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Home is complicated

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Ever since I can remember, there was always something different about me, no matter where I was. While I was born in Taiwan, I was raised in a number of suburbs around Canada and the U.S.

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Despite the fact that North America is frequently touted as a “melting pot” of cultures, I've always felt like an outsider because of my heritage.

I never quite felt “at home,” in the traditional sense of the term, because there was always something different about me, regardless of where we were.

After graduating from college in 2016, I embarked on a solo trip to Taiwan under the guise of completing an internship. In truth, I wanted to spend time in my country of birth on my own terms. Maybe an extended stay there would make my home country feel less foreign to me.

The first time I can remember being called out for my race was at a McDonald’s playground in suburban Ontario, Canada, when I was maybe 4 years old. My older sister and I encountered a blond-haired, blue-eyed boy who greeted us by pulling his eyes into thin slits and exclaiming, “Look, I’m Chinese!” I didn’t understand that he was making fun of us, but being five years older, my sister immediately knew and dragged me away. I don’t remember the rest of that day, but I remember feeling confused in the aftermath. *Why did he make that face? And why did I suddenly feel embarrassed to look the way I did?* **That feeling of shame only amplified as I got older.**

Throughout my childhood and adolescence in North America, I tried to fit in as much as I could. I refused to speak Chinese to my parents at home and threw tantrums when they tried to take me to Chinese school on the weekends (I was a handful). I asked my mom to make me peanut butter sandwiches for lunch at school instead of homemade bento boxes. For a period of time, I told my parents to stop calling me by my Chinese name and that I would only answer to my English name, *Regina*. Still, no matter how I changed my behavior to try to assimilate to American culture, I couldn’t change my undeniably Asian appearance to look more American.



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Whenever we returned to Taiwan for family visits, my efforts to separate myself from my Asian heritage proved successful. I had a hard time communicating with relatives, who would perplexedly ask my parents why my sister and I never learned to speak both Mandarin and Taiwanese fluently. My paternal grandmother, who spoke only Taiwanese, would try to chat with me, only to get a blank stare and puzzled smile in return. Even strangers in the streets could tell upon first glance that I wasn’t a local. They called me “ABC,” short for American Born Chinese — even though I was born in Taiwan.

In Taiwan, I felt ashamed that I was so out of touch with my roots, and I resented my parents for raising my sister and me in North America instead of Taiwan. Then, when we returned home to the States, I’d feel like I had become too Asian during my time away. Immersing myself in one culture seemed to mean that I’d have to reject the other.

As I reached young adulthood, I began to regret having rejected my cultural origins. It helped that I became friends with other second-generation Asian-Americans who were proud of their heritage rather than ashamed. Slowly, I began to embrace Taiwanese culture again, watching movies and TV dramas to practice my Chinese and making a conscious effort to speak Chinese more at home.



Despite my change in heart in my late teen years, my decision to go back to Taiwan alone after college surprised my parents. To be honest, they probably thought I was avoiding adulthood and the impending job search. They were partially right, but I also wanted to go to see what Taiwan meant to me, outside of the context of requisite visits to see extended family.

While I still spent a lot of time with our relatives and family friends, my parents were no longer there to act as translators or a buffer. It was up to me to express myself to the best of my abilities in a language that didn’t always feel comfortable to me. I had my fair share of stumbles and awkward silences, but I slowly became more confident in my Chinese. In hindsight, I realized that this must have been how my parents felt when they were beginning a new life and making a home for themselves in a foreign country.



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As I spent more time with relatives and family friends, I began to learn more about who my parents were before they became my parents. I revisited the mountain trail where my grandparents met and successfully conspired to set my parents up. I heard more about my parents’ shenanigans directly from my aunts, uncles and my mother’s old schoolmates. I learned more about the difficult decisions my parents faced as young parents in choosing where to raise their children.

My parents actually returned to Taiwan after having my sister in the U.S. with the intention of raising their family in Taiwan. However, scarce career opportunities for my dad forced us to move to Canada when I was still a baby. We moved with no plan in place or even any furniture — I slept in my mom’s winter coat on the floor of our apartment for our first few nights in Canada.

I had resented my parents for raising my sister and me in a place where I thought we could never feel at home. In reality, they had given us the chance to have numerous homes: Taiwan, Canada, and the U.S. To me, home wasn’t a place that was given to me or predetermined; I learned that home can be where I choose to start and a place I can grow.

Thanks to my complicated upbringing and my solo stint in Taiwan, I have the luxury of knowing that I can make a home almost anywhere, as my parents did. Not long after returning to the U.S. after my solo trip to Taiwan, I moved to Seattle and built a new life for myself there — the first true home of my choosing.



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