

### Far From Home

At the corner of Mott Street and Grand Street, I begin my journey. As a native New Yorker, I will always call Jackson Heights, Queens my home. However, I have a second home in another borough, and that place is Chinatown. Ever since I was old enough to remember, my family and I spent every Saturday going to downtown Manhattan to buy our weekly Chinese groceries that regular American supermarkets do not provide. I am sad to say that my time spent in Chinatown was spent rather far from it. As a child, I would be sitting in my grandparents' small apartment, watching TV from the time I got there until it was time to go home. When I became older, I had to accompany my parents to shop for food. Rather than paying attention to the surroundings, I would be more concerned with whether we had enough bags to carry our purchases or if someone was carrying too many things. I do not want to continue feeling isolated from this place because Chinatown is the closest thing I have to my culture and heritage, until I have the time and money to travel to China. My ethnic history begins in China, and I want to be closer to the people and my roots, to learn about my cultural identity. I decided it is best to go to the street that I feel is the heart of Chinatown, a mini transplant of China, and start walking, observing and absorbing from there.

To the north, I see the top of the Empire State Building, a towering giant overlooking the rest of the city. The government buildings standing south of Chinatown are symbols of wealth and modernity, a great contrast to the old and tired Chinatown. Most of the buildings in Chinatown, inside and out, are rather shabby, with the exception of recent replacements of windows and wall washings. Garment factories and sweatshops scatter the area, residing in alleyways and lining industrious streets. Worn workers with haggard faces, paid by piece rather than by minimum wage, enter the dark buildings early in the morning only to emerge from their

workstations late in the evening. These hard workers were looking for the land of opportunity only to find a place where they only receive enough money to eat and pay the rent.

To the east, streams of people are migrating to and from the Grand Street subway station. The MTA plans to decrease service to this station to allow a five-year bridge rehabilitation plan to occur. This would isolate Chinatown from many Chinese people trying to both leave and enter the neighborhood. Near the corner of Elizabeth Street, a block away, stands the restaurant owned by my mom's cousin. My family has lunch in this diner-like scenario often. Half of the space is for take-out customers, and the other half is for people who have nowhere else to sit down and eat. People crowd around the front counter, shouting out their orders at the workers, who are busy chopping and weighing meats. Roast pork, Peking duck, and various chickens hang over tubs of steaming food in the window. My family often squeezes through, only to get the last three seats available in the other half of the restaurant, sharing a table with another family. The usual candid waiter comes over and greets us happily. "The usual frog congee, Uncle?" he asks. My dad loves eating this dish. I do not think I will ever see frogs as a delicacy, but they are interesting to dissect, having had done that twice. I could not imagine myself putting the pieces into my mouth and spitting the little bones back out. I grew up on my mother's cooking and I never recalled eating anything other than fish, shellfish, fowl, pork, lamb and beef. Eating frogs is just weird to me, and this is coming from a person who highly enjoys eating chicken livers and hearts, pig's tongue, and other animal parts that are not part of the typical American diet. (I would like to apologize for anyone who may have lost his or her appetite, is a vegetarian or anyone who is now deciding to become one.) At the restaurant, I usually have the tofu with chicken on rice, but my mom usually cannot decide until the last minute.

While waiting for food, one can catch the latest gossip and news about the Chinese community. From across the table, a married couple converses about how the garment factories

have not been very productive lately due to shortages in shipments. The wife's sister has been sitting at home waiting for her boss to call her into work. Yet, the factories are desperately seeking workers who will dedicate at least eight hours of work each day. The wife opens up the Chinese newspaper to the classified section and points to the pages of help wanted ads. Other people in the restaurant talk about issues ranging from their families to events happening in China. Behind us is a group of Caucasians, noticeably tourists. One of them has a guide in his hand and indicates to the others where they should go after the waiter comes back with his change. They talk excitedly about Mott Street, Canal Street, and Little Italy, hoping to visit the quaint shops when they rejoin their tour group.

But the fascination with Chinatown by outsiders has changed since the late 1800's. As police officer Cornelius Willemse recalls in his memoirs:

Visitors are...a good many times...disappointed. For they've built up such fantastic ideas of what goes on down there that if they don't see a few Chinamen disappearing down traps in the pavement pursued by somebody with a hatchet or a long curved knife, they haven't had any fun and they go home disappointed. Chinatown is a peaceful neighborhood most of the time and there isn't much for the casual visitor to see (Sante 295-6).

With the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and their strong commitment to maintain their culture, language and familial ties, the Chinese have been isolated from the rest of America. To prevent further immigration of Chinese immigrants to the United States, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was a reaction by Americans concerned about the Chinese taking away job opportunities by working for cheap wages. This surge of Asian immigration also caused the development of prejudice and racism against the Chinese in America. However, it is nice to see the community open up to everyone and stereotypes breakdown as non-Chinese people embrace the culture of Chinatown.

I head south on Mott Street, and, immediately, I encounter stands of fruits and produce, ranging from *bok choy*, to white carrots, to other vegetables I do not know the English translations for. Pedestrian traffic is rather slow since many consumers are carefully browsing and comparing the selection and the quality from store to store. Towards the middle of the block are fish markets, displaying a variety of fish, shellfish and other seafood delicacies. A truck unloads its supply of fish by the tank-full, while another truck unloads boxes of broccoli across the street. Across the street lies the entrance to the apartment building of another relative of my mother's. He is a very good herbal medicine doctor from China who still offers his services to friends and relatives. By observing your complexion and reading your pulse, he can scribble down the recipe and ingredients for your remedy from his diagnosis. Below his apartment, a store sells Chinese herbs and roots for soups and drinks to aid one's health. "This way, this way," the shop owners shout at the top of their lungs to attract customers to their grocery stands. The streets are not very clean and there is a constant smell of something in the air, as cars and trucks full of food slowly inch down the congested street. The whole block between Grand Street and Hester Street is full of stores and stands of food, a center of Chinese household cuisines and my family's heritage.

Even though my mom and I eventually run into a distant relative or friend on the same small street doing the same grocery shopping as we are, I feel isolated from the Chinese people. It is as if there is a wall that separates me from the people around me, even as they bump me trying to get from store to store. It is bad enough that the neighborhood is isolated from the rest of the city because of the distinct language barrier and culture, but I feel isolated from the neighborhood because of who I am – a Chinese-American with poor Cantonese-speaking skills. The elder generation populates most of Chinatown, along with incoming immigrants. They have different histories and many stories about their hardships and hopes in the United States. As poet

Kitty Tsui describes in her poem, "Chinatown Talking Story," people sacrificed much to come to the United States. It states, "In China families with sons / saved and borrowed the \$3,000 / to buy a bright boy / promise in a new land" (Tsui 34-9). Chinese immigrants gave up their lives in China in hopes of making a better one in America. Being a first-generation Chinese-American, I have none of those hardships to carry with me. My story of all-nighters studying for an important midterm, does not compare to the story of my grandmother leaving my mom in China with her grandmother for twenty years while she lived in Hong Kong. My displeasure from not having the latest toy when I was small quickly turns to shame when my mom recalls the pleasure she received when the only toys she had were the grasshoppers, praying mantises, and cicadas that she found around her village. Sometimes the people in Chinatown look at me and they just know I was born in America and quickly, I feel subhuman when they whisper things to each other while giving me an evil look. Even though they do not know me, they are quick to label me with a Chinese term, *jook sing* (my own transliteration), which carries negative connotations of being unknowledgeable and unmannerly of Chinese ways. It is interesting how far away I feel from the Chinese people, even though I am Chinese myself.

The cars and trucks impatiently inch up the street as I continue down Mott Street, passing by several restaurants in which my family has had dim sum lunches. On Canal Street, a myriad of jewelry stores that glitter with displays of gold, diamonds, and jade in shapes of Buddha and the animals of the Chinese zodiac, Chinese grocery shops, tourist shops and bakeries line the street. Street vendors with carts loaded with fruits and vegetables and pushcarts cooking up a storm of noodles or Chinese pancakes line the streets.

Many restaurants and tourist shops line Mott between Canal and Bayard. In the middle of the block is an apartment building on top of the Mandarin Court restaurant. On the sixth floor is where my paternal grandparents had lived without the use of an elevator. The apartment is rather

small. The door opens up into the kitchen, a wooden board placed over the bathtub for a makeshift table on which to place bowls and other kitchen utensils. To the left of the kitchen are the bathroom and a curtain that hides a bedroom behind it. There are only three useable windows: one in the bathroom, one in the kitchen, and one in the living room, which is to the right of the entrance. The one in the bathroom and the kitchen lead to the dirty, dark, and dank place behind the surrounding buildings, while the one in the living room leads to the carbon monoxide-polluted street caused by heavy traffic. The living room is where my uncle and aunts slept before they married and moved out. Today, I look up only to see the same green fire escape, but a new air conditioner, new windows, and unrecognizable clothes dangling on a line.

Across the street is the Chinese Association Community Center where I went to Chinese school for only one day. I was four years old when I attended the school. On the first day, I was completely restless. Not only did I not realize I was holding my calligraphy book the wrong way, I excused myself to the bathroom, only to find a line of little girls all waiting to use the only sanitary stall. When the teacher dismissed class, I ran to my mother, vowing never to return to that tiny classroom, only to regret being illiterate in Chinese years later. I wished I could understand all of the things my mother says, especially the four word idioms and the meaning behind them. When she tries to explain them to me in a way I would understand, she finds it difficult choosing the right words that I know. Like the character June in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club explains, "These kind of explanations made me feel my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did." My imperfect Cantonese and my mother's imperfect English affects our communication with each other and I do not intend to be distant from my family in this way for the rest of my life. Next to my old Chinese school is a Buddhist temple, which has a golden display of deities and the smell of incense spilling out into the street. On this block, there is also a teashop, stationery stores, pharmacies, souvenir stores and more restaurants.

On the corner of Mott Street and Bayard Street my journey ends. To the east about a block away is the senior citizens center, where at times a passerby can hear traditional Chinese opera performances. On the opposite corner, there is the park where the young frolic on the playground while the elderly sit in circles conversing or playing Chinese Chess. On both sides, you can encounter old women offering their services to read your fortune. My mom sat down with one of these women once. The old woman saw in the palm of her hand the past and present so accurately for only ten dollars. To the north about a block away are Pell Street and Doyer Street, lined with salons and barber shops, one after another.

On Pell Street lies Joe's Shanghai Restaurant. The food tastes a bit different from the usual Cantonese cuisine I have at home and at the restaurants my family would frequent on the weekends. However, like all restaurants, everyone chitchats so loudly that I can barely hear my own tummy growl. Looking around, there is a euphoric sense of camaraderie. Chinese people and non-Chinese people are able to sit together as strangers at the same tables and everyone is happy. There are no frowns, just lots of smiling, talking, and anticipating the mouth-watering food. Joe Shanghai's Pork Soup Buns are delicious. They have dumpling-like skin and inside is a small piece of pork and tangy soup. Cantonese cuisine never had such a delightful invention. The noodles taste rather fresh, not like manufactured noodles, mixed with mushrooms and pieces of chicken and have a deep brown color to them. Unlike Cantonese style, Shanghai meals have a sweet aftertaste that remains enjoyably on my palette for a while. I know it is Chinese food, but it is a different Chinese, just like each individual in the restaurant. He or she may even be of a different nationality. Even more so, who each person is and where he or she comes from does not matter and no one really cares. Dishes and platters flow from the kitchen and everyone picks up his/her chopsticks, ready to eat and fill his/her stomachs with delectable delights.