

Building Homes

Of my family, I am the first to be born in America. I have lived in the “land of opportunity” all my life and have endured the struggles of forging my own identity with no first-hand guidance or advice. But as I have become more entrenched in American culture, I have naturally succumbed to the occasional complaint and frustration towards a parent’s ignorance of our customs or having to repeat, “It’s not China, Mom, it’s the United States.” I can learn to be American. My parents will always have China in their roots.

As difficult as it may sometimes be to converse my immigrant parents and have them understand my conflicts, it is easy to forget that when they first arrived, they were even more alone and unable to express themselves.

I was not one of the departed, who had to leave behind the fragrant and nostalgic scents of Shanghai porridge simmering atop a stove, a box of calligraphic scrolls and porcelain bowls from generations past, and the vivid faces of a large Chinese family, only to be thrust into a new society at the ripe age of 21. I was not my mother, boarding an airplane with no pictures of her destination, her new “home,” but with only a promise. I was not my grandmother, who sacrificed generations of relatives and the photo albums, the antiques, neatly layered in cardboard boxes in her Shanghai apartment, to care for her daughter’s new family—only to see the children grow up not as Chinese, but as Chinese-American. While I can now proudly proclaim myself American, these individuals who made the first great sacrifice can often never accept the United States as their true home.

Our country may promise fundamental rights and freedoms for all, which are inscribed on sacred documents and preserved in the secure and revered niches of our Archives. But do immigrants, from countries liberal to conservative, democratic to socialist, stand before the

Declaration of Independence and Constitution, illuminated behind a dust-laden glass screen, and read the words like treasures, like something larger than print whose tendrils extend into their own lives? Do they hold their hands over their hearts as they rise for the Pledge, and hear the words of the First Amendment echoing through "liberty and justice for all?" They may have visas or grasp certificates of citizenship, but do they consider themselves the citizens, the true voices, of America?

During the past summer serving at the Rosenthal Senior Center in Flushing, a predominantly Asian American community, I witnessed the pervasive silence of this "lost generation" of immigrants. Under the monotonous hum of the office air conditioning, I fingered through paperwork, attached with photographs of time-worn faces, and held my ear to a phone, listening to the ceaseless dial tones as my calls were ignored by seniors who had not contacted the main office since 2002 due to their inability to speak English. Even when they picked up their phones, I was often startled by a sudden babble of Chinese, Spanish or Russian in response to my English greeting and then a *click* as the line abruptly disconnected.

Ever so often, a Chinese lady would hobble in with her cane to consult "Maria," "Mr. Roberts," or "the Social Security lady." But the typical conversation with the agents and manager would degenerate into a one-sided monologue by the senior, interjected with some feeble "I'm sorry I can't understand"s by the agent, who would still fail to quell or comprehend the stream of unfamiliar Chinese words.

Thus, I became a translator. With the scraps of the Chinese language I had preserved from listening to the lectures and conversations of my parents and from the attempts in my childhood to speak and learn my language of origin, I was able to piece together the puzzles of their messages and bridge the gaps of communication for the office. As I became a constant

presence around the office in the summer, constantly wandering around searching for my next task, Chinese seniors began to automatically approach me for their problems, their voices perked and responsive as I greeted them with a slightly American-accented "Ni Hao."

I became the voice of those who could talk but not *speak*. At the end of the summer, seniors who had accepted me as a welcome, familiar sight around their building distributing flyers, collecting lunch tickets, receiving calls, assisting them with retrieving the latest coupons and tickets to events, embraced me with sincere thankfulness and a brightness in their eyes. Some even complimented my Chinese. "No, no, I'm really not that fluent," I'd diffidently replied, following the common humility of my background.

But I understood why. For them, it was not the occasional gap in my vocabulary or the incorrect grammar of my sentences that was embedded in their memories. Rather, it was those moments when I had translated the "Form of Residence" from English to Chinese so that they keep their living quarters, spoken with Maria about allowing a senior to join a trip to a cultural show, and promised and delivered booklets of coupons for the fresh food market further down the block. At last, someone could understand and iterate their concerns.

Although I am the newcomer who had to implant and grow her own roots, the immigrant community had to uproot intricate, extended networks in old homes for often shallow ones in the United States. These welcome strangers are a large portion of the national community, especially in the diverse "melting pot" that New York has become.

They may not speak English. They may face oppression daily for their differences. They may struggle to make ends meet, not comprehending or able to utilize the benefits provided to them. They may have the loudest of voices and the most profound of opinions, but communication and language barriers may render their voices silent.

Thus, for those of us who have a voice, who have the privilege of expression, let us speak up, not for ourselves, but for them.

We can listen. And we can be their voices.