

Angela Hom

(Published in **More than a Menu: Food and its Meaning in Asian Cultures and Across the U.S.**)

Quote: “Always ‘in between.’ Between east and west,” states James Lee, pastor of college ministry and church operations at Living Hope Community Church.

Chapter 1: Between East and West

Identity Crisis

The struggle many Asian Americans experience is feeling like an imposter. The idea of not fully feeling that they are Asian, nor American enough. The world tells them that they should blend in, but it also screams that they do not belong here. The struggle to find this new identity and claim it as their own is something that Ian Lam, a junior elementary education major at Biola University, knows very well.

“Being an American born Chinese makes me feel that I don't really fit in either culture entirely because there's a part of me that will always feel foreign when I'm in the U.S. or in Hong Kong,” explains Lam.

Lam was born in Thousand Oaks, CA in 1999. His parents decided to take him out of his environment and travel across the world more than 7,000 miles away to a land of a new language, new surroundings and little time to claim his bearings. Hong Kong was a place foreign to Lam, yet he called it home for seven years.

“In my first couple years in Hong Kong, I often couldn't understand or relate to a lot of the things my peers talked about during recess or hangout times because I only understood English,” says Lam. “After I moved to the states seven to eight years later, my community felt pretty foreign as well because a lot of people here don't speak Cantonese or understand Chinese.”

Lam had just adjusted to the previously foreign Hong Kong when his parents decided to move back to the United States in 2014. Just when Lam thought he had found a community to identify with, it was pulled from him yet again. He explained it is a “reverse culture shock”.

“I just always felt American during my time in Hong Kong. I never really identified as a Hong Konger, at least for the first couple years. As time went by and I spent more time with my friends over there, I slowly started to view Hong Kong as my home as I got more fluent with the language over there,” explains Lam. “Back then my English was not really good; I had a thick accent. I didn't know anybody at all, everybody spoke English.”

Lam emphasized that language was the biggest driving factor of belonging. For both of Lam's worlds, this was a crucial factor to feeling like he belonged in the countries he was in.

Feeling like they belong is something many Asian Americans do not get the privilege of knowing. No matter where they are, there is always a disconnect between their own upbringing and their lives in the United States. The phrase many Asian Americans have come to know too well is “Go back to where you came from.” But for many, the United States is their home and the

only thing they know. This develops what is known as perpetual foreigner syndrome. According to Thierry Devos and Mahzarin Banaji, perpetual foreigner syndrome means, “members of ethnic minorities will always be seen as the ‘other’ in the White Anglo-Saxon dominant society of the United States, which may have negative implications for them.”

“When people say, ‘China is our home and [they] tell us to go back to China’, that is definitely not true. China has a different culture to even Asian Americans too,” says Lam. “We grew up with a mix of both cultures. If we go to a totally different country that speaks a totally different language, we’ll just be foreigners as well. I think it’s important for a lot of people to understand that. Asian Americans don’t particularly fit in one culture.”¹

History

Historically Asian Americans have been discriminated against for many reasons: fear of communism, xenophobia, economic and employment reasons, and many more. Yet, this is not just an occurrence of the past. George Santayana, a Spanish philosopher, claimed history is doomed to repeat itself. Just because Asian discrimination and anti-Asian racism is not prominent in our everyday, does not mean it is not happening today.

The term Asian American highlights two cultures combining into something beautiful. But where does this term originate? The origins of the term can be traced back to 1968 when activist

¹ Devos, T., & Banaji, M. R. (2005). American = white? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88(3), 447-466. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.88.3.447

Yuji Ichioka rallied his fellow Asian Americans for justice.(2)² Inspired by the Black Power movement, Ichioka wanted to reclaim Asian identity within the United States. He coined the term Asian American as an act of rebellion against the term oriental.(3)³ The term *oriental* was used to attack and discriminate against Asians at the time, implying that Asians were not from the United States, that they were the *other*. The overall movement was an act to end injustice for all Asian Americans, newly immigrated or American born.(4)⁴

But how did Asian Americans get to where they are today? It all began in the 19th century.(5)⁵ This was when the first wave of Chinese immigrants came to the United States seeking a better life and the promise of fortune from the Gold Rush. These rumors were completely blown out of proportion, so White settlers implemented laws to prevent Chinese immigrants from becoming American citizens (Naturalization Act of 1790). Throughout the decades following 1790, Asians were discriminated against and seen as the *other* in the country they were seeking a new future in. Leading the community to now, where there is still a sense of isolation towards those who do not fit into the mold of America.

² Rao, S. (2018, August 1). *The term 'Asian American' was meant to create a collective identity. What does that mean in 2018?* The Washington Post.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-term-asian-american-was-meant-to-create-a-collective-identity-i-s-it-necessary-in-2018/2018/07/27/c30e7eb0-8e90-11e8-b769-e3fff17f0689_story.html.

³ Wang, Y. (2019, March 30). *The long history and slow death of a word once used to describe everyone and everything from Egypt to China as well as rugs.* The Washington Post.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/05/13/the-long-history-and-slow-death-of-a-word-used-to-describe-everyone-from-turks-to-the-chinese/>.

⁴ Rao, S. (2018, August 1). *The term 'Asian American' was meant to create a collective identity. What does that mean in 2018?* The Washington Post.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-term-asian-american-was-meant-to-create-a-collective-identity-i-s-it-necessary-in-2018/2018/07/27/c30e7eb0-8e90-11e8-b769-e3fff17f0689_story.html.

⁵ *The Journey from Gold Mountain: The Asian American Experience.* (2006). Japanese American Citizens League.

High Expectations

Many Asian immigrants are thriving in the United States today, instilling in their children the same work ethic that carried them through the gold rush. Though not every Asian household is thriving, statistically Asians in the U.S. are more well off than any other racial group. According to Statista.com in 2019, Asian American households' annual median income was \$98,174.(6) ⁶ Yet this is only the median. The number does not reflect the many different Asian groups within America as well as those households who are above and, especially, below the median.

“It’s interesting because the wealth gap in Asians is crazy,” explains Kim Huynh, a recent graduate from University of San Diego. “On one hand, my experience is privileged, but my cousin's family goes through a lot because they don’t speak English and are less well off.”

According to Pew Research, “Only four Asian origin groups had household incomes that exceeded the national median for Asian Americans overall: Indians (\$100,000), Filipinos (\$80,000) and Sri Lankans and Japanese (both \$74,000). By contrast, most of the other 15 [Asian] origin groups were well below the national median for Asian Americans, including the two with the lowest median household incomes – Nepalese (\$43,500) and Burmese (\$36,000).”

⁶ Department, P., & 20, J. (2021, January 20). Median household income by race or ethnic GROUP 2019. Retrieved February 24, 2021, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/233324/median-household-income-in-the-united-states-by-race-or-ethnic-group/>

Despite Asians only making up 5.9% of the American population according to the U.S. Census Bureau,(7)⁷ Asian household incomes on average exceed all other race groups in the nation.(8)⁸ This statistic forces many Asian American children to strive for high expectations placed on them by their parents.

“Every time I’d be sitting around, [my parents would] remind me that they had a job by my age, and they’d tell me about how good I have it,” explains Huynh. “They’d constantly tell me how easy I have it and how hard they worked, so it felt like I had to not only do well in school and life, but also have an easy time doing it, because of how much was provided to me in comparison to them”

Many Asian immigrants fought for their place in the United States, seeking a better life for themselves and their families. What Huynh described is what many immigrant children experience every day. There is this high expectation placed on them in order to achieve and excel in society to provide for their families in the future. These expectations apply pressure on many children making them feel as if they can never be enough.

Caught Between

Being Chinese American myself encompasses the feeling of being in-between claimed by many minorities in America. Growing up in a predominantly Asian community provided me with the

⁷ U.S. census bureau QUICKFACTS: United States. (n.d.). Retrieved February 23, 2021, from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/RHI225219>

⁸ Budiman, A., Cilluffo, A., & Ruiz, N. G. (2020, May 30). *Key facts about Asian origin groups in the U.S.* Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/22/key-facts-about-asian-origin-groups-in-the-u-s/>.

opportunity to surround myself with people who look and act like me but stepping into the real world was an entirely different monster. I am seen as the *other* by those outside my little bubble; not fitting in anywhere I turn. Even though I had rarely received any anti-Asian hate in my life, I had to come to terms with my own identity of being both Asian and American. Knowing that I will never fit in completely in America or China but acknowledging that I am a beautiful combination of both cultures. Caught between two distinct cultures. The world telling you that you need to blend in while your conscience telling you to be yourself. This is what it is like to be Asian American.

Diving into a table full of dim sum on Lunar New Year but also celebrating Thanksgiving for Chinese Americans. Playing yutnori for New Years and also laughing with friends between rounds of Mario Kart. Going to learn Vietnamese at Vietnamese school right after coming back from a six-hour day of American school. These are just a couple of experiences many Asian Americans have come to accept as their *normal*. Food and pastimes are a window into someone's culture and the combination of both American and Asian culture is what many Asian Americans know well.

There are so many aspects that make up the Asian American identity. The pressures of familial and societal norms weigh on the generations to come. There will always be a disconnect of culture, but the Asian American community has come to accept their displacement and embrace what makes them unique. Being of both Asian and American cultures and using their experiences to form a new identity.

This is the Asian American experience.