

Old Gold Mountain 旧金山

David Rome Prize
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I am four years old when I start kindergarten at my first American school—doe-eyed, chubby-cheeked, eager to begin a formal education. At this point I can't read, write, or speak English; like my brother, I enter our private k-8 institution speaking only Chinese. This, I thought, would not be much of a problem.

But according to my father, I wouldn't let go of his hand on the first day of school when he led me to my assigned classroom. I'm scared, I whisper to him in Mandarin, clinging to him in the doorway, looking into the sea of light hair and light skin. He pushes me forward gently. *Just practice. It'll be easy.* He turns and leaves me in that classroom full of children who don't look like me or talk like me, children who later that year will pull their eyes at me on the playground and jeer at me when our teacher calls me to read. But I have no way of knowing that then.

I don't remember anything about the rest of that day. My brother, two years older than me, tells me that as we waited together for our mother after school a golden-haired boy from my class ran up to me and asked why I couldn't pronounce my Rs and Ls. I couldn't tell him what I know now—that my thoughts still ran in Chinese, that I was American-born but not American-bred, that I lacked the requisite curl of the tongue and purse of the lips to sound like I belonged.

After he leaves, I begin to cry.

The California Gold Rush began in 1848, when James W. Marshall found gold at Sutter's Mill. In the subsequent months, people flooded into San Francisco by land and sea in search of the precious mineral. Within a year, the population of San Francisco exploded from 800 to over 50,000. Immigrants from all over the world flocked to the mines, hoping to strike it rich, dreaming of a better life.

A significant proportion of them hailed from China—so many that by the late

1850s, one-fifth of the population in San Francisco and its surrounding counties were Chinese.

Upon being hit with the reality of the Gold Rush, however—out of the tens of thousands of forty-niners who toiled in the mines, very few actually found gold—the Chinese immigrants began creating little pockets of settlements, communities of displaced migrants. They began moving into other occupations, seeking more long-term sources of income from laundry businesses, domestic servitude, and small restaurants.¹

My grandmother packs my lunch every day for the first few months of school. I usually eat leftovers, rice with a side of meat and stir-fried vegetables, but sometimes my mother makes dumplings or steamed pork buns.

The first time I use the classroom microwave at lunchtime, my grandma has packed *shi zi tou*, our homemade meatballs simmered with Chinese cabbage. A group of girls wrinkle their small button noses. "What's so *smelly*?" I take my container out of the microwave and go outside. When I open the Tupperware, alone at a table, I am embarrassed to see the guilty circles of moisture that have condensed inside the plastic. I take a bite, decide that yes, the girls are right, my lunch is smelly, and I eat the rest in shame. From then on, I prefer to eat my food cold.

The earliest Chinese restaurants were catered towards the Chinese palate, predominantly featuring stir-fried, rice-based Cantonese dishes that used parts of an animal completely foreign to American cuisine—chicken feet, for example, or pork intestines. After the first Americans discovered the restaurants, however, Chinese restaurant-owners realized that they could potentially have a much larger body of customers at their door, an enormous resource they had yet to tap into.

When I finally make a friend in first grade, I am ecstatic. I eat lunch with her every day, and once, she even invites me to her house to sleep over.

Emily's parents look just like her: blue-eyed and brunette, a picture of all-American charm. Her mom has freckles, wears lipstick and shirts that show off her arms; her dad likes baseball caps and leaving sports games on too loudly. They ask me a lot of questions at dinner: what language do we speak at home? (Chinese.) How long have I lived in the United States? (My entire life.) Oh. Then why do I have an accent? (I... do not know.)

Often, during lunch, I catch her watching me eating. When I eventually ask her

*Chicken Livers and Gizzards**

2 lbs. chicken livers
8 oz. chicken gizzards
1 tbsp goji berries
1 tbsp sliced ginger
1 tsp salt
1/2 to 1 tsp soy sauce

1. Clean chicken livers and chicken gizzards in cold water, then parboil for 5 minutes.
2. Dry off and put in large dish. Add goji berries, sliced ginger, salt and light soy sauce. Mix with chopsticks or fork.
3. Heat pan with water until water boils. Put the dish in the pan and cover with lid. Steam cook for 30 minutes or longer if required.
4. Check livers and gizzards with chopsticks or fork to see if fully cooked. Livers will be fully cooked when they are no longer pink.

¹ "Chinese Immigrants and the Gold Rush." PBS. N.p., 13 Sept. 2006

* Taken from youtube.com

why, she says that she's never seen food like mine before. She also says with a tinge of envy that she wishes she knew how to eat with chopsticks. "You should wear them in your hair," she tells me. "That's how all the Chinese ladies in TV do it."

"...And there wasn't a lot of familiar in China. No pork lo mein or kung pao chicken, and definitely no egg rolls. On our first night in Chengdu, we joined a group of four for dinner — one Chinese woman and three westerners. The restaurant was not fancy, but it was obviously popular. Built into our table was a simmering cauldron of broth, into which we were to add side dishes and cook them until they were done. "I've taken the liberty of ordering us some tofu, some mushrooms and some duck tongues," said the western woman sitting across from me. "Do you trust me to keep ordering, or is there anything in particular you might like?"

I looked at her thinking, "You whore!" Catherine was English and had lived in China for close to 20 years. I figured the duck tongues were a sort of test, so I made it a point to look unfazed. Excited even.

When I was eventually forced to eat one, I found that it actually wasn't so bad. The only disconcerting part was the shape, particularly the base, from which dangled tentacle-like roots. This reminded me that the tongues had not been cut off but, rather, yanked out, possibly with pliers. Of course the duck was probably dead by then, wasn't it? It's not as if they'd jerk out the tongue and then let it go, traumatised and quackless but otherwise whole.

It was while eating my second duck tongue that the man at the next table hacked up a loud wad of phlegm and spat it on to the floor. "I think I'm done," I said."

— David Sedaris²

As Chinese restaurants carved a niche into the American culinary market, their owners began to realize that duck tongue and chicken gizzards were far too foreign to be marketable. Business was still mostly limited to within the confines of the Cantonese communities. To Americans, they still represented the barbaric Other.

They wanted to create dishes that appealed to the American tongue, but had no idea where to begin.

Every so often, my family assembles in the kitchen to fold a large batch of homemade dumplings. It is one of my favorite family rituals: my dad first makes an enormous pot of ground pork filling, which goes at the center of the table, and the five of us—mom, dad, grandma, brother, and I—gather around with stacks of dumpling skins. When I was younger my mother taught me how to pinch and fold the tops to create the pretty pleats, but it takes me a little while to get into a rhythm. The trick is to use both hands symmetrically, I learn. But the next time we gather for another dumpling-folding session, I can't stop thinking about the girls from school. *What's so smelly?* It echoes in my head, spinning around and around until finally I tell my family that I'm too tired to continue. I retreat to the bathroom, scrubbing my hands desperately in the sink to rid them of the scent of cooking wine and pork.

After my brother and I move schools when I enter second grade, I hope that maybe things will get better. But months go by and I still don't have any friends; I still spend recess by myself; I still eat lunch alone every day, tucked into my desk with a book, my unheated Tupperware hidden shamefully in my lap. Finally, in December, I throw up in the classroom when a stomach bug is passed around. This is humiliating enough on its own, but it becomes a genuinely traumatic experience when the first reaction that comes of it is a classmate screaming *Ewww, it smells just like her dumplings!* I panic. How does she know? What did I do wrong? I eat by myself. I don't heat my food. I can't even smell my food most days.

That night, at home, I ask my grandmother to stop packing me lunches.

At first she is confused. Is it bad? Would I rather she stop packing leftovers and instead prepare food in the mornings? No, I tell her. I just don't like Chinese food anymore. I'm tired of it.

It is a lie, and one that I know will hurt her, but it achieves my desired outcome. My dad looks at me, taken aback, and his face settles into an expression of resignation—as if he knew this was bound to happen someday. He agrees to pay for the school's lunch plan. I pretend not to see the lines of regret that have crawled into his forehead, because finally, I will fit in with everybody else.

So I settle into a routine: every day at lunch I swipe my card in the cafeteria line, I hold out my tray, I carry my school-sanctioned and school-prepared food into the cafeteria, where I eat with my friends.³ Sloppy Joes, hot dogs, Hot Pockets, peanut butter sandwiches—this becomes my daily fare.

"The waiter at Ruby's put two bowls of chop suey and a fat pot of tea between them.

"You pour out my tea so it's more homelike," said Lee.

"How much sugar?"

"I don't take sugar."

"Me either."

"Say! We have exactly the same tastes, don't we?" he said.

Both were very hungry and they stopped talking in order to concentrate on the slippery wet food. Every time Francie looked up at him he smiled. Every time he looked down at her she grinned happily. After the chop suey, rice, and tea were all gone, he leaned back and took out a pack of cigarettes."

—Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

By the early 20th century, chop suey had become a well-known restaurant meal throughout the United States. In fact, from around 1900 to the 1960s, most Chinese restaurants in America were called chop suey houses. Soon enough chop suey became synonymous for Chinese food, one homogenous term for one homogenous cuisine.

But where did chop suey come from? The version served in American-Chinese restaurants—some conglomeration of diced meat and canned vegetables, all tossed together and coated with a sugary, cornstarch-thickened sauce—has a long list of col-

2 "Chicken toenails, anyone?" The Guardian. N.p., 15 July 2011.

3 By "friends," I mean my gym teacher, which is pretty ironic because I almost failed gym three years in a row. Still, being around a real human counted for something. I took what I could get.

orful origin stories. One account states that it was invented by Qing Dynasty premier Li Hongzhang's chef during an 1896 visit to the United States, who was trying to create a meal suitable for both Chinese and American palates.⁴ Another tale claims that, in the 1860s, a Chinese restaurant cook in San Francisco was forced to serve something to drunken miners after hours, when he was out of fresh food. He improvised, throwing leftovers into a wok and calling it Chopped Sui, and the miners loved it.⁵

Regardless of its origin, it became a hit dish. By the 1890s, chop suey had grown so wildly popular that the Chinese population of New York had risen to 13,000. About 8,000 of these were doing laundry work throughout the city, already an important occupation for the Chinese, but more and more were coming into the city to open restaurants. A New York Times article in 1900 proclaimed that, “judging from the outbreak of Chinese restaurants all over town, the city has gone chop-suey mad.”⁶ American patrons couldn't stand authentic Chinese food, but they loved chop suey, their imagined version of cuisine in the exotic Orient.⁷

And of course the Chinese restaurants complied—they adapted themselves to suit the American taste palate, bastardizing Chinese food into mixtures of flavors and textures that Americans like to think were authentic but in reality had little to do with actual Chinese food. Such was the dilemma of 19th-century Chinese restaurants: they had to be different, but not too different. Exotic, but not too exotic. There was no in-between.

By the time I reach seventh grade, I've made a few friends. I still buy lunch from school every day, but now I have friends to sit with in the cafeteria, a steady clique. The school cafeteria usually serves the same bland American food I've trained myself to enjoy, but once in a while they have themed Cultural Days—Mexican or Asian food, for instance. On “Asian Day,” the menu is sweet and sour pork, chicken chow mein, and vegetable egg rolls. Oh, great, I think.

*Chop Suey**

Serve over hot rice, topped with chow mein noodles and soy sauce.

*1/4 cup shortening
1 1/2 cups diced pork loin
1 cup diced onion
1 cup diced celery
1 cup hot water
1 tsp salt
1/8 tsp ground black pepper
1 (14.5 ounce) can bean sprouts
1/3 cup cold water
2 tbsp cornstarch
2 tsp soy sauce
1 tsp white sugar*

*1. Heat shortening in a large, deep skillet. Sear pork until it turns white, then add onion and saute for 5 minutes. Add celery, hot water, salt and pepper. Cover skillet and simmer for 5 minutes. Add sprouts and heat to boiling.
2. In a small bowl combine the cold water, cornstarch, soy sauce and sugar. Mix together and add to skillet mixture. Cook for 5 minutes, or until thickened to taste.*

All three dishes are, quite frankly, disgusting, and unlike any Asian food I've ever had. As I push the gloppy mass of sweet-and-sour, batter-fried dough around my plate, I think: are these three American-born dishes really supposed to be indicative of cuisine of the entire Asian continent? What about Korean food, Japanese food, Vietnamese food, Thai food? It's one thing to serve really bad imitation Chinese food, but to classify it under the entirety of “Asian Day”?

Then again, I don't know what I expected from the school cafeteria.

So on Multicultural Day, when Levin from the Philippines brings in sticky rice blooming with coconut milk and mango, when Rohan from South India brings in potato curry and dosa, my grandma makes two containers of shi zi tou and two containers of tofu swimming in a spicy stew, mapo tofu. I watch my classmates nervously as they take their first bites—and, when their faces light up, when they tell me that was not what they expected, I act nonchalant. But I make a mental note to tell my parents.

In April 1882, President Chester A. Arthur vetoed the Chinese Exclusion Act to much of the nation's chagrin. An April 1882 issue of the San Francisco Examiner proclaimed:

“The news of the veto of the anti-Chinese bill... came to the community as a shock of painful character for which it is difficult to find language to describe. We are face to face with the appalling fact that no apparent remedy remains for us as terrible a curse as ever afflicted a people. The Chinese blight comes home to the heart of every man. If our people are to descend to the level of Mongolian civilization, it follows that they must live as the Chinese do; they must abandon the building up of homes, eschew the marrying of wives, and the raising of children, and live on rice, sleep 50 in a room on shelves, and wear Nankin cloth. On all sides the sentiment expressed is that no such calamity had ever before befallen the Pacific coast.”⁸

After the bill passed a month later, then, the American people rejoiced.

The bill, which halted Chinese immigration and prohibited existing Chinese immigrants from becoming US citizens, was only supposed to last ten years, but through the Geary Act of 1892, it was extended for another ten. When those ten years were up, it became permanent. Finally, 41 years later, the Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943 with the Magnuson Act—which still only allowed 105 Chinese immigrants per year. Not until 1965 was natural Chinese immigration to the United States allowed to begin again

*Sweet and Sour Chicken**

*For the chicken:
3-4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts,
cut into chunks
Salt and pepper, to taste
1 cup cornstarch
2 eggs, slightly beaten
1/4 cup canola or vegetable oil*

*For the sauce:
3/4 cup sugar
4 tablespoons ketchup
1/2 cup vinegar (preferably rice or
white)
1 tablespoon soy sauce
1 teaspoon garlic powder*

*1. Preheat oven to 325 degrees.
2. Season chicken with salt and
pepper.
3. Working in two batches, toss the
chicken pieces in cornstarch and then
coat with the egg. Heat the oil over
medium-high heat and again in two
batches, brown the chicken, turning
it so that all sides are browned.
4. Place the chicken in a single layer
in a 9x13 baking dish.
5. Whisk together the sauce ingredi-
ents in a small bowl and pour evenly
over the chicken. Turn the chicken to
ensure each piece is coated.
6. Bake for 1 hour, turning the
chicken every 15 minutes.*

⁴ “Chop Suey: From Chinese Food to Chinese American Food,” *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* 87 (1987): 91-93

⁵ Joseph R. Conlin, *Bacon, Beans and Galantines: Food and Foodways on the Western Mining Frontier*, University of Nevada Press: Reno 1986, p. 192-3

⁶ “Heard About Town,” *New York Times*, January 29, 1900.

⁷ Funnily enough, “chop suey” in Cantonese roughly translates to “miscellaneous animal intestines.” The true origin of the dish actually does lie in China, as a humble dish most often prepared by farmers from rural provinces. So this American-formed “Chinese food” was in fact borne of the chopped chicken livers American consumers had long since rejected. Isn't irony great?

* Taken from allrecipes.com

⁸ “The Chinese Bill Veto: The Bitter Comments of the San Francisco Papers,” *New York Times*, April 6, 1882.

* Taken from browneyedbaker.com

after a hiatus of over 80 years.⁹

And yet Chinese restaurants thrived. If anything, the Exclusion Act helped the Chinese food industry—existing immigrants, subject to widespread racism and hate crimes, were forced into menial service jobs that required long hours and low pay and offered no competition to white Americans. Restaurant work was a perfect example. The Chinese were allowed to stay in this country, but only if they held occupations in menial labor, occupations that solidified the American opinion that they were inferior. They could be seen but not heard, observed but not spoken to, as if through a pane of zoo glass. To American consumers, chop suey was only a symbol of cheap Orientalism—exotic, low-cost, disposable. To the Chinese immigrants, it was a way of life.

“The mystery of mysteries to Francie was the Chinaman’s one-windowed store. The Chinaman wore his pigtail wound around his head. That was so he could go back to China if he wanted to, mama said. When Francie spoke to him, he folded his hands in the wide sleeves of his nankeen shirt coat and kept his eyes on the ground. . .

The best times were when he had to make change. He brought out a small wooden frame strung with thin rods on which were blue, red, yellow and green balls. He slid the balls up the brass rods, pondered swiftly, clicked them all back into place and announced ‘dirty-nine cent.’ The tiny balls told him how much to charge and how much change to give.

Oh, to be a Chinaman, wished Francie, and have such a pretty toy to count on; oh, to eat all the lichee nuts she wanted. . . Oh, to paint those symbols with a slight brush and a quick turn of the wrist and to make a clear black mark as fragile as a piece of a butterfly wing! That was the mystery of the Orient in Brooklyn.”

—Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

Halfway through February of my freshman year in high school, my family flies to Shanghai to stay for ten days. My cousin Xixi is getting married on the sixth day of Chinese New Year, the full impact of which is lost on me until we actually arrive. We land on Chinese New Year’s Eve, *chu xi*, and throughout the duration of the ride from airport to apartment my face is pressed against the taxi window. Fireworks are exploding across the entire Shanghai skyline; the horizon has been engulfed in a smoky, hazy auburn; I can hardly hear my family over the sound of the sky. When we arrive, my entire paternal extended family—five aunts, five uncles-in-law, six cousins, and the grandmother who raised me—greets us raucously, exclaiming about how tall my brother and I have grown. They usher us into the only room in the apartment into which all twenty-something of us can squeeze, and soon we are seated around a table piled with enough food to feed a small country.

Most of Chinese New Year happens around the dinner table. My aunts and grandmother have been preparing dishes for weeks—pickling radishes, marinating bean curds, freezing dumplings. Initially I am arrogant enough to think that this is because of my family’s arrival, and I feel guilty, but I soon realize that this is a yearly ritual. After all, my family in Shanghai gets two weeks off from school and work in honor of

the new year. How else would they celebrate besides family and food?

Nainai, the grandmother who stayed with us in California for eight years of my childhood, has remembered all my favorite dishes. I grew up eating her cooking, watching her Chinese dramas, sharing a room with her, and when I bite into her savory mashed taro that night I am eight years old again, hungry after school for something that isn’t a Sloppy Joe or peanut butter sandwich. Here, I realize, I am truly at home.

Over the course of the next week, my cousins take my brother and me around the city to experience all the Shanghainese street food we’ve been deprived of. Here is where I learn how to eat cumin-rubbed lamb skewers sold from a cart, how to recognize what makes a pan-fried green onion pancake crispiest, how to eat a soup dumpling without carelessly dribbling the broth into my plate. Here is where I learn how to navigate the streets of Shanghai, to seek out the tiny garage-like diners clouded with cigarette smoke and boisterous card games that sell the most delicious potstickers I’ve ever had eight for a dollar. Here is where I begin to appreciate my culture.

The soup dumplings, or *xiao long bao*, are hands-down my favorite Shanghainese specialty food. These dumplings are miraculous: small parcels of meaty filling swimming in a salty, fatty, mellow soup, all packaged in a wrapper so thin it’s nearly translucent. You need a pair of chopsticks and a Chinese soup spoon to eat one. First, nibble a hole in the dumpling’s delicate skin, then drain the broth into your spoon. Wait at least ten seconds before slurping it down, or else you’ll burn your tongue.¹⁰ The soup will have softened the wrapper, which will fade into the tender meat filling when you eat the rest of the dumpling in one bite. Chew it slowly if you have enough self-control. I don’t—it’s an astounding combination of flavors and textures, and my cousins laugh at my gluttony when we order six plates of them for four people.

By the end of the trip, I’ve gained ten pounds, all blissfully acquired. I’ve never consumed so much food in my life, and I’ve never been so happy about it. Nainai whacks the back of my hand with her wooden soup spoon when she sees me reaching for another turnip cake on our last day there and scolds me, tells me I’m already too fat. She’s right, but I just smile and tell her I’ll miss her.

How could I have told my grandmother so many years ago that I hated Chinese food?

*Ma Po Tofu (麻婆豆腐)**

*1 block silken tofu (19 oz box)
1/4 lb ground pork
3 tablespoons Sichuan spicy bean paste
2 tablespoons chili powder
2 tablespoons cooking oil
3 tablespoons chili oil
1 tablespoon Sichuan peppercorns
(roasted and ground to powder)
1 tablespoon light soy sauce
1 teaspoon fermented black beans
(rinsed and pounded)
2 stalks of leeks or scallions (chopped
into 1 or 2-inch length)
2 gloves garlic (chopped)
1/2 cup water
Salt to taste*

*1. Cut the tofu into small pieces, drain the water from the tofu and set aside.
2. Heat up a wok and pour in the cooking oil and chili oil. Add the chopped garlic, ground pork, spicy bean paste and stir-fry until the pork is half-done. Then add in chili powder, soy sauce, fermented black beans and stir-fry until aromatic.
3. Add in the tofu and water; stir gently to blend the tofu (don’t break them) well with the sauce. Lower the heat and simmer for about 3-5 mins or until the sauce thickens.
4. Add in the roasted Sichuan peppercorn powder and chopped scallions. Gently stir and blend well. Dish out and serve hot.*

9 “Chinese Exclusion Act (1882).” *Aspiration, Accumulation, and Impact: Immigration to the United States, 1789-1930*. Harvard University Library Open Collections Program.

10 Which I do frequently because I never have the patience, but oh well.

* Taken from rasamalaysia.com

After the 1965 law passed, re-enabling Chinese immigration, the Chinese-American restaurant industry surged with new business. A new wave of Chinese immigrants arrived, opening restaurants that sold more genuine Chinese food than Americanized. This was what the new immigrants preferred. Thousands of restaurants congregated in pockets of Chinese communities around the country—in Southern California, the Bay Area, Flushings in New York, and more. Few served chop suey, even among the ones that catered to non-Chinese customers. Eventually, chop suey dissolved from the American culinary limelight. The Chinese restaurant business in this country was finally free to start anew.

I am eighteen years old, standing in the kitchen of the house I grew up in, washing six stalks of scallions as streams of dying winter sunlight filter in through the window. My brother is defrosting two pounds of ground pork. As we wait for the meat to defrost, I slice up the scallions slowly, taking care not to disrupt its perfect rings of white and green. My mother nudges me from behind. *You chop so slowly. Kuai yi dian, hurry up.*

My whole family is in the kitchen together for the first time in my recent memory. Both my parents, suffering quietly from empty nest syndrome, have decided that it's finally time my brother and I learn our family meatball recipe, so we are making an enormous batch of them together. As my dad instructs me to slice the scallions, chop the ginger, add a splash of cooking wine—no, two—I keep asking him how much of each ingredient we need. “I have no idea,” he tells me. “I just eyeball everything and it always works out.”

I remember that he grew up under the wing of my grandmother, too—Nainai, who is illiterate in every language but one of the smartest people I know, who is ninety years old and can drink me under the table, who had her feet bound when she was young but has never stopped walking. My father, like me, grew up familiar with the sounds of her pattering around in the kitchen. I suppose he inherited her knack for memorizing recipes. After all, he learned how to make our meatballs from her, who learned from her mother, and back and back and back.

I can't claim that food is all there is of culture, but it is one of the most pungent components, the most physical and visceral. There is nothing quite like biting into my grandma's mashed taro, salty with egg yolk and bits of pork belly, that can transport me back to the ages of six or eight or twelve. Finding home for me has never required much more than finding the right blend of heat and flavors to coat my tongue, the right blend of spices—chili, turmeric, cumin—to dust the bottom of my kitchen drawers. This is the pantry of the first-generation American, the child of immigrants who have painstakingly carved out a niche in this country.

There is a word in Chinese that describes a flavor I don't think exists in American cuisine—香. *Xiang*. The closest translation I can think of is fragrant, but that doesn't really cover it. If I had to describe it I would say it means harmonious, the perfect balance of flavor—full-bodied, rounded, curved like the edges of soup dumplings and

persimmons.

It is hard to describe how I feel about Chinese food without thinking of the intensity and richness of the words I lack in English.

When I think about my childhood now, it is still heartbreaking to me how badly my parents wanted me to assimilate. They had named me Jacqueline, after all, not Ping or Yuexing, because my mother once saw a pretty white lady on television and hoped her unborn daughter would grow up to be just like her. My parents came to this country with few notions of Americanism and fewer belongings, and they wanted me to be born on this land, with opportunities sown in the soil beneath my feet. In fact, the Chinese name for San Francisco is still 旧金山—“Old Gold Mountain.” The roots of the American Dream run deep.

This is the experience of being born here a different color. This is the story of the immigrant family whose bearings in this country are still shallow, who constantly feel like weeds waiting to be yanked from American soil. We wear their clothes, eat their food, speak their language, but still we are the Other, made invisible by this unforgiving land. It took me so long to realize that none of it was our fault.

Rejecting Chinese food, in many ways, was an unconscious manifestation of my cultural self-loathing. I wanted so badly to be accepted by my classmates that I tried to erase the taste of my homeland. And for what? For chicken nuggets, for cupcakes iced in sugary roses, for hot dogs and pizza and eyes pulled at me on the playground. I thought that swallowing down milkshakes and macaroni pasta would paint me over with red and white stripes, white stars against blue, but instead all it did was make me forget that once, I loved to make dumplings with my family.

But I am here, aren't I? Standing in the kitchen of the home I grew up in, folding chopped scallions into pillows of pork and ginger and soy sauce, learning the recipe passed through countless branches of my family tree. In three generations alone, our recipe has survived three government takeovers, one major war, the entirety of Mao's rule, one devastating famine, and my father's ragged uprooting into a new and foreign country. Like Chinatown, like the refurbished and renamed chop suey houses, like the millions of immigrants who have struggled to make this country their home, it is still standing, despite having been pulled and bent and twisted every possible way. And me? I'm standing, too.