

Putting Myself into History While Learning It

By Lin Annie Xiang

The reason I am here in the United State is not because the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the Vietnam War or the Chinese Cultural Revolution in China. I personally have a very limited understanding of these historical events. All I know is my parents sent me to America to get a better education. Both of my parents were born and raised during the period of Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s in China, and they were very lucky because they did not get sent to the villages to serve as servants. Put in other words, not being sent to the village meant they didn't miss the opportunity to go to college to acquire higher education. That is why both of my parents have college degree, which is a very significant accomplishment compared to other individuals who were born in the 50s in China.

My parents came from two different family backgrounds. My father was born in a capitalist family when my grandfather was doing a ceramic business with Hong Kong and overseas companies. My grandfather graduated from Beijing University in the early 1900s in China. During that period of time, most people in China believed in Communism; Capitalism was an unwelcome belief in China. On the other hand, my mother was born in a Communist family and her father served as a General in the Communist army. He took part in many battles and fought for the Communist troops; therefore, he became one of the greatest figures in the early years of China. There is no doubt my parents could not easily get married at the time because

of their conflicting and unique backgrounds; however, my parents still got married despite their different political preferences and they were blessed.

In February 1983, I was born in a local hospital in Canton, China. I was the only child in our family because of the One Child Policy of Chinese government at the time. Under this policy, one family can only have a single child; therefore, I have no siblings. The closest relatives to me are my cousins. We were very close to each other, and we treated each other just like brothers and sisters. I see them just like we are blood-related siblings. My parents do not talk about their past experiences to me unless I ask about it; so, I have little knowledge of the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen Square incident or the Falun Gong. However, it changed after I moved to the United States and saw those various resources regarding these issues. I was surprised by the well organized and precise information people had oversea. Then I questioned why didn't the Chinese government educate their people and give them good explanations on those events. With all these concerns, I began to search for different answers in America. I wanted to learn more about those events from different perspectives.

I remember the day when my mother and I had just arrived at Los Angeles seven years ago. I was naïve and anxious because it was not my choice to come to the United States. It was my parents' decision to come here for our family to get a better life and better education for me. At first, I didn't know why we should move to another country that is so different from China, and I didn't even know what the differences were. To me, both countries were the same, but they just have a different name and they were far away from other. Other than that,

I didn't know the purpose of family migration, and I didn't expect to come to America. I think I am different. I think I am the exception to the American dream. I still vividly remember I told my mom I wanted to go back to China on the first day we arrived in Los Angeles. However, I am getting used to the life in America, and I love to study here because I do get the best quality of education, and I do gain different perspectives on viewing things. More significant to me is I get to understand myself and other Asians and Asian Americans better. If I were still in China, I would not have this opportunity.

I was anxious attending Rowland High School in the beginning because I felt lonely. At school, I didn't know anyone and to be honest, no one was willing to talk to me because I spoke poor English and some people called me FOB (fresh out of the boat). I didn't know the word FOB until there were other new immigrants who came to our school. It was such a shame being called FOB; therefore, I never called other immigrants FOB. I see myself as a very typical Chinese who has all the Chinese characteristics and culture. My physical appearance, my genes, and my blood indicate that I am a 100% Chinese. Also, my family, culture, language and heritage reinforce my Chinese identity. I have no difficulty to identify myself as Chinese in the United States. For those who were born here, people categorize them as Chinese Americans or ABC (American-born Chinese). That is how most of the people distinguish Chinese and Chinese American. I never felt intimidated by their better English ability. I just didn't understand why there was an invisible gap between Chinese and Chinese Americans. Sometimes I felt bad that we couldn't get along and help each other. As

a result, in our high school we had many different groups among Chinese; even new immigrants separated into groups of different regions.

When I took Asian American Studies courses at UCLA I learned that immigrants like me who come here between the ages of eleven to sixteen years old are called the 1.5 generation. Before I moved to the State, I had never thought that self-identity is a problem or a controversial issue among second or further generations of Chinese Americans. Maybe self-identity is not an issue for me, but identity is a very sensitive and important topic for many Chinese Americans. Chinese Americans often identify themselves as American, Asian American, Taiwanese American or Chinese American; yet, from my observation, there is only a small portion of Chinese Americans who identify themselves as Chinese. Therefore, self-identity is an important issue for us to explore.

At some point, I do feel I connected to the Asian American history; however, I feel that I am more like putting myself into the history while learning it. When I learned about the Chinese Exclusion Act, I felt very bad because I am a Chinese and even though those Chinese are not my ancestors, I still feel their pain. Therefore, I can connect my own experience as a new immigrant to the early Chinese immigrants. We as the first generation in America share the similar experiences through migration. However, immigrants in contemporary society have much more rights, freedom and opportunities than before. So it is frightening when I think about the unequal treatment of our ancestors; on the other hand, I feel magnificent because

they were very important and brave in Asian American history. Without their efforts, I would not have this great opportunity to learn Asian American history.

After graduating from UCLA, I want to work as a college advisor at a community college. It is important for me to share my experiences to new immigrant students. I don't want new immigrants to feel they are poor students because they do not speak English well, and I do not want them to get confused about the American education system. It is hard for most of the immigrants to assimilate American ways in a short time. Then, my job is to provide them a better learning environment and explain to them the education system and let them go to college for higher education. Currently, I am working at UCLA Bruin Crop in the One Source Program as a tutor in Chinatown. Our program is designed to help high school dropouts, low-income and pregnant students to go to school and provide them internships in the community. More importantly, our job is to encourage these students to move on and find valuable jobs in the society. Most of my students are new immigrants from Canton, China. They go through a similar process like me at high school, but they are different because they live in the Chinese enclave of Chinatown. Therefore, they lack the environment for learning English. A few of my students have been to the Universal Studios and heard about 60 Freeway. None of their family owns a car or house; they all live in the complex apartment building with more than ten units. I often ask my students why they come to America. The answers I get are all the same, which is that they are not sure about the reason of being here. I think my students are very lucky because their parents do not want them to feel the pressures they have from work and life. However, I want my students to know the purpose of being

here is to get an education. For sure, they need to set their goals up high and get as much knowledge as possible and leave Chinatown and then become a useful person and serve their people.