

Belonging

In the increasingly multicultural nation of America, citizenship can no longer refer to a group of people who speak one language and have one culture. Belonging in the United States has grown to involve cultural citizenship, in which people have a simultaneous claim to their distinctive cultural differences as well as a citizen's democratic rights (Rosaldo). However, this ideal of cultural co-existence has yet to be fully realized in many regards. As a young Chinese Muslim American woman, I have struggled at times to reconcile the multiple facets of my identity here in the U.S. Yet, one white ceramic sculpture that sits in my family's home serves as a tribute to my family's origins in Hong Kong and faith in Islam, acting as a strong, unifying reminder of the communities to which I belong.

First owned by my grandparents, this small ceramic sculpture stirs a deep sense of belonging within me, knowing the stories and history that it contains. A large granite island table stands in the center of our kitchen at home, and on that island stands a vase of flowers, several picture frames of family and relatives, and this ceramic art piece. Painted on the white ceramic is an archway lined with green vines that leads into an open space inside the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. In the center of the Grand Mosque lies the Kaaba Stone, which is the ancient, sacred stone building towards which Muslims all over the world pray. Across the sky, the Arabic word spelling "Allah" or God is written in a bright circle, and at the base of the ceramic piece, the Quran is depicted, with Arabic calligraphy scrawled across its open pages. My grandparents on my mother's side first bought the ceramic in a mosque in Hong Kong, before they immigrated to the

United States in 1991. The sculpture then stood on display in their American home, before they actually embarked on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca in 1998. After my brother and I were born soon after, and our grandparents moved in with us, they brought the sculpture with them and it has been standing in the center of our kitchen ever since, both as a reminder of home in Hong Kong and as an emblem of their holy pilgrimage and religious faith.

The introduction of Islam in Hong Kong began during the British Hong Kong government period. Hong Kong was a British colony from 1841 to 1997 (*Britannica*). Soldiers and businessmen from South Asia and Mainland China arrived in Hong Kong in the late 19th century, bringing the first Muslims of Indian and Chinese origin. The British government provided aid to build mosques for these Muslim communities, and there are now six major mosques in Hong Kong used for daily prayers. However, Britain's sovereignty over Hong Kong was set to end in 1997, when the territory would be transferred to China. In fearful anticipation of this transition to communist rule, a wave of emigration from Hong Kong occurred in the early 1990s, including my mother and grandparents, and these Hong Kongers most popularly settled in Canada or the United States. The fear of communist rule that spurred my grandparents to emigrate from Hong Kong was not uncommon and highlights the striking distinction perceived between China and Hong Kong's government and way of life. Many did not fully believe in China's "One Country, Two Systems" principle, which promised that Hong Kong would retain its capitalist economic system for the next period of 50 years while remaining under the Chinese central government. Due to political, economic, and social factors, many Hong Kongers fled in fear of the Chinese Communist Party changing their way of life.

The white ceramic sculpture that now stands in our home serves as a physical reminder of emigration and our intrinsic sense of belonging to Hong Kong, and also points to a new extended

identity created here in the United States. Growing up as a second-generation, American-born Chinese, my Chinese ethnicity has largely been my defining factor of self-identification within America, and yet when visiting Hong Kong, I never feel more American. My grandparents settled in an eastern suburb of Los Angeles with a large Chinese community, where I was born and raised. My skin tone serves as a distinct racial marker of East Asian descent, and knowing how immersed I was in a Chinese American neighborhood and how much Chinese culture influenced my upbringing and way of life at home, I wholeheartedly identified with my ethnicity. However, just as Elizabeth Chin expresses in “My Grandmother’s Rings,” there were times I felt conflicted about being both Chinese and American, as Chin writes, “I felt like I did everything wrong, including being only half Chinese and only being able to eat, not talk” (Chin, 2016). I recognize Chin’s feeling of estrangement with the language barrier, as I grew up listening to Cantonese and responding in English to my parents. Now, when I travel to Hong Kong, although I may appear Chinese, my broken Cantonese is an immediate telling sign that I am not fully one of them. However, Chin continues to remark, “I wasn’t interested in business, medicine, or law. Since I was a girl, it wasn’t quite as bad, I think, that I was into theater and anthropology.” Chin hints at the gendered standards and stereotypical expectations of females in Chinese society that did still influence the way I was raised, not only in career choice, but also in learning domestic chores and maintaining a demure personality that was fit for women. Jewelry, like Chin’s grandmother’s rings, was also incredibly important for status; my Chinese name Pui-Yee actually means jade jewelry in Chinese, referring to a daughter as precious as the jade jewelry that is so highly valued by Chinese women. Reconciling all of these multifaceted factors, whether it be language, food, jewelry, or educational upbringing has allowed me to acknowledge and accept my overlapping identities as a Chinese American. For Chin, her grandmother’s rings represent her complex family

history, as she states, “They are the world to me, the world I lost, the world I never knew, the world I have made for myself.” As for me, my grandparents’ ceramic sculpture from Hong Kong serves as a reminder of the communities that I belong to and the sacrifices that my parents and grandparents have made to make a new home for us here in the United States, ultimately reaffirming my sense of belonging as a Chinese American.

However, my identity as a Muslim adds an additional layer of complexity and ambiguity to my sense of belonging. My family has been Muslim for several generations on my mother’s side. In Hong Kong, Islam is practiced only by about 4% of the population. However, Asia is home to 60% of the world’s Muslims, and Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world (Pew Forum, 2017). Many local Hong Kong families descended from Muslim South Asian immigrants, who came from countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, which have a significant portion of Muslims. My great-grandparents were half Indonesian and half Malaysian before moving to Hong Kong, creating the Chinese Muslim family that I have now. Although Muslims are a minority in Hong Kong, my mother and grandparents freely practiced and generally found acceptance as a community. Our family’s ceramic sculpture stood proudly in praise of Allah in the center of the home. A peaceful cultural co-existence was present in Hong Kong, where my family never considered themselves to be victimized because of their religion. Although the ceramic still stands in the center of our house here in America, the same cultural co-existence cannot be said about my family’s experiences in the U.S.

The current racialization of Muslims in America affects self-perceived sense of belonging to one’s nation, race, and religion. In Su’ad Abdul Khabeer’s “Citizens and Suspects: Race, Gender, and the Making of American Muslim Citizenship,” Khabeer comments on the “centrality of both race and gender to citizenship in the United States,” as reflected by the experiences of two young,

female, Muslim American citizens, Naeemah and Huma (Khabeer, 2017). Naeemah expressed that as a Black American who wears a headscarf, she was frequently asked where she was from, possibly due to her name or depending on the way she wore her headscarf, and she would “give them all the info upfront” and “constructed a ‘blurb’ that preemptively attempts to make her racial and religious identity legible.” As a Chinese Muslim American myself, although I do not wear a headscarf, I am similarly asked often about my Arabic name and where my family is from, and I feel the need to explain myself. While Naeemah viewed this as benign curiosity, Khabeer believes that it reflects the “contemporary racialization of Muslims in the United States.” Naeemah’s skin color and American accent mark her as an African American, but her Arabic name and headscarf create “cognitive dissonance,” as others are unable to parse that she is both Black American and Muslim. Consequently, Naeemah is viewed as either a “raced citizen or foreign Muslim suspect” who must be from somewhere else. For me, as a Chinese female with an American accent and as a Muslim who does not wear a headscarf, my identity is also illegible, and people are quick to question me about my Arabic name, a linguistic marker that does not legibly match my race. Even other Muslims who recognize and ask about my Arabic name are often surprised because they have never met a Chinese Muslim. I find myself feeling the need to explain the origin of Islam in my family, almost as if I have to prove that I am also Muslim in order to make my racial and religious identity legible, just like Naeemah did with her blurb. Since Chinese Muslims are a minority, it is easy to be curious, and I am often glad to broaden my friends’ perspectives about the diversity of the Muslim community. However, this does reflect the present-day racialization of Muslims in America. In Hong Kong, Muslims of all diverse racial types are largely accepted in the community, although they only make up 4% of the population. Religion and race are two distinct entities of belonging that can coexist in a variety of ways, yet particularly in America,

being Muslim is often pinned as an identifiable racial type, leading to feelings of estrangement even in one's own nation. Identifying as a Chinese Muslim was so foreign to the people around me that it felt foreign even to me, until I first visited Hong Kong and saw how natural it was for entire communities of Chinese Muslims to exist. Huma also reflected on this feeling of separation between two of her identities as a Muslim and an American and finally felt her "indigeneity" when wearing a headscarf in color guard, retrospectively realizing that her experience had been a combination of her two identities. Khabeer notes, "Huma's inability to see herself as both Muslim and American until college demonstrates the psychic violence of racialization and citizenship." For me, that psychic violence primarily manifested itself in reconciling my Chinese and Muslim identities, at times making me question my belonging to both. However, walking past my family's ceramic sculpture each day at home allows me to unify my identity and release my lingering doubt. As both a talisman from Hong Kong and a shining beacon of our faith in Islam, my grandparents' sculpture gives me comfort in recognizing, understanding, and embracing each part of my identity and multicultural citizenship, albeit the lack of full cultural co-existence in the community around me.

The complex history, stories, and communities that my family's ceramic sculpture allows me to connect with make it a powerful object that imbues me with a sense of belonging. Born and raised in the U.S., I undoubtedly speak and act like an American, yet my upbringing, customs, and way of life have all been heavily influenced by Chinese culture and ideals, and I have learned to recognize that I can coexist as both. Reconciling cultural citizenship as a Chinese Muslim American, however, has been a more foreign concept in the United States, building feelings of estrangement as an American citizen amidst the widespread racialization of Muslims. Nevertheless, my family's ceramic art piece reminds me to embrace my Arabic name and religious faith in

coexistence with Chinese cultural influences on my way of life in the United States. Race, religion, ethnicity, and nationality are not necessarily mutually exclusive entities and can coexist, and these multifaceted parts of my identity continually fuel my desire for cultural citizenship and the right to belong as a Chinese Muslim American woman.

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