

My Culture
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Boom, boom, boom. The beat of the drum, my heart pumping. The shuffle of feet. The crowds cheering. The Washington Monument just visible in the distance. The loud music blasting from the loudspeakers, and the voice of the commentators. I marched and banged my Taiko drum to the beat of the music at the National Cherry Blossom Parade in Washington D.C.

Taiko drumming has helped me express my Japanese culture to American and Japanese audiences. It has also helped me connect with Japanese culture even when I am not in Japan.

Everyone has their own distinct culture. Everyone does their own rituals, eats their own food, practices their own religion, plays their own games, or does their own sports. I also have my own culture. My mom is Japanese and my dad is American, so I experience American and Japanese culture everyday. I say thank you before every meal in Japanese, and celebrate Jewish holidays every year. I have been to Japan multiple times for extended periods of time. I feel very connected to Japanese culture, and I make the most of my time when I visit Japan. When I come back to the U.S. I always wish I could have stayed longer.

In the U.S., it might seem I would have a hard time being able to connect to Japanese culture. Fortunately, I have had the opportunity to take part in Taiko drumming and Japanese school.

Taiko drumming comes from Okinawa, the most Southern group of Islands in Japan. Okinawa is in between China and Japan's mainland, so the style of clothes used in Taiko drumming is a little different from mainland Japanese styles. The clothing is a hybrid of Japanese and Chinese clothing. The type Taiko drumming I perform is called "Eisa" in Okinawa. Eisa is performed to honor the spirits of our ancestors. We drum and yell so that our ancestor spirits can hear us from above, however, we also do it for the joy of performing.

When I perform Taiko drumming at school or large events everyone feels connected. Even when the whole crowd is American, everyone is into it. They even sometimes start dancing with us. For example, when I performed at my elementary school, students danced to a song called "Soran Bushi", which requires no drums. They were laughing and dancing. This was also special because I performed this at "International Night", so everyone at our school had the opportunity to share their own culture. At other public events, total strangers will congratulate us after our performances. Therefore, Taiko has helped me connect me with my culture and other people.

Another way I have been able to experience Japanese culture in the U.S. is attending Japanese school. I attend Japanese school every Saturday. Math, language arts/calligraphy, and social studies and science are taught at Japanese school. At the beginning and end of every period, the students and teachers bow to each other in appreciation. This is a sign of respect. It is taken very seriously. Two students that were selected are class leaders lead the bowing and make sure

everyone is behaving correctly. There is usually one boy and one girl, so everyone gets to be class leader.

Every September, my Japanese school hosts a field day. It is a very big deal. The score is kept, and a winner or loser is always determined. Every student wants to win, but at the end of the day, everyone had fun win or lose. I particularly enjoy this event because all the students have fun together. Each person enjoys even if they are opponents. We laugh, dance, and do everything a kid can do.

In conclusion, being able to experience and connect with two sides of culture everyday has help me meet new people, expand my knowledge of Japan, and make new friends. First, by learning Taiko, I was able to meet kind, hard-working teachers that eventually became best friends and great mentors. I have also been able to express Japanese culture with American people and connect them to it. By going to Japanese school, I have been able to experience togetherness, learned discipline and respect.

Throughout my years of experiencing Japanese culture, I have seen more random acts of kindness and a joyous, happy community of people. In recent years I believe this has been disappearing outside of this community. To grow this community, being able to understand and connect to different people and their culture is vital. Therefore, my culture is very important to me. What about yours?

Half-on-Half

Paloma "Dakota" A. Corredoira
Ridgeview Middle School

"My job,
My purpose,
Is to tell a story,
A piece of art,
To make a point that lives
In your heart."

So, I will tell a story. A matter of opinion whether or not it's interesting, as it's not in story form, but why should it be? It is, in fact, my own little "story".

"When I get older,
Will I be colder?
Nobody to warm my heart?"

If I get younger,
Will I be stronger?
Is there a great something
I could start?"

I am a poet. I am a writer. I am an actress. A politician. So, naturally, I cannot decide whether to write a poem or an essay. So, am I allowed to do both? I have no idea. So I'm taking fragments of my own poetry, of the poetry of others--The only way to tell my story, of my culture.

"Boy with purple skin,
Not once did he win
When he stood up for another.

Girl who sings
To the wind,
Why do you bother?

They know your soul
Is worth more than their gold,
But their hearts are still cold."

I was born in the mid-Northeast in the mid-Spring. I am an American. But every bit Northeastern, Mid-Atlantic, every bit of an American I am, I am from Montevideo, Uruguay, from La Paloma, for which I was named at birth. I'm as much of a Sci-Fi enthusiast as I am a seashell collector.

"Pop-rocks,
Lemon drops,
Candy canes,
Window panes.

Tangerines,
iPhone screens,
Drinking fountain,
Little mountain.

Pine trees,
Ocean breeze,
Baseball caps,
Freestyle raps."

I tend to think of everything in theoretics, a poem, or an essay. Every time I have to have a difficult conversation that would make me mad if I paid too much attention to the words I construct a mini-speech out of everything I would get in trouble for saying to help me stay calm. And I think a lot of things I'm not allowed to say.

"Talk less,
Smile more,
Don't let them know what you're against
Or what you're for..."

"You can't be serious."
"You wanna get ahead?
Fools who run their mouths off wind up dead..."

"Yo, yo yo yo yo yo,
What time is it?
Show time!"
"Like I said..."
(Hamilton, "Aaron Burr, Sir?", Lin-Manuel Miranda)

Did I forget Hamilton? *Hamilton, an American Musical*, was written by the son of immigrants about the [formerly] least-loved founding father. The musical got more and more popular. By the time I had known it for a month, every word of every song was memorized by me. I started reading the book that inspired the musical--Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton*. Alexander Hamilton's story is awe-inspiring, actually--An illegitimate orphan, living in Saint Croix, survived a hurricane, and his letter to his father about it was so powerful that it was locally published and his trip to America, the New World, was funded by his town. He tried to shed his past, but he was constantly trying to build up his legacy. But his writing never changed; Always rushed, always beautifully written, always perfect, and incredibly persuasive and passionate. He died in a duel

after offending someone whose life was incredibly parallel to his own--Aaron Burr--and refusing to apologize.

“Legacy...
What is a legacy?
It’s planting seeds in a garden you never get to see,
I wrote some notes at the beginning of the song someone will sing for me,
America, you great unfinished symphony,
You sent for me!
“You let me make a difference,
A place where even orphan immigrants can leave their fingerprints
And rise up,
I’m running and my time’s up!
Wise up!
Eyes up--”
(Hamilton, “The World Was Wide Enough”, Lin-Manuel Miranda)

This is getting really long; long enough that I should end it. So I’ll end it with a little overview

I am Latina. I have been called racist by people who think I am Caucasian, just because I don’t like them personally. Once, I got in an argument, naming no names, and the person said “You’re only mad at me because I’m Spanish!” and I had to say that my family was from South America. It is frankly embarrassing and offensive to me that just because my skin is pale I am assumed to be generically “White”.

The fact that I am Latina does not mean that I am incapable of racism, because no race is incapable of it, but I will always be open to anyone, no matter what their color of skin is, and I will never be a racist, because even though I don’t know what it’s like to be black, I will always know how embarrassing it is to be treated based on the color of your skin. We should not be treated any way based on these uncontrolled factors.

My Culture

Dharma Gonzalez-Ferrette
Earle B. Wood Middle School

For many people, the question “Where are you from?” is simple to answer. But in my case, I have to take some time to think about how to answer. The reason is because I am a third culture kid. Meaning my mom is from one culture—she is American, and my dad is from another—he is Costa Rican, and I have spent nearly all of my life in a completely different culture.

I was born in Washington, D.C. and for my first 10 years of life, I lived in Indonesia, Egypt, and Bolivia. My passport says I’m American. When I move somewhere new I’m considered American. But, I didn’t actually live in the United States until I was ten years old. I’ve also never lived in Costa Rica, but I get to visit family there every summer.

In my opinion, there are many challenges in being a third culture kid. For example, depending on where you are going, you might have to learn a new language, which can be hard. When I lived in La Paz, Bolivia, I had to learn how to speak Spanish. It was hard initially because learning a new language is like learning how to walk for the first time. You also always have to learn how to respect the customs and traditions of a country, so you can be sure you fit in. In some places, it is rude to point. In others, you may have to dress more conservatively. In others, you may not make eye contact. Each place is different and in each place, I have to learn the “rules of the game.” I think that being a third culture kid has made me more sensitive when it comes to respect for others and their beliefs and thoughts. I have really opened my eyes to everything wherever I live, and it has really helped me understand more about people. Another thing that makes being a third culture kid hard is that even though I was not born in the country where I may be living, I do come to think of it as my home. For example, I lived in Bolivia for five and a half years and for a long time felt as if it was my culture and my home. My mom tells me, however, that when I was younger I used to consider myself to be Egyptian. I had lived there for my first 4 years of life, and actually, I learned my counting in Arabic and some of my favorite TV shows were in Arabic.

Now I refer to the United States as my “home” even though when I moved here a couple of years ago, I had to learn how to be “American”—how people act, what is cool and what’s not, and many other things. Sometimes I think how weird it is that I get to live in places people dream of going to, yet I don’t feel as if I can count that place as my culture. Overall, I have many cultures and am happy to be part of each one and that each one is a part of me. I will always be a third culture kid.

The Truthful Confession of my Identity Crisis

Jessica Ye

Thomas W. Pyle Middle School

No human can ever escape the influences of their culture - your culture represents who you are. As someone from multiple cultural backgrounds, I understand this theory in a bittersweet way. Sometimes, it seems as if it's easier to be someone who only needs to worry about one culture than someone who needs to worry about more.

Although I was born in the United States, my family is Chinese. My parents moved to the United States like many other immigrants in search of a better life. Up until this year I lived in Ohio, where the population is much less diverse than the population in Maryland. The majority of my classmates and teachers were less considerate and less understanding of different cultures and traditions - especially those of a country so far away. Whereas there are many Chinese-American students in eighth grade at Pyle, there were only four Chinese-American students in my entire grade at my old school. The school district tried to enforce diversity, and some people honored diversity, but most students didn't. Some were even so ignorant as to mock student's cultures in front of said student. Many times, when I heard classmates saying offensive or inaccurate things about my culture, I would immediately correct them or tell them to stop. Sometimes, I felt like I was more Chinese than American. But then, I would try to read the characters on my Chinese textbook from my Chinese school or I would ask my parents about Chinese stories and I would feel like a complete American again. This sort of pattern went on and on, every vacation to China making it worse. I just didn't understand every aspect of Chinese culture. I was starting to fear that because all of my relatives lived in China, with my limited language and cultural understanding, I wouldn't be able to communicate with them. Then, in third grade, I went to China for two months of school, and I realized that I could never be Chinese. I was too American, I could never become a disciplined citizen that fully understood and embraced the cultural icons of China. I thought the government was ridiculous, the required school uniforms were uncomfortable, I couldn't get used to the environment, and the opinions that my classmates had on almost every subject were extremely different from my own. In an environment where efficiency and precision were demanded, someone who made every mistake under the sun like myself did not belong.

Speaking of accidents, in fourth grade, I accidentally wrote my name in Chinese on a page of my writing journal and a classmate called me out on it. He asked me why I was always doing 'Asian things' and humiliated me in front of my entire class. Even though he got in trouble for that, I didn't care. A lonely and slightly vengeful bitterness had settled inside of myself that made me understand for the first time in my life that I wasn't the same as everyone else, race really did matter, I wasn't American. I never told my family about how I felt about this event because I was afraid that they would deem it nonsense and tell me that I was a Chinese-American and that I should be proud of it. Before, I would have accepted that and moved on with my life, but at that time, I wasn't even sure what a Chinese-American was anymore, as I obviously wasn't

Chinese or American. I also was unwilling to tell any friends how lost I felt was because I knew that they wouldn't understand my issue and just tell me that I was 'American enough.' However, I did ask my two best friends who coincidentally also had Chinese families if they considered themselves Chinese or American. One who had been born in China and had moved here considered herself Chinese. The other claimed that she was American. For the rest of that year, I tried to fit myself into one of those two molds because it didn't appear to me that anyone else was having the same problem as me. Over time, I learned to ignore the pinch in my heart every time someone brought up their culture.

In fifth grade, I learned of the term 'identity crisis.' It showed me that I wasn't the only one who didn't know who they were. Someone must have experienced it to come up with the word. I realized that I was suffering through an identity crisis of great proportions. If I wasn't Chinese or American, then what was I? Was I some sort of unknown outsider doomed to be perpetually distant from the joyful lives of everyday people? What had I done for the universe to curse me in such a horrible way? Questions of this sort often coursed through my head, leaving me isolated emotionally. However, by the universe's decree, life moved on. In no time, I started sixth grade and my troubles turned from my nonexistent cultural identity to my new social life and keeping above the new surging storm of homework. Halfway through the year, people started getting reputations, and very surprisingly in my opinion, one of my labels became 'the conspiracy theorist.' Apparently, this was because I often found solutions to problems in strange, unique ways. One day on my way to school, I thought, 'If everyone thinks that I always come up with solutions to seemingly impossible questions, then I should be able to solve my identity crisis.'

Throughout the year, I tried to discover who I was from every perspective that I could think of. To my dismay, nothing worked. I was still lost and without an identity. It was only until my old school's equivalent of TAG had a class where all students had to come up with as many words as possible to describe themselves that I finally started to figure out who I truly was.

Sitting at a desk near the edge of the classroom, I idly played around with my pencil. I had listed out all of the obvious choices: short, girl, bibliophile. But I soon got stuck. I asked my friend what she put and almost all of her choices were culture-related. Feeling lonely, bordering on melancholy that I couldn't relate to a given culture, I started listing everything about myself that didn't fit into the label of Chinese or American. Soon, I had a giant list of things that made me not American, but Chinese and vice versa. As I looked at my completed sheet of paper. I realized that I was both Chinese and American. I could never become just one or the other, and I definitely wasn't some dismal lone wolf. I find it ironic that in a time when people are being destroyed by their reputations, it was my reputation that saved me. Sometimes, the true difference really is living up to the expectations that others place on you. I never imagined myself as a particularly creative person, yet with this 'alter-ego' in mind, I was able to solve a problem that had haunted me for years.

This is the conclusion of the story of my identity crises, yet I still have more that I want to add to this topic. I want to make it clear that not every Chinese-American identifies themselves in the

same way that I do. Not every Chinese-American will go through the same struggles as I did and not every Chinese-American will identify themselves as Chinese-American. Depending on where they live, and who they truly feel like, they can be whoever they want to be.

It has been two years now since I rediscovered who I am. And even though people still believe ridiculous lies about my culture and make fun of my roots, it doesn't matter. Although sometimes it's hard to bear with the constant jeers and jabs pointed toward me, being from multiple cultures is a blessing and it gives me a richer background. And you, reader, if you are being hurt by what others are saying about your culture or if you are lost and aren't sure who to identify with, remember to always be who you are and think outside the box. You'll find who you are and those that make fun of you for having an amazing cultural identity are the ones that need to find respect in their own cultures and identities.