

Transitioning to Finding Me

By Grace Chang

“Wait, what’s so wrong with majoring in Asian American Studies?” Too many times have I responded with this question to people who ask me what my major is, particularly from my own parents, their friends, and even my friends.

I lived the first five years of my life in Monterey Park, as that was where my parents’ electronics retail business was established in heart of the developing Asian dominated city. When I asked my parents why they decided to come to America after they married in Taiwan, they said it was for the great economic opportunities they had heard of from friends and relatives who visited or were already in the States. Their business flourished as many Chinese speaking customers came to them for services they would otherwise have struggled to receive elsewhere because of their English-speaking incompetence. After 1989, my family moved to Arcadia but still remained working in Monterey Park. Since the LA riots of 1992, they feared the possible threats of a raid to occur in Monterey Park so they later moved their store to Arcadia. The shift in locale was a bad move because of the many clients who were based in the previous city. As corporations and the development of internet shopping made it more convenient for customers to shop, it was harmful to my parents’ business.

As I grew up, I always pondered on why my parents spoke English with an accent, as compared to the perfect sounding English of parents of my Asian and non-Asian peers in

grade school. This discovery already shows my intersection with history of my parents' immigration status to the United States. They grew up in a foreign country but fortunately didn't come to America at a time of exclusionary acts against foreigners. They came at a time when they were allowed to become naturalized citizens, a status in which many natural born citizens like myself take for granted. They had to educate themselves in the history of American law while having no prior knowledge of such while I was in the 5th grade, simultaneously memorizing the United States Constitution with them.

I understand why my parents immigrated to America as they pursued their dream of making a good living, and the sacrifice of what could have been a continual simple life in Taiwan was made for me and my sister's well-being. It is up to me to make a history of my generation and have it told since this is underrepresented generation-the lifestyle of an Asian American living in America, with immigrant parents.

I have always shared very close relations with my parents and sister all through my life. The only thing that hindered me from truly being open was my own crisis in finding my identity. I took on a handful of roles and was easily influenced by my peers. For one, I grew up in a Christian family and so I was already ordained to having a faith in Christianity. Secondly, while growing up in Arcadia, my peers had always been predominately Asian, not by choice of preference at first but by coincidence that they shared the same values typical Asian parents had in setting high standards for academic achievement. I, on the other hand, was not pressured to excel by my parents that much; rather, I wanted to compete with my peers, to be like them. Even though math and

science were not my favorite subjects, I knew they scored far higher than I, but I wanted to be in the same circle of knowledge and friends so I kept trying. Trends in middle school influenced the way I thought of my existence. There was a period of time when everyone started to flaunt their “AZN PRIDE.” What in the world was that? It was a move of liberation but at the same time a show of racism. And guess what I did? I started writing those words on notes to friends, on my backpack, and even on my class notes as my friends had done so. I did this not knowing how demeaning it was until something disturbed my flow of life.

After I graduated from middle school, I was sent to a private Christian high school, where all 500 students were predominately Caucasian. It is expected that those who finish middle school in Arcadia go on to high school at Arcadia High, but my parents wanted to ensure that I received top education and care. This was a transition I had to get used to in a new environment, geographically and physically. I had to form new friendships with people I hardly had things in common with since I was so used to making friends on the basis of race/ethnicity by convenience. I later learned that the strongest bonds shared in my friendships were not through the Asian-ness of someone but at the level of spiritual connection and mutual respect. Even going through a spiritual high for life, I was disheveled and confused as to where I stood in my environment. I couldn't really be the Asian that I was universally perceived to be by my Caucasian peers -- they saw all Asians as international students -- who vastly differ to American born Asians due to experiences. I struggled to explain myself to people who asked me of my background because I

couldn't identify myself with one that was common just to me. I didn't want to be grey as I felt everyone expected to view the world in black or white.

During my junior year in high school, I had undergone an emotional roller coaster from a relationship I was in. I had received news of infidelity, and I couldn't handle the emotional toll it took on me. This was at the prime when everyone was filling out college applications. I had worked hard in school to be at the top, but all that consumed my thoughts were of my relationship baggage which refrained me from applying to the UCs because I couldn't rationally write, let alone think, when I looked through the essay questions required. Of course, I got over it.

It was up until I went to Pasadena City College that I learned of a "new concept" that gave so much more meaning to my life as I scurried through the schedule of classes for random units to fill my GE requirements. Asian American Psychology was the first Asian American course I took. Before then, I thought I would have to identify myself as a foreigner because I wasn't Caucasian, but felt that it wasn't fair since I was born in the United States as an American. Then I would contradict myself by denying that I wasn't American because clearly, my skin was not white. My parents weren't originally from America, so does that make me not really American? But my characteristics were a blend of both Asian and American, so what to do?

As I took more Asian American classes, I decided to declare my major to Asian American Studies. My parents were appalled by my decision as they expected me to be a

business major, or in fact anything to do with math, even though I lacked math skills. My sister would overtly show her disdain for my choice since she saw the major as a joke, maybe since she's never heard of such a category. The discovery of something you can relate to immediately can spark interest. This high interest I have for self-identity can be strengthened and maybe even improvised as I continue my education now at UCLA.

Without history, life would be meaningless. If you technically break down the word history, it can be understood as "his story." One's story that has made an impact in someone's life is important, therefore it's been told, written and kept in books. It could be pointless therefore for people to achieve higher than others and accomplish more if there was no history to look back to. Everyone wants recognition; it's valuable to voice the experiences of our times for in fact, no two people can share the exact same experience and definitely no one can exactly feel the way I feel for the things I have undergone to get to where I am at. Everyone has construed their own interpretations of events and everyone has a particular perspective that cannot be universally understood unless studied by all.

It's true that there are no guarantees in life, as one close friend of mine once said to me. But one thing that is inevitably certain is change. And with change, that is what makes life's experiences so tremendously threatening and at the same time rewarding. It's threatening (terrible) in the sense that the future cannot always go as planned. I had planned, set goals, and taken steps to achieve a successful destiny but accidental situations occur, and may alter the tedious steps of order, into disorder. With this

disadvantage comes an advantage though. It is remarkably rewarding to know that as events and circumstances occur and change, I am able to adapt and mold a new experience. Thus, the transition to my life is a history that is being made, in the process of forming more clarity as I understand the history of my own family, and one day to be remembered by the current generation that casts a web of doubt, but will be proven just as my future generation will embrace and appreciate this history. My history will hopefully impact some lives as I believe that we are living to become something in this world and make a difference in someone's life.