Sydney Lee

Dr. Gingrich

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My Identity as an Asian American

Identity can be anything. It is something that shapes an individual. According to the Oxford Dictionary, identity is “the fact of being who or what a person or thing is,” and certain characteristics that determine who a person is. Because everyone grows up in different environments, all people grow up to become individual personas. The people we associate ourselves with, the parental influence, our race and ethnicity, and basic hobbies and interests all define and shape us to become the people we are today. For me, I struggle with grouping myself with one identity.

I feel unfit. I’m not Chinese. I do not speak ching chong. I don’t eat dogs. I am smart by my own account. I am not an immigrant. Math is not my favorite subject. I do not eat rice everyday. I am simply an Asian-American. My race as an Asian defines me the most in this American society. When people first meet me, their first question is “what are you?” People don’t even try to phrase the question nicer, they just bluntly ask what I am. Humans aren’t curious whether white people are German or British or Croatian, but they ask me if I’m Chinese or Japanese. Both are wrong. I am Korean.

But it gets worse. After I mention the fact that I’m Korean, they immediately follow up with the question: Are you North Korean or South Korean? Why does it matter? It’s just offensive that people ask me where I’m from based on my skin color because I was born in the United States, just like them. The only thing that is different between North and South Koreans is what latitude they live in. Obviously I am not North Korean because if I was, I wouldn’t be living in the United States right now. But if I was, I wonder what people would say afterwards? It really makes me question who I am and it makes me feel self-conscious of who I am. Daily struggles and assumptions like these are what I and many other Asian Americans face everyday along with the impossible expectations set by parents, and the social knowledge that we may never “fit” in.

Because I go to a mostly white school, many times I forget my identity. It is hard to tell who I am or what my appearance is if a mirror isn’t stuck in front of my face every minute of my life. I talk and act like everyone else at my school that I often forget that I am Asian until I get home. I stand and look myself in the mirror, and realize that I’m Asian, or more specifically Asian American. Asian Americans are Asians who were born in the United States, so they are bombarded with two different cultures both in the outside world and their home. At school, I am surrounded by white people so I act white and I have that influence shed on me, but at home I mainly speak Korean to my parents and nearly everyday we eat Korean food. These distinct cultures make it hard to keep up with the trends of the American society and the Korean society.

At least once in an Asian American’s life, they have experienced what is known as an “Asian-American awakening.” This is “that earth-shattering moment in our childhood when we realize we’re not white” (Connie Zhou “The Asian-American Awakening: The Moment When You Realize You’re Not White”). I didn’t experience this awakening til I was thirteen years old. One day during eighth grade, I was washing my hands in the bathroom and I looked up and stared at myself in the mirror. It was me, the person I saw everyday, but I had awakened to who I was. Oftentimes I blindly look in the mirror, but it wasn’t until another girl (who was white) started washing her hands that I noticed how completely different I looked compared to her. She was pale with bright blond hair and crystal blue eyes, but I was much darker with deep dark hair and black eyes. That was when I realized that I belonged to a different group: Asian-American. I may talk and act exactly like any other American in the United States, but I definitely did not look the stereotypical American person.

Ever since I was a little girl, I was shoved into the ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) program until second grade, and I simply did what I was told. I didn’t ask questions or wonder why I was being pulled out of class three times a week. I merely thought I was a special student who was able to leave class. I didn’t care much about skin color or race and I just assumed that everyone was equal and the same. However as I grew older, that was when the racism started to appear.

White people think it’s funny and say it’s a joke, but to me I would just smile and nod. They would say “How can you see?” or make chinky eye gestures at me. I first took these comments and gestures as jokes and funny remarks, but soon enough it became quite draining. Sophomore Mandy Ng also experienced similar situations. She said, “Peers would straight up ask me if I ate dogs or if I was communist.” It was hard to face all this ridicule because the other party thinks it’s so funny, but what it bound was more self-consciousness. Because my classmates had already made their own assumptions and judgements about me, it was hard to open up and be myself. But it turned out that I was not alone, “63 percent of Vietnamese, Hmong, and Korean elementary and secondary students reported that American students were “mean” to them-being insulted or laughed at by classmates,” (Kim Angela “Stereotypes of Asian American Students”). Another Asian American, Urjoshi Kar, said she was “embarrassed to do anything Indian because [she] didn’t want to get judged. [She] didn’t want to bring Indian food to school so [she] brought sandwiches to school and it made [her] happy.” She was scared to show off her hereditary culture because she didn’t want to be judged by other people. These constant racial circumstances I experienced, made me reflect and decide my identity. I honestly didn’t know who I was because my primary language was English and I could speak English just as well and sometimes better than my peers, and yet I never quite belonged. Like Connie Zhou puts it, “I was trapped between two worlds.” A world that awaited me at home with my family where eating with chopsticks and taking off my shoes before coming inside my house was a custom, and another where it was filled with people who didn’t look like me. Being a Korean came with its own set of customs and culture; for example, the way we celebrated holidays. For Koreans, we celebrated New Year's Day, not by hosting a party, but by dressing up in traditional Korean clothing called hanbok. Hanbok are traditional dresses or formal attire worn by both males and females. My entire family used to hold a family gathering where we would wear hanbok and invite all the members of our family. There was a hierarchical status among our family with the eldest member of our family at the top: my great-grandmother. Everyone, including my grandparents and our aunts and uncles would gather in a line and bow to my great-grandmother. Then my grandparents would sit with her, and everyone younger than them would bow again. Even though at that time, I didn’t understand this tradition, I always loved New Year’s Day. After we finished bowing and paying respects, the older members of the family prepared money for each family member. That was my favorite part. I had this vibrant purple and green coin pouch that had two strings at the end to close it. It was made out of silk and this was the one day of the year that I could take it out and put it to use. I would go in a line receiving money from every grandparent and stuffing it in my little pouch, and at the end I would compete with my brother to see who had the most money (I always had the most because I was the first child). Nonetheless years passed, and the tradition started to die, especially after the death of my great-grandmother two years ago. We have grown into a more American family that celebrates New Year’s by sitting in front of the television and watching the countdown. It’s quite sad that traditions I have grown up with have started to die, and have been replaced with the mainstream American popular culture. My family and I are slowly becoming more Americanized.

I am a first generation American. Both my parents immigrated from Korea around high school or college age in hopes of what many call “the American Dream.” Of course when my parents both hopped off that plane, like fresh meat, they were hit with a culture shock. Things in America were different from Korea, the language, the food, and the people. My parents had a difficult time adjusting into their new lives. They weren’t very good at English so they faced struggles in school. Miraculously, both my parents were accepted and graduated college. My father went to the University of Wisconsin and my mother attended University of Georgia. Because they had such a hard time in school, their automatic assumptions are that I would experience just the same struggles unless I am better than everyone else. All the things they couldn’t accomplish in their adulthood come crashing down on me, especially because I’m the first child.

Asian parents’ definition of success is different from others because it is not only materialistic goals but being the best of the best. Asian parents “are often concerned about how much glory, pride, and money their children can bring home, by studying at a ‘big name’ university and earning substantial sums later on” (Jason Hung “How Asian Parents’ Definition of Success Just Adds to Mental Stresses”). However many Asian parents do not take into account that the American influence of success is usually defined by happiness both mentally and socially. This poses a major conflict for Asian children who are expected certain things from parents, but are surrounded by classmates whose lives are completely opposite.

One of the components that most affect a child is the effectiveness of nurture and parenthood. Ever since I was a little child, education and grades have been ingrained into my mind, and this is because of my parents. My parents play such a huge part in my life, and many children aspire to be like their parents and one day make them proud. However this definition of “proud” or seek of approval is almost never found in my household. It is a constant pressure of more. If a bring an A on a test, my mom asks me why I didn’t get a 100% or other times when I receive all A’s on my report card, she tells me next time the A’s need to be higher. Whenever I reach or almost touch the expectations set by my parents, it seems like they raise the bar so much higher. Many times in my life, it doesn’t seem like I am even living because I am constantly studying or only living my life to please my parents.

When I was about six years old, I started to play the piano, and at first I loved it. Pianos were a cool instrument with the different keys that played higher and lower as you went from right to left, and how the black keys played funky sounds. But soon enough, homework started to take a toll, and I chose to play outside with my friends rather than practice piano. This made my mother furious. She would spit out ultimatums telling me to quit if I didn’t practice, and emphasizing how much money she invested for the past six years. But in eighth grade, I finally quit, and quite frankly it was the best decision of my life. I was a little bittersweet at first but this little taste of freedom was all worthwhile. This tiny droplet of independence, and how I was able to make the first decision of my life, and be respected for it, was the best feeling. I still have many friends who are faced with pressure from their parents to be accepted into prestigious musical programs such as All-State, but I am glad that portion of my life is behind me now.

To Asian parents, competition is everything. They have a way of communicating with one another whether it be house parties every weekend or just over the phone, but either way word travels fast. Asian parents are constantly comparing their children with others, boasting about not how their child is so intelligent, but how they as parents got them there. It is almost a competition using their children as pawns to see who raised their child “right.” Ryan Fan, an Asian American, who wrote “The Cultural Expectations of Being Raised in an Asian American Household” said, “My dad would present me with this false image of perfection, overly exaggerating each of my accomplishments so he could seem like a successful father to this community.” When I started reaching out to other Asian Americans, I soon realized that I was not the only one. A junior who attends Chattahoochee High School said she couldn’t leave the house for the entire month of November because she was forced to stay at home to prepare for the SAT exam in coming December. She received a 1550 on the SAT exam. It was such a sigh of relief for her because she said if she didn’t get over a 1500, she wouldn’t know what to do. The love and affection she receives from her parents always feels so conditional because everything always involves grades. Whenever she doesn’t meet the expectations of her parents, she faces so much ridicule from them. She said the love she feels from her parents is so conditional because it is dependent on her academics. I have yet to face this because my parents are much more lenient compared to her parents, but I have definitely faced this type of pressure before.

From the fifth grade, I have attended a tutor institution for math and language arts. To this day, I still get tutored but now I’m preparing for SAT. Every summer I go to a tutoring institution three times a week for four hours. The days I don’t go to tutor, I have to study for three hours a day. Summer is supposed to be fun, where it is a break from waking up at seven o’clock to go to school, but to me summer is much worse than going to school. To me and many of my friends, summer was a lot like hell. Asian parents only have one mindset: raise their children to be smart so they can be accepted into a prestigious college, and get a job that pays a lot of money. I had to start thinking about what I wanted to be in the seventh grade. My parents began to pressure me of deciding what I wanted to do so that I could plan my future for high school. At first I wanted to become a teacher. I would stage my stuffed animals in front of my bed and practice lectures of what I learned from school each day. I had my own whiteboard where I scribbled lesson plans and solved math problems, explaining each step. But my mother quickly shot down my dream to become a teacher saying it wouldn’t pay enough. At that time, all I cared for was my passion to teach, but to my parents, salary was more important. So I suggested to my mother that I wanted to follow in her footsteps and try to become a graphic designer or a real estate agent, that was again rejected. When I was in ninth grade, I finally said that I wanted to be a surgeon, and that was the first time my mother approved of any of the occupations I suggested to her before. My parents even limited what I wanted to do in high school. My mom said that high school would be such a fun experience, and I was genuinely excited, but when course verification forms rolled around, she began to control my entire high school experience. I wanted to take an art class as an elective because I found ceramics very interesting, but my mother quickly denied it and told me not to waste my time taking useless classes. It was really sad how restricted my life was, the life that I wanted to experience in high school had to once again be controlled through the lens of my mother. All I wanted was to be a normal high school student who could to hang out with friends and experience a nice social life, but my parents had already started pressuring me to think of what I wanted to ten years from now when I was only twelve years old! It was a tough reality, and I was forced to grow up much faster than most people my age. I had missed out on so much of my childhood.

Most Asians aren’t born geniuses. Asian parents expect from their children to excel in academics. Not all Asian-Americans are “smart” either. Many people assume that we are only good at certain things because we are Asian, but that is hardly the case. It is our parents who shape us to make the best grades and study the hardest. We are just drilled in the beginning to be the very best and the smartest in the class. We were taught to be the star student, be the most mannerful, and to never do anything risky. We were taught to play it safe. I was taught to not make any decisions that may jeopardize my future because if it affects my future, it also affects my entire family. The life that I live, many times, doesn’t seem like it is mine, but the life of my parents.

However, as I progress my years into high school, I feel like this Asian American identity that I define myself as is slowly brightening up. Even though I still feel a lot of pressure from my parents, I have become more understanding as to why they enforce academic achievement. Racism is not as common, and I usually laugh it off anyways. I have learned to get used to it. I have found many people who face the same struggles as me, and it has made me a stronger and happier person, that out there in this world, I am not alone. I am a person who looks Asian but leans towards trending towards the American society. I am trapped between two worlds, and I always will, but it has shaped me into my own individual being.

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