My family history consists of both old and new immigrants to the New World. My middle name, X, was inherited by my mother’s side of the family. The X part of my heritage is one of white Protestant settlers whose pioneering spirit helped “win the west”, albeit on the backs of enslaved peoples. These settlers were able to climb social ranks through their privileged racial status within society. Contrastingly, my Y Chinese heritage stems from Hunan roots and negatively affected my father’s recent immigration to America. Although my mother’s Protestant roots aided her side of the family, my father’s Chinese roots significantly hindered his transition into the United States, ultimately showing that cultural differences have a large impact on the American experience as half my family received benefits from their cultural backgrounds, while the other half faced hardship due to where they descended from.

My great great great grandfather, lived in Greenwood, Arkansas. He had twenty-six children with two wives and owned a plantation. Because he was a white Protestant, he ultimately had the power to own multiple slaves and become financially successful. When the Civil War ended, the slaves, his family, and his children all took the name X, hence the large X population - both white and black - in the South. X is a Dutch name in theory, translating to ‘town crier’ but the family had been in the United States for so long that the origins of the name are somewhat unclear. In 1889 and 1893, the central part of Oklahoma territory was opened to homesteading which allowed for many to buy cheap land, so the general trajectory of the family was to move out of the deep South and into Oklahoma to work in the oil fields[[1]](#footnote-1). Overall, my great great granfathers’s heritage allowed him to thrive within American society as he was a landowning white Protestant male who, at the time, dominated the social hierarchy.

While my great great grandfather was at the top of the social hierarchy in America, my great grandmother, shared similar privileges yet was restricted by gender expectations. She lived in the South during the Dust bowl and was very independent, once running away from all her current obligations with a baseball player[[2]](#footnote-2). Her father, an English doctor, had to follow her on the train to ‘rescue’ her and bring her back home. She was the oldest of seven children and believed strongly in improving herself through education. Unfortunately for her, she had to struggle against her Old World father who believed that boys should be educated, but not girls. Eventually, she earned two college degrees after marrying my great grandfather after World War I. The couple was the first married students at Oklahoma State University. During the 1930s, she acted as a social worker and worked with Oklahoma residents in order to advocate and explain former President Roosevelt’s the New Deal, as people were impoverished and needed help to survive[[3]](#footnote-3). Her husband passed away at age thirty-five and she became a single working mother who successfully raised four children. While she was white, her gender initially restricted her from pursuing her education. She later chose a field of work designed to create comfort and balance within the community while managing the hectic lives of four children.

On the other side of the family, my father’s mother, grew up in a small village within Hunan province, China. She grew up with her now late-husband who were best friends from the day they were born. Interestingly, she and her husband, grew up in the same village and shared the same last name. They were considered too closely related to marry by some of their relatives, and were not on speaking terms with a few of them. Recently, we did a DNA test of both sides of the family, and it turns out that they are not related at all, genetically. My grandparents were life-long lovers and lived together during the era of Mao Zedong. My grandmother saw many traumatic events that encapsulated the trajectory of Chinese history during the 1920s. In fact, during the Japanese annexation of Nanking, she was a university student and had to flee the ‘Rape of Nanking’, a devastating event for the city[[4]](#footnote-4). She eventually became a pathologist. During the communist era, she associated herself and her family with an opposing political party, and as a consequence, her family was sent to the Gobi Desert during a purge. Later her daughter, had her first child within the US, and so they visited and settled in Long Island with her grandchildren. Because of one careless political statement, she jeopardized the health of the entire family as they were sent to survive in a wasteland.

My father grew up in Beijing, China, during the Great Leap Forward, subsequent Great Famine, and finally the Cultural Revolution. When he was young, his family was sent to live in the Gobi Desert in Northern China. Since he was not able to pursue his studies during 1966 to 1976 as Chairman Mao closed all the schools, he spent a lot of time riding public buses from one end of Beijing to the other at a young age, exploring. He also spent hours at the Beijing Zoo and discovered that if you poke a panda in the rear end, nothing much happens. When he was very little, China had a massive famine which impacted the family greatly. He remembers long lines to buy deer meat and struggles at dinner over who should get the biggest piece of protein. He grew up during the Cultural Revolution, an extremely traumatic time for many people who had money or education in China[[5]](#footnote-5). After the government confiscated his nanny’s bank account, she hanged herself and my father remembers discovering her body. After Chairman Mao died, my father was accepted into the CUSPEA program (a prestigious educational exchange program allowing the best Chinese Physics students to study in the US) by performing extremely well on a test, earning the number one highest score in Physics in China. He was able to attend Harvard and escape persecution, resuming his education. He worked his way up through school, ultimately landing a prestigious job as a private researcher and professor at MIT. Today, communism is an extremely sensitive subject to discuss with my father as he has many experiences imprinted in his mind. I was taught from a young age that it is unacceptable to leave any food on the plate after a meal which is a direct result of the traumatizing starvation he experienced during his youth. My father humbles me by telling of the luck I was granted by living in a country where democracy is prominent within society.

I strongly believe that America lives up to the slogan, ‘land of opportunity’, as my father was able to come to the country and start a life filled with success. However, one cannot deny the prominent advantages in being a white male within American society as my great great great grandfather was provided with social powers that my own father would not have achieved, based merely on race and gender. America is also founded on “land of the free” which displays irony as my ancestors created lives for themselves based on the cruel, unjust oppression of minorities. There is a certain level of irony that while this side of the family used people of color as a means of establishing power, I come from a mixed race background, which has allowed me to represent what America is, a melting pot. While the nation was founded to accommodate whites, being a mixed race woman has led me to understand myself and my cultural backgrounds further as I am not tied down to one specific race. Ultimately while there are beautiful immigrant success stories such as my father’s, they tend to be counterbalanced by those who exploited immigrants - the other side of my family.

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