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Integrative Seminar: Memory

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British-Made China

I never really thought about my identity until one day in the third grade, my classmate Sean asked me, “**So**, what are you?”

**T**he answer seemed pretty obvious – I’m Helena, what else am I? I tried to think of a genius answer.

“Like, you’re not American, so where are you *originally* from?” **Sean asked again, interrupting my thoughts.**

His words confused me a bit. I was born and raised in New York – so naturally, I grew up classifying myself as American. “But**…** I *am* American. I’m from here. What’s the point of your ques-”

**Sean interrupted again with his laughter and told me, “No you’re** not! You’re Asian. Are you from China or Japan?”

Well, since I spoke Chinese with my parents at home and was proud of my Chinese descent, I replied, “**Uh**…I’m from China, I guess” even though I have never even been to China.

Sean finally seemed satisfied and concluded, “Oh! So you’re Chinese!”

From that point on, I stopped calling myself American whenever others asked where I was “originally” from. I began to call myself just Chinese. I’ve always thought that I looked the same as the “truly” American (white) kids I grew up with. But no one ever asked the white kids where they were *really* from; they only asked me. The thought that I would never be accepted as a true American – that I would never belong in the place I called home – scared me.

The summer of sixth grade was the first time I stepped foot in China. I thought I was finally in the country where I belong, where I was considered part of the whole; however, I was terribly wrong: although my physical appearance resembled everyone around me, I was internally different. My distant relatives who knew I grew up in the states treated me like an illiterate because they thought I didn’t know Chinese. I clarified countless times that I knew how to read, write, and speak Chinese because I went to Saturday Chinese school. They would then be shocked at how well I spoke. However, although my pronunciation was like that of a native speaker, I realized that I would never speak Chinese as fluently and accurately as my two cousins who grew up in China. One hot summer day we went out shopping in a popular marketplace. As we passed by a shoe stand, we had a conversation (in Chinese) that I would never forget. It started when I pointed to a pair of sneakers and commented, “Wow, that shoe is expensive!”

“Oh, it is!” one of my cousins agreed.

“Do you know how to say the price?” the other tested me.

“Am I stupid? Of course I know my numbers” I replied confidently. I then looked at the number. It was a long number. Then I said it out loud. I waited for their approval. My confidence shattered when I heard my cousins’ laughter. Turns out, I read the number in the format of English numbers.

Because I was so confident in my Chinese language skills, I couldn’t believe that I would read a number incorrectly. I was an outsider again. In fact, whenever we went out to shop, eat, and play, my two cousins would tell most people we encounter – whether it was a waitress, a sales person, or a cashier – that I was American and that my Chinese was limited.

I was stuck in an identity crisis: in China, I’m considered American, but in America, I’m considered Chinese. I had absolutely no idea where I was truly from and the feeling that I had no place where I belonged haunted me again and again whenever someone bothered me with the question, “Where are you from?”

A few years later, I went to an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art called *China: Through the Looking Glass*. The exhibition showcased fascinating fashion pieces that combined Chinese aesthetics with Western high fashion. Although the chilly exhibition rooms were dimly lit, the dresses and artworks shined brightly in their individual glass windows. To many, the exhibit might be a source of inspiration, entertainment, or pleasure, but to me, it was more than just that. I saw myself in these pieces that combined the artistic values of Chinese and Western culture. Only then had I realized the beauty in not belonging. The pieces that blended elements of different cultures had a uniqueness that others did not have. There was particular porcelain plate that caught my attention. From afar, I thought it was another piece of blue-and-white Chinese Porcelain. I walked closer to examine its details, and saw that the center of the plate was a scene composed of blue sailboats, plants, hills, ponds, birds, and houses that would be found in Europe, not China. The detailed floral decorations and patterns around the edges of the plate were much more elaborate than the Chinese plates at home my mom collected. Turns out, I was looking at a British imitation of Chinese Porcelain: a combination of east and west. I felt as if I had met a non-human sister, and I was so attached to the plate that I stood there for three minutes straight, admiring its cultural variety while familiar, yet foreign flute music filled the air.

It was then when my internal conflict started to resolve. I didn’t have to belong – and there was a beauty in that. I was unique, like that British-made Porcelain which could not be classified as pertaining to one culture. I was proud to be like that piece of Porcelain, which many people crowded around. In fact, the crowd that admired the plate was composed of people from different ethnic backgrounds. I heard native English speakers comment, “wow, China is beautiful,” while Chinese tourists proudly told their children, “See? The British were cool and they loved us.” Because the plate had roots from two different cultures, it had the power to gather people of different ethnic groups together in admiration. This reminded me of the times in school when my teachers asked me to translate between Chinese and English for ESL (English as Second Language) students. I remembered eating lunch with them as a result, and becoming close friends with them. My background of both American and Chinese culture has allowed me to make friends with people who grew up differently from me, just as how the porcelain brought together different types of people. I remembered the times in my art history class when the teacher asked me to translate Chinese characters in artwork to English, which allowed the class to better understand Chinese culture. I remembered so many positive experiences when I formed a bridge between Chinese and American culture.

The fact that I didn’t belong no longer bothered me as much. I began to accept that I am not just Chinese, and I am not just American. Like that British-made China, I am one of a kind: Chinese-American.