

Taking One Step Backward and Two Steps Forward

By Jean Teng

As a graduating 4th year at UCLA minoring in Asian American Studies, I have written my share of oral histories, autobiographies, and self-reflective works for ethnic studies classes. However, each one is a unique challenge in digging deeper and uncovering something new. Although I always start out thinking that I have already made all the connections I can between myself and history, it never ends up being the case.

I am a 1.5 generation Chinese/Taiwanese American. I was born in Taipei, Taiwan in 1984, the youngest of two with an older brother 7 years my senior. My dad was a shipping clerk and my mom was a telephone operator. In 1987 when I was three years old, my family moved to Seattle, Washington and shortly thereafter settled in Torrance, California.

However, our immigration to the United States was nearly 40 years in the making. My dad and his family were refugees in the civil war between the Communists and the Kuomintang from 1947 – 1950. My paternal grandpa worked for the Kuomintang since he joined the military during WWII and had already retreated to Taiwan by late 1949. He could not go back to Yuing-nan province in southwest China to retrieve his family since the Communists had already taken the area. My grandma had to somehow flee to Taiwan with her four young children, including my dad, to join him. The dangerous journey took almost 8 months but by late 1950 their family was safely reunited in Taiwan. My grandpa continued working for the military, received training in supply and transportation in the US where he learned English and eventually became director

of Kee Lung Harbor in Taiwan in 1984. It was this position and the contacts that came with it that helped get my dad a job at Evergreen overseas freight in San Pedro, California.

After my maternal grandparents fled to Taiwan as well during the civil war, my maternal grandpa worked for a military consultant group for American soldiers in Taiwan. When the U.S. retreated from Taiwan, the government offered people who had serviced over 10 years eligibility for permanent residence in the US. My grandpa decided to apply and got a green card. In 1980 my maternal grandparents immigrated to Seattle, Washington. They couldn't apply for my family because my mom and dad were already married. After working in a couple restaurants in Seattle, my grandpa opened his own Chinese restaurant called Big John's where my grandma was the cook. After 5 years my grandparents became U.S. citizens and could then apply for their married children, including my mom. My mom and dad decided to take the opportunity because of better educational opportunities for my brother and me.

My parents chose to settle in Torrance, California in the summer of 1987 so my brother and I could apply for school. They chose the city of Torrance from a recommendation from a friend, but also because it had a better school system than San Pedro and less ethnically concentrated than San Gabriel, which was the other consideration. Although San Gabriel would have been a substantially cheaper and transition-friendly choice, my dad didn't think the kids would learn English well in an area concentrated with ethnic Chinese. My family still lives in the Torrance area today.

This is the background in which my family came to reside in the US. Like many immigrant families, my parents sacrificed better jobs, a higher standard of living, proximity to friends and family to give my brother and I a better life chance. They took themselves out of a comfortable and stable middle class life in Taiwan to struggle as working class immigrants raising two young children. Although my dad held down a good shipping clerk job at Evergreen, he took a minimum wage job at Subway on nights and weekends to help fill in the gaps and provide the façade of a middle class life. My mom was a long-term nanny for two kids from wealthier Chinese families so she could raise them and me at the same time. And like many immigrant and 2nd generation kids, my brother and I served as mediators between American and Chinese, translating, reading mail, taking phone calls, accompanying my parents on errands, all the little things that kids with English-speaking parents take for granted.

Looking back, I was so unappreciative and naïve of my family's situation. I was jealous of those two kids, who had become like adopted little brothers to me, with their big houses and lawns and fancy toys. I was resentful that my mom never volunteered at school like those other moms that brought in balloons and cake for their kids' birthdays or came with us on field trips on the excuse of embarrassing broken English. I was resentful that I rarely got to see my dad growing up because he would come home after my bedtime and be gone before I woke up and work overtime on weekends and holidays. I was ashamed we had to rummage garage sales early Saturday mornings for things that weren't good enough for people to keep but were good enough for us. I took for granted all of the luxuries I received because of these things.

When I think about my childhood, I don't think it is very typical at all. I sometimes think I never had the same carefree innocence and freedom that my peers did. I don't remember my childhood as the best time in my life. Although I don't initially think of the fondest memories, I can look back now in a different perspective where my history intersects with my life. I can see how growing up in this way was a testament to my parents struggles and our resilience as a family. We collectively took a step back in order to take two steps forward. It is both terrible and magnificent because of the things that were lost but also the things that we have gained over many years. My childish feelings of shame and resentment now give way to a new sense of pride, survival and achievement that rings true in both the past and present.