

Instead of wanting to learn Chinese to communicate with my grandparents, I felt like I was “forced” to participate in Chinese school every Sunday and always thought it was a chore to go instead of learning the language that was my parents first language and the only language my grandparents understood. I definitely regret that now because as I got older, like any other grandchild, I wanted to understand and converse with my grandparents about what I was doing in my life without having my parents translate for me. Because I was so stubborn when I was little and didn’t take advantage of the opportunity I had, I find it harder now to become fluent in Chinese because it takes a lot of discipline and effort. My perspective on everything changed when I met my best friend in high school. After getting close with her, we started talking and sharing our experiences of being Asian, and I realized that our experiences were so similar, I didn’t feel alone anymore. We shared the microaggressions we faced at the Upper School and felt so much better opening up to someone about it. Together we started the Asian affinity group at the Upper School so that other students can connect with one another and share their experiences. I started realizing it’s not embarrassing to speak my own language in front of white friends, and it’s not embarrassing for my parents to speak Chinese in front of my friends.

For my whole life, I have lived in a predominantly white area. A lot of the time, I was the only Asian student in my class. However, I never took notice because I identified more with my American side. Because my parents assimilated to the American culture at young ages, I grew up very Americanized. As a young child, I did not feel connected with my Korean culture and heritage. I never learned how to speak the language and only celebrated some Korean traditions throughout the year. However, when my siblings and I visited our extended family each summer, I often felt a sense of shame for never putting in the effort to learn more about my Korean heritage. When we visited them, our interactions consisted of blank stares and asking our parents to translate for us. This feeling traveled back home with me. When other Korean people in New Jersey assumed I spoke Korean, I felt so guilty interrupting them and explaining that I didn’t understand what they were saying. Within the classroom, I felt a new sense of shame for the little connection I had with my culture. I still remember hating it when people asked me if I had a middle name. Because it was Korean, I would often tell them that I didn’t have one because I was afraid that people would make fun of me. I often heard my classmates make jokes and comments towards other Asian American students, and I would just laugh along, so I could feel accepted.

Even up until recently I still felt that I could not be proud of my heritage and would feel ashamed and embarrassed for liking Korean pop music and other Asian media. There is a weird stigma towards non-Western things that further creates this rift in the Asian identity. Asian things are still viewed as “weird,” “exotic,” “foreign,” and “scary,” and that perspective rubbed off on me too. I am now trying my hardest to make up for the time that I have lost grieving over what I could not have rather than embracing and loving the things that I do have. I am taking Chinese language classes (even relearning how to speak the Shanghai dialect at home which is a dialect that both my parents grew up speaking and I am also very familiar with), doing more research on the Chinese culture and community, speaking with other East Asian-Americans about their experiences, educating myself further on racism towards East Asians, and speaking up about how I feel as a Chinese-American rather than suppressing my feelings. I am also no longer ashamed to talk about my relationship with Korean pop music. It’s not something to feel embarrassed about, considering the fact that I owe so much of how I am today to this genre.