

2008-2009  
CBC Writing Competition  
Junior Level Entry  
Category: Non Fiction  
Author: Selina Wang

## “Yes, I am Chinese”

Sitting on the kitchen table with my feet propped up on a chair, I slowly fell into the rhythm of Grandma’s kneading. When the dough finally became smooth and Grandma’s hands were chalky white with flour, she ripped off small pieces of the dough, flattened them, and added in vegetables, spices, and meat. Gathering the outside edges of the dough, she twisted the top into a bun. When fifty neat rows were made, Grandma placed the plate onto the stove to be transformed into the mouthwatering bao zi. My life was like the dough, so smooth and vulnerable, filled with a million Chinese spices, ready to be changed.

Every day, Grandma would pack me one bao zi and one spiced egg for lunch. At school, I enjoyed playing the games with all of my fellow classmates. Maybe we all looked different, maybe we didn’t all speak the same language, but we all had one thing in common: we liked recess. Life was simple; school consisted of play time and fun. However, Mom and Dad gradually noticed my heavy Chinese accent. Concerned, my parents struggled to have me speak more English. But once I hit 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, Mom and Dad were satisfied; I would come home every day blabbering in rapid English. Grandma and Grandpa could hardly understand me half the time. Each time they asked me to switch languages, I rolled my eyes, feeling as if my grandparents were inadequate; if I could speak fluent English in one year, why could they not, after five? Despite my

newfound reluctance of speaking Chinese, I continued to devour every man tou, za cai, mian tiao, and Chinese dish my grandma ever made.

For my first day of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, Grandma packed me one bao zi and one spiced egg for lunch, just like any other regular day. As I took out my food from my pink princess lunchbox, I saw all of my friends staring at me. Ignoring their penetrating stares, I ate my bao zi and then continued to peel my spiced egg. Suddenly, Shelby yelled *your egg is rotten!* The whole table went silent. My face burned as I defended my food, saying that it was delicious. The egg was *spiced*, not rotten. However, my sputtering protests were of no avail. By now the whole table was in an uproar; some girls were squeamish at the sight of a black egg, other girls fascinated. Unable to hold back my tears any longer, I sprinted out of the classroom.

For the first time ever, I told Grandma to not pack me my regular lunch. Instead, I asked for a PB&J. Puzzled, she asked why I would want anything else besides my favorite foods. She had never heard of a pee bee and jay before. I sighed in exasperation, explaining that it was two pieces of bread with peanut butter and jelly smothered inside. When I reached the classroom the next day, I felt my face burn again at the thought of yesterday's trauma. Accompanied with the burning sensation, I also observed something I had never noticed before: food was not the only difference between my new friends and me. Our faces were different: our hair, skin, and eyes too. Shelby and Katie had curly blonde hair. Sara and Madeline had blue eyes. Katrina and Maggie had freckles. All of them had fair skin. For the first time ever, I felt like the odd one out. Not a single person in the room had thick black hair, dark eyes, and tan skin. During lunch

time, I cautiously pulled out my sandwich. No one said a word. But I didn't care about food anymore. It didn't matter what I ate, nothing I ate would make me look like one of them. When I came home that day, Grandma noticed my dismal mood. Mumbling, I told her of my new observation. She replied, *Ai ya, Little Lina, you are Chinese. It does not matter if you are in America, people will always see you as Chinese. You should feel proud.*

That same year, Grandma and Grandpa returned to China, taking some of my Chinese culture with them. Throughout elementary school, I spoke Chinese less and less at home. The English language was insidious, gradually eating up my Chinese bit by bit. My grandparents were no longer present to inject Chinese culture into my life. Although my parents spoke Chinese, I felt rebellious and replied in English every time. I even started to slightly resent my heritage in middle school. I was growing sick of the Asian "smart" stereotype. I was tired of pointing out that my eyes were the same size as everyone else's. I was tired of trying to deal with my heavy, and thick black hair. People expected something from me just because I was Asian. I dreaded it when people asked for my ethnicity. My reply would always be answered with *Oh; you're Asian so you must be smart. You probably have a 4.0 huh? I bet you play the piano and some other instrument. I bet you're in all honor classes. I bet you are good at math.* So maybe they were right. But did that give them any right to assume anything about my life? It was not fair that all of my hard work in school and involvement in extracurriculars should all be attributed to the fact that I am Asian. I achieved because I *wanted* to, not because my "Asian-ness" caused it.

A few years later, my parents announced that we were going to visit China again during the summer. We landed in Hui Xian, a poor town in the countryside, where my Grandparents lived. When we finally reached my grandparents' humble abode to see my relatives come out in swarms, I felt ashamed: it was wrong to be so critical of the country where my loved ones lived. Grandma embraced me in a giant bear hug. I relaxed into her familiar smell of Chinese spices. As we conversed with relatives and other neighbors, Grandma quickly noticed that my Chinese had declined. She frowned in disapproval; I now spoke like a *wai guo ren*, an outsider. I explained that in the years after she had left, I did not have the chance to speak Chinese as often. Grandma shot me a look of disappointment. I felt my face burn from shame; there was no excuse for my American accent. Over the next few weeks I grew to appreciate the beautiful countryside and the village people. Before I even knew it, it was time to pack the bags and leave Hui Xian to fly to Beijing.

A mere two hour plane ride to see my Uncle in Beijing changed the world completely; from rural to urban. Uncle took us to the Forbidden City, other ancient palaces and ruins, and finally the Great Wall of China. It was pouring rain. However, after about half a mile through the Wall, the rain suddenly came to a lull. The clouds parted to reveal a beautiful sky, with a rainbow painted across it. I stopped walking and came up to the wall to peer across it. Laid before me was 5,000 years of history stretching 4,000 miles telling the story of thousands of people who built this immense structure. Perhaps even my ancestors from ancient times had helped build this symbol of China. An unfamiliar sensation arose inside my body, radiating from my head down to my toes. The surging sensation was pride; pride for my culture; pride for my country. Suddenly, I was

viewing China from an entirely new perspective. It was as if before I looked at China from ground level, but now I saw China from a bird's eye view. And was that view beautiful. The bird's eye view exposed rural China, urban China, ancient China, and modern China, encompassing the country's rich culture and long history.

My third journey to China, not my last journey, initiated a newfound sense of pride in my origins, in my heritage. It inspired me to once again speak Chinese like I had so many years ago. A few days after the trip, I invited a friend over for dinner. Instead of ordering in pizza like we usually did, I told her that I would teach her how to make a steamed bun type of food. After making the dough, I kneaded it until it finally became smooth and my hands were chalky white with flour. I ripped off small pieces of the dough, flattened them, and added in vegetables, spices, and meat. Placing the plate of bao zi onto the stove my friend asked me, "What kind of food is this? Are you Chinese?"

I proudly replied, "Yes, I am Chinese."