

The

# ASIAN AMERICAN

## Experience

Melissa Lin, Sophomore

One day not too long ago, while walking toward the bus stop, a man on a bicycle stopped me. One of the first things he said to me was, "Do you speak English?"

Now I was born in Iowa, moved around a bit, then ended up here, in North Carolina. Born and raised (except for a year or so in Taiwan) in America, I grew up to think of myself as an American. I watched "Sesame Street," "Mister Roger's Neighborhood," ate Frosted Flakes and hamburgers, wore blue jeans and windbreakers... And yet, all throughout my life, I've been questioned on where I come from, and if I speak English.

In elementary school, I made friends with all types of people, and found it to be quite an ordinary experience. Except for those few comments made by that one troublemaker in the class, who made it a point to murmur a "ching chong chang" when I was near. At the time, I didn't understand what these comments meant, and I'm sure the little boy didn't either. However, the fact that I remember those incidents means that I must have been in some way, affected by them.

Growing up, I didn't have any more Asian friends than non-Asian friends, and like any child, did not understand what race had to do with anything.

Unfortunately, leaving adolescence also means leaving innocence, and I began to realize that being Asian was an aspect that made me different from others.

In trying to redefine the Asian heritage that I had viewed mainly through my parents, I became interested in learning about my origins. As many fellow Asian friends, I sought to learn Chinese (which was actually the first language I learned to speak, until it was substituted by a more useful one in this country, English). Even so, I had difficulty learning the "foreign language." Why? Because it was just that. Foreign. Though my parents spoke mandarin to me at home sometimes, I still had trouble learning the language beyond

what I already knew. Maybe the only reason I knew what I did know was because, at that point, it had come inherently natural to me. Beyond that, English was my natural language. And so I began to realize that the frustrations that I experienced in identity had a lot to do with the issue of double-consciousness. In essence, being a part of both Asian and American cultures, but belonging completely to neither.

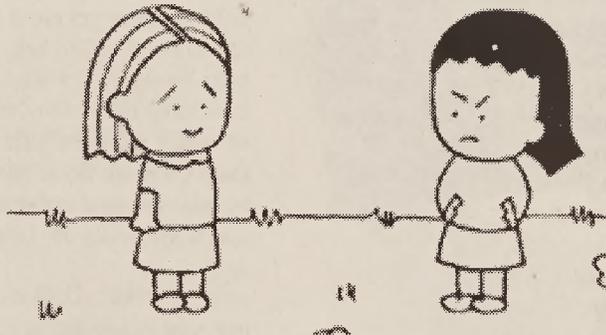
This summer, I went back to Taiwan for the first time in some ten years. It was an interesting experience, where for the first time, I was really aware of the Taiwanese culture. The night markets and the bustling shopping centers in Taipei made me feel at home, for some reason. I still remember living there for the short while that I did, drinking freshly-delivered chocolate milk every morning, heated in up my grandparents' ancient microwave. I loved eating *yótiao* and *saobing*, commonly sold on the street or in small side shops. During this most recent trip to Taiwan, I became a fan of *zhengzhunaichá*, or what is becoming popularly imported to North America's trendy scene as "bubble tea." And even when I was wandering around downtown one night, I felt completely at home. Though my Mandarin skills are definitely not up to par, I still felt at home somehow.

However, in reality, I knew that I really didn't belong there. I could imagine Taiwan as my parents' home, but not mine; I had hardly lived there, and was coming back as a mere visitor. I realized I could only relate to Asia insofar as an aspect of my ethnicity was concerned. As a first-generation Chinese-American, I've come to realize that the situation is new territory. Cultural identity is questioned, and in such an important stage in life as growing into adulthood, getting to understand oneself is essential. At this point, the Asian-American experience can at best be to live in both spheres, continuously adapting, so that we may create a niche for ourselves somewhere in the middle.

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Thanks  
for being  
my friend.

I'm your  
friend?



Lela Lee is well known for her comical depictions of the "angry little asian girl."

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