the intricacies of college football and basketball. It was odd because even though she had lived abroad for the most of her life, she thought that she would at least fit in with all the Chinese Americans. She spoke the same language, ate the same food, listened to the same music, and knew the same pop culture references. But even then, it was difficult to relate to their grounded suburban upbringing.

Amy was surprised, because she thought that she had done her best to herself as "American-passing". When she was younger and lived in Chengdu, Amy remember speaking loudly to her sister in English whenever a white *laowai*<sup>2</sup> walked by, to show that she was fluent in English. She made special note to always follow and research the pop culture trends on the internet, whether it be new memes or celebrities. She had received a fully international education no matter which country she moved to, with white teachers, an American curriculum, and AP classes. And with each new school, she tried to make friends with the American kids. It was disappointing to her that now, even with the wealth of knowledge she had about American culture, she could not fully relate to her classmates in the US.

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<sup>2</sup> Chinese slang for "foreigner"

One day, while facetimeing a friend from high school, Amy complained about this issue she was having.

“I feel like I can’t relate to anyone! I’m too international for the American kids and I’m too American for the international kids. What do I do?”

Her friend paused, then said “Have you considered that you are trying too hard to relate to them, instead of having them learn about you? You were not raised in America, and you shouldn’t pretend to be something that you are not. Maybe if you talk about your experiences, you’ll find people who are interested in your background and want to be friends for who you are, not for who you’re pretending to be.”

Amy decided to heed her friend’s advice and made a concerted effort to truly try to explain where she was from. It was clear that some people, like Amy predicted, were used to cookie cutter suburban lives and were just not interested in hearing Amy explain where she was from. But those but those who were interested became her good friends. Amy brought some of these friends to try Korean Barbeque for the first time, which they loved. Over Thanksgiving, she stayed on campus with the other Chinese international kids who could not go home overseas, and made dumplings to celebrate the holiday. She received recommendations from them for Chinese TV shows to watch and songs to listen to. She though it was interesting how when she lived abroad, she would never interact with the Chinese locals there, or ever consume Chinese media; but now, she has learned more about Chinese culture than she ever did when she lived in Chengdu.

Amy felt a newfound pride in her new ability to relate to people anywhere, as she discovered that even though you may think you have little in common with someone else, with the right people, even the smallest thread of connection can turn into a genuine friendship. All she had to do was be authentic and true to herself.

## **Olivia and the Parent Teacher Conference**

1. Setup: lived a pretty carefree childhood, but would always act as translator for her parents.
2. Conflict: embarrassed that her parents don't know English, so did not want them to come to the parent teacher conference.
3. Resolution: ABC guilt leads her to study Chinese American studies at Northwestern, becomes interested in Chinese American activism.