

My Food Basket: A Collection of Cultures

To convince me to stop eating oily foods, my mom would say to me, “Remember, you *are* what you eat!” This has never stopped me from eating whatever I wanted to, but I cannot deny that my mom’s words do hold some wisdom because I often look back on events in my life in terms of food. It is not because my life is centered on eating, but because certain foods evoke my strongest memories. Take for example, cucumbers. They are nothing out of the ordinary, but every time I see one, I flashback to a crowded classroom in Israel almost fifteen years ago. In my memory, the clatter of chairs drowned out our teacher’s voice as my classmates and I prepared to go home. When our teacher finally grabbed our attention, she made an announcement in Hebrew. Immediately after she finished talking, my classmates cheered and roared. Not knowing what was going on, I pretended to be excited and cheered along with them. The next day, I discovered that my class was going on a fieldtrip. I remember my five-year old self, crying because I wanted to go too. My teacher managed to reach my parents in time for them to hastily bring me a packed lunch for the trip. What was my packed lunch? Two cucumbers. These cucumbers are part of my humongous memory basket of foods taken from Israel, the United States, and China. Although the fruits, vegetables, meats, desserts, and dishes are all taken from various places, the combination in the basket is uniquely mine. With my basket, I am able to have a unique outlook on different cultures.

I. Matzahs

The dry, barren landscape of Israel is like the texture of Matzah. The first time I ate this hard, dry, cracker-like unleavened bread for Passover in Israel, I thought it was the worst “cookie” I had ever tasted. The first time I laid eyes on the hot and desert-like landscape of Israel, I was

stunned. When I was five years old, my dad moved to Israel from China to expand his research horizons at the Ben Gurion University, and my mom and I unwillingly followed a few months after him. Leaving China for the first time, my mom tried to pack everything for Israel in our two suitcases, and as a result, we spent almost two hours “unpacking” at the airport. To reduce the number of items we had to leave behind, my mom asked me to wear all the sweaters she had packed for me. As I stood there sweating in my layers of sweaters in mid-summer heat at the Beijing Airport, I waved goodbyes to my maternal grandparents, aunt, uncle, and cousin on the other side of the security gate. I didn’t know then that I wouldn’t see them again for eight years. The first time I remember seeing my mom cry was aboard that flight to Beersheva, Israel.

In Israel, I lived in two different worlds. During the day, I attended a typical Jewish elementary school, and I loved it infinitely more than strict the preschool I attended in China, where the teacher would slap one’s hand if one’s nails were too long. I quickly made friends, though we didn’t always get along since they made fun of my “slanted eyes.” However, I soon learned to make fun of their “cow-sized” ones. At school, I learned that one ate Maztah for Passover, Hamatashens for Purim, and never pork on any occasion. I read the Bible, learned arithmetic, and memorized vocabulary words in Hebrew. Because most people in academia spoke fluent English, my parents never bothered to learn Hebrew. As a result, I became their “little translator” when we went to the market to buy food or to department stores to shop for clothes. I still marvel at the memory of how I helped my mom buy the perfect pair of brown, leather shoes by saying “size eight” in Hebrew. Israel was one big adventure for me.

Every night at home with my parents, life seemed to revert back to “normal.” Just like how the princess from “Swan Lake” changes from a swan back into her human form when the sun sets, I changed back to my “normal” self when school ended each day. After school, I had

“Chinese School” with my mom at home. She brought the standard elementary school textbooks from China, and I did exercises in reading, writing, and math from them every night. What about homework from school? I never bothered to do too much of it because my parents didn’t think it was worthwhile to complete since Hebrew wasn’t very useful. On the weekends, my parents gathered with the small Chinese community to relax. The weekly Friday ritual was to play Mahjong, and on Saturdays, the parents would gather on Ben Gurion University’s lawns and benches to talk. They would share with each other new discoveries of where to buy pork and when to buy regular bread in order to avoid eating the dry, tasteless Matzahs during Passover. Meanwhile, the kids roamed the campus. My best friend was a Chinese boy who I only played with during the weekly Chinese gatherings. The funny thing was we always spoke Hebrew to each other.

II. Hamburgers

On a sunny afternoon, my family stopped by Wendy’s for a quick lunch near the University of Pittsburgh, where both of my parents initially worked after we came to the United States when I was seven. Each of us ordered a hamburger combo, and my parents also purchased a milk shake for me. As I unwrapped my burger, I was disappointed to find a dark brown patty between two pieces of squished bread. When I took a big bite of my first hamburger, I was even more disappointed. In fact, I was so disgusted by the taste that I refused to try hamburgers again until sophomore year of high school. Since I moved from Israel to the United States in 1998, I have grown to be very “American,” but at heart I am still different in many ways. For instance, I still don’t like hamburgers.

When I moved to Pittsburgh from Israel during the summer of 1998, I was sad to leave the friends I had made and nervous about having to learn a new language again. I attended my school's English as a Second Language (ESL) program and quickly made friends after my English improved. Until fifth grade, I earned low marks on my report card because I was still in my "Israel mentality" that I did not need to complete school work as long as I learned my Chinese well. At the end of fifth grade, my family moved to Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where I attended middle school and high school. So, if you ask me where I am from, I would answer, "Tennessee" because that's where I've lived the longest. In Oak Ridge, I went to a predominately white school where I was one of seven Asians in my entire graduating class of almost 350 students. In many ways, I grew up as the average, southern, American teenager. I lived in a neighborhood surrounded by almost entirely Caucasians, and during the summer, my family attended barbeques in our neighbor's backyards. I was used to southern hospitality and manners; I always addressed teachers and elders as "ma'am" or "sir," and I waved to strangers on the street as I passed by. The only way I wasn't "southern" on the outside besides my looks was my "northern" English.

If one looked at my life a little closer, one would see I have always been in many ways the stereotypical "Asian." At school, I excelled in math and science and so I was highly involved with Math Club and Science Olympiad. Like most Asians, I also played the violin, and I was the Concert Master of my school orchestra. My parents were strict and had very high expectations; when I received all A's on my report card, they would question why they weren't all A pluses. When I wasn't studying or practicing violin, I enjoyed listening to Korean boy bands and watching Korean dramas. Although I didn't understand the song lyrics, and I watched the dramas

with English subtitles, I preferred them over English songs and shows because I felt some sort of unspoken connection with them. Perhaps the skin color makes all the difference.

If one examined my life even closer, one would find me not only Asian, but very Chinese as well, though I never thought of myself as very “Chinese” until I came to MIT. After being surrounded by so many Chinese students and Asians at MIT, I realized that I share many similar experiences and values with them. They understand when I describe the Chinese karaoke and card parties that my families attend, they sympathize with me when I tell them I wasn’t allowed to date all throughout high school, and they know the feeling of acting as the cultural and language “bridge” for parents. At MIT, I have become more Chinese and Asian than I have ever been. Now, instead of mostly Caucasian friends, I have mostly Yellow friends. It is funny how nowadays I crave for Chinese “rou jia mo,” which is literally “meat plus steamed bread,” instead of hamburgers. I’m sad I’m losing a little of my southern identity though.

III. Moon Cakes

As we entered Security at the San Francisco International Airport after our fourteen-hour flight from Shanghai, my family was called aside to open our luggage. The officer took out the boxes of expensive Shanghai moon cakes my mom had bought in China a week earlier. “They’re just moon cakes, Chinese pastry,” my mom hastily explained as the officer examined them. The officer took out a knife and sliced a moon cake in half. She pointed to the round, yellow egg yolk that’s most prized in Chinese moon cakes and announced, “These have eggs in them; I have to throw them away.” I watched in anger as five-hundred-RMB-worth of moon cakes were dumped in the trash. I didn’t even get to taste them yet. The little bit of China I carried back with me after my visit went into the trash that year at the San Francisco airport.

The first time I visited China after I left at five years old was the summer after eighth grade. I was super excited during the airplane ride to Beijing because I was finally going to visit my “native country.” However, in Beijing, I was unaccustomed to the smoggy skies that I initially thought were just clouds. When I visited my family in Shandong Province, I felt uncomfortable living in the small apartment and sharing the bathroom with the entire family. When I went shopping, I felt odd having to try on large sizes. I have a favorite jacket from China that says “XXL” on the tag; it’s not even from the kid’s section. At my home in China, my uncle addressed me as the “little foreigner,” and before he discovered my love for Chinese food, he insisted on buying milk and bread especially for me for breakfast.

Despite of all these differences, I enjoy my visits to China and look forward to them every summer. Part of the reason is because I love Chinese cuisine above all other types of food. The other part, I suppose, is because in China, I don’t seem out of place to others. I look Chinese; I speak Chinese without an accent; I have a Chinese name. People who don’t have prolonged conversations with me wouldn’t question whether I was Chinese. They wouldn’t show prejudice against me. They wouldn’t ever say to me, “Go back to where you came from!” or randomly ask, “Do you know kung fu?” Walking down the street in my newly bought Chinese clothes, I always blend in with everyone else. That’s why although my home is in the United States, I consider myself Chinese. So, every time I return home from my visit to China, I try to bring with me a little part of China. That year, they were moon cakes. Too bad they didn’t even make it across the border.

IV. Pizza Hut’s Pizza

Pizza Hut in China is nothing like Pizza Hut in the States. At MIT, I have gotten so sick of pizza that I have not eaten more than two slices this entire school year. Ironically, during a few short weeks I spend every summer in China, I always have a craving for pizza. Once, my mom decided to treat my cousin to Pizza Hut in Qingdao, and I tagged along. As I walked into the restaurant, I was surprised to see the waitresses dressed in beautiful Spanish dresses and the menus printed on fancy booklets. What really shocked me was the price: more than one hundred RMB for a small-sized pizza! I learned that people often ate there to show off their statuses and wealth. To me, the Beijing Olympic Games was like pizza from Pizza Hut in China. Normally, I'm not interested in the Olympics, but in 2008, I anxiously awaited for the Opening Ceremonies with the rest of the Chinese population. The Chinese government spent a fortune in hopes of showing the world that China was now a global, modern, superpower. As 08-08-08 slowly approached, however, the number of controversies over China's human rights policies increased, and the tension between China and the rest of the world escalated (Zurlo).

One of the controversial issues was China's economic and political ties to Darfur, where more than 200,000 people have died because of civil war. Because China purchases two thirds of its oil from Sudan and supplies Sudan with military weapons, many human rights activists argued that the Chinese government could have influenced the Sudanese government to allow the United Nations peacekeeping force to enter Darfur (Zurlo). The Chinese government took no action and groups like Dream for Darfur thus claimed that the Chinese government was encouraging the abuse of human rights in Darfur (Bowley and Bradsher). The Chinese government, in contrast, claimed repeatedly that Chinese diplomats have made trips to Sudan in hopes of helping the warring parties reach a peace treaty. The Chinese government was not only criticized for its association with the Sudanese regime, but also for the violence in Tibet in

March 2008. The Chinese government arrested many protestors in Lhasa, and Tibetans claimed that over 100 people were killed (Zurlo). Many pro-Tibetan independence groups around the world such as Students for a Free Tibet campaigned against the Beijing Olympics. As a result of these protests against the Chinese government, people of Chinese descent and Chinese citizens showed strong support at torch relay events across the globe. At home in China, protests against the West spread in the form of nationwide demonstrations against the French supermarket Carrefour and boycotts of French goods. Citizens also protested against Western news agencies like CNN due to their “biased coverage of the unrest in Tibet” (Jacobs). Which side did I support? I had my own views.

V. Rice that is Sticky

In the warmly lit McCormick Dining Hall, the server behind the food bar asked, “Would you like rice or pasta with your stir-fry?” Without hesitation I answered, “Pasta.” In truth, I love rice. Rice has always been a daily part of my dinner until the start of college. As a result, I am very picky about the type of rice I eat because typical rice eaten by Chinese people is similar to “sushi rice” and very different from “American” rice. It is a lot stickier and rounder than American rice. Ironically, I would rather eat my “Chinese” stir-fry with pasta instead of rice. Like the way I combine dishes from across cultures to make a dish suited to my tastes, I combine the views and cultures of the East and West to form my own viewpoint and culture, just like a Third Culture Kid.

The term “Third Culture Kids” was coined by sociologist Ruth Hill Unseen in the fifties. “TCKs integrate aspects of their birth culture and the new culture, creating a unique ‘third culture’” (“What is a Third Culture Kid?”). While away from their home country, TCKs often

attend international schools and thus are not fully exposed to the culture they live in. As a result, they do not belong with the people in the country they live in. Upon returning to their home country, they discover that they do not belong with those in their home country either (Wu).

I am a TCK because I never completely integrated into just a single culture; I grew up in a combination of Israeli, American, and Chinese cultures. However, I am different from a true TCK because in Israel and the United States, I was fully exposed to the culture I lived in. As a TCK, I was culturally aware in the sense that I was open-minded to the contrasting views regarding the controversies leading up to the Beijing Olympics. The US media was always criticizing China for using media as propaganda to gain support for the wrong-doings of the government. But then again, wasn't this itself somewhat like propaganda to turn Americans into believing that the Chinese government oppressed people, took away human rights, and was basically nothing but evil? But, then again, Chinese government *was* probably violating human rights. So who should I believe? From my experiences growing up in a very patriotic Chinese family in the United States, I learned to fully trust neither the Chinese press nor the American press. Like TCKs, I created my own theories, beliefs, and culture.

VI. Falafels with Pita Bread

As I waited with my dad for my mom to return from the restroom, an Israeli soldier waved and motioned me to go to him. I timidly approached the soldier and he handed me a plastic keychain with a picture of an Israeli flag and a falafel. I thanked the soldier and quickly returned to my dad to show him my gift. Although I don't like the taste of falafels, to this day when I see them, I always wonder why that soldier gave me the keychain without any explanation at all.

Falafel is often considered as an Israeli national dish, which upsets many Palestinians because falafel is not just Israeli and, in fact, originated in Egypt. The conflict between these two groups, however, stems far more than falafels. The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict is an on-going dispute between the Israelis and Palestinians since the late nineteenth century over Jerusalem, settlements in the West Bank, borders, water, and “mutual-recognition” rights. Over the years, countless civilians have died because of the violence between these two groups. Numerous peace treaties have been attempted with the intervention of the United States, the UN, the European Union, and Russia, but to no lasting success (“Israeli-Palestinian Conflict”).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has always been very close to my heart because I’ve experienced as a child how stressful it is to live in a place constantly in fear of bombings and war. Although Beersheva, the city I lived in, was relatively safe, my family usually avoided riding on buses whenever possible because of the large number of bus bombings even in Beersheva. Security everywhere was tight. At the entrance to every mall, security officers checked each person’s personal belongings. Once my mom left a backpack on the lawn inside Ben Gurion University’s campus to go use the restroom. When she returned a few minutes later, her backpack was blocked off and surrounded by police officers. Towards the end of our stay in Israel, my family had to stock up on canned food, water, tape to tape the windows, and three gas masks because Iraq threatened to launch biological and chemical warfare against Israel. At that point, my mom lost her patience with Israel and demanded that my dad move us to the United States or back to China.

When I visited Jerusalem in 1997, a city which is inhabited by both Israelis and Palestinians, my parents and I were equally welcomed by Palestinians and Israelis because of our Chinese looks. What always puzzles me is how two neighbors could hate each other so deeply

but be so gracious to strangers. I am saddened to see how so many people fight and die due to disputes with people who are so close to them and often so similar to them. Unrest between Tibetans and the Han people in China, guerilla warfare between Arabs and Africans in Darfur, and the civilian violence between Israelis and Palestinians in Israel are just a few examples of neighbors fighting neighbors. One of the reasons I believe there is so much violence in the world is because so many people can't see the other side of the story – they can only see their own. As a TCK, I realize there is no “right” or “wrong,” just like there is no “good side” or “bad side.” In the future, I hope that my experiences in different cultures will allow me to be successful in international relations and international business, where I can promote more understanding across cultures politically and economically. I hope that one day, Israelis and Palestinians will both look at falafels as a food that ties their cultures and histories together.

VII. Picnic

Did I miss out on a normal childhood? Part of me claims yes – I lived in one world during the day outside of the home, and lived in another at night with my parents. By growing up in three different countries, I had a different experience than most children. Sometimes, I wish my food basket consisted of a full-course meal with matching silverware and dinnerware, where everything came in the order one would expect and where there are no tough choices and doubts. However, the larger part of me claims that I didn't “miss out” on a normal childhood; I just had a different one. Instead of a full course meal, I packed myself a grand picnic with food from various cultures. I was able to pick and choose the food I wanted to eat to assemble my picnic, and through the process, I grew a mind of my own. Like my mom warned, I slowly became the basket of food I packed.

Works Cited

- Bowley, Graham, and Keith Bradsher. "After Troubled Tour, Torch Arrives in China." New York Times 01 May 2008. 11 Apr. 2010
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/01/world/asia/01torch.html?_r=1>.
- Burns, John F. "Protests of China Make Olympic Torch Relay an Obstacle Course." New York Times 07 Apr. 2008. 11 Apr. 2010
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/07/world/europe/07torch.html>>.
- Jacobs, Andrew. "Protests of the West Spread in China." New York Times 21 Apr. 2008. 11 Apr. 2010 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/21/world/asia/21china.html>>.
- "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict." Wikipedia. 1 May. 2010.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israeli%E2%80%93Palestinian_conflict#Recent_events>.
- "What is a Third Culture Kid?" TCKID: A Home for Third Culture Kids and Adults (TCKs). 11 Apr. 2010 <<http://www.tckid.com/what-is-a-tck.html#origin>>.
- Wu, Megan. "Third Culture Kids ? Maintaining Stability in a Life Without Roots." International HR Forum. 21 Mar. 2010. 12 Apr. 2010
<<http://internationalhr.wordpress.com/2010/03/21/third-culture-kids-maintaining-stability-in-a-life-without-roots/>>.