

Two Halves

I've always been different from the people around me. Different in the way that I look, different in the way that I talk, and different in the way that I think.

When I first moved to the United States, I don't remember seeing a single Asian kid at my preschool or kindergarten other than me. My teachers had no idea how to deal with an Asian name, and my Chinese name, 张若然 (zhāng ruò rán), originally three distinct syllables, became three identical utterances (ran ran ran) in the mouths of those around me. Since I was still young, however, I picked up the language quickly, along with the southern accent whose existence I wasn't even aware of. Now, years later, I don't remember having a Southern drawl, but it seems so easy to fall into a southern accent if ever I choose to.

We lived in Mississippi for three years before we moved to Washington. Then, when I was eight, my grandparents, who live in China, visited and stayed with us for a year. That was the first time I started learning how to speak Chinese beyond what I spoke at age two, which is when I first moved to the States. For the preceding six years, whenever my parents spoke Chinese to me, I would invariably reply in English, having no ability to speak Chinese. But when my grandparents stayed with us, I had no choice but to learn, since they didn't speak a word of English. Knowing how to speak Chinese definitely came in handy when I wanted something from my grandparents.

So what? I could just stop writing right here and now, and you would never realize how awkward it was for me to write those first three paragraphs because of the convoluted train of thought through which I process language. Let me explain some of

the nuances of how I feel, how I have felt, and how I believe I will continue to feel for the rest of my life.

For one, Americans seem prone to assume that I was born stateside. (I use the term American, in this case, to indicate those who were born and raised, for the most part, in the Western hemisphere.) Chinese people make erroneous assumptions about me as well; when I pass by elderly Chinese people who can't speak much English while I'm out walking, they nod and smile at me, not seeming to understand that I speak Chinese as well. They seem afraid that if they say "hi," I'll try to speak to them in English, so they decide to not talk to me at all, instead choosing to smile and nod.

Another problem for me that has already come up twice in this essay is the fact that some English phrases are much too awkward for me to use—they are too assuming, packaged with connotations that aren't even close to what I'm trying to express. And yet, lacking a concise way to say what I want, I must resort to the bland terms that I find. The first instance of awkwardness was when I used the term "grandparents." In my mind, it feels strange to call my grandparents that, partly because I normally address them in Chinese, but also because I think of them as my father's parents, which is what the terms 爷爷 and 奶奶 mean ("father's father" and "father's mother"). It doesn't seem right to classify them under a generic term of "grandparents."

The second time I felt the lack of a proper term was when I wrote "elderly Chinese people." In Chinese, the word construction 老人 (literal translation: "Old person/people") properly gives respect for their age. In Chinese, I could have just added the modifier 中国, meaning "China" or "Chinese," and it would have automatically turned into a proper phrase that simply indicated that the "old people" were Chinese. But

writing in English, I almost wanted to translate the Chinese into English as “elderly Chinese folk,” and then I realized that “folk” definitely gave off the wrong impression in an English context. On the other hand, “old people” doesn’t give the same feeling of respect as it does in Chinese.

For some reason, despite the fact that I was raised in the States, I still have language problems when communicating with either American or Chinese people. More often than not, you’ll find me staring blankly at an American friend of mine, getting confused because of a reference to some singer or other topic that he grew up with. This usually happens when people mention oldies hits, but it can also happen because I grew up without hearing certain idiomatic phrases. Just the other day, my graduate resident tutor said that her son has never been sick, and her husband told her to “knock on wood.” I was utterly bewildered, until he explained to me that you’re supposed to knock on wood whenever there is a possibility of jinxing yourself.

I also have problems with Chinese idiomatic phrases. The most prominent example I remember was the time when my Chinese school class was rehearsing for the upcoming spring festival performance. After rehearsal ended, I asked to borrow someone’s cell phone so I could call my parents and let them know that we were finished. The problem was, I literally said that we “were finished,” not knowing that idiomatically it was taken to mean that we “were done for,” that we “were about to die.” Everyone in my class and their parents started laughing at my lapse, even though many of my classmates were raised in the U.S. just like me—*somehow* they knew the phrase’s other meaning, and I didn’t.

Not knowing either culture as completely as a native to the culture would, I feel left out on both sides. I have no natural state, and instead I feel contrived, pieced together from two halves that can't make up a whole. I know that my writing skills in English need some work, while I also know that my Chinese grammar can be awful if I'm trying to express some phrase that I normally think in English. Nothing short of a combination of the two languages would make me feel as if I had an adequate lexicon to properly express my thoughts.

I'm happy to report that while my Chinese grammar may not be up to par, my pronunciation appears to be. I went to China this past summer, and while waiting in a line for an interactive exhibit in a science and technology museum, I struck up a conversation with the man in front of me. When there was a momentary lull in the conversation, he asked me, "What university are you studying at?" It was a pleasant surprise to find that my Chinese carried no unnatural accent with it, and that I could pass for a native speaker. Of course, I have my limitations as well. I explained that I had just graduated high school in America, and we got into a discussion about the difference in college applications processes in China and the United States. When I started talking in Chinese about the college application process, I was entering unfamiliar territory with new vocabulary, and he mentioned that he could kind of tell that I wasn't a native speaker.

Even though I have much of the language ability of a Chinese native, certain aspects of me are distinctly American in influence while others stubbornly remain Chinese. I still have certain Chinese values; some of these values would be called highly traditional by modern Chinese standards, and others would be fairly liberal, because of the American influence. One American influence that I have is an interest in Japanese

culture. Japanese culture is so much more appealing to Westerners than Chinese is, and while that has a lot to do with the media, I think it also has to do with the languages. Chinese is a much harder language to pick up than Japanese, and while people have tried to convince me otherwise by pointing out that Japanese has two alphabets of approximately fifty characters each, as well as an assortment of kanji (Chinese characters) that each have at least two different pronunciations, I just point to my Chinese dictionary and show them that the spelling of “yi” could be interpreted to mean any of one hundred thirty-one different Chinese characters. That usually gets them. Besides, the people whom I know who have learned Japanese as a second language are scared out of their minds of the Chinese language because of the massive amounts of 汉字(hànzì)/kanji (Chinese characters, as Chinese speakers and Japanese speakers call them, respectively) and the importance of tones in the language.

But why am I talking about this at all? It’s another way I don’t fit into Chinese culture, and it leads to another way I don’t fit into American culture. When I was in China this summer, my aunt took us to a karaoke place, where your group gets a private room to sing karaoke. Ever the linguist (I speak English, Chinese, French, and I’m planning to learn Japanese, Korean, and Spanish), I decided to look at the foreign language offerings of songs, namely the songs in French and Japanese. When I started singing a Japanese song, my mom had to calm down my grandparents, saying that I only listened to Japanese music occasionally and that I had just learned a few songs. It was then that I realized that anti-Japanese sentiment, from the 南京大屠杀 (NánJīng dàtúshā; Rape of Nanjing) and WWII in general, is still present in China. Even though my

grandparents are by no means extremists on the issue—far from it, in fact—they still reacted to and wondered at the extent of my knowledge.

I think that my knowledge of Japanese culture is fairly extensive, considering that I've never studied it formally, I've never been exposed to the culture, and I don't speak the language fluently (although people who speak Japanese have mistakenly believed that I must have taken Japanese classes because I can talk to them for a few minutes before lapsing into question-asking about what they're saying). My interest in Japanese started with a few Japanese CDs a friend gave to me, and those CDs provoked an interest in Japanese as well as in Asian music, which led to an interest in Asian culture in general. Now, I'm interested in Japanese from an American standpoint as well as a Chinese standpoint (the difference between the two, I really couldn't explain in such a short essay), and I'm also interested in Asian languages and cultures, especially Chinese. It's been hard for me to find anyone who is as interested in the assortment of Asian languages and cultures as I am, and it's another point of separation I feel from American culture, which seems to be more interested in Japanese/Asian culture from a consumerist standpoint.

Around MIT, I have found people who are curious about the subjects that captivate me, and it's nice to be able to talk to people with at least a limited interest in what I have to say, but it would be amazing to find someone who is just as interested and eager to learn as I am. When I translate Chinese, French, or Japanese material, it's hard to not append a footnote to every other word explaining the significance of the usage of the word and why the English counterpart doesn't carry the correct connotation for what the word means in its native language. If I could find someone willing to take the time and

listen to my explanations of each of those words, I would be beyond ecstatic; I would be very 幸福, which carries a meaning that is twenty times the meaning of the word “happy.”