

The Art of Not Fitting In: Lessons from an Immigrant Childhood

By Lanping Deng

“Lán Pīng! Xǐng Xǐng, Qǐchuáng!(Time to get up!) ” a familiar voice called. A pair of scaly yet warm hands gently pressing down my arm. My eyelids felt heavy at the light glowing through them in a reddish-yellow assuring me that I was being awakened at the crack of dawn.

Slowly, consciousness began to trickle back, like the first rays of dawn peeking through the window. My mind returned from the hazy fog of sleep, still clinging to some remnants of dreams as they began to quickly fade. My body awoke as all senses gradually reemerge to my consciousness. Still drowsy, but my muscles began to stretch, shaking away the inertia of slumber until my eyes fluttered open, blinking away the blurriness from the light glowing through until a familiar face and surrounding came into focus. I heard my mother’s voice clear up as she stated, “You should wake up now, you haven’t finished your homework.”

“Ugh, why is it so early?” I asked as I yawn.

Before I could continue complaining, Mom rushed to bed with multiple homework worksheets I was assigned for my language class.

Rubbing my eyes, I weakly picked up my pencil as I began to circle the answers to the multiple choice questions. It was my first week as a first grader. When I graduated from kindergarten, I feared the thought of starting primary school. *What if I have to repeat a year? What if I do not catch up? What if they laugh at me again for being late?* I second-guessed the worst possible future situations I would encounter. I did not want to be scolded like my sister did. I wanted to make my family proud but was scared to put them in embarrassing situations that would cause my mother to cry. She works very hard for us to receive an education. I kept thinking, *she probably hurts when she scolds my sister or I even if she does not show it. She values education and family more than anything else. My mother was only able to finish some high school. Despite how tired she must be from working all day, she still wakes up early to make breakfast. Even if she does not know the language, she always makes the effort to check my homework to make sure it was completed every night before school. She’s doing her best and even more..* A light tapping sensation brought me out of my thoughts; it was my mother’s pencil. Quickly returning to my senses, I noticed my mother copying the dictionary words and reading my language book.

“Ma, why are you copying words from the dictionary?” I asked her.

My mother smiled as she replied, “to quickly learn Spanish.” While it was a simple response, learning a new language at her age, and the urgency displayed in her eyes made me think that she must be struggling to quickly adapt to the new country. But little did I know, her efforts would pay off.

When asked for the reason behind the decision to immigrate from China to Mexico, Mom explained that it was to reunite with family members and because my parents were promised better job opportunities in their distant cousins’ restaurant. Mom had to wash dirty dishes at the restaurant. She always returned late at night, but always tried her best to make lunch boxes, buy

all required school supplies, bring my sister and I to school on time, and attend any required school events and meetings. *Was she expecting this type of job as the “better job opportunities” she was promised? It wasn’t, but why did she do it? She always puts family first. She cared for my and my sister’s education more than her hardships.*

At the time, when I first began to question and have deeper thoughts about my mother’s efforts and struggles, I was a first grader. It was going to be my second day as a first grader. Enrolling in primary school was my worst fear at the time. I was already the only Asian student in class for 3 years in kindergarten and did not know the language well. I did not want to fall behind in class now that we were actually going to learn math, science, and more. *Would I repeat first grade like my sister? Would my mom have to be told the bad news and cry as she is informed that I cannot go to second grade? Will she cry again for being unable to fully understand?* I wanted to do my best so that my parents would be proud of me and lift some weight off their shoulders by not having them worry about me causing problems in school. I wanted to become a model student so that if my parents were to hear from my school it would be only good news about my growth and good academic standing rather than complaints about my behavior and grades. I was determined to focus on my studies so that my parents would not worry about me.

One early morning in my third-grade classroom full of thirty-six students days before summer vacation started, I sat by the window and contemplated how quickly three years have passed. My parents had managed to save enough to open our restaurant. *Isn’t it great? My mother did not need to wash dishes all day long anymore. My dad did not have to cook dishes without understanding the dish name. My parents were now owners.* I was proud of my parents who managed to succeed. Although my mother’s Spanish was great, it was good enough to communicate with customers and employers. She only needed me to help out when it was very busy or when she needed me to translate difficult situations. “Okay guys, quiet down!” my third grade teacher yelled and quickly pulled me out of my thoughts.

“I am sure everyone is excited for summer, but before that, as usual I am going to read off your scores and afterwards we will announce the top 3 scores of this year, alright? Remember, the top 3 get to put their names on the bulletin board and get a prize!” Mrs. Silvia excitedly explained.

As Mrs. Silvia went through the roster, she got my name and score. “Lanping, 9.7!” she announced. When everyone’s name was called as promised, Mrs. Silvia began to call out the top 3 scores.

“2nd best score overall?! Droms please... pa rum pa pum pum. And Lanping is in second place!” Mrs. Silvia announced.

Only second place? How come? I questioned and felt conflicted at the thought that I was not the first place as I was for the past two years. *Will Mom be disappointed?* As I contemplated what would happen, my peers began to whisper among each other. “O, the ‘chinita’ who always thought she was very, very special. Was nothing. Wasn’t she smart in math? HAH, What a joke!” My peers began to mock and talk down on me as soon as the teacher stepped out for a second to

the next classroom. *Since when did my classmates think I was trying to show off my grades? I worked very hard to earn these grades. What right do you guys have to judge me?* As I began to get angry, I slowly began to realize I was denying my own disappointment. I knew that out of all subjects, math was not my strength; especially word problems. I recalled a time when I was in my last year of kindergarten and Mom was forcing me to repeat and memorize the multiplication tables 1-10. That was when she emphasized how “math is used everyday, it's the universal language.” But what could I do? I was not the typical Asian kid who was good at math. I did not even understand why it was so important and why mom held it to such importance. I was always more interested in the sciences. I was different from my sister whom my mother always praised for her math skills. I always lost to my peers when it came to math contests. *So why math?*

The question stuck to me until recently. Math is straightforward, the principles and foundations of math are the same everywhere around the world which is why it's often considered as the study of universal truths. When I finally understood that my mother's high regard for mathematical understanding was not only because she was good at math, but because math is the same everywhere. Therefore, even if she did not understand the Spanish language, she could communicate and buy groceries through math and not be taken advantage of. What did I learn from math? Being true to yourself and your roots even if there's a language barrier of any kind, the truthfulness to the foundations that made who you are will always make you unique. But, once you find your true self and accept who you are instead of trying to change yourself to fit in will make you math because math does change. The principles stay the same and no matter how you re-test and revise proofs, equations, and expressions it will remain true. Math is not like science that evolves and previous hypotheses are changed as technology enables further exploration, rather, math's oldest concepts still remain true and work.

As a current CUNY Hunter College student, it has been 9 years since my parents first told my sister and I we were moving. We were going to New York. “How exciting?!” Many would think that because they believed in the American Dream and out of all the cities, it was New York City; famous for its bright lights and iconic landmarks like the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State building. “New York is a sea of opportunities!” my first and only real friend that I ever made for the long 10 years living in Mexico reassured me. But, I thought otherwise. Memories of all those years of hardwork in the Mexican school flashed before my eyes—learning the language, being laughed at, feeling like an outsider, working hard at math and at making friends, etc. I did not want to restart everything. *I did not know the English language. I was no longer a child so it will be even harder to make friends. Would my teachers accept me and like me the way my current teachers have? How would everyone in school react to bilingualism?*

Despite my mixed feelings about immigrating again, I also knew that it would be inevitable and that my opinion would not change anything since this decision must have been made a long time ago. I began to accept it as the date of departure approached.



2015. Two weeks living and exploring NYC before starting 6th grade. Double Check Businessman at corner of Liberty Street in Manhattan, NY

It has been eight years since I first arrived in New York and was overthinking all the possibilities that soon became insecurities. I was too distracted to even realize I was already standing in an office with my mother enrolling myself in middle school.

“Do you speak English?” an enrollment advisor asked my mother.

“Spanisheh or Chineseh, pleaseh?” my mother replied.

“Ah ok, wait” the advisor replied as he dialed a number. After a few seconds, someone from the other side answered “Hello?” and the advisor answered “I need a Spanish or Chinese speaking translator, thanks!”

The same person who had said hello was now put on speaker as a Chinese translator and assisted my mother in filling out the forms. *Was it that easy to find a translator? Translator is a job? She doesn't even have an accent when speaking both English and Chinese.* Despite not understanding the Mandarin Chinese that she speaks with my mother. It was my first time encountering a person who fluently speaks both languages without an accent. It somehow made me feel it might be okay this time. I might not be the only Asian who did not have anybody to relate to.

Before I got too excited, “What language do you speak at home?” the advisor asked, instantly bringing me back from my excitement about the possibility that I could “fit in” here.

It might be a simple question, but to me it was hard. *Chinese?* Yes, I speak Chinese. Not Mandarin or Cantonese though. I do not read or write any Chinese either. *Spanish?* Yes, I am fluent but my mother is not. She only understands a little and can hold a short conversation. She can't read full paragraphs and still comprehend the meaning. My heart sank. The thought that I might fit in vanished completely.

So, what should I do? What would my mom say? If I choose to say Chinese, I will never be able to read the letters from school. If I choose Spanish, my mom would never be able to read the letters either.. I know that she always wants to know everything from school.

As I weighed out the best choice quickly, “Spanish” I replied.

It was an essential thing and I felt more secure in the fact that I would know and understand the contents of any forms and requirements needed to be taken care of just like how I assisted in translating for my mother all the school paperwork previously and when applying for a Visa. *I will make it work. She should trust me just how she has done when in Mexico.*

As soon as all the paperwork was filled out, the advisor explained to my mother that I would be in a “welcome class” which is designed to help recent immigrant students catch up and learn the English language before transferring me out into a regular class. My mom nods in approval to the arrangement.

The advisor printed out my class schedule for the school semester and handed it to my mother, saying “Ok, you are all set, bye-bye!”

“Ok, thank you so much lah!” my mother thanked him upon receiving the schedule and walked out the office with me.

It is crazy how this was the last time my mother would be the one helping me enroll in school. My first 2 years in middle school were not as easy as I had hoped after realizing there were many bilingual people here. *I thought I was going to fit in here now that there were people who looked like me, people who spoke different languages at home than in school. I thought it would be easier for me to make friends.*

At lunch time, my class was assigned two tables, one for the boys and the other for the girls. I sat at the end of the bench without joining neither the group of girls who clearly looked like me and were Asian, nor those who spoke fluent Spanish language and shared features that I was familiar with. Features like light bronze, olive skin, wavy, thick dark brown hair, thick eyebrows, and full lips that I encountered everywhere I went growing up.

“Nǐ Hǎo!” an Asian girl with a pink Minnie Mouse shirt approached me.

“Hello,” I replied in English. I avoided the Chinese greeting because the Chinese I grew up with is a dialect called Taishanese. Therefore, I had difficulty speaking Mandarin. I thought at most the girl would reply to me in English since we were in America and were supposed to be English learners. Little did I know, she uttered “Tā Bù Huì Shuō ZhōngWén” (She doesn’t speak Chinese) to the group of Asian girls who were already intensely staring at me. At the time I did not understand Mandarin so I did not know what she said. But as I interacted more with all my classmates and listened to different languages I began to use context clues. The girl had uttered “She doesn’t speak Chinese.” *But, what was the issue with not speaking Mandarin?* I did not understand, but also never thought the short interaction would lead me to become an outcast. *Why can’t I fit in?* I wondered.

I progressed quickly by learning English within three months of starting school in America. I was proud of myself because I could finally read letters directed to parents and guardians in English without the confusing translated version. But the questions “How can I fit in? And why am I so different?” remained until I remembered why I was so different in Mexico in the first place. It was not only because I looked different. I spoke differently. It was then that I understood, I did not fit in because I was soon going to become trilingual. *I was never going to fit in.* America is built on different cultures. Perhaps it was never meant for one to fit in but

rather everyone is allowed to be their unique self. This thought brought me comfort and confidence. With the mindset to be me, the last remaining year as a middle schooler became easier to manage. I was applying to high school and the stress of not being accepted was already enough.

Who am I lying to, the story repeats itself again. I was accepted into my first choice high school and had the same interactions as the Minnie Mouse shirt girl who talked down on me despite everyone's ability to fluently talk in English. *This will not change!* Thinking and hoping for a different treatment. *I have been a fool.* I concluded that no matter how many times I start anew, how many times I immigrate to different countries I was destined to overcome the challenges of being questioned or judged for my uniqueness the moment I was raised in Mexico. It does not matter how well I get accustomed to the culture and traditions where I currently reside, my history and background will always be with me. It is something special that will not change no matter what language or country or time period just like math. I will always be Lanping, the person who will surprise others by telling them that I am fluent in Spanish despite my facial features indicating otherwise. People will not understand the differences in Chinese dialects because they only know of Mandarin, Cantonese, and some Fuzhounese. But Taishanese? A romanized dialect of Cantonese mainly only spoken in Taishan, Guangdong; my birth place. It is a historic, beautiful dialect, but is slowly dying since there's no major presence in any time of media that uses Taishanese. Being Lanping, is enough to carry the roots of speaking the unique dialect.

Many including immigrants themselves fail to understand that immigrants' stories do not only carry personal experiences but carry history and legacies. It is essential to understand that immigrants share experiences and goals with other immigrants the moment the decision to immigration is made. Why? People immigrate to achieve a better life for themselves. To do so means they have to overcome language barriers, discrimination, and work twice as hard. These obstacles often lead to losing their identity and sense of belonging and begin to question like I did "Why do I not fit in? How can I fit in?" But just like I am doing right now, other immigrants have opened up about their experiences as immigrants and how they realized that that identity was never lost to begin with. In "My Name" by Sandra Cisneros, an excerpt of The House on Mango Street, the main character's name is "Esperanza" or "Hope" and she dives into the meaning of her name and how despite the different versions the original "Esperanza" held more weight to her identity. It was different but it was who she was. Likewise, I struggled to get back up and adapt to every new environment because of the difference in language ability to my physical facial traits. Further, even after becoming a citizen, I made the decision to keep my name. "Lanping" was uniquely chosen for me. I do not want an English name that will mold me into that character. The name Lanping is part of what builds my identity. It is the name that has been with me through high and lows as I continued to strive for success in life fighting all the lookism that never matched my language abilities and cultural backgrounds.

No matter how hard I tried to "fit in," I never did. My identity was never lost, it was developing. My sense of belonging? I never belonged to the systematized society that tries to

label and categorize me. My sense of belonging began the moment I forged my own categories and labels as I accepted everything that made me who I am. Only then, I am able to determine where I belong because only I know what I have gone through to the current me.

This realization came to me after repeated encounters with others in school who, maybe unintentionally, made me feel that I did not belong. Embracing this truth felt like I found a universal language about my immigration experiences, just like math is a language that is universal. I would still be lost had I not remembered that coming up with my own math expression of myself was the universal language that I need to tell my story.

June 2022, 1PM, a warm wet breeze blew. It was forecasted to rain, but it was only cloudy. I was awarded many awards for my academic achievements in high school and as soon as my name was called, I stepped onto the stage to accept my diploma. After the ceremony, although still cloudy, small rays of sun peeked through the clouds as I looked up at the sky. *I am Lanping and I am ready for my next chapter as a Hunter student. I am ready!*

Looking out through the window on the 3rd floor sky bridge of Hunter College, I smile. *Maybe I was the only one questioning my identity and sense of belonging.* I started college on the right foot because just like high school, no one here has the time to question me, look down upon my differences or isolate me. Even if they did, I already knew how I would handle it. Instead of feeling like I don't belong, I feel proud to be who I am. After all these years of self-doubt and trying to fit in, I found that as long as I am proud to be Lanping, no one could deprive me of my sense of self and belonging. I am here to stay. I belong.



2024, Current self at Hunter College 3rd floor skyscraper