

**Reflection Paper:  
An Essay for a College Course of Asian American Psychology**

Alice Lin

“Go back to China where you belong!” The two faces of my cultural identity never really hit me until these hurtful words were thrown at my mother when I was in the car with her. My mom had taken a parking spot that this lady was also vying for, and she used these words to get back at her. People often seem to use superficial remarks to offend another, such as calling someone “fat” or “ugly” when they have no other hurtful statements in their verbal repertoire. I had just never thought that being Chinese was something I should be ashamed of. To be honest, it was not something that, growing up, I was either ashamed of or proud of- I just had not really given it much thought.

Growing up in a primarily white town in southern California, all of my best friends were white and primarily Jewish. I knew that I looked different from my friends; but I did not really know what it meant, except for the simple matter that I had to be dragged out of bed early every Saturday morning, along with my sisters, and sent off to Chinese school. Also, our Chinese upbringing allowed my mom to use random Chinese proverbs to convey simple life lessons along the way. My sisters and I were very bitter toward Chinese school, because all of our friends were allowed to have fun on Friday evenings, whereas we had to sit at our kitchen table together until we had finished our homework for that week. My parents made sure that we spoke Chinese while at home, and reinforced the language by signing us up for Chinese school. In hindsight, I can not thank them enough for encouraging us to continue with it, but at the time, there was nothing I hated more than having to go to more class early every Saturday morning.

As a child, I was very shy and introverted (which definitely is the typical Asian stereotype). Because my mother recognized this in me, she signed my sisters and I up for the Chinese speech/poetry reciting competitions through our Chinese school. In retrospect, I can see that my mother had a very carefully laid-out plan in raising my two sisters and me. Her childrearing tactics reminds me of our discussion in class about how Asian American parents display their love for their children by guiding them into a successful life. My mom recognized our individual strengths and helped us foster them in ourselves, and the three of us have grown up to become very different people but with very similar moral and family values. We had a unique environment growing up, as my dad was constantly traveling, and my mom and sisters are the only family I have in the U.S. Because of this, the four of us all became very close- sometimes we joke that my mom is our fourth sister and consider her one of our best friends. As this is the case, I could never imagine putting her in a nursing home in the future. I think my sisters and I agreed to each have a room for her in our houses and have her rotate from one to the other after she retires.

With respect to the elderly, Asian culture emphasizes respect toward them. Each year, my family gives money to our grandparents on both sides to show respect. Also, it is unheard of in many Asian cultures to put one’s parents in a nursing home. I was surprised the other day when I heard the

following tagline on the radio: “Now they can live alone without being alone.” These words shocked me, as I listened to this radio advertisement for “Life Alert” for the elderly. The proposal here was to purchase the “Life Alert” package for your aging parents, so that they would not need to bother you in times of need. My family is very close, and my sisters and I seem to all want to take care of our parents in the future and remain close with them. This aspect of me sometimes creates a divide between my white friends from home and myself. Many of my friends never seem to want to spend time with their parents, and expect to go out together every night when we are home in the summer. I love spending time with my mom and my sisters, and my friends sometimes would not understand why I wanted to spend so much time with them. They try to get away from the house as often as possible, and want to move as far away as possible from their parents in the future. I always envisioned a future which included my family living relatively close to me and maintaining our close relationship.

Dating is another aspect in which I noticed a significant difference between my friends and myself. My mother’s original rule was that we could not date until we were 18, but that rule only really applied to me it seems. My mom, although still maintaining many of her conservative views on dating, has become progressively more Westernized as we have grown older. She knows that she is raising American daughters and has adjusted respectively. We recently had a talk in which she discussed her views on premarital sex and moving in before marriage- she told us her thoughts and yet said that she would not tell us what not to do. We were able to have open and honest discussion with her about the topic, and it was refreshing to be able to express our views and hear hers at the same time. One of the rules in our house is that we cannot be in a closed room with a guy. The guy that I dated in high school was very intimidated by my mother, especially when he brought me home late one evening and she and my aunt were sitting outside on the steps waiting for us. I definitely think Asian parents, on average, have stricter rules for their children when it comes to dating. Most of my other Asian friends agree, as many of them were not allowed to date until college either. Also, I think a majority of my Chinese friends’ parents would prefer that they marry Chinese as well.

The Asian philosophy is biased toward community over the individual, unlike Western societies, which value independence above interdependence. This emphasis on family and community extends to our boyfriends and future husbands, as my mom always urges us to be friendly with our boyfriends’ families. One of my best friends from home (who is Jewish) is always complaining to me how she does not like how her boyfriend’s family is so super close, and she would like to move as far away from them as possible after they get married. I was shocked to hear this, because I always valued close family ties and would very much like to be close with my boyfriend/husband’s family. She thought that a crazy idea. In a similar vein to the high value placed on community, growing up, my sisters and I never received an allowance for helping out with household chores. When we found out that our friends were given money to help out around the house, we approached our mother about the situation. She told us that these are everyone’s dishes that we are washing, everyone’s trash that we are taking out, everyone’s floors that we are vacuuming- no one pays her to do the chores around the house either. This philosophy made plenty of sense to us, and from then on, we all contributed toward household duties in whatever way we could. In retrospect, it seems like we were treated almost as equals in the family regarding various issues. For example, regarding drugs and alcohol, I do not think

my mom has ever explicitly told us not to do drugs or drink alcohol; but rather, she expects and knows that we will be responsible with that. Dr. Aktar's speech echoed many of my mother's on this topic—the more you tell your children not to do something, the more they will want to rebel. If the parents teach them lessons throughout their lives and instill in them a sense of responsibility and trust, the parents should be confident to allow their children to face various challenges on their own. My mom was always very open with us about her experiences and her beliefs. Through these open discussions, she allowed us to form our own opinions while providing us with the necessary guidance along the way.

Each summer when my sisters and I were young, the family would travel together to Taiwan to visit the rest of our family. I always enjoyed listening to my grandparents' stories of my parents' childhood. They seemed to be raised in such a different time and culture than my sisters and I had been. My mom told me that teachers would hit the children's fingers with sticks whenever they got problems wrong. I could not imagine anything like this ever happening in the U.S.; but with the Asian emphasis on discipline, hard-work, and academic achievement, such measures were commonplace. I remember the summer when I noticed a drastic cultural divide with my grandmother. The woman exemplifies the Asian concept of "saving face." We discussed in class how many Asians will disregard a mental disorder, as this is seen to reflect poorly on the family. A member of my mom's family experienced depression during his teenage years and attempted to hurt himself. My grandmother's response to this situation was pretending as if nothing had ever happened. She could not bear to have anyone know that a member of her family would act in such a way. I could not believe the way she treated the situation, but to her, saving face is of utmost importance. She was a principal of a school and my grandfather was a general of the Taiwanese army, and there was no way she would allow her family to look poorly in the eyes of others.

There is another concept in Chinese tradition regarding one's ancestors and how circumstances in our lives reflect their actions in the past. Whenever something lucky happens to any of us, my mom will tell us that our ancestors must have done something good. Because my grandfather was a high-ranking general in charge of the seaports, he could have underhandedly accepted large gifts from smugglers during a time when many government officials were well-known to be accepting bribes. However, he acted honorably and did not once take advantage of his position of power. In turn, my mom will always bring up this story and tell us that we should thank our ancestors for our good fortune, reminding us to be honorable in the meantime.

I am really glad that I decided to take this course on Asian American psychology, as it has given me the opportunity to meet people who were raised in circumstances similar to me. Most of my close friends are white, and the experience of sharing my stories and listening to others' similar experiences in class has really been a refreshing one. It is always nice meeting people who have had similar experiences growing up, as I definitely find that sometimes being a first generation American creates a rift between some of my friends and me. However, I have never been prouder to be able to embrace American traditions, while at the same time maintaining my Chinese upbringing and cultural traditions.