

Identity Papers

On being Chinese, but not

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When I was growing up in Canada, my mom used to tell me a story about how our Taiwanese relatives got cheated when they visited mainland China. The story meant only one thing – that all mainland Chinese were thieves and could not be trusted.

It must have been the early nineties, because the tale has been repeated endlessly for at least two decades. My mom wasn't there, but she heard it from her sisters. As the story goes, my aunts visited China for a tour in the summer. They were looking for a place to exchange their Taiwanese dollars for Chinese yuan. But it was a small city and there was no bank in sight. They must have stuck out like a sore thumb, because all the locals were staring at them.

"Hey," a voice called out to my aunts. "Are you looking to exchange money? You can do it here."

By all accounts, the guy looked shady. He was crouching by the side of the dust-filled street, flanked by a few kids and old men. About thirty years old, a few grey hairs, holding up a wad of yuan bills. There were no banks nearby. He wanted to make a deal.

My youngest aunt looked around once more, as if a legitimate bank might materialise out of thin air. She made eye contact with my other aunts. Screw it, they agreed silently. Let's just deal with this guy so we can move on with our day. Very deliberately, she drew a stack of Taiwanese dollars out from her zipper pouch.

The pouch was fixed to her waist, in typical Asian style. The idea was you were less likely to get robbed if your money was in front of you and at hip-level. My aunts knew about the evils of the world. How in the Taiwan night markets, thieves would cut open the bottom of your backpack while you were browsing and take whatever fell out. You wouldn't even know your stuff was stolen until you got home.

My aunts were prepared for ninja thieves. But they weren't prepared for this.

My aunt held the equivalent of 200 US dollars out in her hand. The amount of money changes each time the story is told, but it was a non-trivial figure. Her hand looked unsure, a little unsteady.

In a flash, the makeshift moneychanger snatched the bills from my poor aunt's hand and gunned for a nearby alleyway. Do not pass go, do collect \$200. There was no time to react and process the situation. My aunts just stood there dumbfounded as the man disappeared. They didn't even shout or give chase. They were too shocked, and the money was gone.

My mom says my aunts were lucky. She heard in the news about how a Taiwanese tourist group on a boat tour in China were ambushed by pirates. Maybe the pirates

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were working with the tour operator, she speculated – some kind of inside job. They rounded everyone up and collected their money and watches. Then they killed all the tourists and dumped them in the water.

"It could have been worse," my mom said to me, staring into the distance and looking at no one in particular. "Far worse." That's what the Taiwanese news told her.

From then on, my mom's side of the family instinctively agreed that mainland Chinese were not to be trusted. It's an old stereotype in Taiwan, but never underestimate the power of repetition – of hearing the same story for two decades, and hearing it from your own mother. As much as I didn't want to believe it, it was one of the few data points I had about the mainland.

The other thing I thought I knew about China was its strongarm Communist form of rule. In our Canadian high school, we learned about Marx and Lenin and Mao and Stalin and the whole gang of Commies. I knew that Stalin and Mao were monsters. How could you be anything else if you let millions of people starve and freeze to death? And how dumb was communism? As if people would stick to fairness and equitable wealth distribution. What a pipe dream.

Mainland China wasn't even a clear concept in my 18-year old mind. There was Taiwan, my home country. There was Canada, my adopted home since I was seven. There was the United States next door, and all those European countries, full of ooh la las and exotic food. Who wanted to go to China? I imagined it as a giant Animal Farm, full of dreary communes, with scared people in grey overalls crying in the streets. In the distance, you would see a leader waving as his lackeys bowed to him.

And what outsider could think of China without thinking of June 4, 1989? The day the tanks squashed the student protesters who dared to dream about a future without oppression. I was too young at the time, but it's hard to be Chinese-anything in the nineties and not hear all about Tiananmen square. It was the definitive statement of how messed up China was.

And then there were the "fobs" – "fresh off the boat" Chinese in Canada. The term sounds so derogatory now, like redneck. But back then my brother, friends and I used it quite freely.

After one Sunday mass in Vancouver, we got to know a new group of arrivals in the neighbourhood – two Chinese boys, two Chinese girls and two Chinese grown ups. During the potluck meal, the adults told us that they were the guardians of the kids, who had secretly crossed the Pacific Ocean on a boat. Their parents in China had wanted them to go to a place with "opportunity", and for whatever reason regular immigration wasn't an option. They were literally fresh off the boat.

I was surprised. My mental image of "fobs" was of hicks with tattered clothes and bad personal hygiene. These kids were well-dressed, polite, and normal. But what was so good about Canada, to endure a long boat ride and the risk of being found? And what was so bad about China, other than the drabness of it all and having to work in grey overalls? There were other Chinese families in Vancouver, but they did

it by immigrating. The boat people? They did it illegally. I felt resentful about that and didn't even know why.

I painted my understanding of China in broad strokes.

As a born-again Canadian, I became a Chinese person who was racist towards other Chinese. I felt the need to label other people – *fob* or *banana*, *Honger* or *Twonger*. It was the slang of the day and I didn't think too hard about it. It's like how kids today use words like *faggot* and *tranny* without really meaning to, in the arrogance and ignorance of youth.

It got even weirder. I would trash-talk whole segments of Chinese people at a time, including Taiwan, to the chagrin of my mom. I told her all the crazy news I heard about serial murders, or the tanks, or how small Taiwan's economy was. My mom would try to defend the Chinese or use diversionary tactics. One of her favorite strategies was to point a parallel finger at the wrongs of Canadian or American society. "See," she would say when something horrible happened elsewhere, "this stuff happens worldwide!"

Part of it why I did it, I'm sure, was just to piss off my mom. I was living out a kind of delayed teenage rebellion. With her I would criticise any aspect of Chinese culture, to wind her up. But at the same time, I would passionately defend the entirety of Chinese culture from non-Chinese. How dare the white kids talk about slanty-eyed people or the chinks, I thought. It's bad enough being an angry young man. Being an angry young Chinese man has its share of additional hang-ups.

One time, my brother and I got into a shouting match with some drunk frat kids on a hotel balcony when they started calling us racial slurs. They had obviously had too much to drink, and were shouting at us to "go back to your country" and some other things I don't remember. When their girlfriends tried to break it up, I do remember shouting abuse at the girls, telling them to control their boyfriends. I'm not proud of that moment.

I moved to Beijing two and a half years ago, in search of a new beginning to my life and career. My first year in the mainland was frustrating, but time is on my side. Even though I'm only starting to scratch the surface of China, I'm understanding more about this country with each day. I'm still cynical about many things, but appreciating them from a different perspective helps temper my negativity. Do I think there is a lot of room for improvement, from my Canadian and Taiwanese point of view? Yes. Can I sympathise with the trials and tribulations of mainland Chinese, given all the transformative changes they have been through? Also yes.

Sometimes I still think about that shady moneychanger who robbed my aunts all those years ago. Did he know that his actions would change how our whole family would feel about mainland Chinese for twenty years? Would he still have stolen my

aunt's money had he known how much it affected the complicated way I viewed my own identity as Chinese?

Probably he would, but I like to think he would have reconsidered his actions. Because in the end we're all Chinese, and we have got to stick together.

