

Kancy Student
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My American-Asian Identity

YZ Chin is an immigrant from Taiping, Malaysia, currently residing in New York as both a software engineer and an author. Her 2018 essay, “How I Learned to Claim Space as a Multilingual Author,” reflects her struggles with being a multilingual writer with ties to different backgrounds; namely, she tries to answer the following question: “Why write in English, the colonizer’s language, when I have others at my disposal?” Growing up split between cultures, Chin describes the difficulties in finding relatable figures in popular media. She reflects, “I did not see myself in my Malay textbooks about boys who formed interracial friendships. . . . I gravitated toward the stories in my English books because I thought the lives depicted within were so far removed from mine; they gave me the space to imagine new ways of living.” So even once she discovers something identifiable, it’s to be an escape for her imagination, not a tangible reality. Therefore, as Chin develops her artistic worldview, she becomes torn between her natural heritage and the language she has grown to make her own. Through inspiration from other immigrant writers, Chin realizes that choosing to write in the “colonizer’s language” doesn’t inherently indicate treachery or conformity. She, like many other writers, uses English as a tool to acknowledge history while creating new paths for themselves and future writers in a post-colonial society, as illustrated in her statement, “I, just like anyone else, am shaped by forces that are beyond me, long in motion. ...then might I not be participating in the shaping of forces to come, even though my efforts may seem puny and the effects invisible so far? And why

not participate while wielding the language that so shaped my family?” Essentially in practice, claiming space is learning to acknowledge and accept the past as a part of one’s identity, while maintaining their roots. But some of us in society struggle with this balance. What if, as in my case, one’s grasp of their born culture was limited to the level of an outsider’s? In other words, if I grew up American, practicing American customs, speaking English, and neglecting Chinese (despite my Chinese heritage), what is my cultural identity? Is the shame many of us “assimilated” individuals undergo justified?

When I was in elementary school, my mom made several attempts to teach me Cantonese, written and spoken. Her parents were Chinese immigrants, and had instilled in her a strict discipline to maintain the language and culture of her heritage. I, on the other hand, had known only a few key phrases since growing up. Today I remain at an almost illiterate level. I, a born American, didn’t feel like learning a different language when I was perfectly fluent in another. I didn’t see any practical purpose in learning Cantonese- I went to an American school with American friends, and was the only Chinese person in any of my classes; moreover, I had a love for English literature. Being a voracious reader, my teachers always commended my writing and grammar skills year after year. I participated and placed in several school spelling bees, and I was praised for my hobby of writing short stories. My proficiency in English made me neglect my Cantonese, which no one I knew outside of my household ever spoke. Once in a while I’d flip through elementary Chinese workbooks, but my lack of talent for the language only intensified my disinterest. I decided from a young age that English was the tongue for me, and living this way worked quite well for my academic life.

I grew up under the belief that I was a true American, with nothing separating me from my peers at school except for the household I returned to. I felt so comfortable speaking and

writing in English that I never saw Chinese as necessary. Chin describes her initial perception of English “an abstract, fantastical thing with no real-world application”. In other words, she saw the language as a faraway concept not within her grasp of identity; something that she didn’t claim as her own. Whereas Chin felt an initial disassociation between the two cultures she had grown up in, I felt no struggle in finding my place as a born American. Like English in Chin’s case, Cantonese had little practical application in my life; in contrast, however, I had no interest in learning it. Additionally, unlike Chin, I was never torn between Chinese and American, Cantonese and English; because as a child, I felt neither a responsibility nor a connection to my Chinese lineage. I adopted American culture as my own at once and was perfectly comfortable doing so.

Between the ages of about 10 and 14, my immigrant grandma would ask me to help her with various tasks all centered around my capabilities in English- for example, writing checks or managing her cell phone. The memories that stand out the most to me were also the ones that I remember to be the most frustrating: trying to translate her voicemails from English to Cantonese. She never picked up the phone unless it was a number she recognized to be family, so she accumulated quite a lot of voicemails. Most of the time, they would have something to do with health insurance or a prescription at the pharmacy, Being that my Chinese was always limited, I had no way of conveying the information to her in a way that she could understand, be it either an urgent message or an inconsequential notice. I felt helpless. Once in a while, I’d be successful in miming the concepts to her; but most of the time I’d listen to a few seconds of the recording, feel defeated, and tell her that I’d ask my dad once he got home. Later on my parents, after taking on my task of translating her voicemails, would explain to me how I could better

help my grandma next time, making little effort to mask their exasperation. I would pretend to comply, but deep down I knew I just didn't have the motivation.

There was little to no practical use for Cantonese in my daily life, other than helping my immigrant family members. This simply wasn't enough for me to commit to the language. In Chin's essay, she describes that her younger self "gravitated toward the stories in [her] English books because [she] thought the lives depicted within were so far removed from [hers]; they gave [her] the space to imagine new ways of living." So English wasn't so much as an identifiable medium for her as it was an escape. I can relate to this feeling, but conversely. I quickly grasped onto American stories, movies, and shows, depending on them to shape my personality and worldview. I needed little acclimation in finding myself in the Caucasian brunettes and blondes I saw in books or on the screen, so much so that once I was introduced to Asian representation in movies, shows, books and whatnot, it didn't have much of an impact on me. It wasn't something that I, as Chin had described, had been searching for or missing in my life, because I didn't see myself as different from the average American.

Chin describes her process of developing past her younger mindset, which imagined English fantasies and refuge, and realizes that she has a choice in her identity. This is illustrated by her revelation, "I finally saw that English was not a language of escape for me, but that it rather represented a painful negotiation between myself and my environment." She is not limited to one or the other; she can maintain her cultural pride while accepting and moving on from her country's history with colonialism. I, on the other hand, had grown up so Americanized that I unknowingly separated myself from the Chinese community. This realization set in as I reached high school and was more exposed to the world; I was suddenly bombarded by a flood of regret and shame for rejecting my heritage for so many years- especially during those crucial malleable

years when I could have taken in Cantonese so much more easily. Seeing my peers upholding their family's cultures and providing aid for their immigrant relatives, I felt treacherous to both myself and my family. There were suddenly so many things all around me that I felt obligated to, but couldn't comprehend. My pride in my English capabilities dissipated, replaced by a large gap in my Cantonese that served as a reminder of my illiteracy. I was no longer American as I had believed as a child, I was an Asian-American who had lost my culture.

As a writer, Chin is more exposed to the public eye than most, so the pressure on her to represent her culture is much heavier than on the average person, as described in her introduction, "So if I didn't write in Malay, didn't that make me unpatriotic? And if I didn't write in Chinese, didn't that make me a "race traitor?" Why English?" I identified with this because I have often been teased for my Americanized, or whitewashed, identity. My more culturally distinct peers have poked fun at my Chinese illiteracy, calling me "such a white girl" or a "banana." While our situations are clearly distinct from one another, I can relate to that feeling of being torn between two parts of yourself. I was born into a Chinese family, but had a love for English literature and grammar. I've long since established my identity as an American, but over the years I've realized that I've caused my family shame in "diluting" our culture with American customs. Reading Chin's essay, I felt both enlightened and jealous of the experiences she detailed, my development seeming backwards compared to hers. I never felt that English was imposed upon me the way I saw it was imposed upon my grandparents, particularly my grandma. I feel more that I took it upon myself to adopt; I felt drawn to the colorful and descriptive American media that surrounded me growing up. But I've come to realize that this doesn't make me "unpatriotic", or a "race traitor". Chin's mentions of the questions suggesting her treachery from her native culture don't serve as a guideline for her writing; they're there for her to rebuff

using a self-made identity. By choosing to write in English, she doesn't conform to either side, American or immigrant. She instead creates a path for herself, proving that identity is very much a personal and subjective concept.

There is a great deal of shame associated with rejecting one's born culture, however analysis of my own personal experiences with such using YZ Chin's essay reveals that doing so isn't necessarily wrong. Creating an identity for oneself is subjective; for me, it requires finding a balance between my Chinese heritage and my American national and cultural identity. Chin's proposal, "what kind of layered identity could I create for myself, if I, too, claimed the language and used it the way I wanted to?" really spoke to me, because it introduces the concept of an identity pulling from multiple directions and cultures. Additionally, she depicts the process of creating her identity as a choice; she chooses to use the languages at her disposal at her own will, not by the will of society. I believe that the practice of claiming space isn't meant to be forced; to be effective, a willing choice must be made. In a way, I've been imposing Chinese culture upon myself over the years, while looking down upon the parts of my identity that had been so heavily shaped by American culture. But I've come to realize that there shouldn't be any shame in being an American, and that forcing myself to return to my Chinese roots is both ineffective and disingenuous. I've claimed my space as an American, and I will continue to cherish and value that which I've made my own. Additionally, I've discovered that there's more than enough room in my perception of identity to reclaim the Cantonese language; not because of societal or self-imposed pressures, but because of my own personal volition.

Work cited:

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