

Yellow Women
10.2.2018

A Chinese-American woman,
18, and alone in a foreign place.
Exploring, just enjoying the sun, and then,
Passing by a cafe, there sit three white men.
I feel the stares, their fearless eyes looking me up and down,
But I keep my gaze forward, the way my mom taught me.
The stares keep their hold, the eyes continue profiling.
“Nihao, what’s your name?”
I’m startled, embarrassed, but still politely smiling.
How do I stay composed while the anger’s eagerly rising?
They take one look, and they think they know me?
I’m mad, but not for long. A thought suddenly occurs to me,
Wait, could it be that I am the one to blame?

This wasn’t the first time.

A Chinese-American teenager,
14, and finishing homework at school.
Without hesitation, my friend looks over and says,
“You must have a *tiger mom*... your house must have *so* many rules.”
I’m confused, uncomfortable, I don’t know how to react.
The only thing that comes out is a forced laugh and a quick reply,
“A tiger mom? Rules? No, she’s cool.”
I just don’t get it, *please* help me to understand.
Is it the almond-shaped eyes? The curve of my nose?
How do you, *so thoughtlessly*, give my culture a brand?
I’m mad, but not for long. A thought suddenly occurs to me,
Wait, could it be that I am the one to blame?

This wasn’t the first time.

A Chinese-American girl,
7, and eating lunch in the cafeteria.
As soon as I open the thermos,
The kid next to me requests a different area.
“*Eww*, what is that? Why is your lunch so stinky?”
I look around and come to the realization that he’s talking to *me*, about *my* lunch.
Stinky? I’m pretty sure he’d meant to say, Why is your lunch so *stinking* delicious?
I roll my eyes, but inside I feel the pain.
As soon as I see my mom, I beg her to never pack me dumplings again;

Please give me food that's smell won't stain.
I can see the hurt in her eyes, as she witnesses one culture replacing another.
She attempts to talk some sense into me, but I tell her not to bother.

She wonders if this is the first time.

These incidents are just pieces of a bigger story, a story about society.
A society that puts labels on Chinese-American women, labels with very little variety:
Quiet, reserved, sweet, always behaving with the utmost propriety.
A society so afraid that it must be closed-minded,
Carelessly believing we're a bunch of ladies with feet binded.
A society so ignorant, it must resort to making assumptions,
For example, our driving is so bad, it causes the worst of destructions.
A society so vulnerable that it must put up walls in order to keep it going,
The walls grow so high and the stereotypes just keep flowing.

Fortunately for me, this story isn't just about society.
The heroines—the women in my life—they've written us a new script.
You see, for my grandmother, the last word she'd ever use to describe herself is “reserved.”
Catch her at 24 Hour Fitness daily, at the front of her Zumba class, in the spot most deserved.
Oh, and my other grandma. After trying her sponge cake and bamboo-wrapped sticky rice,
You'd never dare call Chinese food stinky again; you'd think twice.

But for me, the most important figure in this story is easily, my mother.
The term “tiger mom” would be *insulting* to her, it diminishes the amount of strength she really holds.
Brave. Clever. Fierce. Relentless. Invincible.
These are the words she's written into my head, not just about me, but about all of us.
Chinese-American women know perseverance and fortitude, these qualities are a must.
When society thinks they know you and can guess your value by the way you look,
My mom teaches me, You get stronger, wiser, and learn to take back what they took.
The bottom line is, we're all the same—just humans roaming this Earth,
Little people made of stardust, grown to misunderstand the value of each other's worth.
But my mom also taught me this, We must be tough by being kind
She said to teach with my heart, and keep open everything, especially the mind.

Creator Commentary:

The sociological imagination, coined by C. Wright Mills, makes clear the relationship between what we perceive as personal experiences and the larger societal forces that shape our everyday lives. This poem examines snippets of my own personal story. However, upon further investigation, one is able to see the role that forces such as patriarchy and race have played in shaping these encounters. My experiences, although unique to me, overlap with those of other Asian-American women. These experiences have challenged my identity in how I feel my “hyphenated-ness,” in understanding my self-worth, and in being reminded of the incredibly brilliant Asian-American women that bravely take chances and make sacrifices to better the lives of us that follow. Understanding my identity fully has not been achieved, and I am unsure that it ever will be. However, as I navigate the world and face more of these types of experiences, along with positive and empowering ones, I am given new perspectives on how others view myself, and ultimately, how I view myself. Through this poem, I hope to reveal the joy I have felt throughout this process—a process of acknowledging pain and using it to recognize growth.